1991

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Mountain Passage

by

Gary Harlan Greenberg
Florida International University, 1991
Miami, Florida
Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

This novel is the first-person narrative of an underachieving twenty-eight-year-old journalist who convinces himself that he can find fulfillment by climbing the Matterhorn, a dream he once shared with his older, idolized brother, who died before they could achieve it. Forsaking a marriage-minded girlfriend and fledgling sports reporting career in California, Stanley "Rabbit" Goodman decides to sell or abandon everything he owns that can't fit into a backpack, head to Europe, find his brother's former climbing partner and scale the mountain, or die trying. By blending humor with mysticism and action with introspection, Rabbit's entertaining tale poignantly transcends his personal experiences to illustrate the universal human conflicts that arise when one attempts to turn a dream into reality.
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

Mountain Passage

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction for the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

Gary Harlan Greenberg

1991
To Professors Les Standiford, John Dufresne and Mary G. Free:

This thesis, having been approved in respect to form and mechanical execution, is referred to you for judgment upon its substantial merit.

Acting Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

The thesis of Gary Harlan Greenberg is approved.

John Dufresne
Mary G. Free
Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Examination:

Dean Richard L. Campbell
Division of Graduate Studies

Florida International University, 1991
CHAPTER 1

Reality is nearly impossible to define, let alone remember. It tightrope walks between past and future, bombarding the senses with mostly useless information before slipping through the doors of perception, lodging in some cushy cerebral convolution and falling asleep behind veils of forgetfulness. I bugle a reveille, dial a wake-up call, trigger a clock-radio tuned to a staticky heavy metal station, and ever so slowly, reality stirs, yawns, looks in the mental medicine chest mirror and sees its alter-ego, fantasy, staring back sleepy-eyed.

They seem to recognize each other, but I have trouble telling them apart. The problem is that reality changes as it moves from present to past. What is becomes what was, hard facts softened by perception and further eroded by time until reality is transformed into a mirage as nebulous as a distant galaxy, as whimsical as the wind and as dubious as a presidential campaign promise. Even now, as I sit here trying to figure out where to begin my story, my imagination teases my memory, distorting it, seeking a truth that was never quite reality.

I suppose I ought to start when the dream was born. It
was my fifth birthday, the occasion when my parents first asked me to choose a movie to see. My older brother, Robby, lobbied for *Samson and Delilah*, tempting me with the prospect of watching the biblical superhero kill a lion with his bare hands. Usually, I obeyed my brother's wishes without much thought of my own, but for some reason that has long since abandoned my memory, I stubbornly insisted on Walt Disney's new film, *Third Man on the Mountain*.

I wonder how different my story would be if I'd listened to my brother. Would Robby still have fallen in love with the Matterhorn and the romance of scaling it? Or would the inspiration of his life have merely come from another source? One can speculate, as I have, for years on what might have been. But in the end, I can only see reflections of what once was.

A sharper memory snaps into focus, one year, maybe two, after this particular seed of my future fell to earth...

I am six or seven, and it's my bedtime. Robby offers to give me a horseback ride upstairs but won't bend over to make it easy for me to climb up to his shoulders. Instead, he stands as rigid as a statue in the middle of our den, hands on hips, feet apart, knees slightly bent. Latching onto a forearm for support, I step on his calf, dig the toes of my other foot into the waistband of his chinos, grab a handful of shirt and claw my way up until I can swing my legs over his shoulders. I hook my feet around his back and
click my tongue. Robby starts walking slowly towards the back door, his steps measured and mechanical, like Frankenstein's.

I pull his right ear. He turns left and walks towards the wall. I pull his left ear, and he turns right, running us into the door. I start giggling, knowing that whichever ear I pull, he'll turn the wrong way, bumping me into walls, furniture and doorjambs until I laugh so hard I start hiccuping.

And so it goes, through the den, hallway, kitchen and round and round the dining room table. At the sound of my first hiccup, Robby charges across the living room to the stairs, gallops up them two at a time and tears into my bedroom. He stops short and ducks, flipping me over his head. For a second, I fly with the greatest of ease, then feel the mattress springs against my back and hear them creak. They send me airborne once again before I gradually settle, and the springs quiet.

Robby fetches a glass of water and gets rid of my hiccups by plugging my ears with his index fingers while I drink it. Then he turns off the overhead light, and I slip under the covers, feeling the cool sheets warm in an instant. Even with my legs fully outstretched, there is plenty of room for Robby to sit across the end of the bed. He leans against the wall, draws his knees up to his chest and rests his right hand on the blanketed mound of my feet.

"So what story do you want to hear tonight?" he asks.
"You know," I reply.
"The one about Elmo the Friendly Dragon?"
"Nope."
"How Bobwa the Tiger earned his stripes?"
"Nope."
"How Mariah the Wind lost her shadow?"
"Nope."
"Then what?"
"You know."
He shakes his head, but smiles. "Not the Matterhorn story again?"
I clap my hands. "Yep."
"Okay," he says, taking a deep breath and letting it out through his nose. For a moment, he looks like an adult. Then he clears his throat and begins the story.
"A long, long, long, long, very, very long time ago, when man was just a twinkle in God's eye, the earth's surface was as smooth as a bowling ball. 'This is a boring planet,' God announced to His heavenly bodies. 'Let's hire some demigods and fix it up.' At His almighty command, artisans came from all over the universe to help with Project Earth. Using the elements for tools, they created a stage for God's creatures-to-be. Some forged with fire, others sculpted with wind and water, but the biggest and strongest artisans used great wedges of ice to carve the mountains. Do you know what we call those wedges of ice?"
"Glaciers."
"Right. Glaciers. Now of all these mountain-carvers, the best was named Hiver, and it was he who made the Alps. As always, Hiver brought his daughter along for company. Her name was Neige, and she was the darling of the Milky Way, an enchanting child as pure and delicate as a snowflake. For Neige, Hiver's frigid workshop was like a big playground, and wherever the echoes of her laughter fell to earth, little flowers arose.

"Well, when the time came for old Hiver to clean up from his final project, the Bernese Oberlands, he took a break for a few centuries to watch Neige. She was playing in a freshly carved valley, innocently whistling the wind's tune while cutting out patterns for snowflakes. The sight so warmed Hiver's heart that when he sighed, his breath melted a stockpile of glaciers. Water flooded the valley and swept Neige away. Hiver ran after her, but the water was moving a hundred times faster. By the time he reached the Pennine Plateau, Neige was already tumbling into Vesuvio's furnace at the ankle of Italia's boot. Hiver watched helplessly as his daughter melted and flowed into the Mediterranean Sea, which immediately turned from midnight-black to aqua-blue. Do you know what happened then?"

"Hiver started crying."

"Right. A thousand giant teardrops fell from his eyes, churning up ice and snow and earth and rock when they struck the plateau far below. Everything for miles around was
washed away, except for the spot where Hiver was standing, the spot where he'd last set eyes on his precious daughter. On that spot, a pyramid of rock remained, and when Hiver finally stopped crying, he saw that his tears had carved out the most beautiful mountain in the world. His work complete, his daughter gone forever, Hiver stretched his frosty figure across all of the mountaintops of the Alps and quietly died of a broken heart."

Robby shifts, stretches his long legs out and crosses his ankles over the bed's edge. Light from a passing car sweeps across the ceiling and down the wall at his back before disappearing. My brother looks over at me, and even in the dark I can see his smile flash and a twinkle of diffused light in his eyes.

"Now the mountain born from Hiver's tears came to be known as the Matterhorn to most of us. Of course, it was called the Citadel in Disney's movie, and the people who live near it call it Cervin. But by whatever name, for ages it was thought to be unclimbable. Its faces were too steep for the surest-footed goat, and sudden storms seemed to appear out of nowhere, as though the mountain created them itself just to keep people away. And when ice, snow and rock avalanched down its sides, the Matterhorn seemed to be grumbling an added warning to stay clear. The local townsfolk in the surrounding valleys agreed to a man that the mountain was invincible, and none had the courage to even test it until well into the nineteenth century."
"Meanwhile, men weren't put off so much by other mountains. Gradually, all of the great peaks in the region—the Briethorn, the Lyskamm, Monte Rosa, the Dent Blanche, the Weisshorn—were conquered one by one until only the Matterhorn remained. Ignoring legends of an impregnable city of demons on the summit, brave men began assaulting the Matterhorn's forbidding faces. Most lived, a few died, but no one managed to reach the top. And with each failed attempt, another set of voices would join the chorus of doubters who said the mountain was not only unclimbable, but cursed, and would never be conquered.

"Then, in 1860, a lanky young Englishman named Edward Whymper came to Zermatt. Like others before him, he tried to climb the Matterhorn several times and failed. Unlike many of the others, Whymper refused to give up. He studied the Matterhorn from every angle and eventually plotted a route up the northeast ridge, which no one had seriously considered before. Do you know why?"

"It looked too steep."

"Right. But that was only an optical illusion, one that for centuries had fooled men who believed only what they saw. Whymper's drive and imagination allowed him to see more than what met his eye, and it paid off on July 14, 1865, the day he led a seven-man expedition to the Matterhorn's snowy summit. It was an easier climb than even Whymper had imagined. But the toll would prove to be as steep as the mountain's loftiest precipices, for on the
descent, something terrible happened. You remember what?"

"Four of them fell."

"Right. Croz, Hadow, Hudson and Douglas. Their combined weight snapped the rope, and the four fell over three thousand feet to their deaths. Then something really strange happened. A great mirage appeared in the clouds. It looked like two crosses in a divided circle. Do you know what this mirage was called?"

"The broken spectre."

"The [brocken] spectre. Well, it only lasted a few seconds, and when it disappeared, Whymper and the two others, the Taugwalders, continued their descent. They got back to Zermatt the next day and immediately told everyone about the accident. A rescue party set out and soon found the bodies of Croz, Hadow and Hudson on a glacier at the base of the north face, but all they ever found of Lord Francis Douglas were his gloves, belt and a boot. His body is still up there somewhere, and people say he can still be seen wandering the Matterhorn's most treacherous cliffs whenever the brocken spectre appears in the sky."

As always, I feel a chill. But tonight, for the first time, I shrug it off before having to shiver. "C'mon Robby, Miss Martin says there's no such thing as ghosts."

Robby grunts. "That's because Miss Martin's a silly old bat who has no business being a teacher in the first place."

"You mean there really are ghosts?"
"Why not?"

"Well, I've never seen one."

He smiles. "Do you want to see one?"

"Sure, I guess."

"Then close your eyes."

"But how can I see it if my eyes are closed?"

He laughs. "It's the best way. Take my word for it."

I shut my eyes and peer into the darkness.

"Do you remember what Lord Francis Douglas looks like from that picture I showed you?" Robby asks.

A face appears before my eyes. "The man with the funny whiskers?"

"No. That's Hudson."

Another face appears. "The man with the horse smile."

"No. That's Hadow, the goofball whose clumsiness caused the fall. Douglas is the young guy, clean-shaven with short curly hair."

I try to visualize him, but see Robby's face instead. For some reason, my stomach starts feeling like it always does on the first day back to school after summer vacation.

"Can you see him now?" Robby asks.

"No," I say, opening my eyes. "I just don't remember that one."

Robby closes his eyes and smiles. "Well, I can see him. Clear as day. He's up on the mountain, knee-deep in snow, right hand clutched at his waist, the brocken spectre hanging in the clouds over his head."
"What's he doing?"
Robby laughs. "He's holding up his pants, and he seems to be looking in the snow for something."

"What?"

"I don't know. Maybe his belt."

I jam my eyes shut and peer into the darkness, trying my best to see him.

"He's digging in the snow now, like a dog," Robby says.

All I see are tiny blue-green dots that look a million miles away.

"He's found something. A broken rope. He's threading it through his belt loops and knotting it."

No matter how hard I try, I just can't see him. So I open my eyes to see Robby's face in the dark along with something that looks like crosses in a circle of light on the wall behind him. I gasp. Robby opens his eyes, and the image on the wall disappears.

Robby laughs. "What's the matter? See a ghost?"

I shiver and swallow hard. "No. I saw that spectre thing. On the wall over your head."

"No kidding?" Robby tilts his head to look up at the wall. Seeing nothing, he turns his attention back to me. "That's great," he says, patting my knee. "A good start. Someday, you'll be able to see Lord Francis Douglas, too. All you've got to do is believe. You can see anything, or do anything, just as long as you believe in it enough."
Always remember that, Rabbit. Life can be what you make of it, not necessarily what it makes of you."

I don't really understand what he means, but his words seem to settle the funny feeling in my stomach and stick in my head.

Robby squeezes my knee, which kind of tickles and hurts at the same time. "Well, they're all ghosts now," he says, "Douglas, Hudson, Hadow, Croz, the Taugwalders and even Whymper, though he lived a long life. Of course, not everyone who tried to follow in his footsteps lived as long. In fact, to this day, the Matterhorn has cost more climbers their lives than any other mountain. But someday, little brother, you and I will succeed where others have failed. Okay?"

"Okay."

Robby holds out his hand. "Shake on it."

Even as a teenager, my brother's hands are as big as our father's. I grab the one he's offered and grip it firmly, as he always taught me.

"Together," he says.

"Together," I echo.

Someday...
CHAPTER 2

Ah, but that someday never came. My dream of climbing the Matterhorn with Robby ended abruptly on a cliff in Vermont when he hammered a piton into a small crack and a chunk of rock the size of a house peeled away from the face. One minute he was alive, and the next he was dead. Not only dead, but crushed. Mangled so badly I had to say good-bye to him through the closed lid of a gray casket. I remember how pale and wrinkled my mother's face seemed to get overnight and how my father started smoking again, lighting up one after the other as though making up for lost time. I was only fourteen at the time, but can still see the wavery thread of smoke rising from the trembling tip of his cigarette as he made me swear to never take up climbing, and I can still feel how the words caught in my throat, only to be pried free by the silent plea in my mother's eyes. "I promise."

With those two words, the dream was laid to rest. Robby had been wrong. Life wasn't what you made of it or else he never would have died at twenty-one. The truth seemed to be that things just happened, and you had little or no control over them. Robby was gone and no amount of
believing could bring him back, except maybe at night when I was asleep and would dream of him teaching me to throw a football, ride a bike, shoot a bow and arrow, find the North Star, tie a bowline knot or wrap a climbing rope around my body to rappel down a sheer cliff.

I slept a lot in those days, just to be with him. But I always arose early on Saturday mornings. For the first time since my bar mitzvah, I started going to the synagogue every Shabbat to recite the mourner's kaddish for Robby, just as we had once recited it together for our grandmother. I felt comforted there, sitting in cushioned seats with my parents' nametags on the armrests. Even after Robby's death, my folks only went to temple on the high holidays. But every Shabbat, there were always a handful of other mourners who stood to join me in prayer and share my grief as I learned to share theirs. And each week, the rabbi would remind us all of how the dead continued to live through us.

Although mountain climbing was off limits, I tried to let Robby live through me by following his footsteps in other ways, like choosing to study Spanish in high school instead of French or Latin, working on the student newspaper and going out for the gymnastics team. I had a few of Robby's old teachers. Each one smiled when I confirmed that I was his brother. They offered their condolences and expressed hope that I would be as pleasurable a student. I wasn't, but got by. Robby had won a state-wide science
fair; my science projects never worked out the way they were supposed to. Robby had translated a novel from Spanish to English and been named the best foreign language student; I never did get my verb tenses and conjugations straight and might have won the foreign language booby prize had the school awarded one. Robby had been the newspaper's editor-in-chief; I wrote one article for it in my sophomore year, then quit because I didn't like the way it was edited. Robby had taken a cheerleader to the senior prom; I went with Amy Schwartz, who, along with her chiffon gown, wore a neck brace to correct a congenital curvature of her spine. The only area where I outshone my brother was in gymnastics. He wasn't really built right for the sport, tall and lean rather than short and explosive. Robby had been lucky just to earn a letter, but I won the league's all around championship in my junior year. After that, things went against me. I pulled a hamstring, then sprained a wrist and wound up not even placing as a senior.

I got turned down by Robby's collegiate alma mater, Dartmouth, and went to Penn State instead. My brother had a dual major in geology and journalism, but I was never very interested in rocks and concentrated on journalism. At least I did until I discovered the sport of rugby and started practicing and playing and partying with the boys. They were all like brothers, teaching me how to tackle an opponent with abandon, drink a beer with gusto and ignore my academic responsibilities without feeling too guilty. My
grades suffered, then declined even further when I fell for a pretty, blond barmaid/elementary education major named Kim Webb, who had always dreamed of living in California.

After we miraculously graduated, I used some of the money I'd gotten from being Robby's life insurance beneficiary to move us out to the San Diego area. I immediately found the local rugby team and made a bunch of new friends, but Kim never adjusted to either California or post-graduate life with me. She left. I stayed. Life was simple and easy. I moved into a big house near the beach with four other guys. We surfed, played rugby, grew marijuana in the backyard and worked when we had to. I painted houses, slapped sandwiches together in a deli, groomed thoroughbred show horses and installed cable TV. One day, I saw a classified ad for a part-time sports reporting job at the local paper. I applied for it and beat out two others who had no journalism experience whatsoever. Soon, I was working there full-time, and even though the pay was lousy, I found the job to be fun and challenging. I got into all sorts of sporting events for free, interviewed players and coaches and pounded out stories minutes before their deadlines, just like in the movies.

While working at the paper, I met another girl, a much younger one this time. Frannie Hernandez came from a broken home, but she was pretty, bright and charming enough to make me the envy of any guy who wasn't blind, deaf and dumb. We moved into our own place after she graduated high school,
and it seemed just a matter of time before we would get married and start a family. She was in a hurry, but I just laughed when she pointed out a diamond ring which cost as much as a car, and the bridal bouquet she caught at her cousin's wedding and hung on our bedroom wall withered until only stems and ribbons remained. I thought there was no need to force the issue. Something would eventually come along to force it for me. Something always had.

On one particular Friday night, which seemed like dozens of others, I was sitting in the Tidewater Tavern with several of my rugby teammates watching our red-headed captain, Chuck Riley, eat a glass. This is really no big deal for rugby players, who are also inclined to pry off bottle caps with their teeth, hold head butting contests and drive drunk on a fairly regular basis. In fact, I had tried the same stunt two years earlier, after the game in which Bobby Brown broke his leg and was carried off the field with his foot turned the wrong way around. Having survived that match with all of my limbs in alignment, I'd felt invincible enough to try anything. Anything, that was, until I took a bite out of my beer glass and wound up with a four-stitch gash in my lower lip.

The boys had been much more impressed with my past effort than Riley's present one. He could chomp glass more casually than most people chew ice. As interest waned, six-foot, six-inch Mark Whanga let loose one of his wild Maori war chants, then offered to chug a beer while standing
on his head. This is certainly an impressive display of athletic prowess, but one I'd seen performed many times by a variety of rugby players, a few surfers and one skydiver. As Whanga turned his swarthy bulk upside-down, I wandered over to the phone to give Frannie a call.

She picked it up on the third ring. "Hello?"
"Hi honey. It's me."
"Where are you?"
"The Tidewater. I stopped by to have a few beers with the guys."

She sighed. "I thought we were going to the movies."
"We are. Got two passes for the Cinema 10 at work. Check the paper. We'll catch a late show."
"When will you be home?"
"In an hour or so."
"An hour?" she asked. "Why so long?"
"There's still a bunch of money left in the kitty. I've got to help the boys drink it up."
"Why?"
"We're a team. We can't go out on the field tomorrow with some of us being more hungover than the rest."
"You know, Rabbit. For once I wish you'd just give me a straight answer."
"Sorry, honey."
"No you're not. Everything is always a big joke to you."
"Not really. There are little jokes, and
"Don't start with me..."

"C'mon honey," I said. "You know I've had a killer week. Can't I have some fun?"

"Why can't you have fun with me? You're going to be with those guys all day tomorrow."

"We're both going to be with them tomorrow. Or aren't you coming to the game?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I'm sick and tired of watching rugby every weekend. Can't we just go somewhere by ourselves?"

"Not this week. It's a league game. I can't let down the team."

"But you can let me down?"

"That's not fair."

"And what is? You play around with your friends and only spend time with me when there's nothing better to do? Well, I'm tired of it, Rabbit. I'm tired of waiting for you to grow up."

"Since when are you so...Frannie? Frannie?"

She'd hung up. I called her back, but the phone just rang and rang. I let it go, thinking that she was the immature one, always having to get the last word in. The phone kept ringing: ten, fifteen, twenty-five times. I lost track, but could feel my bladder tallying up my beer count. So I slammed the receiver back onto its cradle, grabbed a full breath of fresh air and headed into the Tidewater's
bathroom.

As usual, one of the fluorescent lights was humming and flickering while the rest seemed too bright. The cracked mirror above the stained sink made me look drunker than I felt, and older. The middle urinal was overflowing again, coating the floor with a slime that probably could have bred cooties on dangling shoelaces. And the old gray toilet stall sat as unobtrusively as ever in the corner, the last resort for anyone who underestimated the potency of the Tidewater's Chili Fuego.

Someone was in there. I could see his shoes under the toilet stall door. They were shiny black clunkers, size thirteen at least, with nigger-hippie-wetback-spic-stomping soles. I figured it was probably a cop or one of the grunts from Camp Pendleton, or maybe even a punk rocker or skinhead. Someone to let alone, in any case.

I walked up to the nearest urinal and started blasting a soggy cigarette butt to tobacco smithereens. My eyes scanned the wall, reading the same old graffiti. Sally was still looking for a good time at 887-4059; "Louie, Uniontown, Pa." hadn't budged since nestling himself between a pair of crudely drawn boobs on "12/16/81"; and some anonymous comedian continued to ask anyone who stood here why he was looking at the wall when the joke was in his hand. Frannie had laughed when I told her about that one and had been calling my wiener a joke ever since. I chuckled to myself and decided to head on home. Maybe even
stop by the liquor store to buy a bottle of that expensive champagne she liked so much, just to show her that I really did care. As I zipped my fly, I heard the toilet stall door creak.

"All done?" a voice asked from behind.

"Huh?"

A hard shove answered, and my head bounced off Louie and the boobs. Then a pair of hands started patting my hips. Spinning around, I smacked them away.

"Get your goddam hands off..."

Unfortunately, it was the owner of the shiny black shoes. Hundermark, according to the brass nameplate pinned just below the badge. Dark green shirt...brown trim...funky hat...he was a deputy from the County Sheriff's Department. A big deputy who looked more scared than angry. A fucking giant whose right fist was flying towards my face. I ducked, and his knuckles smashed into the stainless steel flushing handle of the urinal.

He yelped in pain. I yelped in fright, side-stepped a left-handed swipe and headed for the door. But before I reached it, three more deputies charged into the bathroom. One grabbed my arm. Another speared me in the gut with his billyclub. I dropped, but that didn't stop the onslaught. Shiny black shoes danced around the floor, lashing out to bombard me from every direction. I curled up, covered my head with my hands and futilely tried to jumpstart my lungs.
The shoes stopped dancing. I couldn't catch my breath and felt numb all over. I struggled to my hands and knees, thinking this whole thing had to be a bad dream. Any second, I was sure my clock-radio would click on. I'd wonder where I was for a second, then recognize my bedroom and feel the warmth of Frannie's body. I'd snuggle against her until we were coupled as closely as Yin and Yang, reach over her shoulder and...and a soccer-style kick in the ass sent me sprawling in the bathroom floor slime.

The deputies stood me up and bounced me off a couple of walls. I quickly abandoned the dream hypothesis to try to piece together what the hell was going on. A billyclub whacked my left leg behind the knee. My right arm was twisted like taffy. An open-handed smack got my ears ringing. I tried to speak, but a meaty hand latched onto my throat.

"One wrong move and I'll rip your windpipe right out of your fucking neck. DO-YOU-UN-DER-STAND?"

It was Hundermark, and he looked serious. I nodded and flashed a shaky peace sign with my free hand. His fingers dug into my throat for emphasis, then slowly released their stranglehold. I was spun around, thrown against the toilet stall and frisked.

"What did I do?" I rasped, my voice barely working. A billyclub to the kidney answered. My wallet was lifted from my back pocket. I heard the crackle of a walkie-talkie, and one of the deputies rattled off a bunch of codes along with
my name and address. A deputy with a moustache muttered the Miranda rights. I still couldn't believe this was happening to me, even as handcuffs bit my wrists and I was escorted out of the bathroom.

A crowd of rugby players, surfers, surfettes, bikers, pool players and video game addicts was gathered just outside the men's room door. To the Tidewater's typical patron, fighting with cops was considered to be an honorable, if somewhat stupid, pursuit. And even though my run-in with the law had been less than valiant, I was sufficiently battered, handcuffed and outnumbered to evoke peer pleasure. More than one pat reached my back, and jeers directed at the deputies lifted my chin off my chest. Chuck Riley elbowed a tank-topped blond guy aside to ask me what had happened. I knew I should have kept my mouth shut, but Riley was smiling as though waiting for the punch line of a joke, a tiny shard of glass glinting from between his front teeth.

"Gay cops, man," I announced, forcing a carefree grin. "The big one likes to feel other guys' asses."

Everyone not wearing shiny black shoes laughed. A vein popped out on Hundermark's neck. He shoved me through the Tidewater's front door, and once our procession reached the parking lot, he and his pals gave me a painful little lesson in prisoner etiquette. Hundermark punctuated it with a leg-buckling knee to the thigh.

"Got anything else to say?" he asked, drawing his
billyclub and pounding it into the palm of his hand. I dropped my eyes to his shiny black shoes and shook my head. At this point, I figured it might be best to let my innocence speak for itself.

In most situations, innocence isn't a good enough excuse for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But in this case, it was. After my background check came through negative, the deputies searched my rust-spotted Toyota, apparently looking for drugs, firearms, illegal aliens or any other legitimate excuse to arrest me. Coming up empty, they grudgingly admitted that I wasn't the man they'd been seeking and let me go with a warning not to resist an officer of the law under any circumstances.

Riley, Whanga and the rest of my rugby buddies all but carried me back into the bar and filled up glass after glass of beer for me as I told and retold the story, embellishing it a little more each time. John Butler, whose brother was a lawyer, said I should sue. But since I'd been drinking and there weren't any witnesses in the bathroom, I figured the cops could have made up a good story to justify their actions. Besides, I wasn't really injured badly. Just scrapes and bruises. In fact, if I'd had the choice of getting beat up like that again or spending a day in court, I probably would have chosen the beating.

While we talked and drank, an hour seemed to pass in a minute. When I realized what time it was getting to be, I limped over to the phone to give Frannie a call. Some guy
with a Harley-Davidson tattoo was on it. As I waited for him to hang up, Coach walked in. He talked to Riley for a few seconds, then waved me over.

"Hear you had an encounter with the law," he said.

"Yeah. The law won."

He laughed. Coach was one of the good guys. He was from England and had been one of his county's top rugby players before quitting to travel around the world and settle in America. Coach made me take a seat and listened to me tell the story yet again. As I spoke, his gray eyes seemed to watch my every movement, and they narrowed slightly each time I tweaked a tender spot and winced. When I finished, he rested his huge right hand on my shoulder and said it might be better if I sat out of tomorrow's game. I protested, but he cut me off.

"Listen, Rabbit. You're a fine player, but I won't send a man on the field who might be hurt worse than he thinks. Besides, I want to have a look at that Aussie lad, Bill. See what he's made of."

I tried to talk him out of it, but I'd sooner have been able to drink a beer through my nose. Another two pitchers hit the bar. Coach turned to Riley and started talking strategy. I looked around. A blond girl was on the phone. Hippie John, Bigfoot and Joe Douche were waving me over to the dartboard. I glanced at the clock and decided to blow off calling Frannie. We'd already missed the last shows at the Cinema 10, and I knew she'd just piss and moan about it.
and make me feel guilty enough to come home when I was having a good time being the man of the hour. So I shot darts, played pool and drank for free until well past midnight. I knew Frannie would let me have it when I got home, but I figured to make it up to her. If I wasn't going to play rugby, we could spend the whole weekend alone together. Maybe I'd even take her down to the Baja, to that nice hotel in Rosalito where we'd spent the most romantic night of our lives together. Just Frannie and me, marguaritas and the sea.
I could see the blue-gray light of the TV flickering through the living room window as I drove up to the house. Frannie was waiting up, and I started debating with myself whether this was a good or bad sign. I pulled into our dirt driveway and parked behind her VW Rabbit, then grabbed my side and exaggerated my limp as I walked inside. Frannie was lying on our legless living room sofa watching an old black and white movie. Fred Astair dancing by himself. When she heard me, she held up her wrist to look at her watch and said, "One hour?"

"You're not going to believe what happened."

Buster, Frannie's calico cat, jumped down from the top of the refrigerator and walked to the edge of the kitchen alcove.

"You got drunk," Frannie said, still not looking at me.

"Yeah? Well I'd bet you'd get drunk if four cops beat the crap out of you."

She turned her head just enough to see me out of the corner of her eye. "Sure. And I suppose you lost your car keys, got a flat tire and ran out of gas, too."
She went back to watching the tube. Fred was dancing on the ceiling. Buster walked into the living room, pausing on each stride to stretch a leg. I turned on the overhead light, limped around the sofa and stood in front of the TV. "I'm not kidding."

Her eyes narrowed. "You don't look beat up."

"Yeah. Well, the bruises probably won't surface for a couple of days."

She sat up. "You're such a liar."

"I am not."

"Why on earth would cops beat you up?"

"It was a case of mistaken identity."

"Right," she said, leaning over to see the television screen around me. I turned off the set.

"Listen to me, Frannie."

"Why bother?"

"Because it's the truth. Some sleezebag held up a 7-Eleven at gunpoint and the cops saw a car matching the description of the getaway vehicle in the Tidewater's lot. So they checked inside and found someone who matched the crook's description right down to his blue jeans and flannel shirt. Unfortunately, it was me."

"And they just charged right in and beat you up?"

"Not quite. They waited until I went to the bathroom to take me because they thought I might be armed and dangerous." I chuckled. "They sure had that backwards, huh?"
"I've got to hand it to you, Rabbit. You certainly can be whip up a good story when you need one."

"It's not a story. But you don't even... Ow! Shit!"
Buster had decided to sharpen his claws on my pants leg. I brushed him aside with my foot, about five feet aside, right into a wall. He landed on his feet, already sprinting down the hallway.

"Don't you kick my cat!" Frannie yelled.
"Tell him not to scratch me."
"He only scratches you cause you're always kicking him."

"That's bullshit, and you know it. But fuck the goddam cat, Frannie. Don't you care that I just got the shit kicked out of me?"

"I care about you, Rabbit," she said flatly. "It's you who doesn't care about me."

"But I do, really. I was going to come home just after you hung up on me. But I stopped to take a leak, and that's when all hell broke loose."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards, well, I really needed a drink. Then everyone wanted to hear the story and I just lost track of the time." I knelt by the sofa and leaned over to kiss her. "I'm sorry, baby."

She squirmed away. "You smell like a goddam brewery."

"C'mon Frannie. Don't be like that. I'll make it up to you tomorrow."
"Tomorrow?" she asked.

"Coach figured I wouldn't be a hundred percent and decided to sit me out." I grabbed her hand. "We can go away, maybe to that hotel in Rosalito you like so much."

She pulled her hand away and sat on the back of the sofa, seeming to contemplate the myriad of stains in the red, yellow and brown shag carpet. Then she flicked her long black hair out of her face and looked at me, her eyes glistening. "I don't think so, Rabbit."

"Why not?"

"This relationship just isn't working out the way I imagined."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I don't want to stay involved with a guy who refuses to grow up."

"Cops attack me and it's my fault because I'm not grown up?"

She sighed. "The cops have nothing to do with it. Look Rabbit, I know what I want. I want a man who's going to make me the most important thing in his life, a man to marry me and father my children. You could be that man if you wanted, but I'm not going to wait forever."

"Christ Frannie, you're only nineteen."

"Yeah, and in June I'll be twenty, and in ten years, I'll be thirty, and you'll still be farting around with your rugby buddies."

I laughed. "No I won't. I'll be too old to play
rugby."

"So it'll be surfers, or a softball team, or friends from some bar or another."

"I don't get it, Frannie. What is this sudden thing against rugby? I thought you liked watching me play and partying with the guys."

"Yes. That was fine for a while. But now, I want more."

More. She had been demanding more and more of me all along. First, I had to give up skydiving. Then she started complaining about how much time I spent surfing, so I cut down on that. And now, now she was giving me a hard time about rugby. Too much, I thought, it was time to make a stand.

"What if I say I can't give you more right now?" I asked.

She raised her chin. "Then I'll find somebody who can."

I swallowed, my throat feeling thick from the effects of Hundermark's stranglehold. "Go ahead and try."

Frannie looked into my eyes, then shrugged. "Okay."

She swung her feet over the back of the sofa, hopped down, went into the spare bedroom and came right back out with two big blue valises.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Leaving. Where's my cat?" She hissed through her teeth a couple of times and walked over to the door. "I'll
be back for the rest of my things tomorrow," she said, sliding her feet into her flip-flops.

I felt as though I'd just been billyclubbed in the gut again. "You were planning this all along."

She put down the suitcases, smiled sadly, reached out and touched my cheek. "No Rabbit. This isn't what I was planning at all."

I tried to stop her, but her moment of softness passed. Frannie turned deaf to me and shook off my hand when I tried to grab her arm. She dragged her suitcases through the door, then tossed them into the back seat of her car with a strength I didn't think she had. She went back into the house and came out carrying Buster. She threw him into the car with about as much tenderness as I'd used to brush him aside with my foot earlier.

"Move your car," she said.

I crossed my arms. "No."

She picked up a rock. "Move it or I'll break your windshield."

"You wouldn't dare."

She cocked her arm. "Don't try me, Rabbit."

I could see her hand trembling. "Okay honey. You made your point. Please forgive me."

"It's too late. Now move your car or I swear to God I'll..."

"C'mon Frannie, don't be like this."

"I'll count to three. One..."
"Can't we talk about this?"

"Two..."

She reared back, and I realized this wasn't an empty threat. "Okay okay, you win," I said, digging my keys out of my pocket.

She lowered the rock. I climbed into my car and backed it out of the driveway. Frannie let the rock roll out of her hand, then got into her VW, backed it up to within inches of my bumper and popped the clutch. The tires screeched and she sped away, leaving tracks on the pavement and a haze of burnt rubber in the air.

I pulled my car back into the driveway, parked and sat behind the wheel for a minute, trying once again to wake up from what I hoped was nothing more than a nightmare. When I couldn't wake up for the second time that night, I shuffled inside and tried going to sleep. But that didn't work either. My legs were tingling, my mind working. I should have let her break my windshield. What would it have cost? A hundred dollars? Less if I'd picked up a used one at a junkyard. And maybe she'd been bluffing after all. Even if she hadn't been, wasn't she worth the price of a new windshield?

The bed seemed too big. I rolled onto my back, rested my hands at my sides and started to systematically flex and relax my muscles. It was a trick Coach had taught us to ease tension on nights before big games. Right foot, calf, thigh. Left foot, calf, thigh. Ass, stomach, chest, hands,
forearms, biceps, triceps, neck and jaw. Then back to my right foot. Over and over. Flex. Relax. Move on to the next set. My legs began to feel heavy. Arms too. I couldn't lift my head off the pillow. I felt like a piece of lead sinking in a warm sea. My mind cleared, rose through clouds. Images started whirling around the back of my eyelids. Fragments broke off and fell into the vortex where they realigned themselves to form a memory of something that never happened...

Frannie and I are sitting in the dining room at the Seaview Country Club. She's dazzling in an aqua-blue silk pants suit and tight black tube top. Through a picture window, the setting sunlight accents the eighteenth fairway's emerald glow and turns a white sandtrap amber.

The waiter brings a flowered bottle of champagne to us on a silver tray and fills two crystal glasses. As I raise my glass, bubbles tickle my nose. We clink, toast each other's love and drink. I pull a small velvet case out of my pocket. Frannie's merry brown eyes are sparkling. As always, the left one wanders just slightly off center. I flick open the little case with my thumb and hold it out to her. It's the engagement ring she'd pointed out to me a couple of months ago. She reaches for it, but her hand freezes in mid-air. She starts chuckling.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"Your clothes," she giggles. "What happened to them?"
I don't know. Somehow, they've disappeared and I'm sitting there naked. The dining room is suddenly full of people, all pointing at me. Frannie is in hysterics, pounding the table and crying with laughter.

"Will you marry me?" I ask.

"Look at your joke," she sputters.

My penis is small and hairless, like a child's.

"Please marry me," I plead.

She turns around. "Would you marry him?" she asks the other diners. "Would you marry a joke like that?"

They all laugh. Buster jumps down from a windowsill, runs up to me and sinks his unsheathed claws in my bare calf. I try to shake him off, but can't. Some cops arrive and start chasing me around the dining room. I run with the cat latched onto my leg. Frannie just keeps laughing and yelling, "Look! Look at his joke!" I run and run, but there is no way out, and no place to hide...

As soon as I realized I was asleep, I was awake. Alone in bed. Naked. I lifted up the covers and was relieved to see this one really was a bad dream. But Frannie's absence was real. I grabbed the pink princess phone on the night table and dialed her mom's house. Mrs. Hernandez answered, groggy from sleep.

"Let me talk to Frannie," I said.

"She's asleep, Rabbit. Do you know what time it is?"

"Seven-forty-six. But this is urgent."
"Oh, okay. Hold on."
I waited a few prolonged seconds before hearing a click in the line.

"Do you know what time it is?" Frannie said.
"Seven-forty-seven. Listen honey, I'm sorry about everything."

"Me too. But it's too late."
"No it isn't. It's not even eight o'clock yet."
"There you go again."
"I'm sorry. I'll reform. I promise. And if you ever feel like breaking my windshield, go ahead, cause you're worth it."

She paused for what I hoped was a silent laugh. "Then you'll quit playing rugby?" she asked.

"Quit rugby? But I don't have to quit rugby to pay more attention to you."

"That's what I thought. Have a nice life, Rabbit."

"Wait!"

"I've waited too long already. Good-bye."

"But..."

"And please don't call back."

The line went dead. The phone slipped from my fingers and fell to the floor. I rolled over in bed. My bruised body felt as though I'd played three rugby games the previous day. I ran my hand across the bottom sheet in the spot where Frannie should have been lying on her side, knees drawn up, hand protecting her eyes from the morning light.
CHAPTER 4

And so the evidence was presented, the verdict declared. I'd been found guilty of unpardonable neglect and the sentence was immediate banishment from Frannie's life. I tried to appeal the ruling all weekend, but Frannie wouldn't come to the phone when I called and didn't even stop by to pick up the rest of her stuff, as she had promised. Still, I was hoping she'd start missing me more than she expected and would be back in a few days.

Meanwhile, I had the rest of my life to live. On Monday morning, I missed waking up next to her and dreamily making love, but for once I got to the office early. The bruises on my neck had blossomed, prompting the Halsey twins in classifieds to shake their hair-bobbed heads in unison.

"Must have been a rough game," Betty said.

"I didn't play," I told her.

"Then what happened?" Barbara asked.

"A band of desperadoes jumped me Friday night."

"What?"

I was already by them, figuring they could read all about it in the next edition. The newsroom was empty. I headed straight for my desk and found a copy of Saturday's
sports section propped up between my video display terminal's keyboard and screen. My column, "Rabbit Punches," was circled in red marker and "NO MORE OF THIS!" was printed across the page with "R.L." scrawled underneath. It was a little missive from Ralph Lester, the Sensinitas Sentinel's mostly-absentee publisher. I couldn't believe it. I thought the column was a classic. It was a plan for how the public high schools could cope with state budget cuts by introducing girls' mudwrestling as a varsity sport, then charging the local lechers ten bucks a pop to watch. What Lester obviously considered flippant and crass was really an earnest satire aimed at the boneheads in Sacramento who voted to "pare down" the education budget when tax reforms cut revenue.

This wasn't the first time Lester had disliked one of my columns, so I didn't let it bother me. I threw the newspaper in the vicinity of the trash can, turned on my computer and typed, "OUT IN A BOUT WITH THE SHERIFF'S FOUR-MAN TAG TEAM." I was determined to make the deputies pay for what they'd done to me, but I knew that I'd have to tie the whole thing in with sports to get it past the editor-in-chief and into my section. My fingers started skittering around the keyboard, and the lyrical editorial I'd been writing in my head all weekend began to materialize on the screen in black and green:

"No holds were barred in the Tidewater's Memorial John Arena Friday night, and fortunately no bars were held or I'd
probably have breaks instead of bruises, stitches under my band-aids and hospital bills over my head..."

It was a touchy subject, but I quickly managed to weave my way through a series of innuendoes, double-entendres and ambiguities to keep the indelicate details of my bathroom encounter within the bounds of family newspaperism. My fingers got temporarily tongue-tied while trying to tastefully paraphrase one of Hundermark's choice quotes. I gingerly assumed my customary thinking position: feet propped up on my desk, hands clasped behind my head, and body leaning back to test the limits of my creaky, swivel desk chair. Pain stabbed me in the region of my right kidney. I shifted, got a stitch under my ribcage, shifted again, and settled in an almost comfortable position.

The desks in the newsroom seemed to have suddenly sprouted a crop of diligent journalists who were either gabbing away on telephones or tapping their computer keyboards. I winked at Nancy Thompson, a community affairs reporter I'd tried to date before meeting Frannie. She ignored me now as she'd ignored me then. I looked past her, over at a paneled office wall which was covered with California Newspaper Association Award plaques. Mine was the third from the left in the top row, the paper's only first place award in 1981. I won it for a column about a blind marathon runner I'd written from his seeing-eye dog's point of view.

William Snead, the Sentinel's editor-in-chief, appeared
at the door of his office. Clutching his monogrammed pica stick like a royal scepter, Snead surveyed the newsroom through his black-framed glasses. His head stopped swiveling when his minified eyes turned my way. He started walking toward my desk. I picked up a news release and pretended not to notice him until he tapped my sneakers with his pica stick.

"Feet off the desk, Goodman," he croaked. "This isn't your living room." I begrudgingly straightened up, hoping he'd leave me alone. But Snead lingered. "You know, I thought that piece about mudwrestling was a clever bit of writing," he said. "Unfortunately, Mrs. Lester was outraged by it. And what she doesn't like, Ralph doesn't like."

"He'll get over it."

"I suppose he will. But you're definitely on his shitlist. So I suggest you watch your ass." He stepped behind me and leaned over my shoulder.

"What's this?" he asked, pointing his pica stick at the video screen.

"This week's column."

He squinted at it and sighed. His breath was about on par with a Chili Fuego fart.

"Uh, you mind, William? I can't work with you standing there."

"Then take a break for a minute. I want to see what your over-active imagination has in store for us this week."
"Can't you wait until I'm done?"

"No. I can't," he replied, nudging my shoulder.

I surrendered my chair and sat on the edge of the desktop. Snead had been an okay guy when he was the paper's managing editor. But his promotion had gone to his head and lately he'd been acting as though this were the New York Times instead of a two-bit weekly. As he perused my column, he idly fingered his moustache, causing dandruff flakes to flutter down and accumulate on the keyboard of my VDT. Snead certainly had his faults, but no one could say he wasn't conscientious. The old journalistic "watchdog of society" ideal played into his newfound self-righteousness, and I was confident he'd back me up on this column. Although the Constitution didn't have a specific clause on the subject, I figured the privilege to piss in peace had to be as basic a human right as free speech and religious preference.

"Mmmmmmm. Uuuuhhhhh. Aaaachchchch," Snead groaned as if suffering from indigestion of the brain. "What on earth is this supposed to be?"

"The truth. It happened Friday."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. It was a case of mistaken identity."

"If I know you," he said, "you probably mouthed off to them."

"Well, I did. But that wasn't until after the first round."

Snead shook his head. "When are you going to learn
that your job is to write about sports: football, basketball, baseball, tennis, golf...not about social injustice, politics or...or brawling with sheriff's deputies, for God's sake?" With a singular "tsk," he hit two keys, erasing my column. "Do us all a favor and stick to sports," he said. "We have an 'understanding' with the Sheriff's Department."

Snead stood up, grabbed his pica stick and tapped me on the chest with it. "And this is the last time I'm going to tell you to clean up your trash heap of a desk. You're a good writer, but don't press your luck. Comprendes?"

He winked as if we were good friends or something, then scurried across the newsroom to answer the ringing phone in his office. I flipped a bird behind his back and fell into the swivel chair, triggering a jolt of pain in every spot the cops had punched, kicked and bludgeoned. The empty video screen faced me with its blinking cursor mutely asking where all the words had gone. I wondered too.

NO MORE OF THIS! Ralph Lester's missive flashed across my mind. I felt like shouting it out, but instead muttered a string of about a dozen curses without taking a breath. I really wanted to crucify Hundermark and his pals. If it hadn't been for them, I thought, I probably wouldn't have lost Frannie. And if it hadn't been for them, Coach definitely wouldn't have replaced me with that Australian on Saturday. He'd played like an all-star, so it seemed as though those deputies might have cost me my starting
position too. This column had been my only recourse, the only way to even the score. But I wouldn't get the chance because someone supposedly had some sort of understanding with the Sheriff's Department. I didn't know exactly what that understanding was, only that I wasn't in on it.

With a shrug, I started to clean up my desk. Old newspapers accounted for most of the debris. I started throwing them away but stopped when I unearthed a picture of Frannie I took on the day we met. I'd been assigned to do a feature and photo spread on the star of the girls' high school gymnastics team, a stocky junior who could turn twisting handsprings over the horse and back semis on the balance beam. I ended up shooting about six pictures of her and the rest of my two rolls on Frannie stretching out.

Frannie could barely do a lopsided cartwheel, but tried out for the team because she thought it might be a good way to keep in shape, and it was definitely a good excuse to stock up on Danskins. Despite her limited athleticism, she was the closest thing to a perfect "10" I'd ever seen. Her body was already in full bloom and encased in a second skin of peach leotards with ocher nylon shorts and matching leg-warmers. Her thick black hair was gathered in a waist-long ponytail. Wispy little ringlets had worked free to dangle at her temples. Her round face was tanned, her teeth bright and even, and her braless breasts tested the elasticity of her leotards in a way that made undressing her with my eyes a moot point, or two. I snapped photos long
after running out of film, then bribed her into a date with promises of eight-by-ten glossies.

The one I kept on my desk was the best of the lot. In it, she's sitting on a mat in the Sensinitas High School gymnasium, leaning back on her hands with legs spread and head cocked to the left. Her slightly wandering eye mars the perfection of her face, yet somehow makes her seem all the more beautiful. I gazed at that picture and decided it wasn't too late for us. If I quit rugby, I figured I could win her back. I was sure of it.

What I wasn't sure of was whether or not I really wanted her back. I missed her, but it was also nice not having to answer to anyone. Over the weekend, I'd done exactly what I wanted, when I wanted. But at the game Saturday, everyone had asked about her. And when I explained how she walked out on me, they all shook their heads and told me I was crazy for letting her get away. I nodded then, but now found myself wondering what the alternative was: marriage, mortgage, a better job, more money earned, more money spent, natural childbirth classes, postnatal drift, a family to support, responsibilities, pressures...

I stuck the picture in a vertical file and started gathering up the rest of the newspapers on my desk. On the bottom of the heap, I found a Sentinel sports section in which I'd written a feature about a globetrotting South African surfer who'd been to India, Burma, Thailand,
Indonesia, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, Bora-Bora and Hawaii.

I re-read the article and could picture him telling me how backcountry Thai kids flocked around him because they'd never seen a blond before, diving Australia's Great Barrier Reef and holing up with a beautiful Swedish girl on a remote Malaysian island. He'd looked so happy and alive. Fulfilled. I asked him what he was going to do next.

"I've been thinking about a motorcycle trip through Europe."

"Sounds great," I said. "I've always dreamed of traveling like that myself."

He nodded. "If you think you'd like it, you'd love it."

"Probably," I replied. "But not now. I've got too much going on here."

He smiled. "You could if you truly wanted to."

Maybe so, but with Frannie and rugby and my job and all, I told myself that I had more important things to do. Now, sitting at my cluttered desk with that old newspaper in my hands, I wasn't so sure. I questioned what I'd be sacrificing if I did it now: A chance to win Frannie back? The swansong of my rugby career? My budding journalism career? Surprisingly, the last struck me the hardest. After nearly six years of drifting from one mindless job to the next, I'd finally found something I actually enjoyed at times. And something with a future. Soon, I'd have two
full years under my belt, enough reporting experience to qualify for a major league daily.

Then again, I still had over two thousand dollars left from my brother's life insurance policy and could raise another two or three grand by selling my car, TV, stereo and surfboard. If I just quit my job, I could travel around like that South African surfer, maybe even buy a cheap motorcycle and cruise the Continent like he'd been planning. There were so many things I'd always dreamed of seeing: the pubs of Great Britain, Paris cafes, topless beaches on the Riviera, the Greek Islands, Munich's Oktoberfest, Cannes' film festival, the running of the bulls in Pamplona and, of course, the Matterhorn, even though I still felt bound by my promise to my parents never to try climbing it. The least I could do was to see it in person, which would be closer to the summit than Robby ever got.

My fingers drifted over to my VDT keyboard and typed:

"What do I really want to do? Stay in California and fight my way out of this rut or screw it all and travel the world?"

I leaned back in my chair, rubbed my chin and read the words over and over, not knowing what to do, not knowing what was right.

As if in answer, William Snead bopped out of his office with a handful of memos. It was one of his Monday morning rituals to distribute them to reporters and editors, commending the good, criticizing the bad and otherwise
utilizing impersonal paper shuffling to accomplish what would have taken no more than a few spoken words. He dropped two on my desk. I picked up the first:

"Re: Rabbit Punches. R.L. just called, and despite my pleas to the contrary, he's decided to cancel your column until further notice."

My hands started shaking. I read the second:

"Re: Little League game result forms. The forms arrived from the print shop today and need to be mailed out to the coaches A.S.A.P."

NO MORE OF THIS!

Losing my column was bad enough. The prospect of transcribing hundreds of Little League result forms into readable stories over the next few months was an unbearable thought.

NO MORE OF THIS!

I knew I could just kiss it all good-bye.

NO MORE OF THIS!

No more Ralph Lester and William Snead. No more interviews with high school jocks and self-serving coaches. No more dealing with pushy parents who wanted to see their kids glorified in print. And no more Little League. I could feel my heart pounding. Instead of writing about some little twerp's home run, I could be cruising around Europe on a motorcycle.

"NO MORE OF THIS!" I shouted, silencing the telephone
conversations and keyboard clicking of the newsroom. With twenty pairs of eyes staring at me, I tore up the memos and waltzed into Snead's office to have a word with him.

Actually, it turned out to be two words.
I walked out of the Sensinitas Sentinel building a free man, totally psyched to be starting the adventure of my life. But by the time I drove the two miles to my house, I was already feeling shackled by doubt. Had I been too impulsive? Too rash? What had happened to me? Just a few days earlier, I'd been content with my life. I'd had the security of a decent job with a promising future as well as the kind of girlfriend men of another era might have dueled over at the drop of a scented hanky. Suddenly, I had nothing but myself and a vague dream. I was about to wander off into the unknown, hoping to find something better than what I was leaving. But what I was leaving was beginning to look better and better.

The house seemed too empty and quiet, so I rode my bicycle over to the Tidewater Tavern, the knot in my thigh where Hundermark kneed me aching with every pedal. A familiar shock of red hair stood out in the sparse lunch crowd. Chuck Riley was sitting belly-up to the bar with a beer and roast beef sub, giving the barmaid a hard time about something or another. Even though I knew Riley was a loan officer at a bank when he wasn't playing rugby or
eating glass, it looked odd to see him in a pinstriped suit. I sat down next to him and ordered a beer and sandwich. Riley immediately launched into a running commentary about the barmaid's breasts, my brawl with the deputies, soggy potato chips, the game I'd sat out, the barmaid's butt, Coach's new pick-up truck, limp pickles and the state of the U.S. Rugby Union, which had finally selected him for the national team. Eventually, he asked what was new with me. As I told him, Riley shoved the last chunk of his sub into his mouth and wiped each one of his fingertips with a napkin.

"You going on this trip alone?" he asked, still chewing.

"Yeah."

He chortled, causing a small ball of masticated beef, bread and mayonnaise to fly from his mouth to the bar.

"Good luck."

"Why do you say it like that?"

"I did the same thing four years ago. I was planning to stay over in Europe for three months, but came home after one and a half."

"Why?"

He drained the rest of his beer. "I got tired of living out of a backpack and riding those crowded trains and seeing all of those sights I always imagined to be more than just tourist traps. But more than anything, the loneliness got to me."

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"Lonely? You?"

He nodded, then hit his chest with his fist and belched. "Scuse-em-wha. You speak any foreign languages?"

"A little Spanish, but not much."

"Then you'll see what I mean," he said, throwing some bills on the bar. "Hey, Rosy! What do you say we both take the rest of the afternoon off?"

The barmaid was washing out glasses at the other end of the counter. "Not today, Chuck," she laughed. "I've got a headache."

Riley tossed another bill on the bar. "Then here's an extra buck to go buy some aspirins. You'll have to come up with a better excuse tomorrow." He got up and patted my back. "So when are you leaving?"

"A couple of weeks. Maybe a month. My rent's paid up till May."

He shook his head as though I were being carried off a rugby field with my foot turned the wrong way around. "See you at practice then?"

"I don't know. I don't want to risk getting hurt playing rugby now. Besides, with that new Aussie guy, you don't really need me anymore."

"Well, you're right about that," he said, then laughed. "Just kidding. Nobody runs like the Rabbit. Nobody." He looked at his watch. "Except me." He did a couple of stutter steps in front of his bar stool, spun around it, cut between two tables, hurdles a wooden bench,
straight-armed the cigarette machine and dashed over to the door. He turned and waved. "Laterisms, gang."

Rosy delivered my turkey sandwich, still chuckling over Riley's antics. I took a bite, but couldn't seem to chew enough times to swallow it. How could Riley have been lonely? The guy was tall, handsome, funny and outgoing. In Sensinitas, he had as many friends as a man with a winning lottery ticket in his hand.

I forced half of the sandwich down my throat, drank a couple of drafts and went for a ride on my bike. Sensinitas was an unincorporated coastal town with Route 101 serving as its lone main drag. Leaving it meant no more avocado, mushroom and cheese omelettes at Betty's Diner, no more smoking dope in the Palomino Theater's balcony during the Sunday night surf flicks, no more campfire singalongs on Moonbeam Beach, and no more sunset cocktails on the bluffs. I bought a pack of Marlboros, the first one in a year and a half, since I started going out with Frannie. Then I rode my bike around for the rest of the afternoon. The town never seemed so quaint, the beaches so beautiful. I felt as though I had owned the whole area and just sold it for three magic beans.

That night, I called my parents.

"You what?!" Even with three thousand miles of telephone cable between my mother's mouth and my ear, her voice still managed to rattle my skull.

"Quit my job."
"Why?" she asked.

"It just wasn't working out. Besides, I want to travel some, see a bit of the world before I get too old."

"Abe!" she yelled without moving her mouth from the receiver. "Abe! Pick up the phone. It's your son. He lost his job."

"I didn't lose it. I quit."

"Why?" my father asked.

I didn't get a chance to answer because my mother was already off and running about Mickey Weissman, who had apparently quit selling insurance, given all of his money to the Unification Church and been last seen peddling roses on Broad Street in downtown Philadelphia. The same Mickey Weissman, I reminded my mother, who ate Drano on a dare, nearly hung himself when we were playing cowboys and Indians, and used to shoot himself when he got cornered in cops and robbers. My father supported me on this point, then told my mother to keep quiet so I could tell him what had happened. I did and could almost see his nostrils flare when I explained how I wouldn't have to sell my car if he could spot me two thousand bucks.

"Now that's the height of chutzpah," he said. "No. Definitely not. If you do this, Stanley, you're on your own."

"I figured you'd say that."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Miracles happen."
"So now he expects miracles," my mother chipped in. "You know why you'll never make good?" my father said. "Because you live in a goddam dreamworld and don't have any staying power for the things that really matter."

No staying power? That got to me. Obviously, he'd never seen me pushing my limit at the end of a close rugby game. He'd never seen me pump out a story in twenty minutes to beat a deadline. And he certainly hadn't seen me in the sack with Frannie. He was the one with no staying power. He and my mother both. Life had beaten them years ago, when Robby died.

The conversation turned into a three-way shouting match. While I tried to defend myself, they blamed each other for their parental failings. My mother accused my father of being too lenient a disciplinarian. My father accused my mother of being more interested in her bridge games at the club and dinner parties than her son. But in the end, they teamed up against me. After all, they'd done their best, and there were a lot of children around with worse parents who had turned out better than I. What they didn't say, but undoubtedly thought, was that Robby had turned out fine with the same parents.

I finally hung up, feeling an odd mixture of anger and guilt. Anger because my parents always acted as though I was a mistake. "A romantic night in the Poconos," I overheard my father tell someone once. One child was all they ever really wanted, and to them it must have seemed a
cruel twist of fate to lose Robby and be stuck with me. I felt guilty because I was beginning to realize that there was some truth in what my father said. I'd always been a good starter and terrible finisher, in everything from rugby to relationships. With a little more dedication, I could have been a good enough rugby player to make the national team. With a little less neglect, I could have made a good husband for Frannie. With a little more perseverance writing about Little League and the like, I could have been covering the World Series someday. Every time I'd gotten close to succeeding at something, I let it slip away. I wondered what was wrong with me, why I couldn't find my niche in life. What on earth was holding me back, time and again?
CHAPTER 6

Besides my parents and Chuck Riley, almost everyone else I talked to thought a motorcycle trip through Europe was a cool, radical, awesome, bitchin' or just plain great idea. People envied me, said they'd like to do the same kind thing if not for the job, spouse, parents, kids, mortgage, dog, cat and/or car payments. Eyes lit up, smiles broadened and I collected dozens of addresses scrawled on matchbook covers, scraps of paper and restaurant napkins. Everyone wanted a postcard from some exotic spot. Everyone wanted to escape from something. Everyone wanted to be in my shoes.

Except me. I couldn't help feeling that I'd somehow managed to parlay a simple case of mistaken identity into a world series of errors. A typhoon, tsunami and twister combined couldn't have leveled what I'd built up in California any faster. And, to tell the truth, I'd never even ridden a motorcycle before. But it was time to change, adapt, start a new life. To prepare myself for it, I started exercising like a boxer before a title fight, bought a pair of hiking boots with vibram soles and a tourist guidebook called The Budget Traveler's Bible, picked up road
maps of Europe from the automobile club, memorized foreign phrases, read *The Drifters*, started growing back the beard I'd worn during my underaged drinking days, sold my car and everything else I could, and tried to keep my mind filled with daydreams of topless beaches, bottomless beers and the open road.

It didn't always work, especially when memories of Frannie invaded my thoughts. Once it sunk in that she really wouldn't be coming back, my love for her seemed to quadruple. I called to find out when she'd be over to pick up the rest of her stuff, but Mrs. Hernandez said Frannie had gone to visit her father in Orange County. So I was stuck with reminders of her wherever I looked—the twenty-seven pairs of shoes in the closet, the flowery box of tampons in the medicine chest, the pink razor in the shower, the perfume bottles on top of the dresser, the Mason jar of mixed spices in the kitchen cabinet, the wilted bridal bouquet hanging on the bedroom wall—a part of me wanted to pack it all up and dump it on her mom's front lawn in the middle of the night. But a bigger part of me wanted to leave her things untouched, probably for the same reasons my parents had always left Robby's room the way it was when he died.

About two weeks passed before Frannie finally turned up. I was stretching out on the living room carpet after a six-mile run and was feeling both strong and relaxed when she walked through the door with Ray Warren, a friend of the
family who had sat next to me at Frannie's cousin's wedding reception.

Frannie gave my cheek a peck. "You remember Ray?" she asked.

"Sure," I replied, shaking his hand. It felt like a cinder block. "How's the construction business going?"

"Booming," he replied with a smile. He was in his mid-thirties and sported a set of deeply etched crow's feet around his eyes from working out in the sun a lot. I liked Ray because he had tons of money but was a jeans and t-shirt kind of guy. Through the screen door, I could see his old pick-up truck parked in front of the house. It was crusted with splatters of caked cement and dried mud.

"Still driving that eyesore?" I kidded.

"Yeah, well, she's been in the business as long as me and I just don't have the heart to lay her off." He looked at Frannie and shrugged as though apologizing for something that wasn't his fault.

The three of us set about amassing, packing and carting Frannie's stuff out to the truck, talking about the weather, current events and other generic topics people might discuss while waiting for a bus. Had Ray not been there, I'm sure Frannie and I would have reminisced about how she came to buy those toadskin shoes in Tijuana, the tuna noodle casserole she made that Buster wouldn't even eat, how her cousin so blatantly fixed the bridal bouquet toss, and all the other fond or funny memories whose tangible remnants we
were either packing up or throwing away. There was a certain awkwardness I couldn't pinpoint until I realized that Ray was in love with Frannie. I could see it in the way he never took his eyes off of her for long and how his whole face lit up when he said something that made her nod or smile or laugh. I began not liking him so much and wishing he'd just leave us alone.

As Ray hefted the last carton to his shoulder and headed for the front door, he paused to look at the floor and say, "I suppose you'll want to say good-bye to each other. I'll wait outside."

"Considerate guy," I said after he left. "You going to marry him?"

Frannie looked startled. "Marry Ray? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"He's crazy about you."

She shrugged. "He's almost old enough to be my father."

"Well, isn't that what you want? The daddy you never really had to take care of you?"

She didn't answer. I sat on the legless sofa. Frannie walked around the nearly empty room like a dog looking for the right spot to lie down, then settled for a seat on the armrest next to me. She was wearing a pair of white shorts I'd once told her were too tight. They were even tighter, but she looked terrific.

"I like the beard," she said, reaching out to feel my
stubble. "But you need to shave around the edges so it doesn't look so scruffy."

"And you look beautiful, as is."
"I am not. I'm fat as a horse."
"Then you're a beautiful horse."

She looked up at the ceiling. Spider webs had accumulated in the corners since she'd left. I lit a cigarette.

"So when did you start smoking again?" she asked.
"The day I quit my job."

She smiled. "Oh yeah. I heard about that."
"You should have seen the look on Snead's face."
"I can imagine," she said, picking at a little scab on her knee. "So you're going to travel around for a while?"

I blew a nearly perfect smoke ring and watched it undulate through the air. "Yeah. Do Europe on a motorcycle."

She poked her finger through the ring, and the smoke dissipated. "Then what?" she asked.

"Good question. Maybe I'll be ready to settle down when I get back. I don't suppose you'd wait for me."

She smiled, but shook her head. "I might consider it if I thought you really loved me."

"But I do love you. The problem is that you keep wanting to change me, making me quit skydiving and surfing and playing rugby."

She straightened up as though someone had dropped an
ice cube down the back of her shirt. "I hear you have quit rugby," she said. "But not for me. No. You quit so you could go off tramping around the world."

She was right, although I hadn't really thought about it that way. "Look, I'm sorry but...but..."

"But what?" There was a painful whine in her voice.

"But I didn't decide to go away until after you left me. If you could have just accepted me for what I am, none of this would have happened."

She took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds, then let it all out and said, "God! You're such a child."

"That's rich, coming from a teenager."

"At least I don't go around blaming everyone else for my problems."

"What do you mean? I'm totally free now. I don't have any problems."

"We all have problems, Rabbit. It's just that most of us learn to face them. You always run away, and you know why?"

"Because I'm fast?"

"Because you can't commit yourself to anything, or anyone."

"Great. Now you sound like my father."

Tears filled her eyes. "Look, Rabbit. I don't want to fight with you anymore. Things just didn't work out. Can't we leave it at that."

"Fine by me." I butted my cigarette and smiled up at
her. "How about a little hug and kiss for the road, just to show there are no hard feelings?"

She smiled sweetly, stood up and held her arms out. As I hugged her, some decidedly hard feelings started developing just below my belt. Frannie giggled.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Your joke. He's doing his stand-up routine again."

"Guaranteed to tickle your funny bone, if you'll let him."

The tears welled again. "I can't."

"Then give me a kiss and get going."

Our mouths met, open and wet. Her tongue seemed to silently say that she might wait for me after all. I wanted to stay locked together like that forever and felt emptier than the house when she finally pulled away. Tears were running down her cheeks. She wiped them off with the back of her hand and tried to smile at me, but wound up biting her lower lip. My Adam's apple felt as big as a grapefruit.

"Vaya con Dios," she uttered, choking up both of us even more. Then she turned quickly and left, never looking back. Through the screen door, I watched her climb into Ray's old pick-up. I had an urge to run out there and say whatever it would take to bring her back, but my normally quick feet wouldn't budge. So I just stood where I was and watched the old truck sputter down the street and around the corner.
CHAPTER 7

My roller coastering emotions dipped and swayed even more after Frannie left for good. During the days, I managed to keep myself pretty well psyched for the trip, exercising like crazy when I wasn't taking care of odds and ends. But at night, my mood plunged into the dark, tossing and turning me through the seemingly endless tunnel between dusk and dawn. I was nervous about what I was doing and kept thinking that I was forgetting something, or just that something was missing from the whole plan. More than anything, though, I couldn't stop second-guessing myself about Frannie and wondering why I couldn't seem to commit myself to anything.

On the last Saturday of April, I went to a rugby game. The first thing four or five of the guys said to me was: "Are you still here?" I felt like an outsider and couldn't help secretly hoping my team would lose without me. They won, and during the apres-game party at the Tidewater Tavern, as the boys drank and sang dirty songs and pulled down their shorts, I sat by myself daydreaming about my past glories on the field: scampering seventy yards in the last minute to score the winning try against Santa Monica,
tackling the Belmont Shores two-hundred and forty-pound number eight at the goal line to preserve a victory, and my miraculous drop kick to beat Los Angeles in the semi-finals of the Santa Barbara Tournament. It was miraculous because I kicked it from about thirty yards out right in front of the goal posts, but over the seasons it had grown, by team consensus, into a fifty-yarder against the wind from the right sideline. But that was all history now. I wasn't even part of the team anymore. When the inevitable chugging contest began, I slipped out of the tavern without saying good-bye to anyone.

Coach followed me outside. We leaned against the side of his new Datsun pick-up and talked for a while. He seemed to be the only one who understood that I was more scared than excited about my trip. He told me that it was like butterflies before a game, and once I got going, they'd flitter away. He also offered to give me a ride to Los Angeles Airport in exchange for my big oak desk. This was a good deal for both of us, except that he couldn't take me until Sunday, May second, because we had a game on the first and he worked during the week. I called my landlady when I got home. She magnanimously gave me until noon Sunday, but said she'd have to deduct a day's rent from my security deposit if I stayed any longer.

On the first of May, Santa Ana winds were blowing hot air in from the desert and the temperature was pushing a hundred. I was glad I didn't have to play rugby in this
heat. Instead, I was stripped down to my jockeys, sorting through my few remaining possessions. What I planned to bring went into my new backpack, and what I wanted to keep but couldn't take got packed into a large carton that once held ninety-six rolls of blue Charmin toilet paper.

I finished emptying the closet and started on my desk. Most of the stuff in its drawers went into the carton: my high school yearbook, letters from old girlfriends, two shoeboxes full of photos, high school and college diplomas, dozens of newspaper clippings with my byline, rough drafts of short stories, a movie script about rugby I never finished and my nearly complete Conan the Barbarian comic book collection. I picked up my skydiving log and flipped through it. Thirty-three jumps. I had been doing seventy-second delays from 12,500 feet when Frannie decided to stop dating me until I quit.

My eighth jump, a five-second delay from four thousand feet, was underlined in red marker because my parachute had what is called a Mae West malfunction. This happens when one of the rigging lines winds up over the canopy, dividing it so that it looks like a bra that would fit a King Kong-sized Mae West. Although I was drifting to earth at a safe rate of speed, there was the danger of friction from the line igniting the nylon of the canopy at any moment, causing me to plummet to my death in a fiery blaze. The standard procedure is to try to untangle the line, and if that fails, cut away the main chute and rely on the reserve,
which has hopefully been packed more carefully than the giant flammable bra. Unable to straighten out my main, I shakily grabbed my cutaway straps. I'll never forget the feeling I had as I tugged them and started falling faster, life and death fluttering in the wind along with my detached main chute. But it only lasted a few seconds, until my reserve opened with a clap that seemed to stop me dead in mid-air. Ever since I'd quit my job, I'd felt the same sense of helplessness, my main chute needlessly cut away, but my reserve taking forever to pop open and stop my freefall.

I tossed the skydiving log into the Charmin carton and started emptying the desk's middle drawer, which was filled with copy pencils, pens, felt-tips, rulers and a bunch of other office supplies that had once belonged to the Sensinitas Sentinel. In the nook where I kept paper clips, I found my lucky JFK half-dollar, the one Robby had given to me on the first day they came out in 1964. It was the only silver minting and I'd always been afraid of losing it. Now, I couldn't decide whether to take it or leave it. With the flip of the thumb, I let the coin decide. Tails. I tried two-out-of-three. Tails again. It didn't want to come along, but I stuck it in the pocket of the blue jeans I was leaving out to wear the next day anyway.

Clothes packed, knick-knacks tucked away and desk cleaned out, the only thing left was my bulletin board, which had a haphazard montage of pictures tacked to it. The
board wasn't worth saving. The pictures were also worthless, yet priceless.

I took down an old black and white snapshot with scalloped edges. In it, Robby and I are posing with our brand new rabbits in front of the bird feeder in our backyard. Robby is holding his albino like a veterinarian's assistant while I'm clutching my pinto like the Boston Strangler. Robby had just turned a sophisticated eleven and named his rabbit Scamper. After yelling at me to hold mine properly, he pressed me to christen it before it developed some sort of identity complex. Flustered and still a few weeks shy of my fourth birthday, I could only think of one name.

"You can't call your rabbit Stanley," Robby said with a stomp of his foot.

"Why?"

"Because you can't name a rabbit after yourself. It's stupid. You can call it Spot, Fluffy, Jack or Peter, but not Stanley."

I believed him and was trying to decide between Spot and Jack when our mother intervened. She said I could call my pet whatever I wanted and that Stanley was a very nice name for a rabbit. Robby was outraged, but my mother held her ground. It was one of the coolest things I remember her ever doing. However, two days later, Stanley Rabbit escaped from his cage and hippity-hopped into the neighbor's yard where Benny the Beagle munched him for breakfast. At that
point, Robby, who had been so opposed to me naming my rabbit Stanley, promptly reversed fields and decided that his little brother, Stanley, should henceforth be known as Rabbit.

It was a rainy Sunday afternoon when I'd shown this picture to Frannie. We were sitting around my bedroom telling stories about ourselves to each other. She asked how I'd come to get my nickname. I pointed to the picture, and when Frannie saw my little hands locked around Stanley Rabbit's neck, his eyes bulging and his lucky feet pointing in four different directions, she cracked up. She always got turned on when she laughed real hard, and we ended up in bed together before the story even got told. It was our first time. Statutory rape by a month, if you want to get technical about it. But she was the aggressor, later on admitting that she'd been planning the whole thing, even worn her sexiest lace panties. I don't remember them, just the feeling of our bodies uniting, and afterwards, lying together with her head resting on my shoulder, every curve of her body fitting snugly into mine. As her fingers toyed with the hair on my chest, I thanked fate for throwing her my way, yet even then worried that I'd lose her someday.

With a sigh, I slipped the picture into a manilla envelope and took down some hero shots I inherited from Robby: President Kennedy relaxing aboard a yacht, Sean Connery as James Bond, Errol Flynn as Robin Hood, the seven Mercury astronauts, Ernest Hemingway with his fingers poised
on a typewriter keyboard, Jean-Claude Killy flying over a mogul and Gaston Rebuffát, the famed French mountain guide, posing next to the iron cross that stands on the ridge between the Matterhorn's Swiss and Italian summits.

Most of the remaining pictures were of me. My favorite was a black and white blow-up the Sentinel's staff photographer took during the previous fall's rugby season. I've got the oversized football tucked under my arm and I'm making what appears to be a gravity-defying cut. One opponent is lurching past me and two more are sprawled on the turf in the background. I was small for a rugby player and survived the so-called "elegant violence" of the game by being quick enough to avoid the big galoots. But not always. About five minutes after this picture was taken, someone caught hold of my shirt sleeve and spun me right into a guy who looked like a beer keg with legs. He hit me elegantly enough to knock me about ten yards out of bounds and break my nose for the third time.

I removed the thumbtacks from that picture and the photo below it fell behind my desk. I ignored that one to take down the rest: a shot of me riding Fever at the horse farm where I used to work, another of me standing in my prized marijuana garden before it got ripped-off, a group shot from a fiesta in Tecate, Mexico, where I have somebody's pudgy bebita on my lap, a polaroid of Frannie and me sitting astride a donkey painted to look like a zebra in Tijuana, and the last of a daring sports reporter walking
across a runway with a spent parachute in his arms and a goofy smile on his face.

That left the one which had fallen. The one I loved and hated the most. I crawled under the desk, nabbed the picture and whacked my head on the open drawer backing out.

I sat on the floor and gazed at the photo as I had a thousand times before, trying to will myself back to that moment to change the inevitable. The picture was faded from exposure to light, but I could still make out the Dartmouth green of Robby's windbreaker and stocking hat as he clung to some nameless cliff in New England. He was smiling broadly, not for the camera, but rather for the sheer joy of being perched on a nub of rock hundreds of feet above the treetops. On the back he'd written, "We can only die once. 4/14/68"

"We can only die once." It was a quote from Edward Whymper's book, Scrambles Amongst the Alps. Luc Meynet, Whymper's hunchbacked porter, had continually chirped it on the most difficult parts of a scramble which led them to within thirteen hundred feet of the Matterhorn's summit, higher than anyone had ever gone before. Robby liked that story best, I think, even more than the one of the first ascent. He always used to say it was inspiring to think that a deformed little peasant once stood high above the most skilled and able mountaineers in the world.

"We can only die once." Less than two weeks after this picture was taken, Robby and a guy named Kim Erikson tried
to climb the north face of Cannon Mountain. It was early in
the season, and the ice that had set in the cracks of the
rock during the winter was melting during the day and
refreezing at night, loosening up everything. People had
warned them about it, but to Robby, warnings were
challenges. Kim said they were within a hundred feet of the
top when my brother hammered that fatal piton.

Two carloads of his college buddies drove down for the
funeral. After the cemetery, we all sat around the living
room of our house and reminisced about him. Rick Savage,
the Dartmouth Outing Club president, told about how Robby
used to climb the tallest pine trees on campus and tie
little banners with our family name on top. And Kim Erikson
chokingly recounted how they'd once scaled the library tower
in the middle of the night to put a huge drawing of Mickey
Mouse over the face of the clock.

Kim was Robby's best friend, a big guy who was an
exchange student from England. They lived in the same dorm,
where Kim made his round-the-world call. Robby had told me
about it at least a dozen times. Kim used the pay phone on
the third floor to call the overseas operator in England,
then asked to be connected to an operator in France, then
Italy, Greece, Turkey, India and so on until he got a
Japanese operator to connect him with one in the States who
rang up the pay phone on the second floor. Robby answered,
and while the operator said to deposit twenty-seven dollars
for the first three minutes, Kim asked Robby to bring him a
beer and hung up.

Robby had saved Kim's life once, when a falling rock knocked him out. Kim tried to return the favor by giving my brother mouth-to-mouth until he could feel rigor mortis setting in, or so I overheard at the funeral parlor. Later on, Kim told my parents he was giving up mountaineering forever, but then drew me aside and said he knew what the Matterhorn had meant to my brother and me, and if I ever wanted to climb it, he'd be honored to guide me. I shook my head and told him how my parents had made me swear not to take up mountain climbing. Robby had always told me a man was only as good as his word, and I wouldn't have thought of breaking so serious a vow. Besides, I didn't want to even think of the Matterhorn back then. It had been a common dream for Robby and me. Climbing it without him just didn't seem right. Kim gave me his address anyway, which I lost when I moved to California. But I never forgot the name of his hometown, Flyford Flavell, because it was so odd and sounded like the brand name of a fishing rod.

Kim had taken this last picture of Robby, and I wondered what had happened to him. I couldn't help asking myself if he'd still make good on his offer. Or would he be too old and settled? Robby would have been thirty-five. It was hard to believe. I couldn't imagine him any different than he was in the picture. I seemed to be hypnotized by his face, and for the first time noticed the glinting reflection of the sun in his sunglasses. It looked like a
cross of light in each dark round lens. Almost like a negative of the brocken spectre. I shivered. Robby's smile started talking to me, telling me that it wasn't too late for me to fulfill our dream and that the pledge I'd sworn to our parents shouldn't really count because it was made under duress. Besides, the two of us had shaken hands on a vow to climb the Matterhorn long before I promised anyone I wouldn't. I could hear his soft, deep voice urging me to go for it on my own, for the both of us.

My heart started racing, and the spot where I'd bumped my head on the desk drawer throbbed. I wasn't exactly sure of the question, but somehow knew that the answer was to climb the Matterhorn after all. It was Robby's unfinished business in life, the unfinished business of my own past. Maybe this unrealized dream was a key to that stumbling block buried deep in my subconscious which kept me from committing myself to anything and finishing what I started. And, if nothing else, climbing the Matterhorn would be a noble challenge, one that would give my trip a purpose and take all of my strength, courage and determination. It was something I could start and see through to the end, no matter what.

I started to put the picture of Robby into the manilla envelope, then decided to take him with me and stuck it in the middle of my new, blank-paged journal. Then I pulled on a pair of rugby shorts and ran over to a neighbor's house to call international information. Somehow, I knew Kim Erikson
was still waiting for my call, even after fourteen years. It wasn't too late. All I had to do was find him. If he waivered, I'd remind him of his promise to me and how Robby had saved his life once. He wouldn't turn me down. Not Kim. He was too much like Robby.
I had to put my nose right up against the screen to see inside my neighbor's porch. Old man Arnold was stretched out on a chaise lounge reading the afternoon newspaper. A sweating glass of lemonade was sitting on the wooden floor within easy reach of his right hand. He shifted as though he were reaching for it with his left hand and cut two short farts and a long one.

"Excuse me, Mr. Arnold. Could I use your phone for a minute?"

He looked in my direction, then dropped the paper on the floor. With another fart to get him going, he took about seven separate movements to climb out of the lounge chair. The old guy shuffled over to the screen door and peered at me as though trying to remember who I was.

"My phone?" he asked. "Why?"

I explained that I'd turned in my telephone last week to get my deposit back before I left town, but needed to find out the number of a friend in England.

"England?" he said. "You want to call England on my phone?"

"Just information, Mr. Arnold. It won't cost
anything."

He took a deep breath, the ribbing of his white undershirt stretching like an accordion across his bowling ball belly. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah. Pretty sure. But if there's a charge, I'll pay it."

He unlocked the porch door and motioned me in. "Wait here," he said, turning towards the front door. "I've got to make sure the missus is dressed." He paused before opening it. "By the way, what happened to your wife?"

"She was my girlfriend, but she split."

"Split?"

"We broke up."

He clicked his tongue. "Shouldn't have let that one get away. She was a little sweetheart. Pretty too."

Mr. Arnold went into the house yelling his wife's name. The door drifted most of the way closed, but I could feel a draft of cool air seeping out. For a few moments, I pictured Frannie and me growing old together and retiring to a comfortable house like this where I could spend my twilight "happy hours" reading the newspaper, sipping lemonade and farting on the porch. I thought that Mr. Arnold was probably right. I shouldn't have let Frannie get away. But what was done was done, and most of my concentration was rightfully focused on getting Kim Erikson's phone number and convincing him to climb the Matterhorn with me.

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Mr. Arnold opened the door and invited me in, explaining that his wife was "indisposed in the bathroom." We checked his phone book together to see how to call information in England. Mr. Arnold dialed double-zero to reach the overseas operator and verified that there would be no charge for the call. Then he handed the phone to me. The operator connected me to another line, and I waited through twenty-some of its truncated double rings before someone answered.

"Directory inquiries," a woman who sounded like Julie Andrews answered. "How may I help you?"

I told her, spelling out Erikson once and Flyford Flavell twice. While waiting for her to look it up, Mrs. Arnold hobbled into the living room with a cane, whistling through her dentures. Clad in a flowered house dress and fluffy slippers, she positioned herself in front of the couch and kind of fell back onto it next to her husband. They watched me as if I were a television set.

The operator cleared her throat, which seemed to cause a bit of static on the line. "I'm sorry sir, I have no listing for an Erikson there."

I sighed, suddenly realizing I'd been holding my breath. I thanked her anyway, then hung up and shrugged in the Arnolds' direction.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Arnold asked.

"She doesn't have a listing for my friend."

"Well, maybe he moved."
"Yeah. I suppose he did. But I'm taking off for England tomorrow and don't know how I'll be able to get in touch with him."

"You're going to England?" Mrs. Arnold said. "How lovely."

Mr. Arnold grunted. "Well, once you're over there, you'll just have to go to your friend's hometown and ask around. Maybe one of his neighbors knows his whereabouts."

That made sense. Flyford Flavell didn't sound like a booming metropolis. Even without a street address, I could probably find someone who knew where Kim was, or where his parents had moved. I thanked the Arnolds, wrote down my parents' address for them to keep in case someone came looking for me someday, then walked back to my house.

Unfolding my AAA road map of the British Isles, I scanned England from Berwick-Upon-Tweed in the northeast to Lizard's Point in the southwest, fully expecting a mystical wink from Flyford Flavell to grab my eye. When I couldn't find it, I turned to the index of cities and towns on the reverse side. The listing jumped straight from Fleetwood to Folkestone.

Having nothing better to do, I borrowed the Arnolds' phone again. Maybe the inquiries operator could tell me where Flyford Flavell was located, or at least what county it was in. I went through all of the motions and spellings I had the first time, all the while thinking that I was putting one over on the phone company for a change, like Kim
did with his round-the-world call. This time the information operator was a man, and when he told me there was no such listing, I asked where Flyford Flavell was located. After a slight pause, he answered.

"I believe that would be in the Manchester vicinity."

Back at my house, I quickly found Manchester on my map. It was in the north, near Liverpool. The area was congested with thick red lines denoting major highways. Heavy population. It made sense. I figured there must be hundreds of suburbs that weren't marked. Once there, just about anyone would be able to tell me how to get to Flyford Flavell.

Content I'd done all I could from this end, I rode my bike over to Mrs. Kim's Chinese food restaurant and took home a last supper. Number Eight. Wonton soup, egg roll, pork fried rice and teriyaki chicken. I'd never liked eating alone, but was already beginning to get used to it. At least there was nobody to nag me for slurping hot soup.

After dinner, I put on my new hiking boots and went for a walk around the neighborhood, past the poinsettia nursery, across the Tom Reidell Memorial Little League Field and into a stand of Eucalyptus trees, where I began to feel blisters rising on about eight different parts of each foot. I emerged from the glade at a steep, rocky embankment which had a huge billboard on top. Beyond it, I could hear cars zipping by on the Interstate. One of the round metal billboard poles had a ladder. Without thinking much about
I climbed the knoll and the ladder, then the diamond-shaped scaffolding behind the sign. On top, there was a narrow catwalk. I sat down with my legs dangling over the front side of the billboard. I couldn't see much of the sign from this angle, but knew it was a Coppertone Suntan Lotion ad with that ageless little blond girl having her bikini bottom pulled down by the equally ageless black dog.

As I looked down at the rushing cars on the San Diego Freeway a hundred or so feet below, I felt a slight uneasiness in my loins. This feeling, I'd once reasoned, was some kind of instinctive warning from the source to take care and protect those tingling balls to assure survival of the species. But my balls hadn't always been scared of heights. When I was a kid, I used to climb to the top branches of tall trees without a thought of falling. I loved high places and was good at getting to them. Robby always said that I was the best natural-born climber he'd ever seen. Then he died, and the next time I got ten feet off the ground, my legs started shaking. For a few months, I didn't climb anything. But the following summer, I went into business for myself cleaning roof gutters. That job seemed to steady my legs, even though I never again felt as carefree and secure when I was aloft as I did before Robby's accident.

I looked in the direction of Sensinitas. Porticos from the buildings lining Route 101 were sticking up through the trees. From my vantage, the whole town could have been a
movie set held up by stanchions. I'd sure managed to screw up my performance on that stage. Everything I'd had was gone, my girlfriend, my job, my friends—I scratched my ankle—everything but the fleas from Frannie's cat. I wished I had old Buster up here now. I could do a little experiment: drop him and see if he landed on his feet. Of course, the rocks below would make it irrelevent, but occasionally we do have to make sacrifices for scientific research.

I looked down at the rocks, thinking not of Buster hitting them, but me. It would really be so easy, just lean forward and let go. I probably wouldn't have even felt the impact. I hooked my elbow around a metal strut and thought of the day Robby had told me that the guy who played Superman on the TV show had blown his brains out. Back then, I couldn't understand why anyone would commit suicide when he could have probably just quit his unhappy life and do something fun, like travel around the world. Now, I was doing just that. Was it the last act of a desperate man? Or a dream come true?

I tried to think of it as the latter and pictured climbing the Matterhorn on a crystal clear day, standing on its summit and seeing the whole world spread at my feet. As surfers off Moonbeam Beach caught the day's last waves, the planet Jupiter came out directly overhead, soon followed by the few stars whose light was bright enough to twinkle through the smoggy southern California atmosphere. The cars
below gradually turned into broken streams of white and red lights. I grabbed the metal strut with my hand and leaned over to see the Coppertone girl's broad white ass, remembering how I used to wish I could find a girlfriend who looked just like her. Now, I hoped to meet a grown-up version of her overseas, maybe a Swede or Swiss who could make me forget Frannie.

I felt as though I could have stayed up there all night watching the world turn in. But I knew I'd be better off getting a good night's sleep myself. So I climbed down and headed home, my hiking boots feeling as though they were lined with sandpaper. The house was dark, silent and empty. A ghost house. I undressed and wiggled into my sleeping bag, but couldn't come close to falling asleep. I tried flexing and relaxing my muscles. It didn't work. Frannie popped into my thoughts for a visit and I couldn't turn her away. I saw what she looked like with candlelight flickering on her face, the dimples in her back, her dark nipples growing taut, her thighs drifting apart, her soft, moist lips parting and her warm breath urging me on. "Just for you," she used to gasp at the height of passion. "I'm all yours, all yours, baby."

I got out of my sleeping bag and took a walk around the dark house, avoiding furniture that was no longer there. I sat on the edge of the fireplace, lit a cigarette and tried to blow one smoke ring through another. I had trouble remembering my last full night's sleep. Before the cops
beat me up. After the last time Frannie and I made love. The only other time I'd gone through a sleep-starved stretch like this was when Robby died.

I took a last drag of my cigarette, flicked it into the fireplace, went back to my bedroom and slipped back into my sleeping bag. I took ten deep breaths, then flexed and relaxed my muscles until they felt like jello. But I still couldn't clear my mind. Nasty little doubts about my trip started crawling around inside my head like Buster's fleas crawled on him, and mentally scratching one merely stirred another. Would I ever find Kim Erikson? If so, would he climb the Matterhorn with me? If not, would I be able to find some way to do it without him? How long would five thousand bucks last on the road? Would I get robbed? Beaten up? Lied to? Cheated? What if I couldn't hack it? Where would I go? What would I do?

I rolled over again. You can do a lot of rolling in a sleeping bag on a nearly empty bedroom floor. The sky was lightening. I pulled the sleeping bag over my head and stared open-eyed at the darkness. I could feel my heart racing, like just before a skydiving jump. I saw myself poised at the open door of an airborne DC-3...

A couple dozen other skydivers are lined up behind me anxiously awaiting their turns. My instructor gives me a playful nudge in the small of my back and laughs. It's too late to turn back. I dive through the door. The plane's
prop-blast knocks me ass over teakettle. I arch my back and quickly stabilize in a belly-down free-fall. Arms and legs outstretched, I'm floating high above the brown and green contours of Perris Valley. Wind rippling my jumpsuit and whistling through my helmet, I'm flying with the ground so very far away...far away...away...

"Oh way out west, they have a name, For wind and rain and fire..."

Robby drives up to our old house in Philadelphia in his '65 white Skylark convertible, singing:

"...the rain is Tess, the fire Joe, and they call the wind Ma-ri-ah."

He's smiling, and his wavy brown hair looks as though Sheena of the Jungle has been running her fingers through it. A mop-headed blond who could be an adult version of the Coppertone girl is sitting comfortably on the front of the hood. Dressed in a sleeveless black blouse and white jeans, she's swinging her shoeless feet and laughing silently. Robby waves to me. "C'mon Rabbit!" he yells. "Let's get lost."

I hop into the car. "Where are we going?"

"Wherever the wind blows," he says, stomping on the gas.

"But what about the lady on the hood?"

"Oh, don't worry about her. She's Mariah."

"Mariah the Wind?"
"Right. She can't fall off because we're following her."

Mariah leads us across a suspension bridge to Europe, past Big Ben, under the Eiffel Tower, through the Colosseum, around the Acropolis and into a parking lot at the base of the Matterhorn. There's a triple-chairlift to the top. Robby, Mariah and I strap on skis and get on the lift. It stops just short of the summit. I want to wait for it to start up again, but Robby and Mariah grab my hands and jump off. We land on the mountain's shadowed north face and start skiing down it. They glide effortlessly over the rocky terrain, but I try to stay on the snow-covered parts and can't keep up. Tears blur my vision. They ski out of sight. I catch an edge and tumble down a steep snowfield. I can see where it ends, but can't stop myself from sailing over its edge. Then I'm falling, falling, endlessly falling through black and white clouds, my arms and legs flailing uselessly...

My stomach muscles twitched. I opened my eyes to see my barren bedroom. Once I knew where I was, I forgot where I'd just been. I closed my eyes and tried to remember. Pieces of the dream came back to me, fusing with fragments of countless others, all of which started and proceeded differently, but ended the same way. In my dreams, I'd always fallen off the Matterhorn and awoken before hitting the ground.
CHAPTER 9

My landlady turned up at noon-sharp to take my keys and lock me, my desk and carton of memories out of the house. I couldn't sit still while waiting for Coach and was hit by a fresh jolt of apprehension when he arrived about ten minutes later. He backed his pick-up into the driveway and uncoiled himself from the cab. Flashing a broad smile of removeable teeth, he slapped my back heartily.

"All set, mate?" he asked.

"Yeah. I guess so," I replied, forcing a smile of my own.

"So you're heading to London, are you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, I've got a brother there you might look up."

"Thanks, but I figure to go to Manchester first thing."

He pulled the lobe of one of his cauliflowered ears as though opening the aural canal to let my words in.

"Manchester? Why, that's where I grew up."

My heart skipped. "No kidding? I'm going there to find a place called Flyford Flavell. Ever hear of it?"

"Can't say I have."
"Well, it's probably just a small suburb or something."

His crooked nose seemed to straighten out a bit as he pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. "Not any suburb of Manchester, I can assure you of that. I know the whole county like the skin of my chin."

"But just yesterday an English information operator told me it was in the vicinity of Manchester."

He shrugged. "Well, maybe she got her codes bolixed up. I'd certainly double-check before I went all the way up there."

Coach wasn't the type of guy to say he was sure about something when he wasn't, except maybe during a halftime pep talk of a game we were already hopelessly losing. I began to feel as though I were doing that right now, walking onto a rugby pitch against a team I knew we couldn't beat.

Coach slapped my back again. "Well, let's get the desk into the back of the truck, Rabbit. I want to go and return with enough daylight left to get some work done in the garden."

We made a trip to his house to drop off the desk and store my precious box of memorabilia in his garage. Then it was off to Los Angeles Airport. The sun was so bright on the Interstate it hurt my eyes. I asked what the weather would be like in England. Coach laughed and said that it was usually cold and rainy, even in May. I moaned. The one thing I'd neglected to buy was rain gear.
Coach seemed to be a lot more enthusiastic about my trip than I was. He'd been through it before, pulling up stakes and traveling most of the way around the world before settling down again. He told me to remind him to give me his brother's address, just in case I wound up staying in London longer than I was expecting. Then he went on to tell me what fun and adventures I was going to have. I pictured myself zipping along a two-lane European highway on a motorcycle, lying next to a topless Swede on a Mediterranean beach, drinking a stein of frothy lager in a German beer garden and cresting the summit of the Matterhorn with Kim Erikson. But then I saw myself alone and tumbling down a snowfield towards a fathomless drop. I pulled my lucky JFK half-dollar out of my pocket and rubbed it as though it were Aladdin's lamp, half-wishing I could time trip back to the day I quit my job to reconsider. Dreams, I was learning, are only perfect so long as they remain dreams.

The ride seemed interminably short, and when signs for the airport cropped up on the expressway, I began to feel as though I'd swallowed a live porcupine. We exited the expressway, drove around to the overseas terminal and parked in the unloading zone. While Coach leaned on the hood to scribble down his brother's address and phone number on the back of an envelope, I tried to think of a way to turn back. Coach gave me the envelope and patted my shoulder.

"Well, mate. Chin up."

That was what he always told the team when we lost. I
folded up the envelope absently and stuck it in my back pocket, then shook his hand. It felt dry and warm. I didn't want to let go.

"Don't worry, Rabbit," he said. "Although things can be tough on the road, they always work out."

I knew he was the voice of experience and probably right. But I still had to fight to swallow the lump in my throat.

"Give my brother a ring if you get a chance," he added, pulling his hand away. "At the least, you should be able to wrest a free night's lodging out of him." Then he climbed back into his pick-up and drove away with a cheerful toot of the horn.

I just stood there watching him, and as the shiny blue Datsun rambled across the last of my burning bridges, the porcupine in my stomach started rolling around like a dog in a compost pile. If only I'd been able to contact Kim and set up plans, I might have felt happy and free and excited about leaving. As it stood, I felt unsure about everything and couldn't stop trying to figure out a good enough reason to turn back. But I kept moving forward, mechanically, like my brother used to walk when he started giving me a horseback ride to bed. I bought a standby ticket, then headed off towards a cocktail lounge to await confirmation on an overnight flight to London. The ticket agent called me back, beckoning with the hand that wasn't holding my new little daypack containing my wallet, traveler's checks,
passport and other assorted incidentals, including The Budget Traveler's Bible, with its common sense section whose Rule Number One was: "Don't be careless."

I collected my daypack, walked into the lounge, settled at a table and made the first entry in my journal:

"5/2---Here I sit in LAX (in the lounge, where else?) preparing for my big trip with a scotch on the rocks. I can't remember ever being so scared. Fear is really such an unpredictable emotion. How could someone who has willingly jumped out of airplanes balk over an assuredly softer landing in a not-so-foreign country like England? The thing is that I'm totally on my own now. I don't know if I'll be able to find Kim, or what I'll do if I can't. There's so much I don't know...about climbing, about traveling overseas, about everything I'm doing. Not knowing is what scares the shit out of you."

I ordered another drink, read my words over and over, then stared at the last picture ever taken of my brother. His right hand was still reaching towards the next hold, his everlasting smile urging me to live the dream for the both of us. I chugged my scotch, the whiskey feeling hot and cold at the same time. Then I picked up my pen and made a second entry:

"5/2---Two drinks later---I'm feeling a bit more secure. As fear cross-examines, booze-bolstered philosophy rises to the defense. I'm about to start the adventure of my life and my dreams. And even though Robby is dead, I take him with me. In fact, I now officially dedicate this expedition to Robert Samuel Goodman. The road might be rough, but, like Coach said, things always work out somehow. And if
they don't, the worst that can happen to me is I'll die, and dying is as natural a part of life as eating and screwing, and, who knows, it might be even more fun.

In conjunction with the scotch, the written words did a fair job of exorcizing my fears. But once aboard a British Airways jumbo, my confidence nosedived again. It took two little bottles of Johnny Walker Red to dry my palms, and I still felt nervous enough to chatter away with the Amway distributor in the window seat. At twenty-six, he was two years my junior and already allegedly raking in over sixty grand a year. After I explained what I was doing, he handed me his card and assured me that I too could make a bundle of money selling soap suds. It sounded too easy and too sensible and I had no answer when he asked why I was waiting so long to hit the road of financial prosperity. But when he started showing brochures of his products and pictures of his wife and infant twins, even my fretting brain was lulled into a fitful sleep. We landed at Heathrow at ten in the morning, and by eleven, an airport shuttle had deposited me in front of Victoria Station in downtown London.

The building was terribly dirty. The sky was an oppressive gray and seemed much lower than the sky in California. I walked into the station and threw the Amway guy's card into the first trash can I saw. I'd finally thought of an answer to his question: I had the rest of my life to make money, but only a few years left to climb the Matterhorn. Seemed simple enough, and true. I strolled up
to the posted train schedules. I wasn't sure how to interpret them, but didn't see Flyford Flavell listed as a stop on any of the lines. I tried asking a man at an information window.

"Never heard of the place," he replied.

"Do you know where I could find someone who does?"

"Any post office, I'd wager."

"Where's the closest one?"

He pointed across the station quadrangle. "Next to the coffee shop over there. But you'll have to wait until tomorrow. Today is May Day, a bank holiday. All of the postal offices are closed."

I stepped aside to let a heavyset black woman approach the window. A wino walked up and wanted to know if I'd be willing to buy his overcoat for fifty pence. I shook my head and asked him about Flyford Flavell. He waved his arm ambiguously and slurred something that sounded like "rooster shit," then offered me the coat for twenty-five pence. I gave him ten to leave me alone and found a telephone, hoping a different information operator could help me. This one likewise had no listing for Erikson in Flyford Flavell, but said the city code was the same as Pershore's, which he thought was near Devon. I checked my AAA map of the British Isles. There was no listing for Pershore, but Devon was to the south, in the opposite direction of Manchester. Not knowing quite what to do, I tried calling Coach's brother. But there was no answer.
I sat on my backpack in an out-of-the-way corner and thumbed through The Budget Traveler's Bible, which said there were numerous tourist bureaus around town, and they were open every day of the year except for Easter, Christmas, New Year's and official bank holidays. Tired and frustrated, I leaned against the stone wall and watched people walk by, hoping one of the occasional large, curly-headed passersby would turn out to be Kim Erikson.

The station was big, airy and damp. The domed ceiling made me feel small. A steady stream of people drifted past, but none of them was Kim. I tried to think of what to do, but my brain wasn't working right, something that can happen when you fly eight thousand miles and watch a night pass in three hours. I was wired-out, giddy from a lack of sleep. After several minutes of muddled deliberations, I decided what I needed was a cup of coffee and maybe a cigarette, even though I'd decided to give up smoking again until after climbing the Matterhorn. So I walked over to the shop next to the closed post office.

A pretty blond woman wearing a brown and purple polyester dress and blue leather boots was sitting at the counter. She was reading a hardcover book, smoking a cigarette and looked to be alone. I immediately began to wonder if she might be willing to shelter a wayward traveler like myself. I thought of the success English men have with American women. It was all in the accent: sophistication, classy manners and refined wit, all for saying "bloody"
instead of "fuckin'.'" I figured the reverse would be true in England. Hit her with a blast of yankee bluntness. They all loved John Wayne, didn't they?

"Hey there, good lookin', mind if I sit next to you for a spell?"

She glanced at me and moaned. "Jesus Christ."

"Don't let the beard fool you. My name's Stanley, but all my friends call me Rabbit."

She ignored me and returned to reading her book. I leaned my backpack against the counter, took a seat next to her and ordered a cup of coffee. "What's your name?" I asked.

"None of your business," she replied.

"So your friends call you None?"

Her eyes never left the book. Her cigarette was now smouldering in a glass ashtray on the counter. Beside it, there was a pack of Rothman's and box of wooden matches.

"Uh, mind if I bum a smoke?" I asked.

She looked up. "What?"

"A cigarette. Can I have one?"

The corners of her mouth dropped like Frannie's used to when she was about to get on my case about something or another. But the woman still went to the trouble of picking up the pack and half-extracting a cigarette for me to take. I thanked her, borrowed her matches without asking and lit up. She went back to her book.

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"
She didn't answer, didn't even look up.

"You wouldn't happen to know of a place called Flyford Flavell, would you?"

"No."

"Do you know someone who might?"

"A Flyford Flavellian, I suppose," she said, stubbing her cigarette in the ashtray.

My coffee arrived. It was steaming and so hot I couldn't even hold the cup by its handle. While waiting for it to cool, I used my X-ray imagination to undress the woman next to me. She was thin and fairly flat-chested, but far from scrawny. Probably had a nice ass and thighs, and little boobs with pink nipples. Her face was gorgeous: cover-girl complexion, intense eyes the color of faded blue jeans, dark eyebrows, slightly upturned nose and mouth a fraction too full. I couldn't figure out why such a good-looking woman would want to conceal her beauty in such an ugly dress. Then she turned a page and I caught a glance at the book's title: Women and Labor Management.

I chuckled. "What's that about, having babies?"

She grunted.

"You a women's libber?"

She lowered the book to her lap and paused a second before facing me. "I would deeply appreciate you keeping your imbecilic thoughts to yourself, STON-ley. But if you wish to appear as something other than a complete ignor-RAY-mous, you might consider adding the word
'feminist' to your limited vocabulary."

"Sorry," I replied, and downed a gulp of my cooling coffee. "I was just trying to be friendly. I just got here in England, you see, and I'm a little lost and confused."

She raised her eyes and stopped frowning for a few seconds. "We're all a bit lost and confused, STON-ley. But you'll have to excuse me, I'm extremely upset at the moment."

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not with you."

She looked at the book and growled, then snapped the cover shut, swept her cigarettes and matches into her macrame shoulder bag and left without saying good-bye. I watched her walk across the station quadrangle, the heels of her blue leather boots clacking on the station's marble floor. I noticed that she seemed to be swaying her ass a bit more than seemed natural for her stride, and as she passed the bank of telephones at the corner, she glanced back at me. Then she was gone.
CHAPTER 10

I had another cup of coffee, then tried calling Coach's brother again. As the phone rang, I watched the wino with the fifty-pence overcoat try to sell it to a man with a briefcase. He never even broke stride. The phone rang three, four, five times. I was about to hang up when a breathless woman answered.

"Is Alex Hooper there?" I asked.

"No. Is this Rabbit?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Your accent."

"My accent?"

"Larry rang us last night and said we might be getting a yank caller."

It took me a couple of seconds to remember that Coach's real name was Larry.

"I'm Alex's wife, Nan," she added. "Did you just get in?"

"No. I've been here at least an hour or two."

She giggled. "So you must be terribly familiar with London by now."

"Just familiar enough to know there's no such thing as
a free coffee refill. And it's not cheap. Nearly a pound a cup. For instant."

She giggled again. "Where are you?"

"Victoria Station."

"Well the prices there are bound to be a tad dear."

I loved the way she spoke.

"So what are your plans?" she asked.

"Well, I'm kind of looking for a place to crash for a while. I've got a killer case of jet lag."

"Hmmm, I know how that can be," she said. "But I'm on my way out. In fact, I was halfway down the stairs when I heard the telephone ringing. Could you possibly hold out until later, say around four?"

"What time is it now?"

"Half-eleven."

She meant eleven-thirty. Coach used to say the time backwards just like that. Either way, it meant four and a half hours to wait.

"Is your place near here?" I asked.

"Not far," she replied and started giving me directions. I wrote them on the envelope Coach had given me earlier, surprised to notice how much his handwriting looked like mine.

"...then make a left at the first cross street and walk down to the chemist's shop on the corner. We live in the flat above it. Four-forty-one Kingsland High Street. The entrance is around back. Just ring the bell on the gate.
Any questions?"

I had one but felt it would be too presumptuous to ask if she could wait around until I got there. Nan apologized for running out and suggested I visit the British Museum in the meantime.

A few seconds after I hung up, I remembered that I'd forgotten to ask if she knew where Flyford Flavell was located. But it wasn't worth calling her back. If I'd waited fourteen years to turn up on Kim Erikson's doorstep, I figured one more day couldn't make too much of a difference. Besides, I was too beat to start traipsing around England looking for the phantom village. Actually, I wished I could have just been magically transported to the Hooper's apartment at four o'clock.

A few yards away from the phone, a smiling bobby was moving the bum with the overcoat along. I bought a city map at a news kiosk and, not knowing what else to do, checked my backpack with a locker attendant and asked him the best way to get to the British Museum. He directed me to a bright-red, double-decker bus. Board on the back and step to the front. I sat in the middle of the lower deck, wondering why they seemed to do everything backwards over here.

The bus chugged off. It was nearly empty, but a bunch of people got on at the next stop. One of them was an impeccably dressed gentleman I recognized as Edward Fox, an actor who once played the assassin in The Day of the Jackal.
No doubt about it. After he settled in a seat across the aisle from me, I gave him a knowing smile. He acknowledged it with a barely perceptible nod.

"Too bad de Gaulle ducked," I said with a chuckle.

"Pardon?"

"Charles de Gaulle. You would've had him if he didn't duck. You know, The Day of the Jackal."

"Yes, of course," he replied with a measured smile.

The man attended to some lint on his sleeve. I thought I must have been mistaken. If he had really been Fox, he would have laughed. Besides, I couldn't understand what a movie star would be doing on a bus in the first place and figured the least he'd have done was take a taxi.

I turned my attention to the woman sitting on my left. She was pretty in a kind of prim and proper way, as though someone had put too much starch in her bath water. I introduced myself and joked about the nice weather in London, which was as cold and damp as a healthy dog's nose. She turned up the collar of her raincoat and stared straight ahead until we passed Big Ben. Then she stood up and tromped on my foot when the bus jerked to a stop in front of the Houses of Parliament. She excused herself without sounding the least bit sorry and was soon replaced by a burly, blue collar type with a folded newspaper tucked under his arm. He tapped my thigh and pointed at the well-dressed gent across the aisle.

"Know who that is?" he whispered.
"Edward Fox?"

"Right," he replied, looking a bit disappointed. Then he smiled and winked at Fox, receiving the same reserved nod I'd gotten in return. I expected him to jump across the aisle to sit next to the movie star, or at least get an autograph. But he just unfolded his newspaper and started reading it. Even after being recognized, Fox was left to enjoy his ride in peace. Seemed strange, unnatural even. Fox got off the bus at Trafalgar Square. As we pulled away, I watched him stroll along the sidewalk, nodding here and there, but never being approached for so much as a handshake.

The conductor waved to me when he announced Tottenham Court Road, then pointed in the general direction of the British Museum as I got off. It was only a couple of blocks away, but the cold, misty air made me walk fast and dance around while waiting at a corner to cross a street. I looked left. A man standing next to me was looking right, a drop of watery snot hanging at the tip of his nose. He nodded at me and smiled.

"Nasty day, isn't it?" I said.

"No worse than yesterday," he replied.

"When's the spring weather going to get here?"

"Spring?" he snorted, disgorging the snot-drop. "It came last Saturday. You must have missed it."

What I was really missing was California, with its big blue sky and toasty sun. It was even cold inside the
museum. I kept my sweatshirt on as I walked through a rotunda and great halls filled by things from dozens of ancient civilizations. The emphasis seemed to be on Egypt, and as I strolled past gargantuan statues and temple pillars covered with hieroglyphics, I thought about the time Robby had taken me to the mummy room of a museum in Philadelphia. One of the specimens there had been a baby whose feet were exposed, and you could count all ten little black piggies. In a glass cabinet above the baby, there was a series of painted jugs shaped like animal heads which contained various mummy innards. Robby said the Egyptians used to pull out a corpse's brain through its nose with hooks. I didn't really believe him until my eighth grade history teacher said the same thing, which made Mary Alexander throw up the remnants of a tuna fish sandwich on her desk.

The British Museum had a mummy room too, upstairs. I was surprised to see that the Egyptians practiced the same mortuary arts on animals. Apparently, they held all life sacred. Or maybe they just experimented on the animals, like we do. Anyway, I saw mummies of a cat, kitten, dog, eel, snake, ibis, falcon, shrew, bull, ape, duck, gazelle, crocodile and fish.

In the corner of another room, there was a large glass case containing a human body half-buried in sand. According to a plaque on the wall, the corpse was a couple of thousand years old but had been preserved as well as a mummy by the heat and aridness of the North African desert where the man
had died. His complexion made a prune look smooth, but his cardboard-brown skin was intact from the tip of his nose to the pointed index finger of his outstretched hand. He looked as though he'd died while crawling somewhere. I wondered if he had been lost, or injured, or an outcast, or an explorer. Leaning on the glass, staring down at the two thousand-year-old man, I felt a wave of dizziness. My mouth suddenly seemed parched, my eyes burning, my limbs heavy, my breath tortured, the low whistle of a relentless wind humming in my ears...

"Hear now, you're not to lean there," a guard said, tapping my arm. I shivered once and looked up at him.

He laid a hand on my shoulder. "Are you all right, sir?"

I straightened up and shook my head to clear it. "Yeah. I'm okay."

The guard's eyes narrowed slightly. "Then you'll be having no reason to lean on the cases, will you now?"

I nodded absently, left the Egyptian exhibit and walked around aimlessly, looking at Greek and Roman artifacts and seeing nothing but a lost soul crawling through the desert. It was like I'd just been there, actually been that guy for a few seconds of misplaced time.

I wandered past the Rosetta Stone and into the museum's reading room, which contained the Magna Carta as well as handwritten notes and manuscripts from the likes of Robert Louis Stevenson, Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll. George
Bernard Shaw was represented by a postcard explaining how he normally wrote in a code to make his work inaccessible to "the literary ghouls who dig up and publish all an author's mistakes and slips and blunders and redundancies." There was also a letter from Thomas Hardy and a mortgage contract penned by William Shakespeare.

The library felt warmer than the rest of the museum, and my eyes grew weary of trying to read the lousy penmanship of the immortal writers. I asked a guard the time. One-thirty. Still too early to head over to Coach's brother's place, but I knew if I hung around the museum any longer, I'd fall asleep on my feet, or perhaps leaning on another glass case. So I left.

Outside, the drizzle was heavy enough to be classified as rain in any other country. I flipped up the hood of my scarlet sweatshirt, crossed the street in front of the museum and ducked into the Black Cannon Pub to kill some time. A guy holding a pound note called the bartender "barkeep" and ordered a pint of Watney's bitter. I did the same and, like him, pocketed the twenty-six pence change.

The pub's dark, wood-paneled decor was easy on my tired eyes, and disjointed chatter flavored the smoky atmosphere with good cheer. I took a seat at the bar and sipped my beer, feeling comfortable for the first time all day. I watched four young guys shoot darts at a well-worn board and two businessmen marveling over the assets of a bare-chested tabloid newspaper model. A gray-haired man with a wooden
leg limped in using an umbrella for a cane. He was obviously a regular with a reserved seat at the end of the bar near the bathroom. As the barkeep drew a pint for him, a robust, middle-aged guy wearing a Ralph Lauren polo sweater and Houston Astros cap walked through the door and stepped up to the bar next to me.

"Hey there," he yelled to the barkeep. "I hear y'all got the best damn beer in the world. How about giving me one."

"What kind would you like?" the barkeep asked, pointing out the half-dozen taps.

"Shit, I don't know. Just give me the best you got."

The barkeep shrugged and drew a pint of McEwan's Export. Astros Cap smiled, wet his lips and took a healthy swig. Then he grimaced like one of the Little Rascals swallowing a tablespoon of castor oil. "Goddam, that's terrible," he said. "I've tasted better beer in Mexico for chissakes."

I blushed, thinking that I'd probably sounded as obnoxious to the feminist at the coffee shop and the starchy woman on the bus and Edward Fox.

"I'm sorry sir," the barkeep replied with an affected patience. He pointed to the Carling tap. "Perhaps you'd prefer a lager. That's more like the beer with which you're acquainted."

"Carling Black Label? What're you, kidding me?" He wiped his mouth with a napkin. "How much do I owe you?"
"Eighty-eight p."

Astros Cap slapped a pound note on the bar. "Well, I know we're not supposed to tip you fellas over here, but keep the change anyway. And you can keep your beer, too."

Muttering something about cow piss, he turned and walked out of the place. My face still felt flushed. I eyed his barely touched beer. Mine was almost empty. The barkeep rang up the sale. For a second, he couldn't seem to decide whether or not to take his twelve-pence tip, or where to put it when he did. I swallowed the last sip in my glass and was about to reach for the full one when the barkeep grabbed it and yelled across the room:

"Hey John! Want a free McEwan's?"

One of the guys playing darts came over to the bar.

"Sure. What's the occasion?"

"The wanker what was just in here didn't like it. Yank twit, you know what I mean?"

John nodded with a laugh, grabbed the pint and tilted it towards the door. "Well, cheers to him."

He took a swig, then got called back to the dart game. I ordered my own McEwan's and drank it quietly, trying not to act like too much of a yank twit or wanker. After that pint, I had a Young's Mild and bummed a cigarette from the guy sitting next to me. He didn't seem to mind and half-extracted one from his pack in the same way the woman at Victoria Station had. We got to talking, and I asked him about Flyford Flavell. He said it sounded like something
that would be in the north, in Yorkshire or Durham.

"What about Pershore?" I asked.

He shrugged. "No. But that could be up there too."

"Pershore's in the Midlands," the guy on the other side of him said.

"You're both balmy," the peg-leg yelled from the end of the bar. "Pershore's in the south, near Brighton. And so is that other place, whatever-it-is."

The three of them argued about it for a while. I ordered a Whitbread. The best beer yet. As I sipped it, the argument died down to a series of grunts and muttered curses, then died with each of the three shaking his head at the other two. There was some talk about the British invasion of the Falklands, and the peg-leg, whose name was Arthur, stood up and challenged anyone in the bar to say that the British shouldn't "go teach the bloody Argentines a thing or two." There weren't any takers, and Arthur sat back down with his chest sticking out as though the Queen herself were about to pin a medal to it.

After that, people started drinking up and leaving, first the dart players, then the other guys at the bar. By three o'clock, even Arthur had hobbled along, patting my shoulder as he passed. The barkeep, who had fetched all of the wayward pints, was washing them out.

"Drink up," he said over his shoulder. "It's closing time."

I laughed. "You're kidding."
"No, all the pubs close now. Three till six, then we open again."

"Why's that?"

He wrung out a dishrag and started wiping down the bar. "It's an old law left over from World War I. Meant to keep the workers in the munitions factories from getting too pissed during their lunch breaks."

"World War I?" I asked, downing the last of my Whitbread. "Why don't they repeal it?"

"Too late. It's become tradition. But what would a yank like you know about tradition?"

" Tradition was what kept the fiddler on the roof."

The barkeep paused for a second, as though he couldn't wipe down the bar and think at the same time. He nodded. "Aye. It stands to reason that if there was a fiddler on a roof, it was whiskey what put him up there. And it rightly follows that there would be no reason for him to come down until the bars re-opened."

I laughed and left the pub, feeling good for having finally made some sort of socially acceptable contact with the natives. But before I even reached the bus stop, the beer, jet lag and past month of partial insomnia teamed up to hit me like a gang-tackle. Too tired to think like a Brit, I tried to cross a street by looking left instead of right. A horn sounded and a shiny black taxi cab swerved into the right lane with an angry fist shaking at me through the driver's window. I jumped back on the sidewalk, my
heart thumping and head spinning. The image of a man
crawling across a desert flashed across my mind. Once
again, I felt as though I were he. But instead of baking in
a sea of sun and sand, I was floundering in a big, noisy,
gray-ceilinged city, perhaps only one careless step away
from joining him in Kingdom Come. I reached into my pocket
to make sure I still had the directions to Alex and Nan
Hooper's place, then flipped up the hood of my sweatshirt
and cautiously made my way to the bus stop.
CHAPTER 11

Once reunited with my backpack at Victoria Station, I followed Nan's directions and took a subway to the Highbury and Islington stop. From there, I was to hop a bus to Dalston Junction. But as I tried to leave the subway station, a big black uniformed woman sitting on a high wooden stool at the exit turnstile stopped me and said, "Ticket, please."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You have to surrender your ticket to me," she replied, impatiently waving the four ringed fingers of her right hand.

"But I don't have it."

"Where is it?"

"I surrendered it to an ashtray on the train."

She rolled her eyes and collected the tickets of some other commuters who offered them automatically. Then she sighed. "Where did you board?"

"Victoria Station."

"And how much did you pay?"

"One pound, ten pence."

"Well, if you wish to avoid paying for your fares
twice, hold onto your tickets from now on, okay?"

I nodded, thanked her and left the station feeling as disoriented as ever. I boarded on the back of the bus to Dalston Junction and stepped to a seat in the front. The conductor let me know when we got to my stop near Kingsland High Street, and from there I followed my hastily scrawled directions to the corner drug store. I walked around back and rang a doorbell on a high wooden fence. A half-minute later, a thinner, more handsome version of Coach opened the door in the fence.

"Alex Hooper?"

"Yes. You're Rabbit?"

"Right."

"Come on in," he said. I pulled the gate closed behind me and followed him up a long flight of exterior stairs. He turned at the landing on top and muttered a curse. The gate door had swung open.

"The latch is a bit of a sticky wicket and you've got to slam the gate," he said, hopping down the stairs to close it properly. As he ran back up, I could see Coach's loping gait in his.

"You play rugby, Alex?"

"No. I was lucky."

"How's that?"

"Larry ruptured one of my kidneys in a game when we were lads. Ended my career just as it was starting."

"You call that lucky?"
"Could have been worse. I could have become a star like my big brother and ended up with a score of broken bones and cauliflower ears and whatnot. But come. Meet my wife."

As we walked into the apartment, Alex nudged a carton of papers aside with his foot. "Don't mind the mess," he said. "We're preparing for a little dinner party."

"A dinner party? Gee, I hope I'm not intruding at a bad time."

"Not at all," a shapely woman said. She was standing in the doorway of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel. "It's just as easy to prepare for seven as six."

"Thanks," I replied, shaking her damp hand daintily. "You must be Nan."

"Yes, I must be," she said with a shy smile. She had dark hair cut in a page-boy do, porcelain-white skin, lively green eyes and would have been beautiful if not for her teeth, which were even and straight but more gray than white. "Have any trouble finding us?"

I told her about my adventure with the subway ticket, which gave them both a little laugh. Nan's breasts jiggled beneath her madras shirt, which was unbuttoned to the top of her cleavage. A pair of blue veins stretched symmetrically from the base of her neck to the top of her breasts, and I couldn't help imagining how they branched out across the creamy skin beneath her shirt to nourish the nipples I could see in outline.
"You chose a good day to visit," she said as though I'd just decided to drop by because I happened to be in the neighborhood. "Tonight is..."

"Special," Alex interrupted. His wife looked at him oddly. "Let's keep it a surprise for now, Nan."

She put her hand in front of her mouth and giggled. A wave of weariness swept over me, and for a second I could have sworn Nan was standing there naked. I shook my head like a late-night driver trying to stay awake behind the wheel. Nan's clothes instantly reappeared.

"You may take off your rucksack if you wish," Alex said.

I'd almost forgotten about it. As I shrugged it off, Nan excused herself to go back into the kitchen. Alex and I sat down in the living room, which looked to have been decorated by a spinster and smelled like a used bookstore. There were tons of books around. Most of them were history tomes, as thick as telephone books and probably about as much fun to read. But one shelf was filled with novels written by a lot of the same authors I liked: James Michener, Leon Uris, Kurt Vonnegut, Mark Twain, James Clavell, Trevanian and Robby's favorite, Robert Ruark.

"They're Nan's," Alex said when he noticed my head tilted to read the titles. "I haven't the time for fiction."

Nan reappeared with three ice teas on a silver tray, sugar and lemon on the side. As we drank them, the Hoopers
asked about Coach, then told me a bit about themselves.
Alex was a history teacher at a private high school; Nan was a nurse who specialized in critical care. They'd been married eight years. They had no children, but seemed to want some. And their flat was mostly furnished by antiques they'd inherited from old Aunt Clara, who Alex said had probably bought the stuff new. I told them about my job and why I quit, then asked if they knew the whereabouts of Flyford Flavell. The Lost City of England. Neither had ever heard of the place.

My eyelids felt like concrete, and after swallowing several yawns, I couldn't help indulging in one. Nan stifled a yawn of her own, then said we had a long night ahead of us and asked if I wanted to take a nap before the guests arrived. I nodded, grabbed my pack and followed Alex up two flights of squeaky wooden stairs to a cramped bedroom on the top floor. Alex pulled down the shade and closed the door on his way out. I undressed and climbed between the sheets. But as tired as I was, I still couldn't fall asleep. My legs were tingling with tension. I flexed and relaxed my muscles, trying to think of something pleasant. Nan's blue-veined breasts and Snow White skin popped into my mind. I imagined her sneaking upstairs and crawling into bed next to me. All of my tension seemed to flow into my groin. My hand drifted under the sheet, and I pretended it was her mouth, then her delicate fingers as they slipped me into place, her breasts swaying as she rocked back and
forth, bringing me relief, and serenity.

A doorbell rang. I opened my eyes. The clock on the bedstand said eight-thirty, but sunlight was still filtering through the crack between the shade and its gabled window. It seemed as though either the clock was wrong, or the sun. I heard voices downstairs and remembered the dinner party and enigmatic surprise. I was still tired, but even hungrier. And curious. So I got out of bed, took a quick shower, brushed my teeth, slipped on a pair of clean jeans and my electric blue Mr. Zog's Sex Wax t-shirt and wandered downstairs. The dining table was set with white linen, gleaming silverware and crystal glasses. The other guests were milling about, dressed like urban cowboys and cowgirls but holding their cocktails with pinkies extended. I rubbed my eyes, briefly wondering if I might still be asleep.

"Surprised?" Alex asked. He was wearing blue jeans, a plaid shirt with snaps for buttons and a string tie with a silver long-horned steer clasp.

"Yeah. In the States, we celebrate Halloween in October."

They all laughed. "We don't celebrate Halloween at all," Alex said.

"Then why..."

He held up his hand. "It's western night at the pub. But you'll see for yourself later on."

The guests gathered around for introductions. There
were Stephen and Margaret, who were dressed in matching outfits which made them look like they worked in a Roy Rogers restaurant, a chubby, bearded guy named Simon who was wearing a Stetson and red kerchief, and his girlfriend, Hansa. She was a small, doe-eyed India Indian clad in a fringed cowgirl dress and suede boots. She held onto my hand a count longer than the others. When she let go, Simon put his arm around her shoulders.

"So, yank, what do you do?" Simon asked.

"I was a journalist until about a month ago."

"Really. What was your reportage?"

"Sports."

"That's interesting," Hansa said.

"Sports interesting?" Simon scoffed. "Come now, dear. You don't know a bat from a wicket."

She slid out from under his arm. "What I mean is that it sounds like an interesting profession."

Simon just snorted in reply. Something about him reminded me of my childhood next-door neighbor, Brian Weiss, who was a polio baby and never able to walk right. Brian had a big mouth, which he shot off whenever he wanted because he knew none of the other kids were allowed to beat him up. Simon seemed to be waiting for me to ask what he did for a living. When I didn't, he pulled a business card out of a small vinyl case and handed it to me. Attorney-at-Law, it said.

"I'm a barrister," he announced proudly.
"Barrister?" I asked. "Isn't that what kids slide down instead of using the stairs?"

Hansa giggled.

"That's a bannister," Simon replied.

"I know. I was just kidding. But I thought English lawyers were called solicitors."

Simon quickly explained the difference, that barristers are trial lawyers while solicitors deal mainly with contracts. I laughed to myself, thinking that this guy really was an English equivalent of Brian Weiss. In fact, last I heard, Brian was in law school. I tried handing the card back to Simon.

"Keep it," he said. "You never know when you might need my services."

I shrugged and pocketed it, trying to think of something clever to say and coming up empty. Nan, who was now clad in jeans and Lonestar Beer t-shirt, handed me a cold, wet bottle of champagne. I looked at the label, nodded like the connoisseur I wasn't, then tried to give it back.

My hostess smiled without showing her teeth. "I'm glad you approve. We've been waiting for you to come down and open it for us."

"But of course," I said, and quickly peeled away the foil, untwisted the wire and, with John-Wayne-suavity, broke off the cork in the neck of the bottle.

Hansa laughed. Her teeth were even and white, brightly
contrasting her soft brown skin. Simon chortled. "One never twists the corks of champagne bottles."

"One never does, unless one has been accustomed to opening champagne bottles with plastic stoppers," I replied.

Simon looked as though he'd just smelled dogshit. But Alex laughed and quickly solved the problem with a corkscrew. We all clinked glasses, drank up and were seated at the round dining table. I was placed between Hansa and Nan, the seat I'd have picked myself. Big bowls of chili and cole slaw were passed around as well as platters of corn on the cob, baked potatoes, roast beef and barbequed chicken. Simon missed out on the baked potatoes because he was busy explaining how the English government could solve all of the country's financial woes by taxing the Church. When he realized a platter had passed him by, Simon tapped Hansa on the arm and said in a strained cowpoke accent, "Excuse me darling, but would you kindly pass me them there potatoes."

I laughed. "No, no, no. It's not 'excuse me darling' but 'scuse me darlin,' and it's not 'kindly pass me them there potatoes' but 'howsa bout one of them thar taters.'"

Simon closed his eyes for a few seconds as though trying to fend off a headache, then said, "Even in jest, one would hope to retain some degree of lingual civility."

This guy was such a pompous jerk, he was beginning to ruin my appetite. I just wanted to ignore him, but Hansa
was looking at me as if to say, "You're not going to leave it at that, are you?"

I couldn't resist trying to impress her. So I said, "Actually, most cowboys wouldn't even bother to ask. They'd just help themselves like this." I stood half up, leaned over the table and grabbed a potato out of the bowl. Then I reached across Hansa's plate and dropped it on Simon's. "Here ya go, greenhorn."

Hansa laughed. Everyone else was trying not to. Simon frowned at the potato, then speared it with his fork and thrust it back across Hansa's plate to dump it on mine. He looked at Stephen and Margaret. "Heaven knows what he was doing with his hands before he came downstairs."

Heads swiveled towards me, and I could only hope they wouldn't notice my blush. I was about to tell Simon where he could stick his potato when Alex cleared his throat punctiliously and started talking about the war in the Falkland Islands. The British Navy had just drawn first blood by torpedoing an Argentine cruiser called the General Belgrano. The conversation turned into a debate. The three women were unanimously against war for any reason, but the men more or less echoed old Arthur from the bar in saying that the uppity Argentines needed to be taught not to mess around with the British Empire.

"What do you think, Rabbit?" Nan asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. It seems kind of silly for grown-up countries to play finders keepers with islands."
Hansa giggled. "He has such a charming way of expressing himself, don't you think, Si?"

Simon snorted. "I don't know if 'charming' is the right word."

Margaret sighed and said, "It just seems such a waste to risk the lives of young soldiers."

"That's their job," Simon countered.

"To die?" she asked.

"To fight. And I'd bet that any man worth his salt has always wondered how he'd react under fire. Would he be courageous, or crack from the pressure? It's a question that one can't possibly answer until one finds oneself in that situation."

The women just shook their heads, but I could see Alex and Stephen pondering the thought. Me too. In a way, rugby was like war, but it wasn't life-threatening and ultimately just a game. Skydiving could be deadly, but all of the choices were automatic once you left the plane. You couldn't run away in the middle of a jump. But war was different. I wondered how I'd react if my life were really on the line in battle.

"Look!" Hansa said. "He eats the jackets."

They all watched me fork a piece of potato skin into my mouth. "It's the best part," I said, chewing.

"Really?" Hansa asked. "I've never tried it."

I felt something under the table: one of Hansa's stockinged feet rubbing my ankle, her toes working their way
under my trouser cuff. As she cut a piece of potato skin, she winked at me. "But I'm always willing to try something new." She popped the skin into her mouth and said it was delicious. For a moment, I thought I might be dreaming again. But I did notice she didn't take a second bite.

"So, Rabbit, what brings you to England?" Hansa asked, her toes pulling my sock down.

"I'm looking for an old friend who used to live in a place called Flyford Flavell. I don't suppose any of you know where it is, do you?"

Everyone at the table murmured negatives.

"Does this friend owe you money?" Simon asked.

"Nope. But he owes me something else."

"And what might that be?"

I told the whole story, my childhood pact with Robby, how my brother had saved Kim's life once and how he'd promised to help me climb the Matterhorn if I ever chose to try it. Hansa's big brown eyes were wide, her foot caressing my calf. "That's a lovely gesture," she said.

Simon was fiddling with a spoon. "I don't know. One would think he would have learned something from his brother's fate." He looked over at me. "Are you experienced in mountaineering?"

"Not really. That's why I have to find this guy."

"Well, then, I think you're just asking for trouble," he concluded.

"Yeah, I suppose I am," I admitted. "Then again, so
are the soldiers in the Falklands. Like them, I'm just doing what I have to do, regardless of the danger."

Simon scratched his beard. "Perhaps. But yours is a selfish reason. A soldier risks his life to protect those who can't protect themselves."

"Like you?" I asked.

Hansa giggled, but pulled her foot away from my leg. Simon ignored me. "The soldier's act is nobler than yours. You're on holiday, and scaling the Matterhorn is a lark to you, something you do because you don't know what else to do. Correct me if I'm mistaken."

I could have told him it was more than that, but he was wearing me down. Like Brian Weiss, Simon seemed to have the uncanny ability to turn any conversation into an argument, and I didn't really feel like getting into a debate about my personal life with him.

"You just don't understand," I said, trying to end it.

"Perhaps it's you who doesn't understand."

Hansa sighed. "Stop it already, Simon. This isn't court, so you have no need to be cross-examining the poor chap."

"That's okay," I said. "If you really want to know what I can't understand, it's why I've been having so much trouble finding Flyford Flavell."

Margaret brought her index finger to her cheek and rested it where she might have wished she had a dimple.

"You don't mean Flyford Flavell?" she asked,
pronouncing the first part of its name as though it rhymed with the last part of Frank Gifford's.

"Yeah. I guess so. It's supposedly near a town called Pershore."

"Yes, that's right. They're both in Worcestershire."

Worcestershire? I laughed. Slur the pronunciation a bit and it could sound like "rooster shit," which was what I thought the bum in Victoria Station had said.

"My cousin, Alicia, dated a lad from Flyford Flavell when she was at Cambridge," she added.

"His name wasn't Kim Erikson, was it?" I asked.

"No. It was...Jeffries. Colin Jeffries."

"Well, how do I get there?"

Margaret looked at her husband. Stephen cleared his throat. He stuttered a bit. "To reach P-p-pershore, you would take the M-40 to Oxford, then thirty-four north and f-f-forty-four west. From there, you'll have to inquire. There are a host of hamlets in that area."

As I wrote the directions on the back of Simon's business card and stuck it in my wallet, Nan served a dessert of apple pie and cream. Dinner then concluded with a shot of Drambuie. I offered a toast to Margaret for setting a wayward traveler on the right path, then slammed my drink before realizing that the others were all sipping theirs.

Stephen laughed. "He ought to l-l-like Yank, all right."
"Who's Yank?" I asked.

"You'll find out shortly," Alex answered. He looked at his watch and said that we ought to "hit the trail."
Everyone else nodded. All except Simon. He raised an index finger in the air as though making a point to a jury and said, "Let's not be too hasty."

Unsnapping the button on one of his shirt pockets, Simon pulled out a little foil packet and hash pipe. I immediately began to reaccess my opinion of him. He opened the packet and passed it around the table. Everyone sniffed the contents and smiled.

"It's from Morocco," Simon said. "The best hashish money can buy."

I'd always thought the best hash came from Afghanistan, but kept my mouth shut while Simon loaded the pipe and passed it around. We each got two hits, which was roughly equivalent to one bongload of the homegrown sensemilla I was accustomed to smoking in California. Just enough of a taste to make me crave more.

"Had enough?" Simon asked, already refolding the foil packet.

"Yes," Nan said for all of us, except Margaret, who didn't smoke. "Thank you, Simon. That was quite lovely."

Shortly thereafter, the seven of us taxied to a pub called the Mare's Tail. It was pretty crowded inside. A lot of boots, jeans and cowboy hats. The one and only Yank Wanker was on stage with a back-up band, strumming a guitar
and straining his vocal cords. Alex swore that Yank was as English as Prince Charlie, but his act seemed to be straight from Austin, or at least Amarillo. Decked out in buckskin jacket, ten-gallon hat, suede chaps, snakeskin boots and racoon tail tie, Yank yowled and yippity-yo-cah-yeahed his way through some of the funniest country and western songs I'd ever heard.

Apparently, Simon wasn't one for kicking up his heels. So Hansa had grabbed my hand almost as soon as we walked in and made me dance to just about every number, which ranged from the spiritual gospel, "Bowling for Jesus," to the tender, broken-heart love ballad, "At Least I'm Still Standing on my Own Two Knees."

As pints of beer were set up and knocked down, I began to feel as though everything was finally falling into place. I had friends and good music and knew the general whereabouts of Flyford Flavell. Hansa really seemed to like me, and it felt great to hold her in my arms. I began to wonder exactly how hot and heavy she was with Simon, and if she had her own place. Maybe I wouldn't even need Alex and Nan's hospitality.

Yank broke a string, and while he fixed it, Alex intercepted me on my way back to our table. He looked like Coach after someone made a dumb play.

"I think it would be for the best if you stopped monopolizing Hansa's attention," he said. "Simon is getting in a terrible snit."
"C'mon Alex, that guy was born in a snit. Besides, Hansa is the one who keeps insisting we dance."

Alex bit his lower lip. He looked over at Hansa, who had taken a seat next to Simon but was watching us. She took a sip of white wine and smiled innocently. Alex pointed his index finger at my nose, the rest of his fist clenched tightly. "Okay Rabbit. But you better start thinking about finding somewhere else to stay after tonight."

The champagne and beer and hash and Hansa's intoxicating affections made me not even care. Maybe I wouldn't need to stay at the Hooper's flat at all. Just stop by tomorrow morning to pick up my gear and be gone. Off to Flyford Flavell, and Kim Erikson, and the Matterhorn. I was refreshed. Reborn. Ready for anything. But first, another dance with Hansa, and another, and another until Yank Wanker announced that he was taking a break to grab a piss and a beer.

"Me too," I whispered in Hansa's ear. "Don't run away."

She smiled and blew me a little kiss. I didn't even feel the floor as I walked back to the bathroom, that was until I entered it, slipped and nearly fell on my ass. Yank was standing at one of the urinals, whistling through the gap in his front teeth.

"Good show, man," I said, pulling up next to him. "You ought to take it to the States. They'd love you over
there."

He spit into the urinal and flushed it. "Maybe so. But I only make fun of the yanks because I wouldn't want to be like them. Get it, mate?"

I didn't really. But who cared?

As I was walking back to our table, I saw Simon and Hansa leave the bar. I started to follow them, but Alex stepped in my path.

"C'mon Rabbit, I'll buy you a beer," he said.

"What about Hansa and Simon?"

"They just went outside to have a little chat."

He put his arm around my shoulder, but there wasn't much friendliness in it. I sat down at the table and watched the door. Nan touched my arm gently. She wasn't smiling and looked beautiful. She told me that Hansa was not a nice girl, that I should stay away. Deep down, I knew I should have listened to my hosts. But I was in a kind of alcoholic overdrive, drunk beyond propriety. I saw Hansa as fair game. Just somebody's date for the evening. A jerk at that. Brian Weiss's English clone.

When Yank cranked it up again, Hansa came back into the bar alone. She strode up to the table, grabbed my hand and said, "Let's dance."

"What about your beau?"

"I don't care to discuss it." Her eyes were bloodshot as though she'd just been either smoking dope or crying. I looked over at Alex. He seemed to be pretending he didn't
know me. "Listen, Rabbit," Hansa said. "Do you want to
dance with me or shall I find someone else?"

I shrugged at Nan and let Hansa lead me to the dance
floor, where we boogied through a rousing rendition of
"Jailhouse Fop." Then Yank started strumming his guitar idly
and announced:

"This here's a little tune about love called 'It Hurts
to Pee in the Morning.'" He plucked a short lead-in, then
started singing:

"Well, I knew she wasn't
no Virgin Mary when we met,
But I was drunk on red-eye,
and she had such a nice set..."

It was a slow song. Hansa put her arms around my neck
and rested her head on my shoulder. I hugged her so tightly
I could have almost touched my own hips.

"...when I took her home,
she was such a delight,
We did that dirty business,
all through the night..."

Hansa seemed to be trembling. I felt her warm tears
seep through the left shoulder of my t-shirt.

"What's the matter?" I asked.
She sniffed. "Nothing."

"...she said that I was
like no other lover,
except this one bronco buster,
whose name was Glover..."
A heavy hand landed on my dry shoulder. I felt Hansa and me being pried apart. It was Simon, his shirttail hanging out and hat gone. Lights reflected off his balding head. His wide eyes spoke to me. They said, "Duck!" I did, but his fist struck me squarely in the temple. A wave of prickly heat flashed through my head, like when I'd catch a knee or hipbone making a tackle on the rugby field. The floor seemed to hit my back. I craned my neck and saw nothing but legs and feet. Two pairs were scurrying away. I propped myself up on my elbows. Through numerous knees, calves and thighs, I watched Simon and Hansa run out of the bar hand-in-hand. Alex, Nan, Stephen and Margaret rushed over to kneel beside me, but old Yank kept right on singing:

"...her extensive carnal knowledge, shoulda been a warning, Cause now when I wake up, it hurts to pee in the morning..."
As Alex helped me find my temporarily misplaced feet, a massive guy wearing a "Who shot J.R.?" t-shirt pushed his way through the circle that had formed around me. He grabbed my elbow lightly, but in a way that numbed-out my lower arm.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'll have to ask you and your party to leave," he said just loudly enough to be heard over one of Yank's off-key yodels.

"We were just going," Alex replied for all of us.

As the others fetched their things from the table, the bouncer escorted me to the door, holding my elbow almost as though I were his date at the senior prom. I was still in a daze when Alex hailed a cab. It came out of nowhere and seemed to be facing the wrong way to me. We all climbed in, Margaret and Stephen taking the jump seats. As we got underway, the silence was as awkward as a newborn foal. Margaret broke it by saying, "Well, that certainly was exciting. I've never been asked to leave a pub before."

The cabbie glanced in the rearview mirror, then leaned forward to concentrate on the fog-shrouded street.

"C-c-can't say I have, either," Stephen added with a
chuckle, "though I'm rightly ashamed to admit it."

"I don't find it the least bit amusing," Alex snapped.

"Me either," I said, rubbing my temple. Each stroke seemed to bring back another one of my senses. "I hope Simon broke his fucking hand."

I could hear Alex breathing through his nose, making the same funny noises Coach used to make when he was too pissed off to talk. I was glad Nan was between us.

"Well, you can't say I didn't warn you," he finally blurted. "You had it coming all night, Rabbit."

"I had what coming? A sucker-punch to the head? Just because I danced with the asshole's girlfriend?"

Nan squirmed in her seat. Margaret and Stephen just stared out of opposite windows. The cabbie glanced at me over his shoulder. Alex leaned forward to look at me. "It was more than that, Rabbit. And you know it."

"Maybe so," I admitted. "But that guy is just too much. I can't believe he's a friend of yours."

Alex leaned back and cleared his throat as if he were about to give a speech. "Simon and I have known each other since grade school," he said, "and he's a damn decent bloke, even if his manner can be a tad abrasive at times."

"That's putting it lightly."

"Listen Rabbit. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt because Larry spoke so highly of you. If you were anyone else's acquaintance, I'd have left you lying on the floor of the pub."
I almost wished he had. At least I wouldn't have been stuck in a cab, having to listen to him yell at me. I couldn't really blame Alex for defending a friend, but couldn't understand why he was laying all of the blame on me. Simon didn't have to hit me. He hit me because he wanted to, because he was a yappy, mean-spirited little dog of a man who didn't deserve a girl like Hansa in the first place. Tadly abrasive? That was rich. I felt like telling Alex to go to hell along with his "tadly abrasive" pal. But I checked the impulse. It was after midnight and all of my stuff was at his place and the fog was doing its Jack the Ripper thing. And Hansa's place was definitely out. So I just bit whatever moustache hairs I could coax between my teeth and looked out of the window. A spit-shine of mist covered the streets and sidewalks, and the buildings were lurking behind foggy curtains that were invisible except for where streetlights turned them white.

"Do you know what Simon actually does for a living?" Alex asked a few blocks later.

"He's a lawyer, a barrister."

"Correct. And would you care to guess who he represents?"

"Probably corporations and rich people. The lawyers I've known all tend to go with the money."

Alex snorted. "Not Simon. He could make a bloody fortune defending people like that, but he's chosen to champion the poor and downtrodden, waiving his fees as often
I found it hard to swallow. "Well, good for him. But that still doesn't give him the right to sucker-punch me."

"Of course it doesn't. But, you see, Simon's former wife ran off with an American, and he took it extremely hard. Hansa is the first girlfriend he's had in years."

"So he picks girls who like Americans. Is that my fault?"

Alex just grunted. Nan put her hand on my knee. "Can't you see what was happening?" she asked.

"Sure I can. Hansa and I were having a good time and Simon got all pissed off and punched me in the head when I wasn't expecting it. The least he could have done was ask me outside."

"That's not what I meant," she said. "Couldn't you see how Hansa was playing you two against each other all night."

"Why would she do that?"

"Because, if you pardon my language, she's a selfish, manipulative bitch."

"Seemed pretty sweet to me."

Nan laughed. "Perhaps she should have been an actress instead of a nurse. I never would have introduced her to Simon had I known what she was really like, but she had me fooled as well. Alex and I have told him again and again that he could do better, that he deserves better. But he adores her, and she keeps him in line by constantly bringing
him down. She was just using you, Rabbit."

"No way," I said.

"Then why did she go home with him?"

It was a good question, one that my anger and outrage at getting slugged had pushed to the back of my mind. I thought of a few possible answers, but only one of them made sense. Nan was right. I replayed bits and pieces of the evening: how Hansa held onto my hand when we were introduced, laughed at almost everything I said, goaded Simon on by saying I was charming, played footsie with me under the table and danced so closely to me that you couldn't have slid her boyfriend's emaciated self-esteem between us. My love-at-first-sight fantasy evaporated, leaving behind the reality that I was nothing more than a dupe, a yank twit, a real wanker.

The rest of the ride was silent, except for muffled rumble of the engine, the whosh of the tires on the slick streets and the flip-flop of windshield wiper blades. No one in the cab seemed to even be breathing. When we stopped in the alley behind the corner drugstore on Kingsland High Street, the cabbie never took his eyes off of me, except to count the money Alex handed him.

"Well, it was nice meeting you, Rabbit," Margaret said with a disarming laugh. "I shan't forget this evening."

"Me neither," I replied, rubbing the side of my head. "Thanks for telling me how to get to Flyford Flavell."

"My pleasure. I hope you climb your mountain." She
hugged the back of my neck and kissed my cheek. "I think you will."

Stephen grabbed my hand and winked. "Wish you would have gotten a shot at Simon," he said under his breath. "The b-b-bloke rankles my bones as well."

Alex and Nan said their goodnights and went inside. I sat on the outside stairs, lighting up a cigarette while watching the taillights of Stephen and Margaret's car disappear into the fog. I thought I should have asked them if I could stay at their house instead, but now it was too late. I smoked the cigarette down to its filter, then flicked it over the fence and went inside. Alex was sitting on the sofa with his arms stretched across the back and feet crossed at the ankles. He waved one hand. "Have a seat."

I sat on the matching ottoman, expecting a lecture. But Alex just tilted his head back and stared at the ceiling. Nan came out of the kitchen with three drinks on the silver tray she'd used earlier to serve the ice tea. "Hope you like gin and tonic," she said.

I grabbed one. Nan sat next to Alex, propping the tray across their laps so they could use it for a table. I finally apologized for my behavior, telling them about my own girl problems with Frannie and how schizophrenic I'd felt since arriving in London. "I guess you're right, Nan," I concluded. "It was just a case of Hansa finding a fat pigeon to pluck."

"Yes. She has a knack for finding pigeons."
"And she's probably a good plucker," I added.

Nan giggled. Alex popped an ice cube in his mouth and struck a Socratic pose. "Odd," he said.

"What?"

"How much you really have in common with Simon."

"How's that?"

He tongued the cube to his cheek and let it sit there like a wad of tobacco as he explained. "You're both dreamers. He with his equal justice for all, you with your mountain to climb. And you're both reasonably young, bright and good-looking, yet haven't been able to find the right woman."

"I don't know, Alex. I don't think there is a right woman for Simon. No offense, but the guy's got the personality of a tree toad."

Alex chomped down on his ice cube and chewed it up.

"What you've yet to learn," he said, "is that it's easier to criticize someone than to understand him. Where criticism offers nothing but a perverse pleasure, understanding someone like Simon can teach you something about yourself."

The only thing that I could see Simon and me having in common was the same taste in women. But I wondered how I would have reacted had he come to America and hit up on Frannie.

Alex slapped my knee. "Well, I must admit that Simon was in rare form tonight. But let's not dwell on it. We all learn by making mistakes." He looked at his watch and
grimaced. "One-forty, and we both have to be up for another
day of toil at half-six. What are your plans, Rabbit?"

"To sleep late and not toil at all, that is if it's
okay with you. I can lock up when I leave, and I promise
not to steal anything."

Nan laughed. "Where will you go?"

"Flyford Flavell. To track down my brother's friend."

"Will you be coming back to London?"

"I don't know."

"Well, if you do, you're welcome here anytime."

"Really?" I looked at Alex.

He smiled and patted my knee again. "Sure. One should
expect some trouble when one is dealing with ruggers. I
seem to have forgotten that since my brother moved away, but
I'll keep it in mind should there be a next time."

Alex rocked to get up off the sofa, grabbed Nan's hand
and pulled her to her feet. "If you should change your mind
about tomorrow, there's a spare set of keys hanging on a
hook by the kitchen door," Alex said. "But if we shan't see
you again, good luck in your quest. Let us know how it
turns out."

He started for the stairs, but Nan let go of his hand
and headed towards the kitchen.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

She looked exasperated. "The dishes need washing, and
if I don't do them now..."

"I'll take care of them," I offered.
"Well, let me at least do my crystal."

I shooed her away, but she hesitated until Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the stairs. She gave in, and they headed off to bed together, laughing about something on the way. I went into the kitchen, mixed up another gin and tonic and got to work. The hot, soapy water felt good on my hands and seemed to warm up my whole body. As I mindlessly scrubbed and rinsed crusty pots and pans, piles of silverware, stacks of plates and an army of glasses, I thought about the way Hansa kept casting me glances through dinner and how her little nurse fingers massaged the back of my neck while we danced. I thought of Simon pulling us apart, the crazed look in his eyes and the punch I'd almost ducked. I thought of Margaret's kiss goodnight, and Stephen's wink. And I thought of how lucky I was to have fallen in with people who brought out nightcaps on a silver tray and seemed to understand me better than I understood myself. By the time I finished the dishes, I actually felt more sorrow than anger for Simon and toasted him silently before downing the last watery sip of my drink. Then I rinsed out the glass and moseyed on upstairs, whistling the melody of "It Hurts to Pee in the Morning."
CHAPTER 13

Unlike the aftermath of my nap the previous evening, the clock and sun seemed perfectly synchonized when I awoke. Twelve o'clock and noon bright. My whole head ached, but it was more hangover than injury. I wandered downstairs, grimacing in remorse with each freshly turned memory of my actions the previous night. In the kitchen, I found a set of keys to the apartment on the table along with a note addressed to "Yank, Jr." It re-extended the Hoopers' offer: that I could stay for a while, "a fortnight, perhaps." Considering my behavior, this struck me as a generous gesture, even though I was a little hazy on exactly how long a fortnight might be.

As I showered and dressed, the porcupine in my stomach woke up and stretched. The odds of finding Kim and having him agree to go with me seemed a lot longer now than when I'd formulated this plan back in California. I thought that I was probably just pissing in the wind, then smiled as I directed a stream into the toilet. At least it didn't hurt to pee.

Sparing no expense, I rented a right-hand drive Ford for twenty-nine pounds and followed Stephen's directions
through city, town, forest and lush green countryside to Pershore. The first three people I asked there had never heard of Flyford Flavell, no matter which way I pronounced it. The last suggested I try the local post office. A clerk recognized the name right away. He explained how to get there and put an X on my AAA map of the British Isles on the south side of Route 422 between Worcester and Stratford-Upon-Avon.

"Look to your right for a wooden sign shaped like an arrow and follow it," he said. "If you reach Inkberrow, you've gone too far."

I drove along the two-lane highways until seeing the arrow, then followed it up a gently sloping offshoot and passed right through Flyford Flavell before realizing that the church, pub and few houses scattered around a crossroad were the full extent of the place. The porcupine was on a tear as I turned around, drove back to Flyford Flavell's sole intersection and parked in front of the pub. Since it was after three o'clock, the Willow's Leaf was closed. No one seemed to be around. I crossed the street and strolled over to the church. No one out front. I circled around back and found an old man in clerical collar kneeling in a flower bed, trowel in hand.

"Nice day for gardening," I said.

He looked up at me through glasses thick enough to start a fire on a sunny day. "Yes, indeed. Tis a lovely day. Even my dahlias approve, don't you sweethearts?" He
spotted a beetle on the head of a cherry-red flower. "Hey you," he muttered, flicking at it with his forefinger, "bugger off!"

"Bugger off?" I chuckled. "That's pretty funny."

The minister looked up at me with his jaws working as though he had to chew my words to digest them. Then his mouth rounded like someone blowing smoke rings. "Oh yes. I see. Somewhat of a pun that is. Yes. But my dahlias are very sensitive beauties, not indigenous to this area. No. Not indigenous to this area at all." He nodded at me, and his mouth settled into one of those reserved English smiles that's more imagined than seen. "Then again, neither are you, what?"

"No. I'm from the States. I'm trying to find a guy who used to live around here. Kim Erikson. You know him?"

His bushy salt-and-pepper eyebrows raised, seeming to trigger a benevolent frown. "Now there's a name one doesn't hear too often anymore."

"Because he moved away, right?"

"Who?"

"Kim Erikson."

"Kim Erikson. A fine lad. Fine lad indeed. Took care of his mother right to the bitter end, and that was no pleasant business. Cancer, you know."

"No, I didn't. I'm sorry to hear it."

"Father's a bit of a cad, though. Haven't seen him for years."
"Who? Kim?"

"His father, Jack. Jack Erikson. I told Jan--she was a lovely girl--there were a number of eligible Englishmen still around, but she was quite enamoured of the Dane. Made a good showing in the War, he did."

"Dane?" I asked. "You mean Kim's half-Danish?"

"Of course."

"But he doesn't live around here anymore?"

"No. The Weatherstone family moved into Spalding Mill House, what, ten or fifteen years ago."

"Do you know where he is now, or somebody who could tell me where to find him?"

"Who? Jack?"

"No. Kim."

"They'd been divorced for years, you know."

"No, I didn't. So can you help me or not?"

He looked starled. "That depends. What do you want?"

Talking to him was like trying to play ping-pong in a hurricane. "Kim's phone number, or address."

"You want his address?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"I thought I did."

"Lives in Copenhagen, near his father, I believe."

"Copenhagen? You mean Denmark?"

"Yes, Denmark. A lovely country. I taught at a seminary there for years," the minister said, squinting at
the sun. "Well, I'd say it's near enough tea time. What say you come inside and join me, and we'll see what we did with his address? Fine lad, Kim. Took care of his mother like a saint. Cancer, you know. Nasty business."

All I wanted was the address, but the minister insisted on pouring me a cup of tea, fixing a tray with stale little cakes, and rambling on and off about his exploits as a missionary in Rhodesia, his undercover intelligence work during World War II, another missionary stint in New Zealand and the local gossip. Occasionally, I reminded him why I was there. It eventually sank in. He pulled a large, leather-bound Bible from a bookshelf, set it on his desk and started flipping through the pages.

"Keep the E's in Ezekiel. Let's see now... Eaton... Edgars... Edwards... Ely... Emerson... Erikson. Yes. Here it is," he said, handing me a slip of paper. I clutched it like the holy grail.

"Phone number is on the reverse," the minister added with a wink. He seemed to have caught a buzz from the tea and cakes. "Why don't you ring him up?" he asked, pushing the telephone across his desk.

This was almost too good to be true. I thought that maybe I should come to church more often. "You sure it's all right?" I asked. "It's long distance and..."

The minister cut me off with a wave. "I'm sure the Lord will guide your conscience."

"Huh?"
"Perhaps a quid or two for the collection basket."

Sounded fair, even though I wasn't sure how much a quid was. I nodded and dialed the number. The porcupine seemed to be crawling up my esophagus. What if Kim didn't remember his promise? Or had grown too old and out of shape? Or lacked the money? Or the time? I pulled my lucky coin out of my pocket and rubbed my thumb over JFK's profile.

The line rang once and clicked, then a recorded message came on, a woman. I couldn't understand a word.

"No one home?" the minister asked.

"No. It's a recording in Danish or something."

"Danish? Let me have a go," the minister said, grabbing the receiver. He smiled as he listened. "A new listing. Three-double eight, three-double eight." He pushed the phone's plunger. "What say we give it another go?"

"Sure."

"What was that number?"

I dialed it myself. The connection clicked and was followed by that stuttering European ring. A man answered.

"Kim Erikson?" I asked.

"Yes?"

"Hi. It's Stanley Goodman, Robby's brother."

"Rabbit?"

"Yep." There was a pause, then the line started clicking as though someone were dialing a number on an extension. "You still there, Kim?"

"Yes," he replied, his voice sounding an octave lower.
"It's just that...well, it's been such a long time. How have you been?"

"Fine, although I nearly went nuts trying to find Flyford Flavell."

"You've been to Flyford Flavell?"

"I'm here now."

"I see," he muttered. "Looking for me?"

The porcupine seemed to be caught in my throat.

"Uh-huh. I'm going to climb the Matterhorn and was hoping you could guide me."

"When?"

"Whenever. Sometime this summer, if you can get away from whatever you're doing."

He said nothing right away, but I could hear other voices on the line, faint and inaudible.

"Remember what you told me at his funeral?"

"Yes, I remember," he replied, solemnly. "I remember that whole week far too well." The line went quiet again, except for the distant voices in the background. "Of course I'll go with you," Kim finally said. "But we'll have to hire a guide. I haven't climbed much of anything save stairs since the day your brother died."

I smiled and sighed and laughed inside, all at once.

"Hold on a minute," Kim said. "I'll get my calendar."

I strained my ears to hear what the people on our crossed line were saying, but the only words I could make out were "raining over here."
"Right," Kim said, sounding out of breath. "My holiday starts June nineteenth. Why don't you make your way here around then and we can plan our expedition."

"Sounds good to me. You live at this address?" I asked, butchering the pronunciation of Agadeabou.

"No. We recently moved." He told me his new address, then spelling out the name of the street. "By the way, how did you get my number?"

"From the minister here."

"Vicar Blackman?"

"I suppose so. He let me use his phone to make the call."

"That's Vicar Blackman all right. He's a good old soul. Tell him I say hello."

"I will. And I'll be seeing you on or about June nineteenth."

"Come anytime, but call if you change your mind."

"I won't be changing my mind," I said, fighting the impulse to hang up before he could change his. "How about you?"

He sighed. "No. In a way, I've been waiting for this call for a long time. I expected it years ago and was beginning to think it might never come."

"Gee, Kim. You make it sound like a draft notice. Are you sure about this?"

"To tell the truth, I haven't had much desire to climb again. Of course, I've also never had so good a reason."
Anyway, I've kept myself reasonably fit, still have my gear and, what the hell, we can only die once, right?"

"That's the spirit. See you soon."

"I'll be here. Take care till then, Rabbit." He hung up. I held onto the phone half-expecting him to come back on the line to say it was all a joke or something. The minister was staring at me with his mouth open. I cradled the receiver.

"Kim says to say hello."

"Well, hello to you too, Kim," the minister replied. "Lovely boy. Still sends me a Christmas card every year. One came from Bethlehem with a special postmark. Had a painting of the burning bush on it which reminded me of the time Rommel came through this village near Tunis..."

"I'm sorry, Father," I interrupted. "I've got to be going now. Got to get the car back to London tonight." I felt a little badly about telling even a white lie to cut him off, but he probably could have told the same stories over and over again for hours. I tried to make up for it by handing him a five-pound note. "Here, this is for the collection basket."

He looked at it twice. "Why, that's quite generous of you, quite generous indeed, uh, what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. But it's Stanley Goodman."

"I thought you hadn't, Stanton, but one can't trust one's memory too well when one gets to be my age,
eighty-five...no...eighty-six now, and still have all of my teeth." He smiled to show me. I complimented him on them, then left the church with Kim's voice echoing in my head.

"**We can only die once.**"

He had sounded just like Robby. I began to think how great this adventure was going to be, a dream come true. Things were finally working out perfectly. According to plan. For the first time since I'd left the States, the porcupine in my stomach played possum.
CHAPTER 14

As I drove along a two-lane highway back towards London, the scenery changed with every sweeping curve—a stream cutting through a flowery meadow, an old stone house with moss-covered chimney, a shadowed glade where branches from trees standing by either side of the road met in the middle—I watched the sights fly by, but kept seeing a calendar in my head.

June Nineteenth.

Approximately a month and a half. I counted up the days, using my fingers to keep track. Nine handfuls and a thumb. Forty-six days. A horn beeped. It came from a speeding motorcycle in my lane. Or rather its lane. I'd drifted across the road's center line on a curve and had to veer to my left to avoid hitting it. The motorcycle swerved too, skidding a bit on the gravel shoulder before hopping back to the pavement behind me. I looked in my rearview mirror and saw the driver raise his right arm and give me the finger.

For a second, I imagined it was that South African surfer I'd written a feature story about back in Sensinitas. He said he was going to make a motorcycle trip around
Europe. I wanted to as well, and with my Matterhorn expedition safely secured in a forty-six-day holding pattern, I now had the time to get it together. But I wasn't really sure I was willing to risk having some dumb tourist in a rental car end all of my dreams, and maybe my life.

My hands were squeezing the wheel so tightly I seemed to feel each little ridge and rut of the road in my fingertips, all except for the odd thumb which was still sticking straight up.

Forty-six days. And then another week or so more before Kim and I could get to Zermatt and arrange for a guide. By the last week of June, I'd be on the Matterhorn, standing on its summit, a promise kept, a dream come true.

As I sped along, I kept wishing I could drive through time, each mile taking day instead of a minute. May would be history by Moreton-in-Marsh, Kim would be on vacation by the time I reached Woodstock, and we'd be climbing the Matterhorn somewhere on the motorway between Oxford and London.

I pressed down on the accelerator, as though speeding up on the highway would somehow make the time pass more quickly. But I only succeeded in getting back to London with marginally more time to wait than if I'd driven slowly. Alex and Nan welcomed me with an evening cocktail and congratulations on finding Kim Erikson. But they were tired from staying up past their bedtime the previous night.
and turned in around ten o'clock. I climbed the two flights of stairs up to their guest room and slipped into bed. Sleep would make time pass more quickly, I knew, and wished I could fall into a state of suspended animation and wake up in about forty days to embark on the next leg of my quest. But sleep wouldn't come, and as I lay in bed, the clock on the night table seemed to have stopped.

Somewhere between a toss and a turn, I dropped off and awoke at nine. I pulled on a pair of jeans and wandered down to the kitchen. There was a jar of instant coffee and a cup on the counter. On the table, the key to their flat were lying atop the morning London Times. No note. I fixed some coffee and read the newspaper. An Argentine missile had sunken the HMS Sheffield, Prince Charles was quoted as saying that the conflict in the Falkland Islands was "a matter of principle," and three hundred Argentine sailors were still missing from the torpedoed General Belgrano. The front page was filled with stories about the war along with a file photo of the Sheffield cruising through the open sea and a map showing the general vicinity of where it was now impersonating a submarine.

Stories about other events were relegated to inside pages: Thirty-one people were injured in a train wreck, ten thousand, five-hundred pounds had been awarded to one of the Yorkshire Ripper's surviving victims, a cemetary staff in Liverpool had gone out on strike and a climber was hurt:

"Mr. Nigel Richardson, 20, of Londonderry Road is in
critical condition with head injuries following a fifty-foot fall in the Derbyshire Peak District."

The article didn't give any other details. I wondered what had happened to Nigel Richardson. Had he been careless or just a victim of fate, like my brother? What thoughts had flashed through his mind when he realized he couldn't keep his grip on the rock? I pictured a lone man on a cliff, rocks crumbling out from under his hands, falling backwards, legs kicking, fingers twitching, a hollow cry echoing through a valley until his body crashes into the shale below. I saw him in the hospital, swollen-eyed parents sitting by his bedside.

At least there was still some hope left for him. There had never been any for Robby from the moment that house-sized chunk of rock crushed him against the north face of Cannon Mountain. He died before doing the one thing he most wanted to do in life. He was waiting for me, and I hadn't grown up quite fast enough. Now, I was ready to take the both of us to the Matterhorn's summit, but I'd have to wait until the end of June, if I could.

Reading about Nigel's accident made me even more anxious to get at that damned mountain. My stomach had the same queasy feeling it used to have while I was warming up for a rugby game or squatting in a plane while it circled up to jumping altitude. Like a soldier waiting for battle. Except I still had forty-five days to go. Time to kill.

I kept flipping through the newspaper. An Arab girl
was shot dead by an Israeli soldier, three British women were busted while trying to smuggle two hundred pounds of marijuana into England and Lady Plowden was turning seventy-two. The lead story on the sports page was about a soccer game: "Sunderland Tenacious in Art of Escapism." I laughed. William Snead would have had me drawn and quartered for writing a headline like that. I skimmed through articles about boxing, cricket, golf, tennis, show jumping, squash and snooker, not quite believing how the sports writers led their stories with comments about the weather, field conditions or team histories instead of the scores.

The stock market wasn't doing too badly, considering the fact that the Empire was at war. The classified section was mostly taken up by "Recruitment Opportunities," but there were also birth and death announcements, services offered, flat sharing, rentals and motor cars for sale. On the bottom of a column, a lone motorcycle was advertised. A Honda 250cc in good condition. "Any serious offer considered."

I decided to find out what a serious offer might be and dialed the first of two telephone numbers listed. No answer. I tried the second. It was a pub where the motorcycle's owner worked. I asked how much he wanted. He said it was up to me to make an offer, which couldn't possibly be serious until I saw the bike. I wasn't sure I really wanted to go through with it, but having nothing
better to do, I agreed to meet him at his apartment in Chelsea at three-thirty, during the pub's traditional siesta.

I killed most of the day wandering around London, checking out the Tate Gallery, the Cat and Cucumber Pub and the Tower of London, where lovely Anne Boleyn was beheaded. I even saw the chopping block, and the Crown Jewels which quite possibly adorned the head and neck of the queen before they were separated from her body. That made me think of a picture the Sensinitas Sentinel's photographer had taken of a motorcycle wreck. It was too gross to be in our paper, so he published it in the California Highway Patrol Magazine. The unfortunate rider was sprawled next to the guardrail on Highway 101, his helmet lying a few yards away with his head still in it.

I convinced myself that I couldn't let this thought stop me from getting a motorcycle any more than I could let Nigel Richardson's climbing accident keep me from the Matterhorn. Even though I'd never ridden anything bigger than a moped before, I was a good driver and had the quick reflexes of an athlete. Besides, the bike in question probably wouldn't even suit my needs, or would be too expensive.

At three o'clock, I found a bank to change five hundred dollars into pounds, which was the most I figured I could spend. I put the wad into my sneaker for safekeeping, took the underground to Chelsea and found the townhouse where the
motorcycle's owner lived. I rang the bell, but no one answered. So I sat on the front stoop, transferred the wad of cash from my sneaker to my pocket and watched some boys play soccer in the quiet street. A few minutes later, I heard the sound of a motorcycle. It rounded a corner and pulled up to the curb in front of me. The rider took off his silver helmet, ran his fingers through his curly dark hair and looked up at me.

"You the bloke who called about the bike?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, here she is," he said, dismounting and stepping aside so I could examine it. It looked kind of beat. The chrome fenders had a bad case of rust-pox, one of the rear blinkers was broken off and the engine was caked black with grease and grime.

"Just filled her up with petrol," he said, patting the gas tank. The name "Britannia" was painted in fancy scroll on either side of it.

"Great. Uh, what year is she?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't pick up on the fact that I didn't know much of anything about motorcycles.

"Nineteen seventy-five. A banner year for Honda."

So Britannia was seven years old and looked fourteen. But she seemed to be within my price range and had a padded extension sticking up from the back of the seat which would be ideal for securing a backpack. The owner told me he was a recent university graduate and said a lot of things about
the motorcycle I couldn't understand and a few things I could, like "eighty miles to the gallon" and "nearly new tires" and "rebuilt transmission with one month left on the three-month guarantee."

"Leave me your passport and you can take her out for a test ride," he offered.

"No, that's okay. I, uh, don't have my passport with me."

"Then give me something else. Your wallet, a credit card, some cash..."

"Just let me listen to her," I said. "I can tell what kind of shape she's in from the sound."

He shrugged and said, "Go ahead. Crank her up."

I straddled Britannia and grabbed the handgrips. It felt right, as though I'd ridden her a thousand times already. I flipped down the kick starter with my toe and stomped on it.

Nothing.

I tried again and again.

Nothing.

I looked up at the guy. He was laughing.

"You've got to turn on the ignition," he said, pointing at the keys. "And you can start her just by pressing that button on the handlebar."

The engine turned right over. I revved it up a few times, and it seemed loud enough to be healthy.

"Sounds like a Harley," he shouted. I nodded, and
turned off the key. "I hate to part with such a reliable machine," he continued, "but I've been accepted to do my graduate work at the University of Florida, and with the money I get for this bike, I figure I can buy one over there. Save the cost of shipping her, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah. So what kind of money are you talking about?"

"Pounds sterling, mate."

"I mean, what's a serious offer?"

"You tell me."

I had two hundred and seventy-some pounds, so I figured I'd try about half. "One-thirty."

He laughed. "You couldn't buy a decent moped for one-thirty. I was thinking more like three hundred."

We haggled for a while, until he said he wouldn't consider anything less than two-fifty. I waved eleven slightly smelly twenty-pound notes under his nose and said that was as high as I could go.

He stepped back. "For cash, I'll let you have it for two-forty. And don't forget, I'm throwing in two helmets and a full tank of petrol."

We eventually shook on it for two-thirty, helmets, gas and driving lesson included. He grabbed the cash, counted it and tucked it into his shirt pocket with a smile that made my scalp prickle.

"There's nothing to riding a bike," he said, pulling the keys from the ignition. He held up the bigger of the
two. "This one's for the ignition, and the other one's for the front wheel lock. Now have a seat on her and pay attention, cause for two-thirty, I'm only going to go over this once."

I climbed back on the bike and grabbed the handgrips.

"Okay," he said. "You already know about the electric starter, but if the battery runs down, you can always kick start her, that is if the ignition is on. Now, you have a brake pedal for the back wheel by your right foot and a hand brake for the front wheel on the right handlebar. The clutch is on the left handlebar, and the gear shift is that lever down by your left foot. There are five gears: one down, four up. To downshift, just push the lever down, once for each gear. The throttle's the right handgrip. The more you twist it, the faster you go. Just remember to keep to the left and watch out for the other guy."

Right. Brakes, clutch, throttle, gear shift. One down, four up. It sounded easy, but trying to coordinate my uneducated hands and feet made me look like a prime candidate for the Special Olympics of Motocross. A half-dozen practice runs around the block elicited some jeers and, eventually, a few sarcastic cheers from the neighborhood kids, who'd postponed their soccer game to watch me from the safety of the sidewalk.

I would have kept practicing if it hadn't started raining. A few sprinkles quickly transformed into a wind-blown deluge. My young audience scattered. I stopped
for a minute to try on the second helmet, which was green and smaller and fit better. I transferred the scratched plexiglass visor to it, took a few deep breaths and scooted off on my maiden voyage.

A voyage it was. The rain and traffic were both as heavy as could be. Sink or swim. I stalled out more than once, made turns from wrong lanes, rearranged a few car mirrors with my handlebars while cutting between lanes of backed-up traffic and nearly broadsided a double-decker bus by mistaking the clutch for the brake in a moment of panic. But my goal was one of survival, not style, and in this I was raging success.

Soaked by rain from without and nervous sweat from within, I parked the bike under an eave in the alley behind the Hoopers' flat and climbed off. My legs were shaky, but my blood was tingling with the thrill of the trip. I stepped out from under the eave, tilted my head back and let the rain pelt my protective visor, smiling the same way I used to smile when jumping into the wild blue yonder at 12,500 feet. This was it. The real adventure was about to begin.
Grasping the magnum's neck as though he were strangling it, Alex pushed his thumbs against either side of the cork, working it back and forth. He and Nan had both just braved the rain to check out my new used motorcycle, and once back inside their flat, figured my purchase was as good an excuse as any to crack another bottle of the bubbly from their seemingly limitless supply.

The cork crept closer and closer to popping. Alex squinted as though diffusing a bomb, then closed his eyes completely as the cork exploded from the magnum. A ribbon of cool condensation snaked up through the bottle's lip like smoke from the barrel of a pistol. Alex quickly filled three stemmed glasses.

"Well, it looks as though Yank Jr. has got his steed," he said.

"More like an old nag," I laughed.

"No, a black beauty," Nan said, clinking my glass. "Hail Britannia."

We all hailed her and took sips. Before swallowing, Nan swished the champagne around her mouth as though its effervescence could somehow put a sparkle into her
gray-toothed smile. "So, what are your plans now?" she asked.

"Tomorrow morning, weather permitting, I'd like to just climb aboard Britannia and go somewhere."

"Sounds nice," Alex said. "But perhaps you should take a few days to get used to riding it, make sure its mechanically sound as well."

"I'll learn as I go along."

"Don't we all?" Nan said.

"Don't we all what?"

"Learn as we go along." Her green eyes were sparkling. "You have such a healthy attitude towards life, Rabbit." As her mouth settled into a wistful half-smile, I once again felt a rush of mutual admiration, thinking that in a different time and place, maybe she would have shucked her own responsibilities and joined me on the road.

"Just be careful," she said, taking another sip and swallowing it directly. "I've seen some bloody horrible motorcycle accident victims at the hospital. Dr. Samuels, our chief orthopedic surgeon, calls them 'instruments of destruction.'"

"Don't worry, I'll be careful," I assured her, actually believing it myself. But all through dinner and an evening round-robin backgammon tournament, my bloodstream felt as bubbly as champagne. I kept thinking about riding Britannia through the London streets, cutting between lanes of backed-up traffic, beating the slower-starting four-wheeled
vehicles off the line at lights, slicing through puddles, leaning into turns and feeling the pull of eighty horses with every twist of the wrist. When Alex turned on the TV to listen to the news, I only half-heard a report about how the Argentine junta was considering a U.N. ceasefire proposal and interviews with some of the surviving sailors from the H.M.S. Sheffield and how Yorkshire scored three hundred and some runs in the first inning of a cricket match. Then the weatherman came on. I leaned forward in my chair to hear his forecast. Clear and mild weather for the coming day. I eased back and smiled. Clear and mild. Almost as if I'd willed it.

I went to bed wishing it were already morning, a feeling I hadn't had since childhood. By seven, I was up and packed. Alex, Nan and I all walked outside together. For once, a weatherman was right. It was a perfect day for motorcycling. Alex gave me a firm handshake. Nan kissed my cheek warmly and pressed a housekey into my palm.

"I had it cut for you yesterday," she said. "Just to remind you that our home is your home."

"Thanks, but I really don't think I'll be needing it." I offered it back. "God knows when I'll get to London again, if at all."

She closed my fist around the key. "Then keep it as a memento."

I shrugged and put it into the same pocket that held my lucky JFK half-dollar. Nan was right. Again. I could use
it as a reminder of how nice and caring and tolerant people could be.

As Alex and Nan headed off to their respective jobs in separate cars, I tied my pack to the pussy bar on the back of Britannia's seat, made a couple of runs up and down the alley to make sure it wouldn't effect my balance too much, then hit the streets, which at this hour were nearly as clear as the sky. I zipped over to the Driver and Licensing Center, where the guy who sold me the bike said I'd have to register it in my name. But the office wasn't open yet, and that was a good enough excuse to procrastinate. I kept going, figuring to register it later in some other town.

I didn't care where I was going. I just wanted to go. The faster the better. With the wind whistling through my helmet and rippling my clothes, I flew just a few feet above the ground, along city avenues, suburban streets and a two-lane country highway. This seemed to be the next best thing to skydiving. Maybe even better. I could only free-fall for a minute, but I could ride Britannia for hours at a stretch.

Or so I thought. Fifth gear did a disappearing act just north of Buntingford, and fourth gear began sounding like silverwear in a garbage disposal. I rode the crippled bike back to London in first, second and third. Fortunately, Britannia's previous owner had given me the transmission warranty along with the rest of her papers. The shop where it had been rebuilt was located in the East
End, where a lot of rough-looking characters were hanging out in packs on streetcorners. A few of them shouted things to me, sounding like Eliza Doolittle before Henry Higgins got to her. Not wanting to stop, I just rode around until I got lost in the right direction and found the place. It was a dingy, damp, cluttered garage with a hand-painted "Cash Only" sign over the door. The only one there was a surly-looking redhead who had the name "Tyler" embroidered on the breast pocket of his greasy blue shirt. He didn't stop working long enough to even glance at the warranty.

"Don't remember you," was all he said after I explained the problem.

"That's because I just bought the bike yesterday."

He looked up at me from his seat on the cement floor, then leaned over to see out the garage door, where Britannia was parked.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Real pain in me bum, that bloke. 'ow much you pay for that piece a shit?"

"Two hundred," I lied.

"Well, it moight be worth near that, in parts. But I 'ave no use for it."

"Look, I don't want you to buy it. I want you to fix it."

He lit a cigarette. "Sorry. That guarantee only 'olds for the original owner."

"No way. It says right here, 'unconditional.'"

"I don't care wha' it says," he said, peering at the
engine of a Kawasaki. "Now, if you don't mind, I've got more work than I can 'andle and me 'elper's in the 'ospital."

"But...but..."

"But wha'?"

"But the guy I'm staying with is a lawyer," I improvised. "And he assured me that this is a valid contract. He said if you choose not to comply, he'll take you to court."

He wrenched a nut loose with a grunt. "Think that scares me?"

"Suit yourself," I replied, determined to play my bluff for all it was worth. I folded up the guarantee and put it into my pocket. "I don't really care. You can fix it now or later. I've got plenty of time and it won't cost me a cent, uh, pence either way. That I guarantee you."

Tyler squinted up through his cigarette's smoke, seeming to really see me for the first time. "Brown eyes," he said.

"Huh?"

"Brown eyes," he laughed. "Means you're full a shit."

I fished through my wallet for Simon's business card and handed it to the mechanic. He read it, lips moving, then idly turned it over in his hand, leaving black fingerprints on my directions to Pershore. "Exactly wha' kind a lawyer is this friend a yours?" he asked.

"He's a solicitor," I said, remembering Simon's brief law lesson. Then I thought about the "Cash Only" sign over
the door. "He actually specializes in taxes. But I'm sure he'll know how to deal with a breach of contract case."

"Taxes?" Tyler muttered.

"Yeah. He works for the government and..."

The mechanic held up a greasy hand. "All roight, mate. All roight. But you'll 'ave to leave it for a while. I'm swamped roight now and won't be able to get to it for at least a week or two."

I was disappointed, but didn't want to press my luck. So I just told him not to take too long or he'd be hearing from my solicitor. Then I went back to the Hoopers' place, let myself in, grabbed a beer from the fridge and a novel from Nan's bookshelf and made their home mine, as she had offered.

Alex and Nan both seemed pleasantly surprised to see me back so soon and said I could stay however long it took the mechanic to fix Britannia. A few days passed, then a week. I didn't feel as though I were imposing. In fact, they seemed delighted to have a reasonable facsimile of Yank Wanker for a houseguest, not to mention someone to do the dishes. When my hosts were working, I explored London on my own, wandering from palace to pub, park to museum. But I preferred going out with Alex and Nan. We went to Stephen and Margaret's house in Wimbledon for backgammon and bridge, a dinner party in Kensington, a classical concert in Kenwood Gardens and a tennis club where we were relegated to a back court because I was wearing colors instead of whites.
That was just one of the several minor social blunders I committed, but under Alex's tutelage, I gradually adapted to the London urbanity and managed to develop what he called "a primitive notion of class." Besides learning to sip after-dinner cordials and uncork champagne bottles with my thumbs, I learned how to offer cigarettes all around when I drew one for myself and to preserve both gentlemanly pretense and money by ordering just a half-pint when buying a beer for a lady. I learned that a quid was a pound, fourteen pounds were a stone, the underground was the subway, a subway was a pedestrian underpass, a poofter was a fag, a fag was a cigarette, french fries were chips and chips were crisps. I also learned that badgering my motorcycle mechanic over the telephone only antagonized him.

"Look, mate," he said on one of my numerous callbacks, "if you keep ringing me every day, it's just going to take me longer to get around to your bike."

I continued calling anyway, but began to find myself hoping that Britannia wouldn't be ready. I was comfortable where I was and becoming totally infatuated with Nan. She was always so pleasant and cheerful. And I could listen to her talk for hours. She spoke with both sense and sensitivity, but her accent was so crisp and classy that even profanity would have sounded like poetry coming from her mouth.

More and more, I felt her attraction to me. She seemed
to perk up whenever I came home from a day in town, and I could feel her warm gaze on me whenever I told Alex and her about my adventures and observations. She laughed in all of the right places and was quick with a quip of her own. We never were at a loss for things to talk about and seemed to have so much in common, from our taste in books to our dislike for politics to the fact that we both left the cherry tomatoes and cucumbers uneaten in our restaurant salads. And she never stopped marveling at my courage to leave the security of home to follow a dream. With Alex, I felt almost as much a pet as houseguest at times. But with Nan, I felt like a prince. Or perhaps a knight-errant.

Just after Nan got home from work one afternoon, Alex called to say he'd stopped by Simon's place and gotten conned into helping him install a car stereo. Nan was upstairs in the loo at the time, so I relayed the message while he held the line. Nan wanted to know what she should do about dinner. Alex said not to worry about it. He'd pick up something for all of us on the way home. I hung up, the toilet flushed and Nan came downstairs wearing what looked to be one of Alex's old flannel shirts and little else.

"Well, what shall we do in the meantime?" she asked.

Something immediately came to mind, but I just shrugged.

"How about a rousing game of cribbage?"

"Don't know it," I said. "How about strip poker."
She laughed. "No. I'm afraid I'm not dressed for it. But come. I'll teach you cribbage. It really is a smashing game."

Not dressed for strip poker? Right. As she fetched the cribbage board from a high shelf, I saw that she could have lost in two hands. Cribbage, however, looked to take at least a dozen hands and there seemed to be enough rules for ten different card games. Nan couldn't possibly explain them all upfront, so she just gave me the basics and we started playing. Each time she came up with a new rule which happened to favor her, I jokingly accused her of cheating. It got to the point where she would cover her mouth and start giggling before she even began to explain another rule. By the time we'd kidded our way through a few hands, I was sure I had at least heard, if not remembered, all of the rules. That was until I counted up four points for having a flush in my crib.

Nan started giggling. "No, no," she said. "The suit of the flush must match the suit of the cut card for it to count."

"But you did the same thing two hands ago. You had spades and the cut card was a diamond. You even said you would have gotten an extra point if it had matched up."

"Yes. But that was because I had the flush in my hand, not the crib."

I threw my supposedly worthless crib on the table. "Now I know you're cheating."
She started collecting the cards for her deal. "No, I'm not."

"I bet you can't look me in the eye and say that."

She raised her head, lips pressed together, but eyes laughing. "I'm not cheating," she said. I stared into her eyes. Without so much as a blink, they changed expression. The merry glint seemed to melt away, or rather surface-dive to become something else, something sultry. It was the same expression I'd seen in Frannie's eyes. I could almost feel her urging me to lean over and kiss her. I wanted to, but my conscience quickly wrestled my libido into submission. The moment passed. Her hands moved. The shuffling cards slapped each other's backs. She looked down to bridge them together, smiled flatly and said, "I'm not cheating, Rabbit."

After that, Nan seemed preoccupied. She played without laughter and put the cards and board away after "skunking" me. She couldn't seem to sit still, and every time I got within an arm's length of her, she would move away to busy herself with some needless little chore, like wiping down the already spotless stove. Alex came home at about eight-thirty with some Indian food from a take-out stand. Nan barely touched any of it and just shook her head when Alex asked what was wrong. Finally, she announced that it was too late to be eating such spicy food and went off to bed while Alex and I were still pigging out.

That night, I had trouble falling asleep again. I kept
fantasizing about Alex getting killed in a car wreck and how I would comfort Nan, then make her forget he'd ever existed. I tried to drive the thought from my head, but merely came up with alternate ways for him to die—falling onto the underground tracks right in front of a train, a heart attack, a brain embolism, blown up by a terrorist's bomb—all relatively quick, painless ways to go and set Nan and me free to consummate our passion. When I finally did drop off, I dreamed that Nan and I were making love on her dining room table, which was set with white linen, crystal glasses and gleaming silverware. She was on top, and I started laughing at how her breasts were slapping together.

"What's so funny?" she asked without missing a beat.

"Your breasts are applauding my performance."

She kept rocking, but reached over to a place setting, picked up a butter knife and plunged it into my chest. I could feel my own blood, hot on my naked chest, burning me.

I awoke, my chest on fire from the Indian food. I crawled out of bed and looked around my bathroom for some Alka-Seltzer. There wasn't any, so I headed downstairs to check Alex and Nan's john. As I stepped off the bottom stair, the bathroom door at the end of the hall swung open. Nan was standing there, naked. I quickly diverted my eyes from her face to her breasts, which were every bit as full and white and firm as I'd imagined. I watched them jiggle as she gasped, then slap together as she jumped back and slammed the door.
I didn't know what to say, or do. So I said and did nothing, except belch and retaste the curry flavoring I hadn't particularly liked the first time around. I went down to the kitchen to get a glass of water, and on my way back upstairs, passed Alex and Nan's bedroom door. I stopped when I heard her talking in a painfully hushed voice:

"...no privacy in my own home. Even when we make love, I can't help worrying that he'll hear us."

"It's just a matter of days now," Alex said. "As soon as his motorcycle is repaired..."

"That could take weeks."

Alex said something else, but I couldn't make out what it was. I really didn't want to hear another word. I crept up the right side of the stairs to avoid the squeaky middle and started packing my gear. Britannia or no Britannia, it was time to move on.
Hurt and embarrassed from what I'd overheard, I waited in my room until Alex and Nan took off for work. Then I lugged my backpack down the two flights of stairs to the kitchen, where I left my housekey on the table along with a note thanking the Hoopers for their hospitality and apologizing for any inconvenience I might have caused them. Before leaving, I called Tyler again. He hadn't even gotten around to diagnosing Britannia's ailment yet, so I figured I'd just have to abandon her for the time being and come back when she was fixed. I rode a bus to the Drayton Park underground station, caught a train to the end of the Picadilly Line and stuck out my thumb, not even caring where it led me, so long as it led me away from London.

I was numbed by Nan's sudden change of heart. One minute she was practically inviting me to kiss her, and the next she was acting as though I were some kind of fungus. What had happened in that moment between cribbage hands? Had she'd been offended I didn't make a move? Or had she suddenly realized that she couldn't trust herself with me alone? Whatever the reason was, she left me as confused and frustrated as I'd been with just about all the women I'd
known, right back to Amy Schwatz, who dumped me for a pre-med student soon after we graduated high school.

I lit a cigarette when I hit the road and vowed to give up women until after climbing the Matterhorn. They seemed to be nothing but trouble, always wanting you to read their minds, then changing them with every hormonal swing. I figured I was better off alone and began to feel lucky I'd escaped Nan's temptations so cleanly. The sunny skies and prospect of the open road further improved my spirits. One good thing about travel, I decided, was that if you screwed up one place, it was easy to just pack up and go somewhere else.

And so began my first hitchhiking excursion in a foreign land, excluding Mexico. Since cars in England are driven on the opposite side of the road than cars in the States and Mexico, I naturally assumed hitchers would use their left thumbs for flagging down rides. But it wasn't so. The English employed an awkward, right-hand cross method which wasn't nearly as visible to speeding motorists, but was undoubtably more refined.

Regardless of which hand is used, there's really nothing quite like hitchhiking. Standing on the side of a road waiting for someone to stop can be a slice of untainted freedom. You never know who will pull over, where they've been, where they're going, or what they'll have to say about things like legalized abortions and Ronald Reagan. You're free of worry, free of plans and free of schedules. Unless
nobody stops. Then hitching can be like jail, stranded in the middle of God-knows-where without food, water and basic creature comforts like TV, beer and crisps.

For the most part, I had good luck and let my nose follow my thumb from the outskirts of London to Cambridge, then King's Lynn, Newark on Trent, through a section of Sherwood Forest which bore little resemblance to the Sherwood in Errol Flynn's Robin Hood, and down to Rugby, where there was a plaque at the boys' school explaining how William Webb Ellis disregarded soccer's most sacred rule by picking up a ball with his hands during a game in 1823 and thus gave birth to my favorite sport.

Along the way, I stayed at bed and breakfast inns, finding these homey lodges to be fairly cheap and comfortable. My only problem with them was that breakfast was invariably served between seven and nine, and without a watch I tended to either miss them entirely or bound downstairs at six. It was ironic. Back home, I was one of few reporters I knew who didn't wear a watch. But while traveling, when I least expected a watch to be much use, I seemed to have trouble dealing with life without one. I found myself constantly asking people what time it was, not necessarily because I had someplace to go or be at a certain hour, but more because the rootless nature of vagabondage itself made me crave some sort of structure to my life.

I called Tyler from Rugby, but he just squawked about his workload and sick helper and said he'd fix my bike when
he was good and ready. The phone got hungry for more coins in a hurry, and I couldn't see it being worth another pound-thirty to argue with him, so I just told him to do the best he could and hung up.

I kept traveling, happier just to be on the move than actually arrive anywhere. All roads became The Road, a place between places where I sometimes ate, slept and went to the bathroom. I began to feel at ease sitting on The Road's shoulders, even when I wasn't getting rides. I'd toss rocks at signs or tree trunks, let my imagination turn clouds into animals, tightrope walk along guardrails, mock the birds by trying to whistle their tunes, daydream about climbing the Matterhorn, count the rides I'd had, remember the stories I'd heard, and wonder who would stop next and where I would go.

I rode my thumb up to the Lake District, then down through Liverpool and south along the Welsh border. I slept in the woods near Shrewsbury, then caught an early-morning lift with Simon Simpson, a seashell salesman from Cornwall who was selling shells to curiosity shops nowhere near the seashore. After making a delivery in Ludlow and buying me a Milky Way in return for helping him unload his wares, he lost his way on the narrow rural lanes. Unaccustomed to being so far inland, Seashell Simon panicked and opted to turn his van around and backtrack rather than risk getting further lost. I began to get the feeling that if I held Simon to my ear, I'd hear the ocean. So I asked him to drop
me off at the next crossroad.  

It turned out to be an intersection that wasn't busy enough to warrant so much as a stop sign. The forest lining the roads looked more like the Sherwood in the Flynn movie than the real thing had. An ancient wood, only the strongest trees had survived. With gnarled trunks as thick as temple pillars, the trees seemed to respect each other's space. Yet overhead, their canopies all but blocked out the sky, and the branches were so entangled it was tough to tell which one went with which tree. Other than the two roads, the only sign of civilization at the crossroad was a windowless stone building which slouched more than stood on the northwest corner. The Mortimer's Cross Pub, according to the painted sign hanging over an arched door, which looked as though it hadn't been opened since the Middle Ages.

Traffic was light and the sky heavy. Very heavy. I had been lucky in avoiding rain up to this point, but it appeared as though my luck was about to run out. Silent prayers preceded approaching cars, mumbled curses followed as they passed. The clouds grumbled along with me until scattered raindrops the size of Hershey Kisses started bellyflopping on the pavement. I got to thinking that maybe the pub wasn't as closed as it looked and reached for my backpack. Too late. A solitary crack of thunder seemed to shatter a cloud above, and I was instantly drenched.

I spladashed across the street, trampled some weeds
swept a curtain of cobwebs out of the way and tried the pub's ancient door. It creaked open just enough for me to squeeze through without my backpack. I dragged it in behind me, slipped one arm through a shoulder strap and slowly made my way down a box-strewn hallway. Except for some muted daylight filtering through the cracked door, it was as black as a tomb inside. I saw nothing and heard nothing until a deep voice rolled out of the darkness:

"Looks like someone found his way in through the back door."

"Aye. And if I'm not mistaken..."

A match flared to reveal two men in a large taproom. The one standing in front of the bar was lighting a candle. As soon as the wick caught the match's flame, the man walked over to me, held the candle up to my face and sighed.

"Ah, but I am," he said. "Sorry lad. I thought, well, I have a son I haven't seen for three years, but he's about your size, and I understand he has a beard now. What with that rucksack and all..." He stopped talking and looked at the floor.

"Sorry to disappoint you," I said.

He looked back up at me and slapped my shoulder.

"Well, what the dickens, it doesn't hurt to dream, eh?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging off my backpack. "My father keeps telling me that my problem is I live in a dreamworld."

The man drew back a step. "What an awful thing for a
father to tell a son. Bloody awful! Imagine..." His words fell into an incoherent mutter, then stopped abruptly as he raised his arm and held the candle up to his watchless right wrist. "Well, I'd say it's fair time to have a shandy. Care to join me?"

I threw my backpack in a corner next to a much smaller, older canvas pack. "Why not?"

"Why not indeed. Alston! Two shandies please."

"I'll tell you both why not," the deep voice croaked out from behind the shadowed bar. "I can't see me bleedin' hand in front of me face. Nobody's getting a bleedin' thing till I find those other candles. Now what on earth did that woman do..." the words trailed off.

"Lost the electricity," the man beside me whispered as though it were a state secret. Another match flared. Alston melted the bases of two candles to a couple of foil ashtrays on the bar and lit their wicks.

"Ah, that's better," said the other man, laying a hand on my shoulder. "There's a certain charm to a candlelit pub, especially with such a splendid storm raging outside."

"Maybe splendid for you, but the motherfucker soaked me," I replied, doffing my wet sweatshirt.

"Yes, indeed," the man said, clearing his throat. "Of course, one often lacks for a shower when on the road. And nothing cleanses so well as nature, eh?"

The barkeep waved his arm. "Would one of you gentlemen kindly close that back door before nature cleanses the
hallway, which doesn't need no cleansing at all," he said. "And throw the bolt while you're there. Don't know how it got unlocked in the first place."

The guy standing next to me wandered down the hall with his candle, pulled the arched door shut and bolted it. As he walked back, I noticed another, more modern door to my left.

"Well, lad," the man said, returning to my side. "What's your name?"

"Stanley Goodman, but everyone calls me Rabbit."

"Then Rabbit it is. I'm Oliver Tripod. Ollie, if you please." We shook hands. Ollie held onto mine as though we'd just gotten engaged. In fact, he didn't let go until Alston slid the two pints of shandy across the bar. Ollie passed one to me. We toasted each other's health, sat on a couple of barstools and started shooting the shit.

Ollie did most of the talking. He told me he was a painter, poet, philosopher, historian, teacher, student and devout pub patron. He had once been an architect, but that part of his life had ended seven years earlier when his wife ran off with a university professor and his three kids. Angry, broken-hearted and suicidal, he'd quit the firm, sold his house in the country and had been walking around Great Britain ever since.

Ollie seemed a bit touched, but carried it well. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man who maintained a stately bearing despite his plebian garb of faded Oxford University
sweatshirt, combat fatigue trousers and pair of well-worn running shoes. His hair was steel-gray and as thick as a helmet, and he wore an aristocratically-trimmed beard that curved around his lantern jaw like a chin strap.

Chain-smoking Player's non-filters, Ollie rattled off the story of his life as though he'd told it a hundred times before. Then he ordered another round and started asking me questions, like where I'd been and where I was going. As I told him about leaving California, my adventures in London, the pleasures of hitchhiking and my quest to climb the Matterhorn, he gazed at me the way a master craftsman might eye a promising apprentice.

"So, what is it you seek?" he asked when I finished.

"Seek? The Matterhorn. I'm going to climb it."

"And what do you expect to find?"

"Who knows? It's just something I've got to do."

He sighed through his nose, shook his head and bit his lip as though trying to keep some words from escaping his mouth.

"Something wrong with that, Ollie?"

"Oh, no. Not really. I mean, it's your life."

I didn't know why I should care what he thought, especially since he seemed to have misplaced a few of his marbles. It was just that he acted as though he knew something I didn't, and it irked me. "Why?" I asked. "What are you seeking?"

"Myself," he replied with an expression that brought
out every wrinkle in his forehead.

"And have you found yourself yet?" I asked, trying not to sound too sarcastic.

"Bits and pieces, lad. Only bits and pieces." The wrinkles disappeared. "But I've time yet, until Grim comes to fetch me."

"Grim?"

"The Reaper. I'm at the age where we're on a first-name basis."

"That's pretty, uh, weird."

Ollie laughed. "Yes, well, we all have to deal with the inevitable in our own way. I prefer to think of Grim as an old friend whom I'm destined to meet somewhere down the road rather than a shrouded, faceless foe I can't hope to defeat."

I smiled because that sounded like something Robby would have said. Ollie might have been a little crazy, but I had to admit that I liked his attitude. He ordered a third round, tapped my pint with his and took a swig that made me think Grim might not be quite as far down the road as Ollie thought. He smacked his lips, looked at me and said, "Now that we're set about where we're ultimately going, tell me where it is you're from?"

"I already said, California."

"No, that's not what I mean. It doesn't make a whit of difference where you last paid the rent. I'm asking about your roots, your heritage."
"Oh. In that case, I guess you'd say I'm an upper-middle class suburban Philadelphia Jew."

"Ah-ha! A wandering Jew," he said with an emphatic slap on the bar. "That's splendid! Wandering is in your blood. Your people have always done well in exile, adapting to new civilizations without prostituting their inherent beliefs. Yes, if you can keep an open mind, you might do quite well, quite well indeed."

Ollie finished his pint in another big swig and turned to order another round. But Alston had gone somewhere. Undaunted, my drinking companion climbed over the bar.

"Have you tried Guinness yet?" he asked.

"Just the bottled version we get in the States, and I can't say it's my favorite."

"Well, you'll have some of this. It's not as good as what one finds in Ireland, but it's a fair measure better than the rubbish they export to America."

He drew the beer, the pint glasses mostly filling with brown foam. I hurriedly finished my own shandy while the Guinness settled. Ollie gave each glass another squirt, then just watched the tiny bubbles burst, leaning on the bar with his arms splayed like a giraffe's front legs at a water hole. He raised his head. Shadows from the candlelight hung a frown on his chin, hollowed his cheeks and buried themselves in his eye sockets. It was kind of creepy. I couldn't see his lips move, but heard his gravelly voice.

"Mark my words now, lad. You will find what you seek
in the most unlikely of places, so travel with neither great expectations nor restrictive preconceptions. Most people travel from place to place physically, but leave their minds tethered to old habits, familiarities and prejudices. You must allow your mind to take two steps where your body takes one. Question what you see, answer what you question, find a lesson or laugh in everything. And when all else fails, simply imagine. Don't just tread the earth, navigate the cosmos."

I couldn't resist. "Look, up in the sky... It's a bird... It's a plane... It's The Cosmic Navigator."

"Laugh if you must, but listen well," he continued. "You can only navigate the cosmos with your feet planted firmly on earth. As you make your way from town to town and country to country, be aware that you are also strolling through the pages of history and legends of yore. There is always more than meets the eye, and you mustn't be afraid to look. Above all, learn to appreciate your freedom, for this is something all people crave, but few can master. Be the wind's shadow, time's pendulum and fate's affable date. Listen to the song of the road. Learn to dance to its melody, and you'll enrich not only your present journey, but the rest of your life as well."

"Well spoken, Ollie. But to tell you the truth, it doesn't look like it's enriched your life much. Smoking up a storm, drinking your breakfast... You should see yourself, man. You look about a half-step away from the
bums I saw on the streets of London. No offense."

"No offense taken," he muttered, shaking his head. He topped off our pints and slid one over to me. We drank in silence, and the velvety Guinness went down easily. As I swallowed the last bitter-sweet mouthful, a toilet flushed and the overhead pipes creaked and rattled. Ollie spryly hopped back over the bar as Alston emerged from the men's room with a lit candle in one hand and newspaper in the other. He looked at the foamy brown residue in our glasses and started to say something when Ollie slapped a five-pound note on the bar.

"Here, this ought to cover both the lad's and mine," he said. "That is if Lord Fancy here doesn't mind accepting the generosity of a ne'er-do-well."

He walked to the front door and pushed it open. The rain had let up, and the gray sky was a few shades brighter than before. Waving me over, Ollie ducked outside and took a deep breath, looking around a small gravel parking lot like a baron surveying his land.

"You know the story of this place, Mortimer's Cross?" he asked.

"Nope."

"Then come with me for a while."

"What about my backpack?"

"You won't need it for this trip. Just leave it in the corner with mine. They'll be in safe hands with Alston."

"Safe hands with Alston? That's funny. You sound like
a TV commercial we have in the States."

He was already walking around the side of the building, paying no attention to me. I had to run to catch up, and for the better part of an hour, he led me along the wooded lane at a pace that made me glad I'd left my backpack behind. Eventually, we came to a large clearing dominated by a green hillside that was peppered with crumbled walls. Ollie stopped and sighed. "A magnificent sight, eh lad?"

"What sight would that be?"

"Why, Wigmore Castle, of course," he said with a disgruntled shake of the head. "Dear, dear. What has become of my young cosmic navigator? You see nothing but ruins? Well, allow me to elaborate."

Ollie proceeded to describe what Wigmore Castle looked like in its heyday. He guided me on a tour that tested my imagination, from dungeons to kitchen, across a courtyard, through the dining hall, around the knights' quarters, into to the royal bedchamber, and right up to a pile of rocks he said had once been a fireplace where "Henry VIII might have warmed his backside on a cold winter's eve." The castle's primary role in history, he explained, dated back to the War of the Roses some five hundred years ago. At that time, Wigmore housed a future king of England along with his retinue of noblemen and army officers. Edward, the White Rose of York, was poised to topple the House of Lancaster, led by simple-minded King Henry VI and his domineering queen, Margaret.
Ollie scrambled up a steep knoll with the dexterity of a man half his age. Once atop it, he knelt in the manner of a knight at his dubbing, wheezing slightly, but blue eyes sparkling, ruddy face glowing, and silvery hair tousled benevolently by the light breeze.

"Imagine what a sense of pride this young man, Edward, must have felt as he stood in this very spot and surveyed his troops," he said, "each and every man sworn to defend him to the death. He was a just lad who'd yet to see his twentieth year, but destined to rule one of the most powerful kingdoms on earth.

"Edward was a tall, strapping fellow with long flaxen hair and winning smile. A very charismatic character, indeed, and truly one of our finest monarchs. He stabilized the country both militarily and economically, promoted the arts and sciences, married for love, and fathered ten children.

"But as he stood here five centuries ago, his future was very much in doubt. Queen Margaret, whose allies had recently removed Edward's father's head from his shoulders and displayed it upon a pike outside the gates of York, was marching towards London from the north. Edward's spies had told him that Jasper Tudor, the Earl of Pembroke, was leading a large force from Wales to join the Queen. Knowing he could only hope to defeat these armies one at a time, Edward ambushed Tudor's advancing troops down the road at Mortimer's Cross."
"The morning of the battle, while Edward's army anxiously awaited the enemy, a strange thing occurred. A treble sun rose at dawn. This was merely an optical illusion caused by clouds, but the men of the fifteenth century were, by and large, a superstitious lot. Panic swept through the home force, for this odd phenomenon was interpreted as an evil omen. Edward saved the day, and quite possibly his own head, by announcing the treble sun represented the Holy Trinity. Once assured of divine backing, the soldiers fought with the spirit of avenging angels. They routed the Welshmen, and when dust from the battle came to settle, it did so upon four thousand corpses, most of which were Welshmen. This battle marked the turning point in the lad's quest for the throne. He soon dispatched with the Queen's army and was crowned Edward IV, sovereign ruler of the English Empire."

Ollie fell silent and seemed to peer into an era of days gone by. I wandered down the knoll, took a seat on a rock and leaned back against the remnants of Wigmore's parapet. A flock of birds glided past, riding a breeze which rustled forest leaves. Church bells pealed in the distance. My whole body felt weak, like when I'd been leaning over the glass case in the British Museum, staring at the two thousand-year-old man. But instead of a dry desert wind, this time I could almost hear the scrape of crossed swords, the twang of bowstrings and the whinny of a wounded horse. I closed my eyes, and the sounds took
form...

I'm in the midst of battle, standing back-to-back with my brother. A broadsword is clenched in my fists, and I swing it in a figure-eight arc. With the power of the Holy Trinity coursing through my veins, my blade draws cries and blood with nearly every stroke. Dead and dying men nearly encircle Robby and me. There has been no rain, yet my feet slide in the mud. A screaming man falls against my legs. I silence him with the heel of my boot, but have break with my brother, hopping over bodies to free my footing.

Men are fighting everywhere, some with swords or lances, others with just rocks and fists. Arrows darken the sky in great flocks, and where they alight, soldiers fall by the tens. Two short, dark men charge me with blades drawn. I whirl away from the first and deal him a backhanded blow that cleaves his mail as well as the flesh underneath. My sword catches as he drops, and for a second, I'm defenseless against the other's attack. I see his sword sweeping towards me and duck, then hear a grunt and feel the flat of his blade clang against my helmet. I look up to see my opponent fall and Robby pull his sword out of the man's back.

Warm blood gushes over my ear and down my neck. It's just a flesh wound, thanks to Robby. I nod my thanks, and see him smile his welcome. Then an arrow point seems to sprout out of his chest. His eyes widen as he drops his
sword and grabs the protruding arrow. I reach for him, but he falls away, splintering the wooden shaft as he hits the ground on his back. I kneel beside his convulsing body. His jaw works as though he's trying to speak. I lean over to hear him better over the din of battle.

"The arrow," he gasps. "The point of the arrow."

With trembling hands, I grab the splintered shaft just below the point and jerk it up through his wound. Blood pools in his sunken chest, and a red froth gurgles through his lips. I ease his head onto my lap and watch helplessly as his brown eyes slowly lose their luster and set.

With a rage like none I've ever known, I grab my sword and take my feet. My head is pounding. The battlefield has grown fuzzy. The men all look the same. I swing my broadsword blindly. One man screams, then another. Then the ground starts rumbling. A line of mounted soldiers is galloping towards me. While others run for cover, I stand my ground. A horseman bears down on me, his blade whistling. I duck and thrust my sword at him. It bites flesh and is torn from my grasp. I hear a horse's scream and a man's curse, then the wind as a chill ripples up my spine.

I feel light. And free. Flying and falling at once. Somersaulting through the air, I see sky, then a treetop, branches and trunk. As the ground rises to meet me, I glimpse my own headless body topple next to Robby's corpse in puddle of mud made from earth and blood...
I shivered. Opened my eyes. Saw Ollie Tripod kneeling beside me, watching my face.

"You've been away," he said.

"Yeah," I muttered, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Where?"

"The battle of Mortimer's Cross."

Ollie smiled like a father whose kid just hit a homer to win a Little League game. "That's marvelous."

"Not really. I was fighting alongside my brother until he caught an arrow in the chest and died in my arms. Then some asshole Welsh horseman beheaded me. I mean, I even saw my own body spewing blood as it fell."

"Well," Ollie said, taking a seat on Wigmore's fallen parapet at my back. "Life isn't always pretty, but we must remember that beauty owns many masks."

"I can't believe it. Christ, I still have the smell of earth and blood in my nose. And my neck is tingling like crazy."

"That is marvelous. Simply marvelous."

"What's so fucking marvelous about seeing yourself decapitated?"
"For one thing, living to tell me about it," Ollie said with a chuckle. "But let me hear the whole story, from the start."

I told him exactly what I'd seen. When I finished, Ollie just sat where he was, gazing at the horizon and idly scratching his chin-strap beard. A thundercloud grumbled, sounding very much like the charge of mounted soldiers.

"So what do you think?" I asked.

"I think we're in for some more rain."

"It was so weird, so real."

"And I've got a bit of a cold coming on." Ollie sniffled. "What say we start back to the pub?"

The heavens grumbled again, louder. The tingle at the back of my neck ran right up into my scalp. Ollie put his hands on his knees, rocked back and forth a couple of times and stood up with a little grunt.

"So are you going to tell me what you think, or not?" I asked.

"I should think one might expect such a thing when one mixes shandy and Guinness on an empty stomach." He laughed and started walking. I followed like a dog on heel.

"Did you hypnotize me or something?"

"No lad. Hypnotism isn't in my repertoire of skills."

"Then what was it?"

He shrugged. "A dream. A vision. A glimpse into a past life. An omen for the future. It's hard to say. But for lack of a better term, you might consider calling it
cosmic navigating."

I kicked a rock down the center of the road. "Cosmic navigating?"

"Yes, I rather like the ring of that. I've had similar experiences myself and must admit that I was as befuddled as you the first few times it happened. But I've come to accept it as simply another mode of travel."

"To go where?"

"Wherever you choose. In effect, cosmic navigating seems to be a state of altered consciousness, a heightened awareness, if you will, which uses knowledge, setting and imagination to transport one into a realm where perception creates reality, rather than the reverse."

"You mean what you imagine to be real becomes real just because you think it is?"

"Precisely."

"That's absurd."

"Then why do you keep rubbing your neck?"

My hand froze in mid-stroke. "That's just my mind playing tricks on me."

"But how can the mind play tricks on itself?" he asked. "In fact, it can't. It can only play tricks on your conscious self, the dominant part of your mind which thinks you're confined to the so-called material world. But there's a lot more out there than meets the eye, or any of your other senses, Rabbit. Surely you know that by now."

I kicked the rock again. It took an odd bounce, rolled
off the road and buried itself in a little pile of dead leaves.

"But I think you're missing the point," he continued. "It doesn't matter what cosmic navigating is so much as what it means."

I laughed. "Maybe it just means that I shouldn't mix shandy and Guinness before breakfast."

"Perhaps," he said. "If you're afraid to confront the truth."

"What truth?"

"The truth that transcends reality. Didn't I tell you to try to find a lesson in everything?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Think, boy. What's the lesson to be learned from this extraordinary experience?"

"Good question," I said.

"I know it's a good question, Rabbit. What's the answer?"

I thought about it for a few steps. "Well, for one thing, I'd say it shows me that war is bad."

"Why? It wasn't bad for Edward."

"But it was bad for my brother and me."

"Ah-ha. Now we're getting somewhere. Why was it good for Edward and bad for you?"

"Because he wound up being king while we wound up being two of the four thousand corpses you told me about."

"So one might conclude that it's not self-serving to
fight another man's battles."

"I guess so."

"Yet, by climbing the Matterhorn, are you not fighting one of your dead brother's battles?"

I stopped walking, struck by the thought that he might be right. "But that's not a battle," I reasoned aloud. "It's a dream. One that we both just happen to have shared."

"Perhaps," Ollie said, waving me along. "Yet as an objective observer, I see two men back-to-back in battle. One loses his life, causing the other to lose his composure. He fights on carelessly, and eventually loses his own life because he couldn't handle his brother's death."

"So what are you saying, that I shouldn't climb the Matterhorn because of something I imagined?"

"Something you perceived," Ollie said. "Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true."

"You know, that's what crazy people say."

"Aye, and visionaries as well. There's not much of a difference between the two. But you really have so much to learn. And you can start by learning how to appraise yourself honestly. If you are planning to climb the mountain for yourself, fine. But if you are doing it for your dead brother, I'd reconsider. You have to ask yourself what's best for you, lad."

"Well, I am doing it for myself," I said stubbornly.
"Fine, but then we're left with my original question: What is the lesson in your cosmic navigating sojourn?"

"Maybe there isn't any lesson."

"Oh, there's a lesson all right. Perhaps you just can't recognize it yet, but I'd wager you will eventually. Let's just hope you see it before you lose your head."

"Let's hope so," I said, feeling another tingle at the nape of my neck.

The sky darkened. Ollie picked up the pace. He had the long, easy stride of a man who'd been walking around Great Britain for seven years, and my relatively short legs had to scurry to keep up. We rounded yet another bend in the serpentine road, and the wind changed directions with a gust. Dead leaves swirled across the road. Tree branches swayed, their leaves rustling as they flashed their paler undersides. I started looking around for shelter, but the dark cloud miraculously passed without raining on us. Soon, the sky stopped grumbling, and by the time we reached Mortimer's Cross, a short, faint shadow had sprouted from my heels.

Power had been restored to the pub, but the electric lights weren't much brighter than the candles had been. Two other patrons were sitting at the bar, hands clasped around half-empty pint glasses. They were fairly old men with red noses and looked to be locals, even though there didn't seem to be any town in the immediate vicinity. As Ollie ordered a couple platters of bangers and mash and a round of Tartan
Bitters for us, I phoned my motorcycle mechanic in London and fared no better than the last time I'd called him.

Ollie took a seat at the table in the corner where we'd left our backpacks and was merrily munching a sausage from one of the plates when I rejoined him. I didn't realize how famished I was until I gulped down my portion and immediately fetched a second helping from Alston. Ollie settled for one platter, which he ate slowly, so that we finished at about the same time. Ollie nudged his plate away, lit a Player's and offered me one. He leaned back in his chair, exhaled and said, "Well, Rabbit, what's next on your agenda?"

I lit my smoke and shrugged. "I don't really have an agenda. I'm actually just killing time until my motorcycle is fixed."

"Oh yes," he said with a frown, "the motorcycle. Blasted noisy contraptions, they are. I'd think you'd be better off walking and hitchhiking for a while. What was it Thoreau said? 'The swiftest traveler is he who goes afoot.'"

"That was before motorcycles were invented."

Ollie smiled, then finished his beer with a smack of the lips. "Delightful stuff, this. How about another pint?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't want to get too wasted. I really ought to be going soon."

"Where?"
"South, I guess. At least that was the direction I was heading before I stumbled through the back door of this place."

Ollie nodded, then craned his neck to see the clock over the cash register. "Hmmm. Two-ish. I suppose I should be on my way as well."

"Where to?"

"Don't rightly know. Shall we see?" He pulled a hole-riddled old map and a wooden dart with mangled feathers out of his little canvas knapsack. Then he walked up to the pub's dartboard and stuck the map to it with two of the house darts.

"Here now, sir," Alston said. "What game is that?"

Ollie turned around, back against the dartboard. "Just one I play with fate," he replied and slowly paced off a few steps. Then he wheeled suddenly and threw his wooden dart at the map in the same motion. It hit high on the left side. Ollie rushed up to it.

"Scalasaig," he announced.

"What's that?" Alston asked.

"Scalasaig. On the island of Colonsay, off the southwestern coast of Scotland. It shall be my next destination."

Alston rolled his eyes, prompting a couple of throaty laughs from the guys sitting at the bar. Ollie ignored them to take down the map and spread it on our table. He gazed at it open-mouthed, blue eyes slowly shifting from a hole at
Mortimer's Cross to a hole on the tiny Scottish Isle. The new one was actually a bit north of Scalasaig, in line with some red dots denoting a ferry route from the mainland.

"You always plan your itinerary this way?" I asked.

"No. Just since my fourth year on the road." He smiled. "Care to have a go?"

I shrugged and grabbed the dart. Ollie retacked the map to the dartboard, then positioned my back to the wall.

"How many steps do you take?" I asked.

"I take seven, one for each year of my travels. But you may take as many as you wish."

Seven sounded about right. And lucky. I made them long steps, spun around and threw the dart. It hit open water. The Irish Sea.

"What now?" I asked.

Ollie pulled out the dart and handed it back to me. "Unless you're an exceptionally strong swimmer, I'd say to have another go."

I did, pacing off seven shorter steps, wheeling and firing at the lower part of the map. But the dart hit too low, sticking right in the middle of the English Channel.

"You aimed!" Ollie blurted.

"And I missed," I said. "So what?"

"You mustn't aim. The whole idea is to let Providence guide you. Now try again."

I did, pacing off seven even shorter steps, wheeling and throwing blindly at the same time. The dart missed the
map entirely and hit the blackboard used for keeping score of more commonly played dart games. It chipped the slate and fell to the floor.

"Hey!" Alston shouted. "That's me slate." He waved his arm angrily. "We'll have no more of this nonsense or out you'll go. The both of you."

Ollie picked up his dart and examined it. "Broke the tip as well."

"Sorry."

"That's okay," he said. "It's my own fault, trying to force you into doing things my way. Every man must find his own path. I was just so damned sure..." He stopped talking and, handling the dart like an injured bird, put it back into a side pocket of his knapsack. "Well, what's done is done, eh Rabbit? What say we have one last pint together?"

I didn't really want one but felt too guilty to turn him down. I even bought the barkeep and the two other men pints. As Ollie and I sat at our table and drank, we talked about the weather some more, then the war in the Falklands, which led us into politics and politicians.

"The only statesman I ever trusted was your man Kennedy," Ollie said with bit of a slur. "Now there was a man with vision."

I agreed and told him how Robby had campaigned for Kennedy. Then I showed him my lucky half-dollar. His eyes glinted.

"It's your talisman?" he asked.
"I guess so."

He rubbed his hands together. "Do an old man a favor, Rabbit?"

"Sure," I said, hoping he wasn't going to ask me to give it to him.

"Have another go at the map. With your coin this time."

"I doubt it'll stick in the board, Ollie."

"No. I mean to flip it onto the map. I'll lay it on the floor, in the corner, and you stand right over there, by the bar..."

Alston was shaking his head as I walked over to the bar, coin in hand. I smiled at him and turned around. Ollie was standing beside the map, looking from me to it to me again. "Flip it," he said, flicking his thumb as though showing me how.

I flipped the coin towards the map in the corner. It hit on edge, bounced off both walls, dropped to the floor and rolled across the map drunkenly until falling over on its lower left side. From where I was standing, it looked as though I'd hit water again.

"Another landing at sea?" I asked, walking towards it.

"No. You caught the coast of Wales." We kneeled over the map together. The coin had fallen heads-side up, covering the westernmost point of Welsh land. Ollie carefully turned the coin on edge to look underneath it.
"The center fell right on St. David's."

"St. David's what?" I asked, having a look myself.

"The city of St. David's."

Under the center of the coin, there was a splotch of green, and in the middle of the green was a white dot smaller than a nearby dark hole. "St. David's" was printed beside it in type as fine as any of the map.

"City?" I asked.

"Aye. It's Britain's smallest city."

"Isn't that a contradiction of terms?"

"Perhaps. But isn't life full of contradictions?"

"But a city that small would just be a town, or a village, wouldn't it?"

"Normally, St. David's might even be considered a hamlet," he said. "But it's a city nonetheless."

"Why is that?"

He smiled. "Well, lad, you'll just have to go there and find out. Now won't you?"
CHAPTER 18

With a mystery to solve and a fate to follow, I left Ollie to have a third "last" pint and started hitching towards Wales. The sparse traffic seemed to be going every way but west. I was just about to give up and change directions when a car going my way slowly emerged through the ground fog. I stuck out my left thumb. The car passed, then stopped about fifty yards down the road. The driver waved to me. Lucky thing. It looked about ready to rain again.

I jogged up to the car and threw my pack in the back seat, then heard Ollie call my name. He was standing in front of the pub's ancient back door, his small canvas rucksack casually slung over one shoulder and a dense curl of fog engulfing his legs as though he'd willed it there for effect. He seemed to be floating, more spirit than flesh, as he lit yet another of his non-filter cigarettes. The sky behind him looked black, but just over his head, the treble sun of the tavern's sign shone as brightly as ever. As he waved good-bye to me, the sign's wrought iron fixture creaked in the stiffening breeze like a rusty suit of armor.
I waved back, feeling that odd chill at the nape of my neck. I shivered, then climbed into the car.

"Thanks for stopping."

"You're quite welcome," the driver replied. He was a small, dark man who looked a lot like the guys I'd imagined I was fighting at Mortimer's Cross, except that he was wearing a green tweed sports jacket and clerical collar instead of leather and mail. He checked the side mirror, put on his turn signal and carefully eased out onto the empty road. "Where are you going?" he asked, accelerating slowly.

"St. David's. It's a little town...."

"City," he interrupted. "St. David's is a city."

"That's what the guy standing outside of that pub was telling me. But I didn't believe him. How can it be so small and still be considered a city?"

The sixty-four-thousand-pound question. The priest, who had a tick in his lower lip, offered me the answer for free.

"Because it has a cathedral."

"So what?"

It took him a long time to say it, but apparently the ultimate criterion for cityhood in Great Britain is the presence of a cathedral. Take away the cathedral, and St. David's would be just another two-bit burg. During the course of this explanation, the priest told me that the miniature metropolis was once called Mynyw before being
renamed after David, who not only had an easier name to spell, but also happened to be the patron saint of Wales.

I smiled, realizing that this was the second time a man of the cloth had given me a fairly prompt answer to one of my immediate questions. The first was old Vicar Blackman, who solved the enigma of Kim Erikson's whereabouts. But these were both relatively simple questions with definite answers, unlike the questions raised by Ollie Tripod and my mystifying trip through time. I leaned back in my seat and contemplated what it all meant, if anything. Was a clue to my destiny hidden in that strange journey? I wracked my mind trying to find some meaning in it, something different from Ollie's ominous interpretation. But I couldn't.

Meanwhile, the priest rambled on about Saint David's earthly deeds, which included a battle against one particular heresy, the founding of several monasteries and the supposedly divine occurrence of a white dove landing on his shoulder during a sermon. I listened to what he was saying, but kept seeing that bloody arrow sticking out of my brother's chest and my own headless body crumpling next to his.

We passed through a town called Hay-on-Wye and crossed the Welsh border. The sun broke through a high layer of clouds, bright enough to hurt my eyes. I put down my visor. There was a little oval mirror in it. From my vantage, I could only see the tip of my nose, moustache and upper lip. I tilted the visor so that my eyes appeared in
the mirror. Brown irises, slightly bloodshot whites. I shifted my head and watched my eyes watch me, then leaned closer. My irises adjusted their aperture with a precision finer than any machine. My pupils seemed to swell, the ends of twin black tunnels which led into the depths of my brain. Black depths where I'd seen my brother die a thousand times on Cannon Mountain and was now beginning to see his death at Mortimer's Cross over and over.

The priest eventually dropped me off in Bronllys because he was turning north. The sky had cleared, and as I forced smiles at prospective rides, my black thoughts drifted to the back of my mind. It felt good to know where I was going for a change, even though I wasn't sure why. And hitching turned out to be a breeze, partly because rugby is the country's national sport and I'd wisely donned my Sensinitas Surf team jersey. The people who stopped for me were invariably either players or fans, well-aware that their favorite sport was played to a lesser degree in the States. But all of them seemed delightfully surprised to actually meet an American rugger in the flesh.

Rides were short, but came frequently. I had just enough time to catch a glimpse of someone's life before popping into someone else's. It was like sitting in a movie theater watching trailer after trailer of coming attractions. I reached the eastern fringe of Haverfordwest well before dark. St. David's was a scant twenty miles further, and I no doubt would have made it there that day.
had I not run into a guy named John Megan while walking through town. He played rugby for the Pembroke side and was so impressed to meet an American rugger that he pretty much kidnapped me to his local pub, which was about fifteen miles out of my way.

It was one of his teammate's birthday, and I helped them all celebrate. We consumed mass quantities of Brains beer, a Welsh concoction which seemed to go straight to its namesake. John Megan's mates were rightly hospitable until everyone got pretty well toasted. Then, this huge guy with a nasty slash of scar tissue cutting through one eyebrow started staring at me, squinting as though it was a chore for him to see through his drunken stupor. When I smiled uneasily at him, he lurched over from his stool and accused me of having all of my own teeth. With a relieved laugh, I admitted it was true. He smiled like a jack-o'-lantern, announced the fact to his pals and concluded that I must be a sissy, or at least had played like one. I enlightened him on the advent of the mouthgard, but that just prompted him to razz me more. I tried pointing out my thrice-broken nose, but the last break kind of straightened it, and even John Megan admitted he'd seen girls with worse-looking beaks.

Irrked by thirty sets of taunting eyes and gap-toothed grins, I offered to prove my manhood by chugging a pint of Brains while standing on my head, the same stunt I'd seen performed numerous times but had never actually attempted
myself. I succeeded in downing (upping?) the pint, but
gravity pulled a measure of the beer back through my nose, saturating millions of olfactory cells in a bilious swill which smelled about on par with a three-day-old road kill.

The bar mercifully closed at "half-ten," and John Megan put me up for the night on the floor of his studio apartment. Come morning, he was considerate enough to let me sleep in while he staggered off to work. I didn't stir until noon and still had trouble getting out of my sleeping bag bed. After a leisurely cup of coffee and shower, I left my host a Sensinitas Surf patch and hit the road again. For the first time in Wales, I had trouble getting a ride, even though I was wearing my "Give Blood, Play Rugby" t-shirt. It seemed like hours before a local farmer stopped to give me a lift for about five miles, and it took three more short rides to reach a small town named Solva. I stopped in a grocery store to buy a medicinal bottle of beer and some bread and cheese, then picnicked on a bench in a small park. I still felt hungover, and not even a healthy, salt-tainted breeze could erase the latent regurgitated beer scent in my nose. When I finished eating, it seemed to take a herculean effort just to lug my backpack over to the road.

Not many cars passed, and none stopped, although a few of the drivers gave me friendly waves and toots of the horn. After about half an hour, an old woman emerged from a nearby cottage with white picket fence. She started
shuffling toward me, pulling an empty shopping cart with a wooden cane hanging on the side. Even though I was sweating under the afternoon sun, she was wearing a heavy purple cardigan sweater. She passed with a pleasant, "Good day," then stopped to watch me try to flag down a car. The driver signaled that he was turning and kept going straight until he was out of sight. I looked at the old lady and shrugged.

"Not much luck today," I said.

"No," the woman agreed. "I had good luck all of my life until my husband, Dylan, died last September."

"I'm sorry."

"We were married sixty-four years."

"That's a long time."

"I have three sons, one daughter, twelve grandchildren and five great-grandchildren."

"That's nice."

"Perhaps, but they live far away and only visit on holidays, except for Gareth, who's in Carmarthen. He's the closest, but they never come. Emily, his wife, and I never did get along."

Another car came down the road. I stuck out my thumb, but the driver didn't even seem to see me.

"Where are you going?" the woman asked.

"Nowhere right now. But I'm trying to get to St. David's."

She waved a liver-spotted hand at me. "Why St. David's
can't be three miles from where we're standing," she said. "And you could take the coastal path for a lovely walk."

I really didn't feel like walking anywhere, but the old lady shamed me into it by saying I should appreciate my youth and vigor and not be lazy like Charles, her eldest. She told me how to find the path, then kind of shooed me away towards it.

The coastal path was just over a hill and around a bend. When I reached it, I stopped to take off my sneakers and put on my hiking boots, which I'd been keeping in my backpack because they didn't seem to want to break in. But I figured that this was as good a time as any to loosen them up a bit, and also that they'd be lighter on my feet than they'd be to carry on my back.

I started walking along the rocky trail towards St. David's. It ran along the sea atop a cliff, then dipped into a valley, up a hill, and into another valley. My feet stumbled over nearly every rut in the trail, I had a crick in my neck from sleeping on John Megan's floor, my boots had almost instantly started raising blisters and, for some reason, one of my backpack shoulder straps kept cutting off the circulation in my right arm. Even though it was getting late in the day, the sun was warm enough to keep me sweating, and with each drop that sprang out on my brow and ran into my eyes, I took solace in the hope that I might at least be ridding my body of some of its Brains beer poison. But the sickly smell lingered in my nostrils, my inner
thighs were chafing worse and worse with every step and my underwear began to feel like iguana skin. I crested another hill, then came to a valley that was deep enough to reach the beach, which was flat and hard, like in California during low tide. I figured it was silly to be struggling up and down hills when I could easily stroll along the beach. St. David's couldn't have been too far away, around the next bend, or the next.

When I discovered it was around neither, I dropped my backpack in the shadow of a slate-gray cliff. My mouth felt as though I'd just brushed my teeth with Elmer's Glue-All, and not even a saltwater douche could rid my nose of that awful aroma. I lay down for a minute, and using my backpack for a pillow, gazed at the sky. But it was still awfully bright. I closed my eyes and swore to give up drinking for a while.

I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep until I felt a ripple of water creep up my pants legs. I jumped to my slightly soggy feet and pulled my backpack into a natural cul-de-sac which was still dry. But it wouldn't be for long. No one had told me that the tide rises upwards of twenty feet along the Welsh coast, and the expansive beach was now almost entirely covered by the sea. There was no way out of this little canyon except to wade through the water or...

I craned my neck. The cliff rose about a hundred and fifty feet above me, but it appeared to be easily climbable
for a guy who was about to tackle the mighty Matterhorn. Figuring I could always turn back if things got too dicey, I shouldered my backpack, pulled the straps as tightly as I could and started up. The lower part of the cliff was as easy to climb as a jungle gym. But as I gained altitude, the nubs and cracks I'd been using for holds shrank in both size and frequency. I had to move slowly, then stop completely when I came to an overhang. The only way around it was to traverse the cliff along a narrow ledge to my right. Conveniently, there was a horizontal crack running at eye level above it for my hands.

I inched along the cliff just beneath the overhang until the ledge narrowed to non-existence. It was a dead end, unless I could somehow get to a nice wide ledge that was just out of my reach to the upper right. That ledge was also overhanging the face of the cliff. To grab its lip, I'd have to lean back, straddle a narrow rift and step on a nub of rock that looked loose. It was risky, but even if the rock only held momentarily, I figured I'd have enough time to at least grab the lip of the ledge with my right hand.

With the sea beginning to crash against the base of the cliff, I eased to the very end of the narrow ledge I was standing on. My left foot firmly set, I straddled air to step on the suspicious rock and let my left fingers slip out of their hold in the crack to reach for the other ledge with my right hand. Just as it found the lip, the rock beneath
my right foot shifted, then fell away. If it had crumbled a
split-second earlier, my story would have ended then and
there. Still, I was in no position to celebrate. I was
hanging on the precipice by my right hand and left foot with
nothing to grab with my other hand and foot. In fact, I was
stuck where I was, stretched out like a heretic on the
rack. While my right hand and left foot held on for dear
life, my right foot pawed at the sheer underside of the
overhang while my left hand stretched futilely towards the
crack it had just abandoned. Finding that out of reach, it
started groping all around for something to grasp. Had I
not been wearing a backpack with a sleeping bag strapped on
top, I might have been able to reach the ledge where my
other hand had alit. But my range of motion was too
limited, and there was no way to shuck my backpack without
shucking myself off of the cliff.

Time seemed to slow until each second lasted a minute.
I pictured falling, which would have been a nasty way
to die. The barnacled rocks at the base of the cliff had
sliced up my hands from passing touches. Hitting them from
this height would have surely rended flesh from bone. And
if I somehow survived the fall, I thought, Ollie's old
buddy, Grim, would no doubt ride in with the tide to sweep
my crippled body to never-neverland. Days later, a
blotched, bloated corpse would wash up on shore somewhere,
eyes eaten out by fish...

My left leg started doing a credible impersonation of a
sewing machine needle and threatened to shake its tiptoed foot off of the narrow end of the ledge. As the rest of my limbs froze in pre-rigor mortis, my befuddled brain refused to come up with a game plan. It merely pictured that English climber I'd read about in the London Times. Nigel Somebody. I saw him falling and heard his hollow echo, and I wondered if perhaps someone would read about me in a newspaper tomorrow, or the day after.

I glanced down. The rocks below looked like jagged black teeth frothing with the sea's rabid foam. I tore my eyes away and looked up. Beyond the vein-crosse of back of my right hand, I saw a lone cloud which resembled an elephant's head. That made me think about the time when Robby took me to the circus at Convention Center. We had great seats, dead center to the middle ring and just a couple of rows back. I was dying to see the trapeze artists, but during the opening parade, one big, old Indian elephant sneezed as it passed and drenched us with pachyderm snot. We had to leave even before the trained poodles came on.

My right hand was tiring, losing its grip. If only I hadn't listened to that old lady and stuck with hitchhiking. If only I hadn't run into Ollie Tripod. If only that frigging coin had landed somewhere else on the map. The fingers of my left hand were clawing blindly at the unyielding cliff, scraping their tips bloody. The veins on the back of my right hand looked ready to pop. I could smell my own sour breath on the rock in front of my nose.
The cloud above had a sunset-pink tint to it. A pink elephant. If only that goddam elephant had held its sneeze for another two strides...

"Snap out of it, Rabbit!" a voice interrupted my discombobulated thoughts. It sounded like Robby, but it wasn't. It was me, or rather my mind's voice. I obeyed it and stopped thinking about everything but my predicament. My right hand was tingling as though it were asleep. My left leg was shaking uncontrollably. My backpack felt like a pair of heavy hands on my shoulders, slowly pulling me away from the cliff and down towards the sea nearly a hundred feet below. My heart was pounding furiously, but I couldn't seem to take a full breath. My eyes watered, and the tingle in my right hand started turning into a cramp. I knew I couldn't hold on much longer. I squeezed my eyes shut to clear the tears away. As they ran down my cheeks, my mind's voice purred, "Relax, Rabbit. Relax." For a second, I seemed to float out of my body, off the cliff and over the ocean. My body looked small and insignificant, almost laughable in its plight.

"Panic and you're dead," I heard that inner voice say. "Relax and everything will be all right. Control your fright. Use its strength."

Miraculously, my left leg stopped shaking. My right hand shifted on the ledge, relieving the cramp. I opened my eyes and forced my lungs to take a few deep breaths while envisioning what I had to do. My body seemed to kick into
gear on its own. My left foot pushed off of its hold, unweighting me just enough to swing my left hand high over my head in a blind, groping arc. My bloody fingers caught the lip of the ledge next to my right hand, and I was left swinging back and forth like a pendulum. But only for a few ticks. My legs scissor-kicked the air, and with an adrenaline-aided rush, I pulled myself up to the ledge and flopped on my belly atop it.

I slithered away from the edge, then just lay there panting, trembling and muttering thanks to whatever god or angel had been watching over me. The ocean breeze felt chilling on the back of my sweaty neck. I rolled to my side, loosened one of my backpack straps and slipped one arm out, then the other. I could breathe again, could taste the refreshing lick of the salty air. Slowly, I got to my feet, feeling light and agile without my backpack. I looked up. There was still a long way to go, but I was over the hump. The rest of the climb looked to be more of a steep rocky hill than cliff, one I could mostly walk up. I sat down and massaged my right hand until it felt normal again. Then, without once looking down, I put on my backpack and continued climbing.

Even though I might have walked upright, I scrambled on all fours. A few loose rocks broke off and tumbled down the slope, but my body kept chugging upwards as if to get itself out of danger. In a matter of minutes, I reached a natural platform just below the top of the ridge. But there, I ran
into a final impasse. A good eight or nine feet of unclimbable topsoil separated me from the crest of the cliff. I shucked my backpack and cursed. So close. So goddammotherfucking close. And now I'd just have to wait where I was until someone came along. But it was getting close to dusk, and even if someone passed by on the trail above, chances were he wouldn't see me.

I started shouting for help. Between the wind and crash of waves below, I could barely hear myself. If only I could have reached the weeds growing atop the cliff, I'd have been all right. But they were even out of my jumping range. The only possible way I saw was too chancy, a dead root sticking out of the topsoil about two feet below the cliff's weedy crest. I thought I could probably reach it by jumping. But if it pulled out or broke off, I'd fall to the side of my little platform and probably not stop until I hit those frothing black rocks at sea level.

The root didn't look too promising. It was about half as big around as my wrist, dry and gnarled. I couldn't even see the tree or shrub it came from. In fact, I couldn't remember seeing any trees or shrubs growing anywhere near the edge of the cliffs I'd walked across earlier. For a second, I considered that it might even be an illusion, a mirage like an oasis the two thousand-year-old man might been crawling towards when he died.

I turned away from the root and sat down, my arms hugging my knees. The sky to the east was already beginning
to turn a deeper shade of blue. At least I was safe where I was. Someone would come along eventually. I decided to write a note explaining where I was, pin it to my backpack and heave it on top of the cliff. But when I ripped a blank page from the back of my journal, Robby's picture fell out. A puff of wind swept it off the edge of my platform, and I watched helplessly as it fluttered down towards the sea.

It was the last picture ever taken of him. And on the back was one of the last things he'd ever written. "We can only die once." But here he was, dying again. I cursed my carelessness, first for losing the picture, then for getting myself stuck on some godforsaken cliff in the middle of nowhere. My hands trembled with both anger and dread as I wrote the note and stuck it to the front flap of my backpack with my emergency safety pin. Then I picked up my pack by its shoulder straps, swung it back and forth to get sixty pounds of momentum going the right way and let it fly. It landed on the edge of the clifftop with a gruntlike thud. That was all I could do. That and wait.

But I couldn't wait. Losing Robby's picture had totally unnerved me. It seemed like a bad omen, perhaps even the Mortimer's Cross prophecy coming true. I lose my brother, then I lose my life. I thought that the fish might feast on my eyes yet. I didn't want to be here. I wanted to be safe and comfortable. I didn't even want to be in Europe. I wanted to be back in the Tidewater Tavern with my own rugby buddies, who knew I was a good player despite the
fact that I still had all of my teeth. I wanted to be able to talk to people without having to first introduce myself. I wanted my own house and my own bed. And in that bed, I wanted somebody to touch and hold and love. I wanted somebody to love me back. I wanted someone to tell me that it mattered whether or not I lived or died on this lonely cliff.

The cliff seemed to be sapping more of my strength and resolve the longer I was on it. And it was getting chilly. I should have taken my sweatshirt out of my pack before throwing it atop the cliff. But now, even that was out of reach. My eyes kept drifting up to the root. It was no mirage, and I knew I could nab it if I jumped. The question was whether or not it would support my weight. One glance, it looked sturdy, the next it looked fragile. I couldn't decide, so I tried yelling for help again. But each scream just seemed more futile than the last.

I looked back at the root. There was a thick clump of weeds topping the cliff just above it, and the sky above them. The elephant cloud had drifted south and changed form, the trunk curling under its chin and the head elongating to a point. Actually, it now looked a little bit like the Matterhorn.

"We can only die once." The words popped out of my mouth spontaneously, almost as if Robby were speaking through me.

He only died once, but I'd lived his death a thousand
times. A thousand and one, now. Maybe the time had come
for me to join him. If I jumped for the root and it held,
I'd be safe. If it broke off, I'd be dead. It was as
simple as that, a fifty-fifty chance. Continued life, or a
relatively painless death and possible reunion with Robby. I
stood up, my palms suddenly sweaty and breath coming short
again. I gazed up at the cloud and bit my lower lip.
"Well, Robby," I said to the sky. "If you're up there, help
me out on this one and we'll climb the Matterhorn yet."

I felt a surge of confidence and could almost hear a
voice telling me that this wasn't my day to die. My eyes
shifted back to the root, locking onto a spot right where it
emerged from the topsoil. I forced a few deep breaths into
my lungs and leaped towards it, life and death somersaulting
through the air like the heads and tails of a flipped coin.
My hand caught the root right where I'd been aiming. It
heard a crack, but the root held fast while my left hand
flew up to grab a clump of weeds. Then, in one quick
motion, I pulled myself from the shadow of the cliff and
felt the orangy warmth of the setting sunlight splash in my
face.

Once safe, the emotional wave of terror I'd been
holding back broke in an orgasm of relief. And
invincibility. I'd felt Grim's icy breath on the back of my
neck not once, but twice, and still managed to leave him
waiting further down the road. How much further, I neither
knew nor cared. All I knew was that I was alive, more alive

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than I'd ever felt before. I jumped to my feet and started prancing along the top of the cliff, fists raised triumphantly and feral whoops jostling the quiet airs of dusk.
CHAPTER 19

My backpack felt light as I hoisted it to my shoulders and started walking towards St. David's. The sunset I so nearly missed turned out to be a beauty, bathing the craggy coastline in a warm glow that seemed to crank up nature's colors a notch. Purple, pink, white and yellow wildflowers sprang to my attention, decorating the fringe of the path like embroidery. I shuffled through them for a couple hundred yards, letting the perfume of their crushed petals erase the last vestiges of that rotten scent in my nose. I wandered back across the path to walk along the very edge of the cliffs. The lengthening shadows of dusk softened the scarred battle line of sea and shore, yet far below, relentless waves furiously chopped away at the rock with spray flying like chips from a lumberjack's ax. The cliffs seemed much higher from the top. I was amazed that I'd been dumb enough to try climbing one, and even more amazed that I'd succeeded.

I crested a rise and saw St. David's lying below in a sea of green fields, the famed cathedral sticking out like a hitchhiker's thumb. It was the only structure that rose to metropolitan heights, elevating the entire hamlet to the
inflated status of cityhood. I supposed the Church could do
the same for puny man in a way, if you believed.
Unfortunately, I didn't, or rather couldn't, believe in the
Christian view of God, nor even the Jewish one. Frankly, I
didn't know what to believe in other than the miracle of
life itself, and the lesser miracle that I was still around
to appreciate it.

I strolled into town and stopped at the White Dove for
a baked chicken dinner, which tasted as fine as any meal I'd
ever eaten. Opting for water over beer, I drank pint after
pint, consuming it as though it came straight from the
fountain of youth. Once satiated to belly-swelling
proportions, I asked the barkeep where the cheapest lodgings
would be. He suggested the local youth hostel.

"Don't you have to be a member or something?" I
asked.

"I'm certain you can sign on there," he answered.

Sounded good to me. I got directions, shouldered my
backpack once again and followed a dark, windy lane through
fenced fields until I saw a triangular Youth Hostel
Association sign hanging on a post at the end of a long dirt
driveway. At the other end, there was a stone farmhouse
like dozens of others I'd passed. Only one car was parked
out front, but inside, a small crowd of hostel-dwelling
types was gathered around a fireplace. There were two young
couples and an old man. I assumed the latter was in charge
and asked him if I could stay the night.
"Don't ask me, ask the warden," he said, pointing to a guy with shoulder-length black hair and scraggly beard.

"Warden?" I asked.

"Yes, of course you can stay," the bearded one offered. "Seeing how it's early in the season, there's plenty of room."

The fee was a scant four pounds, but I had to spend another five for a membership card as well as five more to buy a compulsory bedsheet which was sewn up like a linen sleeping bag. I assumed it was meant to keep the guests from trading body lice along with their tales of travel.

Once business was taken care of, I joined the others by the fire in the common room and was introduced all around. Peter and Paula were sitting on a sofa, her legs hanging over his lap. They were from Canada and snorted in unison when I announced I was from the States. The old guy was an Irishman named Daniel Wheelock, and the warden and his wife were simply Mr. and Mrs. Davies. As we sat drinking tea with milk, Wheelock told us all about the puffins, kittiwakes, petrels, guillemots and razorbills he'd spotted on his walk along the coastal path from Mathry, comparing it to the Dingle Peninsula in Ireland. When he finished, I told the tale of my perilous climb, automatically adding fifty feet to the height of the cliff and twenty pounds to the weight of my backpack. The story came out sounding artificial even to my ear, and at one point I caught Peter rolling his eyes at Paula.
A crying baby interrupted me just as I was explaining how a root was sticking out of the topsoil where there had been no trees or shrubs anywhere nearby. Mrs. Davies excused herself to run upstairs and came down cradling a red-faced infant. Without the slightest bit of hesitation, she sat on a chair, pulled her left breast out of her blouse and started breast-feeding the little bugger.

Paula began asking Mr. and Mrs. Davies about parenthood, and the grand finale of my story never got told. Since I wasn't particularly interested in things like feeding times and the benefits of cloth diapers over disposable ones, I forced a yawn, said my goodnights and moseyed over to the dormitories, which had been stables before being converted for human use.

I pulled out my map, spread it on the naked mattress of my assigned bunk and looked at it trying to figure out where to go next. I considered letting fate decide by flipping my lucky coin on it again, but then thought of how close it had come from leading me to my death. Actually, the coin had never really been lucky for me. In fact, it hadn't even wanted to come along on my trip in the first place.

"One can certainly get lost whilst gazing at a map, eh?"

I looked up and saw old man Wheelock standing by my bed.

"I guess so. But I'm just trying to figure out where to go next."
"What was it Cervantes said?" He closed his eyes.
"'Journey the universe on a map, without the expense and fatigue of traveling, without suffering the inconveniences of heat and cold and hunger and thirst.'"

I smiled. The old guy was tall and lean and looked to be a world-class walker. He reminded me of Ollie, about ten or fifteen years down the road. He peered over my shoulder, then pointed to a place in Ireland. "Killarney," he said. "That's where I'm from. Beautiful country: the Ring of Kerry, Macgillycuddy Reeks, the Gap of Dunloe... If you haven't been to that neck of the woods, I can recommend it highly."

"Thanks," I said. "but I kind of have to be heading back to London soon."

He shrugged and pointed out some national parks which wouldn't be so far out of my way: Brecon Beacons and Snowdonia in Wales, and the Peak District near Manchester. "Of course, you won't find anything much finer than the coastal path right here," he said.

I nodded, and we both just stared at the map in silence, traveling hundreds of miles with infinitesimal shifts of the eye. Peter disrupted us by coming into the dorm cursing.

"What seems to be the problem?" Wheelock asked.

"The warden," Peter replied. "He won't stretch the rules enough to let me sleep with Paula, even though she's the only one in the women's dorm."
"Why don't you just wait until he's asleep and sneak over there?" I asked.

"Not worth it," he said. "If the warden catches me, he could confiscate my card."

I shook my head and laughed to myself. A five-pound membership card wouldn't have kept me from getting laid. Wheelock chuckled good naturedly and told Peter how he hadn't been allowed to sleep with his wife until after they were married, as though that would somehow console him. It didn't. He continued to grouse while the two of them washed up and slipped into their bedsheets on their respective bunks. Peter finally shut up when Wheelock opened a paperback bird-watching guide and stopped listening to him. Meanwhile, I'd started writing about my cliffhanging ordeal in my journal. The written words were better than the oral version, and I considered making a copy to send off to the *Sensinitas Sentinel*. I stopped writing to wonder what Frannie would think if she read it. Maybe she would start worrying about me. Maybe she would even call my folks and tell them to tell me to call her. Maybe she would want me to come back to her before I killed myself.

I knew was just kidding myself. Frannie never read the *Sentinel*, even when I was reporting for it. With a sigh, I continued writing, but didn't get past the overhang before the warden ducked his head into the room, announced that it was ten-thirty and flicked the light switch off.

"Well, that's it for another day," Wheelock announced
merrily. "Goodnight lads."

Peter and I both muttered goodnights. I wasn't ready for sleep and moved over to a bed by the window. The starlight was just bright enough for me to continue writing, but my eyes soon tired from the strain. I wound up just jotting down notes about jumping for the dead root and pulling myself over the rim of the cliff. Then I moved back to my assigned bed next to old man Wheelock, slipped into my linen cocoon and quickly fell asleep despite the old man's snuffling snores.

I awoke wondering if I had to get up or could go back to sleep for a while. Peter's bunk was empty, but Wheelock was still in his, turned on his side away from me. His watch was lying on an unfinished wooden stand between our beds. I picked it up. Eight-fifty. About time to get moving if I didn't want to miss my free continental breakfast. I lay the watch back down where I'd found it, got up, washed, dressed and zipped up my backpack as quietly as possible, then went to the main house. The warden was shuffling papers around on the counter, and Peter and Paula were sitting at a table in the common room eating English muffins with jam and sipping tea. Their matching backpacks were leaning against each other in a corner, Canadian flags sewn neatly onto the front flaps. I dropped mine by the sofa and rubbed my hands together.

"What's for breakfast?"

"Muffins and tea, or coffee, if you prefer."
"Coffee, if it's not too much trouble."

He grabbed a push broom with a dustpan fitted on top of its handle. "No trouble at all," he said, handing the broom to me. "I'll fix a cup of Nescafe while you sweep out the dorms.

"Sweep out the dorms?" I asked.

"At youth hostels, you're responsible for performing a little chore. It helps to keep expenses down."

"But the old guy's still asleep. I don't want to disturb him."

The warden looked at his watch. "It's after nine. I'd say he should be getting up anyway. We close at ten, you know."

I didn't. But if the bars closed at three in the afternoon in Great Britain, I supposed it shouldn't have been too surprising for the hostels to close at ten.

I took the broom back to the converted stables and started sweeping up the women's dorm. There wasn't enough dirt on the floor to bother picking up, so I just spread it around. Then I went over to the men's side. Wheelock hadn't moved. I purposely banged the metal trash can with the broom to rouse him. If Wheelock heard the noise, he didn't show it. Probably a little hard of hearing, I figured. He looked much older asleep, and paler. I ran the broom under his bed to get at some dustballs and whacked it against one of the bunk's legs.

"C'mon, Mr. Wheelock. Time to rise and shine."
He didn't stir. My hands suddenly felt clammy on the broom handle. They started trembling. Wheelock didn't even seem to be breathing. And the fingers curled under his chin were blue.

I dropped the broom and gently shook his shoulder. "Mr. Wheelock?"

He didn't move. My breath caught. I held it as I reached for the wrist of his exposed hand to feel for a pulse. One touch was all it took. I drew my hand back as though death were contagious and stared at his lifeless face, the waxy skin mottled with blue, his upper lip drawn just enough to show the tips of his yellow front teeth. My feet felt rooted to the cement floor. The whole room was deathly still and so quiet I could hear his wristwatch ticking on the bedstand.

My eyes drifted over to the watch. Nine-ten and counting. It was an old watch with scratched crystal and gold leafing peeling off the expandable metal band. Not worth much to anyone, especially Wheelock. It hadn't kept time from running out on him. I, however, had plenty of time left and no way to keep track of it. Nine-eleven. I stole a glance around. No one would know if I took it, and I doubted that even old man Wheelock would have objected if he could have. I walked around his bed quietly, as though he were just asleep, grabbed the watch and stuck it into my pocket. Then I ran over to the main house.

"All done?" the warden asked cheerfully as I burst
through the door.
"The old guy...he's dead."
"What?"
"He must have died in his sleep."
"Good heavens," the warden said. "Are you certain?"
"Yeah. He's cold as ice."
"My God," Peter said.
"That poor old man," Paula muttered.
Mrs. Davies came into the room, holding her baby on her hip.
"What's the matter?" she asked.
The warden stepped out from behind his counter. "It seems as though Mr. Wheelock passed on during the night."
"Oh dear," she said. We all just stood there for a few seconds, as though no one knew what to do. The baby pawed at one of its mother's breasts. Mrs. Davies shifted it to her other hip. "Well," she said. "Let's have a look."
She headed out the door and over to the dorm with her husband, the Canadians and me close behind. Still holding the baby on her hip, she leaned over Wheelock's bed and felt his wrist with her free hand. The outline of where he wore his watch was even whiter than the rest of his skin, and I thought I caught Peter looking at the nightstand quizzically.
"Tsk, tsk," Mrs. Davies clicked. "May God save his eternal soul." She looked over at her husband. "Gerwyn, you'll have to call the constable."
"Right away," he answered, but just stood there with the rest of us and watched his wife fold the loose end of the sewn sheet over Wheelock's head.

"He seemed so alive just last night," Paula whispered.

"Yes." Mrs. Davies said. Her baby seemed to be pointing to something in the corner of the ceiling. "But this is really quite a lovely way to go. I once worked in a home for the elderly and saw some terribly agonizing deaths. When I pass on, I hope it's as peacefully as this. But come now, there's nothing we can do for him here."

We all left Wheelock where he lay and returned to the common room. The warden called the constable, then told Peter and Paula that they were free to go, but I'd have to wait around to make a statement. I felt a sudden urge to pee and excused myself to go to the bathroom. When I returned, I was surprised to see that Peter and Paula hadn't moved. I took a seat on the sofa, feeling guilty for stealing the dead man's watch. The warden seemed to keep looking at me sternly, and I wondered why the other couple hadn't left. Maybe they all knew I what I'd done and couldn't wait for the constable to get here and see that justice was served.

After about ten minutes of awkward small talk, I heard the crunch of tires on the rocky driveway, then the high-pitched squeal of squeaky brakes. I looked out the window and saw a white police car that had "Dyfrd Powys" stenciled on the door. The warden walked outside to meet
the constable. They went into the dorm for a few minutes, then came back out. Through the front window, I saw them talking as they walked slowly toward the house. The warden pointed at me a couple of times, and I thought of trying to surreptitiously slip the watch out of my pocket and under the sofa cushion. But I decided against it because Peter never took his eyes off of me. The door opened, and the warden and uniformed constable walked inside. The constable was young and rosy-cheeked. He came right to me.

"You the person who found the deceased?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

He sat down next to me on the sofa and opened up the folder he was carrying. Across the top of a form, he wrote "Sudden Death." Then he flipped through an old leather wallet until finding Wheelock's driver's license, which he used to copy down the old guy's name and address. The constable seemed dyslexic, pausing every few letters to peer at the license. When he finished, he looked up at me. "Now then, tell me exactly what happened."

I explained it all, except for the part about stealing the watch. He wrote slowly on a lined section of the form, and I had to repeat parts of my story as well as the spelling of my name and hometown. When we finished, he lowered his pen. I could see his eyes read over the report before they settled on mine.

"Now I want to ask you one more thing," he said.

Here it is, I thought, already feeling the handcuffs.
"Did you notice anything unusual about him last night?"

I shook my head. The constable looked at the others. "His face seemed a bit flushed," Paula said.

"Yes," Mrs. Davies agreed. "His face was flushed. I noticed that as well, but didn't think anything of it. He'd been out walking, and it was sunny yesterday."

The constable noted these remarks, then closed the folder. "Very well. All that remains is to call the county coroner. May I use your phone?"

"Of course," the warden replied.

As the constable got up, he said to Peter, Paula and me, "By the way, you three may go whenever you wish."

I had to consciously check the relieved sigh that was trying to get out. Not wanting to hang around long enough for someone to remember Wheelock had been wearing a watch, I grabbed my backpack, headed over to the coastal path and started walking north. On every other stride, I could feel the gold watch in the pocket of my jeans rubbing against my thigh. I was sick to the point of nausea about what I'd done. When I reached the top of the first hill, I sat down on a rock and pulled the watch from my pocket. I watched the second hand sweep around the Roman numerals of the face, then worked the metal band through my fingers like worry beads. There was an inscription on the back:

"To Daniel with love, Marie"

Marie. I wondered who she was. Probably his wife or
daughter. Whoever she was, if she were still living, she'd no doubt want this memento. But I was too ashamed to go back to the hostel and admit what I'd done.

So I pocketed the watch again and walked on. The ocean and the sky were the same shade of gray, and the horizon was as hard to pinpoint as the sun. I didn't know where I was heading, didn't really care. All I thought about was Daniel Wheelock. I spent the better part of a quarter-mile calculating in my head how he'd gone to sleep and arisen twenty-eight thousand, four hundred and seventy or so times in his life. It took me even longer to figure out his heart had beaten two billion, four hundred and fifty-nine million, eight hundred and eight thousand times, give or take a few million. Why oh why had his heart stopped beating on the one night I'd slept next to him? It could just as easily have been me who was dead. I felt as though old Grim had passed me up on the cliff to take Wheelock, and I'd repaid him by stealing his watch. I gazed at the formless sky. Yesterday, I'd wished with all my heart that Robby was up there somewhere watching over me. Now, I was ashamed for him to see me.

I looked back towards St. David's and saw only the cathedral tower. Compared to the other British cathedrals I'd run across, this one was plain. Yet it had a certain majesty. It struck me that man built these monuments to God mainly because he was afraid of death. Live a righteous life, and your ticket to heaven is assured. Wasn't that the
way it worked? Then again, weren't heaven and hell just human inventions? Surely we live through heaven and hell on earth. Right now, I was in the latter, damned for committing one of the most despicable acts of mankind. Stealing from the dead had to rank right up there with wife beating and child abuse, taking advantage of the helpless. I was no better than a maggot and felt about as big as one. I wished I could have gone back in time and just left the watch on the nightstand, but that was impossible. There was really nothing I could do, except to somehow return the watch to Wheelock's next of kin.

"Killarney," I mumbled, remembering the name of Wheelock's Irish hometown. I took my map of the British Isles out of my backpack and let my eyes follow my memory of the old man pointing to Killarney just last night. It was in the southwest, not too far from Cork. And there was a ferry route from nearby Fishguard to Ireland. I could go there, find Wheelock's house and make up some story to tell his widow, or daughter, or maybe just slip it into the mailbox. I had plenty of time to kill before Kim's vacation started, and I could think of no better way to spend some of it than rectifying a wrong.

I looked at the watch. Ten-forty-six and thirty-three seconds...thirty-four...thirty-five....

I stuck the watch back into my pocket, folded up my map and slipped it into my pack, then started walking toward Fishguard, feeling a little better already.
CHAPTER 20

The clouds seemed to lighten as I walked, but they didn't part enough for blue sky to show through. And occasionally in the valleys, I'd come across a patch of fog so thick I could only see a few strides ahead. More than once I stopped to lie back, close my eyes and try to cosmic navigate into an era when questing knights might have trod the same ground fighting their imaginary dragons. But I never managed to transcend reality, in part because my dragon wasn't imaginary. It was ticking away in my pocket.

I stopped for lunch in a coastal town whose name I never knew, then continued on. It rained in spots, but I didn't mind. Dry clothes were just a zip of the backpack away. Twice, I changed in the open with only birds to compromise my modesty. Some of them were probably the puffins, kittiwakes, petrels, guillemots and razorbills that Wheelock had spoken of in such glowing terms. Except for the cartoonish, fat-billed puffins, I didn't know one from the other. However, a gray and white seagull followed me for a while. Imagining that it was the spirit of Daniel Wheelock come to escort me on my journey, I started talking to it, asking forgiveness and promising never to steal from
the dead again. The seagull answered by shitting on my shoulder, then flew off with a derisive caw.

As the afternoon wore on, the clouds lifted, thinned and finally broke up in time for sunset. Fishguard was still a few miles away, so I unrolled my sleeping bag on the lee side of a boulder and dined on a can of fruit cocktail, a package of spicy, smoked beef sticks and a bottle of warm Coke. Night arrived clear and moonless. Far from city lights, even the shyest stars came out. Robby had drilled the constellations into my head, and they'd been my faithful nocturnal companions since childhood. I remembered how my brother used to laugh at astrologers, astounded that people thought it possible to predict the future from starlight that was already millions of years old by the time it reached earth. Right or wrong, Robby used to laugh a lot. It was a grumbling kind of laugh that brought a smile to every face within earshot.

I gazed at the sky and saw not the future, but the past. The Pleiades were looking over Taurus' shoulder for their lost sister. Agnes the Swan glided along the Milky Way. Cassiopeia reclined on her chair. Wrapped in my toasty-warm, synthetic down sleeping bag, I watched Orion cautiously stalk the Great Bear until the Scorpion and the Centaur rose side by side in the southeast. Robby was a Scorpio, I a Sagittarian. Side by side. I fell asleep without having to count one sheep, and Mariah blew into my dreams for a brief visit. She appeared just as before:
black sleeveless blouse, white trousers, bare feet, sitting on the hood of the Skylark, laughing silently, and gone with the sun.

In the morning, I walked on until reaching Fishguard, where I stopped in a pub to eat and call my motorcycle mechanic. Tyler said he finally got a chance to work on Britannia, but the transmission looked as though the bike had been "driven by either a madman or idiot" and the linkage was stripped. Since the bike was such an old one, he was having trouble rounding up replacement parts. I didn't know much about either Zen or the art of motorcycle maintenance, but got the feeling that Britannia had yet to feel the bite of a wrench. So I threatened to call my solicitor, and that motivated Tyler to promise me it would be ready in a week.

One week, and then I'd be free to cruise the highways on my own, be the master of my own destiny. And in twenty-four days, Kim would be on vacation. Within a month's time, I'd be on the Matterhorn, my dream come true.

But first, I had the business of the watch to take care of. I finished my lunch, walked down to the harbor and found the passenger terminal closed. A security guard told me that the employees of the ferry company were on strike, and if I wanted to take a boat to Ireland, I'd have to go to Holyhead and try the rival line. I pulled out my map. Holyhead was in northwestern Wales, and the ferry ran to a place called Dun Laoghaire, which was just south of Dublin.
From there, it would be just two routes to Killarney, Route 7 and Route 21. No problem.

I walked to the northern outskirts of Fishguard, stuck out my thumb and rode it through Cardigan, Aberystwyth, Machynlleth and into the hills of Snowdonia National Park. I spent the night in a rural youth hostel, where the warden told me the ferry I wanted left at two o'clock every afternoon. I got an early start the next day, but not as early as five other hitchhikers, all of whom had been staying at the hostel. Since there is a kind of first-come, first-served etiquette to hitching, I figured I was in for a long wait, which meant I probably wouldn't get to Holyhead by two. But there was nothing I could do about it, except hope that someone came along with an empty station wagon.

The station wagon never came, and if it had, it probably would have passed the lot of us like every other car on the road was doing. After about an hour, a compact stopped and picked up the first guy in line. He was a stuttering Liverpudlian who, the previous night, had taken about three times as long as he should have to tell us how his uncle went to school with Paul McCartney and once stole one of his girlfriends. He waved from the passenger seat as the car rolled by, then probably started telling the driver the same story.

The morning sun ducked behind an impenetrable bank of clouds, and the Snowdonian air turned instantly chilly. I dug into my backpack, pulled out my red sweatshirt and
slipped it on. Not long after my head popped through the hood, a scarlet car chugged around the nearby curve.

It slowed down as it drew near, but passed the other hitchers to stop by me. A kid in the passenger seat waved me aboard. I couldn't understand my good fortune, but didn't question it. As I settled in the back seat, the bearded man behind the wheel said that his son and he were going to Betws-y-coed. They both were wearing scarlet shirts and trousers as well as identical brown bead necklaces. I recognized the necklaces from a syndicated series on religious cults which had run in the Sensinitas Sentinel. Each one had a pendant picturing a westernized Indian guru who preached self-fulfillment from the back seat of a Rolls-Royce.

"You follow the Bhagwan?" the driver asked.

"No."

"I thought you might because of your jumper."

"You mean my sweatshirt?"

"Yes. All of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's followers wear red."

"So do a lot of other people," I said, expecting that to end the conversation. But it didn't. It merely gave the driver a chance to spread the Bhagwan's word to a non-believer, one who happened to already have half of an acceptable outfit. As he rambled on about how the Bhagwan had changed his life, I listened with an odd mixture of cynicism and envy. As stupid as it might have sounded,
blindly believing in even a shyster can still be fulfilling. This guy had found his path through life. I wondered why I couldn't seem to find mine, then closed my eyes for a second and seemed to hear Ollie Tripod's voice:

"What is it you're seeking?"

It was a question I still couldn't answer. Tangibly, I was seeking the Matterhorn, and if I could stay alive for another month, I knew I would find it because it would be almost impossible to miss a famous fifteen-thousand-foot peak. But what would I find along the way? And what would I find when I finally got there? What was I seeking? Knowledge seemed too vague, paradise too abstract, adventure too flighty, love too trite and wealth too venal. But what else was there? What was I really seeking? Where would I find it? How would I find it if I didn't even know what it was? Every question I asked merely raised another.

One thing I was sure of. The answer wasn't Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. I survived the ride without developing any compulsion to buy a pair of red trousers, and on the outskirts of Betws-y-coed, I met another hitchhiker who was going my way. Like the Bhagwan's disciple, he also believed that clothes could make the man. To expedite his journey, he'd requisitioned a sky-blue jumpsuit from the unlocked cab of a parked truck.

"Lorry drivers wear these for uniforms," he explained, "and I guarantee you that not one will pass us up."

Martin (who was named after his mother's older brother
who died at eighteen from an ear infection that went to the brain) was coming from London (where he'd gone to watch the Tottenham Hotspurs play an F.A. Cup soccer match which they'd won in extra time) and heading to Limerick (where his Irish wife coerced him to move six months earlier so she could be close to her mother who'd been terminally ill since their wedding). He was a mason by trade, had been trying to get his wife pregnant for months and never heard of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh.

Martin took a break from his life story to mention that the ferry would actually leave at one. I pulled out Wheelock's watch and saw that it was nearing noon. Not much time, but it wouldn't matter. The first truck that came along stopped, and the driver said he was going all the way to Holyhead. In the cab, Martin resumed chattering like a speed freak, first giving the driver a bogus explanation of how he came by his blue jumpsuit, then touting the Tottenham Hotspurs, a team he'd been following "since the night me daddy done me mum." In his eyes, the team's weak players were martyrs, the good ones saints, and the great ones deities. At least until they lost. No statistic, fact, conjecture nor shard of hearsay was left unmentioned, and by the time we reached Holyhead, I knew enough about the Hotspurs to almost wish they'd lost in the first round of the F.A. Cup. But we arrived just in time to catch the ferry. Without Martin and his peerless hitchhiking suit, I probably would have missed it.
Once adrift on the Irish Sea, Martin hooked up with a dwarfish middle-aged woman whose amorphous chest was covered with various Tottenham Hotspurs pins. She was some sort of social secretary for the team and thus privy to a litany of fresh gossip she couldn't wait to share. For the first time since I'd met him, Martin was all ears.

I wandered down to the ferry's bar thinking how much better off I was to be spiritually lost than put my faith in a rughead guru or bunch of soccer players. The air inside the bar was stifling and thick enough with cigarette smoke to bother even me. I peeled off my sweatshirt, and three blond girls immediately started pointing at my Mr. Zog's Sex Wax t-shirt.

"The best for your stick," one crooned Mr. Zog's motto with a wink.

I felt like howling. Two were borderline gorgeous, and the third put them to shame. She was sitting on a table, swinging her sandaled feet and laughing, looking just like Mariah, right down to her tight white jeans. I fetched four bottles of Harp lager from the barkeep and did the Sensinitas hang-ten shuffle over to the girls' table. They giggled and told me their names. Only one mattered. Valerie. A beautiful name for a beautiful girl. I was bewitched by the life in her eyes and swooned with every batted lash. Not knowing quite what to say to this vision of loveliness, I relied on instinct.

"Pretty good beer, huh?"
She grimaced. "To tell you the truth, I been in this here United Kingdom for six months and would give anythang in the world for an eyes-cold Michelob Light right now."

I chuckled. Her words brought to mind a little poem my brother used to recite:

"Sabina has a thousand charms
To captivate my heart,
Her lovely eyes art Cupid's arms
And every look a dart;
But when the beauteous idiot speaks,
She cures me of my pain,
Her tongue the servile fetters breaks
And frees her slave again."

Thoughts of Valerie's tongue and fetters quickly re-enslaved me. She was no Einstein. But so what? The rest of her was hard to fault. When we docked, the three girls and I took a bus into downtown Dublin together. I thought of heading off to Killarney, but it was getting late to start hitching and I figured I'd come far enough for one day. Besides, I couldn't bring myself to part with Valerie. So the girls and I walked through the streets of Dublin, their heads swiveling to take in all of the window-shopping sights, mine holding steady on Valerie's ass. I could see her panty lines cutting across the tight translucent fabric of her jeans, meeting between her legs.

"So do they have a lot of Catholics here, or what?" Valerie asked her friends.

Her idiotic banter was really beginning to get to me. I tried to ignore it while picturing us on a brass bed in a
guest house, having to pull her jeans inside out to get them off, panties rolling up and catching on her knees...

"Look! A McDonald's!" Valerie shouted, stopping to gesticulate in the general direction of those hallowed golden arches. "Wow! I haven't ate a Big Mac in a dawg's age."

"They call them 'Big Micks' in Ireland," I joked. She turned around open-mouthed. "Really?"

Too much. My prospective lover was thicker than a Guinness Stout and probably not nearly as accessible. A pity. Valerie and her friends went into McDonald's for dinner, and I retired to a bar down the street to drown my sorrows. It took about two sips.

After a pint of Guinness and platter of stew, I got directions to the nearest youth hostel, which happened to be just a few blocks away in Montjoy Square. The hostel was truly a sore sight for eyes. Most of the other buildings on its block had been torn down, so it stood alone, propped up by wood planks like a billboard on an interstate. Inside, dust particles from the razings seemed to have somehow stabilized in the air. Instinctively, I didn't want to touch anything. Like the hostels in Wales, the guy in charge was called the warden. Here, the title really fit the ambiance. Then again, what could I expect for five Irish pounds?

Maybe a few less roommates. I had fifty-nine. The men's dorm was lined with two wall-to-wall rows of
double-decker beds, and there was barely enough room in the aisle to fart. I'd been assigned to bunk number thirty-three, or "t'irty-t'ree," as the grizzly old warden put it. This accent had thrown me for a while. I thought the first few Dubliners I'd talked to had speech impediments, but soon realized they all spoke as though they'd be excommunicated if they let their tongues slip through their teeth when pronouncing "th."

Anyway, it was far too early to turn in, so I stashed my backpack under the bunk and wandered downstairs. As I walked by the staircase, I noticed the pointed tips of cowboys boots protruding from beneath it. Curious, I ducked my head under the steps and saw a tall guy stooping in the shadows with a brownbagged bottle.

"Hey mate," he said with a tip of the bag.
"Happy hour?" I asked.
"Just ducked in here for a quick nip."
"Nip of what?"
His eyes narrowed. "Jameson's."
"Ah, one of my favorites," I said. "Can I have a hit?"
He muttered a curse, but nodded. "Okay. But don't stand out there where they can see you."
"Who? The warden?"
"Screw the warden, mate. You crack a bottle around here, and before you know it, every bleedin' wanker in the joint'll be at your elbow bummimg slugs."
I felt my face flush as I ducked under the staircase. The guy handed me his bagged bottle. He looked familiar, but I couldn't quite place where I'd seen him before. I brought the bottle's lip to mine. "Cheers."

"Cheers yourself," he said, grabbing it back after one gulp. He took a swig and wiped the corner of his mouth with his forearm. "How'd you spot me in here?"

"Saw your cowboy boots sticking out. I figured you must be from Texas or something."

He smiled. "Actually, I'm from 'stralia."

That was when it hit me. "Errol Flynn!" I said. "That's who you look like. Fuckin' A. You're a dead ringer for him."

His smile broadened. "Yeah, a lot of people say that. Usually old geezers."

"Errol Flynn was my brother's favorite swashbuckler. Mine too. We used to watch all of his old movies on TV: [Robin Hood, The Seahawk, Captain Blood, Don Juan...]

"Zorro," he added.

"Nah. That was Tyrone Power."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I never did like Zorro so much anyway," he said. "Half the time he was a poof, right?"

"Man, I can't get over it. Maybe you got some common relatives or something. Flynn was Australian too. In fact, they say he spread his seed around a bit..."
"So I hear. But he was from Tasmania. I'm from Queensland." He took a long draw from the bottle. I expected him to offer it to me again, but he didn't.

"So where did you get the boots?" I asked.

"Picked 'em up in Austin, Texas, on my way across the States. They're rhino-hide. Bloke who made 'em guaranteed they'd last ten years." He took another belt and swished the whiskey around his mouth before swallowing it. "It's good stuff, this."

"Sure is."

"Then here," he said, tipping the bottle's neck towards me. "But if anyone else comes by, we'll tell 'em to beat it, right?"

Right. As the pint bottle was passed back and forth,
Flynn's twin told me his name was Paul Rowe. Since leaving home nineteen months ago, he'd been to twenty-some countries in Europe and North Africa, not to mention seventeen of the fifty United States and Juarez, Mexico.

"Traveling's in my blood cause I'm an Aussie," he said proudly. "My grandfather set foot on six continents before he disappeared in New York City, and my father was a merchant marine who sailed the seven seas before he met my mother. With us, traveling is tradition."

Tradition again. So it not only kept the fiddler on the roof and closed English pubs in the middle of the afternoon, but also motivated the Australians to travel. Although Paul looked to be a few years younger than I, he
was a veteran vagabond from a long line of vagabonds. I wondered what he was seeking.

"So tell me Paul, with all of this traveling and all, what are you looking for?"

He shrugged. "Nothing, mate. I just take what comes."

"No purpose? No plans? No goals?"

"Nope. Plans and goals and whatnot weigh you down. Like my old man always says, 'To travel right, travel light'. The less you carry with you, on your back and on your mind, the further you can go. And the further you go, the more you see. What you've got to understand is that you don't have to find things when you're traveling about. Things find you."

Like the warden. He peeked under the stairway to find us breaking one of the hostel's cardinal rules. Given the choice of either taking his whiskey off the premises or having it confiscated, Paul opted for the former. But before we left, the warden grabbed the bottle and surreptitiously confiscated a couple of swigs. "Call it a warning," he said with a wink.

Soon after, Aussie Paul and I could be found serenading and waltzing an imaginary Matilda through the darkening streets of Dublin. The Jameson's bottle finally emptied, and realizing that we wouldn't be able to tolerate our singing in a sober state, we started looking for a bar. Seeing how there were almost as many corner bars in Dublin as there
were corners, it didn't take us long to find one. The jolly, chatty locals inside the Keg and Whistle welcomed us like prodigal sons, and a pair of brothers named Ray and Donal Fitzsimmons took an immediate interest in our impressions of their country.

"So, what do you t'ink of our Guinness?" Ray asked, beaming like a priest's mother in her son's church.

"Well, it tastes all right," Paul replied with a Flynnish smirk. "But I could drink it all night without getting drunk."

"Is t'at so?" Donal doubted. "Hmmmm, Australians must be made of sterner stuff t'an us Irish. T'is drinking wit'out getting drunk is somet'ing I'd pay to see. In fact, I'll even buy ta first round." He nudged Ray. "T'at is, if me dear brot'er here can spot me a fiver till ta weekend."

Ray said he couldn't, but did so with a minimum of coaxing. Thus began the challenge. We toasted, sipped and chugged our way through Ray's fiver, then one of mine, then one of Paul's, then another of mine. By the time the bar closed at eleven, my head was spinning like a band of quarreling sheehogues on May Eve of a seventh year. Despite having had a head start with the Jameson's, Paul and I managed to survive the bout with our drinking honor intact. Or so I thought before we slurred some overly sentimental fare-thee-wells.

"Where're you going friends?" Ray asked. "When ta bars close t'eir doors, ta clubs open t'eir's. We know a
lovely after-hours place just a few blocks from here."

"And we got accounts t'ere," Donal chipped in merrily.

"T'at's right. We owe you a couple of rounds. You're not going to part at such an early hour, or have a few pints made you a wee bit pissed?"

"Well guys," I said. "We'd love to, but, you see, the hostel has an eleven-thirty curfew and we ought to..."

Paul cut me off. "Screw the bleedin' curfew, mate. Ain't been a hostel built I can't break into."

"Well, uh..."

"Christ, man! They're buying."

He said it as though turning down a free drink was heresy. It probably is in Australia. The thought kind of went against my principles as well, and an involuntary nod brought beery smiles to the three faces that had started whirling around my head. The walk seemed a lot longer than the promised few blocks, but we eventually turned into an alley, descended a short flight of stairs and arrived at a wooden cellar door which looked capable of withstanding an English invasion.

"It's two raps to ta low left," Donal told his brother.

"No, t'at's Maloney's place," Ray replied. "Shaughnessy's is t'ree to ta high right."

"Ah, you're too pissed to t'ink a straight t'ought. Don't say anot'er word till you give two to ta low left."

After what seemed to be five minutes of deliberations,
they tried both secret codes. Neither worked. While Ray and Donal squabbled over a few alternatives, Paul decided to take the matter into his own hands, or rather feet. He slammed one of his rhino-hide boots into the center of the door.

"Hey you in there! Open the bleedin' door! I need a drink!"

Apparently, "I need a drink," is an Irish translation of "open sesame." The sound of sliding bolts was followed by an cryptal creak as the portal swung open. We entered this "after hours club," which bore a striking resemblance to someone's slightly renovated basement. It was dark, dank and smelled like a fraternity house on Sunday morning. There was a two-tap bar, a toilet behind a curtain, a sheet-covered couch, a couple of lopsided tables, some three-legged barstools, a brand-new dartboard and a grand total of two other patrons, neither of whom proved to be capable of coherent speech. The only wall decoration, other than the dartboard, was a large poster of a man passed out in a gutter. Across the top was written:

"An Irishman is never drunk so long as he can hold onto a single blade of grass and not fall off the face of the earth."

A little glass with dried grass clippings sat on the bar, and Shaughnessy, the owner/barkeep/doorman, was adamant about testing our sobriety in the prescribed manner before offering us a choice between "Guinness and Guinness." We
drank more pints than I care to remember while talking and playing darts with minimal damage to the new board. At one point, I mentioned my quest to climb the Matterhorn, which didn't seem to register with Ray and Donal. But Paul babbled something about having been to Zermatt during ski season and a guy named Jeff whom he met in America. There seemed to be some sort of connection between the two, but Paul never got around to explaining it.

By twelve-thirty, my Aussie pal was planted on one of the three-legged stools, elbows on the bar, snoring into his hands. The only thing keeping me awake was a vague fear that I might have fallen off the face of the earth if I closed my eyes. Ray and Donal, however, hadn't slowed down all evening and continued their distinctive brotherly banter in which one often finished the other's thought. They had very strong beliefs. They believed that their stout beer was the finest beverage known to man; they believed in being friendly to strangers; and they believed in their country. In fact, they tended to brandish their patriotism in the same manner Gary Cooper wore his sheriff's badge in _High Noon_. But without a doubt, the best thing about being Irish to them was having a patron saint like Patrick.

"St. Patty was Scottish, you know," Donal explained. "And he came over here to rid our land of snakes..."

"...and poisonous lizards." Ray added.

"Aye, and poisonous lizards. And he went about doing good deeds all of his life, till he finally fell ill. T'en,
as he lay dying on his deat'bed..." 

"...and t'ere wasn't a dry eye in all of Ireland..."

"...he said, 'I don't want you to mourn me, m'friends. If you feel pain from me passing, have a little nip to help you cope'..." 

"...and ta Irish have been coping ever since."
The youth hostel was dark and silent when Paul and I managed to find our way back to Montjoy Square. The front door was locked, and there wasn't a secret code in the world we could have rapped to get it opened. We jokingly tried a few anyway, then circled the building, checking the windows and back door without luck.

"What now, Houdini?" I asked Paul.

He scratched his head, then motioned me to follow him across the street to the square, where he sat on a curb facing the hostel. "Have a seat," he said.

I plopped down next to him. His head dropped back a few degrees and he stared at the hostel as though afraid it would disappear if he took his eyes off of it. After about a minute, he pointed at a second floor window. "I figure that's our dorm."

"Yeah. And it looks easy enough. One of us could climb up the drainspout and walk across the ledge..."

"Too rash, Rabbit. Too rash."

"Then how about that stanchion? I could shinny up it in a second, and it leads right to the window."

"But the window's barred."
"So what? I can wake up someone inside, tell him to come down and unlock the door."

Paul shook his head. "Too rash, Rabbit. If you're going to climb up there just to wake someone, why don't we just throw some pebbles at it from here?"

Good question. I couldn't come up with an answer until our little pebbles didn't make enough noise and Paul heaved a larger one that shattered glass.

"Well, that ought to do it," he said, brushing some dirt off his hands.

"Yeah," I laughed, "but don't you think that was a bit rash?"

"Maybe it was at that." He nodded at the hostel. Lights were flickering on in several windows. "Let's get out of here."

Paul took off at a gallop. So did I, laughing so hard he beat me to the end of the square and around a corner. We kept running for blocks, drunkenly shouting at each other and laughing until a voice bellowed out from a side street.

"Here now! What's all t'is?"

It was a cop. He was kind of old and fat, so my first inclination was to run. But Paul grabbed my arm and shook his head as the cop waddled up to us. He had a nose like W.C. Fields.

"What's all ta yelling about?" he asked.

"Sorry officer," Paul replied. "We just got to town today from overseas and some of your lads spent the night
introducing us to your Guinness and I guess we overindulged."

The cop laughed through his nose. "Well, t'at doesn't surprise me, but it's still no excuse for waking up everyone in ta neighborhood."

"You're right," Paul said. "We'll be more quiet, won't we Rabbit?"

"Yeah," I whispered. "Real quiet. Like mice."

With little waves, we turned around and starting tip-toeing away.

"Just one minute, boys," the cop said. We froze. "Either of you have a light?"

A cigarette was dangling from the corner of his mouth. I had a box of wooden matches I'd picked up in the Keg and Whistle, so I lit one for him. My hand was shaking so badly he had to steady it.

"Where might you lads be staying tonight?" he asked, holding my hand as the flame burned ever closer to my fingers.

"A bed and breakfast near here," I replied, figuring he'd know it was long past the hostel's curfew.

He let go of my hand just in time for me to drop the match without burning my fingers. Then he took a little puff on his cigarette and eyed me. "And what might the name of it be?"

"Shaunessey's," I said.

"Shaunessey's?" he asked with a disbelieving frown.
"Can't say I've heard of it."

"It's just a small one," Paul said, "Over by Montjoy Square. Run by a little old widow and her son. She told us she just opened it last week. Used to be called something else."

"Hmmm. Might be ta old Cutler Arms," the cop said. "But Montjoy Square is back in ta direction you were coming."

Paul looked around, slapped his forehead a bit too dramatically and said, "That's what Rabbit was saying, weren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"But I thought it was down this way." He smiled cheesily at the cop. "Guess I was wrong for once."

"Guess you were," the cop said, dropping his barely-smoked cigarette and grinding it out under the toe of a shiny black shoe. "You better run off then. Don't want to worry ta little old widow, now do you, boys?"

We both muttered "Nope."

"And I don't want to be seeing you again, or I'll run you in for disturbing ta peace." He rested his fists on his hips and rocked back and forth. "Now off you go."

We didn't wait around to be told again and started walking as fast as we could back towards Montjoy Square.

"That was lucky," I said. "I can't believe he bought that bit about the B and B."

"Well, I'm not sure he did, Rabbit. The bugger might
have just been too lazy to fill out a report and all. But I wouldn't want to try him again, so we better find a safe place to kip."

Once out of the cop's sight, we wandered away from Montjoy Square in a different direction, turning one way or another at almost every block. I pointed out several potential sleeping spots: benches in a park, an empty garage at the end of an alley, a little stand of trees and an abandoned van that had neither wheels nor doors. But Paul said the first was too open, the second was too closed in, the third was too rough and the fourth was no good because it smelled like stale piss.

"Well shit, Paul," I whined. "I could sleep anywhere and we ain't gonna find the Ritz."

"I know. I know. It's just that I had a place in mind and can't seem to find it."

"What place?"

"I think it's up this way...yeah...by that Guinness sign."

I nearly puked at the sight of the twenty-foot-high pint of Guinness on the billboard, but followed Aussie Paul as though he were Errol Flynn and I were one of his cinematic sidekicks. We took a right at the sign, walked under a railroad trestle and came to a brick stadium.

"Now this is more like it," Paul said. "Croke Park. They have their big hurling matches here. I saw one last Saturday. Nasty sport, that. Rougher than Aussie
football."

Hurling. That was the one game Robby and I would go out of our way to watch on "The Wide World of Sports." It was a little bit like rugby, except the players had sticks which they were supposed to only use to swat a small hard ball but wound up using to swat each other, drawing penalties and blood with about equal regularity. Robby had always said he was going to take me to a hurling match someday. I looked at Paul and smiled. He reminded me of my brother in a lot of ways. Like Robby, he was tall, handsome and daring, more prone to seek out a little trouble than avoid it. Following Paul's lead, I felt the same way I used to feel when Robby and I would hop into his Skylark to "get lost."

We walked around to the vehicle entrance. The dual fence gates were chained together, but there was enough room for us to squeeze through. We wandered around the stands collecting abandoned seat cushions that had been torn, burned and otherwise abused until amassing enough for two makeshift mattresses, then made our beds in an aisle at the top of the lower deck.

Come morning, we awoke to the shouts of a guy standing beside a cart filled with rakes, shovels and other groundskeeping tools. The man had his hands cupped by his mouth and yelled something about the police. Paul and I were up and running at the magic word. The groundskeeper chased us in the cart, but gave up once we slipped through the loosely chained gate.
We jogged back to the youth hostel, which I was surprised to find only four or five blocks away. The warden was standing behind his counter in the front hallway and called us over as we tried to nonchalantly walk by him.

"Well, well," he said. "What happened to you two last night?"

"We got lucky," Paul said.

"Lucky?" the warden asked. "You look like you slept in a park. And it just so happens, someone t'rew a rock t'rough one of my windows and I saw two fellows about your sizes running away..."

"Well it wasn't us," Paul said. "We met these two sheilas in the...what was the name of that bar, Rabbit?"

"The Keg and Whistle."

"Right. The Keg and Whistle. They were sisters..."

"The Fitzsimmon sisters," I said.

"Yeah. Mary and, uh, what was the name of yours?"

"Paula."

Paul gave me a sideways glance but didn't miss a beat. "Right. How could I have forgotten? Anyways, they took us to an after hours club when the bar closed, then over to their flat for some of the dirty business." He winked. "If you know what I mean?"

"No. I don't know. But I do know I want you to collect your belongings and go. And you'll not be welcome back, either of you, so long as I'm ta warden here."

"Well you're wrong, warden," Paul said so righteously
he almost fooled me. "But we don't care, do we Rabbit?"

"No way."

"This place ain't exactly the Ritz, you know. Just give us back our cards and we'll gladly leave."

The warden reached into a wooden box and pulled out our membership cards, but held onto them. "I should rightly confiscate t'ese till you own up and pay for ta damages. But since I can't prove anyt'ing, I'll have to give you ta benefit of ta doubt."

He threw them on the counter. We scooped them up and went over to the stairs.

"Paula?" Paul muttered as we walked up them. "Of all the names..."

"Sorry. It was the first one that popped into my head."

"Well, all's well, eh? Good thing he didn't keep our cards. Mine's been confiscated twice. Once more, and I'd be banned from all YHAs for a year."

I laughed. "No kidding? What was it confiscated for?"

"The first time was for sneaking one of them Reeperbahn hookers into the men's dorm in Hamburg, and the other time was for fighting."

"Fighting who?"

"The warden. But it was more his girlfriend's fault than mine. Remind me later to tell you why I'll never go back to Helsinki."
We collected our backpacks and left under the scornful gaze of the warden. Paul squinted when we hit the sunlight. His face was dirty and unshaven, his hair was sticking up in the middle of his head like a Mohawk au natural and he had sleep dust in his eyelashes.

"Well, Rabbit, I reckon it's time I was going anyway. I'm supposed to meet a kiwi girl in Cork tonight. Where are you off to?"

"Killarney."

"Then I guess this is it."

I felt kind of bad. Paul was the type of guy I would have enjoyed traveling with, and Killarney and Cork were in the same general direction. But, as odd as it sounds, I didn't feel like tagging along just to lose him to a girl. Besides that, I had Wheelock's watch ticking on my conscience, and once I delivered that, it would probably be about time to head back to London and pick up Britannia. Still, my gut instinct was to hang with Paul for a while.

He smiled and held out his hand. There was something I wanted to ask him, but I couldn't think of what it was.

I grabbed his hand and felt my throat tighten. "Well, it was an adventure, man. Good luck."

"Yeah, good luck to you too," he replied. "See ya when I see ya, mate."
And so I hit the road again. The further from Dublin I got, the more sing-songy the people's accents became, and the hard "th" seemed to soften until it sounded as natural to me as a belch after a hearty swig of stout. Like the Dubliners, the rural folk took a great deal of pride in their nationalism, friendliness and beer, and I was told more than once that I was headed towards the lake where St. Patty drowned the last snake in Ireland. As often as not, a driver would insist on taking me to his local watering hole and buy a round, and I would feel obligated to buy one in return. So the trip turned out to be an extended pub crawl, and I didn't reach Killarney until long past dark, as wasted as I'd been the night before. The last driver went out of his way to take me to a youth hostel a couple of miles west of the town. This one was a square stone building of palatial dimensions. I staggered up the long gravel driveway, through an arched doorway and up to a white-haired gent who was sitting behind the front desk, reading a book.

"Past lights out call," he said without seeming to look up from the book. "Besides, I've no beds left for tonight."
I just stood where I was, my feet feeling nailed to the wooden floor while my head did loop-the-loops without an airplane. I opened my mouth to say something, but had to close it and swallow to keep the dozen or so pints of Guinness I'd consumed in my stomach. The warden must have been appraising my condition as I swayed in front of him. He laughed, then said he couldn't turn away someone in my state and offered me one of the sofas in the living room, free of charge. I don't remember walking over to it and lying down, but I awoke in the morning fully dressed except for one sneaker, which was standing on the sofa's armrest, laces tied. A few girls skipped down the stairs and giggled as they passed. Moments later, the warden walked up to me with a steaming cup of coffee.

"Here, lad, this ought to help," he said.

I sat up and took the coffee. My hands were trembling so badly I couldn't keep from spilling some. It burned my fingers, but I held tight and took a few sips. My mouth had no trouble handling the heat.

The warden laughed. "Time to pay the piper, eh boy?"

"What piper?" I asked.

"The piper who showed you such a good time last night. I'd wager his name was Guinness."

It hurt my head to even hear the name. I sipped some more coffee and thanked the warden as some more people tromped down the stairs and smiled when they saw me, no doubt glad to feel better than I apparently looked. The
warden patted my knee with a chuckle and followed the stream of hostlers into the kitchen/dining area. I could hear some other people walking around upstairs, toilets flushing, water rushing, a shouted word or two. I pulled Wheelock's watch out of my pocket. It was still ticking, even though I hadn't once wound it. I squinted at the dial. Eight-thirtyish. My gaze wandered around the living room, into the front hall and over to a telephone book chained to a pay-phone. It looked to be thin enough for a ninety-six-pound weakling to tear in half.

I limped over to it, one shoe on, one shoe off. The printing seemed smeared, but I managed to find Wheelock's name and address. As I read it aloud and repeated it for my memory, the warden walked up with a green slate and hung it on the front desk. It said: "Forecast for toady: Scattered T-showers --- Bring an umbrella, just in case."

"Where's Schoolhouse Lane?" I asked him.

He waved as though it were far away. "Towards town, behind Shannon's Grocery."

More hostlers were filtering downstairs, bright-eyed and freshly showered like the others. I went against the flow, up two flights of a grand wooden staircase and right into the bathroom. All the hot water was gone, but the cold shower probably did me more good than a warm one would have. I washed, dressed and put on my hiking boots, figuring I really needed to start wearing them more often if I hoped to break them in by the time I reached the
Matterhorn. When I wandered back downstairs, people were sweeping floors, cleaning windows and dusting tables. Others were on their way upstairs with mops, pails, sponges and brooms, and I could hear pots and pans banging in the kitchen. I asked the warden what I had to do.

"Nothing," he replied with a wink. "I've thirty-two beds here and thirty-two chores, so they're all covered."

I hung around anyway to drink another cup of coffee and force an unbelievably dense bran muffin down my throat. Then I stashed my backpack with the warden and set off to find Schoolhouse Lane. The morning mist seemed as lethargic as I felt, lounging in the tops of the trees which lined both sides of the road. A driver stopped for me as I walked towards town, even though I hadn't bothered to stick out my thumb. He dropped me off in front of Shannon's Grocery. Schoolhouse Lane was just a couple of blocks away. I moseyed along it, checking addresses while concocting a story to explain why I had the dead man's watch. The best I could come up with was to say that it must have been knocked off of the nightstand and into my open backpack during the commotion surrounding his death, and I hadn't noticed it until later in the day, when I got caught in a rainstorm on the Coastal Path and dug through my backpack looking for a pair of dry socks.

Wheelock's name was on the mailbox at number forty-one. It was a whitewashed stone cottage with slate roof and several small, blooming flower gardens. Some of
the windows were open and an old green car was parked in the driveway. I decided to just stick the watch in the mailbox and beat it before anyone saw me. As I started walking away, I wondered what the Marie of the inscription would think when she found it. She'd probably consider it some kind of miracle, which would make me somewhat of an angel. A reluctant angel. My head was pounding. An angel with a hangover.

"Yoo-hoo! Young man!"

I turned around to see a tall, thin woman in a white apron waving at me from the doorway of Wheelock's house. My heart immediately went into a "flee" mode, but as it raced, my mind convinced my feet to hold their ground. After all, the woman might have seen me fiddling around with the mailbox. She might have even been considering a call to the cops if I acted the least bit suspicious.

"What were you doing?" she asked, striding briskly up the gravel walkway which snaked from the front door to the mailbox.

"Nothing," I said.

She opened the mailbox, pulled out the watch and turned it over in her hand. Then she looked my way, and her eyebrows rose as she made the connection between the watch and me.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

I walked over to her and started reciting my story. But it sounded like such bullshit that I gave up between a
hem and a haw. "Actually, what really happened was I stole it when I found him, then felt guilty, so I decided to return it."

"You stole my father's watch?" she asked, brushing a strand of gray and black hair back off her forehead.

"It was just a spur of the moment thing. I'm really sorry."

She clicked her tongue and shook her head. "You stole my father's watch and came all the way from Wales to return it, even though he...he passed on?"

I nodded. "I figured Marie might want it as a keepsake. Is that you?"

"Marie?" She laughed. "No, I'm Kate. Marie was my parents' cat, years and years ago."

"Cat?"

"Yes." Her brow wrinkled as she peered at the inscription on the back. "Marie knocked my father's watch off of the bedstand one night and broke it, so my mother bought him a new one and had this inscription done as a joke." She closed her fist around the watch. "They were lovely people, really."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes. I'm sorry as well," she said with a sigh. "But I suppose I'm rather lucky to have had them for parents. And they're together again now. We buried him yesterday, you know."

I hadn't, but thought it strange that the dead man got
here quicker than I did.

"But I'll always carry them with me, in my heart," she added, biting her lower lip. "Thank you ever so much for coming so far to give me this."

She looked at me, her deep blue eyes softened by tears. They were the only mark of beauty on her face, which was long, angular and pockmarked. I apologized for stealing the watch again and said good-bye. She smiled, then reached out to lay her hand on my forearm. "Won't you stay for a cup of coffee."

"Thanks, but..."

"I've just brewed a fresh pot."

She squeezed my arm gently, a silent beckoning I didn't have the heart to refuse. As I followed her towards the house, she asked my name. I told it it was John, just in case she had second thoughts on the matter and I'd have to make a hasty, anonymous retreat.

The house was small with tiny rooms and low ceilings. She motioned at a wooden rocking chair in the living room, which was cluttered with half-packed and empty cartons. I sat down, still wary. Maybe she was planning to call the cops and was just delaying me. I rocked forward to see into the kitchen and marked the back door, ready to bolt as soon as I heard a police car pull up, or the crunch of shiny black shoes on the gravel walk.

But my suspicions were for naught. Wheelock's daughter seemed to just want some company. As we sipped our coffees,
she talked about her parents. Her mother, who had loved gardening, suffered a fatal heart attack while planting some crocus bulbs three years ago. Daniel found her lying in the flower bed as though asleep. He had owned a toy store in town and was still working when his wife died. But he sold the shop shortly after the funeral and spent his time reading and writing about nature in the winter and experiencing it firsthand by hiking all over the British Isles during the rest of the year.

"I suppose he felt close to her in the outdoors," Kate said, stifling a little choke. "They both loved nature so."

Kate told me she was an elementary school teacher in County Clare. She made it sound as though she lived on the other side of the world, even though Clare was the next county north. I fidgeted while she talked, not quite able to get comfortable in the wooden rocker.

The telephone rang, and Kate excused herself to answer it. She spoke in a language I couldn't understand. Gaelic, probably. I picked up a book which had been lying on the coffee table beside my cup. It was an old anthology of Irish fairy tales. I leafed through the introduction, reading thumbnail sketches of the mythical characters: fairies, changelings, merrows, pookas, far darrigs, banshees, tir-na-n-ogs and, of course, leprechauns, who wore not green clothes, but red.

"Reading about the wee folk?" Kate asked.
I looked up, not realizing she'd hung up the phone. "Yeah. There's a lot more of them than I thought."

Her blue eyes twinkled. "Aye. The hills about these parts are full of them."

I laughed. "You sound serious."

"I am," she said. "But it's something an outsider would never understand."

"Why's that?"

"You have to live with the wee folk from the crib, or else you can never fully believe in them."

That sounded like something Robby might have said had we been born here instead of Philadelphia. Red-clothed leprechauns instead of Lord Francis Douglas' ghost. All you had to do was believe. I smiled at Kate, thinking how different she was from most of my elementary school teachers, who had always bawled me out for daydreaming.

"Would you care for another cup of coffee?" she asked.

"No, thanks. I already had two at the youth hostel and really ought to be going."

"Where?"

"I've got to be in London soon."

"London? My, my, John. You certainly did come a fair stretch out of your way."

"It was the least I could do," I said, wishing I'd told her my real name.

"Well, now that you're here, you must stay long enough
to take a walk around the countryside. The hills are beautiful this time of year, and though you might not see any wee folk, you certainly can't help but feel the magic."

"Maybe I will go for a little hike today," I said, more to appease her than anything.

"Why don't you take a walk through the Gap of Dunloe. It makes for a lovely day's trip."

The Gap of Dunloe. That was one of the places Wheelock had mentioned before he went to sleep for the final time. I wondered exactly how scattered the forecasted thundershowers would be. As if in answer, a shaft of sunlight tentatively filtered through the window, illuminating a swath of otherwise invisible dust. As Kate gave me directions to the Gap, my eyes followed the brightening shaft of light to a box on the floor by the fireplace. On top, there was a framed picture. By rocking forward a little to offset the glare of sunlight on the glass, I could see it was a picture of Daniel Wheelock and his wife kneeling in a flower bed by the mailbox. He was watching her pat down some earth around a blue-flowered plant, but seemed to glance up at me and wink.

"...across the golf course, they won't mind, around Lough Leane and carry on through the acacia grove," Kate was saying. "When you reach the road, go left and that will lead you straight to the Gap."

My eyes stayed locked on the picture, waiting for Wheelock to move again. But he just gazed at his wife.
"My father used to say that the air is so fresh in those hills that one deep breath is enough to cleanse the soul," Kate said.

In the picture, the old man's hand was resting on one of his wife's shawled shoulders. It was a light touch, something she could no doubt bear for an eternity. "I guess my soul could use a good cleansing," I said. "After what I did."

Kate smiled. "Well, John, we all make mistakes. I'm always telling me students that if we learn from our mistakes, then they're not mistakes at all but just part of the learning experience."

"You must be a great teacher."
She blushed. "I do love children..."

She seemed as though she wanted to say more, but just sighed and stood up to escort me to the door. When we reached it, she pulled her father's wristwatch out of her apron pocket and paused to look at it, then me.

"You may have this if you wish," she said, extending it.

I held up my hand. "I couldn't. Really."

Kate shrugged and acted as though she didn't know what to do with the watch. She started toward the mantle, but seemed to get caught in the dusty shaft of sunlight and followed it to the box that held her parents' picture. She set the watch in it, then came to the door to thank me again and wish me a pleasant journey.
Outside, the morning mist had dissipated. High above, a string of puffy white clouds coasted along the jet stream, looking like islands in the sky. I squinted up at a swath of blue, took a deep breath of the crisp Gaelic air and imagined both Robby and Daniel Wheelock smiling down at me for having done the right thing.
CHAPTER 23

Had Kate not been watching me from the front door of the cottage, I probably would have just headed back to the youth hostel. Instead, I walked further along Schoolhouse Lane towards the Gap of Dunloe. I couldn't get over how nice she'd been to me and felt that I was somehow paying her back in part by following her advice. Not very logical, I admit. Then again, I was learning that logic often didn't make as much sense as impulsiveness when traveling.

As I walked up a long, steep hill, I was pleasantly surprised to realize that my hangover had vanished as completely as the heavy morning mist. My head felt clear, my feet light. And the puffy clouds above looked to be about as threatening as cotton balls. As usual, I let my imagination turn them into animals until I crested the hill and saw two more tangible sights that were as astounding as anything my imagination could have conjured up out of clouds. The first was a set of twin peaks which broke the skyline looking remarkably like a pair of mammoth breasts. The second was an equally colossal ribbon of rainbow. Backdropped by a nearly black cloud, its brilliant colors seemed to be pouring from heaven right into the twin
summits' cleavage.

It was pure Irish magic, a sight so alluring that I immediately decided to bag a trip through the Gap of Dunloe to check out the end of this rainbow. Of course, I didn't expect to find any red-clothed leprechauns or pots of gold, but had an odd feeling that I would find something of value there. I reached the edge of the golf course Kate had mentioned and took a straight line across it towards the peaks. They must have been due west because I was following my shadow. It was much shorter than I was and distorted like a reflection in a funhouse mirror. Beach ball body, stubby legs and hands without arms. As my deformed shadow effortlessly glided along in front of me, the rainbow in the distance began to dissipate. Both ends got eaten away evenly until just a diamond of spectrum remained. It hung in the air, seeming to turn slowly and grow smaller and smaller until it finally disappeared when I blinked.

But the twin peaks remained, giant breasts that grew infinitesimally bigger with each step. The sod of the golf course was spongy and seemed to thrust my feet into a trot on their own, like they used to do when I was a kid on my way home from school. I wove between some trees lining a fairway as though slalom skiing, ran over the fourteenth tee and dodged a few shrubs between holes with the same moves I'd used to sidestep rugby opponents. Tucking an imaginary ball under my arm, the green ahead became my goal. I ran straight towards it, leaning farther and farther forward,
arms pumping, knees churning, driving onward, faster and faster. I hit the green at a full sprint, charged across it, jammed both feet into the curled lip of a sandtrap and rode the momentum up into the air, my hands reaching for the sky before snapping down to grab my knees. Then I was spinning heels over head, opening up, seeing my boots hit the white sand, diving into a foward roll, hearing the sand crunch under my back, feeling the far lip of the trap hit my calves and finally coming to an abrupt stop, flat on my back, arms stretched out, gasping for air and staring at the sky.

It had been months since I'd run like that, and years since I'd done a front semi. Yet I seemed to be faster than ever and couldn't recall ever flying so high to turn a flip. I closed my eyes and willed my panting breaths to deepen, pushing my stomach out on each inhalation, pulling it in when I exhaled.

"Fore! I say, you in the bunker! Fore!"

I did a back roll and popped up to my feet. Two golfers were standing on the far tee. A par-three hole, no doubt. The guy with the honors was poised behind a teed ball with one hand on his hip and the other waving an iron over his head. I waved back, smoothed out the trap with a rake and jogged to the top of a nearby knoll well out of his line of fire. The two men took their turns, the click of the ball coming a second or so after the club head struck it. Each swing was different, but the results were
similar. Both balls bounded onto the green, two putts for birdies, but neither very probable.

I walked through the rough. The two golfers passed going the other way, each pulling a golf cart. They seemed to be in a hurry. I wasn't and casually strolled over the tee, along the bank of a lake, across the western boundary of the golf course, through a grove of acacias and down a macadam lane. Thunder rolled across the sky, which seemed to have grown suddenly dark. I ducked into an abandoned millhouse just as the rain started and sat against a wall watching a spider dine on a dried-out fly in its web while a brief but violent storm passed.

The sun came out before the rain even stopped. I wished the spider **bon appetit** and continued on my way, cutting through a rain-drenched wood where I could only see the twin peaks in glimpses through the trees. When I reached the edge of the forest, I hopped over a dry stone wall and onto a broad grassy plain, which dipped into a dark swale and rose in waves until being broken by the bosomy summits. The plain was an ocean of green, surely a thousand shades marred only by scattered fluffs of grazing sheep and an occasional boulder. Although the grass looked to be as well groomed as the golf course, the ground was much softer, almost boggy. It seemed to swallow my soles before reluctantly releasing them with a little slurps. My boots started rubbing my feet the wrong way, but I kept my eyes fixed on the peaks and trudged onward.
The craggy tits towered over me, yet I walked and walked and didn't seem to be getting any closer to them. My shadow all but disappeared, then started following me. I led it across the dark, even boggier swale and up a short rise, where I was disappointed to see I'd only come halfway across the plain, if that. But from this vantage, I could make out a lone rock sticking up on the summit of the farther of the two peaks, looking like the tip of a delectably erect nipple. I licked my dry lips, took a few deep breaths and could almost taste the effervescence of the sparkling air. Soul cleansing stuff, for sure.

I pushed on, my roly-poly shadow right on my heels. Knowing that a straight line was the shortest distance to the twin points, I kept my shoulders square to them. I took off my boots and socks to wade across a brook, then climbed over the shoulder of a lesser peak. Hill and swale, hill and swale, hill and swale. With my feet set on an increasingly painful but unwavering path, my mind began to wander all over the place: to rugby games where I ran free on sheer instinct, skydiving jumps where I felt as though I were flying rather than falling, riding Britannia through London during the rush-hour deluge and cosmic navigating into the medieval ages at Wigmore Castle.

For a second, I was back at Mortimer's Cross, standing back-to-back with my brother, seeing that arrow sprout from his chest, watching my own headless body topple next to his...
I asked myself if it really meant something. What Ollie had said? Or something else? Something I was missing? Once again, I tried to come up with a better explanation, a different lesson that wouldn't turn my quest to climb the Matterhorn into a suicide mission. But I couldn't think of anything else, and even though the memory of Mortimer's Cross was born in my imagination, it was still too painful to dwell on.

I forded a second brook and walked up yet another hill. I was now close enough for the nearer of the two peaks to block out its twin, giving me the equivalent of an ant's eyview of a naked woman lying on her back. My mental meanderings shifted from Mortimer's Cross to Amy Schwartz and Kim Webb and Frannie Hernandez and Nan Hooper and all the others whom I'd thought, if only for a few hours, days or months, might be the love of my life. I began to wonder when I'd find her, and where. I imagined she'd be like Mariah, blond and carefree, and I'd know her the instant I saw her. Her name would be Greta, or Ursula, or Petra, or something else exoticly beautiful. I wondered what she was doing at the moment and if she ever pictured a short, bearded cosmic navigator when she daydreamed of her future mate.

A huge, dark thundercloud seemed to rise out of the peak, blotting out the sun and turning the peak's grassy lower slope a shade of green that bordered on black. I reached that slope and plodded on up it. The ground sucked
my soles as much as ever on each step. Even so, it didn't take long to reach the rocky part leading to the summit. The sky let out a growl when I started scrambling up the broken brown rock, but the climb was easy. I soon crested the summit and stood leaning into the wind with all of Ireland at my feet. The dark cloud seemed to be hanging just a few feet above my head, growling still as it blew past.

I looked over at the other peak. It rose higher by a hair, or rather by the height of the lone rock sticking out on top, the very tip of the teat. The only thing separating me from it was a narrow rock saddle which dipped like a long rope bridge between the two summits. It was only a foot or two wide, and the drop to either side was long and sheer enough to make me think twice. But this was certainly no time for logic. I simply couldn't leave without giving each breast equal attention. Besides, the end of the rainbow I'd seen earlier had touched down in the middle of the saddle, and I was determined to reach that exact spot and find its magic, if not a crock of gold.

Cautiously, I started across the saddle. A light rain I could see more than feel began to fall, turning the rock slick beneath the vibram soles of my boots. I walked hunched over, ready to drop to my hands and knees should I start to slip. When I reached the level middle of the saddle, the wind died suddenly. The back of my neck started tingling. I froze. The tingle instantly spread into my
scalp and across my shoulders, down my arms and legs until it felt as though every hair on my body were standing on end.

Just as I realized what was happening, the sky seemed to explode. The blinding flash and ear-ringing crack came simultaneously, and a blast of static heat hit me in the face. I don't know whether it knocked me down or I just dropped instinctively, but I found myself straddling the saddle with my legs and hugging it with my arms. The wind picked up again, and the rain started falling harder. I lifted my head and stared up at the tip of the peak. The lone rock was smouldering, a wispy trail of white smoke uncoiling skyward.

The rain was freezing cold and falling so hard the drops felt like pinpricks where they hit my exposed arms and neck. Shivering almost to the point of convulsion, I turned around and started scrambling back to the other peak. Like on the cliff in Wales, my body seemed to be working on its own to save its ass. When I reached a place I could start downclimbing, I did, then skidded and slipped and tumbled down the grassy slope until coming to rest where it leveled off.

The rain was already letting up. I shakily got to my feet and started walking into the wind. A few minutes later, I was out of the shadow of the grumbling cloud. My body was still trembling, and my blood felt chilled. For a moment, I thought that I might really be dead. A
lightning-zapped zombie destined to wander the foothills of the giant tits forever. A legend, like banshees and leprechauns and crots of gold at the ends of rainbows.

I felt my wrist. The skin seemed to be as cold as Wheelock's corpse. But there was a pulse, racing at warp speed. My teeth were chattering. I pulled off my t-shirt and wrung it out, then started walking briskly, following my newly reborn shadow back the way from which I'd come. Movement seemed to warm my blood, and my shakes slowly subsided. But my jeans and underwear remained sodden and I began to get an adult equivalent of diaper rash. So when I reached the nearer of the two brooks I'd waded across earlier, I stripped, spread out my clothes on a flat rock to dry and lay back in a bed of clover.

I closed my eyes and could hear the low whistle of the wind, the babbling of the brook, the chirp of an occasional bird and a clicking, buzzing chorus of insects. The sun felt warm on my face. It revitalized me, charging my organic batteries until my hands felt strong enough to crush rock. Once again, I'd survived where I might have died. This time, Grim had taken the form of a lightning bolt and had come within fifty yards of grabbing me by the scruff of the neck and hauling me off. I could still felt his icy touch there, where my neck had started tingling in warning, like at Wigmore Castle.

Or rather Mortimer's Cross. I saw that medieval tragedy unfold again...my brother and me fighting side-by-side, the
power of the Holy Trinity coursing through my veins, my sword cleaving mail and flesh, the flat of a blade striking my helmet, my brother smiling, the arrow sprouting from his chest, his blood-frothed lips uttering, "The arrow...the point of the arrow..."

I repeated those words aloud, again and again, not knowing why but unable to stop. There was something about the point of the arrow, or rather, the point of another arrow, long ago. Until this moment, I'd forgotten all about it. But now, as I lay naked in a soft bed of clover, the memory poured out of some dark recess in the back of my mind, perfectly preserved, like the contents of a time capsule freshly unearthed...

It's my ninth birthday. Robby pulls his Skylark into the driveway with a toot of the horn, parks, then pulls a long, skinny package from the trunk. I grab it, already knowing what it is. Ever since seeing Errol Flynn's Robin Hood on TV, I've been bugging him about buying me an archery set. I joyfully tear apart the plain brown paper wrapping, but something seems wrong.

"The string's broke," I say.

Robby laughs. "No it isn't. You have to string it yourself. Let me have it and I'll show you how."

He takes the bow and bends it against his leg until he can slip the looped end of the string over the tip and into the notch. I reach for it, but he undoes the string before
giving it back.

"You try now," he says.

I do, but need two hands to bend the bow and lack a third for the string. I try letting go with one hand. The bow boings out of my grasp.

"I can't do it," I say. Robby doesn't seem to care. He's setting a cardboard box on top of a trashcan he's pulled in front of the basketball pole.

"Keep trying," he yells. "If you can't string it, we'll just have to wait until your next birthday."

"Like hell," I mutter. I grab the string loop with my teeth, bend the bow and tongue the loop over its tip.

"Got it," I holler, pulling the bowstring back and letting it go with an empty twang."

Robby is drawing a target on the box, holding the top of a magic marker between his teeth. He looks over his shoulder. "Don't do that," he sputters.

"What?"

He spits the top out of his mouth. "Twang the string like that. It's bad for the bow."

"Why?"

"It'll warp it. You should only pull back the string when you're shooting an arrow."

I can't see what difference it would make, but the box of arrows is lying on the ground next to me. I open it and pull one out. The shaft is white, the feathers green. I look over at Robby. He's still busy, filling in the
bulls-eye with his magic marker. I nock the arrow, point it straight up and pull back the bowstring as far as I can just to see how it feels. I can't resist letting it loose. The twang is deeper, richer. It feels good, even though the inside of my left forearm stings from where the string hit it. The arrow soars up and disappears in the bright autumn sky. I look over at Robby. His head is turned, his mouth half-open. He starts to say something when the arrow lands point-down in the ground next to the basketball pole.

"You stupid idiot!" he yells, grabbing the arrow and jumping to his feet in the same motion. He runs over to me and snatches the bow from my hands. "This isn't a toy. It's a weapon. You can kill somebody with it."

I don't know what to say, so I lower my eyes and giggle nervously. Robby takes three giant steps backwards and nocks the arrow. "So, you think I'm kidding?" he asks, pulling back the bowstring and aiming the arrow directly at the center of my chest. "If I let go now, you're dead."

I stare down the length of the shaft to Robby's one open eye, which looks vacant, almost lifeless. The point of the arrow is trembling, but I'm not scared. I know he won't let go. And even if his hand accidentally slips, I'm sure I can only be hurt, not killed. I hold my ground without wincing. Robby's eye narrows. He pulls the string back even farther, then wheels around and fires the arrow into the dead center of his freshly drawn target. It rips through the cardboard and hits the metal basketball pole
with a ping.

"Just do it like that," he says, throwing the bow down. Then he turns his back on me and walks into the house. I go over to the target, crying in shame if not fright. I pull the arrow out and stare at its point, which looks dull through my tears. I blink them out of my eyes and the point snaps into focus. I know what that point means, but I still can't believe it...

I felt tears on my cheeks, opened my eyes and saw a thousand shades of green. The leaves of a fern growing beside the brook were the same shade as the feathers on that arrow. My eyelids drifted shut, and I once again saw its trembling point and my brother's lifeless eye fixed on my heart from behind the feathered end of the shaft. My chin seemed to rise on its own, my chest expand. For a second, I remembered exactly how it felt to be nine and know I couldn't die.
CHAPTER 24

My clothes had dried as stiff as cardboard. I put them on and started following my shadow, which had slimmed down and lengthened to the point of looking as though it belonged to Wilt Chamberlain. I felt seven feet tall myself, lean and strong. Not only had I survived another encounter with Grim, but I'd also found a palatable lesson in my cosmic navigating excursion to Mortimer's Cross. Although the point of the arrow had meant death to my brother, it had meant life to me. Not only life, but a sense of invincibility. And my own beheading, I rationalized, represented not the future, but the past. I'd been wandering through life as aimlessly as a headless man ever since Robby had died. But now I had my head screwed on right, eyes fixed on a path that would lead to my salvation.

Despite my blister-sprouting boots and the sole-swallowing sod, my stride was long and steady on the way back towards Killarney. The air seemed to get even fresher as it cooled with the approach of dusk. I stopped to watch the sun set over Lough Leane, wondering if this might be the lake where St. Patty had given drowning lessons to the last snake in Ireland. Unseen frogs paid a croaking
tribute to him, and I was sure all the rodents of Ireland were eternally grateful as well. Of course, conservationalists might have had an entirely different opinion on the matter, but Mother Nature didn't seem to mind. The ecology of this enchanted isle seemed to be as well-balanced as a Chinese acrobat. The sun bowed out with a flourish, igniting the lingering clouds with the last rays of its luminescent fire while ringing a dinner bell for the mosquito population of the lakefront. I slapped my wrist, arm and neck, wishing St. Patty had done something about ridding the land of these pests as well. Since he hadn't, I headed back to the youth hostel at a trot, futilely trying to outrun the little bloodsuckers.

"You've not been drinking again?" the warden asked when I walked in.

"No. Why?"

"You look high."

I smiled. "I suppose I am. I went for a walk in the hills..."

"Didn't pick any of those mushrooms, did you?"

"Mushrooms?"

"This time of year they come from all over to pick them." He shook his head with a laugh. "Say they grow in sheep droppings. A couple of yanks tried to give me some once, but I told them, no thanks, I'll stick with my Guinness."

The hostel was sold out already, but the warden had
saved me a bed. I eventually went to it feeling charmed. Everything was falling into place. Ollie had been wrong. I wasn't climbing the Matterhorn for my brother, I was climbing it with him. This was the pact we'd made and shaken hands on dozens and dozens of times, and it was proving to be stronger than death. Maybe Grim could beat one of us alone, but the two of us together were too much for him. As long as I kept heading toward the Matterhorn to fulfill my vow, I thought, I was invincible.

My invincibility assured, I called Tyler in the morning to see if he'd made any progress on Britannia. "Sorry," he said, not sounding the least bit apologetic. "You're out a luck. The warranty's expired now."

"But it wasn't when I brought the bike in."

"So says you. It's my word against yours."

"I'll call my solicitor."

He laughed. "So you keep saying. But I figure you would a called 'im by now if you weren't full a shit. So now you'll 'ave to do things my way. An' if you want your piece a crap Honda back, you'll 'ave to pay me fifty quid for three weeks storage."

I argued, but Tyler just laughed off my cursing tirade and hung up threatening to disassemble Britannia and start selling her parts to pay for the storage. I was so pissed off, I slammed my fist into the wall, which didn't yield any more than Tyler had. The pain shot through my knuckles and up my arm. I grabbed my hand and tried to squeeze the hurt
away. The pain slowly ebbed, then welled up in a different manner and place. My wallet. Two-hundred and thirty pounds worth of hurt. No way I was going to add fifty on top of that, then even more to get her transmission fixed at some other shop.

I flexed my fingers. Nothing broken. Just sore, like Simon's hand must have felt after he cold-cocked me in the Mare's Tale. Now more than ever, I wished we'd remained at least superficially civil to each other. He no doubt could have helped me get Britannia back. I pulled his card out of my wallet, turned it over and saw Tyler's greasy fingerprints on the back, where I'd written directions to Flyford Flavell. I wondered if I should try calling Simon anyway. He had offered his services to me. Of course, that was before I hit on his girlfriend and he hit on my head. But figuring I had nothing to lose, I swallowed a bitter morsel of pride, dialed his office number and was surprised when his secretary put me through to him after a short wait on hold.

"Didn't expect to be hearing from you again," he said. "How's your head?"

"Fine. How's your hand?"

"It was damn-near broken," he replied. "But I suppose that was a small price to pay."

"For what?"

"For Hansa's hand in marriage. You see, that night proved to be a turning point for Hansa and me, and we got
engaged last week."

"No shit?"

"I see you're still as eloquent as ever."

"And you're still a putz," I thought.

"I must admit our little encounter did me more good than harm. Hansa used to complain that I lacked passion." He laughed. "I suppose I ought to thank you for bringing out the animal in me."

I imagined a slimy invertebrate, but didn't make any crack I might have regretted. Instead, I asked about Alex and Nan, who were fine, then told him about my problem. Simon said my impromptu ruse at the garage was surprisingly clever, even though I didn't have a legal leg to stand on. The main problem was that I'd neglected to register Britannia in my name. In effect, Tyler had been right when he said the warranty only held for the original owner because the bike was still legally his. But he added that legality and justice had little to do with each other in most cases and was confident he could out-bully the mechanic by playing up the tax-evasion angle. He told me to call him back in a day or two, then wished me "happy trails" and hung up.

The following day, I phoned Simon from a pub in Cork, where I'd gone to see if I could find Aussie Paul. I had no luck tracking him down, but Simon said it'd only taken one call to scare Tyler into submission. Apparently, he'd nearly shit in his overalls when Simon threatened to have
his taxes audited. A deal was quickly struck, one in which Tyler's books would remain unscrutinized if Britannia was in perfect running condition by the end of the day. So she was ready and waiting for me already.

I immediately set off for the Dun Laoghaire port, caught a late ferry to Wales, slept for few hours in a Holyhead park, then hitched straight through to London. I got to Tyler's dingy garage just as he was closing, but he stayed open long enough to wheel Britannia out. He was almost cordial until I asked if this repair was guaranteed. With a curse, he said that there was no warranty on this job, and if I didn't like it, I could take my case to the Queen Herself and he wouldn't care a rat's ass.

Fortunately, Britannia's transmission seemed to be in perfect health. I called Simon at home to thank him, but Hansa answered and said I could best show my gratitude by not bothering either of them again. Fine by me. It was too late to really go anywhere, and I toyed with the idea of phoning the Hoopers and trying to cop another free night's lodging out of them. But after a short internal debate, I decided not to impose on them again and wound up staying at an unofficial youth hostel called the Queen E. Hotel.

The morning broke rainy, but I was determined to be on my way. Kim's vacation was due to start in a week, and I was itching to get over to the Continent. Some guys at the Queen E. had raved about the hash marts and red light district of Amsterdam, and it sounded too good to bypass on
my way to Copenhagen. To counter the rain, I went to a sporting goods shop and bought a pair of rubber trousers and day-glo orange poncho. Then I went over to the Driver Licensing Center to register Britannia. The fee and mandatory three-month's insurance set me back another ninety pounds, but I didn't care. I still had plenty of money, and the Matterhorn was now close enough to taste. With a spirited cheerio to London, I set off toward the port of Harwich, where The Budget Traveler's Bible said ferries to Holland left twice a day.

At first, the steady rain was annoying, but I soon grew accustomed to its embrace. After all, I figured, there were worse things in life than spraying rooster tails down a two-lane highway at better than sixty miles an hour. Astride my mechanical steed, with orange poncho flapping in the breeze, I felt like some sort of winged avenger, invincibly flying through the dreams of anyone who'd ever sat by an office window on a rainy day.

I arrived in Harwich just in time to see the eleven o'clock ferry drift over the horizon, and the next boat wasn't scheduled to leave for ten hours. Having no better way to get to Amsterdam, I bought a ticket and resigned myself to hang around the ferry port's overgrown parking lot by the sea all day.

The rain soon changed into a quiet, intermitant drizzle, yet the atmosphere was far from placid. Apparently, a big motorcycle race was about to take place.
somewhere in Holland over the weekend, and it seemed as
though everyone in Britain who owned a motorcycle and set of
leathers was gathering at the port to make the crossing on
the Friday evening run.

From noon on, the harbor air was heavy with that
heart-thumping, blood-boiling, spine-tingling roar of cycle
motors as Triumphs, BMWs, Hondas, Yamahas, Kawasakis,
Suzukis, a few Benellis and an occasional Harley Davidson
rolled in. At first, it was pretty intimidating for me and
my little Honda 250. Having never been a biker before, I was
wary of the breed. To me, bikers were the kind of guys who
used to cut in front of me in the high school lunch line
when they weren't out in Joe Mazzatti's Death Van II
screwing their Camel-smoking, gum-chewing girlfriends.

Suddenly, I was one of them. Same faces, same basic
wardrobes, same grease-caked fingernails, but now just
regular people. Britannia stood out like a '65 VW in a
Rolls-Royce showroom. Nobody was snotty about it, though.
In fact, two cockney guys with tattoos and German infantry
helmets kind of took me under their wing. Dennis and Evan
gave me tips about riding and maintaining Britannia and
suggested I hang with them and go to the motorcycle races.
Sounded good. They were nice enough guys, even though they
spoke in a rhyming slang I couldn't understand half the
time.

As more and more motorcycles pulled up, our makeshift
camp in the parking lot grew. Dennis and I made a beer and
food run, then returned to the ever-growing party by the sea to eat, drink, smoke hash-laced cigarettes, swap tales and bullshit about things like gear ratios, turbo-boosters, shaft drives and Dutch women.

At about eight o'clock, we got the green light to board the boat. Nearly two hundred motorcycles were kicked or punched to life and revved up in unison. The gate swung open, and we rolled toward the spiral loading ramp two or three abreast. The nape of my neck tingled just to be in the midst of it all, especially when I hit the ramp and accelerated up it, tires screeching and staccato spurts of unmuffled engines reverberating off of the ramp's concrete walls.

Dennis and Evan showed me the best way to secure Britannia in the bowels of the ferry, then led me up to the aft lounge. Some punk rockers were standing at the near end of the bar, looking like mutants with their radical hairdos, multiple earrings, nose jewelry and assorted tattoos of spiders, snakes, swastikas and other creepy things that made my skin crawl, if not theirs.

"Well, will you look at tha' bunch a junk bankers," Evan said with a snort.

"Junk bankers?" I asked.

"Junk bankers. Punk wankers. Know wha' I mean?"

I had to laugh. The regular passengers were probably saying the same kind of thing about us. But here, we were in the majority. Most of the non-bikers found some other
place to be, and the punks retired to a large round table in
the back of the bar. By the time we chugged out of the
harbor, the lounge seemed to be wall-to-wall leather.
Leather jackets, leather trousers, leather jumpsuits,
leather boots, leather wristbands, leather caps. Everywhere
I looked, I saw leather.

Except in one corner. At the back table. Leaning
against the stern bulkhead with a book propped up on her
raised knees, there was a woman dressed in a green and red
shirt and bright yellow trousers. A pack of Rothman's was
sitting by a frothy beer on the table. I edged forward to
see around her table. Just as I suspected. She was wearing
some leather too. Leather boots. Blue ones. The same
boots I'd seen in the coffee shop at Victoria Station. It
was the pretty little feminist. I ordered my second beer
and strolled over there to see if she remembered me.
If she saw me coming, she didn't show it. She was totally engrossed in the book, a fat, worn collection of Hemingway stories. I walked right up to the edge of her table and stopped.

"I didn't figure you for the Hemingway type," I said. She looked up, a little startled.

"Remember me?" I asked.

She squinted at me as though I were standing a hundred yards away. Her eyes seemed to quickly focus in on a memory. "As a matter of fact, I do," she said, sounding surprised herself. "Victoria Station, right?"

"Right."

"You said you'd just arrived from America and asked if I were a women's libber."

"Yeah. But I'm sorry about that. I mean, I wasn't trying to be a wise guy or anything."

"It's I who should apologize," she said, laying the open book face down on the table and fishing a cigarette from her pack. "Smoke?" she asked, then answered herself. "But of course you do. You, uh, 'bummed' one from me, if I recall."
She half-extracted a cigarette for me and held out the pack, just as she had done in the train station coffee shop. I took it and struck a match for the both of us.

"It's still okay for a man to light a woman's cigarette, isn't it?" I asked.

"Or a woman to light a man's. Courtesy is not a sexist issue." She smiled. "You are a wise guy at heart, aren't you STON-ley."

"Sometimes," I said, pleased that she'd remembered my name and liking the way it sounded coming from her lips.

"But back at Victoria Station, I was more giddy from jet lag than anything."

"And I was perfectly horrid."

"That's a fact."

She cast me a mock glare, then laughed lightly in a way that seemed to warm the air between us. "Well, you needn't agree so readily. But I shan't be horrid to you again. Would you care to join me?"

I sat down in a swivel chair that was anchored to the floor on the opposite side of the table. Vibration from the engines below made it feel like a hotel bed hooked up to one of those Magic Fingers machines. The woman turned to face me, sliding her feet off of the bench. Behind her, there was a large smoked-glass window in which I could see ghostly reflections of the biking crowd.

"You were upset over something that day, weren't you?" I asked.
"Yes. That book I was reading..."

"Women and Labor Management?"

"Right." She laughed again. "You asked if it were about having babies. You know, it didn't register until later, when I was on the bus. Bloke next to me must have thought I was crackers, the way I just up and said, 'So that's what he meant.'"

She put her cigarette in an ashtray and took a sip of beer, then licked some froth off her upper lip. She didn't seem to realize how sensual the gesture was, but it triggered a couple of choice images in my mind. In the window, I saw the reflection of a circle of bikers raising their glasses to clink a toast.

"Actually, the book is a collection of essays," she continued, "and the editor, who's an old university friend of mine, asked me to write an introduction. I did it more as a favor than anything else, but she turned around and edited the bloody hell out of it without consulting me. If you think I was horrid to you, you should have heard me when I walked into her office."

"You're a writer?" I asked.

She closed her eyes and nodded as if ashamed to admit it.

"What's your name?"

"Leslie Field."

"No kidding. The one who wrote Birth of a Woman?"

"Yes. Have you read it?"
"Can't say I have. But I read about it in Time or Newsweek or somewhere."

"Of course. The critics loved it, for what that's worth."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because what the critics accept is already passé. I was hoping to topple some literary barriers, but the poetic nature of my prose, political ramifications of the subject and fact that I was an attractive twenty-five-year-old woman seemed to make everyone miss the point. I'm happy to say that my subsequent works have been panned by everyone save a few renegade critics who agree with me in thinking that the primary purpose of fiction is to test the bounds of its art form."

It sounded strange to hear a writer reject critical praise. Seemed self-destructive in a way. But I just nodded as though it were the most natural thing in the world while trying to remember when I'd read about her. I was still in college, and my roommate had gotten a Newsweek subscription under a bogus name. Leslie Field was on one of the covers, carrying a placard at a woman rights demonstration. That had been seven or eight years ago, which made her thirty-two or thirty-three now. Except for a few laugh wrinkles around her eyes which didn't quite go away when she stopped smiling, she could have still passed for twenty-five, or less.

She started staring over my shoulder. I turned
around. A couple of the punk rockers were pointing at us. One of the guys nudged one of the girls in the back, which seemed to start her walking towards our table. She was wearing a black leather jacket that was a few sizes too big, white t-shirt, holey jeans with rolled up cuffs and shiny black combat boots. Her hair was buzz-cut except for a short two-tone ponytail that stuck out from the back of her neck. As she wove her way through the crowd of taunting bikers, I could see that her gold nose stud was cast in the figure of a mouse.

"Excuse me," she said shyly, "You wouldn't be Leslie Field, would you?"

"Yes, I would."
The girl smiled. "I'm a big fan of yours, read all your books."

"I'm honored," Leslie said. "What's your name?"

"Christina Clark."

"That's a very pretty name."

Christina stood where she was and looked at the floor. "Thank you. Would it be too much bother...I mean...could I ask for your autograph?"

"Of course," Leslie said, rummaging through a macrame bag and pulling out a pen and pad.

"No need for the paper," Christina said, putting one of her boots on the table and pulling up the rolled cuff of her jeans. "Just sign my leg."

Leslie laughed. "Well, I've never signed a leg
before. What shall I write?"

"Anything you wish."

Leslie stuck the end of her pen in her mouth for a few seconds, then wrote across the outside of Christina's calf:

"If art's a fart,  
Then punk's bunk.  
But if art's sublime,  
Punk's a rhyme."

She signed her name with a flourish. Christina turned her head to read it.

"That's wonderful," she said, rolling her pants leg up over her knee. "Thank you ever so much."

She kissed Leslie's cheek and walked back towards her friends, pausing every other stride and craning her neck to see the writing.

"So you're a poet too," I said.

"Only when I sign body parts."

I smiled. She must have caught the drift of my thoughts because a faint blush spread across her cheeks. She took a sip of beer, then nodded for me to look at the punk rockers. Christina's friends were gathered around her with their necks bent at odd angles to read her leg. One guy raised his spike-haired head and flashed Leslie a thumbs-up. She waved back.

"Strange crew," I said.

"We're all strange, STON-ley," she replied, resting a hand on the Hemingway tome. "Some of us just have hang-ups
about expressing it."

   I couldn't really agree, but didn't feel like debating the point. "So what's a nice feminist like you reading Hemingway for, anyway?"

   "I admire his writing."

   "But he's about as chauvanistic as they come, isn't he?"

   She shrugged. "Not really. His reputation as a man's man may well be, but his writing is honest and superbly crafted, especially in his short stories. Ironically, many of them—"Hills Like White Elephants" for example—are sympathetic toward women. In fact, a critique was recently published in which the author contends Hemingway was a feminist."

   "Sure. And I'm the Queen of Sheba."

   "No wonder, then, that one never hears about a King of Sheba."

   Leslie went on to explain the critic's arguments, citing examples from stories I'd never read, which could have been just about everything Hemingway wrote except for The Old Man and the Sea. Then she refuted the argument in a couple of sentences, concluding that "the nature of good writing defies such grandiose classifications."

   I nodded, finished my beer and suppressed a couple of yawns. She was done too, so I offered to fetch us another round. The pitching of the ship made me feel drunker than I was, but since the stemmed glasses were half-filled with
foam, I managed to return to her table without spilling any beer.

Leslie insisted on paying for her own, but I wouldn't take the money and left it sitting on the table between us. As we drank and had another smoke, she asked what I was doing so far from home. I gave her an abridged version of my story, then fielded a lot of questions about myself: what kind of stories I'd written for the newspaper, how it felt to jump out of an airplane, when I planned to climb the Matterhorn, who I considered worthy male role models and a bunch of other questions which made me feel as though I were being interviewed by a talk show hostess.

"Well, you seem to be quite an adventurer," she surmised, "but with a surprising degree of sensitivity. I suppose you've had a lot of quote-unquote success with women."

"Not really," I said, grabbing her pack of Rothman's and half-extracting one for her. "Cigarette?"

She smiled, displaying teeth a hundred times brighter than Nan Hooper's, despite her smoking habit. "Why how generous of you."

She took it, and I helped myself to one. We both reached for the matches at the same time.

"Allow me," she said.

I did. She struck the match and held it out over the table. The rolling of the ship made the flame an evasive target for the tip of my cigarette. I grabbed her thin
wrist to steady her hand. For a second, our eyes met just above the flame. I diverted mine to my cigarette.

"You really are quite shy, aren't you?" she asked after lighting her own and waving out the match.

"What makes you think that?"

"The way you avoid people's eyes."

I hadn't really thought about it before, but it was true. Looking into someone's eyes almost seemed like an invasion of privacy to me. And I never felt comfortable when someone stared into mine, except Frannie. We used to gaze into each other's eyes often, especially when we were in bed and about to make love. That was one of my nicest recollections of her, a composite memory of many nights when we'd be cuddling in the candlelit bedroom. I'd stroke her hair back off of her forehead, stare into her soft brown eyes and feel a throat-lumping rush of tenderness towards her.

I looked at Leslie's powder-blue eyes. There seemed to be no softness in them, just a penetrating inquisitiveness. I felt as though she were peering directly into my thoughts and couldn't hold her gaze. But I didn't want to shy away, so I crossed my eyes and said, "Well, I love to look into people's eyes, but my nose keeps getting in the way."

She didn't laugh. "You needn't be ashamed, STON-ley. It gives you a certain vulnerability which complements your rugby-playing, sky-diving, mountain-climbing machismmo rather nicely. I would guess you're a man who holds a lot
inside, a man who kids around to cover up his insecurities, a man who enjoys the company of others yet constantly distances himself."

"What are you, Sigmund Freud's granddaughter or something?"

"Just a student of human nature. Perhaps I shall write a story about you someday."

"Will I get the girl in the end?"
She laughed. "Perhaps you'd get the man."

"You wouldn't do that to me, would you?"

"I suppose not. It would be out of character." She took a deep drag off of her cigarette, stuck out her lower lip and exhaled the blue-gray smoke almost straight up in the air. "If there were a girl to be had in the end, what would she be like?"

"Pretty, intelligent, a lot like you."
She arched one of her dark eyebrows. "Then I think not," she said. "But you'll be better off without her."

"Guess I'll just have to drown my sorrows then. Care to join me for another?"

"No. I really must be off to my cabin. I've a busy day ahead of me."

"Doing what?"

"First I have a luncheon engagement with some publishing tycoons in Amsterdam, then I must do some research on Rembrandt's wife for a story I'm writing, and the curator of the Rijksmuseum has been kind enough to ask
me to dinner."
  "So you'll be in Amsterdam?"
  "Yes."
  "Me too," I said, instantly forgetting all about the motorcycle races.
  "Well, if you're in town on Sunday night, you must come to my reading."
  "Where?"
  "The University of Amsterdam. At eight. I'd be interested to hear what you think of my work."

This was the first thing she'd said all evening which sounded forced, and I thought of how she'd glanced back at me after leaving the coffee shop in Victoria Station.
  "I'm honored that you'd be interested in my opinion," I replied, hoping it didn't sound as phony to her ear as it did to mine. "I'll try to make it, okay?"

  "Okay," she said, reaching across the table to cup my chin in her palm and stroke my beard lightly with her fingers. The gesture surprised me. It was more like something one of my grandmothers might have done had either of them still been alive. "You really are quite a lovely man, STON-ley. And if we shan't meet again, I do wish you the very best of luck."

  "You too, Leslie. And I promise to read one of your books someday."

She smiled sweetly, pulled a few cigarettes out of her pack and left them on the table next to the money neither of
us seemed to want. Then, with a cheerful goodnight, she grabbed her book, slung her macrame bag over her shoulder and walked towards the door, her tight butt swaying in a most unfeminist manner. She turned sideways to slip through a group of drunken bikers. One of the boys squeezed her ass as she passed.

Leslie Field dropped Hemingway to grab the offending guy's hand at the wrist. Then, with a vicious suddenness, she spun under his arm to twist it around and drove her right knee toward his crotch. I winced, but she stopped just short of contact, torked the guy's twisted arm sharply and said something to him I couldn't hear. It raised a chorus of ooohs and aaahs from the other guys. One of them picked up her dropped book, brushed off the cover and offered it back with an exaggerated bow. She snatched it angrily and stormed away, throwing her elbows out to clear a path. A couple of the guys whistled, and the rest howled with laughter at their embarrassed crony, who was rubbing his arm. He shrugged, pointed a thumb in Leslie's direction and said something, the only words of which I could make out were "fucking woman."
CHAPTER 26

After the bartender shut down the beer taps, the lounge turned into a flophouse. People crashed in heaps of leather everywhere, sprawled all over the floor, slumped in chairs and lying head-to-toe on the padded benches. I stretched out where Leslie had been sitting, using my backpack as a pillow. Sometime around dawn the ferry docked at the Hoek van Holland. I got up with most of the others and walked to the nearest head, swaying as though the ferry were still at sea. The bathroom was crowded, and as I brushed my sleep-spiked hair into place, one of the punk rockers was brushing his sleep-flattened hair into spikes. I mentioned this anomaly to him, and he laughed, seeming less mutant that human to me for a change. After a quick wash-up in the sink, I wandered around the decks looking for Leslie. But she wasn't to be found. Too bad. I was going to offer her a ride to Amsterdam on the back of Britannia.

Dennis and Evan were waiting for me down in the car deck. We cleared customs and scooted away together. But at the first fork in the road, they went right, towards Vlaardingen, while I veered left, towards Den Haag and Amsterdam. Alone on the open road, I once again felt an
incredible sense of adventure, as though I were a knight-errant boldly traversing strange and exotic lands on a holy quest. I even had a beautiful damsel waiting for me in the next realm, which was reputed to be a den of iniquitous fun.

What might have taken a mounted knight a full day or two of riding took me a scant hour and a half. However, I found Amsterdam to be a confusing town to blow into on a motorcycle. I bought a map, but it didn't help much because street signs seemed to be an endangered species. From my map, I could see that most of the streets changed names every few blocks, so I assumed signs would have only succeeded in confusing me more. As it was, I passed the Heineken Brewery twice and Rijksmuseum three times before finding the Vondelpark Youth Hostel. It was an old stone building on a closed-off sidestreet next to the park it was named after. I was assigned to a bright, high-ceilinged dorm which, at this time of the day, was unoccupied except for a tall, swarthy guy who looked like an Arab. Wired up to a Walkman, he was leaning against the headboard of his lower bunk, using a "No Smoking" sign for a tray to mix hashish and tobacco.

While he twisted a huge three-paper joint to go with the four others lying on the sign, his head bobbed up and down to the hypnotic beat of reggae music, which I could hear faintly several feet away. Being Jewish, I'd always had an inherent dislike for Arabs. But the reggae music and
hash overwhelmed it. I smiled at him and said, "Irie, mon."

His dark face turned towards me, brightening a little when he returned my smile. Then he licked the paper of the joint, finished rolling it up and lit it with the flick of a disposable lighter. He took a couple of deep drags, sat up and offered it to me.

"Thanks," I said, grabbing it and taking a hit.

"What's your name?"

"What?" he asked, pulling the Walkman's earphones down so they rested on his neck. As I repeated the question and handed the joint back, I could hear Bob Marley's voice singing about buffalo soldiers through the tiny speakers in the headset.

"Ofer," he said. "And you?"

"Stanley, but my nickname is Rabbit."

"Like the little animal?"

"Yeah."

He shrugged. "Someone once tell me my name sound like a little animal too, a gopher, but I do not know it."

"A gopher is a rodent that digs in people's gardens."

He smiled, took a toke and said, "The only garden I will dig in if I am a gopher is one of ganja." He passed the joint back. "You like reggae music?"

I nodded.

"Me too."

It was obvious. He had a big, square Bob Marley patch
on the front flap of his blue jean overalls, several green, yellow and red thread bracelets on his left wrist and a matching sweatband on his right.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Israel."

I was surprised. "You're an Israeli Arab?"

His eyes narrowed. "No. I am Jewish."

"Sorry. I am too."

"You have not been to Israel?"

"No."

"Someday you will go there."

I wasn't sure whether it was a question or statement.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Someday you will go there," he repeated. "But now you will come with me."

"Where?"

"Around the city. I am here a month...no...a week now. I know Amsterdam like the palm of my hand. I will show it to you."

Sounded good to me. But first, we finished the joint, and I was pretty well loaded by the time we left the hostel. Ofer walked across the street to Vondelpark and immediately lit another one of his spliffs. We smoked it while strolling on an asphalt path that circled a pond. There were a lot of people around, but no one seemed to notice or care that we were blowing dope in public.

By the time we left the park through another entrance,
I would have had trouble finding my way back to the hostel. It didn't matter. All I had to do was follow Ofer, and as we wandered, he pointed out attractions like cheap restaurants, coffee houses that sold hash and a theater where reggae bands played on Sunday nights.

The day was lost in a haze of hash and unfamiliar surroundings. Mostly, we just spaced around, stopping to sit in Amsterdam's multitude of parks and squares, smoking and watching other people while listening to street musicians. Ofer complained that none of them played reggae, which he seemed addicted to. Every once in a while, he would put his earphones on, turn up the Walkman and bliss-out for a while.

As the afternoon closed in on evening, we stopped in the middle of a stone bridge that spanned one of Amsterdam's numerous canals. Ofer fired up yet another joint, which I helped him smoke even though I was already toasted to point of being burnt. A boat of sightseeing tourists approached, and Ofer raised the joint in salute.

I laughed. "Wonder what the guide will have to say about that?"

"He say, 'There is Ofer and Rabbit smoking hashish on the bridge.'"

The boat passed under us and disappeared, leaving behind a slight wake which rippled the surface of the calm water. Ofer was leaning on his elbows, absently holding the joint between two fingers, staring down at the water. He
seemed to be frowning slightly, the same expression I'd seen in the faces of old Jews, or American Indians. The lost tribe, supposedly. With his red, yellow and green bracelets and sweatband and Bob Marley patch, Ofer looked ready to start his own lost tribe of Rastafarian Hebrews.

"I'm surprised reggae is popular in Israel," I said.

"It isn't. That is why I am here."

"In Amsterdam?"

"Yes. I am wanting to go to Jamaica, but have only money enough to come here. There is work I know in Norway, at a place in the ocean where you put fish into cans. If I work there two, maybe three months, I will have money enough to go to Jamaica."

I smiled. Like me, Ofer was following a dream, one he was determined to see through even if it meant toiling in an offshore canning factory. We were two of a kind, wandering Jews, a Rastafarian Hebrew and cosmic navigator. Ofer tried to take another hit off the joint, but it had gone out. Rather than relight or save the roach, he flicked it into the canal.

"That's a waste," I said.

He shook his head. "No. It is a gift for Jah. Always I give some to him, so he will not ever let me go without."

Having smoked four of his five joints, he was almost "without" already. So we started heading toward his favorite hash mart, which was near a small square called Leidseplein. The square had three or four cafes on one side,
a fountain on the other and a trolley stop in the middle. It was hopping with tourists and locals and street entertainers. Even the birds seemed to congregate there, perched in tree branches, scanning the scene below. Occasionally, one or more of them would swoop down to nab whatever crumbs hit the ground around the cafe tables. Ofer and I sat on a stone wall surrounding the fountain to smoke his last joint and take in the various shows.

I was so stoned that the mishmosh of music from the two dueling rock bands almost sounded good. There were other acts to watch as well: a magician using children for assistants; a comic juggler who kept pretending to burn himself with his flaming torches; a sidewalk artist drawing Mona Lisa in chalk; a mime shadowing passersby; a puppeteer with portable stage; and a bearded yogi contorting his body into series of seemingly painful and useless positions. They all performed for the coin of the realm—in this case guilders—which the tourists would throw into hats or sacks or guitar cases or the pink piggy bank drawn by the pavement artist. I was fascinated by all the activity, not so much by the performers as their audiences. Each little impromptu skit between ordinary people doing ordinary things blossomed into a social commentary on the universality of the human condition. All life is like show biz, I decided, thinking this a great revelation.

As darkness fell, we ate at a nearby automat then went to Ofer's favorite nightspot to score some more hash. Just
a block or two from Leidseplein, there was a club the size of a warehouse called the Cosmic Debris. Crossing its threshold was like walking into the Magic Cannibis Kingdom. I followed Ofer into a large hall where shoppers could buy red Lebanese, green Moroccan or black Afghan hash, Nigerian, Jamaican, Columbian or Congo Bongo marijuana, hash-spiked sweets called "cosmic delights" or a variety of dope-smoking paraphernalia. Ofer purchased three grams of the Afghan for the standard twenty-five guilders, which was about eight bucks. I opted for the slightly milder Moroccan, then followed Ofer through a curtained doorway and up a flight of stairs. We passed by a room whose walls seemed to be papered with television screens playing music videos, walked through a piano bar that looked as though it belonged in New Orleans and peeked into a small movie theater where a black and white French film was playing to a handful of zoned-out people, any one of whom might have been a corpse for all the movement they made. We drifted down a spiral staircase, through another door and into a grand ballroom where a heavy metal band was screeching and pounding in time to flashing colored lights. Another door led us into still another dimension. This one was a wine bar furnished with long wooden tables like you might find in a summer camp mess hall. Disheveled partiers sat at these tables, mixing hash with tobacco, smoking, laughing, coughing and sometimes nodding off with a smouldering joint still clasped between their fingers.
We sat at one of the tables and joined the communal smoke-in. Ofer taught me how to roll a three-paper spliff with cardboard filter, which we then shared with five other guys of four different nationalities. There were men of various nationalities all around, but almost no women. I wasn't sure if it was the hash or recurring thoughts of Leslie Field licking beer froth off of her lip or the fact that I hadn't been laid in over two months, but I was feeling as horny as a rhino's nose.

"So what you think of this place?" Ofer asked.

"Great. But it would be better if there were some more women around."

He smiled. "This is good place only for buying hash. No worry. For womens, we go some other place."

My magical mystery tour guide led me out of the Cosmic Debris and onto a trolley for a short ride across town. Soon we were walking down the narrow cobblestone streets of Amsterdam's infamous Red Light District. Smut was everywhere: sex shops, porno movie theaters, peep shows, peep show hawkers and half-naked women lounging in parlors aglow with blue fluorescent lights. I'd been imagining this part of town to be slimy, scuzzy and oozing sleaze from every door. In fact, it was older but not much dirtier than the rest of Amsterdam, and cleaner than most of Los Angeles. The main attractions sat in their ultraviolet parlor windows wearing Frederick's of Hollywood fashions, painting their faces, filing their nails, reading, or in one case, knitting.
baby booties, all offering the obvious to a myriad of gawkers and browsers.

A voluptuous blond in lacy white bra and matching panties, garters and fishnet stockings beckoned me into her boudoir with a smile. She looked like some kind of Nordic love goddess, a vision further enhanced by the way her white outfit glowed an electric indigo in the black light.

"You're gorgeous," I said.

She batted her fake lashes and popped the front clasp of her bra to flash me a teasing glimpse. "You like?"

"Uh-huh."

"For fifty guilders, you can have."

That was less than twenty bucks. Not much, considering. She put her stockingted foot up on the windowsill, which drew my eyes toward the glowing triangle of underwear between her legs. A couple of coarse dark hairs were sticking out. Despite the fact that she obviously wasn't a true blond, my hand reached into my pocket. But Ofer grabbed my arm.

"Come, Rabbit," he said. "Shop some first, see them all. You come back here later, if you want."

"Okay," I agreed reluctantly. "You're really beautiful," I said to the woman as Ofer pulled me away. "Don't go anywhere. I'll probably come back later."

She winked at me, then caught another shopper's eye. Ofer and I moseyed down the narrow street, swiveling our heads like spectators at a ping-pong match. I stopped to
watch one woman strike up a deal, pulling at her customer's belt even as she drew a heavy velvet curtain across her window. When I turned around, Ofer was gone. I looked for him, but only until spotting a short, shapely redhead wearing a chain-mail micro-skirt and thigh-high black leather boots with studs. She was leaning against a corner building with one leg up. The white strips of flesh between boots and skirt looked enticingly vulnerable. She noticed me checking her out, nodded at my crotch, and ran her tongue around her pouty lips. My legs weakened, but found strength enough to bear me to her side.

"Love your boots," I said.

"They'd never fit you," she replied.

"Would they fit around me?"

"For fifty guilders they will."

If I hadn't been having so much fun window-shopping, I probably would have taken her up on the deal. But I continued flirting and demurring until I'd seen just about all of the hookers who weren't occupied. I went back to the Nordic goddess, but her parlor's curtains were drawn. However, a couple of doors away, there was a brunette I'd missed the first time around. She was wearing a shortie negligee so sheer it might have been spun by a spider and looked to be just a couple chromosomes away from being Nan Hooper's twin sister. I smiled at her. She smiled back, the black light over her window turning her teeth greenish.

"What's your name?" I asked.
"Ellie. What's yours?"

"Rabbit."

She leaned back on her stool, spread her legs and rested her hands on her knees. "And is Rabbit looking for a little pussy?"

Finding speech suddenly difficult, I nodded.

She ran her hands lightly along the inside of her thighs, not stopping until her index fingers met at a little fold in the lower middle of her tight silk undies. She rubbed herself in slow circular motions, leaning back a little more and spreading her legs even farther apart.

"My pussy is ready for a little Rabbit," she whispered.

"Fifty guilders?" I asked hoarsely.

"Fifty guilders," she purred, "and I'm all yours."

All mine. I forked over the money with trembling hands. Ellie stopped rubbing herself to snatch the cash and count it, then motioned me into her parlor and pulled the drapes. She threw open a set of double doors which led into a bedroom smaller than some closets. Then she put the money into one of the bedstand's drawers and stripped in a few quick motions.

"You have a condom?" she asked.

"No," I answered, trying to pull off my jeans over my sneakers.

She sighed, reached into the drawer and ripped a foil packet from an industrial-sized roll. I succeeded in
getting my pants and shoes off together and quickly ditched the rest of my clothes. She ripped open the foil and sat on the edge of the bed to roll the condom on me. But the sudden impersonality of it all caused the hard-on I'd been walking around with for the past hour to wilt.

"You must get hard now," she said.

"I know. Maybe you can, uh, lend a hand."

She mumbled something in another language and started stroking me mechanically. I barely felt her hands.

"Come on, little man. Get hard," she said.

My penis seemed to be shrinking, if anything. She continued stroking me to no avail. After a minute, she stopped and clicked her tongue. "Come on," she said. "You do not pay me to be a therapist."

"I know," I replied. "But I seem to have somehow gotten out of the mood. Maybe you can give me some of my money back and we'll chalk it up to nature."

"No. You pay me for my time. What you can do with it is your business."

"How much time?" I asked.

"Ten minutes at most. But most men don't even take that much." She reached up and pinched my nipples. "Then again, most men are not as handsome as you." She grabbed my right hand and put it on my shriveled wienie. "Maybe if you try yourself..."

She leaned back on her elbows and watched me. Her breasts were smaller than Nan's, but I could see a few blue
veins stretching upward from her brown nipples. Her eyes were locked on my stroking hand. Her lips parted, and her pink tongue slipped out to rest against the top one. Her hand drifted between her legs. She let out a little moan as she started rubbing herself. I felt myself getting stiff.

"Hallelujah," Ellie said. She sat up quickly and rolled on the rubber. Then she flopped back on the narrow bed and lay there spread-eagled. I climbed aboard. She turned her head, presumably for sanitary reasons. Since kissing seemed to be against the rules, I turned my oral attention southward, but was told that nipple nibbles cost extra. So I closed my eyes, took the plunge and pumped away uninspiredly while she probably fantasized about the new dress she was going to buy.

"Come on and finish, or it will cost you extra," she cooed in my ear.

"Maybe if you moved a little..."

"You don't pay me to move. You want me to move, it will cost you extra."

I pushed myself up and watched her breasts jiggle with each of my thrusts, blue veins branching out from brown nipples. I thought of Nan and doing things to her I'm embarrassed to mention. After a minute or two of intense of concentration, my imagination carried me over the brink. Just for fun, I kept going through the motions to see how long Ellie would let me continue. It wasn't another thirty seconds before she warned me to come or go.
"Oh, I already did."

"Well, if you want to do it again..."

"...I know, it'll cost me extra."

Ellie was up and dressed in her panties and skimpy negligee before I could even peel off my latex souvenir. She impatiently tapped her foot while I extracted my sneakers from my pants and put on my clothes, then flung open the curtains as I pulled up my fly. I slipped on my sneakers and quickly tied the laces. She took her seat in the window and, ignoring me, started smiling sweetly at every guy who passed. I felt as though I'd been had, but also that Ellie had somehow been had by life. I patted her shoulder as I left. She called out after me, and I turned around to see her sitting on her stool, one leg up, white negligee glowing indigo. "Come back anytime," she said with a wink, once again looking totally irresistible.
"Go where?" Ofer asked, pulling the hostel dorm's "No Smoking" sign down from the wall.

"To a reading at the University. I only told you about it about ten times already."

Ofer's brow furrowed as though he were trying to remember. One of the drawbacks to being constantly stoned is that you tend to forget things. I liked hanging around with Ofer, but had to admit that my brain was getting mushy from being saturated with THC. We must have gone through a dozen humongous joints since meeting yesterday morning. I was actually looking forward to straightening out for an evening, or at least a few hours.

"But there is good reggae music tonight at the Paradisio Theater," he said. "Three bands, one from Jamaica and two from Africa."

"So you've said," I replied while trying to hand press the creases out of my chinos. "But this writer is special. A beautiful English woman."

Ofer just shook his head slowly as he searched through the numerous pockets of his overalls for a pack of rolling papers he'd just bought on our way back to the hostel.
"Her name's Leslie Field," I added. "Ever hear of her?"

He found the papers in a little hip pocket just big enough to hold a Swiss Army Knife. "No, I do not know her. But I know womens are more easy to find in this city than reggae music."

"Not one like this."

Ofer shrugged and muttered something in Hebrew. Then he sat on the edge of his bed and started mixing hash and tobacco on the sign.

"Maybe I'll meet you at the Paradisio later," I said. "The reading won't last all night."

Ofer nodded without looking up. I left him rolling his evening's supply of joints and rode Britannia over to the University. It took me longer than I'd anticipated to get there, and I walked into the lecture hall as Leslie was being introduced by a bald guy in a suit. The steeply tiered rows of seats were entirely filled, mostly by women. I walked up the stairs to the back of the hall where a few other latecomers were standing. To the polite welcoming applause of the capacity crowd, Leslie Field skipped up the rostrum's steps and rested a manilla folder on the lectern. She was wearing a baggy white blouse and tight jeans that were tucked into her blue leather boots. I felt nervous for her, but she seemed at ease as she adjusted the microphone and made a few opening remarks about how she resented being labeled a feminist writer.

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"Like all good art, I would hope my work transcends socio-political conventions," she explained. "I write about the human condition by focusing in on individuals who face the same problems and anxieties and insecurities that all people, whether man or woman, face in their daily lives. I must admit I tend to write about women, but only because I understand them better, for obvious reasons." She flicked a few strands of silky blond hair out of her face. "My intention is not to preach, but to merely dramatize life as I see it."

She opened the folder. "Tonight, I'd like to read two short stories which are still very much works in progress. The first is called 'Lucy May.'"

She cleared her throat and began. Surprisingly, the story was told through the eyes of a man, or rather a series of men, who were gathered in a small town church somewhere in Tennessee. The title character was a young woman who had apparently screwed all of the narrators. Leslie deepened her voice and affected a southern drawl in an amusingly English way, which seemed to add to the humor of the story. Each guy took his turn talking about Lucy May. They ranged from a hick who compared her mouth to his uncle's cow-milking machine to a former state representative who very eloquently explained how Lucy May was nothing more than a common whore who didn't have the sense to charge for it, yet revealed himself to be an equally inept prostitute in the political arena. Even the preacher had fooled around
with her, and a gas station mechanic who never charged her for labor, and a young sheriff's deputy who hid his gun in his boot so he could sneak it into church. In the end, it's revealed that Lucy May committed suicide and these guys were all attending her funeral. I didn't really get what the story was supposed to mean, other than how different people can see the same person in different ways.

The second story was called "The Blind Man." Although this one was much shorter, I got tired of standing around and had trouble concentrating on it. The story was tough to follow because she let the blind man tell it through his sightless eyes. The man got lost in London, then rolled by a couple of teenaged thugs and was finally picked up by a hooker who gave him his first blow job and saw him safely home. The point of this story totally eluded me, unless it was something like you have to take the good with the bad, or maybe that you have to pay for your pleasures.

When she finished, the people in the crowd applauded until Leslie held up her hand and told them to stop embarrassing her. She grabbed her folder, came down from the rostrum and was soon surrounded by fans who wanted her to autograph copies of her books. A line formed on the stairs. I joined it and waited patiently as words like "brilliant" and "genius" were tossed around. More than once, Leslie caught my eye and winked or smiled. Finally, my turn came.

"You have a book for me to sign?" she asked with a
laugh.

"Nope. But I was hoping you'd sign one of my body parts."

She laughed again, thanked me for coming and asked what I thought of her stories.

"Well, I liked the first one better because it was funny, at least until the end. But I'm not sure I got the point of either of them."

"Stick around then. We'll talk about them later."

I did, first bumming a couple of cigarettes from her so I'd have something to do while I waited outside. The laggards slowly filtered outside until Leslie finally emerged with the bald guy who'd introduced her. He was a creative writing professor, and as we strolled towards the parking lot together, the professor told her that he'd been trying to teach his students something about how all the parts of a story need to fit in with the whole and how her work exemplified that principle so well. He offered her a ride, but she shook her head and said she needed to talk to me about something. The professor thanked her for coming, climbed into his Peugeot, and left with a beep of the horn.

Leslie sighed. "Thank God that's over with," she said. "I really despise readings."

"No kidding? You seemed to get off on it."

"Well, the reading itself is fun, but all the ersatz adulation makes me feel like vomiting at times. I'd wager that most of those people didn't have any more idea of what
I was trying to say than you did, but at least you have the honesty to admit it."

"I still feel like a dummy."

"And I'm knackered."

"So where do you want to go? There's supposedly as good reggae concert..."

"To tell you the truth, STON-ley, I just want to get back to my flat and relax. It's been a hectic couple of days."

"Say no more," I said, motioning towards Britannia. "My steed awaits."

I let her wear the smaller green helmet while I used the silver one. It was too big and cut into my field of vision. I had trouble seeing where I was going, but I didn't let that slow me down. At first, Leslie just leaned against the pussy bar and held onto the bottom of the seat, directing me by tapping my arm and pointing. I took a few turns faster than I should have and succeeded in getting her to grab my waist. She hollered something in my ear, but I couldn't hear it. So I just followed her directions to a brick townhouse on a canal in what looked to be a ritzy part of town.

I parked out front and climbed off, hanging my helmet on one of Britannia's mirrors.

"Not bad," I said. "Who's place is this?"

She pulled off the green helmet, hung it on the top of the pussy bar and ran her fingers through her hair. "My
publishers own it, but it's all mine for now."

She got off the bike and took a wobbly step. "My, that
certainly was exhilarating. I haven't ridden on a motorbike
in ages. Thank you."

Leslie grabbed the back of my head and kissed me hard
on the lips. I hugged her shoulders and tried to slip my
tongue into her mouth, but she broke away. "Come on
inside," she said. "They left a couple bottles of champagne
for me. I'm dying to crack one, take off my boots and just
melt into the sofa."

I followed her inside. She locked the door behind us
and flicked on a light. The townhouse looked to be newly
renovated with shining wooden floors, modern furniture, a
big Persian rug and a grandfather clock facing the living
room from a stairway landing. The centerpiece of the whole
place was an overgrown corduroy sofa. It was soft and deep
and had four matching ottomans which turned it into more of
a lounging area than couch. A large oil painting of a
cornucopia overflowing with fruit hung over the back of the
sofa. There was a small hooded light on its frame, and when
Leslie flicked its switch, the painting suddenly seemed
three-dimensional. I felt as though I could just reach up
and pluck a grape, or apple, or banana right off the
canvas.

Leslie sat on one of the sofa's ottomans and held up
her right boot. "If you'd be so kind," she said.

I pulled off the boot and massaged her foot. Her eyes
closed and she drifted back until she was lying flat.

"Mmmmm. Aaaah. That...feels...so...wonderful."

Her foot was small and hard, as though she walked around without shoes a lot. I pulled off her other boot and gave her left foot equal time. She sighed and moaned even more. When I finished, she propped herself up on her elbows. "That was marvelous. Would you ever consider signing on to be my personal masseur."

"Maybe," I said. "What's it pay?"

"Mmmmm. Champagne. Let me up and I'll bring you a downpayment."

I didn't want to let her up, not even to fetch champagne. All I wanted to do at the moment was to tear off her clothes and give her naked body a complete rubdown right there on the sofa. When I hesitated, she swung one of her legs over my head and stood up.

"I'll be back in a jiff," she said, then patted my beard and walked over towards the kitchen. She'd thrown her manilla folder on the glass coffee table as soon as we'd come in, and I leafed through it, picking out the five-page story about the blind man. I heard a toilet flush, water running, then the champagne cork pop just as I finished reading the story. She returned with the bottle and two stemmed glasses. The champagne was in a silver ice bucket with a towel draped around its neck.

"Which one is that?" she asked, setting the ice bucket and glasses on the table.
"'The Blind Man.'"

"And what do you think about it after a second reading?"

"Pretty much the same as before. I don't think I get it. I mean, this blind guy gets lost, rolled, blown and taken home. So what?"

She laughed. "You know, I'd been asking myself precisely the same thing. Actually, this was just an intellectual exercise in that I wanted to write a story which lacked the visual sense. So I picked a young man who'd been blind from birth and told it through the senses he felt. Like all my work, I didn't know where it was going, and in the end I decided it didn't necessarily have to go anywhere to reflect this poor man's own sense of being forever lost without sight in such a visual-based society. But this is what the literati would call experimental fiction. I suppose you're more accustomed to the traditional."

"I guess so," I agreed. "I was just expecting something more to happen."

She smiled and held up her filled glass to clink. "Something more might happen yet."

I wasn't sure if she meant in the story or with me. Leslie took a sip and put her glass down to get her cigarettes. She offered me one. I pulled a three-paper joint out of my pocket that I'd brought along just in case she liked to get high.
"How about one of mine?"

"What's that?"

"Hash."

She rolled her eyes. "I realize that. What kind?"

"Green Moroccan."

She smiled. "Fine. I love to indulge on occasion, but that Afghan stuff which is so popular these days gives me a piercing headache."

The last thing in the world I wanted was for her to get a headache, but she assured me she wouldn't. She got up to flick off the overhead light, leaving just the painting's little lamp to illuminate the room in its soft, shadowed glow. We sat facing each other on the couch, smoking and drinking and talking about her stories. The first one, she said, was really about a young woman who couldn't differentiate between passion and love, and it cost her her life. Leslie said the biggest challenge in writing it was to draw a well-rounded character entirely through the contradicting observations of others.

"And in the end, all of these men come to certain realizations about themselves through their memories of Lucy May," she explained.

"Maybe that's what the other story lacked," I said.

"What?"

"A realization. Something the blind man would realize about himself."

"For example?"
I grabbed one of her cigarettes, lit it and thought for a minute. "Maybe if he sees something for the first time in his life when he...uh...when he shoots his wad with the hooker."

Leslie laughed, leaned forward and peered up into my face.

"There go your eyes again," she said. "You really are quite shy."

"No I'm not," I said, looking directly into her eyes. They seemed a little softer than before.

"Then why don't you kiss me, STON-ley."

I did, and this time our tongues met halfway. I put my arms around her. She leaned back, pulling me with her, and we kissed again and again, sloppy wet kisses that tasted of tobacco and hash and champagne. My right leg slipped between hers. Her hips began to rise and fall slowly, her crotch rubbing harder against my thigh with each lengthening pump. But then she stopped abruptly, squirmed out from under me and sat up.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Too many clothes," she replied, crossing her arms, grabbing her shirt at either side of her waist and pulling it off over her head without unbuttoning it. She'd seemed flat-chested before and I was pleasantly surprised at the size and shape of her breasts. As she wiggled out of her tight jeans, her taut pink nipples seemed to be crying for my mouth. I latched onto one, nibbled and sucked and ran my
tongue over it. Leslie grabbed my hair, sighing and moaning like she'd done when I'd rubbed her feet.

Together, we worked off my clothes. Then she was on top of me, and I was deep inside. She bit her lower lip and dug her fingers into my shoulders, rocking back and forth faster and faster, tossing her head and driving herself against my pelvic bone. A flush spread from her breasts, up her neck and into her face. She kept increasing her pace until my crotch seemed ready to catch fire, then let loose with a gasp and collapsed on my chest panting.

"Oh STON-ley," she sighed. "That felt wonderful."

"Yeah. But I didn't finish yet."

Her hips started rocking again, slowly. "Well, we can't have that," she whispered in my ear. She pushed herself off of my chest and rocked at a slightly different angle which seemed to catch me just right. "Finish for me," she said, grabbing the hair at my temples and staring into my eyes. "I want to see you finish."

She didn't have to say it a third time. But soon we started over again with me on top and her legs locked around my waist. Then we took a break to crack the second bottle of champagne and smoke the rest of my joint. Before the bottle was drained, we were at it again, Leslie sitting on my lap and my hands free to roam her body. I closed my eyes and rubbed, probed and pinched her soft, sweaty flesh, seeing her whole body through my fingertips just as the blind man in her story had "seen" the hooker's face by
touching it. My fingers ran through the coarse curly hair between her legs, parting it to massage her hard little nub.

"Mmmmm. Right there," she moaned, tucking her ankles under my knees. "Don't stop."

My finger stroked faster.

"Uh, uh, uh, uh, uh..." her grunts came faster and higher-pitched until she slapped her hand over mine and shivered against it a few times. I pulled back on her hips as hard as I could and let loose with a cry of my own, seeming to come again and again deep inside of her.

Leslie leaned against my chest, her back slick with perspiration, her hair tickling my face.

"Mmmmm," she purred, and just lay against me until my penis retreated on its own. She tried to stuff it back inside, but it was clearly spent. With a disappointed little sigh, Leslie rolled off of me. I felt her warm lips brush my cheek, then whisper, "Good night, sweet prince."

I opened my eyes just in time to see her turn on her side away from me and rest her head on her hands. She seemed to be instantly asleep, oblivious to the light that illuminated her softly, like a fine work of art. I tenderly kissed a shadowed spot on her neck, then stood up on the sofa to turn off the lamp hanging over the cornucopia. As I lay back down in the dark, images of the unblemished fruit lingered on my retinas. I stared at them until they faded away, then just watched the darkness, not wanting to fall
asleep.

Maybe Leslie Field is the woman I've been waiting all my life to meet, I thought, imagining what it would be like to be married to her. I could write books too, books of travel, adventure and cosmic navigating. We would read and criticize each other's work. I could see her sitting in a robe at a breakfast table somewhere, drinking coffee and laughing over one of my manuscripts. We'd both be famous and circle the world reading and writing and having great sex.

The grandfather clock on the stairway chimed. Leslie stirred and started snoring gently. It was a soothing sound, something I knew I could live with.
I awoke wondering where I was, not an uncommon sensation when you sleep in a different place almost every night. I looked around the room having more trouble than usual placing myself until I saw the painting of the cornucopia. In the morning light, the fruit looked too perfect to be real.

"Good morning, sweet prince."

Leslie was standing on the staircase landing, already dressed in a gray sweater and the yellow trousers she'd worn on the ferry. Over her head, the grandfather clock read ten past nine.

"Morning," I said, untangling my legs from a sheet that we didn't have when we'd fallen asleep. "You're up early."

She clomped down the stairs and dropped a carpetbag on the floor. "Yes. I have to be back in London today. Booked a ten-forty flight, so you'll have to get moving."

"Why don't you put it off a day or two and come back to bed, or should I say sofa?"

"Can't do it, STON-ley," she replied, walking over to me. "I've got to see my solicitor."

"What for?"
"Business." She yanked the sheet off of me and rolled it into a ball while staring openly at my naked body. She smiled. "You'd best put that thing away."

"Love to. And I know right where it could go."

"Not now," she said, grabbing the loaded ashtray and the ice bucket, which had the unfinished bottle of champagne sitting in it. "I'm a bit rushed as it is." She started walking toward the kitchen. "And if you want to shower, you better hurry. I've rung for a cab to pick me up at half-nine."

I got up, grabbed the other champagne bottle and glasses and brought them into the kitchen. She was standing at the sink washing out the ashtray, the ice bucket freshly rinsed and upturned on the counter. I padded up behind her and set the bottle and glasses on the counter.

"Thanks," she said, without even looking up from what she was doing.

I kissed her neck and whispered in her ear, "I love to help. Here, let me hold your breasts while you wash." I reached around and cupped them, but she just gave the glasses a quick rinse, shut off the water and walked out of my grasp.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Nothing is the matter, STON-ley," she said, drying the ashtray with a dishtowel. "I'm just in a hurry."

"But what about me?"

"What about you?"
"I want to spend some more time with you, get to know you better and all."

"Well, STON-ley, to quote a man I can't stand, 'You can't always get what you want.'"

"Why not?"

"Because I've got my life to live and you've got yours."

"But I thought we could maybe live our lives together, for a little while at least."

She reached out and stroked my beard like she had on the ferry. "Listen, STON-ley. Last night was wonderful, but I've no time for a man in my life. Besides, you have your mountain to climb, don't you?"

"Yeah. But I have plenty of time. My brother's old climbing partner won't even be starting his vacation until the end of the week. Why don't you call your solicitor and tell him you've been unavoidably delayed for a couple of days."

"I can't. Now be a good lad and hurry up."

She rehung the dishtowel on its rack and walked purposely out of the kitchen, the heels of her blue boots clacking on the linoleum. I just stood where I was, staring at the overturned silver ice bucket on the counter. Its shape made my reflection look like a pinhead, which somehow seemed fitting.

Leslie was standing by the sofa rubbing her chin when I came back into the living room. She pointed towards a towel
draped over the bannister. "If you want to shower, you'd best get to it. And please don't make a mess of the bathroom."

"Don't worry," I muttered, walking towards my piled clothes on the Persian rug. "I'll wait until I get back to the hostel to wash up."

"That's...fine," she mumbled distractedly, then nodded at a dark splotch on the sofa. "Seems as though we made a bit of a mess."

"No problem," I said, flipping over the cushion. "Now it looks like we were never here."

"That's bloody rude, but I suppose it will have to do."

I dressed while she fluffed the cushions and wiped up a few stray ashes from the table. Then I sat on one of the ottomans to tie my sneakers and stare at the diamond patterns in the rug. Leslie walked over to me and brushed my hair with her fingers.

"Don't want you looking too disheveled," she said.

"I'm surprised you care."

She lifted my chin, forcing me to look into her eyes. "Now don't be like this, STON-ley. We had a nice fling, nothing more. Why can't you leave it at that?"

"Because I thought we might be falling in love."

"Love or lust?"

"Both."

She shook her head. "I think not. Love is something
that is nurtured and grows. It can't possibly happen overnight. To tell you the truth, I was rather surprised at what did happen. You're not exactly my type."

"Bullshit. You were attracted to me the first time we met."

"At Victoria Station?"

"Right."

She laughed. "That's absurd. I was put off by you."

"Then why did you glance at me over your shoulder as you were walking away?"

She squinted, thinking back. "Yes. I did look back. But not at you. I thought for a moment that I'd forgotten something. My cigarettes."

So I was wrong again, or perhaps right for the wrong reason. Anyway, Leslie told me that I'd probably make some lucky woman very happy someday, but it couldn't possibly be her. A car horn honked.

"That will be my cab," she said, fetching her carpetbag. "Ready to go?"

I looked around, feeling as though I were leaving something behind. "I guess so."

It was drizzling outside. The cab was double-parked next to Britannia, the helmets still hanging on her mirror and pussy bar. I'd completely forgotten about them and figured I was lucky they were still there, lucky this wasn't downtown Philadelphia where somebody had once broken into my father's Lincoln to steal a pack of cigarettes. Leslie
checked to make sure the front door was locked, then grabbed my hand and pulled me to the curb.

"Now I want you to be careful on that thing," she said, nodding at my motorcycle.

"Why?"

"Because you have too lovely a body to have it senselessly mangled." She kissed me. Her lips felt thin and hard, so different from the night before. "Take care, STON-ley."

"You too," I mumbled. But she was already opening the cab's back door and saying something to the driver. He nodded, the door closed and Leslie Field rolled out of my life without so much as a glance back this time.

I sighed, mounted Britannia and rode off toward the hostel, wheels whining on the wet streets. I couldn't believe she was gone. It had all happened too fast. There were so many things I'd wanted to talk to her about: Daniel Wheelock dying in the bed next to mine, Ollie Tripod and cosmic navigating, the Matterhorn story Robby used to tell me, my family, her family, her books, writing...

How could she have been so intimate without feeling any love? Had it all been lust? Unlike Lucy May of her story, Leslie seemed to be well aware of the difference between love and passion. But was I? Apparently not. I could see a lot of myself in Lucy May, believing in love at first sight, or second, falling in love with love as much as people, and thinking that good sex signified some sort of cosmic
affinity which transcended the physical act.

A Volvo cut me off. I swerved. Britannia's front tire caught in a trolley track and I nearly lost it. I stopped thinking about love to concentrate on driving. Maybe Leslie Field had left a small gap in my life, but she certainly wasn't worth eating pavement over.

Back at the hostel, I found Ofer in the dorm. He was packed up and looked ready to go.

"Rabbit!" he said, throwing his arms in the air. "I am waiting for you last night. Where are you?"

"I'm right here."

"I know. But last night?"

I told him what had happened. He smiled and sang:

"Good friends we have, and good friends we have lost,
Along the way,
In this great future, you can forget your past,
So dry your tears, I say,
No woman, no cry,
No woman, no cry..."

It was a Bob Marley song, one of my favorites. But I'd never listened to the lyrics closely enough to hear what they were saying.

"So what are you doing now?" he asked.

"Now, I'm standing here talking to you. But soon I'll be heading up to Copenhagen to meet my brother's friend, and after that I'll be climbing the Matterhorn."

"And I," he said, "am today going up to Norway to put
fish into cans so I can go to Jamaica. I am waiting for you here to say good-bye and give you my mother's address. Write her if you want to go to Jamaica sometime, and she write back with my address there."

I took the slip of paper he offered, then wrote down my parents' address for him. We walked downstairs together. He raved about the bands he'd seen, but I didn't really listen. I stood by the front door while he put on his Walkman earphones and a new green, yellow and red knit cap. We shook hands, and he left. I held the door open to watch him as he paused to light one of his fat spliffs, then walk away through the drizzle. He disappeared in a puff of smoke, off the follow his dream.

I let the door drift shut. My dream was a lot closer than his to becoming a reality, and I decided to start my trip to Denmark that day. But first, I needed to take a shower and wash away the last remnants of Leslie Field's loveless passion. Maybe by the time I finished, I thought, it would stop raining.
The weather got nastier while I washed up and packed, but I couldn't let a little windblown rain stop me. Donning my rubber trousers and day-glo poncho, I fired up Britannia and only lost my way twice before I was once again on the open road. I'd plotted out a rather zig-zag route that would keep me on two-lane highways all the way to Germany. Even though this would take longer than the more direct super highways, I figured it would be more scenic. At least it would be when the rain stopped. It poured so hard in places that I couldn't see ten yards ahead. I downshifted into third, rode the shoulder, but kept forging onward, feeling better and better about being dumped by Leslie Field with each mile I put between us. It never would have worked out between us, and who was I to second-guess a night of ecstasy which hadn't cost me so much as a single guilder? It had been a bargain. She'd used me; I'd used her. No regrets. No guilt. Just a night to remember, and a moment of weakness to forget.

The rain began to let up around Biddinghuizen, and by the time I reached Ijsselmuiden the sky was as much blue as gray. My poncho and rubber pants started baking me. I
stopped to doff them and change my shirt, which was wetter from sweat than rain. I put on my all-county rugby jersey. Thirteen colors including collar and cuffs and one of my prized possessions, even though it was big enough to fit me more like a dress than shirt. I got underway again, the air smelling sweet after its midday shower. Great banks of cottonball clouds cast shadows that swallowed small towns whole. In the distance, a church steeple's dark silhouette was backdropped by a sunlit tulip field, which stretched to the horizon looking like a fallen rainbow. It was a vista crying to be painted, or at least photographed. But since I couldn't draw worth a damn and had no camera, I just filed it in the art gallery/photo album of my mind. More than the view, I wanted to capture the feeling I had at the moment. With Britannia purring between my legs and the flat Dutch landscape rolling away beneath her wheels, I felt in complete control of my life, my destiny and my motorcycle. Backpack securely lashed to the pussy bar behind me, I was a self-contained traveling machine, free as the wind and the envy of everyone I passed. For once, I knew exactly where I was going. The future was as clear to me as the past. I'd even been here before. Sitting in the Sensinitas Sentinel office the day I quit my job, I'd pictured riding a motorcycle on a two-lane European highway towards the Matterhorn. It was a case of my perceptions creating reality. Cosmic navigating.

Birds on the wing rode air currents with barely a
flap. Many more were grounded, poking around for worms brought out by the rain. Britannia and I zipped past a pair of still windmills and parted a shallow puddle. I downshifted as I followed a Volkswagon van into a traffic circle. The van slowed to a crawl. I downshifted again, veered around it to the left, twisted the throttle and...

The sound hit me first. Horn blaring and air brakes squealing, a tractor-trailer came barreling into the circle right in front of me. There was no time to swerve. My hand and foot clamped down on Britannia's brakes. With a screech of protest, she tested the laws of physics and failed miserably. The truck looked twenty feet high...thirty...forty...fifty. Britannia was going down. I dove to the left, bounced once and skidded along the pavement watching the skin peel off the heel of my palm. I stopped a couple of car-lengths short of the truck, but Britannia kept going. Spraying sparks, she slid towards a certain death beneath the locked tires of the truck's trailer. I winced. The knob of her gear shift lever caught momentarily in a rut and spun her around before snapping off. With another half-pirouette, Britannia's front wheel kissed one of the rig's eighteen tires on its sidewall, and she bounced harmlessly off of it. The blaring horn passed, then faded. My left hand was burning. Its palm looked like pizza pie topping. Britannia was lying on her side in the middle of the road choking. She sputtered, gasped and stalled out with a hiss.
I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. The VW van chugged away, but the truck driver jumped down from his cab and ran over. He helped me to my feet, then asked something in a variety of languages. The English version sunk in, and I answered by holding up my skinned hand. Seeing that my only apparent injury was a flesh wound, the driver started spouting what I assumed to be a series of Dutch profanities. Returning to a language I could understand, he threatened to twist off my head for hogfeed.

"Idiot!" he yelled. "You could have killed me!"
"Killed you?" I asked, finding my breath again. "What about me? I had the right of way and you cut me off..."
"No! I have the right way..."
"You're crazy! I was already in the circle, and you came barrel-assing onto it without even looking. Why I..."
"You are wrong," he interrupted, pointing to a yield sign which must have been shielded by the VW van. "Holland is different of England. If you drive on a roundabout, you must stop for traffic entering it. This is the law. You must read the book of road laws. Kaascope!"

People had called me a lot of things in my life, but never kaascope, which I later found out meant "cheesehead." The man facing me was big, angry and probably in the right, so I muttered a meek apology at the ground, picked up Britannia, cranked her back to life and shakily scooted off before anyone resembling a cop showed up. Even though the gear lever knob was gone, I found that I could shift by
adopting a pigeon-toed technique. But each time I turned my left foot inward and upshifted, I felt a sharp pain on the inside of my knee. I figured I'd twisted it in the accident and just didn't notice until the adrenaline content in my blood dropped down to a non-life-threatening level.

More debilitating than the pain in my knee, I seemed to have caught an acute nervous disorder that turned the road into a series of potential deathtraps and thus took all of the fun out of going fast. I kept Britannia under fifty through the rest of Holland and into Germany. Just before dusk, Britannia and I crept across a suspension bridge into the city of Bremen. To my right, the Beck's Brewery smokestacks were blowing black smoke rings. The sight convinced me to treat my newborn nervous affliction with multiple beers, and I pulled off the highway to find the closest place to get medicated. My knee stopped hurting as soon as I sat down at the Gastskeller's bar, and the first glass of frothy draft drove off my chills. The second not only anesthetized my skinned hand, but steadied it as well. The third washed the lump down my throat for good. A belch and hiccup later, I successfully rationalized that surviving another run-in with Grim simply meant I'll have one less to worry about in the future.

Ah, rationality. I raised my stemmed glass to that cerebral trait separating exalted man from lowly beast, the domain where wrong can be proven right, and shades of gray replace black and white.
Fairly well besotted, I spent the night at the local youth hostel. My knee was sore and swollen in the morning, but nothing bad enough to keep me out of a rugby game, if I'd had one that day. Still, I took it easy on my way north, stopping every hour or so to walk around and do a few deep knee bends. The sore one cracked more than normal, but its range of movement was only slightly limited. Nothing that would keep me from a game, or the summit of the Matterhorn.

The trip was almost an instant replay of my ride to Amsterdam. I got to the ferry port in Puttgarden and had to wait a few hours to make the crossing, then rode for about two hours into Copenhagen. Like Amsterdam, it was tough for me to find my way around, even moreso because I couldn't pronounce the name of the street Kim Erikson had spelled out for me over the telephone. Lyshøjgaasdreg. Kim lived at number fifty-one. I knew I could have easily phoned him, but that seemed like cheating. Besides, I wanted to surprise him, just blow in with the wind. So I scooted around, passing a church which had a green steeple with a golden staircase wound around it, crossing a canal bridge and driving by a building with a spire that looked like two strands of taffy wound together by a giant hand. Closer, I saw that it was really four snakes, or rather dragon tails.

A gold dome shone in the bright afternoon sky to my right. Ahead on the left, a massive green turret rose to skyscraping heights. I passed a statue of Hans Christian
Andersen. No wonder he wrote fairy tales. It was easy to get swept up in the fantasy of Copenhagen. I'd been in town for all of five minutes and already felt like a fairy tale character.

...having battled elements like wind, rain and tractor-trailers, the fearless cosmic navigator rides triumphantly into the heart of the distant kingdom seeking the one man on earth destined to help him fulfill his quest...

I stopped at a news kiosk. A gnome of a man with warts on his forehead and nose sold me a street map, marking the general vicinity of Lyshojgaasdsreg 51 with a big, black X. Following the map, I passed three reflecting ponds, cut between two fountains and made a left at a flower garden. Voila! Lyshojgaasdsreg 51. It was a small apartment house. I parked Britannia in a space across the street and hopped, skipped and jumped over to the building's stoop and up its stairs. There were ten labeled buzzers lining the doorjamb. I pushed the one marked "Erikson" and heard Kim's welcomed voice through the intercom.

"Come on up," he said. "Third floor, first on the left."

He buzzed me in. I took the stairs two at a time. A twinge of pain stung my left knee as I made the turn between the first and second flights, but it was gone by the time I reached the third floor.

Kim was waiting at his door, big enough to still make
me feel like a kid. Or a little brother. He looked almost exactly as I remembered him. Maybe his curly blond hair was shorter, but he'd yet to lose all of his baby fat or develop the need to pick up a razor more than a couple of times a week. And a set of even, white teeth promoted the notion that he was more Danish than English. I gripped his extended hand and squeezed as hard as I could. He broadened his smile and crushed mine.

"Good to see you, Kim."

"It's good to see you as well," he said, ushering me into his living room. "You've grown quite a bit."

"You've grown a little bit yourself," I chuckled, patting his gut. "Grip's still pretty good, though. You fit for the Matterhorn?"

His smile evaporated. "I'm afraid I won't be able to make it."

I thought I must have heard him wrong. We'd set it all up over the phone. I'd even asked him twice if he was sure about it, and he'd promised me he wouldn't change his mind. It was too late for him to back out now. I held up my hand.

"C'mon, Kim. Don't kid around. I've come too far."

"I'm not," he answered, staring at my skinned palm. "What happened to your hand?"

"Motorcycle wreck. In Holland. But that's beside the point. What do you mean you can't make it?"

"I'm sorry, Rabbit. Something came up." He walked over
to the mantel and pointed to a small vial sitting on it.
"This."
"What's that?"
"My son."
"Your son?"
"Well, not exactly," he said with a chuckle. "This is a pregnancy test. You see that black spot at the bottom? That means positive. My wife, Jette, is going to have a baby."
"A baby? When?"
"Not for a while yet. She just took the test two days ago. It's funny, she had to pee in the bottle, and..."
"It's not funny, Kim. I've been counting on you. What's the big deal, anyway? She must have at least six or seven months to go, doesn't she?"
He tore his eyes from the vial to face me. "Yes, but for me it is a big deal. Jette and I have been trying to start a family for over a year, and now I want everything to go right."
"I would too. But what's that have to do with the Matterhorn? What'll it take? A week? Two weeks?"
"The time doesn't matter," he said. "What matters is that I'm going to be a father, and neither Jette nor I want to risk..."
"So it's your wife's doing?"
"Not at all. In fact, she didn't say a word about it. But I knew what she was thinking, mainly because I was
thinking the same thing. You see..."

He kept talking, but I stopped listening and started thinking about all of the time I'd wasted searching for him, then waiting for his vacation to start. I should have known from the way he'd sounded over the phone when I called him from Flyford Flavell. He never wanted to go at all, and I figured if he didn't have a pregnant wife for an excuse, he probably would have found some other reason to back out.

"...and you can just hire a guide on your own," Kim was saying. "So you don't really need me at all. In a way..."

As he talked, disappointment stretched my frustration like a rubber band, further and further until it snapped into anger.

"...but of course, I'm sorry you came so far out of your way."

"Yeah? Well, I'm sorry too," I replied, heading out the door. "But forget it!" I yelled, trotting down the hall. "Forget I ever called!" I screamed, clomping down the stairs. "And while you're at it, why don't you forget abow-ow-OOOWWWW..."

Pain stabbed my knee, buckling my leg. I tumbled down half a flight of stairs and hit the landing on my back. My head bounced off the linoleum floor, doubling my vision and bringing the sound of crashing waves to my ears. I rolled over. The new scab that had formed on my palm was cracked down the middle and bleeding, but my leg felt as though it had burst into flames. I clutched my knee, trying to
squeeze the pain away. It didn't work.

Kim came running down the steps. He knelt by my side. "What happened?"

"My goddammotherfuckingsonofabitch knee gave out."

"It just gave out, like that?" he asked with a snap of his fingers.

"Yeah," I grunted through clenched teeth. "I twisted it in that motorcycle wreck."

"Twisted it?" Kim shook his head. "I don't think so."

He carefully lifted me into his arms and carried me upstairs as though I were made of styrofoam. I winced at his every step. It felt as if someone kept jabbing a red-hot knife into my knee.

"It's a good thing this happened here rather than on the shoulder of the Matterhorn," he said.

The pain was as intense as any I'd ever felt, but it was something else that brought tears to my eyes. "Maybe for you, Kim. Maybe for you, but not for me."
In ten years of rugby, I'd never had a single serious knee injury. Broke my nose three times. Had two concussions, one separated shoulder, an occasionally sprained ankle, a pair of cracked ribs, a hyperextended elbow, a dislocated thumb, a repeatedly pulled hamstring, cramps, cuts, bruises and even a festering bite wound. But my knees had seemed almost charmed. They had withstood shots from all angles on the rugby field, as well as thirty-three parachute landings, monumental skiing and surfing wipeouts, two car-totalling wrecks and a night in an "adult" hotel with Frannie on Quaaludes. My knees had withstood everything ever thrown at them.

"Why now?" I asked as Kim settled me on his living room sofa.

"It's just one of those things," he replied.

Just one of those things, like the black spot at the bottom of the little vial on the mantel. Kim's wife, Jette, came home just as he was propping my knee up on a pillow. She was tall with short blond hair and a face which could have served as a model for those ancient Greek statues of the Olympian goddesses. At first, she just stood in the
doorway as though she thought she might have had the wrong apartment. But once we were introduced and my injury explained, she changed from her dress into jeans and a t-shirt and started to practice her mothering. Jette brought me some ice neatly wrapped in plastic and a towel, then a half-bottle of scotch and shot glass, then a pillow for my back, then soup and stroganoff.

My knee swelled up enough to look nine and a half months pregnant. Kim kept saying we should go to the hospital, but I wanted to sleep on it, see how it felt in the morning. With the exception of one broken nose, a few precautionary X-rays and my memorable gash from trying to eat a beer glass, all of my rugby-related injuries had healed quite nicely without medical supervision. And by avoiding the irrefutable evidence of an X-ray or arthroscope, I could cling to the slim hope that my knee wasn't as badly hurt as it felt.

The pain was really the least of it. For over two months I'd been driving myself full-throttle towards one distinct goal: the summit of the Matterhorn. As that dream drifted out of my grasp again, I was left floundering in a kind of no-man's land. Neither here nor there. Numb. The scotch succeeded in dulling the pain in my knee, as long as I didn't budge. I lay as still as I could, pretending I wasn't hurt at all. Then, I'd move my leg an inch and feel that hot dagger of pain stab my knee.

I was up most of the night, drank all of the scotch
without getting drunk and felt even worse in the morning.

"They'll give you something for the pain if you let me take you to the hospital," Kim said as he got ready to go to work.

"That's okay. I think I'll wait a day or two and see how it feels when the swelling goes down."

Kim left shaking his head. Jette changed my ice bag and arranged some fruit, water, the television's remote control, an uncracked fifth of schnapps and a bottle to pee in within my reach, then left for her job. I watched some game shows and *The Magnificent Seven* in Danish on TV, fell asleep and woke up to read a couple chapters of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which was one of the numerous books stacked in shelves and lying around the apartment on tables, a big oak desk, stereo speakers and even on top of the TV. It hurt my knee to fetch the book, which didn't seem to be worth the trouble. Like in Leslie Field's stories, nothing seemed to happen fast enough for me, and my mind kept wandering. More than once, it led my eyes to the little vial sitting on the mantel. That vial seemed to dominate the living room, its black spot joyfully announcing that the rabbit had died.

I wished I had as good a reason as Kim for not climbing the Matterhorn. I felt so forlorn, because of Robby, my parents, Frannie, because of the world as I knew it. I would have gone back home in a minute, if I'd had a home. But I didn't. I was on my own. More alone than ever.
Well, not quite. Kim came home just after three. He changed my ice pack, suggested we go to a hospital and shook his head when I refused.

"You're just as stubborn as your brother," he said, making it sound like a compliment.

He went into the kitchen and came back with a couple of beers, then sat down in a chair beside the sofa and asked me to tell him about my trip. I did, and he listened politely with hardly an interruption until I got to the part about climbing the cliff in Wales. At that point, he shifted in his seat and seemed to lose the color in his cheeks.

"Jesus, Rabbit," he said. "You should have known better than that."

"Yeah. And you should have known better than to climb the north face of Cannon in April."

"That was your brother's idea," he said. I could hear him swallow. "But you're right. I should have known better."

"Don't get me wrong, Kim. I didn't mean to lay any blame on you."

"I know. It was no one's fault. Just something that happened." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and pressing his fingertips together. He stared at the white shag rug. I closed my eyes, heard Kim breathing deeply and found myself matching him breath for breath. I felt as though I were drifting out of my body, flying through time and space, then landing on a cliff in New

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Hampshire on a sunny spring day...

I hear the sound of metal striking metal, Robby hammering a piton into a crack on the north face of Cannon Mountain. Seven strikes, then silence.

"Climbing!" Robby yells.

I loosen my grip on the rope, feel it slowly slip around my back and through my fingers. I can't see him for the overhang above, but can tell he's climbing easily now, pushing the gap between pitons to its limit.

"How about another piton, mate?" I holler.

"Give me ten feet more!"

I let him have it, feeling more rope slide through my hands. Then it stops. As I stand with my back against the cliff, I hear his hammer strike a piton, one, two, three times. Rubble rattles down the face and rolls off the overhang above me. Then I hear a rumble like thunder, even though there isn't a cloud in the sky.

"Whoa!" Robby yells.

I wonder what is happening. I can't see him. The thunder sounds more like a roar.

"Shit!"

I hear a mighty crack.

"Falling!"

I tighten my grip on the line and cross my wrists. The rope cuts into my back, then my hands. A strange jerk in the line catches me by surprise, but I'm well set and hold
on. The rock at my back trembles. It sounds as though the whole cliff is coming down on top of me. Instinctively, I duck and feel a shadow pass over my head. It's a mammoth chunk of the face, the size of a house. It seems to freeze in the air beside me for an instant, then falls silently towards earth. I don't move until hearing it smash into the ground, far below.

"Okay?" I ask.

There is no answer. I start shaking.

"Robby! Are you all right? Robby? Robby!"

I pray he's only knocked out, like I was the day he saved my life. I have to remain calm, tie up the line, climb without it, around the overhang, and I see him, maybe thirty feet above, hanging by the rope, not moving. I climb without thinking, seeing only that one of his legs is gone and there is a red splotch on the rock next to him. I know he's dead even before I pull even. Blood is splattered all over the rock. Robby's right hipbone is sticking out with nothing below it. His chest is crushed in, his helmet cracked, his face ashen and mouth slack, drooling blood. I press my lips to his and try to breathe life back into him. But there is no life left, just the rubbery feel of his lips and the salty-sweet taste of his blood...

"I see a lot of him in you."

"Huh?"

Kim was looking at me. "I see a lot of your brother in
I shifted my leg just to feel the pain. "Thanks," I said. Sweat has broken out on my forehead.

"You all right, Rabbit?"

"Yeah. It's just that...well...I was wondering how come the boulder that killed Robby didn't kill you too."

"It might have if I hadn't been belaying him from beneath an overhang. The rock bounced off of it, right over my head."

I shivered, the chill settling in the back of my neck. Kim shook his head and sighed through his nose. After a few moments, he stood up and patted my shoulder, then walked down the hallway. I felt weak, sick to my stomach, the taste of blood in my mouth. I swigged a gulp of schnapps out of the bottle, then lay back thinking about what I'd seen, horrified at what Kim had lived, yet utterly amazed. I'd never known that Kim was belaying my brother from beneath an overhang. Not until seeing it myself. It was as if I'd climbed inside of Kim's memory to see the reality of my own worst nightmare.

A toilet flushed, and Kim soon came back carrying a tray table holding a little, headless clay animal and some art supplies.

"Don't mind if I fiddle around a bit with this?" he asked.

"What is it?" I asked, glad to change the subject.

"A tiger. Or at least it will be when I'm finished."
"You're a sculptor?"
"Only as a hobby."

He picked up the tiger and stared at it from several angles. "Did all the animals in the room," he said.

I'd noticed them before: a zebra, giraffe, rhino, lion and elephant. The elephant was especially good. Even from across the room, I could make out its wrinkles, heavier in the trunk and ankles and around the tiny eyes. But all of the animals seemed to be perfect in shape, proportion and texture, as though someone had just shrunken down the real things.

"You've got a real talent there," I said.

He smiled. "No. I'm just an amateur. But I'm getting better."

I watched him work on the headless, tailess tiger, meticulously adding a dab of clay to make another muscle, or shoulder blade, or fold of skin, constantly shaping and smoothing it out with his fingers.

Kim wasn't really like Robby at all. He was quiet and plodding, not the kind of guy who would make an around-the-world telephone call, or climb mountains. He was an English teacher who coached the school soccer team and made little animals in his spare time. His wife was a secretary at the Carlsbad brewery, a job Kim's father had arranged. They were both interested in nature and liked to go hiking. Jette did volunteer work for some ecology organization I've forgotten the name of. Mostly it
consisted of stuffing envelopes with letters asking for donations.

"Did you know that twenty species of wildlife are becoming extinct everyday?" she asked me later that evening after coming home from work.

"No, I didn't."

"Well, they are. And it will get worse unless we all do something about it."

In this way, she conned me into licking the envelopes she stuffed until my tongue was as sticky as an endangered Venus fly trap. She rewarded me with a much needed beer, then stood behind Kim's chair and massaged his shoulders while he slowly shaped his tiger's head.

Even after three years of marriage, Kim and Jette acted like high school sweethearts. They were always kissing each other, casting glances that took the place of words and giggling spontaneously. Her belly had yet to swell, but they talked about their child as though it were already part of the family. Treated me like part of the family, too.

I didn't move farther than the bathroom for three days. The pain eased quite a bit, but my knee remained grotesquely swollen and I couldn't put any weight on my leg at all. The fourth morning was a Saturday, which was also Kim's first day of vacation. He disappeared after washing the breakfast dishes and came back carrying a pair of wooden crutches.

"Come on, Rabbit," he said cheerfully. "It's a
smashing day. Time you got out for a little fresh air."

"Thanks, but I don't really feel like going anywhere."

"Too bad," he said. "You're coming with me whether you like it or not."

"You're not planning to take me to a hospital."

"Not at all. We're going to the beach."

"Jette too?"

"No. She's going up north to visit her mother." He leaned over the end of the sofa and whispered. "It'll be better without her."

I wasn't sure why he said that and would have preferred a bar or a movie to the beach, which was bound to be hot and sandy. But Kim was adamant. I was no stranger to crutches, and it did feel good to get up and out. I was glad to see Britannia parked where I'd left her and wondered how long she'd have to wait for me. It didn't seem as though I'd ever be able to ride her again.

Kim drove me through town in his tinny beetle-like Citroen, which had a strange horizontal gear shift sticking out of the dash and a suspension that seemed to lack shock absorbers. When we got to a beach on the fringe of the city, Kim helped me out and left me sitting on a low stone wall by a bicycle rack while he went to park the car. I looked out towards the sea, but my eyes never got that far.

The beach was crowded with hundreds of Scandinavians. At least half of them were women, and only about one out of ten was wearing a bathing suit top. Kim was standing next
to me before I realized it.

"What did I tell you?" he said.

I was speechless.

"Let me go find a good spot."

He staked out a nearby plot in the midst of it all, then helped me over to the spread blanket. I flopped down, my knee throbbing like crazy. But I barely felt it. Once again, I wished I had a camera. But I settled for my journal, which I'd brought along in case I got bored, or inspired. As Kim stripped down to his bathing suit and went for a swim, I opened up my journal and started writing:

"6/20--Today, Kim took me to the beach, and I must admit it's almost made me forget all about my screwed-up knee. Why? Because tits are everywhere, a veritable sea of boobs on the beach. It's Beauty and the Breast wherever I look. Big jugs, little buds--fat, skinny, pointy, round, droopy, firm, white, brown, stretch-marked, suntan-lotioned, peeling, sweaty and sandy--all with large, small, rosy, mahogany, erect, flaccid, delectable nipples. Tits everywhere. Two-by-two-by-two-by-two.

"Although all shapes, sizes and types of breasts abound unbounded, there's a high percentage of my personal favorites, the ever-popular Scandinavian upslopers. These perky lovelies are most commonly found on blond, blue-eyed bodies and adorned with pert, pink nipples. They're happy breasts which always seem to be smiling, jutting merrily from a bathing beauty's chest like twin dolphins poking their heads out of the water.

"Even in Denmark, there are only so many upslopers to go around. The rest of the breasts fall into other categories ranging from pre-pubescent nubs to post-menopausal
lap slappers. One of the nice things about tits is that if they're not enticing, they're usually funny. Like the ones on the girl sitting closest to me. They have a pleasant upsloping curve, but point in different directions, buttonlike nipples looking askew, like Marty Feldman's eyes. Teeny-weeny boobs are generally no laughing matter, but great big knockers can be a riot, especially when their owners are jogging or playing volleyball or trimming the hedges. Some tits look like eggs, sunnyside up, while others resemble softballs in socks or Charles de Gaulle's nose. From single-A to double-D, perky to pendulous, budding to full-blown, these mammiferous mounds of fatty flesh are, from birth, forever on the tips of men's tongues.

Even now, I must admit that I have an adolescent's fascination with boobs. Perhaps it stems from the fact that I was a bottle-fed infant, or maybe I just developed this obsession from hours of clandestinely leafing through the pages of Robby's Playboy Magazine collection. For whatever reason, my first exposure to the breasts on the beach in Copenhagen sticks in my mind as vividly as any other memory of my trip. One might think that I'd have been overwhelmed by their sheer number and quickly grown jaded to the sight of them. But the opposite was true. My eyes couldn't get their fill, and I only wished I was mobile enough to wander around sightseeing. As it stood, I contented myself to sit where I was, gazing and gawking, and diverting my eyes from the faces of the topless bathing beauties who happened to look my way.

Although the beach did wonders for my morale, it was as short-lived as the nice weather. The next morning broke
overcast and chilly, and it stayed that way for days. Kim didn't really know what to do with me. Mostly, we sat around the apartment drinking beer, playing chess, backgammon and cribbage. When we weren't, Kim would work on his tiger, which took a long time to finish sculpting and almost as long to paint. To get the right color and texture, he thinned his watercolors and layered the base coat dozens of times before painting on the stripes, redoing them over and over until he got them perfect.

Kim seemed perfectly happy to do nothing more, but I was growing increasingly restless, which led to frustration, which led to crabbiness. I still wonder how Kim and Jette put up with me.

Wednesday broke as miserably as the past three mornings. I'd had a bad night, and after Kim sweetly kissed Jette and sent her off to work, I started complaining about my knee and the stupidity of the traffic laws in Holland and my parents and Frannie and Leslie Field and my boredom and how I never seemed to get a break. Kim just sat quietly until I paused to think of some more things to bitch about.

"Come on, Rabbit," he said. "You don't have it so bad."

That was all I needed to hear, stuck in somebody else's apartment and country, unable to fend for myself with nothing to look forward to, I rattled off a half-dozen more things to show him that I, in fact, did have it so bad I felt like bashing my head against the wall.
Kim leaned towards me, resting his elbows on his thighs and clutching his hands together almost as if he were about to pray. "You know what I came home to after your brother's funeral?" he asked.

"No," I said, not really caring.

"I came home to learn my mother had liver cancer. The doctor told me she had six months to a year, but she was a strong woman who'd already been through a lot in her life and lasted eighteen months. My parents were divorced, and since I'm an only child, it was up to me to take care of her, running her to the clinic for radiation and chemotherapy, cooking for her and cleaning the house, all the while working full-time installing burglar alarms, a job I despised."

"That's tough," I admitted.

"And tougher it got, when my mother became bedridden and I had to feed her and change her soiled bedclothes like a baby. I sat by and watched her waste away, as helpless to do anything for her as I'd been with your brother up on that cliff. I felt trapped, and just wanted to run away from it all. But I couldn't, so I stayed where I was wondering why God had decided to chastise me so. I began to wish my mother dead, not so much to end her suffering as mine, then I'd feel guilty for allowing myself such thoughts."

"Anyone would have thought the same," I said.

"But it wasn't just anyone, Rabbit. It was me. Then one day at work, I was up on the roof of a shoe factory and
nearly lost my balance. I grabbed an air vent to steady myself, but didn't move away from the edge. Instead, I stared at the parking lot below and considered how simple it would have been just let go and end my misery. But I didn't, you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because I decided that I wasn't going to let life beat me. If I could just keep my wits and strength together and wade through this sea of pain, I knew nothing again would be so difficult. So I moved back from the edge of the roof, finished the job and went home to look after my mother. When she died, I sold the house and moved up here to be closer to my father, who is no saint, but the only family I had. And things did get better. I found a job I liked, fell in love with Jette and would now say I'm relatively happy. But I can only fully appreciate what I have because of what I'd been through."

He leaned back, resting his hands on his lap. "I guess what I'm trying to say is that sometimes you just have to bite the bullet, Rabbit. It hurts, but in the long run, you'll be a better man for it. No one can control what happens in life. You just have to learn how to deal with whatever life throws at you in the best way possible."
In my heart, I hoped Kim was wrong. In my head, I knew he'd spoken the simple, obvious truth.

"No one can control what happens in life."

That was why Robby died on Cannon Mountain. He couldn't have willed that boulder to miss crushing him any more than I could have willed Britannia to defy the laws of physics in Holland. Ironically, just before I reached that damned traffic circle, I'd been feeling more like a cosmic navigator than ever. Just when I'd convinced myself that my perceptions had created at least one particular reality, poof, it was gone. Like waking up in the middle of a good dream. No way to go back. And for me, no way to go forward and live my dream of climbing the Matterhorn. It had been vaporized in a moment of carelessness. A fluke of timing. If I'd left the Vondelpark Youth Hostel a minute earlier or later, I probably would have missed that truck entirely and been in Zermatt by now. Or maybe I'd be dead, having had a less benevolent run-in with a different truck somewhere down the road.

But what might have happened, didn't. For better or for worse, Kim was right. You just have to accept whatever
reality throws at you and deal with it the best you can. Reality creates perceptions. There is no other way.

And yet, I couldn't forget those moments when I really had seemed to live a dream: fighting in the Battle of Mortimer's Cross, finding strength in my fear on the cliff in Wales, feeling the static heat of a lightning bolt as I stood in the twin peaks' cleavage, riding Britannia through the English rain like some kind of winged avenger, falling head over heels in lust with Leslie Field and seeing Robby's death through Kim's eyes. The last one was the kicker. I'd imagined a truth I couldn't have otherwise known. Was it reality creating perception? Or perception creating reality? In this case, they seemed to be interchangeable. But how can opposites both be true?

As confused as I was, I had to admit that Kim was definitely right in one respect. Things could have been a lot worse. I could have been stuck somewhere else where I knew no one at all and would have had to have called my parents for help. At least here I had a place to stay and a couple of selfless people to care for me, which is more than I probably would have had back home with my folks.

Kim insisted I call them, just to say hello and let them know I was still alive. My mother was horrified to find out I'd been in a motorcycle wreck and told me for the umpteenth time in my life about her best friend's brother, who was a college football star until he lost a leg in a motorcycle accident. My father seemed less than upset. He
said I'd merely gotten what was I was asking for and hoped this "cheap lesson" would somehow manage to knock some sense into my head. As usual, they started arguing over the phone, my mother yelling at my father for being callous, and my father yelling at my mother for never wanting him to speak his mind. To an outsider, it probably would have sounded funny. To me, it was just another door slamming. I knew I would have had to have been brain dead to live in that house again.

With nowhere to go and not much to do other than wait for my knee to heal, I sat around the apartment with Kim, trying my best not to mope or gripe. Fortunately, the World Cup telecasts started, and a soccer game or two was on just about every day. Kim and I watched each one, from kick-off to final whistle. As a former player and practicing coach, he knew all of the ins and outs of the sport and explained them to me, a big help since the broadcasts were in Danish. I got to know the teams by their colors and best players and looked forward to the upcoming matches. If only vicariously, I could enjoy sports again. I swear it made my knee feel better.

Before long, I could get around the apartment without crutches, moved into the spare bedroom/future nursery, and started taking a few short walks outside by myself. First to the end of the block, then around the block, then to the nearby flower gardens, then over to a shallow reflecting pool about a quarter-mile away. There was a wood and
wrought iron bench at the near end, and I used to sit there and rub my knee, gazing at the reflections of buildings, tree limbs and sky in the still water. I'd bring Kim's copy of _The Sun Also Rises_ and, weather permitting, read a chapter or two. I kept waiting for the story to get going. It never really did, and when I finished, I can't say I understood what the whole thing was really about.

I tried something easier. Hans Christian Andersen. Kim had an old leather-bound collection of his fairy tales. They all had a lot of plot packed into a few pages, and I read one after the other, even during the World Cup games. I was surprised at how dark most of them were. Things never really turned out happily-ever-after, but rather for the best considering the circumstances, like in real life.

By the middle of my third week in Copenhagen, my knee was strong enough to ride Britannia. But I generally opted for Kim's one-speed bike, which hurt to pedal but had to be doing me some good. At least that's what I kept telling myself as I rode around town or to the beach when the weather was conducive for breast-browsing. My hand was proving to be almost as much of a pain as my knee. The scab on my palm kept wanting to get bumped or scraped and crack open and didn't seem as though it was ever going to heal.

Jette's vacation started. Originally, the Eriksons had planned to go camping in Norwegian fjord country, but those plans had changed when I called Kim from Flyford Flavell. Now, with me there and Jette's pregnancy, they decided to
just stay home, get some work done around the apartment and relax. I could sense that they wanted to be alone a lot, so I made myself as scarce as possible, half-expecting to come home one day and overhear Jette telling Kim the same thing Nan Hooper had told her husband.

One morning, I awoke to the sound of Jette throwing up in the bathroom. I stayed in bed until she stopped, then slipped on some rugby shorts and wandered into the kitchen, where Kim was casually drinking a cup of coffee and reading the newspaper. I poured a cup for myself and sat down, craning my neck to see a picture of bulls running through the streets of Pamplona on the front page. It was *The Sun Also Rises* time of year. Not too far above it was the date, which, even in Danish, struck me.

"Hey, you know what today is?" I asked.

"Bastille Day," he said.

"It is?"

"Yes. July fourteenth."

"Well, it's also the anniversary of the day Edward Whymper climbed the Matterhorn."

Kim mumbled something and looked down towards the bottom of the page.

"Robby and I always dreamed of climbing it on the anniversary."

"Yes," Kim said, lowering the paper. "Robby had told me that. But remember that today is also the anniversary of the tragedy. Whymper paid dearly for his moment of glory,
which is often the case when one yields to one's obsessions. Triumph and tragedy tend to walk hand-in-hand."

Triumph and tragedy. Robby had a book about the Kennedys called Triumph and Tragedy. I thought of one part immediately. When Jack Kennedy was running for Congress, he said that he was just filling the shoes of his older brother, Joe, who'd been planning a career in politics before being killed in an airplane crash. Jack said he would have expected Bobby to fill his shoes should something happen to him, and Teddy after that should something happen to Bobby. With one exception, those shoes all led down the same tragic path. The only thing saving Teddy was that he was a bit of a fuck-up. Like me.

"So what are your plans for today?" Kim asked.

I looked outside and saw blue sky. "Guess I'll ride your bike over to the beach, if it's okay with you."

"Fine," he said, turning a page and pausing to read a headline or something. "If Jette feels better later on, we'll be going to her brother's house for a cook-out. You're welcome to join us."

The invitation sounded half-hearted, and I thought they must be getting pretty tired of having me around.

"No thanks," I said, picking the fringes of the scab on my palm. "I think I'll be leaving in a couple of days."

Kim looked up from the paper. "To go where?"

"I don't know. Maybe up to Oslo."
"That's a very nice city."
"Or maybe over to Sweden."
"Sweden is nice too."
"Or maybe back down to Germany."
"You know, you don't really have to go anywhere, Rabbit," he said, folding the paper and laying it down. "You're welcome here as long as you want. In fact, I know a building contractor who's always looking for help he can pay off the books."

I laughed. "Listen, Kim. If you want me to go, just say it. You don't have to threaten me with work."

He looked surprised. "I just thought you might want to make a little money while..."

"I'm just kidding. But as it stands, I still have plenty of money, so I definitely don't want a job."

"Well, think about it anyway," he said. "Copenhagen is a lovely place to live."

"Yeah. And a lovely place to go to the beach."

Kim took a sip of coffee and put the cup back on its saucer. "You know what Jette says? She says the only thing you need is a good woman."

"Married women are always saying that about single men. I think it's some kind of a professional courtesy."

He laughed and patted my shoulder. "Well, we both just want you to know you're welcome to stay here as long as you wish, and if you want to settle down in Denmark, we can help you."
I thought about it as I rode to the beach. This was a nice place to visit, and the Danes seemed like sensible people, taking care of the poor and the elderly, painting a bicycle path on every street and not treating the female breast like some kind of forbidden fruit.

But could I really live here? All it would probably have taken to convince me was a nice local girl to teach me how to say "I love you" in Danish. There were plenty of beautiful ones around, and after parking Kim's bike in a rack with a hundred others, I followed two choice prospects onto the beach. As they walked a few paces in front of me, I undressed them with my eyes. Then they found a spot they liked, spread out a couple of beach towels and simultaneously pulled their beach dresses over their heads to reveal four nearly identical Scandinavian upslopers. All I'd imagined, and more.

I sat nearby and picked out dozens of girls I might have fallen in love with, but I couldn't think of a reason why any of them would want to fall in love with me. I watched as other guys flirted with the topless bathing beauties. When the girls giggled, their breasts seemed to nod like dolphins trying to coax a handler to toss them a mackeral. I wanted to be a part of it all, but felt I had about as much chance as the mackeral. So I just watched everyone else play, like an old man gazing through a schoolyard fence during recess.

Later on, I rode downtown along the coast. My usual
route. I stopped to look at the little mermaid, poised on her rock in the harbor. As always, I strained my eyes to see some trace of her rude decapitation of a few years ago. But the scar was invisible to my eye. I blew her a kiss, then pedaled on, down the coast, through the port and over a couple bridges into Christiania. This part of town had once been an army base, but when the military moved out in the sixties, a bunch of squatters moved in and turned it into a kind of hippie haven. The old barracks had mostly been repainted in psychedelic colors and were used for housing, cafes and small stores selling mostly handmade goods. The police kept clear of the place, so hash dealers set up shop in the unpaved streets, biting off small chunks from bricks of the stuff and weighing them on little hand-held scales. Ofer would have loved this place, and I always kept an eye out for him, even though I knew he was somewhere off the coast of Norway, packing fish into cans while listening to reggae music through his Walkman.

I had a beer at one of the cafes, then bought three grams of black Afghan and rolled up a three-paper joint. Even though I'd retired to a fairly secluded spot to indulge, a half-dozen drifters gathered around to help me smoke it, then ask for spare change. I felt both annoyed and guilty, so I left, riding Kim's bike back through the port and over to a big square called Rhodhus Pladsen. I dismounted and walked Kim's bike along a cobblestoned pedestrian street. The sights were similar to those I'd
seen the day before, and the week before that: shops and cafes, fountains and monuments, and people, people everywhere: Japanese posing for photos; Nazi-generation Germans bullying a cafe waiter; a little old couple wandering around with noses buried in a tour guide book; young Europeans wearing t-shirts from American universities; American students dressed like Europeans; guitar strummers, sing-a-long hummers, cigarette bummers, and, as in every great bastion of western civilization, a colony of punk rockers. And, lest I forget, the women. At least one in ten seemed to be an incarnation of my Mariah. I watched them with a sigh, knowing I'd just as soon try to catch the wind.

My leg started aching, so I limped back to Rhodus Pladsen, leaned the bike against a lampost, sat on a stone wall by a flower garden, rubbed my knee and watched the world passing me by. Within earshot, two scraggly guys with one guitar were singing "Homeward Bound," an empty cap sitting by their feet. A woman giggled behind me. I turned to see her sweetheart step into the garden, pick a flower and give it to her. She rewarded his gallantry with a kiss, and they walked away arm-in-arm. I fished the last cigarette out of my pack and lit it. One day, Jette had taken a break from nagging me about my escalating habit to show me how to make a flower out of the foil from an empty pack. Having nothing better to do now, I let my clumsy fingers give it a try. The flower turned out a little
lopsided, but it didn't matter since I had no one to give it to.

The wind shifted, and I caught the whiff of grilling meat from a nearby hamburger stand. When I didn't make a move towards it quickly enough, my belly growled to remind me it hadn't seen a thing since its morning cup of coffee. Not wanting to upset my stomach, I limped over to the red, white and blue stand and saw yet another incarnate version of Mariah standing by the condiments. Burger in hand, she was struggling with a farting ketchup dispenser. She looked around for somebody to help her, saw me and shrugged. I was more than happy to oblige and came to her aid like a McKnight in shining armor, tilting the dispenser to improve the flow. She smiled. I bowed and offered her my lopsided foil flower.

"How sweet," she said, taking it. "Thank you."

Her eyes were two different colors, blue and hazel. They lingered on my scabbed palm. "Fall off a bicycle lately?" she asked.


"Poor guy," she said, feigning a whiff of the foil flower. "Where are you from?"

"California." I couldn't get over her eyes.

"Me too," she said. "Santa Cruz."

"I'm from Sensinitas. It's down near San Diego."

"Yeah, I know. I've been there." She picked up her
tray. "Listen, are you here alone?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then why don't you come sit with us."

"Who?"

"Over there," she said, pointing with her elbow. "By that heavyset girl with the dark hair. That's Gitte. I'm Melissa."

Melissa. Nice name. I watched her weave her way between the round white tables, moving as gracefully as a ballerina. Before she even reached her seat, I was hopelessly in love.
CHAPTER 32

I bought a burger and joined Melissa at her table. Her friend, Gitte, was all but snuffling her food and grunted a monosyllabic greeting to me without missing a swallow. But Melissa didn't even seem to be interested in her food. She put the foil flower behind her ear and smiled at me.

"How's it look?" she asked.

"A little lopsided, but you're beautiful," I said, surprising myself.

Melissa batted her lashes. "Thanks. You're not bad yourself."

I couldn't take my eyes from hers. There was a tinge of blue around the top of the hazel one. "Can I ask you something, Melissa?"

"It's just a genetic quirk," she said. "My grandmother had different colored eyes too."

"Blue and hazel?"

"No. Hazel and brown, which is more common. I'm one of a kind."

"I can see that."

She smiled, picked up a french fry and ate it in two bites. "So what's your story?" she asked. "What are you
doing alone so far from home?"

I started telling her about my trip, trying to evoke a little sympathy. But once I got past Robby's accident and my quest to climb the Matterhorn, she mostly laughed. My tale of woe began to sound more like a comedy of errors—getting knocked down by a wimp barrister, letting myself get caught by the tide in Wales so I had to climb a cliff, sleeping next to a man who died of old age in a youth hostel, trying to break into the Montjoy Square hostel and having about as much success as the Watergate burglars, getting picked up by a feminist writer who only wanted me for my body, wiping out on Britannia because Holland is the one country in the world where vehicles entering a traffic circle have the right of way—it all seemed like one big joke, and her laughter was as contagious as Robby's used to be.

Although Melissa was from Santa Cruz, she looked purebred Danish. Definitely one of those California girls easterners dream about. As she chatted away about her nursing career, a few of her past lives, the women's soccer league she used to play in and the poetry she wrote, I could only think that if I were to make a woman from scratch, it would be her. She was perfect in looks, size, intellect and disposition, from the ease of her laugh to the curve of her upslopers. To top it off, she had a gold Star of David stud in her left earlobe. A nice Jewish girl, no less.

I was forever falling in love at first sight, but this
time it felt different. She seemed to be just as infatuated as I. I stretched my last bite of burger into three, and when the final swallow cleared my throat, Melissa giggled and wiped a gob of ketchup from the corner of my mouth. Once again I was mesmerized by her strangely beautiful eyes. She held my gaze, and I felt a strong sense of recognition. I saw myself looking back at me, a reflection in the twinkle of her eyes.

"Ready to go?" Gitte's voice sounded distant.
"Melissa? Melissa!"
"What?"
"Let's go."
Melissa glanced at her friend and turned back to me.
"Stay with me instead," I said.
"I'd love to, but I don't think I should."
"Why?"
"Because she is going to marry tomorrow," Gitte snapped.

My heart sank, then rose. It had to be a joke. I looked at Melissa, but she dashed my hopes with a resigned nod. "It's true. Tomorrow's my wedding day. Gitte here is serving as my maid of honor, and she won't let me forget it."

"Oh yeah?" I mumbled, trying to disguise the feeling that my heart had just been torn from my chest and trampled by a troupe of flamenco dancers. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"A Dane named Mattis," she said, pointing a thumb at
Gitte. "Her brother. It's a marriage of convenience. We tie the knot at nine, and by eleven we'll be on a plane to Saudi Arabia."

"What for?"

"For the money, honey. He's got a two-year contract as an architect, and I've got two years as a nurse. I'm getting over a hundred and fifty grand, tax-free. Then I'll get a divorce, and fulfill my greatest dream.

"What's that?"

"Buy a sailboat and cruise around the world."

"Sounds great. But why get married at all?"

"Because the Moslems down in Saudi don't want any single western women coming into their country, especially Jews. Listen Rabbit, I really like you and all, but I've been planning this for too long."

"I understand," I said, wondering if I would have let her compromise my dream of climbing the Matterhorn.

Gitte tapped Melissa's shoulder impatiently, but she just leaned back in her chair and looked up at the sky. I could see her tongue pushing at the inside of her left cheek.

"Let's go," Gitte said again.

She smiled at me, then turned to Gitte. "No. You go."

"Melissa..." Gitte growled.

"Now stop that," Melissa said, putting her feet up on the white plastic chair her future sister-in-law had been filling from armrest to armrest. "Mattis wanted to go out
with his friends tonight, so it's only fair I should get to go out with one of mine."

"But you just meet him here."

"So what?"

"So, I am going to tell my brother."

"Go ahead."

Gitte put her hands on her hips and puffed out her rather expansive chest. She released the air with a couple short blasts through her nose, turned around and huffed away. Melissa chuckled. "Some sister-in-law, eh?"

"Yeah. But won't your fiancee mind?"

"Mind? Look, Rabbit, the first thing we decided was to keep this marriage in name only and not to get involved in each other's personal lives. Besides, he's out with his pals, getting drunk and chasing women. It's only fair that I'm allowed to chase a man."

"Well, you won't have to chase too hard. I've got a bad knee."

"So you said." She pulled her feet off of Gitte's chair and spread her knees. "Here, let me have a look at it."

I put my left foot up on the triangle of chair between her legs and pointed to the spot where it hurt. Her hands were small, but looked strong. She placed her thumb on the inside of my knee, right next to my kneecap and pressed. I winced.

"Sorry," she said. "That the spot?"
"Yeah."

"Did it swell a lot?"

"Like a balloon."

"Probably popped the cartilage." She grabbed just above and below my knee and pushed and pulled. "The joint seems pretty stable, though, so there probably isn't any serious ligament damage. But I'd get it scoped, get that cartilage cleaned up."

"Did you used to work for an orthopedist or something?"

"No. But my brother's one."

"Next best thing, I guess." I grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "So tell me doc, will I live?"

She shook her head. "Nope. I'm sorry to tell you this, but you've only got fifty or sixty years left, in this body, anyway."

I laughed. "And will my knee hold up that long?"

"Maybe." She leaned over and kissed the sore spot.

"How's it feel now?"

"Wonderful," I said, feeling only the damp ring of moisture her lips had left. She looked up at me, and once again our eyes locked.

"You're not really getting married tomorrow," I said.

She blinked. "Oh yes I am. But we have tonight. What do you say we make the most of it?"

We started by walking over to Tivoli, the amusement park across the street from Rhodus Pladsen. It was a
fantasyland of flower gardens, water-lined walkways and fountains of stone, brass and glass, all lit up in soft hues of amber, rose and violet, forest green and royal blue. We strolled hand-in-hand between reflective ponds, rode aboard a Viking ship merry-go-round, clinked champagne glasses in a wooded cafe, watched a blond ballerina flitter around an outdoor stage, and as the midnight hour approached, sat side-by-side on a soft lawn beneath a sky full of fireworks. The gentle breeze blew her hair back, and her Star of David earring sparkled with each burst of light from above.

"I like your stud," I murmured in her ear.

"Who, uh, what?"

"Your earring stud, the Star of David."

She laughed. "Oh, that. I thought you were talking about my fiancee or something." We both laughed. She stopped first. "You can have it if you want."

"What?"

"My stud."

"But I don't even know him."

She hit my arm playfully. "The earring, dummy. I don't think I'll be wearing it much in Saudi."

"Thanks, but I don't have a pierced ear."

"Maybe you will someday," she purred, bringing her lips to within millimeters of mine. "Then you can wear it for me."

With the thundering crack of a bursting skyrocket, the
millimeters between our lips were bridged. We kissed as though there would be no tomorrows, as though there had been no yesterdays, as though there was only one eternal moment.

"You're not getting married tomorrow," I whispered.

"Oh yes I am. But let's not think about tomorrow tonight."

On a nearly empty bus to Lyshojgaasdsreg, Melissa and I sat in the back talking between kisses. An elderly lady with heavily rouged cheeks and auburn-dyed hair smiled at us and asked how long we'd been together.

"Just met tonight," Melissa chirped.

The woman shook her head. "No. Maybe the bodies meet tonight, but the souls, the souls are old friends. In you, I see more than lovers. I see a...how you say...a reunion."

Melissa scrunched closer to me, throwing her legs over my lap. She kissed me, then pulled back to stare into my eyes.

"Do you remember any of your past lives?" she asked.

"No. Unless..."

"What?"

I told her about how I felt when I'd seen the two thousand-year-old man in the British Museum and fighting Edward's battle at Mortimer's Cross. She stared at our reflections in the dark window when I finished, a furrow creasing the skin between her eyebrows.

"Neither of those ring a bell," she said, "but you
might just be the one."

"What one?"

"The one I've loved as a man and as a woman since our primary incarnation."

She was serious. Wacky, but delightful. A fellow cosmic navigator for sure. Maybe more. I kissed her for perhaps the billionth time. Her lips felt as familiar as my own.

With simultaneous little waves to the woman on the bus, we got off at a stop in front of the flower garden I used to walk around to exercise my knee. I didn't even feel it now, or my legs, as we retraced those once painful steps. Kim and Jette were already in bed when we reached the apartment. After I assured Melissa for the tenth time that they wouldn't mind me having a guest, she asked if I'd carry her across the threshold of my room.

"Don't waste your time practicing for tomorrow," I said. "You're not getting married."

"Oh yes I am," she replied, throwing an arm around my neck. "But not tomorrow anymore. Today."

I chose not to believe her and carried her across the threshold with my lips locked to hers. My knee was trying to tell me that this wasn't a good idea, but I just didn't care about the pain and absorbed an extra jolt to lay her gently on the bed. For a few seconds, I could only look at her, the way her hair was lying in a golden aura about her head, the delicate curve of her neck, eyes dreamily hooded
and mouth smiling just enough to bring out a dimple. The

tip of her tongue wet her lips and they puckered ever so

slightly. I answered their call over and over and her
clothes seemed to melt from her body. As I stood to strip
off the last of mine, moonlight filtering through the
mullioned window cast her naked figure in silver. She held
out her hand, limp-wristed, palm down.

Fingers interlaced.

Bedsprings creaked.

One thigh fell in place between two.

Teeth nibbled a studded earlobe.

A tongue glided down the soft underside of a neck.

A mouth covered a swollen nipple.

Soft moans.

Gentle hands.

Fingers sifting hair.

Legs spread.

Feet together.

Hip to hip.

Breast to breast.

Nipple to nipple.

Mouth to mouth.

Rolling waves.

Pointed toes.

Whispers.

Gasps.

Fluttering eyelids.
Cries of love.
Breaking waves.
Floating.
Floating.
Floating away...

I stirred in the morning with a kiss still warm on my lips and a cold, wet spot beneath my butt. My first thought was that something was missing.

Melissa.

I sat up, scanning the room for some sign of her. There was nothing except a few blond hairs on the pillow and a wisp of perfume in the air. Then I noticed her Star of David earring stud on the night table. It was pinned through some sort of note.

Dear Soulmate,

Oh yes I am.
Sorry, but I have to follow my dream like you.
Perhaps some other day, or in another life, we will find love and happiness together again forever.
yours,  

Melissa
CHAPTER 33

So Melissa wound up reciting those sacred matrimonial vows with my spermatozoa flagellating around her fallopian tubes. It sounds funnier than it felt at the time. I'd been looking for a woman like Melissa all of my life. Finding and losing her in a single night was like giving a starving man a bite of filet mignon, then throwing the rest to the dogs. All that remained of her ambrosial love were crumbs: just a few taunting memories, a short note and a dram of gold. And no forwarding address. I couldn't understand why she hadn't left me her address in Saudi Arabia, or her parents' address, or their phone number. Something. Anything. As it was, I didn't even know her last name, maiden or married.

I folded up her note and stashed it in my wallet. As for the stud, well, it was so small, I was afraid I'd lose it. And it had instantly become my most precious possession. Although I'd never been too keen on earrings for men, as soon as Kim and Jette woke up, I had them numb my left earlobe with ice cubes and pierce it. Wearing the stud was the least I could do to preserve my love for Melissa. Sadly, it was also the most I could do.
"Poor Rabbit," Jette said, stroking my head as though I were a child with a skinned knee.

Kim slapped my shoulder. "Don't take it so hard. Someone else will come along. I guarantee it."

I didn't bother to tell him that I didn't want anyone else to come along. Melissa was my soulmate. I knew it from the moment I'd seen her. I looked at the clock. Nine-thirty. She was probably already married and on her way to the airport, soon to take off to one place on earth where I couldn't hope to follow.

But maybe I wouldn't have to.

"Kim, can you give me a ride to the airport?"

"Yes. But if she's already married..."

"It doesn't matter. C'mon, let's go."

Jette came along too. From the back seat, I kept one eye on Jette's watch and the other on all the cars we passed, looking for one with the love of my many lives inside. I didn't see her, but we got to the airport a full hour before her flight was scheduled to leave. Kim dropped Jette and me off in front and went to park the car. I ran inside at a hopping gait and up to an information booth. Apparently, there was no direct flight to Saudi Arabia, so she'd have had to make a connection. But which airline?

"Maybe you can have her paged," Jette suggested.

Good idea. I wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself.

"Melissa," the dispassionate feminine voice over the
intercom announced. "Meet Rabbit at the information kiosk in the main terminal."

I listened to the message being repeated, looking right and left, straining my eyes to see her graceful stride emerge from the crowd of other travelers. But the only familiar figure I saw was Kim's.

"What's the story?" he asked.

I explained, then asked if they could look around for her while I waited for her to answer the page, or had her paged again.

"But how will we know her?" Jette asked.

"She's a blond, about five-foot-two or three, hair down to the middle of her back and different colored eyes, one blue, the other hazel."

They glanced at each other, wordlessly expressing a futility I refused to admit. Kim said they'd be able to cover more territory if they spilt up. Jette nodded, and they took off in opposite directions. I kept my vigil, looking left and right, checking the clock occasionally and thinking that it was moving too fast. My heart fluttered every time I saw a long-haired blond, but none of them turned out to be my soulmate. The clock's big hand swept around the half-hour mark and seemed to pick up speed. I had her paged again and again, and felt a renewed sense of hope each time that amplified voice said her name. Then seconds would pass, then minutes, and I only saw her in my memory.
Just before eleven, Jette came back shaking her head. Kim wasn't far behind. He shrugged and said, "Well, I saw a lot of blonds, but none with different colored eyes."

All three of us looked up at the clock as it clicked off the final minute before eleven. My chin dropped to my chest. Kim draped his arm around my back and squeezed my shoulder.

"At least we tried," he said. "You can't do more than that."

If that was supposed to cheer me up, it didn't. Outside, while waiting for Kim to get the car, I couldn't stop looking around for Melissa, even though I knew she was already gone, on the plane soaring off into the clouds right now, or the last one, or the next. I fiddled with the stud in my earlobe and imagined her twirling the lopsided foil flower between her fingers, suddenly realizing that she didn't want to wait for another day or another life to continue our romance, that we could invent a new dream to pursue together. But the truth was that our romance was over almost before it'd begun, just like my quest to climb the Matterhorn.

I sat quietly in the back of the car while Kim and Jette chattered away in the front, trying to somehow cheer me up. But I didn't want to be cheered up. I just wanted to feel miserable.

"By the way, Rabbit, I didn't see my bicycle in the downstairs foyer this morning. Did you..."
"Oh shit!"

"What?"

"I forgot all about it."

Kim sighed. "Where did you leave it?"

"In Rodhus Pladsen, leaning against a lightpost. Fuck! I didn't even lock it because I was just going to get a hamburger. But that was when I met her."

"Well, maybe it's still there," he said flatly.

It wasn't. I apologized about a hundred times and offered to buy him a new one. Jette started talking in Danish. The only word I understood was "Carlsberg" and figured from her exasperated tone that I'd finally managed to rupture the dam of her patience, and she was now complaining about everything I'd done since arriving, including how I'd taken the last beer out of the refrigerator and left the empty carton inside. Kim nodded as she spoke, not saying much in return. When we arrived back at the apartment, Kim double-parked while Jette hopped out.

"C'mon in the front," Kim said to me.

"We going to a bike shop?"

He laughed. "No. It was an old bike that Jette's brother gave me before we were married."

"Still, I want to replace it."

He waved me off. "You know what Jette said?"

"What?"

"She said it was sacrificed for love and hoped whoever
took it will use it more than I have."

"No kidding? I thought she was pissed off at me."

"On the contrary, she feels sorry for you and said I should take you over to the Carlsberg brewery for some spiritual revitalization."

I suppose I should have felt better, but the way Kim and Jette kept giving to me without getting anything in return just made me feel worse than ever. I figured that the least I could do was go along with him and pretend he was doing me some good.

Kim's father met us at the brewery. Jack Erikson was Carlsberg's public relations director and normally only gave tours to VIPs, but made an exception in our case. He was a bit shorter than Kim, but had the same blue eyes, weak chin, curly hair and even-toothed smile. Jack wore a tweed sports jacket and vest and carried a cane which he didn't seem to need for walking. Kim had told me he was a spy during the War and got shot in the leg. They were kind of awkward with each other, not talking much beyond standard pleasantries, probably just like my father and I would have been had Kim come to visit me in America and toured the knitting mill my old man ran.

I was almost incoherent during the tour, thinking only of Melissa and, oddly enough, still looking for her, hoping for a miracle. I followed Kim and his father around, not taking much notice of anything until we were standing on a catwalk overlooking the bottling room. As thousands of
returnables clinked along endless paths of conveyor belts, Jack finally said something which sunk in.

"If someone took all of the bottles that are processed in this brewery in the course of a year and lay them end-to-end, the chain would stretch around the world at the equator three and a half times."

Staggering. Before hearing that, I'd thought I drank a lot of beer. Now, I was comforted. My yearly empties wouldn't have even stretched across Liechtenstein. If nothing else, it seemed a good excuse to go on a Carlsberg binge. If we all pulled together, I figured we could make it an even four global circumferences for the current fiscal drinking year. So I spent the rest of the day trying to drown my sorrows in beer, starting with the free samples I drank with Jack and Kim in the brewery's VIP lounge. When we got home, I skipped the meal Jette had prepared to ride Britannia downtown and continue the binge by drinking ten-kroner elephant malts by myself at a variety of cafes and bars. It was in the resulting state of semi-sobriety that I hopped on Britannia to head back towards Lyshojgaasdsreg. But before I got three blocks, some people in a car waved to me.

"Hi gang," I waved back drunkenly.

They weren't just friendly people. They were cops. Allegedly, Britannia had a spent tail light. While burnt-out lights aren't terribly heinous crimes in themselves, they're known to lead to more dramatic stuff,
like the body in the trunk, the gun in the glove compartment, the drugs in the upholstery or, in my case, the alcohol in the bloodstream. One of the four cops detected the familiar aroma of fermented barley on my breath and asked about it in such a polite manner that I almost felt guilty lying.

"Uh, I'm just coming from my girlfriend's apartment. We split a beer just after, well, you know."

The cop looked eighteen years old. He smiled amiably. "Then you will not mind blowing into this tube?" Logical, polite, non-violent and chillingly efficient. I hit .20 on the Richter Scale of breathalyzers and was immediately whisked away to the local slammer.

Unlike drunk tanks in America, the Danish cell was bright, clean and devoid of fellow inebriates alternately blowing chips on the floor and picking fights. I was left alone with my thoughts, which made sleep impossible. My blood test results came through in the morning, and my alcohol content was officially lowered to a mere .151. Unfortunately, that was still nearly double the legal limit in Denmark. The judge was as sober as they come. His gavel fell to the tune of a thirty-five hundred kroner fine, which was close to four hundred dollars. He gave me three days to come up with the cash, then the coppers sprang me on my own recognizance. But they kept Britannia hostage until I paid my debt to society.

Kim picked me up at the station. He mussed my hair and
said something encouraging about my luck having bottomed out and how things were destined to get better. I was too tired, hungover and depressed to argue, so I nodded like an idiot and tried to believe him. Not quite sure what to do about my motorcycle, I deliberated for the rest of the day and finally concluded that it was better to procrastinate than make a bad decision.

However, during another nearly sleepless night, I regretfully decided dear Britannia wasn't worth her ransom, which meant I'd have to leave Denmark or risk getting arrested again. I announced my decision to my hosts over breakfast, then went back to my room to pack. Kim wandered in after a few minutes and sat on the edge of the bed. I tossed him my thirteen-color all-county rugby jersey, which he'd admired on several occasions.

"You want me to fold this for you?" he asked.

"No. I want you to have it."

"You're kidding."

I smiled. "Yeah. Give it back."

He held it up by the shoulders. "Of course, it might fit me better."

"Try it on."

He slipped it over his head. The sleeves were a little short, so he pushed them up to his elbow. "Thanks. It's smashing."

"That's only because it's been smashed a few times, with me in it."
He looked at himself in the bureau mirror. "So, Rabbit, where will you go?"

"South, I guess. Otherwise, I'll have to come back through Denmark. And by midnight tomorrow, I'll be a fugitive here."

He looked over at me. "You're not going to try the Matterhorn?"

"I don't know. Maybe, but probably not. I'm really not sure about anything right now."

I zippered up my backpack, and carried it into the living room. My knee was barely able to support the extra weight. Jette was standing beside the mantel. She smiled when she saw Kim wearing my shirt and said something about him wanting it ever since the first time he'd seen it. That made me feel better. And I imagined they'd think even more of me when they found the five hundred kroner I'd left in the bureau drawer to pay for the bike. I hugged Jette, kissed her cheek, thanked her about eight times and gave her incubating belly a little pat for good luck. Then, with Kim at my side, I hobbled down the stairs I'd so joyously run up just over a month earlier. We climbed into his Citroen, and he drove me to a good hitchhiking spot on the southern outskirts of town. He said he would have taken me all the way to the ferry, but had to drive Jette to her obstetrician for an eleven-thirty appointment.

"It's not too late to come back," Kim said as I muscled my backpack out of the car. "You could stay with us a while
longer. We could find you a job, get you your own little flat somewhere. Believe me, I've been around, and Copenhagen is the nicest place I've found to live."

I was sorely tempted to slip back into his car, but knew it wouldn't be right. Kim and Jette had done enough for me already. "Thanks, but I think it's best I start fending for myself again. Besides, what can happen? We can only die once, right?"

He smiled and gave me a one-armed hug. "If you need anything, anything at all, you know where to reach me."

"I'll keep that in mind," I replied, feeling a familiar lump rise in my throat. I waved my thumb at a few cars. Surprisingly, one pulled over in front of us.

"See, your luck is changing already," Kim said cheerfully. He went over to the driver's window and said something to him in Danish. They both looked at me and laughed. I threw my pack in the back seat and got in the front, then waved good-bye to Kim, who waved back, slipped in his car, made a U-turn and drove off as if afraid I might change my mind after all.

Fleeing Denmark on the Rodbyhavn/Puttgarden ferry, I arrived in Germany a free man. But I still felt like a fugitive, running scared. Hitchhiking on the autobahn scared me. Being a Jew in Germany scared me. A middle-aged man with effeminate mannerisms picked me up in a Mercedes. Even he scared me.

"Where do you go?" he asked.
"Switzerland," I answered.

"Schweitz? Is far."

I already knew that. While on the ferry, I'd figured out the distance on my map. Switzerland was over twelve hundred kilometers away, and Zermatt was about another three hundred. Over nine hundred miles in all. But I was determined to at least see the Matterhorn, if not climb it.

"Well, I'll probably just get to Hamburg today."


His friendliness scared me. I asked him to let me off at the next exit and caught another ride. The driver of this car talked mostly about getting laid and suggested I visit the Reeperbahn, Hamburg's red light district. I did, just to hear some pretty girls come onto me. It was a lot sleazier than Amsterdam's hooker haven. Teenaged prostitutes winked and promised ecstasy for fifty marks, pinky-ringed pimps roved around keeping overenthusiastic tourists in line, shifty-eyed Africans badgered me to buy hash and sealegged sailors bumped into me while yelling vulgarities at the hookers in a variety of languages. The guy from Ratzeburg had been right. Hamburg was a hole. I left in the morning and couldn't believe how heartless the German drivers were. I got one decent ride to Munster, and then nothing for hours.
I waited and waited by an autobahn entrance ramp. Most of the drivers looked right through me. A few signaled that even though they were getting on the highway here, they weren't going my way. How they knew this without stopping was beyond me. Little kids waved through windows. Big kids flipped me off. It wasn't much different from hitching the American interstates. There was even some graffiti spray-painted on the overpass.

"Was mich nicht vernichtet macht mich stärker."

---Nietzsche

Well, it wasn't exactly like America. Could you see an American graffiti artist attributing his source? Or quoting a philosopher? Anyway, I wondered what it meant. As I recalled from my oft-supercilious liberal arts education, Hitler used to quote Nietzsche too.

Finally, a trucker hauling new cars pulled over and waved me aboard. He didn't ask where I was going, but rather where I was from.

"America."

"Ah. I am speaking English little."

As we got underway, I pointed to the graffito on the overpass. "What's that mean?"

"Nietzsche? He dead. Many years."

"I know, but what does 'Was mich nicht vernichtet macht mich stärker' mean?"

He said the phrase himself, which sounded nothing like
my version. "It mean...something like...What not...uh...kill me make me...uh...what is 'stärker'?" He made a muscle and pointed to it.

"Strong?"

"Ya. Strong. More strong. What not kill me make me more strong. That is it."

What doesn't kill me makes me stronger. I liked that. In a way, it echoed what Kim had said when he was telling me about how he managed to deal with his hard times. What didn't kill him not only made him stronger, but it also made him more appreciative of what he had. I smiled at the driver and thanked him again for stopping. At least I was going somewhere, not standing still, fruitlessly waving my thumb at cars or freeload off of some overly nice people. And even if my knee was still fucked up, at least I could walk. How could I feel sorry for myself when there were so many people in the world who couldn't even do that?

The trucker kept looking over at me and talking incessantly in German, throwing in an occasional word of English as though that would be enough to let me understand him. Even though I couldn't, his banter sounded cheerful. So I nodded and agreed with him just to be polite.

As we wove our way through the autobahn maze in and about Essen, he bummed a cigarette from me, but only took a couple of puffs before butting it in the ashtray. Then he reached over and grabbed my bad knee. I pulled it away. He reached for my upper thigh. I smacked his hand, and he
started yelling at me in German, which was scary. I yelled back in English and told him to let me off. With a curse, he pulled over in a place where the autobahn divided. I got out, pulling my backpack down from the cab. He took off, going to the left. There was no exit here, so I walked along the right fork for a few hundred yards, then spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on my backpack and watching traffic whiz by at seventy, eighty, ninety and over a hundred miles an hour. No one even slowed down to wave, laugh or shake a disapproving finger at me for illegally hitching on the autobahn proper. At dusk, I finally gave up and started walking along the emergency shoulder.

By dark, my knee felt as though someone were drilling a hole through it, and there was still no exit in sight. Having had enough bullshit for one day, I climbed over the guardrail and hopped down the autobahn's embankment on my good leg. Near the bottom, I hit a hole, twisted my ankle and flopped into a wet drainage ditch. An uncontrollable surge of emotion clenched my fists and drove them into the soggy turf again and again, until they were covered in mud.

"What the fuck did I do to deserve this?" I shouted at the ground. The ground, of course, had nothing to say. Tears of self-pity came to my eyes, but anger drove them back. I suddenly felt incredibly pissed off about everything: pissed off that some perverted truck driver dumped me in the middle of nowhere; pissed off that I was thirsty, hungry, dirty and lonely; and extremely pissed off
that Jette got pregnant, Melissa got married and Britannia's tail light burned out. I was so pissed off I could have just...

Died?

"No," I said, biting an imaginary bullet. "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

I felt that strength well up inside me, dragging me out of the ditch and telling me that I didn't need anything more than what I had.

"What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

I didn't need Melissa, Kim or Britannia. Didn't need a bed, beer, burger or bath. Didn't need anything but me, myself and I.

"What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

The pain in my knee felt good because I could handle it. I purposely twisted it, feeling the bite of the torn cartilage, or whatever it was. The more my knee hurt, the better I felt. There was no moon, no stars. Good. I didn't need them, either. I didn't need anything. I had my sleeping bag. That was enough. I spread it under the cover of a large bush and lay down. I was exhausted, but my muscles were tingling with tension, keeping me awake. I didn't even bother to go through my standard relaxation exercises, but just listened to cars on the autobahn and counted them like sheep. One passed after another until I saw Robby's Skylark approach. He cast me a glistening smile and threw his arm forward like a cavalry officer leading a
charge. Mariah was still sitting on the hood, looking like Melissa, yet different. As before, she was swinging her bare feet and laughing silently, beckoning me onward like a breath of fresh air.
Once clear of the industrial north, I found Germany to be a breath of fresh air indeed. It was Brothers Grimm territory: forests instead of factories, rural hamlets instead of concrete cities and personable country lanes instead of indifferent autobahns. As I followed the Rhine south from Bonn to Koblenz to Mainz, I felt rejuvenated, surely a different person than the lost soul who'd left Copenhagen with his tail between his legs. Having survived my crucible in the autobahn wilderness, I walked with my head held high, looked people in the eye, and when the going got a little rough, I'd force a smile and say, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

My knee continued to ache when I walked more than a few hundred yards at a stretch, and it clicked on almost every stride. But it gradually grew stronger, or else I just got used to the pain. I knew from rugby that being in shape is only half physical conditioning. The other half is the mental capacity to deal with the pain of exertion, sprinting to make a tackle or cover a kick when your lungs are burning and your legs cramping. Pain is just something to overcome, like the wind in your face and sun in your eyes. You can't
stop to think about it, but just put it outside your body and keep going, determined to drop before letting up.

However, traveling was more pleasure than pain. I drifted off my planned route to Zermatt, happier to be half-lost all of the time than to actually be going anywhere. But wherever I wandered, the people I met were nearly as friendly as the Irish, welcoming me to their towns, their bars and even into their homes on occasion. Whatever uneasiness I'd originally felt about being a Jew in Germany disappeared. And with each good turn, I laughed at my mother's neverending distrust of the Germans. With each mark I spent, I thought of how silly she'd been to go out of her way to boycott any product made in their country.

"Why should I give money to the people who exterminated half of my own family?" she used to ask.

When I was a kid, I didn't know how to answer that question. Now, I could tell her that these weren't the same people, and that they couldn't be held responsible for something their parents or grandparents did. She'd been exaggerating anyway. The only close relative she lost during the war was an uncle named Willy, and no one ever found out what really happened to him. Willy stayed in Germany after the rest of the family emigrated to America. A prominent Munich businessman, he couldn't believe they'd harm him because he'd been a hero during the first world war and decorated by the Kaiser himself. But I suppose he went the way of the Kaiser. The last anyone heard from Willy was
when he sent my great-grandmother a birthday card in 1937, assuring her that he had friends in high places who would take care of him no matter what.

Things were obviously different now. I found no evidence of anti-Semitism. On the contrary, the Germans who were prone to pick up hitchers seemed to embrace me even more when they found out I was Jewish. I let them guide me on a zig-zag tour from Mainz to Aschaffenburg, Wurzburg, Rothenburg, Rothenburg, Ansbach, Gunzenhausen, Dinkelsbuhl and right into a three-day rock 'n' rock festival in a meadow outside of Oettingen, a town so small it wasn't even on my map.

The festival was a lucky find. I was about the only foreigner there and made friends just by opening my mouth. A few hours after arriving, I was adopted by a group of people from a nearby town called Treuchtlingen. They let me stay in one of their tents and share their hash, wine and food for the price of a few Marlboros, English slang lessons and stories about life in the States. Everyone seemed to be friendly and peace-loving. The festival was really like a mini-Woodstock, with a lot of long hairs running around barefoot and wearing embroidered blue jeans, tie-dyed t-shirts and bandana headbands, preaching nuclear disarmament, ecological conservation and the gospel according to Jerry Garcia. When the music ended, I stuck around until Monday to help clean up, then waved my now scabless hand to the kraut flower children and headed off
towards Munich. It was too early for the Oktoberfest, but almost everyone I'd met said "München" was a city I shouldn't miss.

The Bavarian capital was only a hundred miles away from Oettingen at most, but I turned it into a long trip by sticking to the back roads where traffic was light to nonexistent. When rides did come, they were only good for a few miles, generally to the next town. A young guy in an Opel took me to a place called Rain. No cars came by for such a long time that an old woman shuffled out of a nearby cottage to give me an apple, lump of cheese and bottle of juice. Apparently, she was worried I'd starve to death while waiting for a ride. She spoke no English, so I thanked her in German, inhaled the food and juice and started walking, waving auf wiedersehen to the parted curtains in her front window.

Not long after that, a car sped by. On another day, I might have cursed the driver for passing me up in such a lonely spot. But I didn't really care now. I was in no particular hurry, and not even my knee seemed to mind walking in so a pretty place on so a fine a day. Forest and farmland as green as Ireland flanked the road, and dozens of times I was tempted to stop for the night in a nice camping spot. But there was plenty of daylight left, so I kept on trucking, enjoying the scenery and beautiful weather. Clouds like white Rorschach inkblots paraded across the sky. One looked like an alligator, another a shark, a
hippo, a dachshund. A deer strolled out of the woods and leisurely crossed the road about a hundred yards ahead of me, seeming to know better than I that not much traffic passed this way.

My hiking boots were finally broken in enough to stop raising blisters, although I'd begun to develop an inexplicable pain in the arch of my right foot. More and more, I limped on both legs as I followed the road along a stream through a narrow, heavily-wooded valley, around a series of hairpin curves, down one hill and up another. Then a gingerbread village popped out of the forest. Neuberg, according to my map. It was perfect timing. My knee and foot were certainly ready for a little rest, and my biological clock had just hit "beer-thirty."

Curious stares and friendly waves greeted me and my backpack as I shuffled through Neuburg looking for the local drinking establishment. I found a brauhaus right in the center of town, plopped down at a table on its patio, kicked off my hiking boots, massaged my sore arch and ordered a stein of their finest brew. Ah, a sip of bliss. German beer's the best. I had another and watched the lengthening shadow of a fairy tale clock tower inch across the town's main square. Just before it reached the tips of my outstretched feet, an oddly-dressed character marched up with dog on leash and sat down at the next table. Decked out in green suede lederhosen, knee socks and a feathered hat, he looked like an overgrown von Trapp Family kid. His
square jaw was neatly framed by a velvety black beard, and his gray-blue eyes struck me as having about as much warmth as tungsten steel, especially when they seemed to lock onto my Star of David earring. The dog was far more amiable. Docked tail stump wagging, it wandered under my table to get a closer whiff of my socks.

"Boy, I'll bet my feet smell like a bouquet of roses to you," I told the dog. It didn't seem to understand me, but a slight smile creased its master's face.

"You are English?" he asked.

"No. American."

"Where do you go?"

"München."

The man nodded and started drinking his beer. He didn't say another word until draining the stein and wiping some froth from his moustache with a napkin. "If you wish, I can take you to Ingolstadt in two or three hours," he said, grabbing the dog's leash. "You will remain here?"

"Yeah, uh, maybe. I don't know. Why? Where are you going now?"

"Now, I go hunting."

"For what?"

"Deer."

"No kidding? I just saw one earlier today, crossing the road near Rain."

The hunter shrugged. "There are many deer in this area. Too many."
"Yeah. I had friends in Pennsylvania who used to say
the same thing, that some of the deer would starve if they
didn't thin out the ranks a bit."

The guy just nodded.

"My friends used to hunt a lot," I continued, "but I've
never been myself. Maybe I could just tag along with you
now. That way you wouldn't have to come back here.
Probably be easier that way, and I won't be any trouble. I
mean, you won't even know I'm along."

His heavy brows knit, then flattened. "Yes, you can
come. But you must not talk so much."

We climbed into his German army-surplus jeep and headed
for the woods. The hunter didn't seem willing to talk and
drive at the same time, but my standard hitchhiker's jabber
prompted him to reveal that his name was Heinrich Wernicke,
and he was a thirty-two-year-old elementary school teacher.
Stern as Miss Martin, I figured.

Just a couple of miles outside of town, we turned onto
a dirt road, which ran around a wooded hillside and came to
a dead-end in a shadowed glade. Heinrich parked, grabbed
his rifle and led me into the forest. Single-file, we
walked along a trail he said had once been a Roman road.
Progress was slow because each footstep had to be carefully
placed to avoid snapping twigs and crunching dead leaves.
Heinrich moved with the stealth of a Shawnee Indian scout,
and I matched him on equally soundless feet. Unfortunately,
my knee kept clicking and my corduroy trousers insisted on

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thigh-whistling what sounded like an old German marching song. The incessant noises prompted the hunter to turn around a few times, and those steely eyes of his reprimanded me without a spoken word.

I lost a little bit of my Nietzschean nerve with every one of his chilling glances. Here I was, advancing deeper and deeper into unfamiliar wilds with a man I hardly knew, a man who had a loaded rifle in his hand and all of my belongings in his car. Had I been too hasty in trusting the inherent goodness of people who offer rides to hitchhikers? It was a fine time to be asking. I felt like a bonehead, but had no choice other than follow Heinrich with the allegiance of his hound who, incidentally, had been left in the jeep. Heinrich wouldn't need the dog's help until after the kill. At least that was what he'd told me.

After creeping along for about fifteen minutes, the Bavarian deerhunter pointed to a large boulder and told me to sit. "Wait here," he said. "I'll be back in less than two hours."

"Two hours?! What'll I do for two hours all alone in the woods?"

"Appreciate nature," he suggested with a mirthless smile. Then he ducked through a thicket and seemed to evaporate into the forest.

Great. I realized too late that I should have insisted on staying with him. What if he didn't come back for me? What would I do then?
But there was really no sense in worrying about it. Whatever happened, I'd just deal with it the way I'd dealt with everything else. There was nothing I could do except sit on the boulder and wait. I closed my eyes and tried to cosmic navigate myself into a Brothers Grimm fairy tale. But nothing came. Not even a breeze to rustle the leaves.

No matter. It was like being in a woodsman's dream just to sit where I was. There seemed to be a hundred varieties of trees, mostly hardwoods. Their leaves hung over my head in a kaleidoscopic canopy just holey enough to let random shafts of setting sunlight slip through to dapple bits and pieces of the trees and ground. Not much was left of the Roman road. The centuries had reduced it to a trail of white marble chips which lay scattered like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs along a carpet of green moss. I heard the distant drone of an airbound jet. But it faded away quickly, leaving the forest so quiet that the snap of a twig was as easy to hear as a shotgun blast. I turned in the direction of the sound and saw a doe and her spotted fawn wandering towards me with their noses to the ground. The doe stopped suddenly and looked up, ears cocked and snout sweeping through the air. I froze, didn't even breathe. But my scent, which was admittedly hard to miss, must have betrayed me. The deer took flight in unison, vanishing into the depths of the forest with cloven hooves making no more noise than the flap of butterfly wings.

The woods darkened in leaps and bounds. I began to get
the creeps again and nervously paced up and down the path, swatting mosquitoes and wishing Heinrich would get back. Twenty paces up the trail, twenty paces down it. The moss was springy under my feet. It would have made a nice mattress for my sleeping bag. If I still had a sleeping bag. I turned around to start pacing back up the path and nearly had a heart attack when I saw a man sitting on my boulder. He was short, lean and had a moustache so thin it looked to be malnourished. In fact, he reminded me of a picture I'd seen of my mom's father before he went gray.

He brushed a cobweb off of the ribboned medal pinned to his breast, then looked up at me, frowning. "Can't trust those German bastards," he said.

Sounded like my grandfather too. I shook my head to clear it, and he was gone. I walked over to the boulder and felt the spot where he'd been sitting. It was cool. I sat back down trembling. Just my imagination, I kept telling myself. But the reality of my situation was nearly as disturbing. Here I was waiting for a man I didn't know, a hunter, heartless by nature, who might possibly have circled around and driven off with my backpack. I pictured him laughingly telling his dog how gullible Americans are. Paranoia stalked me, and mosquitoes started attacking faster than I could swat them. I couldn't sit still and rode a wave of uncertainty back towards the jeep. When I got to the end of the trail, the jeep wasn't there. No jeep, no hunter, no dog and no backpack. My stomach turned three
somersaults and landed in my throat.

I couldn't believe this was happening to me and began to imagine that it was all part of some sicko German game. What if Heinrich was really some sort of Neo-Nazi hunting me, waiting for me to make a move to give him more of a challenge? I'd seen a movie like that once and wished I could remember how the hero had outfoxed the hunter. Backing against a thick tree trunk, I looked all around. Heinrich was nowhere in sight, but I spotted a wooden tower I hadn't noticed on the way in. Could I have missed it earlier? Or was this just the wrong glade? I didn't see the dirt road we'd ridden in on, so it had to be the wrong place.

I decided to go back to the boulder and wait. Retracing my steps along the disintegrated Roman road, I told myself over and over that Heinrich was a good man and would return, all the while thinking I should have at least memorized the license plate number of his jeep. I found my boulder easily enough and sat on it with crossed fingers and legs, listening for a gunshot. If I heard one, then I'd know my imagination had just been running around like a headless chicken.

The forest grew dark before the sky. I had no idea what time it was but thought that hours must have passed since Heinrich left me. I eventually ran out of fingernails to bite, and the insatiable mosquitoes were raising welts that I could no longer even scratch properly. My feet
panicked and hurdled me back down the path at a faster version of my usual limping, knee-clicking gait, looking right, looking left. It was really getting dark, and the last thing I needed was a long walk back to Neuburg, if I could even find it. Some stars were already out. I cursed, looking vainly through the dark forest. There was nothing. Nothing but trees and more trees. Then I saw an odd shadow in a glade to my left.

Could it be?

It could. The jeep was right where we'd left it, about fifty yards off the former Roman road. Camouflaged by trees and the encroaching twilight, it was easy to understand how I'd missed it the first time through and how lucky I was to find it at all. Heinrich's plott hound seemed as happy to see me as I was to see him. I let Bismark out of the car, and as we baptized a nearby tree trunk together, the report of his master's Winchester with the silver saddle and telescopic sight cracked the silence. A few minutes earlier, I would have rejoiced at the sound, but now felt sorry for the deer. Heinrich didn't seem the type to waste bullets.

Nevertheless, I was relieved. I sprayed myself with enough bug repellent to ward off the Luftwaffe, then sat on the hood of the jeep peering into the forest, trying to determine which of its nebulous forms would develop into a walking man. After about twenty minutes, something unnatural appeared through the trees. A glowing orb that
looked like one of those follow-the-bouncing-ball cues from oldtime movie theater singalongs. My first thought was that it was some kind of alien life form, but it turned out to be Heinrich's flashlight. He walked up, squawking at me for deserting my post by the boulder. But he was more disturbed that his prey had used its last bit of life to cross the hunting ground boundary and onto a farmer's private property.

"So what do we do now?" I asked.

"We must go back to Neuburg and notify the authorities." he replied.

"Why don't we just drag the deer back over the boundary? It's dark. No one will see us."

Heinrich looked at me as though he'd just caught me cleaning a loaded weapon. "The hunting laws are made for a reason, and they are good laws," he said, sounding very much like Miss Martin. "The laws make the sport safe and also protect the wildlife. We do not disobey these laws because no one is here to see us."

So we drove back into town, where Heinrich telephoned the police to get permission to call the farmer to get permission to retrieve the dead deer from his property. It was past ten o'clock by the time we finally met the fat farmer at a country tavern. He was wearing a faded pair of Levi Strauss overalls and didn't seem to speak any English. He took the front seat, so I climbed into the back with Bismark. After spending most of the evening cooped up in the
jeep, Bismark sensed some action and started jumping all over me.

"Bismark!" Heinrich snapped. "Runder!"

Bismark obediently lay down on the seat. That killed me. The dumb dog understood German better than I did. In fact, he was bilingual. A yearning whine, which needed no translation, escaped his throat.

"Boy, he's really excited," I said.

"Yes," Heinrich grumbled. "But it is all for nothing. I do not need his help tonight."

"Why not?"

"The deer cannot have run too far from where I shot it. I can find it without the dog."

"So what are you going to do? Just leave him in the car?"

"Yes."

"Awww. Why don't you let him have some fun?"

"There is time for fun, and time for work. For Bismark, tracking is work, not fun. Sometime he must track a wounded animal for miles. Too easy a find like this will...how you say...ruin?...no, not ruin...spoil. An easy find like this will spoil him."

Bismark obviously didn't understand English, because he continued to whine excitedly while Heinrich parked in the pasture where he'd last seen the wounded deer bound. The dog looked crestfallen when the three of us got out of the jeep and left him behind, his wet black nose pressed against
the jeep's plastic back window. The farmer had brought along a portable fluorescent light, and in its eerie, blue-white aura, Heinrich started crawling around the ground as though searching for a lost contact lens. He felt something in the grass, brought his index finger to his mouth and announced that it was blood. Taking the light from the farmer, he used it to find more spots of blood and followed the gory trail into a small grove of trees. He disappeared for a few seconds, then reemerged dragging a glassy-eyed young buck by its stubby horns.

As expected, the shot from "about eighty meters" had been accurate. Although the bullet's entry hole just behind the shoulder was small, the exit wound was Jack the Ripperish. Half of the animal's innards were hanging out of its ruptured rib cage.

"Good shot, Heinrich," I said, wishing he'd missed. "I can't believe this little guy could have run anywhere after getting hit like that."

Heinrich grunted. "It did not run far," he said.

Meanwhile, the farmer had fetched a sprig of pine. He dipped it in the wound and ceremoniously stuck it in the band of the hunter's hat. Heinrich acknowledged the gesture with a curt nod before dropping the tailgate of the jeep. Bismark bounded out and started slurping blood from the buck's gaping abdomen. Heinrich pulled a plastic tub to the edge of the tailgate, then shooed the dog away and swiftly gutted the carcass with his American-made buck knife. He
put the body into the plastic tub and set about cutting the heart, liver and kidneys from the rest of the entrails. The deer's chin was propped on the tub's side, making it seem as though it was peeking out to watch Heinrich work. When he finished, he tossed the organs into the tub, then, with the same motion a soldier uses to throw a hand grenade, heaved the clump of stomach, intestines and lungs into some bushes edging the pasture.

When we finally arrived in Ingolstadt, Heinrich said it was too late to hitchhike anywhere and offered to put me up for the night. His pretty, blond wife set a loaf of black bread on the table and dished out two heaping platters of sausage stew before wishing us both a "guten nacht." Heinrich kissed her passionlessly, then fetched a bottle of apple/pear brandy and two glasses. We ate and drank without wasting any oral energy on conversation. Bismark joined us, washing down his raw organ entree with a blood and water nightcap before Heinrich kenneled him in the garage.

Heinrich and I continued to drink long after our plates were picked as clean as Bismark's bowl. The brandy eventually managed to erode his stony demeanor, and we talked about a lot of things, including the superiority of German dog breeding, American weapons and Scandinavian upslopers. I started raving about my favorite breast-browsing beach in Copenhagen, but Heinrich stopped me with a raised hand. He tilted his head, listening to something. I heard it too. A crying baby. Heinrich left
the dining table for a minute and returned cradling his nine-month-old son. The hunter rocked the little guy tenderly and hummed "Brahms' Lullaby" until he fell asleep again. Heinrich shifted his hands, and I noticed dried deer blood caked in the cuticle of a thumbnail.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"You look, uh, disturbed. Disturbed is the right word?"

"Yeah, I guess. It's just that I'm sitting here watching how gentle you are with your kid, and I can't help thinking about that buck you shot. I've never been a hunter, so I hope you won't mind me asking why a nice guy like you doesn't feel any remorse about blowing away a defenseless little deer for sport?"

His tungsten eyes met mine, and he waited until I shied away before answering. "In Germany, hunting is not sport," he said. "It is tradition."
In the morning, Heinrich gave me a lift to the autobahn. Once again, his expression seemed to be chiseled out of stone, but he cracked a smile as I pulled my pack from the back seat and told him to say good-bye to Bismark for me. I suppose Heinrich was a nice enough guy, but he still gave me the creeps, especially when I thought of the words he'd so proudly uttered while holding his baby on his lap:

"In Germany, hunting...is tradition."

Apparently, tradition not only kept the fiddler on the roof, closed English pubs in the afternoon and incited the Australians to travel, but it also perpetuated the Germans' affinity for killing things. Passed down through generations, tradition varies from country to country and culture to culture, yet its purpose is universal. Long-standing traditions are like learned instincts that dictate the rules of survival in the man-eat-man world. Survival of the individual, survival of the people, survival of the species.

As I waited on the autobahn ramp for a ride to Munich, I started humming that song from *Fiddler on the Roof* and
thinking about the traditions I adhered to: getting drunk on
New Year's Eve, eating turkey at Thanksgiving, watching
fireworks on the Fourth of July, dressing up on Halloween,
standing for the National Anthem at ballgames...

Pretty lightweight stuff. Americans generally aren't
defined by their traditions, probably because our country is
relatively new and the proverbial melting pot of dozens of
cultures whose traditions tend to get mixed up and all but
lost in the stew. I was a Jew, part of a five thousand-year
legacy. Yet I wasn't kosher, never had much of a head for
handling money and, except for my brief fling with Melissa,
hadn't even dated a Jewish girl since Amy Schwartz dumped me
for a pre-med student ten years earlier. I'd practiced
rugby religiously, but hadn't stepped inside a synagogue
since I was a teenager.

Like most of the Jewish children in my neighborhood,
I'd gone to Hebrew school as a kid, learning the history of
our people as well as how to read and write the cryptic
language, if not understand much of it. After my bar
mitzvah, I quit going to Hebrew school just as Robby had
done and rarely went to temple, even on the high holidays.
The lone exception was the year following Robby's death,
when I attended Shabbat services every Saturday to recite
the mourner's kaddish for him. It was ironic because Robby
had considered all organized religions to be bogus,
including his own. Yet, when I stood up in temple and
mumbled that prayer along with the rabbi and other mourners,
I'd felt a part of something. And even though I no longer practiced my religion, I was still defined as a Jew. Ollie Tripod had been delighted to find out I was Jewish and predicted I'd be a good traveler because it was in my blood. I'd also felt an immediate kinship with Ofer as soon as I found out he was one of my brethren. And after seeing Heinrich in action, I was feeling a renewed sense of vulnerability just to be in Germany.

What this all meant remained a mystery to me. My character had been defined more by my older brother than anything else, and he had never considered Judaism to be a particularly important part of his life. But Robby had died, and the Jewish custom of reciting a short prayer in his memory every week for a year helped me deal with the loss. Why hadn't I followed it up? How had that five thousand-year legacy gotten lost in the sauce of America? Who was I to ignore the traditions of my people? How had tradition managed to keep the fiddler on the roof in the first place?

Two cars zipped past, neither driver bothering to even slow down to check me out. I stepped onto the guardrail and started tightrope-walking along it. Arms waving, I made it to the next post, then the next, then the next. It got easier with every step. All it really took was for me to concentrate on centering my balance.

That was when it hit me. That balance was what kept the fiddler on the roof. Not an acrobat's balance so much
as an ability to weigh things evenly: highs and lows, right and wrong, work and play, secularism and spirituality. The laws of the religion defined the extremes at both ends of the scale, and it was the tradition of following them which kept us in the middle. As with a fiddler on a roof, balance was an extremely important factor in keeping a vagabond on the road, where the ups and downs of daily life are much more pronounced than when you're safe and secure at home.

I tried doing a 180-degree turn, started falling off the guardrail to the right, overcompensated to the left, threw my hips back, flung my arms forward and, with a death-tolling scream, plummeted three feet to the ground far below. A car coming up the ramp stopped next to me. The driver was laughing and motioned for me to get in. I chuckled to myself, thinking that maybe it did pay to be slightly unbalanced at times, but not in the traditional sense, of course.

Munich seemed huge and disorienting compared to rural Bavaria, so I let The Budget Traveler's Bible steer me to the cheapest flophouse in town. It wasn't the standard youth hostel, but rather a gigantic tent set up in an expansive field and garnished with picnic area, snack bar, small food store and portable toilets and showers. The Tent, as it was called by one and all, attracted globetrotters whose priorities began and ended with economy. For the piddling sum of four marks a night, a
budget traveler could borrow an ensolite foam pad and blanket and camp out on the wooden floor beneath the big top.

The Tent looked as though it'd run away from a circus and taken the side show along. Backpackers from as far away as New Zealand and as close as the local neighborhood helped to create an atmosphere somewhere betwixt Ringling Brothers and the United Nations. It was easy to make friends. I drank whiskey with a Swede named Lars, played chess with a German named Kurt, tossed a frisbee with two Americans named John, got clobbered in a game of ping-pong against a Korean named Tad, flirted with an Indonesian named Maya, and smoked a hash joint with two citizens of the world named Razor and Blade.

After dark, bonfires broke out to illuminate yellow, brown and white faces; bright eyes twinkling amicably, and travel-weary eyes mesmerized by the flames; a dozen languages and a hundred stories. Five Israelis I'd gravitated toward talked in hushed tones about their day's trip to Dachau. One noticed my Star of David earring and told me, as a Jew, I must see Dachau for myself. So, come morning, I walked over to the train station and approached a brauhaus blond sitting in a glass booth.

"Bitte fraulein, may I have a ticket to Dachau?"

"One-way or return?"

Forty or fifty years earlier, no one bothered to ask because Dachau was the first Nazi concentration camp. More
than thirty thousand imprisoned bodies had had their souls set free there, quite possibly including Uncle Willy.

I didn't know what to expect from the place, other than a dreary, gray day. It was raining by the time I arrived, and the shelter of choice appeared to be the museum, which had once been the commandant's quarters. Just inside the entrance, a memorial directory sat on a wooden pedestal. It was like a telephone book listing people who no longer needed addresses and phone numbers. I flipped through it without finding Willy, then meandered around a grisly photo gallery. The pictures were black and white, grainy and gray, living skeletons piling skeletal corpses onto wooden wagons, digging trenches for mass graves, crammed into triple-decker bunks or just standing around under the expressionless gaze of gray-cloaked soldiers who looked as if they could have been Grim's acolytes, holding machine guns instead of scythes. Once again, I tried to find Uncle Willy, or at least someone who might have been him. But between the prisoners' drawn faces, shorn hair and baggy striped uniforms, they all looked alike. In some pictures, it was tough to even tell the living from the dead.

The doors of a small theater sprang open. A crowd filed in. I followed and took a seat in the back. A big guy sitting a few rows ahead of me asked if there was going to be a cartoon first. Everyone around him laughed, and a group of kids from an American soccer team started jabbering about Bugs and Porky and Daffy. But once the film got
rolling, the horrors of life and death at Dachau in its prime quieted them.

The rain had passed by the time the film ended. I left the theater with the rest of the tourists, and the gray day suddenly seemed bright. The camp had changed a lot since the film was shot. The grounds were better landscaped, and I couldn't help thinking of how the grass in our backyard at home always grew thicker in the spots where Robby had buried Stanley Rabbit and Scamper.

Dachau looked more like a park than the death camp I'd seen in the film. Only one prisoners' barracks was left standing, and it was freshly painted, spanking clean and, in general, seemed to be on par with the Hogan's Heroes set. Behind the barracks, there was an area which had once been a riflery range. The narrator of the film had mentioned that target practice accounted for some six thousand deaths, mostly Russians. My legs felt heavy, every footfall probably landing on a spot where someone had died. I crossed a bridge over a narrow creek to get to the crematorium. Gas chambers disguised as showers were never used, but the ovens were. Sinister mouths agape, they continued to earn their keep by serving as a backdrop for posing tourists. A chunky guy elbowed his equally chunky wife in the ribs. "D'ya know the difference between a pizza pie an' a Jew?" he chuckled. She slapped his arm in mock disgust and giggled, "You're incouragible, Earl."

A group of boys from the soccer team ran in, all
talking at once and kidding around. A couple of them ducked under the rope barriers and crawled into the ovens, laughing and smiling for their friends with cameras. One red-headed boy climbed into an oven and held out his instamatic. "Take my picture, take my picture," he yelled.

A lanky kid with bad skin laughed. "Nobody'd want your picture, Toad."

"C'mon, please."

"Hey Bobby, Toad's whining again. Let's shut him up."

The two boys shoved Toad all the way into the oven, slammed the iron door and leaned against it laughing. Boys will be boys. Men will be men. Soldiers will be soldiers. These boys were just playing, but the cries from within the oven sounded genuine.

I left just as a chaperone came in and started giving them hell. Crossing back over the creek, I wandered into a memorial garden and sat on a stone bench. A short, skinny, gray-haired man shuffled up, mumbled the mourner's kaddish at a monument for the dead and sat down next to me. I noticed the tattoo of a number on his forearm.

"Have you been here before?" I asked.

He looked over, a jagged old scar creasing his right cheek. "Here? No," he said. "Auschwitz, yes."

The name made me shiver. The man pointed to my earring and asked if I were Jewish. When I told him I was, he held out his hand. I felt honored to shake it. He said his name was Hyman Eisenstark and that he'd manufactured zippers in
York's garment district. After I introduced myself, he asked what I did.

"I was a sports reporter, but now I'm just traveling around."

He smiled. "Yes. It is good to travel. I wish I have more time to travel when I am young."

"Where are you from originally?"

He sighed. "I was born in Poland in 1921. But on October 25, 1942, the Gestapo came to my town, Wacock. And that was that."

"What did they do?"

"First, they lined up all the Jews in the square. Then they pointed with their fingers saying, 'You go this way, and you go that way.' They pulled my brother and me out of line and, I'll never forget it, my father looked at us and said in Jewish, 'Warum gayen zee avec fuhn mir, mein kinder?' Why are you leaving me, my children? It was...it was the last time I saw him."

After more than four decades, the memory still brought tears to Hyman Eisenstark's eyes. He got too choked up to speak. I didn't know what to say, but wished the kids from the soccer team were here. Hyman cleared his throat and kept talking.

"After that, they put us with many others on a open train like they use for cattle. People packed like animals, so you have no room to sit down even. It was terrible, the way we fight over the snow that falls on us. We have no
water what for to drink, so we fight over the snow, saying, 'That is my snow, it fall on me.' And after two days with nothing but a little snow to eat, we come to a work camp for making munitions. There, the soldiers tell us to strip. It was freezing cold, and they took a fire hose and sprayed water all over us to see who will be strong enough to live and make for good workers.

"For almost two years I work there, under the ground so the Allies cannot bomb it. It is always dark and cold and so much dirt in the air it makes you sick. Then, near the end of the war, they send me to Auschwitz. I had consumption and was too sick for working. But still I have to try, and when I collapse, a guard hit me with the end of a rifle and broke open my face. Then they take me and some others to the gas chamber, and we are all thinking we are going to die. But then they turn us around and march us back to the barracks. Some people said they ran out of gas, but the next day, they take away another group and no one comes back. So who knows? That I lived at all was just luck, dumb luck."

He didn't look so lucky. His eyes still held a sad, tortured expression, and his rounded shoulders seemed permanently stooped from bearing the weight of his memories. "What happened to your brother," I asked.

He shrugged. "Treblinka. They take him from the munitions factory when he got sick, and I never saw him again. I had twenty-seven relatives living in Wacock before
the war, and I am the only one who survived."

He wiped some tears from his cheeks.

"So why would you want to come here?" I said. "I think I'd just want to forget places like this ever existed."

He shook his head slowly. "No one who has lived through something like this can ever forget. No one should forget. The future is the shadow of the past, and whatever happened before can happen again. I come here to remind myself of this, and to pray that such a thing will never happen again, to anyone."

It started raining. The old man flipped up the hood of his yellow slicker and just sat where he was, seemingly oblivious to everything outside of his memory. I said good-bye softly and walked back to the train station. I was soaked, and the air conditioned train got me shivering. But I thanked God that this wasn't an open train car where I'd have to fight over falling snow just to have something to drink. All of my problems seemed so trivial compared to what Hyman Eisenstark had endured. I imagined what he had looked like in his striped uniform, the blow that laid open his cheek and the terror of being led into a gas chamber at Auschwitz. I gazed at my ghostly reflection in the train window and wondered what had happened to Uncle Willy. For the first time in my life, I thought of how my great-grandmother must have felt when Willy's letters stopped coming, the cycle of hope, disappointment and dread
she must have gone through daily as she checked the mail, year after year, knowing the truth, but not wanting to believe that her first-born was dead.
For the rest of the day, I couldn't seem to escape either the rain or Dachau. I sat in a lot of restaurants and bars, watching water drip off awnings, eating without tasting, feeling lonely in rooms full of people. The beer, of course, was superb. But I couldn't seem to drink enough of it to drive Dachau's black and white images from my mind.

Rain washed out the nightly bonfires and forced everyone inside early. People played cards, backgammon or chess, drank whiskey, beer or Coca-Cola, read quietly or laughed loudly, smoked or munched chips or trailmix and crashed out early. By about eleven, The Tent's wooden floor was pretty well packed with prone bodies. My plot on the perimeter was just slightly bigger than my outstretched sleeping bag. As I climbed into it and shut my eyes, I once again saw the images that had been shadowing me all day. Herds of stooped, starved, black and white striped people. The living dead, watching me. Emaciated faces with big, round eyes. Bewildered eyes peering through time to ask, "why?" Sad eyes with no tears left to shed. Dark eyes brimming with a glimmer of hope. Thousands of eyes watching
me turn side-to-side, trying to escape to the land of nod. Millions of eyes, haunting me with their silent screams.

So I didn't exactly sleep like a baby, although I did manage to dream about trying to make one with Amy Schwatz, of all people. But her cervical brace was held together with bra clasps I couldn't undo, and I awoke feeling frustrated and grumpy. The guy to my right and girl to my left were both still asleep, so I quietly slipped out of my sleeping bag and shuffled over to the communal showers. While waiting my turn, the Israelis who had told me to check out Dachau walked up wearing sandals and towels. Their own sullen eyes seemed to already be dreading another day. The one who had first noticed my Star of David earring started telling me about their visit to the Olympic Stadium where Arab terrorists massacred Israeli athletes during the '72 Games.

"You guys sound like you're on a fun vacation," I muttered.

"We have our fun," another one snapped. "But we also are here to see and learn about things that happened in this country over and over in one way or some other."

"Why bother?" I said. "You can't do anything about it."

"Maybe not. But if we pretend these things did not happen, they will happen again, to us. To survive, we must see the truth. And to see the truth, you must first open your eyes."
I sighed and stared up at the scattered clouds, not wanting to hear him. The guy clicked his tongue.

"You are American, so you do not know. One time you must come to Israel and see what we must do to keep two hundred million Arabs from driving us into the sea, as they are always saying they will do. We are all in the army," he said, sweeping his arm around and nearly losing his towel in the process. "And we have all been in Lebanon, where my sister's husband had half of his head shot away."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"We are all sorry. But being sorry does not stop the Arabs any more than it stops the Nazis."

"The Americans stopped the Nazis," another guy piped in. It was one of the Johns I'd played frisbee with on my first day at The Tent.

"Yes, with help," the Israeli admitted, turning around. "But do they stop Stalin when he murders twenty million Russian? Do they stop Sukarno when he murders eight million Indonesian? Do they even say a word when Assad murders ten thousand Syrian in one day?"

A shower opened for me before John could answer, which was good because I was sure he didn't have anything to say. As much as I hated to admit it, the Israeli was right. I'd seen the horrors yesterday at Dachau, not only what the camp had been, but also what it had become: a zoo of ghosts for visitors to gawk at and desecrate. How people could be so ignorant, intolerant and selfish was beyond me. Quick to
judge, slow to learn and only compassionate at their own convenience, people deal with their own shortcomings by battering the defenseless. It's a universal tradition. Everyone is out for himself. Arab against Jew, Irish against English, Hindu against Sikh, White against Black, young against old, and even man against woman. It's mob rule, a world in constant war with itself.

Back in The Tent, as I was tidying up my little plot, Razor and Blade came looking for me.

"What are you doing?" Razor asked.

"Nothing," I replied. Actually, I was removing the clips which attached the shoulder straps to my backpack, sabotaging it in case someone decided to mistake it for his own while I was in town. If anyone tried to pick it up, the harness would fall off and, hopefully, this would be enough of an inconvenience to convince the thief to mistake his own backpack for someone else's.

While Blade stood by striking James Dean poses, Razor squatted down like a catcher behind home plate. "We can get us some hash, if you want."

"How much?" I asked.

Razor pulled at the three safety pins in his ear.

"Twenty marks for a finger."

"So that would be seven to me, thirteen for you two?"

He smiled. "No. We have not enough money. But the other day, you smoked some with us for free, no?"

Yes. And twenty marks was less than ten bucks, a
bargain if it could help change my mood. I nodded. Razor smiled.

"Good," he said. "Give me the money and we will come back in one or two hours with it."

"Well I'm not planning to hang around here all day. Why don't I just go with you?"

Razor looked at Blade, who was leaning against one of The Tent's wooden poles with his arms and ankles crossed. He shrugged, and Razor said, "Okay brother, come with us then."

Brother? Sure. Brotherhood can always be had for a price. We took the trolley over to Englisher Garten and bought a piece of black Afghan from a band of punk rockers. I rolled a big joint and passed it around, from Razor to Blade to a chick with a scorpion tattooed on her cheek, to another with F-U-C-K shaved out of her crewcut head, to a guy with a motorcycle chain for belt, to another with technicolor hair and no eyebrows and so on. Unlike Americans, they didn't take just a hit or two, but would smoke their fill before passing it on. Still, there was plenty left until the guy next to me figured it was up to him to smoke the rest. I'd only taken a couple of hits and wanted more, but didn't feel like asking him for it.

The guy smoked the joint down to its cardboard filter, flicked the butt into a pond, then looked at me and said something in German which made everyone laugh. Except for the rare times someone addressed me, they all spoke entirely
in German. The English version of what they were saying probably wouldn't have made much sense to me either. Mostly, they seemed to talk about the "normal" passersby, laughing at them, making faces, flashing bits and pieces of anatomy and cursing every other word. I stuck around for a while anyway. Everyone else seemed to hate punk rockers, so I figured they couldn't be all bad. But I didn't find much good in this group, except that they were honest in their contempt for society and funny to look at.

The hash didn't do much to improve my spirits, and I left without so much as a wave from the strange crew, except for Razor, who probably figured he'd found an easy mark. I spaced around town on my own for a while. Munich was just another big city, not as pretty as Copenhagen nor as much fun as Amsterdam. After a brief visit to the Deutsches Museum and a longer visit to a beer garden, I forewent a trolley to walk back to The Tent, head bowed, watching my feet lackadaisically flick out ahead of me, right, left, right, left...

I kept trying to think about balance, how you have to take the good and the bad evenly. But how can you keep yourself in balance when you see so much hate in the world, so much destruction? And how can you keep yourself balanced when your parents had considered you a pain in the ass ever since you could remember? And how can you keep your balance when your brother had been smashed like a bug by a chunk of rock? Life itself seemed to be so unbalanced.
"What doesn't kill me makes me stronger," I mumbled.

It didn't help. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger by numbing you out. Feelings die, but the body keeps going. For what purpose? To get knocked down again, and again, and again until you just lose the will to get up.

I thought of Hyman Eisenstark stuck in a cattle car on a freezing ride to hell, fighting over falling snow for lack of drinking water. What had kept him going? Probably nothing but the primary instinct of survival, something we humans share with every animal right down to the amoeba. Fight or flee, or just stand there and take it if you can do neither. Hyman Eisenstark was about five-foot-four, maybe a hundred and forty pounds. A weakling, born to be a victim. But he had survived where so many had died. And he felt lucky about it. "That I lived at all was just luck," he'd said, "Dumb luck."

A car horn sounded because a traffic light had changed when I was in the middle of crossing a street. I jogged to the sidewalk and hopped up onto the curb. As I continued on my way, I realized that my knee wasn't clicking. And it didn't really hurt. In fact, it hadn't hurt all day. I'd just been too bummed out to notice.

I leaned forward and gingerly broke into a slow trot, limping automatically. But I put more weight on my left leg with each stride, and my knee still didn't hurt beyond the dull, achy tug I'd already grown so accustomed to. I jogged
to the end of the block, across a street and down the next block and the next and the next. Then I stopped, breathing harder than I should have been. My scalp was prickly with sweat and both of my legs felt a little shaky. But my knee was no worse than it'd been before I started jogging. I walked on, concentrating on keeping my stride strong and even, pretending that my knee was as sound as it'd ever been.

I passed a news kiosk and checked the date. August seventeenth. The porcupine in my stomach seemed to wake up and stretch. The Matterhorn would still be climbable for a month, before the early winter season shut it down to novices like myself. Maybe I'd be fit enough to climb it after all, or die trying. Without even realizing it, I felt as though I were back on a path towards the Matterhorn's summit, as though I'd never even left it.

Zermatt. I started getting excited, walking faster. I already knew what the town would look like, quaint and quiet, restaurants and hotels and shops, and the famous graveyard, all totally overshadowed by the majestic peak that towered over every rooftop and every tree.

But something was nagging me. Something forgotten. Something about Dublin, or rather Aussie Paul Rowe. He was going to tell me something about Zermatt before he passed out in that Dublin speakeasy. What was it? I'd forgotten to ask.

Oh well. There was nothing I could do about it now,
except just go to Zermatt and find out all I needed to know for myself. And the sooner the better. I passed the hospital on Landsbergerstrasse and turned right at the corner. The Tent was nearby. By the next block, I'd be able to see the red and green banner rippling in the wind atop the center pole. I decided to pack up and leave before dark. I hadn't paid my four marks yet, so I wouldn't even be losing anything. And Munich was no great bargain. If I left now, I could get clear of this place, be back out on the open road.

A dashing figure rounded the corner ahead, a tall, dark-haired guy carrying a blue duffel bag on his shoulder. Despite the load, he was running with grace as well as speed, right towards me. It took a moment or two for me to recognize him, and when I did, that strange chill tiptoed across the back of my neck.
As Aussie Paul Rowe sprinted closer, I could see that he looked spooked, eyes wide and breath heaving. He ran right up to me but didn't pause to say hello. He just tossed his duffel bag over the high stone wall surrounding the hospital, muttered a quick "cover me," scrambled to the top of the wall and dropped out of sight.

A few seconds later, a balding man wearing a work shirt and blue jeans rounded the corner looking confused. He jogged up to me wheezing like a horse with hay fever and pulled a badge out of his shirt pocket, then sputtered a question in German. I shrugged my shoulders in English.

"A man with big blue bag come running this way?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's right," I said, pointing towards a trolley gliding up Landsbergerstrasse. "He ran up to that main drag and jumped on the trolley. Looked like some kind of nut to me."

The guy nodded curtly, took a deep breath and charged across the street, nearly getting hit by a car. Without even pausing to look back at the cursing driver, he ran on towards the trolley, which was already a full block away.
couldn't help laughing. I'd seen Paul for a total of thirty seconds and was already an accomplice. I waited until the undercover cop was out of sight, then hoisted myself to the top of the wall. At first glance, there was no sign of my Aussie pal. Then I saw a pair of rhino-hide cowboy boots sticking out from beneath a bush.

"Yo, Paul!"

He parted some branches and squinted up at me. "Coast clear?"

"Yeah, mate."

Paul got to his feet and brushed dead leaves off of his clothes and out of his hair. "What do you mean I looked like some kind of nut?" he asked with a Flynnish grin.

"I just call them the way I see them."

"Here, grab this," he said, holding up his duffel bag. I took it and dropped back down to the sidewalk. Paul climbed over the wall. "Thanks for bailing me out there, Rabbit," he said with a slap on the shoulder.

"No problem. What did he want you for?"

"Aw, the ratbag was one of those undercover ticket inspectors. Caught me riding the trolley for free and wanted forty marks for a fine. Of course, I took one look at him and rightly assumed it was a problem I could outrun." Paul slung the duffel bag over his shoulder. "But no sense hanging around here waiting for him to double back. You know where's this tent that everybody's talking about?"
It didn't surprise me that Paul already knew about the
city's premier dive. But as we started off towards it, I
was still surprised about how he turned up just after I'd
thought of him for the first time in weeks. It was as
though I'd felt his presence moments before seeing him, or
actually willed him here myself.

"It's funny," I said. "I was just thinking about you."

He laughed. "Well, I sure as hell wasn't thinking
about you. Can't say I wasn't glad to see you, though."

"Yeah, it's good to see you again. Get kicked out of
any hostels lately?"

He hadn't, so we talked about Montjoy Square and our
night on the town in Dublin.

"You said something about Zermatt in that Irish
speakeasy, remember?" I asked.

"Not really," he said. "But I've been there. Last
winter. Got a mate there."

"An American?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"You mentioned him and Zermatt in the same breath back
at...uh...Shaughnessy's place."

He shook his head. "You sure got a good memory,
Rabbit. The only thing I remember about that place is
kicking on the door to get in. But yeah, the guy's name is
Jeff. He picked me up hitching in California and put me up
at his house for over a month. He kept saying he was going
to travel around like me someday, but I didn't really believe him until I ran into him on the ski slopes in Zermatt."

I laughed. "Literally ran into him?"

"Nah. He was off to the side taking pictures of the tourists to sell at a boutique in town. It was a good job, and he found himself a decent-looking French girl to fall in love with. Yeah, he'd done all right for himself. Might still be there, for all I know. And if he is, you should look him up."

"How?"

"Well, he was working for the owner of the Scorpio Boutique, a crazy old geezer. Jeff was living with his sheila in a one-room flat above the shop, but he conned the old guy into letting me crash at his house for a few days. Good guy, Jeff is. And that old man too...what's his name?"

"Got me."

"Felix? No. Fritz. That's it. Maybe they'll do the same for you, if you tell them I sent you."

Jeff. Fritz. The Scorpio Boutique. Robby was a Scorpio, so I knew I'd never forget that name. But Paul's sudden appearance kind of threw Zermatt onto the back burner. He seemed to have such a healthy attitude toward life, treating it as though it were a game in which the object was to get away with breaking as many of its stupid little rules as possible. I couldn't see running off before raising a
little hell with him. Make up for the time I couldn't find him in Cork.

Paul already seemed like an old friend, walking along with that long, easy stride of his, heavy heels thumping the sidewalk, boots giving little squeaky sighs on each step. He told me about a French girl he met in Bordeaux, an American girl he met in Venice and an Italian girl he met in Vienna. The list went on, but they were all I remembered, and I might have gotten their nationalities mixed up at that. I think he was telling me about a Swede in Salzberg when we arrived at The Tent. Paul had a look around and quickly changed the subject.

"So what's the deal here?" he asked.

"Four marks a night. They give you a card and stamp it when you pay. Then they issue you a pad and blanket and you pick out a spot on the floor and crash."

He looked around some more, then smiled and said, "You're kidding me."

"Why?"

"Only a bleedin' wanker would pay to kip here."

"It's only four marks."

"Four marks is four marks," he said. "The way I see it, anyone with a sleeping bag can stay here for free. Spread it on the floor and act like you own the place, and who's to know?"

The answer, apparently, was no one. Neither Paul nor I paid, and no one bothered us all afternoon, or evening, or
night. No one even knew. I seemed to sleep better for free and felt raring to go in the morning.

"So what's up for today?" I asked Paul over a morning cup of coffee.

"Dachau," he said. "Want to come along?"

I shook my head, disappointed. "Uh-uh. I was there a couple of days ago and that was enough."

"Had a good time, then?" he asked.

"What? At a concentration camp?"

"No. I'm talking about the beerfest."

"What beerfest?"

"The one some guy on the train from Salzburg was telling me about. It's like Ocktoberfest but cheaper. Three marks for one of those big steins."

Sounded good, even if it meant another trip out to Dachau. This time I didn't follow the crowd of tourists to the death camp. Where they went straight, Paul and I turned left towards the town and followed our ears and noses to the festival, where the beer was as cheap as promised, the food tasty and plentiful and the rides wild enough to make me wish we'd gone on them before drinking and eating. We met a couple of girls from Las Vegas who literally had diamonds coming out of their ears. Paul charmed them until they got into a heavy discussion about their fingernails. Then he said we had to go. But we stayed until night, avoiding the girls like a couple of third-graders, eating, drinking and finding out-of-the-way spots to smoke the rest of my hash.
Occasionally, I'd look in the direction of the death camp and feel a twinge of guilt because, for the most part, it might have been a million miles away.

Having spent the money we'd saved at The Tent ten times over, we returned there to save another night's fee. The place was even more crowded than before, but that just meant less chance of getting caught. I was drunk enough to fall right asleep amidst the gurgles and snores, but awoke when I felt someone nudging my shoulder. I looked up and squinted into the beam of a flashlight. For a moment, I thought that I was someone else, in a different time and place. Cold and breathless and scared.

"Your card," the faceless German voice behind the light said. "I must see your card."

I shivered off the chill and placed where I was. "Sorry. I...uh...lost it."

"Then give me your passport."

"My passport?" I asked. "What for?"

"For making sure you pay in the morning."

I sat up. "No way. I don't give my passport to anyone."

"Then you must to leave. Now."

I looked around. It seemed as though everyone within five yards was watching us. Everyone except for Paul, who had his sleeping bag pulled over his head and was lying perfectly still.

As I slipped out of my bag with a curse, the flashlight
beam shifted over to Paul's body. A hand lifted up the foot of his sleeping bag, revealing nothing but wooden floor underneath. No blanket and no pad apparently meant no card. The hand dropped the sleeping bag and shook Paul's shoulder. He didn't stir.

"Excuse me," the German said.

Now that the light was out of my eyes, I could see the guy's dark profile against the white canvas backdrop of the tent. He shook Paul harder. "Excuse me, but I must see your card."

Still nothing. He might have been dead. As the guy reached to pull the sleeping bag off of Paul's covered head, he sat up suddenly, barking, "What?"

The profile jerked back, and the flashlight fell to the floor with a clunk. Paul laughed. "Well, you don't have to wake up everybody in the joint."

"I must see..."

"Well I don't have a bleedin' card. And I ain't going to give you my passport, either. So I guess I'll just say I'll see you later, mate."

It was about three-thirty when we were escorted from The Tent's grounds and told never to come back again. I wasn't too upset because I'd been ready to leave Munich almost since I'd gotten there. But that didn't stop me from giving Paul some flak.

"Well, here we are," I said as we walked away from the big top, "pounding the pavement when we should be dreaming
of sweet young frauleins with big tits. If we ever wind up staying at the same place again, remind me not to listen to you."

"Aw, quit your sniveling, Rabbit. We didn't lose nothing except maybe half a night's sleep. And we got a full night for free. The way I figure it, we came out ahead."

I just laughed, liking the way Paul figured things. We passed the hospital, then took a left at Landsbergerstrasse, which was deserted at this time of the night.

"So what now, Kimosabe?" I asked, walking on a trolley rail.

"I'm about strapped, so I reckon I'll head back to London. Got a uncle there who says he can get me work. You heading over to Switzerland?

"Uh-huh," I answered, slipping off of the rail.

"Same way, sort of. C'mon, we can catch a train together."

"Train? What are you, kidding? Trains are too expensive. I'm going to thumb it."

Paul laughed. "There's nothing cheaper than a train, that is if you know what you're doing."

Not knowing what I was doing, but sensing I should have known better, I listened to him. We crashed on a couple of benches outside the station until morning, then boarded a Zurich-bound train without going through the formality of buying tickets. Paul's plan sounded simple to the point of
stupidity. Pick a compartment in the middle of a car, keep an eye out for the conductor, and when you see him working his way down the aisle punching tickets, go to a bathroom in the opposite direction, lock the door and don't open it up no matter what. Paul said that conductors only checked tickets after stops in pretty big towns, so timely trips to the bathroom could work as well as a Eurailpass at less than a fraction of the cost.

"And besides that, spending a lot of time in the crapper helps to keep you regular," he added.

I was shocked to see how easy it was. Our roly-poly conductor only made two passes and never even checked the bathrooms. Mostly, he sat in one of the other compartments talking to a couple of men in business suits. I stood in the aisle, keeping one eye on the scenery and the other on the door of the businessmen's compartment. When we reached the Swiss border at Lustenau, the conductor emerged, got off the train and walked into the station. We got underway again before he came out. I turned to ask Paul about it, but he was gone. A different conductor came down the aisle. I started walking towards the john in the opposite direction, but he stopped me with a shout, then scurried up to me and asked to see my ticket. I went through the Oh-my-God-I-must-have-lost-it routine, but he just shook his head as though he'd heard this particular excuse a hundred times before. Since I didn't have any Swiss currency on me, he took one of my traveler's checks as collateral, then
escorted me to cash it when we arrived in Zurich. I wound up paying him twenty-two Swiss francs, which was about eleven bucks. Paul, who had disappeared on the train, reappeared by my side the moment the conductor walked away. He seemed to think that my getting caught was the funniest thing in the world, seeing how the ride didn't cost him a cent, mark or franc.

We walked over to the posted schedules where Paul pointed out that another train was due to leave for Paris in half an hour. My friend pulled a small wad of crumpled bills from his pocket. I watched his lips move as he counted it.

"Hey Rabbit, what's seventeen marks work out to in pounds?"

"It's about six or seven dollars, maybe four pounds."

"Yeah, that'll do me. I might have to pay for the ferry, though. You're pretty flush, ain't you?"

The Germans say the heaviest baggage is an empty purse. If that's true, Paul was lugging around a cast-iron suitcase. I smiled and offered him thirty francs. He accepted the money as though I owed it to him, then walked over to the Zurich-Paris gate. There, Aussie Paul Rowe shook my hand, stole a quick glance around and boldly strolled past a multi-lingual sign which said, "Only passengers with tickets allowed on platforms."

"Hey, you're not allowed over there," I joked, nodding at the sign.
"Yeah, but rules are made for the wankers who walk around in uniforms, not for me," he replied with a wink. "See ya when I see ya, mate."
CHAPTER 38

Not keen on spending the rest of my day in and out of train toilets, I bought a ticket on a local to the outskirts of Zurich and started the long and winding hitch to Zermatt. Through Zug and Schwyz, Altdorf and Amsteg. I was trying to beat the night to Zermatt, catch the Matterhorn at sunset. It was hopeless from the start, but still I pushed on, walking when I wasn't riding, strengthening my knee, and my lungs, and my heart. My hiking boots felt as comfortable as fur-lined slippers, their vibram soles scuffed enough to maximize traction. I caught a good ride with a Swiss car salesman and cruised down through Andermatt and over to Gletsch.

The sun set, and a sliver of new moon was right on its heels. Even though I didn't like to hitch after dark, I was too close to Zermatt to stop anywhere for the night. A guy with a beard and no English took me to Fiesch, where I waited by the light of a restaurant sign rather than risk walking along the road's shoulder. Except for an apple one of the drivers had given me, I hadn't eaten all day. But I wasn't hungry. I just wanted to get to Zermatt, to be there, finally.
My hands hugged each other for warmth in the pouch of my sweatshirt. The moonless sky was filled with thousands of stars which seemed to twinkle brighter than ever in the chilly alpine air. I gazed at them, picking out the constellations Robby used to trace with a flashlight beam, playing a celestial version of connect-the-dots while telling me the stories written in the stars: how Perseus rescued Andromeda, how Pegasus was born from a drop of Medusa's blood, how Diana the moon goddess immortalized Orion in the heavens after accidentally killing him on earth...

Two Canadian guys in a rented car stopped. It was good luck. They were also heading to Zermatt.

"I'm planning to climb the Matterhorn," I said after we introduced ourselves.

The one in the passenger seat, Bill, turned around and smiled. "That's the highest mountain in the world, eh?"

"What are you, kidding? Everest is nearly twice as high. The Matterhorn isn't even the highest mountain in the Alps."

"Really?"

The driver, Kevin, cast a glance at his pal. "Too high for us to climb anyway, eh Bill? We'll probably just ride the tramway to the top."

"There is no tram to the top," I said.

"I thought there was." He glanced at his pal again.

"You too, eh?"
The other knucklehead nodded. Zermatt was just another stop on the tourist map for them, another place for them to shop and take pictures and get drunk and talk about how everything was different from home, or just like it.

In Visp, there was a sign pointing towards Zermatt. Kevin turned, and Bill checked their map. "We're almost there. Just keep going straight for about forty kilometers and that should be it."

"You can't drive all the way," I told them, feeling like a tour guide. "No cars allowed in Zermatt."

"So we have to walk in?"

"No. There's a train from Tasch."

"Well, I hope it's still running," Kevin said. "Else we'll have to sleep in the car again, eh Bill?"

"Yeah, Kevin. But this time I get the back seat."

"Well, I don't know about that."

They argued over their possible sleeping arrangements for a while, then bickered about other incidentals. They sounded married. At least married like my parents. I couldn't imagine arguing over anything with Melissa. Nothing would be important enough. I thought of her easy laugh, strong but gentle hands and two-tone eyes, reliving moments from our precious hours together until Kevin turned into a massive parking lot at the Tasch railway station. A train lined with yellow squares of lit windows was idling on the tracks.

The train ride was only six kilometers, but seemed a
hundred. It was too dark to see much of anything, except for Kevin and Bill, sitting side by side in the otherwise empty coach, wearing flannel shirts and down vests, jeans and sneakers, blaming each other for getting shot down by some American girls in Innsbruck, the last place they'd slept in the car. I stared out the dark window looking for some sign of the mountain, but saw only stars and my own reflection: dark hair, beard, Star of David earring stud. Serious eyes, no smile. The face in the window barely seemed to be mine. Just a mask I was forced to wear.

The train finally squealed to a halt. With thanks for the ride, I left Kevin and Bill collecting brochures from a rack outside of a closed tourist kiosk at the Zermatt depot. Kevin was calling Bill a "hoser" for picking out one written in German. I laughed and kept walking up the main street, suddenly feeling as though I were in a dream. A recurring dream. I'd been here so many times before, listening to Robby, looking at pictures in his books and watching Third Man on the Mountain the few times it played on TV.

The town was pretty much as I'd imagined, except that most of the shop, restaurant and hotel signs were neon instead of handpainted. I looked for the old Club-Room. Whymper had been an artist as well as climber and writer, and in his book he'd done an etching of a group of guides standing outside of the club, white church off to the left in the background. Even though the Club-Room was now a
hotel, I recognized it immediately because the relatively new facade didn't look much different from the original. The church was right where Whymper had drawn it and looked the same: a white building which might have been a barn if you took away the windows and painted it red. The graveyard was right next to it, the final resting place for Hadow and Hudson. I stopped to pay my respects and wove between the tombstones searching for them. I could still see Hudson's muttonchops and Hadow's horsy smile from the pictures Robby had shown me. I fired up my disposable lighter, but couldn't find either Hudson or Hadow. However, I did find plenty of other climbers. Here, the Matterhorn was called "Cervin," and this was the most common word carved into the tombstones. The epitaphs said different things in different languages, but mostly boiled down to "I came, I saw, I fucked up."

Or maybe "the mountain fucked me up." Edward Pope's epitaph said he was from Gloucester, England, and died in an avalanche while attempting to scale the north face in 1976. Charles Cooper had been hit in the head by a falling rock, and Greg Lincoln had disappeared in a sudden storm. One tombstone had a likeness of the Matterhorn chiseled into it. Bernard Bertand's grave. The epitaph was in French and probably explained how he had died. But I couldn't understand any of it, other than the fact that he lost his life on September 3, 1966, two days before his twenty-fifth birthday.
I sat on a stone bench under a tree which had probably been there before the graveyard. Nobody else was around, but I didn't feel alone. I chanted the mourner's kaddish. Even after fourteen years, the words came automatically, without thought. The air was crisp, the wind picking up, whistling, blowing tree branches around. Shadows seemed to take form. I imagined they were the spirits of the dead climbers come to wish me luck. I could almost see Eddie Pope's wild curly hair and Charlie Cooper's Pepsodent smile, hear Linc's goofy chuckle and smell the garlic on Bernard's breath as they sat on their headstones and told me their stories, each laughing over what had happened to himself and the others.

My fingers idly traced some letters that had been chiseled into my stone seat. The letters felt rough compared to the otherwise polished surface. I jumped up when it struck me that the bench was actually another tombstone. I flicked my Bic to read it. Johann Jorg. He was born in 1901, the same year as my mom's father. But he died on Cervin in 1923, how, I'll never know because I couldn't understand his German epitaph.

The wind blew harder. I was shivering. The ghosts had disappeared. I shouldered my pack and walked off toward the hills, knowing right where the Matterhorn was looming, but not able to see it. I passed more hotels, restaurants and shops. One of them was the Scorpio Boutique, where Paul had said his friend worked. Jeff. Maybe he still lived above
the shop. I stepped back and looked up. The second-floor windows were dark, and it was too late to bother whoever was up there. I kept walking, past chalets and a tramway terminal. The road became a trail and took an upward turn past a bunch of weathered wooden hay sheds.

Once Zermatt's lights were far enough behind me, the Matterhorn's spectral silhouette emerged ever-so-vaguely against the starry sky. Nebulous and indistinct, the mountain remained more of a feeling than an image as I rigged a lean-to out of my poncho and unrolled my sleeping bag. Sleep approached slowly, but upon arrival, it shortened the night into the most fleeting of blinks. Dew roused me just before dawn. For a second, I didn't know where I was. Then my eyes told me in no uncertain terms. I grabbed my journal, writing with barely a glance at the page:

"While all else sleeps, the Matterhorn awakens and stretches its cusped summit into the first rays of the new day's sunshine. Dawn's amber glow ignites the tip of the peak and the fire slowly cascades down the east face's lopsided vissage until every nook, cranny and ledge is glimmering in a gilded splendor. For a minute, the mountain basks alone in the glory of daybreak like some kind of earth-goddess caught in the act of heavenly ascent. Only then does it magnanimously share the morning with the rest of the horizon."

Once the sun was clear of that craggy horizon, the Matterhorn's golden glow faded to gray and white. I read my
words and thought them the most beautiful I'd ever written, if not the best spelled. But spelling doesn't count in real life. And this was as real as it got. The Matterhorn was more inspiring than I'd ever imagined, so much bigger and more captivating than it was in pictures. I started packing up my stuff, but kept stopping to watch the Matterhorn as though it were a movie and I might miss something if I looked away for too long. On my walk back to Zermatt, I continually glanced back over my shoulder, struck anew by the mountain's awesome beauty each time. Its mass dominated the town, and I didn't even have to take my eyes off of it while I ate breakfast on the patio of a restaurant.

To the surprise of the waitress, I ordered a second complete meal and finished it considering thirds. But I paid my bill and wandered over to the Scorpio Boutique instead. It was a small shop cluttered with racks of clothes and shelves of knick-knacks. The Matterhorn was hung all over the walls, the subject of paintings, posters, framed photos, towels, cooking aprons, plastic placemats and dozens of iron-on t-shirt decals. A guy with no hair other than a bushy salt-and-pepper moustache was sitting on a stool behind the counter. He looked like a Fritz. I introduced myself and said Paul sent his regards. He laughed at hearing the name and didn't stop chuckling until a woman browser pointed at a watercolor of the Matterhorn and hollered, "How much is this in American money?"

"Excuse me," Fritz said as he stepped out from behind
the counter. "Jeff is in the back room. Go tell him who you know. Cheer him up."

Cheer him up? I wondered how anyone could be depressed in this place. Jeff was bent over a work table in the windowless work room. He was framing something, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He barely seemed to notice me until I mentioned Paul's name.

He looked up, narrow face, wavy brown hair, blue eyes, twenty-three at most. "Paul? Where is he?"

"On his way to London. He's broke."

Jeff grunted. "He's always broke. I don't know how the guy survives."

"Balls," I said. "And charm."

"I suppose," Jeff muttered, putting his cigarette in an ashtray. He started looking around for something.

"So you work here?" I asked.

"Yeah." He found a little packet of eyescrews and ripped it open. "There ain't much money in it over the summer, but winter's a gold mine."

"Snapping flicks of the skiers?"

"That's right," he said, sounding a little surprised. "I split the take with Fritz, which generally works out to a hundred bucks a day, give or take. But he supplies the darkroom. All I got to buy is film."

"A hundred bucks apiece?" I asked.

Jeff nodded as he finished attaching a wire to the set eyescrews. Then he flipped the frame over. It was an
eight-by-ten photograph of the Matterhorn at dusk, a big orange sun sitting on its shoulder.

"Nice shot," I said. "You take it?"

"Uh-huh," he replied. "I love taking pictures of that mountain."

"I'm going to climb it."

"No kidding?" he said. "When?"

"Soon as I can."

"That's great," he mumbled distractedly. "I wish you luck."

"Paul said you might know of a cheap place where I can crash for a few days."

He butted his cigarette. "You can stay with me, if you don't mind sleeping on the floor."

"What about your girlfriend?"

"Carol?" he said, looking up startled. But his eyes seemed to quickly figure out how I knew about her. "She went home to visit her parents. C'mon."

He brought the picture out front to Fritz, and we talked about California for a few minutes while he priced it. Jeff was from Santa Barbara and had once shot some pictures of the rugby tournament there. So we might have crossed paths before without knowing it. Fritz thought that rugby and soccer were the same sport. While I explained the difference, Jeff started wandering around the shop, stopping to examine each of the framed photos hanging on the walls. He seemed distanced, distracted to the point of forgetting
there was a world outside of his thoughts.

"You were going to take Paul's friend here upstairs," Fritz said.

"Yeah," Jeff muttered and walked out of the shop with a limp wave to me.

Fritz winked at me and said, "Boy's lovesick."

I followed Jeff up a flight of outside stairs and into his one-room apartment. "Make yourself at home," he said, kicking a pile of dirty clothes under a wooden dresser. On top of it, there were a few bottles of cologne, an overflowing ashtray, some change, a wide-angle camera lens, a framed picture of a dark-haired girl with a shy smile and a chessboard set up to look like a game in progress.

"That your honey?" I asked, pointing at the photo.

"Yeah. She's French."

"No kidding?" She looked more nice than pretty. "Meet her here?"

"No. I met her on a kibbutz in Israel last summer."

"You're Jewish?" I asked.

"No. Are you?"

"Yeah."

"Then you definitely ought to check out Israel someday."

That's what Ofer had said, and one of the Israelis at The Tent. Jeff went on to tell me what a wonderful country it was and how he recommended it to everyone, but especially Jews. It sounded like the same speech I'd made to Irish
people I'd met who'd yet to visit Ireland.

"...and if you want to fall in love, go live on a kibbutz for a while. Everyone falls in love on the kibbutzim."

Sounded nice. He gazed at the photo again. I fingered my Star of David earring, wishing I had a picture of Melissa.

"Carol's down in Vence now," he continued. "It's the first time we've been apart since we met and I can't believe how much I miss her. It's like I'm not a whole person without her, even though she calls me everyday." He looked at the chessboard and studied it, chewing on the nail of his index finger.

"Who's move?" I asked.

"Carol's," he said. "We started the game but didn't get a chance to finish it before she left, so we've been playing it over the phone. I've been trying to force her queen off of that diagonal for days. If she moves it, I can checkmate her in two moves."

"Not if she castles."

"You play, huh?"

"Yeah. My brother taught me when I was a kid. He's the reason I'm here."

"How's that?"

I told him the story. He kept staring at the chessboard and didn't appear to be listening. When I finished, he smiled vacantly and said, "That's great.
That's really great."

Jeff reached out and touched the photo of his girlfriend, seeming to try to brush a lock of hair back off her forehead. "You should hear her accent," he said, "and the funny way she mixes up her English. She's like something out of a movie."

The guy had it bad, yet I couldn't help envying him. If Melissa had come with me instead of marrying some stranger and flying off to Saudi Arabia, I probably would have been walking around in the same semi-coherent state of bliss.

"Want to shower?" Jeff asked.

"How did you guess?"

He wrinkled his nose in answer, then flicked a switch on the wall. "You have to wait about fifteen minutes for the water to heat up. Just don't forget to turn it off when you're done, or you'll have to answer to Fritz. He pays the electric, and leaving the water heater on is about the only thing that ever seems to piss him off." He looked over at a chair piled high with more laundry. "Need a towel?"

"No, thanks."

"Okay. Just make yourself at home then. I'll be downstairs if you need anything."

He left. I found a nearly empty pack of Marlboros on the kitchenette counter, helped myself to one and smoked it, thinking about Melissa and what it would have been like if she'd come with me. I could picture her waiting anxiously
in town while I climbed the mountain, then throwing her arms around my neck when I returned triumphant, kissing me and promising to be mine forever.

As I stripped and stepped into the shower, I imagined what it would have been like to have had her sitting with me in the graveyard at midnight, awakening together to watch the Matterhorn steal the sunrise, and having her in this big, tile shower, just to hold and hug and feel loved.

I popped a hard-on, but dissuaded it by cutting off the hot water with a sharp twist of the faucet. An icy blast hit me with such a shock that I squeezed the soap out of my hand. I turned my back to the flow. The water stole my breath, but I stood under it, knowing that if I wasn't tough enough to take this, I wouldn't be tough enough to climb the mountain. I decided that it was good Melissa wasn't here. Now wasn't the time to be sappily in love like Jeff. Now was the time to be determined and strong, pure and noble, a questing knight closing in on the Holy Grail. I turned around and let the water pound my chest and face. It reminded me of riding Britannia through the cold English rain, and I felt the same sense of invincibility, as though nothing could stop me now.

I ducked my head into the spray. A chill swept through my body, staggering me. I took a half-step back to regain my balance, but slipped on something. My feet flew out from under me. I saw them at eye level and instinctively threw out my arms. But there was nothing to grab. Something hard
struck my right elbow, then the tile shower floor hit the back of my head...

I get up trying to shake the dizziness away. My head is throbbing, my ears buzzing. I shut off the freezing water, step out of the shower and towel off, shivering like crazy. My right elbow hurts when I bend it, then hurts when I straighten it. I drape the towel over one shoulder and brush my hair with the fingers of my left hand. My reflection in the bathroom mirror seems to have its part on the wrong side.

There is blood on my hand. And on the towel. My scalp is bleeding. My fingertips are sticky with blood. A rugby injury? I don't even remember playing.

I hear a door slam and someone walk past the bathroom. I wrap the blood-spotted towel around my waist and go to see who it is. A lanky, young guy is kneeling on the floor by an unmade double bed, searching through a padded suitcase. He looks over at me and says, "Someone just said that four guys bought it on the north face." He pulls a big camera lens out of the suitcase. "I'm going up to the glacier to see...Rabbit? Are you all right?"

I am, except that my elbow hurts. And my head is pounding. And I don't have the faintest idea of what he's talking about, or who he is, or where I am, or what I'm doing. I can't remember anything, except something I immediately forget.
"Is that blood? Jesus, what happened?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" he says, laying the lens back in the suitcase. He walks over to me, stares at my eyes. His pupils look dilated. He steps behind me, and I feel his fingers pulling at my hair.

"We better get you to the clinic," he says. "C'mon, get dressed."

I drop the towel and pick up a pair of underpants. The guy grabs them from me.

"These are mine." He balls them up and throws them aside. "Put yours on."

"Okay," I say. But I don't know where mine are, or who this guy is, or what is happening to me.

"Here," he says, lifting a big brown backpack onto the bed. "This is your stuff. Now put some clothes on while I get some ice."

He goes over to the kitchenette. I hear ice trays crackling as I dress, then sit on the floor to put on a pair of shoes. They're so big I can slip my feet into them without untying the laces. The guy comes back to my side
with the bloody towel. He presses it to the back of my head. It feels cold and lumpy.

"Here. Hold this and..." He laughs. "What are you doing wearing my shoes?"

"I don't know."

"Where are yours?"

We both look around. "Well, it doesn't matter," he says. "Let's just go."

I follow him down a flight of wooden stairs and along a street in an alpine village I know I've seen before but don't remember when. I can't seem to walk straight, and the guy grabs my sore arm to steady me. Other people look at us strangely, stepping aside as we approach. We pass a church, then come to a graveyard. I see some familiar faces and stop, pulling my arm out of the guy's grasp to wave.

"Who are you waving to?" he asks.

"The dead climbers. There's Eddie Pope and Charlie Cooper and Linc and that French guy, Bernard something or other." There are a host of others, all young men who could be modeling climbing attire through the ages. I see two even more familiar figures wearing long woolen sport jackets and knickers tucked into button-up leather gaiters. "Hey, there's Hudson and Hadow. Where were you last night?" I yell.

"C'mon," the guy next to me says, looking scared.

"Wait. Here come some more. Some Japs."

"Japs?" he asks.
"Yeah. Four of them."

"Jesus," he mutters. "That must have been some conk on the head."

He grabs my arm and leads me away. I look over my shoulder to see the Japs bowing to the dead climbers, and the dead climbers bowing back, looking as though they'd be more comfortable shaking hands. A drip from the icepack I've been holding to my head trickles down my neck, chilling my whole body.

We go into a square white building where the guy talks to a woman behind a counter.

"Do you have insurance?" he asks me.

"I don't know."

"Then you must sign this form," the woman says.

I lay the bloody icepack on the counter and pick up the pen, but don't know what to write. I'm scared. Don't know what is happening. The woman takes the pen from me and squeezes my hand gently, saying not to worry about it. Then she leads me into a room where a doctor looks at my head and says something about me not needing stitches. He shines a light into each of my eyes. I tell him I'm not going to give him my passport no matter how much I owe. He flicks off the light and asks me a bunch of questions I can't answer, except if anything besides my head hurts. I point to my elbow. He presses on it, causing me to wince. Then he calls a nurse in and talks quietly to her in German.

The nurse smiles, grabs my arm gently and walks me into
a smaller room where I have to lie on a hard table. She takes X-rays of my head. The machine whirs with each shot. It sounds familiar. She stands me up, positions my arm on the table and slips a plate under my elbow. I seem to remember having had this done before. The same elbow, in fact. It got caught between a Belmont Barbarian and Chuck Riley during a rugby game. I was pushing him out of bounds when Riley came barreling into us.

A trickle of memory turned into a torrent. I felt as though I'd just woken up, but couldn't remember going to sleep or how I got here. The nurse took another shot of my elbow, then gave me a blue chemical icepack and told me to hold it tightly to my head to keep pressure on the cut. Then she walked me back to the waiting room. I recognized Jeff, even though he had to remind me of his name. While I waited to see the doctor again, Jeff asked me if I remembered when I got to Zermatt, what the Scorpio Boutique looked like and meeting him. It all came back, hitching with the Canadians, the Matterhorn at sunrise, the picture of Jeff's girlfriend, the long-distance chess game...

"So what happened?" Jeff asked.

"I was taking a shower, and I guess I must have slipped or something. Next thing I remember is being X-rayed."

Jeff nodded and told me about the time he got knocked out in a car wreck and woke up in the hospital to find out he'd never really been asleep. He asked if I remembered waving at someone as we passed the graveyard. I didn't, so
he started telling me what I'd done and said. It came back in pieces, but they didn't quite fit together.

I seemed to be the only patient in the clinic, yet still had to wait at least an hour before the doctor could see me again. Another universal tradition, I supposed. The receptionist finally directed Jeff and me to yet another room. The doc came in and asked about my memory. He didn't act the least bit surprised when I told him it had come back. He shined his pen-sized flashlight into my eyes again, then flicked a switch which illuminated a screen lined with X-rays. Using the flashlight as a pointer, he showed me that my skull had apparently survived the fall intact, but I had a hairline fracture in my elbow as well as some calcification from a previous injury.

"It is not a kind of fracture we will cast, but it should be kept as still as possible for the next few days," the doctor said. "There also is nothing we can do for your head. But if your headache gets very worse or you suffer another memory lapse, I want you to come here immediately, okay?"

I nodded, and my headache seemed very worse already.

"Keep your elbow elevated, and put the ice to it when your head stops bleeding. I will give you something for the pain, but I want to see you in a few days whether you feel well or not."

"Why? Is business bad?"

He didn't seem to understand I was joking and started
talking a lot of medical mumbo-jumbo meant to convince me that I might have a brain hemorrhage which could blind, paralyze or kill me if I didn't listen to him. He asked if I had any questions.

"Just one. How long will it be before I'll be able to climb the Matterhorn?"

He laughed and patted my shoulder. "You are funny."

"But I'm not kidding."

He laughed again. "I should think with that elbow you'll not be climbing anything for a while. Even if your arm feels well enough, you may suffer dizzy spells at any time for the next several weeks from the concussion. So I suggest you make that thought leave your mind. Okay?"

I didn't answer.

"Now go in bed, put ice on that arm and come back in two days. And no drinking of alcohol for one week."

I felt like having a drink when the receptionist showed me the bill. Five hundred and eighty francs. I didn't even have a one-franc downpayment on me, so I had to sign the form I hadn't been able to sign earlier, promising I would pay up before leaving town.

Jeff walked me back towards his apartment, stopping at a pharmacy to fill the pain pill prescription. As we approached the graveyard, I looked over to see if I could spot the dead climbers. But they were gone, scared off by scattered groups of tourists, some pointing at the tombstones, others snapping pictures. We passed the church,
and suddenly mighty Cervin was looming overhead.

"Did you do something to your leg, too?" Jeff asked.

"No. Why?"

"You're limping, and your knee's cracking."

"That's old," I said, "from a motorcycle wreck in Holland a couple of months ago. Popped the cartilage, I think."

He shook his head, then looked up at the mountain.

"And you wanted to climb that with a bum knee?"

It looked incredibly high, impossibly steep.

He laughed. "Maybe it was a lucky thing you fell in the shower."

Maybe, but the mountain also looked more beautiful than ever. This would only delay me a few days. I'd played rugby the week after Riley hyperextended my elbow, and that had hurt much more than this. I'd also had concussions before. None of them were this bad, but I'd never suffered dizzy spells afterwards. And I'd never let one stop me from drinking.

But right now, my head and elbow were both hurting and all I wanted to do was find someplace to eat my pain pills, go to sleep and wake up feeling better. When we reached the apartment, Jeff covered one of his pillows with an old but clean towel, drew the curtains and put me to bed, propping my elbow on a spare pillow and rigging up a fresh icepack for it. I took three pills, snuck a big hit off a bottle of cognac that was sitting on the windowsill and drifted away.
I woke up again and again, the apartment growing a little darker each time. Once, a bit of burnt orange sunlight was filtering through a gap in the curtains to reflect off the picture on the bureau. I watched it fade out, saw the girl's stringy dark hair and close-lipped smile. A sweet smile. I dreamed I was trying to talk Nan Hooper into cutting open my elbow with a bread knife so I could fix the fracture with Krazy Glue. She agreed, but said she'd have to sterilize the knife and dipped it into a bowl of ice. Then she pulled it out, glowing hot, and touched it to my skin.

I jerked my arm away and woke up, my elbow burning with pain. Green neon light was seeping through the gap in the curtains, just enough of a glow for me to make out forms, like in a darkroom. Jeff was lying in a heap on the floor. I could hear him snoring, then the grind of heavy equipment outside. I peeked through the curtains. A small tractor was pulling a flatbed trailer down the center of the deserted street. As it passed below me, I saw what looked to be four huge trash bags lying on the trailer. The tractor chugged on by. My elbow seemed to be on fire, and my head was pounding. I popped a few pain pills and scrunched over to grab the cognac bottle on the windowsill. The bedsprings creaked.

"Rabbit?" Jeff whispered.

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"
"Uh-huh," I said, washing down the pills with a stiff belt. "Except I feel like I drank a fifth of Wild Turkey last night and let somebody bash my elbow with a sledge hammer."

"That doesn't surprise me," he said, sitting up. "But something else did. Remember when we walked past the graveyard and you saw those dead climbers?"

"Yeah."

"You said they were Japs."

"Just a few of them."

"Four. You said four Japs."

"Yeah. So what?"

"So they were."

"What?"

"Japs."

"Who?"

"The four climbers who died yesterday. After I left you, Fritz told me that they were Japanese. Freaked me the fuck out."

"Four climbers died yesterday?"

"Yeah. I told you about them..."

He kept talking, but I didn't need to listen because I suddenly remembered how he'd been getting a telephoto lens out of a case and said four climbers bought it on the north face. I'd forgotten all about that, yet I'd seen their freshly freed souls in the graveyard, bowing to Hudson and Hadow and the rest of the boys. That familiar chill ran up
my neck, settling in the throbbing spot where I'd hit my head.

"...so you must have overheard somebody talking about them yesterday," Jeff stated. But it sounded more like a question.

"Not that I remember."

"Sure is weird. You know what Carol said?"

"Carol?"

"My girlfriend."

"Oh yeah. The shy girl."

The floorboards creaked as Jeff shifted positions.

"How did you know she was shy?" he asked.

"I guess I could tell from her picture."

"Jesus, Rabbit. Maybe you really are psychic. That's what Carol said. Actually, she said you were 'psychotic,' but she meant psychic. She's always mixing up her English words." Jeff lay back down. "She believes in all that stuff: ESP, astrology, reincarnation..."

"Then I must have just seen them again," I muttered more to myself than him.

"Who?"

"The Japs. In body bags. Four of them lined up on a flatbed trailer heading towards the train station."

Jeff grunted. "Yeah, probably. They tend to ship them out at night, so as not to make a circus out of it." I could hear him yawn. "But let's go to sleep now. We'll talk about it some more in the morning."
He rolled over and his breaths began to deepen almost immediately, threatening to break into a snore at any moment. I just lay in bed thinking about what had happened. If Jeff hadn't known the climbers were Japanese, how could I have? I hadn't ever even thought of Japanese as being climbers. Golfers, baseball players, sumo wrestlers, karate champs, even rugby players, but not climbers. What did it all mean? That I was psychic? That fantasy and reality are constantly crossing paths? That perception can create reality? That dreams really do come true?

If so, what was the message here? That my recurring dream of falling off the Matterhorn was a reality waiting to happen? That my soul would soon be passing through Zermatt's graveyard as well, my body to be shipped home in an overgrown trash bag?

Someone switched off the green neon sign. The apartment turned so black I couldn't tell whether my eyes were open or shut. But I could see quite clearly that the Matterhorn meant death. It had killed Robby, the Japanese climbers, Hadow and Hudson and all of the others. Now, it was just waiting for me. I saw how my whole trip had been a warning—breaking a vow to my parents, having to wait for Kim and his wife getting pregnant, seeing my own death at Mortimer's Cross, nearly falling off the cliff in Wales, losing Robby's picture, screwing up my knee, slipping in the shower—it seemed as though fate had constantly been trying to hold me back or scare me or distract me with women, beer
and hash. I decided I'd be a fool to ignore the omens. I could come back next year, when the stars might be more favorable. And by then, my arm, leg and head would be completely healed. There was no hurry. The Matterhorn wasn't going anywhere for a long, long, long, long, very, very long time.
CHAPTER 40

Once I excused myself from my quest, I felt relieved, like going into school with a note from the doctor. "Dear Miss Martin, Stanley can't climb the Matterhorn today because he has a broken arm." Not to mention rattled brains and a bum knee. I'd tried, and I'd failed. Once again. But this time, it wasn't my fault. Just fate. Something beyond my control, like a car passing my outstretched thumb on the road.

My elbow was swollen stiff and had turned different shades of blue and purple and yellow and brown. Fritz said it looked like a Matisse, but I didn't know what he meant. I only knew that the slightest touch anywhere between my wrist and shoulder seemed to send amplified impulses directly to the pain reception center of my brain. Generally, my brain responded by sending an impulse to its speech center, which relayed the message to my mouth, like when I bumped my elbow on the water cooler in the boutique.

"Ouch! Shitgoddammotherfuckingassholeshitgoddamit!"

Fritz laughed. "You have such marvelous command of English profanity."

"Comes with a lot of practice," I said as the burning
pain settled back down to a more tolerable throbbing ache. Jeff went into the back room to frame some more of his pictures. He surely wouldn't be needed to help customers. The shop was dead, Matterhorn memorabilia collecting dust in every nook and crevasse.

"So what's with business?" I asked.

Fritz shrugged. "The end of the summer is no good. But we make up for it come ski season, when Jeff takes his camera onto the slopes. Those pictures attract crowds here, believe it or not."

"Sounds like a good idea. Was it Jeff's?"

"No. Jeff is the fifth boy I have doing this for me. But the best by far. However, I got the idea years ago, when I took my third wife on a Caribbean cruise and saw how, every night after dinner, crowds gathered by the pictures the ship's photographer took that day."

"So why don't you do it now?"

"Only the top of the glacier is now open for skiing, and it does not attract many people."

"So what? There must be plenty of hikers around."

"That's true, although most will have their own cameras."

"So do people on Caribbean cruises. Besides, they'll have to wait days or weeks to get their pictures developed, and, let's face it, even idiot-proof cameras aren't totally idiot-proof. You can sell them a guarantee of at least one good shot. They'll buy it for insurance, if nothing else."
"Yes. Everybody wants insurance these days," Fritz said, looking out the window. The little bit of sky visible over the rooftops across the street was blue, and the morning shadows seemed sharp enough to cut your foot if you stepped on the edge of one. "What you say is all very true," he added. "I suppose it can't hurt to try, can it?"

He stood up and bellowed, "Jeff!"

Jeff came out of the back room, agreed that my idea sounded viable and wondered aloud why he didn't think of it. I couldn't understand either. It seemed so obvious. Anyway, Jeff set out for the hills with his camera and a pocket full of film, and Fritz pulled the slotted wooden photo boards out of the darkroom. I helped him set them up and wipe them down, as much as I could one-armed. All the while, he kept telling me what a good idea I had. When we finished, he bought me a Coke.

"So what is next for you?" he asked.

"Good question."

"You will go back to America?"

"I don't know. I guess I'll have to. Work for a while and maybe come back here next year to try again."

"Why not just stay here? There will be many jobs come ski season. Maybe you can work for me."

"Maybe," I replied. "But I don't even want to think about tomorrow right now."

"No, not now. But keep it in mind. I can always use a smart boy."
I was looking even smarter when dozens of people came by to check out Jeff's pictures that evening. Not many were actually bought, but Fritz's cash register sang with other sales. For the rest of the week, business was unseasonably good, especially in the evenings, when the daily picture show was slipped into the slots of the wooden boards. The faces in the photos differed, but the backdrop was always the same. The Matterhorn, impassively posing behind men and wives, brothers and sisters, groups and loners, friends and lovers and two coeds from Michigan State. For the most part, the people just seemed to be in the way.

I started going for short hikes in the nearby hills. My whole arm hurt, but my knee felt great in comparison. And my head remained clear even though I hadn't abstained from beer and cognac. I did quite a bit of scrambling around the rocks. Nothing too difficult or dangerous. However, the few times I needed to use my bad arm, it felt as though someone had injected 500cc of broken glass into my elbow.

All the while, the Matterhorn loomed above me, and I couldn't keep my eyes from tracing the route along the northeast ridge from base to summit. I knew it was a relatively easy climb. Robby had told me a seven-year-old girl did it once, and a seventy-year-old man. The Japanese team had been speed climbing the treacherous north face, all moving at once on the same line, clipped into a piton that might not have supported one man's falling weight. Their
accident was a fluke. Carelessness, really. Hundreds of people had already climbed the mountain this summer and only ten had died, the other six being amateurs who thought they could do it without a guide. Supposedly, a guide hadn't lost a client in thirty-some years. Not that it mattered any. I was too beat-up and out of shape to even give it a try. I'd been smoking a lot ever since hurting my knee, and even at lower elevations, I couldn't seem to catch my breath. The Matterhorn might as well been Everest as far as I was concerned.

The weather took a drastic turn one night, and for my first time in Zermatt, I awoke to a chilly, damp, gray day. The bad weather brought equally bad news to Jeff. His girlfriend's favorite aunt died unexpectedly, and she would be delayed coming back for at least a week. Jeff looked ready to cry until Fritz kind of ordered him to go down to Vence.

Jeff was happy to oblige, especially since the lousy weather would keep most of the tourists in town, or convince them to head for sunnier alps. A cumulus curtain had fallen on the Matterhorn, covering it as though it were temporarily closed for renovations. I still hadn't decided what to do or where to go, but figured I couldn't have found a much better place to hole up for a while than a free flat in Zermatt. I tried to pay Fritz back by helping him mind the shop: dusting little brass statuettes of the Matterhorn, cleaning the glass of its framed portraits and running
errands. Mostly, we just sat around and talked. Fritz was from Berne and had some great stories about serving in the Swiss underground during the War. He'd also been married four times and around the world once. Both were enough for him. Of all the places he'd been, he said that Zermatt was his favorite.

"Always I wished to live here. Then one day, I asked 'why not?' My second wife told me why not, but it was an answer for her, not me. To tell you the truth, I was glad to be rid of that one. The fourth, too. But my first and third, ah..." He gave his fingertips a kiss and sent it flying off towards heaven.

The curtain of clouds hung around for days, never once parting enough to let a little sunshine through. On one particularly gloomy afternoon, Fritz hung a newly acquired watercolor of the Matterhorn at dusk, grousing that the painter had "cheated" by touching it up with pastels. It didn't matter to me. More than any other painting or photo in the shop, this one captured the peak's deific solitude while accenting its feminine qualities: those soft lines, graceful curves and pristine faces powdered with the subtle rouge of sunset. I turned my head and realized that the mountain had the same shape as a Scandinavian upsloper.

"So you like this one?" Fritz asked.

"Yeah," I said, rubbing my elbow. "Wonder if I'll ever climb it."

Fritz ran his hand over his shiny bald head, brushing
back some phantom hair. "I have lived here for over twenty years now," he said. "Cervin has been my life and livelihood in that time, but I have never attempted to climb her. For me, it has always been enough just to look at her and feel her power. And now, of course, I am too old and fat. But I have seen this desire of yours in others. It is a calling one cannot resist, a challenge to steal some of her power by conquering her, I believe. And for people like you, Cervin's call is irresistible. If you stay here long enough, you too will climb her."

"Or die trying."

"Perhaps," he said. "But that is a risk you must take."

"I could always choose not to even try."

"Could you?" Fritz asked. "All through life, we think we have choices, but most of the time, we do not. We do what we have to do, what we are compelled to do."

For the time being, I was compelled to do nothing. But as the days passed, my elbow loosened up and grew less sensitive. One time, I whacked it against the corner of the counter and didn't even scream. And a couple of days later, I managed to do a few lopsided pull-ups on the crossbeam of the shop. My elbow told me this wasn't a good idea, but it was more of a nagging protest than screaming tirade.

The sun returned from its week-long vacation on the first of September. It was like a holiday for me. I filled Jeff's winesack with burgundy and headed for the hills. The
Matterhorn seemed to have a fresh coat of radiance that contrasted its relatively dull finish in the paintings and photos in the shop. Once again, I had trouble taking my eyes off of it as I followed the now-familiar path out of town, past the tramway terminal and hay sheds and through a pine-scented forest. I veered from the trail to climb an easy fifty-foot cliff, then continued on, blazing my own path through the forest, across a flower-dappled meadow and ever higher. I passed the tree line and kept scrambling up rock and rubble. Eventually, I came to a stark glacial lake filled with the Matterhorn's reflection.

I sat on a tabletop boulder, panting, slow to catch my breath. The sun was warm, but the wind felt chilling through my sweat-dampened t-shirt. I untied the sleeves of the scarlet sweatshirt I'd been wearing around my waist and put it on, then drank some wine and stared at the mountain's upside-down reflection in the lake. My eyes locked onto its wind-rippled northeast ridge, moving from summit to base, then base to summit of the real thing. That was Whymper's route, and would have been mine. Mine and Robby's. He was always going to take me here. Now, I was taking him. But this was about as far as we were going to get, at least until winter came and went. And so much could happen between now and then, I thought, this might be the closest I'd ever get. With a sigh, I took another sip of wine and closed my eyes, wishing Robby were here...
"What did I tell you, Rabbit?" Robby asks. He's sitting cross-legged on the boulder, gazing up at the Matterhorn "Isn't she the most beautiful sight in the world?"

"Yeah. Too bad we can't climb it."

"Nonsense. We can do anything we want if we believe in it enough." He grabs the winesack, and holding it an arm's length from his mouth, squeezes out a stream.

"Tell me the story," I say.

He lowers the winesack, swallows a gulp and smiles, a red drop trickling out the corner of his mouth. "What story?"

"You know."

"Yeah, I guess I do," he says, wiping the dribble of wine away with the cuff of his green Dartmouth sweatshirt. "But don't forget that you're a man now. And men have to test themselves occasionally for courage, strength and character. To stir the instinct of survival is to grab Destiny by the scruff of the neck and let her know who's boss."

He musses my hair, takes another draw of wine, clears his throat and begins:

"A long, long, long, very, very long time ago..."

The story of Hiver and Neige hasn't changed a bit since I heard it last. Robby hasn't changed much either. He's just a college kid, but still my older brother. An
innocuous nystagmus causes him to look at me with his head
cocked slightly to the right. A wavy lock of dark brown
hair keeps falling over his brow a la JFK, and he tosses it
back with intermittent flips of the head. He faces me, but
his eyes seem to be focused somewhere else.

"...and when Hiver finally stopped crying, he saw that
his tears had carved out the most beautiful mountain in the
world..."

Robby's lips thicken to round off vowels, and his teeth
cut consonants sharply, as though each word is of monumental
importance. His eyes brighten at mention of Edward Whymper,
then set in a kind of grim determination as he comes to the
end.

"...to this day the Matterhorn has cost more climbers
their lives than any other mountain. But someday, little
brother, you and I will succeed where others have failed.
Okay?"

"Okay."

Robby holds out his hand. "Shake on it."

I reach for his hand, but grab only air.
CHAPTER 41

It was after four by the time I reached the mid-station of the ski tramway. I boarded it feeling lethargic, tired from my all-day hike and depressed about being on injured reserve. The tram wasn't crowded. A few skiers sat in back, looking a bit foolish in their parkas and heavy plastic boots. Up front, there were two climbers with a full complement of gear along with a tall, lean woman who might have been their mother. All three seemed to be glowing, faces a healthy pink, eyes bright, smiles indelible.

"...and I'm afraid I was a terrible burden for my guide, especially in the upper reaches," the lady was saying. "The poor bloke had to all-but-drag me up the last few hundred feet. But I shall never forget this day."

The two men nodded, their faces echoing her words. I couldn't believe she'd even attempt climbing the Matterhorn, not to mention conquer it. I felt like an idiot, or rather a wimp, sniveling over a few bumps and bruises when I should be doing what I'd set out to do.

"We can do anything we want if we believe in it enough."

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Right. If some middle-aged lady could climb the Matterhorn, I could too. Even with a weak knee and cracked elbow. I'd just been making too big a deal out of this damn mountain from the start. The Matterhorn was no Everest. Just a big chunk of rock that you could almost walk up. I began to see that all of my dread and foreboding had come from me, from my own imagination. Not the mountain.

I clenched my right fist and felt a needle of pain in my elbow. It might not have even stopped me from playing a rugby game. Swallowing a freshly risen lump in my throat, I decided I wouldn't let it stop me from climbing the Matterhorn either. And the sooner the better.

The mountain guides' office was still open when I got back to Zermatt. Inside, a crusty old man wearing glasses on his forehead was standing behind a high wooden counter which ran the length of the narrow room. I told him what I wanted.

"Do you have any mountaineering experience?" he asked.

"Not really. But I'm a good climber."

He rolled his eyes. "Less than half the people who try to climb Cervin succeed, and if you are not in excellent shape, you most likely will not make it, whether you are a good climber or not."

"C'mon. On the tram just now, I overheard a lady old enough to be my mother talking about how she'd climbed it."

He smiled. "So Mrs. Simmons succeeded. I am happy to
hear that. She was very concerned. But also she is in excellent shape. Already this year, she has completed three marathon runs."

So she wasn't just some middle-aged lady. She was an athlete. A marathon runner. I couldn't have run a marathon if my life depended on it. Never could. I'd always been a sprinter, not built right for long distance running. But Mrs. Simmons was, thin and long-legged. Yet she had barely made it to the Matterhorn's summit.

While I wondered if I even had a chance, the old man told me that a guide cost two hundred and fifty dollars, paid in advance, and room and board at a climbing lodge called the Hornlihutte would be another thirty-five. If the weather cancelled the climb before we started, I could get a refund for the guide's fee. If, however, it turned bad during the ascent, too bad. No refunds. No guarantees.

"Still want to try?" he asked.

At that moment, I realized Fritz was right. I didn't really have a choice. I answered the old man's question by signing five fifty-dollar traveler's checks. He dropped his glasses to his nose to make sure my signatures matched, then filled out a receipt, wrote down my guide's name and told me I'd have to rent climbing boots and crampons if I didn't already have them.

"What about these boots?" I asked, stepping back.

The old guy leaned over the counter to look at them. He laughed. "Maybe for hiking those boots are good, but not
for climbing Cervin. Go to the Alpenhaus and tell them I sent you. They will rent you a pair for ten francs."

And probably give him a kickback, I figured. After spending so much time and pain breaking in my boots, I wasn't about to leave them behind.

"You also will need a hat to protect your face from the sun as well as a good pair of gloves, no mittens. And you are to be at the Hornlihutte no later than sundown tomorrow to meet your guide, Brigger Jacques." He slid the receipt across the counter. "Give him this, and you'll be on your way. Good luck."

I went to the recommended mountaineering shop to pick up the crampons. The clerks all agreed that my boots were too soft, and one guy said my guide would probably send me back down to get a different pair. I argued about it, but then the crampons didn't fit my boots very well, and I didn't want to take a chance of one coming loose on a snowfield where I might slip and tumble into that endless fall I'd dreamed about so often. So I spent the extra ten francs to rent a pair of boots which seemed heavy and stiff and felt as though they'd been broken in by a lot of other people's feet. I also bought a Ski Blizzard cap, but passed on the gloves because they were all expensive and I was hoping to borrow a pair from Fritz.

My knee started hurting for the first time since Munich on my walk to the boutique, and I couldn't help thinking I'd made a big mistake. A three hundred dollar mistake. But
when I got to the shop and told Fritz what I'd done, his enthusiasm rekindled mine. After all, I was finally going for it, living the dream. A bad knee and broken arm would merely make the adventure more daring and worthwhile, and serve as a good excuse if I failed.

"So is there anything you need?" Fritz asked.

"Yeah. Gloves."

He reached under the counter, pulled out a pair and smiled as he handed them to me. "I give you my best ski gloves. They cost me eighty francs ten years ago. I will not lend them to you if I am not certain you will return them to me safely."

"I wouldn't take them from you if I wasn't sure of the same thing," I said. But I took them anyway.

The Hornlihutte sat at the base of the Matterhorn like a benign wart on a giant's little toe. Even after taking two tramways, I still had to hike for a couple of hours to reach it, up and up the switchbacked trail, eventually taking a more direct line over rocky debris that the Matterhorn had discarded through the centuries. The stiff boots helped on the ankle-twisting terrain, although they started to rub my heels after a while. My knee swelled a little, but it felt okay. And the closer I got to the mountain, the shorter the route to its top looked. By the time I reached to the Hornlihutte's stone terrace, it seemed as though I could have scooted up to the summit and come
down in an hour.

I walked through the front door of the wooden lodge feeling strong and fit, if not winded and a bit light-headed from the altitude. Brigger Jacques was playing poker with the other guides. He was smaller and older than I'd been expecting. Scrawny, balding and sporting a stringy goatee, he looked a little bit like a mountain goat. I smiled, thinking that he was probably as sure-footed as one.

Jacques sat out a hand to examine my receipt and, in English that sounded like a cross between Maurice Chevalier's and Tarzan's, suggest we climb the Monte Rosa instead. I told him the Monte Rosa didn't interest me in the least. He frowned as only a Frenchman can and threw an ante in the pot.

I paid for room and board and was shown my bunk in the dormitory. Then I wandered into the lodge's A-framed lobby where a couple dozen other climbers were sitting around dressed like models from some mountaineering shop catalogue. I felt out of place in my jeans and Sensinitas Surf jersey and roamed the perimeter, stopping to have a look in a bookcase. Whymper's *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* nearly jumped into my hands. It was like finding an old friend. Robby had ordered a copy of this book from a shop in England and it had been one of his dearest possessions. But it wasn't in any of the cartons his friends brought down to us when they came for the funeral, so I hadn't seen it since I was fourteen.
I skimmed through it, stopping to read about Whymper's nastiest fall, Luc Meynet's cheerful muttering of how they could only die once, the first ascent and the accident. I saw Whymper's etchings of the mountain and the climbing gear he used, the guides gathered outside of the Club-Room, the individual portraits of his companions and the broken spectre. And I read and reread his closing thought:

"There have been joys too great to be described in words, and there have been griefs upon which I have dared not dwell; and with this in mind I say, Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are nought without prudence, and that a momentary negligence can destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste; look well to each step; and from the beginning think what may be the end."

I reluctantly put the book down when dinner was served. The Hornlihutte was famous for its "last suppers," and the main dish of this one was a tasty and overwhelming portion of carbohydrate-rich lasagna. Brigger Jacques and I got better acquainted while we ate. To my dismay, I discovered him to be clumsier than the average guide. He not only knocked over my water glass with his elbow, but also managed to yank the tablecloth half off when he stood up. Jacques seemed equally underwhelmed at having a novice for a client and moaned when I admitted to smoking "an occasional cigarette." After checking my boots and crampons, he briefed me about our climb until the guides'
card game cranked up again.

Abandoned by Jacques, I joined the other climbers by the fireplace in the lobby. They were sitting around, fiddling with equipment and trading mountaineering stories: tales of Mount Kenya in Africa, Grand Teton in Wyoming, Ixtaciuatl in Mexico and Mont Blanc in France. I told them about Robby's accident and the cliff in Wales, but they didn't seem to want to hear the first story nor believe the second. An American guy who reminded me of a rugby ref I used to hate told everyone about how he'd climbed the Matterhorn before. He made it sound like a battle against fatigue more than anything else, saying it took every ounce of strength he had. Yet he seemed to be in good shape. They all did. And nobody was smoking, drinking or appeared to have weak knees or broken arms.

I tried to make some small talk with the only woman in the group, an ample-bosomed Wall Street stockbroker. But she seemed about as interested in me as I was in pork belly futures. So I read some more passages from Whymper's book, then turned in at nine-thirty with everyone else. The double-decker beds creaked continually through the night. Apparently, everyone was having as much trouble sleeping as I was. I heard the stockbroker roll over and thought of creeping out of my upper bunk and into her lower so we could relieve our tension together. But she hadn't exactly been wetting herself over me earlier and looked strong enough to have done as much damage to my body as a motorcycle wreck
and slip in the shower combined. So I tossed, turned and climbed the Matterhorn over and over in my mind without once falling off of it. Then I was back in college, playing rugby on the field next to the water tower...

I catch a kick near my own goal line and start running uphill, dodging tacklers left and right until breaking into the open. But as I run, the other goal line keeps getting farther and farther away. My legs feel heavy, yet still no one can catch me. It starts raining, and the field turns to mud. The goal line disappears completely and I'm suddenly running naked through a thick forest at night with hundreds of giant, red-eyed lizards-from-Hell chasing me. My legs get heavier and heavier, but they keep pumping for fear that the demons will catch me if I stop.
CHAPTER 42

Someone yodeled, a rooster's reveille that sounded more like hyena laugh. I opened my eyes and was momentarily blinded when someone switched on the light.

"Wake up." It was one of the guides. He clapped his hands a couple of times. "Come on. Wake up. Cervin is waiting for you."

"What time is it?" a raspy voice muttered.

"Four-forty-five," the guide replied.

Two or three people groaned. Bedsprings creaked. The guide left with another yodel. Everyone crawled out of his or her bunk. Arms stretched, joints cracked, mouths yawned, fists rubbed puffy eyes. No one seemed to have gotten enough sleep. One-by-one, they all shuffled off to the bathrooms with towels and toiletry kits in hand. I didn't move from where I lay, not wanting to get up. But then I remembered my dream and didn't want to fall back asleep, either. So I just curled into a tight fetal ball and tried to calm the porcupine in my belly until an Austrian guy walked into the dorm, hair wet and smelling of soap.

"There is shower for you now," he said as though I'd just been waiting for one to open up.
A couple of others filtered back, all looking at me oddly, but saying nothing. I finally climbed out of bed and into a shower stall so small I couldn't help but bump my sore elbow again and again. I washed my body and shampooed my hair one-handed, my fingers lingering over the still-tender scar in my scalp. I let the hot water pound the back of my neck, warming my body, temporarily quieting that agitated porcupine in my gut.

I brushed my teeth and hair and dry-shaved two bits of skin just below my cheekbones, then dressed, wondering over and over if this might be the last time I would perform these daily rituals. I slapped a band-aid on each heel to make sure I wouldn't get any blisters from my rented boots, then put on my woolen rugby socks, which had seen me safely through dozens of games. I pulled the laces as tightly as possible and double-knotted them. This was it. I grabbed my not-so-lucky JFK half-dollar and rubbed my thumb over Kennedy's profile. His head seemed to have been neatly sliced from his body. My own neck tingled at the thought, but I ignored it to flip the coin to see if it wanted to come along.

Tails.

I didn't bother trying two-out-of-three. Instead, I pocketed the coin figuring that if I didn't have a choice, then neither should it.

I was the last one down for breakfast. It consisted of coffee, fried eggs, sausage, bread and jam, all of which
might have been brick and mortar for the way it went down. No one else seemed to have much of an appetite either. Even those masters of nonchalance, the guides, were picking at their food and wearing expressions as serious as Whymper's warning:

"...from the beginning think what may be the end."

Only Jacques seemed unperturbed. Having cleaned his plate, he wolfed down the remains of my breakfast. A gob of grape jelly ended up on the chest of his white sweater, and he ran off to wash it out before the stain set. When he returned, we walked across across the Hornlihutte's terrace to join the other groups of guides and climbers at the mountain's base.

It was still dark, and most of the others had lights like miner's lamps on their helmets. I didn't even have a helmet. What I did have was a nasty case of shivers from both nerves and the pre-dawn chill. One duo after another mounted the Matterhorn to start the arduous climb up its northeast ridge. Jacques and I were the last in line. As he tied the red and blue climbing rope around my waist, I gave the mountain a friendly pat. Then I took a deep breath and tried to exhale the butterflies from my belly. It didn't work.

Jacques started climbing. I followed him, feeling almost as though I were sleepwalking through the dark and eerily quiet mountain air. My gloved hands and booted feet barely felt the rock, or even the weight of my own body.
Jacques and I made good time, passing one pair of climbers after another, the light cast by their lamps fading on the rock at about the same pace that the stars above faded in the brightening sky. Jacques flicked his light off just as the tip of the Matterhorn's summit caught the first rays of dawn. In a matter of minutes, the golden glow washed over us and swept down to flood Zermatt's valley. Jacques kept glancing up at some wispy clouds in the sky and seemed to be in a hurry. We passed three more sets of climbers, stepping on their elongated shadows. The guy who'd been talking about his previous ascent the night before was sitting on a rock, looking pale and panting while his partner stood by with his lips tucked into his mouth. I nodded at them with a smile, checked my own heaving breaths for a few strides and pretended that the climb was a breeze.

The wind was picking up and thin layers of clouds were rolling in with the morning. Jacques pointed them out and warned me that this wasn't a day to dally. With three hundred bucks on the line, I was inclined to agree. So we pushed on without rest, staying just to the east side of the ridge. The face, which had looked so impossibly steep from the valley, was actually like a giant staircase for the most part. We scrambled up its jagged steps at a steady clip, passing more climbing parties and seeing just a few ahead. With my body holding up well, I began to feel as though this really was a dream come true, the ultimate adventure. Roped to my temperamental but fearless French mountain guide, I was
climbing into the sky, feeling like a giant among men and infinitesimal speck of dust at the same time.

After about an hour, we came to a sheer section where we had to pull ourselves up a fixed cable like Batman and Robin on a skyscraper. It was more work than fun. Whatever adrenaline had gotten me this far began to wear off. I started having trouble keeping up, and Jacques had yet to learn that patience is a virtue. My guide became particularly anxious whenever we had to cross falling rock zones. From afar, the Matterhorn had seemed to be an unblemished beauty, but up close I could see how the ravages of time had pockmarked its faces. Great rifts in the mountainside were spillways for loose rocks which littered buttresses below, and we traversed them at a near gallop. Once, we had to wait for a minor rockslide to pass. Jacques took the time to explain that even a pebble falling from above could crack a skull.

"Is why I have hat hard," he said, rapping his plastic helmet with his knuckles. "But big rock fall, and hat no help. Monte Rosa is good mountain. Cervin is bitch, always throwing rocks at you. But everyone love bitch, eh? Everyone want climb Cervin. So I must climb Cervin, or no money. Come, we go."

He led, I followed, hand over hand, foot over foot. We passed three more climbing parties, including one led by a guy wearing an orange day-glo helmet. He'd been the first in line, the first to mount the Matterhorn.
As we left them in our wake, my knee began to hurt, a dull, twisting ache that ran under my kneecap. And I could feel my elbow stiffening as it swelled, numbing my arm and robbing it of strength. I tried to put the pain out of my mind, trying to think of my moments of glory on the rugby field, skydiving, riding Britannia through Europe and the women I'd slept with. But I kept thinking about Hyman Eisenstark instead, how he fought over falling snow in that open cattle car, stood naked while German soldiers sprayed him with cold water and was marched off to the gas chambers. I moved mechanically as though on a forced march, knowing that each step brought me one step closer, the end almost always in sight.

It seemed as though we were getting close to it when Jacques announced that we'd reached the halfway point. He didn't stop to mark the occasion, but just said the most difficult part lay ahead. Soon after, the giant staircase steepened, and its steps turned into a series of small overhangs.

"This is Moseleyplatte," Jacques said. "Where first American die in 1879."

For a man of few words, Jacques didn't seem very selective in choosing them. And he was pushing me beyond my limit. We had to climb some more fixed cables, and I began to feel my whole body trembling from fatigue. But I did my best to keep up. We crested the Moseleyplatte and came to an emergency bivouac called the Solvay hut. For the first
time, Jacques sat down and broke out his water bottle. We shared some water, both watching heavy clouds gather in the east.

"Is not a good day," Jacques said again, grabbing back his water bottle. "Come. We go."

The short rest seemed to have stolen more of my energy than it replenished. And I couldn't come close to catching my breath. But I kept moving, up and up. The gray rock gradually grew white with snow. We stopped again, this time to strap on our crampons. I had to take off my gloves, and in his haste to move on, Jacques accidentally kicked the left one. It slid past my lunge and over the edge, tumbling down the east face.

Jacques looked at me and excused himself with a shrug. He didn't know the gloves weren't mine and had cost eighty francs ten years ago, but I did. And I knew he'd just blown his expected twenty percent tip.

Onward and upward. Everything became more difficult in the ever-thinning air. Jacques ignored my panting pleas to slow down. He kept pointing to the thickening clouds that were now blotting out the view below, saying we must hurry. So I plodded along behind him, knee aching, right arm throbbing and heart and lungs revving past the red line. We crested a ridge, and the summit, which had been hidden for a long time, suddenly seemed close enough to touch. Jacques smiled and said, "Forty-five minutes more. Rabbit is very good climber."
Forty-five minutes. The same amount of time as a rugby half. The second half had always seemed longer when my team was ahead, shorter when we were behind. But whether ahead or behind, there invariably came a moment when my exhaustion evaporated, when I realized that, win or lose, I would last the game and soon be quaffing a hard-earned beer or ten.

Just as the home-stretch syndrome had so often kicked new life into my body on the rugby field, it did so on the mountain. But a seemingly endless series of fixed cables soon pulled the plug on this energy reserve. My bare hand went numb from the cold and its fingers kept cramping up. My right hand was warm, but the crack in my elbow seemed to extend all the way to my fingertips. My whole forearm was deadened, and my hand lost almost all of its gripping power. Meanwhile, my thigh muscles were on fire, and blood pounded my temples. Still, I kept climbing, up one steel cable after another until there were no more. We traversed around the ridge to the north face, and that left just a long, steep snowfield between us and the summit. Jacques didn't pause to rest. I did my best to keep up, but each step took more and more effort. I eventually slowed down to a stop. Jacques told me to shorten my strides, but to keep moving. I shook my head and sat in the snow.

"Come Rabbit," he commanded, tugging the rope as though I were a dog on a leash. "We is close but weather is no good. We must go. Now."

I tried to protest, but there wasn't enough air in my
lungs to make audible speech. So I just huffed and puffed, hoping Jacques would get the message. He did and proceeded to curse me out in three or four languages. Then he pissed in the snow, wiped his hand on his corduroy knickers and took off, apparently determined to drag me if need be. I followed on unsteady legs. The slope was so steep that my knees left marks in the snow on every step, each one a battle against fatigue and altitude, and the worsening ache in my left knee. The mountain brought me to both of my knees again and again, but I concentrated on making one step, then another, trying to extend my stomach as I inhaled deeply, then needing to gasp several short breaths. The ground seemed to be moving as much as my feet. Little pings of light darted in front of my eyes. I had trouble focusing. My legs felt heavier than in last night's dream. How many more steps? One more. Then another. And another. I looked up at the summit. It didn't seem to be getting any closer.

The rope was tugging at my waist with each of Jacques' strides. I grabbed it with my hand and sat down, leaning against the slope.

"No rest now," Jacques said. "We is very near. Come. Weather is no good."

He pulled on the rope. I pulled back.

"Don't... pull... me," I gasped. "Let... me... do it... on... my own."

He shrugged. "Okay. But we go now. Or we go down."
I rolled over to my hands and knees, struggled to my feet and willed them to start moving again. With each step, I seemed to bear all of the pain this mountain had laid on me throughout my life. I kept thinking of Hyman Eisenstark's ordeal as well as what Kim had said about the time he tended his cancer-ridden mother, how he had to wade his way through pain before finding happiness. I knew I could do the same, step by step, until there was no more pain. My eyes saw nothing but Jacques' footprints in the crusty snow and how my rented boots made two marks for every one of his.

His strides started lengthening. Walking seemed to be marginally easier. My knees stopped scraping the snow. I raised my head and saw the summit just ahead. Twenty yards at most. My leg muscles were burning as I labored through the last few paces. And then, at long last, I was standing on the Matterhorn's summit.

All of my pain should have been vaporized by the glory of the conquest. I'd been expecting to feel something special, if not miraculous. At the very least, I thought that I should have felt something other than an unmitigated desire to sit down. But I didn't.

Jacques shook my hand, offered me one sip of schnapps from a hip flask and sat next to me for a few minutes. I still couldn't catch my breath. He didn't even seem to be winded. This was supposed to be a dream come true, but the unrelenting reality of my exhausted body was overwhelming.
I could only think with dread that the trip down would be every bit as long as the one up and worried that I wouldn't have the strength to make it.

The sky above was clear, a twilight shade of blue even though it was not yet noon. Below, a sea of clouds wiped out whatever view of earth we might have had. I didn't care. I looked along the ridge to the Italian summit, lower by a few feet. The iron cross was standing near it, and I wished I had the energy to walk over there. But I didn't. My head felt heavy. I bowed it and let my eyes wander the ground. Edward Whymper had theorized that the great forces creating mountains also worked on a smaller scale, and, when climbing, he said he often found rocks that approximated the shapes of their mountains. I dug around the snow, looking for a miniature Matterhorn. But the closest thing I found was a triangular stone which could have represented half of the mountains on earth.

I heard voices. The guy in the day-glo helmet and his partner arrived, then a guide with the busty stockbroker, who found plenty of air with which to boast about her outstanding lung capacity. She did have an impressive thoracic region. In fact, I pictured her turning around unexpectedly and knocking the rest of us off the narrow ridge of the summit.

Jacques talked with the other guide for a minute, snapped a few pictures of him with his well-endowed client, then handed the camera back to her and waved me on. I
nodded. It was too crowded up here now. I took the triangular stone to plant by Robby's grave and followed Jacques as he started walking back down the snowslope.

"You first," Jacques said, pausing to let me go ahead. "Be careful. Most accidents are when going down."

I nodded, but was too tired to keep his words from going in one ear and out the other.
CHAPTER 43

With boots and crampons cutting elongated footprints into the steep, crusty snowslop, I descended into the clouds. Within minutes, the air turned the same color as the snow. I felt as though I were walking through a white void. This whole expedition wasn't anything like I'd imagined. The day should have been clear, the view more breathtaking than the altitude, and the guide a Swiss version of Robby. Everything was out of whack. There was no sun, no view, and my guide was a testy Frenchman who kept calling the Matterhorn a bitch.

Whatever energy I'd recouped on top quickly waned, and my bad knee found the descent even more taxing than the ascent. I started favoring it more and more, which threw me off-balance enough to slip now and again. Each misstep was immediately checked by the ever-vigilant Jacques, who kept steady tension on the line that was tied around my waist. I felt badly about being such a load, but couldn't do anything about it. At one point, there was a momentary break in the clouds, and I caught a glimpse of the Hornlihutte far, far below. I wished I had a hang glider. Even though I'd never flown one before, I thought I would have gladly taken my
chances. One way or another, I just wanted to be back at that lodge.

The clouds quickly fused together again, wiping out my view of the Hornlihutte. I trudged onward, through the void, with no end in sight. I kept expecting to pass climbers going the other way, but none even came within earshot. Jacques said they all must be heading down, turned back by the weather.

Dark forms began to materialize here and there, atolls of rock in the sea of snow. They grew as we descended, seeming to change into ever bigger islands before connecting like continents. When there was more rock than snow, Jacques and I stopped to take off our crampons. The numbed fingers of my gloveless hand could barely undo the frozen straps, and by the time I finished, I felt too comfortable to get up and start walking again. But I did, my knee buckling unexpectedly once, then again and again. My knee now seemed to be like a time bomb, and I could only hope it wouldn't detonate before we got back to the Hornlihutte, safe and sound.

We downclimbed some fixed cables, skirted a snowfield and followed a ledge around the ridge and onto the north face. I hadn't remembered climbing on the north face at all on the way up until we were close to the top and asked Jacques about it.

"This is more faster way for going down," he said.

A shortcut. I can't say I didn't welcome it. The
ledge dipped and curved, then narrowed until disappearing completely. Jacques seemed surprised and looked all around like a lost tourist. He peered down.

"Oh," he said. "Is wrong way. Right way is next ledge. But we climb down here to it."

I looked down, saw the ledge below as well as the near vertical cliff between it and us.

"Why don't we rappel to it?" I asked. When Robby had taken me climbing, rappeling was my favorite part. I remembered how I'd wrap the rope around my shoulder and between my legs, then just lean back and let gravity do the work. It was both thrilling and effortless, like skydiving.

Jacques apparently had other ideas. He snorted and said, "From when is you boss? You pay me, but on mountain, I am boss. And I say we climb."

Robby would have let me rappel. But Jacques wasn't Robby. And this wasn't the Yorktown cliffs in suburban Philadelphia. It was the Matterhorn, where ten people had lost their lives since May.

Jacques unraveled several lengths of rope from the coil on his shoulder and knotted it around his waist. "You first," he said, looping the line between us around his back. "I belay you. The ledge twenty meters down. You stop there. Okay?"

"Oui, boss."

Although the cliff was almost vertical, there were
plenty of solid holds. I got down it without even having to use my bad arm, except for when a rock shifted unexpectedly beneath my right foot. Nevertheless, I was relieved to reach the ledge. It was about three feet wide and rimmed a steep snowslope. I sat down on its edge and stuffed a handful of snow into my mouth.

"Okay Rabbit!?"

"Yeah!"

I probably would have had a magnificent view on a clear day, but the mountain was totally fogbound. Visibility couldn't have been more than fifty feet in any direction. I didn't really care. It felt great just to sit down. I was exhausted, and the quiet solitude was so pleasant, so relaxing. I leaned back on my left elbow and could have fallen asleep on the spot.

I heard something. The prattle of cracking rock. It sounded distant in the fog, but Jacques had driven the explosive nature of avalanches into my head. I quickly hopped down to the snow and ducked under the lee side of the ledge.

"MERDE!!...ERDE...erde..."

As Jacques' cry echoed all around, a small boulder slammed into the ledge above my head and bounced over it. My guide was right behind. He cleared the ledge, hit the snowslope with a grunt just below me and started tumbling like a downhill skier who falls on the steepest part of a course. He was desperately trying to check his momentum,
yet seemed to be picking up speed.

I watched him as though I were watching a dream, something that couldn't be happening. Jacques started fading away into the fog, trailing the blue and red climbing rope. My eyes made the connection between that rope and the other end tied around my waist. I stood up and reached for the ledge, but was off-balanced when Jacques hit the end of the line. Suddenly, I was airborne. But just for a second. A wall of snow smacked my face. Then I was tumbling. The whole world turned a cold white. There was no up nor down, just the sensation of hitting snow and flying through air. Careening along the slope in longer and longer bounds, I hit on my hip, shoulder and back, crampons tied to the bottom of my daypack jingling together until I landed on them and felt their bite. The slope must have leveled off a bit, because I stopped tumbling and started sliding on my belly, face-first. I spread my arms and legs and tried to dig my hands and feet into the snow. But there was nothing to grab, no way to stop, or even slow down.

I saw Jacques just ahead to my right. Somehow, I'd almost caught up to him. The slack in the line seemed to give it a twisting, turning, slithering life of its own. Jacques was also on his belly, but facing uphill. His hands were dragging in the snow. The right seemed to hit something that kicked it into the air. Or maybe he was waving me that way, to the left of a small black outcropping that had suddenly appeared through the fog. He was sliding
to its right, about to sail off the end of the snowslope with nothing but clouds beyond. And once he went, I'd be gone too, my nightmare come true. Either that, or I'd smash into the outcropping, which was directly in front of me and approaching fast. With the instinct of a gymnast, I dipped my head, rolled over in a tuck, jammed my boots into the crusty snow at the base of the outcropping and sprang to its left.

For a long second, I fell into nothingness. Then a searing pain ripped across my gut, once, twice, three times, driving the air from my lungs. It felt as though I'd been torn in half, but after repeated bungy-cord-like bounces, neither half was still falling.

I was alive. Dangling in the air at least fifty, but perhaps a thousand, feet above the ground. The fog made it impossible to tell.

I looked up and saw that the rope had snagged on the outcropping, as I'd been hoping. Jacques had fallen to its other side and was dangling about thirty feet below me, face down, body doubled up, spinning slowly. The rest of the rope must have slipped off his shoulder, because a length was hanging down from the knot at his waist, disappearing into the fog below. I felt as though someone had just punched me in the solar plexus and I didn't have the breath to even yell to Jacques to see if he was all right. Instead, I just hung where I was and tried to force some air into my lungs.
Jacques looked up over his shoulder and groped for the line with one hand. When he grabbed it and tugged, I dropped about a foot. The rope above had nearly cleared the outcropping and was now tenuously perched near its tip. Jacques pulled on the line again, and I watched it slip a bit closer to the edge. My breath came back instantly.

"Jacques! Don't move!" My voice sounded so frantic it scared me. Jacques froze. "What?" he shouted back. "The rope caught on a rock, but it might come off. Don't move."

"You can climb up rope?"

"Maybe. But if you move, we're dead."

I reached over my head, grabbed the line and tried to work it into a more stable position on the rock. It didn't budge. The rope could only move one way because the outcropping was shaped like a stalagmite, wider at its base than top. From my angle, it looked like a maquette of the Matterhorn itself, the detail work of the great forces that had shaped this mountain. Slowly, I pulled myself up the line, hand over hand until I could wrap my feet in the slack. The rope held fast. I inched higher. The fall seemed to bring life back to my deadened right arm. And with the wind howling and a fathomless drop below, I felt a frightening, yet exhilarating sense of exposure, like freefalling. But now, I was going up, fighting gravity, forcing myself to move at a snail's pace, barely breathing.
Fifteen feet to go. Then ten. The shifting weight on the line caused it to slip again, this time to the very tip of the outcropping. I stopped climbing, held my breath. Another inch, and we'd be history. Two more candidates for Zermatt's graveyard.

"Safe?!" Jacques yelled.

"No! No! It's coming off! Don't move!"

He couldn't move. I couldn't move. The outcropping overhung a dark wall which was just five feet out of my reach. But there was no way to get over to it without swinging on the line, and that was suicide. I thought it was all over. But for some reason, I wasn't scared. My eyes locked onto where the taut rope was caught on the tip of the rock and waited almost calmly for it to slip off, realizing that it was my fate to die on the Matterhorn after all.

There was nothing I could do. Nothing anyone could do. The rope seemed to be taunting me, daring me to make a move. And if I didn't, it would get bored after a while and let a twitch from one of us or gust of wind free it from the rock. I looked down past Jacques' still form and into the white haze of clouds, wondering how far we would fall. Would it hurt to hit the ground? Would I even feel it? I felt calm, but my balls were tingling like crazy.

I looked up past the rope and outcropping, towards heaven, hoping that I would rise after I fell. Maybe even see Robby again. At least I wouldn't have to face Fritz and
explain how I'd lost one of his precious gloves. The sky brightened as though the sun were trying to break through the clouds. The light played tricks on my eyes. Something took form in the clouds. Pale, colorless, but perfectly defined. Two vast crosses on either side of a divided circle. The brocken spectre. Along with it, a dark figure materialized. It was a man, standing on the outcropping just above.

"Help us!" I hollered.

The man stepped on the rope, and I seemed to hear the word "climb" in my head. I pulled myself up the remaining stretch of rope, grabbed the side of the outcropping and crept up and over it in a way that kept tension on the line. As I moved, I glanced all around, looking for my savior. But there was no sign of him, not even a footprint in the snow. And in the sky, the brocken spectre had likewise disappeared without a trace.

"...and people say he can still be seen wandering the Matterhorn's most treacherous cliffs whenever the brocken spectre appears in the sky..."

Lord Francis Douglas? I shivered as I sat in the snow and braced my feet against the base of the rock.

"Okay Jacques! Start climbing!"

As he climbed, I kept looking around for whoever I'd seen, be it man or ghost. But there was just fog and snow and the rock at my feet. Oddly enough, there didn't seem to be any strain on the line as Jacques climbed. I loosened my
grip a little. No tension at all. The rope was stuck on the tip of the outcropping, as though Lord Douglas' foot had somehow fused it to the rock.

I held on with both hands anyway, just to make sure. But I didn't feel the pull of Jacques' weight. When his helmeted head popped into view, I could see the look of pain on his face. He dragged himself to my side, rolled onto his back and eased off his right glove with a moan. His thumb was contorted in dislocation. From rugby experience, I knew how to pop it back into place with a joint-cracking yank.

"Merci," he muttered, shaking the pain off. He slipped his other hand under the rope around his midsection and pushed it down to his waist with another grimace. "You is okay?"

Except for the ring of fire around my own torso, my whole body felt numb. "Yeah. I guess so. How about you?"

"Okay," he said, holding up a flap of shredded corduroy from his knickers. He seemed to be much more upset with the tear than the bleeding scrape on his hip beneath it. "I okay, but pants is kaput. Achchch. This mountain, she is the most big bitch."

"What the hell happened, Jacques?"

"I step on a rock, and it fall away. I hate Cervin. Always rocks is falling away from her. If they no make you fall, they hit you on the head. But we is lucky this time, no?"

"Yes. More than lucky. You're not going to believe
what happened. I saw the brocken spectre and..."

He cut me off with a wave of the hand. "Thirty years I am climbing this mountain and others all around. Brocken spectre? There is no thing or I am seeing it before."

"No. You don't understand. The rope was coming off and this guy—I think it was Lord Francis Douglas—appeared out of nowhere to step on it and tell me to start climbing."

Jacques wasn't listening. He tried yanking the rope to unsnag it. That failing, he crawled out on the outcropping and pulled it free. "The rope stick in crack," he said, returning to my side. "Is very good luck. If we falls, is one thousand meters, more or less, before we stop. My wife, she no like that."

"Stuck in a crack? But what about the guy I saw?"

He untied the knot at his waist and started coiling the rope. "Who know what we see when we think we is dying? I one time see a most beautiful angel who call to me. But I know she is no real thing."

Real or not, I couldn't help believing we were saved by something other than luck. Yet it had been luck. Dumb luck, like Hyman Eisenstark surviving Auschwitz. Jacques finished coiling the line. He slipped it over his shoulder and told me to put on my crampons because we'd have to walk up the snowslopes we tumbled down to get back to the descent route.

"Can't we just cut over to the ridge?" I asked.

"No. There is no way."
I felt cheated. The least the mountain could have done was concede us these two hundred or so vertical feet. But no. Cervin was going to be a bitch about it, even after kicking our asses. My hands were trembling so badly that Jacques had to help me with my crampon straps, sore thumb and all. As we stood up, he let loose a defiant hyena-laugh yodel, slapped my back reassuringly and motioned me on as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

We climbed up the snowfield alongside our skid marks. I seemed to have plenty of energy, even though the slope eventually grew as steep as the one leading to the summit. When we reached the ledge, we stopped to have a sip of schnapps before continuing our descent. My knee seemed to have gained strength in the fall, but Jacques didn't hurry me anymore. And he didn't try taking any other shortcuts. We climbed down the Moseleyplatte and the giant staircase, through the fog, one step at a time. I barely felt my body. Even my mind seemed numb, thinking of nothing more than where to put my feet, what rock to grab and which way to lean. Finally, some eight hours after mounting her, Cervin dismissed us from her court in the clouds.

I took off my daypack and sat at a wooden picnic table on the Hornlihutte's terrace, my whole body quivering. Jacques dropped his gear, sat on the tabletop and pulled off his gloves to massage his sore thumb joint. He started to say something, but was interrupted when a few guides came out of the lodge, hailing him in French. One of them touched
the tear in his knickers, and Jacques said something which sounded offhanded. The other guides all smiled at me.

"So, you make a little fall?" one asked.

"Yeah, you might say that," I replied, pointing at Jacques. "But he's the one who fell."

The guides looked at Jacques with raised brows. He started jabbering away in French. His hands fluttered through the air like butterflies as he no doubt described the fall, and they came to rest lightly on his knees. A blond guide said something angrily. Jacques cursed at him, and soon they were yelling at each other. The blond guy turned to me, his clear blue eyes looking sharp enough to pierce my skull.

"You tell vut happen."

It was an order, and I can't say his Gestapo accent endeared me to either him or his apparent cause. Jacques was watching me, his brown eyes soft and scared, like a man being led to his execution.

"I ask you vut happen."

"A rock broke," I said. "Jacques fell, and I wasn't paying attention. So we took a little tumble down a snowslope. It was no big deal. He got the worst of it."

That pretty much ended it. The blond guide got several last words in, his index finger firing blanks at Jacques' chest. Then he led his fellows back into the lodge. Jacques just sat where he was, idly rubbing his sore thumb.

"Thank-you," he said. "I do not know the right
words... I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," I replied, although I didn't know why. "Listen, about the tip..."

He held up a hand. "No. Already, you give me tip. Come, I buy you beer."

I'd been looking forward to a beer at the lodge all day. But now, I didn't want one. I didn't want to have to be asked over and over what had happened. And I didn't want to see any of the other climbers who had failed this time. I didn't want to tell them what it felt like to reach the summit and barely care, or nearly die on the descent and barely seem to care about that either. I just wanted to be alone, to try to figure out why I felt so empty inside.

I shook my head, stood up stiffly and put on my daypack. Jacques grabbed my shoulders and gave me a pseudo-kiss on each cheek, then walked me across the lodge's terrace. He seemed relieved that I was leaving so soon, as though he just wanted to forget the whole thing ever happened. Oddly enough, I kind of felt the same way as I started limping down the trail towards the tramway station.

I was lucky to be alive, but I didn't feel lucky. All I felt was my weariness and a vague sense of disappointment. My knee was hurting again, but the aches and pains throughout the rest of my body seemed to neutralize it. I couldn't wait to be back in Zermatt. Even though it was mid-afternoon, all I really wanted to do was climb into a soft, warm bed and sleep for a year.
When I reached the first switchback, I turned around. Jacques was standing on the terrace's low stone wall, a phantom in the mist. He waved one of his gloveless hands, right arm seeming to direct me to the left. I waved back and walked on. Once around the bend, both Jacques and the lodge were out of sight. So too was the Matterhorn. The amorphous gray clouds had obliterated all traces of it. It seemed as though the mountain no longer existed. As though it had never existed at all.
Floating alone in the tramway, I sat perfectly still, shoulders slumped, hands on lap, too relaxed to even want to fall asleep. My body ached all over, but it was a dull pain and so evenly spread out that no part hurt any worse than any other. Stiffness from fatigue, bruises from the fall, and even the throbbing pangs in my bum knee and cracked elbow fused together to create a warm, tingly sensation that eddied and flowed from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

I closed my dry eyes and listened to the steady purr of the tramway and the wind whistling through a cracked window. A slow, smooth descent. Each breath I took turned into a sigh of relief. It was all over now. The quest had been realized, the pact fulfilled. For the first time since Robby's death, the Matterhorn wasn't hanging over my head. And yet, I was still plagued by a feeling of emptiness, almost as though I had no heart, no core, no center.

With my eyes closed, totally relaxed, I began to see how living the dream had killed it. The dream had been beaten to death by reality. Yet the reality had been more like a nightmare, in fact, the same nightmare I'd dreamed.
over and over, tumbling down a snowslope on the Matterhorn to fall endlessly into space. I was still falling, through clouds, tumbling between fantasy and reality, not knowing where to land.

The tram rose slightly and jiggled as it passed a set of cable rollers. I opened my eyes, looked down at the evergreen treetops far below. I thought how ironic it would be if the tram car fell off. A horrible accident, they would say, but only one death. Lucky for a lot of other people.

But I knew this wasn't my day to die. If it had been, I never would have escaped the Matterhorn. I closed my eyes again and saw Jacques hit the snowslope and tumble down it, pulling me along, powerless to stop myself. I took a deep breath and felt where the rope had ripped into my abdomen. I could feel my boots resting flat on the tram's floor, yet saw them dangling over that fathomless drop. There was no fright in that vision now, just the exhilarating sense of exposure that I'd felt while hanging between life and death.

"What doesn't kill me makes me stronger."

I muttered my Nietzschean mantra over and over, feeling a bit more invincible each time. It was the same feeling I'd had when Robby pointed that arrow at my heart and riding Britannia through the English rain, what I'd felt after rugby games and skydiving jumps and when the setting sun splashed life in my face after cresting the cliff in Wales.
I wondered why I hadn't felt it earlier this day, when my crampons bit the Matterhorn's snowy summit, or when I pulled myself to safety over the outcropping, or when I finally plopped down at a table on the Hornlihutte's terrace. The truth was that I'd managed to duck yet another swipe of old Grim's scythe and conquer the mighty Matterhorn in the process. I'd also started something which I'd seen through to the end, even though there had been plenty of chances to bail out. As the tram neared the terminal in town, I could almost feel Robby patting my back, giving me a firm handshake, thanking me for finishing what he'd started. What we'd started together. And yet, there still seemed to be something missing.

When the tram car docked, I walked down Zermatt's main street to the Scorpio Boutique. Every muscle hurt, but the pain felt good for what it represented. The shop's door was locked, a cardboard sign taped to the inside of the window saying, "Be back in ten minutes" in English, German and French. Fritz would have to wait to hear how I'd lost one of his gloves, and how I'd nearly lost them both.

I wandered over to a grocery store, bought a liter of beer and sat on the steps of the old church drinking it. I took off my rented boots and rubbed my feet and my elbow and my knee and every muscle group I could reach. The village was getting foggy now, and my weariness seemed to increase with every swallow of beer. More than once I felt as though the whole thing had been nothing more than a dream, that I
would wake up in Jeff's apartment, or Kim's guest room, or next to Frannie in California. I wondered where I'd wake up if I had the choice.

"Hey Rabbit!"

It was Fritz. He walked up smiling. "So you climbed her?"

"Yeah. But I lost one of your gloves."

He patted my shoulder and laughed. "Better a glove than a hand, eh?"

"I guess so," I said, handing him the survivor.

"Actually, it wasn't my fault. My klutzy guide knocked it down the east face when we were putting on our crampons. Probably fell two or three thousand feet. But I'll buy you a new pair, the best money can buy."

"Ach, don't you worry about that."

"I do, and I will, and I won't take no for an answer."

"Whatever you say. But believe me when I tell you it was worth more than an old glove just to see you sitting here, looking so peaceful and fulfilled, like a man who has the world at his feet."

"Actually, I'm just tired," I said, then told him about the climb and the fall. When I finished, he whistled through his bushy moustache. "Well, that will be a story you'll tell your grandchildren someday."

I nodded, even though I couldn't even picture myself as a father.

Fritz glanced at his watch. "So what are your plans
"Plans? I don't know. Sit here, finish my beer..."

"And savor the victory?" He laughed. "Why not? You have earned it. But when you come down to earth, I have a business proposition for you."

"What's that?"

"Jeff called from France last night to say he is now engaged to marry, and Carol's father has offered him a job he cannot refuse. So I will be needing a boy to take pictures."

"Me?"

"Why not?"

"I don't have a camera, for one thing. And I've only done black and white lab work. I don't know the first thing about color."

"I have cameras, and the lab work is not difficult. I can teach you." He looked at his watch again. "But we will talk about it later. Now I must get back to the boutique. You never know when a rich lady will come by looking to spend a fortune of her husband's money. Whenever she comes, I must not keep her waiting."

Fritz slapped my knee with the orphaned glove, then stuck it in his back pocket and walked off, the glove's fingers waving bye-bye to me on every stride. He and I both knew there probably would be no such woman waiting for him now. Zermatt looked like a ghost town. But things would pick up in the winter, during ski season. I could see
myself skiing, snapping flicks of tourists, making a hundred bucks a day, all under the vigilant gaze of Cervin. I looked up toward the mountain and saw only clouds. I tried to picture what it had looked like from here, but could only see it up close, the rotten gray rocks and crusty white snow, cold and desolate, more dead than alive.

I polished off the beer and shuffled over to a nearby phone booth in my stockinged feet. I wanted to call everyone I knew, but settled on Kim because he'd be able to appreciate what I'd done more than anyone. He wasn't home. I tried Frannie, just to see what she'd say. A machine answered, and the operator cut the connection before the beep.

"Do you wish to try another number?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, then recited the first telephone number I'd ever learned. My parents were home. They accepted the charges and sounded more relieved than surprised to hear what I'd done.

"I knew it all along," my father said. "I knew what you were going to Europe for, but I didn't want to tell your mother because I knew how much it would worry her."

"What? You think I'm stupid, Abe? That you're some kind of genius to figure out what our meshugah son was up to?"

They fired off a bunch of questions about the climb. I told them it was taxing, but went smoothly. My mother asked if I'd been eating well. My father wanted to know what time it was over here. We talked and laughed, just like we used
to around the dinner table when Robby was alive.

"Got a rock from the top to plant by Robby's grave," I said.

There was a moment of silence on the line. My father cleared his throat. "So now that you've got that bug out of your system, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I can get a pretty good job here for the ski season."

I heard his sigh. "Don't you think it's about time you did something constructive with your life?"

"You still don't get it, do you Dad?"

"Get what?"

"I have been doing something constructive with my life."

"You call vagabonding constructive, Stanley?" He laughed. "And climbing mountains? No, son. Those are avocations, hobbies, things to do in your leisure time. When I say constructive, I mean finding yourself a career, working for a living."

"I don't need to work right now. I've still got nearly two thousand bucks left."

"Go ahead and laugh. Ha-ha. Tell me what an old fart I am, but don't come running to me when you run out of dough, because I'm not going to give you any. Maybe then you'll understand that you can't be irresponsible your whole life. One of these days, son, you're going to have to grow up."

"But I have been growing up, and there's no price you
can put on what I've seen and done and learned."

"Frankly, that sounds like a load of crap to me, Stanley. Just like your word of honor, or did you just forget promising your mother and me you'd never take up mountain climbing?"

"No. I remembered. But I wasn't thinking of you. I was doing something for myself. Something I had to do."

"And what about us?" he asked. "Did you ever consider what it would have done to us if you'd been killed?"

I hadn't, but did now. "It would have saved you the trouble of having to deal with a problem kid like me."

The phone line clicked.

"Dad?"

"He hung up," my mother said. "You shouldn't have said that."

"Why? Because it's true?"

"Because it's not true. We both love you dearly."

I started getting choked up.

"Parents can't help but love their children," she continued. "We have no choice."

"Thanks a lot, Mom," I said, swallowing the dwarfed lump in my throat.

"But you should really think of us more often. A post card every now and then would be nice, and a few more phone calls. We'll pay. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Your father and I do love you."
What could I say? "Me too, Mom."

"Oh, by the way. You got a letter from that girl in California."

"Frannie?"

"Well, it's not actually a letter. It's an invitation."

"An invitation?"

"Well, not really an invitation. An announcement, I suppose. I hope you don't mind that I opened it. I didn't even notice the name..."

"An announcement of what?"

"Her wedding."

"You're kidding."

"No. She's getting married. Next month. To a boy named Raymond something or other. I have it right here and can read it to you if you want."

"No. Don't bother."

She did anyway, then said, "There was no RSVP card. That's why I said it wasn't really an invitation. Oh, and she wrote 'Vaya con Dios' on the bottom, whatever that means."

"Go with God. It means go with God."

"That's nice," my mother said, then shouted. "Okay Abe! Just wait a goddam minute! Listen, son, your father is tearing apart my freezer looking for his frozen waffles. Everything is ready to fall out, and if I don't go now..."

There was a crash in the background.
"Abe! Goddamit Abe! You are the most impatient son of a bitch in the world."

I laughed. "Bye, Mom."

"Oh, Stanley. Good-bye, son. Vaya con adios, or whatever it is."

Vaya con adios? I chuckled to myself, thinking that children can't help but love their parents, too. Like them, we have no choice. I bought another beer and sat back down on the church steps, picturing what Frannie would look like in a wedding gown. Beautiful, of course. But I couldn't imagine Ray Warren in a tux and patent-leather shoes. Surprisingly, I didn't feel bad about not being in those shiny black shoes myself. In fact, I didn't feel much of anything, no remorse, no anger, no joy, no jealousy. I was just glad she hadn't been home when I called. I should have known that there was no going back. To Frannie. To any home I'd ever known. To the past. I looked up towards the mountain. It was gone, erased from the horizon. There was no going back to the dream, either.

My beer bottle was half-full one sip, half-empty the next. That hollow feeling resurfaced, a vague sense of loss and disappointment. I couldn't understand it. I'd come, seen and conquered. What was there to be disappointed about, unless...

A chill ran across the back of my neck. Was it possible I was disappointed that I hadn't died? Had I been looking forward to sacrificing my life on the Matterhorn
since the day Robby died? Was that why I'd come here? To join him in the dream till death brought us together again? I'd almost been expecting it, been prepared for it, had even accepted it while dangling from that rope in the sky. But now, I had to live without the dream, without Robby. Was I really disappointed, or just plain scared and lost? What was I going to do now?

Funny. My father's question had become my own. Why couldn't he understand me? He'd relied too much on Robby to raise me, to teach me everything I'd need to know. Maybe I'd relied on Robby too much as well. I'd been listening to him ever since I could remember, even after his death. I was still Robby's little brother, not knowing how to grow up because he'd died before presenting me with a model of adulthood. Like him, I'd stopped maturing at the age of twenty-one. I was almost twenty-nine and still living life like an irresponsible college kid. Was it possible my father was actually right about something?

I took my lucky half-dollar out of my pocket and rubbed my thumb against JFK's smooth cheek. To stay in Zermatt would just be killing time, and I knew that whatever magic the Matterhorn might still hold for me would be lost if the mountain became too familiar. Then again, a hundred bucks a day wasn't exactly killing time. I could live above the boutique, ski all day, party at night, be a local. And when spring came, I could maybe climb the mountain again on a clear day, in better shape, with my pick of guides.
I flipped the coin.

Heads. It wanted me to stay. I smiled, thinking that the coin hadn't been right yet. And deep down I knew that it was time to move on, to walk out from beneath my brother's shadow, to live my own life for myself. But how? And where?

I had no place to call home, but that just meant I was free to go wherever I chose. Like cosmic navigating, I could make any perceptions I wished become a reality. Good ones, like riding a motorcycle across Europe, and bad ones, like tumbling down a snowfield on the Matterhorn. The lesson of cosmic navigating, I began to understand, was that dreams can come true. But just as reality is altered by perception, fantasy is altered by the hard facts of life. Both Ollie Tripod and Kim Erikson had been right. Perceptions can create realities even while realities are creating perceptions. The key to it all was finding the right balance, and, of course, having some idea of what dreams you want to live in the first place. But what did I want now? And where would I find it? I needed someplace to start over. Someplace special. Someplace where I wouldn't have to buy a new wardrobe for winter.

_Vaya con Dios_.

Frannie's words brought it all together. Like birds and baseball teams, wasn't it the most natural thing in the world for Jews to head south for the winter. And what better place than Israel? Israel. A young country I could
grow with, a struggling country I could fight for, a country built by the Jews, for the Jews. My once and future homeland. Ofer had said I should go there, and so had the Israeli at The Tent in Munich, and even Jeff. Maybe I'd fall in love on a kibbutz like he did. Or maybe I'd bump into Melissa somewhere in the Middle East. Anything was possible.

And much would happen. But I'm afraid that story will have to wait for another day. Let me just say that I felt reborn and spent a good part of the night celebrating my latest victory over old Grim, well aware that he would return again and again and ultimately win a final battle. I slept as though already in his arms, but awoke late the next morning to buy a new pair of gloves for Fritz, pack up my gear, strap it to my back and walk down to the railway station, pausing only to chant a final kaddish for the dead climbers in Zermatt's graveyard.