

Being & Becoming

a short story

by John T. Cullen

Being & Becoming

Tom touched the gun under the driver's seat. It was snowing so hard on the bridge that he could hardly see the car ahead of him, just its glowing red taillight rimed with constantly falling snow. He dimly saw flashing lights at the west end of the bridge, not the orange lights of road crews desperately battling the storm, but red white and blues twirling atop several police cars.

Tom felt muffled by the whiteness all around; the snow ate sound, even that of tires rumbling through the ruts of cars ahead. If he didn't -- But there was a small turnout ahead, just a single parking spot where the sidewalk dipped to street level, maybe for a maintenance crew to pull up its truck.

Without a further thought, Tom pulled out and stopped. He took the gun out and stared at it, as if it were going to speak to him. It was such a heavy, powerful object, a killer, that he half expected it to resist. But he tucked it under his heavy jacket and pushed the door open; there was a little give, for it was frozen to the car frame.

Slipping and sliding on ice just under the snow, Tom made his way to the railing. Blood rushed in his ears, and if anyone saw him and shouted, he did not hear. All he heard was the whine of wind, and he felt the bite of snowflakes on top of his ears. He could taste the cold; it tasted of snow and oil and tires and river mud.

When he got to the railing, he leaned against it. A clot of snow fell away as if he'd thrown up; it twirled in the air, disappearing among the ice floes on the Mississippi. Leaning over thus, he heard the wind howling like a choir in the steel rigging under the bridge. The concrete pilings were like organ pipes, and the sound rose and fell.

The gun didn't twirl, but it dropped straight down, resentfully turning, slowly, to survey its surroundings with disdain. Two or three seconds later it made a tiny plume among the ice floes.

* * *

Tom was hungry and he couldn't see and the old stationwagon wouldn't go any faster. Not only that, but he was broke. His stomach kept signaling that he was hungry. He felt light-headed, and wasn't sure if it was fumes leaking around the manifold through the rusty floor into the cab, or if it was hunger. How long since he'd eaten? That would be the cellophane-wrapped cupcakes yesterday, cheap off-brand.

Near Albuquerque, late in the afternoon, he pulled over to count his change. With the engine off, he felt almost restful. The sun shone through the dirty windshield and laid its glow like a yellow drug in the back seat over Tom's neatly folded clothes and boxed belongings. He didn't have many places to look -- the ashtray (he didn't smoke), the cigar box on the rear floor among the paperbacks, the pockets of his other jeans, the breast pocket on his flannel windbreaker. Two bucks. He'd parked the car on a hill in case it wouldn't start. Then he could roll it down and jump-start it in second gear. Provided nobody pulled in front of him. Everything was difficult. Why was life this way? Gravity kept you from flying off into space, he supposed, but it made things fall down. It helped you start your car, but if someone pulled in front of you as you rolled downhill, you had to jam on your brakes and then you were stuck with no place to roll, no way to build new momentum. Two bucks and thirty two cents. That was every penny.

He sat back and drew a deep breath. Being hungry made you tired. He'd just outrun a terrific storm that had swept down from the Rockies, moving east toward the Mississippi Delta like a mountain range of smoky gray air. Like a burning building, but wet instead. Cold. Dismal. Hard to drive in. No wonder he was tired. You had to sit hunched, squinting, blinded by gusts of rain breaking on your windshield. The wipers, on max, could only provide glimpses. If you were broke, or hard-pressed, or just plain loved the feel of roads passing under your car, you kept moving. It was a great country, an immense country. You kept driving, possessed by a burning urgency, with the black rain squalls at your back and the water hammering in your face. It was like being a mile underwater. It weighed down on your spirit like a mile of ocean water. It sure made you tired. Made your legs tense, your back sore, your shoulder ache. No wonder he felt this way.

He couldn't remember if he'd ever been in Albuquerque. He had maps in the car and he'd study them tomorrow. Yawning, he walked to the corner and surveyed his world. At least he was warm, for now. It was good to stretch his legs. Cold, though. He shivered. And he smelled snow in the air. The sky looked like gray paste. A couple of little grammar school girls waited at the light on the other side. For a moment, it was like, is this it? Is this the whole world? The universe? Life? At one time I was a child and waited at a corner for the light to change. The red hand winked away, replaced by the little white man. Now I am on the other side of the street, crossing the other way. The girls were in no hurry, chattering, shifting their heavy school bags from one shoulder to the other. What did they see in him? A thin, unshaven man, in his 30's, but he probably looked older, in need of a bath.

In the corner store he bought a carton of milk and a plastic-wrapped loaf of sandwich bread, day old and on sale. He had a few coins left and, on a whim, bought a packet of licorice gum. For old times' sake.

It was night when he climbed in the car -- it did smell faintly of himself in there; could use airing out, but the temp was dropping and now was not the time. He drove to a church parking lot, pulled in next to some other cars by the rectory door, and climbed into the back. He pulled the little torn curtains over the station wagon's rear windows, not that anyone would peek, and then got into his long johns. He put on the rest of his clothes and crawled into his sleeping bag -- good expensive mummy bag he'd bought from a former mountaineer. Former, because the man had fallen from a cliff and was paraplegic. Actually the wife had sold it to Tom behind her husband's back, hating it and everything connected with, oh well. Tom rolled to one side and then the other, pulling his spare blankets under the sleeping bag, and around it like a volcano. Anything to conserve heat. He opened the milk and drank half; greedily; he had to stop himself from downing it all. Then he opened the plastic bag and breathed deeply the smell of the bakery. He always did that because it reminded him of his mother's kitchen. That was long ago and never to return. He reached in and tore hunks of the insides of the loaf, so that the brown crust hung in bracelets on his wrist. He mashed the bread in his palm and bit off chewy mouthfuls, groaning with relief as his hunger abated. The bread would swell gently during the night, soaking up his stomach acids, sending long telegraphs of wellness and fullness to his brain. It would build strong bodies twelve ways while he slept.

Sated, he stared at the last lingering fans of violet and orange light in the western sky. As the night settled in, Tom's eyes closed and he fell into a deep sleep. If he had dreams, he could not remember them when he awoke, not even to say whether they were peaceful or tortured. He thought he heard someone screaming: "A.J.! A.J.!" Several times during the night, he opened one eye as the car was buffeted; he thought it was teenagers and wished they would go away because he was so tired.

He awoke with a start. It was still night. The glow on the dash read 4:30. Was that Central or Mountain time? He couldn't remember if he'd changed the dial. It was cold in the car; of course. He pushed the curtain aside and wiped copious fog off the window. He was amazed to see that the windows on the outside were rimed in frost. Thick snowflakes glued themselves in tiny incremental bits to the growing sediment all around the car. Oh Jesus. He pushed the sleeping bag away, shivering. It was so-o-o cold.

Needed to g-g-get the car rolling, the heater on.

Easier said than done. Hopping up and down to keep the chill in the seat springs from numbing his rear end, he kept trying the ignition. Plenty of spark. The car whined and whined. There was a bang and black smoke fanned away from the sides, where the exhaust pipe should have been. At last, she started up. Skidding slightly on an inch of snow blanketing the flat and sacred ground of the parking lot, he backed the car out. The heater would cut in soon, he hoped; he'd replaced the core twice and couldn't afford to do so again. But soon he'd scratch together a little money again. He found a paper cup filled with peanut shells on the seat beside him, under the newspapers and tissue box. He rolled down the window, tossed the shells out, and scooped up fresh snow from the car roof. He found the bread bag, glad to see there were plenty of round crusts to eat. That would keep him going a while longer.

The ride into California was even wilder than his passage across the plains. Visibility was nearly zero. If the sun had appeared, it wasn't making much of itself. Big rigs jackknifed on frozen asphalt, sliding into each other like pins at a bowling alley while snow devils whirled across the road surface. It was hard work, and tiring, to drive like this. He was afraid sometimes to ask himself why he did it, because he was afraid the answer might be to live to ask the same question the next day. Cars went off the road right and left as Tom drove through the high mountain passes. Here and there, he saw twirling red lights. He spotted Zonie highway patrolmen standing in clusters, probably debating about when and where to start closing the freeways. The radio, too, was saying you could get snowed in for weeks at a time.

But the road started downhill and the snow turned into fierce rain, with wind gusts that shook the big freeway signs as if they were made of paper. Gradually, the black clouds tangling tightly wedged between mountain shoulders gave way to lighter and lighter colors, thinner rain, streaks of sunshine. For a long time, Tom drove through the light drizzle. The land lay lower, alternating in stretches of forest and desert. The road wound ever downward, and pretty soon Tom had the car window open. He drove through one small town after another. Here and there, a palm tree reared out of the mist, slanting into a wall of drizzle. A rainbow shimmered in the sky.

Violence swept up the road, hitting Tom while he was still hypnotized by the rainbow. The huge rig bore down on him in a wake of fine mud. He realized he must have been dozing off. Too late. He swerved. In slow motion, he saw himself losing control. Felt himself turn the wrong way, crosswise in the middle of the road. He managed to grab the steering wheel with both hands, just as the car spun out on sand, skidded off the road onto a sandy lot, and smashed sideways against a tree.

He must have blacked out for a few moments, because suddenly the car was surrounded by faces. They were staring at him, and nobody was making a move to help him. He felt locked into place, frozen into this moment. His head rolled forward of its own accord, and he found himself staring at his hands. They were peppered with black dots that turned out, at second glance, to be blood spatters. The sight of his hands, and the sound somewhere of children laughing and a woman screaming, broke him out of his freeze. He came to life suddenly, re-empowered over his body, filled with a supercharge of adrenaline. With one hand he undid the seatbelt while with the other he yanked open the door. He smelled the burning now, the rubber gaskets and the oozing oil and the trickling gasoline, all in a paraffin cocktail. Coughing and sputtering, he staggered away from the car. He was dimly conscious of faces around him, backing away from him. He heard the children screaming. The woman fell silent. With a laugh, he turned suddenly and made his way back to the car. A different woman screamed now. Men shouted. The car was beginning to smoke now. Clots of black smoke oozed from the crumpled hood. The air was getting hot and difficult to breathe. Coughing, he pulled open the back window, conscious of the heat all around him and of the gas tank near his lap. Fumbling, he found the cigar box and pulled it out. Hugging it to himself, he staggered away from the car. The blast, when the tank caught, knocked him off his feet. It wasn't an explosion so much as a rushing of air and heat. He felt it singe the hair around his temples. He

lay on the ground smelling the charred bonemeal smell of his hair, and wept.

A few minutes later, he sat up, aided by the hands of small Chicano children. Three or four dark-skinned little girls helped him to sit up. Their small hands were surprisingly firm as they guided his elbows. Though they were about ten, their eyes radiated compassion and grownup understanding.

The fire department came and doused the car. A policeman in khaki rode up on a motorcycle looking magnificent in his shiny knee-boots and gold helmet with smoky sun shield. The policeman glanced at the car and then walked over to Tom. A strapping, wiry black man, he chased the girls away with a gesture. "You hurt?"

Tom rose to his feet, testing himself. His hands stung, and his left side in the middle back was sore; must have bumped himself with the armrest. "No, not much. Just a few cuts."

The officer, who was short-haired and clean-shaven and of a color like nutmeg, leaned close. Every bit of him seemed starchy; Tom smelled a hint of some light citrus cologne, and envied him. "Don't move. I just want to smell your breath, not you." He sniffed resentfully, and quickly backed away. "I don't smell any booze on you. This may be your lucky day yet. Why'd you run into that tree?"

"Tired, Sir. Been driving for days. Got blinded somehow, skidded on sand."

"Car's got South Dakota plates. You got the papers?"

"I guess -- they're burning in the car. I have my license though." He fumbled with his wallet. Extracted the tattered bit of plastic, handed it over.

The policeman's eyebrow rose. "Kansas. Where are you from?"

"Kind of all over. I sort of travel a lot." He sized the policeman up, fighting a temptation to hit him. He was too weak to even try, and he pushed the crazy thought aside. Am I losing my mind completely? He wondered.

The policeman looked him up and down. "When was the last time you shaved? Had a bath the last month? Haircut?" His eyes grew flinty. "Roll up your sleeves and show me the meat on your arms." Tom complied, conscious of people watching. "No tracks. You on the run for anything? Might as well tell me, because I'm going to check you out right back to grammar school or better."

"I haven't done anything." He was careful not to raise his voice. With a man like this, that would only make things worse. But he felt a pink wash of humiliation; his cheeks burned like the fire in the car.

"Don't go anywhere." The policeman turned and walked to his motorcycle.

Tom waited. Time went by and he squatted, then sat on the ground.

The fire department left and in the same dust cloud appeared a tow truck. The tow truck driver, who wore blue overalls, walked up to Tom: "You got insurance?"

"I'm afraid it lapsed."

The man, tough-looking with leathery skin and a cloud of white hair jammed under a baseball cap, stared at Tom.

"It ran out a month or two ago."

"Who's gonna pay me for the tow? You got money in your pockets?" He eyeballed Tom as the

policeman had.

"I can earn some money. I'm just trying to get a new start here. I can pay you, but it will take a little time."

The policeman returned. "Tom Smith, huh? You got an alias, Sir? Tom Smith has a clean record with the Kansas HP, but you all of a sudden don't look like Tom Smith to me. You got any money on you?"

"Nossir. Just the value of the car."

The officer looked at the charred, smoking wreck. "You figure that car's worth enough to keep me from arresting you for vagrancy?"

"Sir, I can be out of town in a couple of minutes. I'll never come back."

The truck driver said: "Who is going to pay for the tow? That's what I want to know. Quit dicking around here, Joe."

"Open the cigar box."

The officer used his ballpoint pen to stir things around. Photos, little knickknacks. "Okay." He flipped open his warrant book. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Antonio here is going to tow your car to the impound lot. I'm going to write you a ticket for unsafe driving. Cost you about \$500. I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to keep the white copy and the yellow copy in my book here. I'm not going to turn them in. I'm going to issue you the pink copy. If I don't hear from Antonio the next ten days you paid him--."

"--A hundred bucks--" Antonio said.

"--Then I'm going to submit these to the department and the county clerk, and we'll be looking for you. Sir, do you understand what I just told you?"

"Yessir." Tom took the pink paper, a flimsy that smelled metallic, and folded it with dirty, shaking fingers.

The policeman went back to his motorcycle and drove away. The tow truck driver hooked up Tom's car and then pulled up. "Get in." He sniffed. "You're not oozin' anything, are you?"

Tom held up his hands. "Just my hands, I think."

The driver threw a roll of gauze on the seat between them. "Take what you need. You can wash up at the station." He shifted the truck into gear and pulled into traffic. In a milder tone he asked: "You ain't busted up inside or nothing, are you?"

"Just a few aches here and there. Thanks."

The gas station was in a valley -- canyon, they called it here -- deep in the folds of some pine-stubbed mountains. The rock faces up around looked blue and hard. It was cold down here, a dry cold. Antonio owned the station, where two skinny blond mechanics in their 20's, in blue jumpsuits, smeared with oil -- labored over Cougar's cars. Cougar was the nearby town, Antonio said, named after the Mountain Lions who still today roamed about. "When was the last time you ate?"

"I -- ."

"God dammit, nevermind." Antonio went into the cashier's office, where a young woman looked up from a magazine. "Maria. Ring up a sandwich and an orange juice," he instructed. The woman, who wore glasses and no makeup, moved gently. She had soft fingers, moving on the cash register keys. Antonio

reached into one of the deli cases and took out a prefab sandwich and a plastic container. "You go wash up now, hear?"

Tom went behind the garage, where a floor of pine needles sloped upward. He smelled the toilet before he saw it, pungent urine that fought with the natural pine smell. Tearing the cellophane open, he wolfed at half of the sandwich. He turned his head to the side, ripping the bread with his teeth so the upper slice slid on its mayonnaise surface. He sucked the mayonnaise from between his fingers, and the soot there along with it. The ham and the butter mingled on his palate like a song. He'd forgotten how good oil tasted. He chewed the juice out of the lettuce. He tore off the plastic top and let the bittersweet orange juice trickle between his teeth, stinging his tongue, and down his throat. The salt in the ham lingered on his palate and he wished he had more. He sat against the wall and took his time with the other half, savoring every bite.

He washed his face and hands in cold water, figuring the urine smelled bad but it was like a song that told him he was alive. Now that he had something in his gut, he breathed right again. Took the strain out of his shoulders. Made him euphoric. He went to the cashier's office. Antonio was counting money, licking his fingers on every tenth bill. He breathed loudly as he did so. Maria looked up from her magazine and regarded Tom curiously. Antonio handed her the money, without fully looking back. He was more interested in Tom. "So, you gonna pay me for the tow."

"Yessir, I will. And for the sandwich."

"Okay, when?"

"I've gotta find some work. A place to stay. No car -- ."

"Excuses. Bunch of frigging excuses. Okay. You want another sandwich?"

"Yessir."

"I got some work for you to do, just today and then we'll see."

"Thanks!"

He had Tom clean up the property. Tom moved stiffly. It was hard to bend over. For a while he thought he might have some cracked ribs. Then he began to think maybe just some pulled muscles. Either case, it would go away. Pulled muscles, three days; cracked ribs, two to three weeks. If he could take it easy. Which wasn't likely.

Antonio left him alone, and Tom managed to fill three rusty 50-gallon drums with everything from old wrappers to dessicated pine boughs. Toward dark, Antonio called him in. Two sandwiches, a can of chili, and two colas stood on the counter. "You move slow, like maybe you hurt, but you a steady worker. You want to come back tomorrow?"

Tom knew it was his best straw to grab for at the moment. "I'd like that, yes."

"You earned yourself a bed for the night. Tomorrow we talk a little more."

Bed was a mattress in a tool shed that smelled mostly of machine oil, which Tom liked, but too often there was a whiff of something foul. Dead mice in the walls, Tom figured, lying awake, staring at the full moon through a cracked, cobwebby window. Poison them, then they crawl and hide in the walls. Still, it was warm. The room, other side of the work bays, was tight. Antonio had left the big water heater on to heat it. That was this tank in the corner, standing upright and wrapped in insulation, with pipes running to the garage sinks and toilets. Tom lay wrapped in two old army blankets and watched a spider spinning its web across the face of the moon until he fell asleep.

Antonio had sandwiches and orange juice for him in the morning. "I gotta be honest," he said. "I got two mechanics here and we're just barely busy enough to keep it open. I need a yard man but I can't afford to pay you much. And you owe me money."

Tom chewed slowly on the sandwich, savoring it. He was ready to pop the whole thing in his mouth if Antonio came sailing over the counter to grab the sandwich back. "I will pay you the money. I do think it would be good if you could pay me by the hour."

"Pay you!"

"I know you're barely able to stay open, but I'm hard on my luck, Antonio. I can clean up the place, maybe fix the toilet for you, and I'll be happy if you give me minimum wage."

"Minimum wage!"

"I'll work extra hard for you."

"I tell you what, Tom. I don't give you minimum wage. That's too fucking much. Crazy, shit like that. I tell you what, Tom. I will pay you three bucks an hour. That's after tax. Same as I would pay you on paper. Only I pay you under the table."

"That's fine by me."

"Also, I give you sandwiches. They are a day old and I got to toss them out, but they still good. You give me an honest day's work and keep your nose clean, you can stay a while."

Tom thanked him. For the next two weeks he labored at the gas station. He never once left the property, and that was fine with him. He felt rested. His side stopped hurting. His hands scabbed over and healed. He got a hot shower every evening, long as he wanted. He'd spend a half hour in there, soaping himself, turning this way and that. It was good that the road no longer moved under his feet. He felt sheltered and protected in the deep canyon. He only wished it were warmer. The sun never directly reached here. He couldn't remember ever being in a place where the sunshine never reached. Closest it came, on a sunny day in the early afternoon, was when the day's promise was already shot and a drunken afterglow painted the blue rocks up above the back of the station. Within an hour, the glow was gone, fading into the blackish green of the pine trees. And the cold wind would whisper on down, combing through the pine boughs like through a thousand harps, combs, organ pipes, anything that made a noise when wind slid on its blade. On days when it wasn't sunny, a watery fog the color of thrown dishwater would come rolling through the canyon. Those were days to wear Antonio's old army jacket. The mechanics' breath would flap away as they spoke with customers.

Tom got the toilet fixed. He had to dig up the pipes outside with a shovel. The mechanics braised in new piping where the old had been cracked by a tree root. Tom closed the hole back up. The piss smell went away. Tom also found the mummified mice, two of them, in the wallboards near his pillow. He threw in some pine needles for fragrance and hammered the board back. The cigar box he hid under the bunk. On the tenth day, Antonio called him in. As usual, a sandwich sat on the counter. Antonio winked and handed him a yellow and a white slip of paper. "You paid up, buddy. You want to stay, you stay and work. When you ready, you go. I know you by now. You like a cat. You stick around when you hungry and then you leave, is nothing gonna keep you from hitting the far side of the moon when that itch hits."

Only one thing marred his two weeks at Antonio's and that was the arrival of Patrolman Oliver Hawkin. "Hello again my ass."

"I'm only trying to be polite."

"Yeah. Me too. Look, I know somehow, somewhere you've been an asshole, only I don't know how or why, and I aim to find out."

"Okay."

"That car you were riding in. It was stolen in Kansas City."

"I paid a guy two hundred bucks for it."

"Where's the receipt?"

"In the car. Burned."

"How convenient."

Tom thought to himself -- and it must have radiated from his eyes as he stood by the hole holding a pickaxe -- you just don't have enough to do, do you?

Hawkin looked at Tom's eyes and at the pickaxe. "I know you're an asshole and sooner or later you're going to make your move. And I'll be faster and smarter and better than you, and I'll enjoy locking your ass up. You hear?"

"I hear you, sir."

"You always stay on the edge, don't you? I warned Antonio about you but he's a thick-headed Arab from Argentina and thinks he knows it all. So you watch yourself."

"All the time, Sir."

"Smart ass. You get a little food in your gut, you start feeling full of yourself. I'll have my eye on you every minute."

Get a life, Tom thought. "I've got work to do." He turned, ignoring Hawkin, and continued working on the footing for a wall Antonio wanted to build along the edge of the asphalt apron, where it dropped down into a gorge.

After a month, Antonio said: "You been here now a while. Don't you get tired? Want to take a day off? See some sunshine?"

"I was up on the high meadow," Tom said in a sort of protest. He felt warm, dry, fed, rested, and treated well. It was the best he'd felt in a long while. He felt no higher ambition. Sundays Antonio let him off the whole day. Nobody around but Tom and the occasional stray dog. On Sunday Tom had climbed up out of the canyon on the winding, crumbly country road. Except for the occasional passage of a car, it had seemed like a thousand years after the end of the world. The silence was as balmy as the soft sunlight that captured it. Butterflies twirled in groves of trees. Insects everywhere. From the high point, you could see for miles. The air below eye level far away had a mossy tinge, almost a dusty obscurity. Yellow erosion lines gleamed on distant mesas. Closer up, the blue mountains sparkled in the sun. Carpets of yellow and orange flowers hung on sloping hillsides. The ear, starved for sound, was massaged by a mumbling wind. The grass at his feet waved in time with the rushes in his ears. It wasn't peace. He'd never find that, he knew. But this peacefulness took him out of the trouble in his soul, outside of himself, where it didn't hurt all the time.

"Sure, Sundays you been," Antonio said. "I like for you to stay, keep an eye on the place. A month you been, and I sleep good at night knowing you here. But I can't ask a man to stay like a dog."

Tom shrugged. "I've been feeling pretty good."

"I know, I know. But you young. How old you?"

"Thirty two."

Antonio's leathery face widened and his white frizzle of hair seemed to flex. "You a young man, Tom. You got a lot you can do. Hey, we make a deal. You like it here in Cougar, you stay as long as you like. Work for me as long as you like. I pay you a buck an hour more."

"That's nice of you."

"Under the table."

"Of course."

A few days later, Antonio showed up with a great big German shepherd named Sapphire. She'd had one litter and then been fixed. "She's gonna watch the place," Antonio said. "You better make friends with her, Tom, or she bite you." He gave Tom a bone, and Tom took the dog over by the low wall he'd built. There he played with her, holding the bone but letting her lick it, until they had a rapport going. Antonio arranged it so that only he or Tom could give the dog food, to have her loyalty.

Antonio had a spare room, his garage actually, and there he set Tom up. It was much nicer than the shed. In the afternoons the sun would shine in, on a western exposure, and Tom would pull down the amber plastic shade and lie on the rug on his back -- probably not much different than Sapphire -- and enjoy the peace. Only thing about the peace was, there were children all around. Not just the quiet little Indio girls who had helped him to his feet the day of the accident, but a lot of screaming smaller kids. And the boys who were the same age as the mature girls were not at all quiet or mature. Sometimes they teased Tom, but usually they all got along pretty well. Tom charmed them with stories of his travels. The serious little girls would always sit in too, chiding the boys when they got rowdy or silly. Then again, some evenings the serious little girls might be having an off day and everyone was giggling and being silly. Mostly, the children listened. He told them about big cities all around America, glowing with lights powered by mighty waterfalls. He told them about the north winds that came down past Alaska every winter, whirling like giant pinwheels, and colored ashgray with moisture which they then dumped as rain or snow in a swath from Washington over the Rockies across the plains and into New England. He liked the feel of the road under his feet, the slick way the gravel in the roadbed turned into lines and streaks when he looked down from the window. He liked the sense of going someplace that was like blood rushing in his veins. It was a rush, a high. It was an addiction. He didn't tell the children that part. All addictions demanded, by their nature, that they be broken. There was, too, the fact that if you were addicted, probably you got that way because something lay in your past. What that might be, he couldn't figure out exactly. At times he had dreams in which he knew what it was but he couldn't remember after he woke up sweaty and holding his throat. One night Antonio even came with a gun and a flashlight, banging on the sliding glass door in his gruff voice. "You all right in there, bud?"

"I'm sorry, I had a dream."

"Damn near shouted your head off."

"Sorry."

"Put a rag in it."

Luckily, it didn't happen often.

The customers at the station were at first just a blur, but they got to know Tom and he got to recognize them. The women were attractive, some of them, and he began to think that maybe he, well, he'd brush the thought aside and keep working. But he kind of noticed one or two, all of them out of his reach, the ones that interested him. Right about then he finagled Antonio into giving him several sets of clean jumpsuits so he'd look a bit more professional. There was one blonde woman in particular who made the lump in his throat go dry every time. Reasonable figure, he guessed, eyeing her boots, jeans, and work jacket. She drove a creamy colored little Mercedes with gold trim. Probably some rancher's wife; had money, looks, the whole bit. He didn't even know her name at first, until he saw it on her credit slip: Evelyn Blisscomb. Nice name, he thought. He heard Antonio's loud voice next time, thanking her as she walked to her car: "Thank you, Eve, have a nice day now." Eve -- so she went by Eve. She'd always stop and play with Sapphire, but Tom somehow always managed to be on the other side of the property and couldn't hear what she told the dog. What kind of voice she had.

Antonio would give Tom the keys to an old van almost every day, to make deliveries and pick up supplies in town. There were two car parts stores that always had items for Antonio -- gaskets, switches, cases of oil, tires, sometimes even an engine. Tom discovered the town library and stopped there once or twice a week. There were two librarians, near as he could tell. One was real old, the other real young. Both were kind of cold and severe and he avoided conversation with them. One good thing was that they kept the place quiet. No rowdiness here. No giggling. The children came here after school and studied. He recognized Antonio's kids. "Hi, Mr. Smith," they'd said, waving. He'd wave back.

Then one day he nearly had a heart attack at the library: the main office door was open, and through that he glimpsed another door, marked Librarian. That door was usually closed, but today it was open and there sat Evelyn Blisscomb. She wasn't wearing any old jeans or ragged jacket. That was a smart, campy kind of blue denim skirt she wore. Just then the younger assistant told someone in a hushed tone: "I'll get the Librarian for you."

Tom wanted to look at Eve, but thought he'd better not. So he ran his finger along the large print books, and saw out of the corner of his eye that she noticed him. She spoke with a customer in whispers, her words lost across twenty feet of carpeting. Tom picked out two volumes and walked to the checkout register. Eve went into the back without another glance at him.

On two occasions during the following week, she ignored him totally. So what, he thought, she's somebody's wife. He could see the hunger building in himself. He needed to put his life back together and have a woman in it, maybe some kids whether they were his or someone else's, and it wouldn't do to hang around a strange town mooning about some woman. She wasn't even exactly beautiful. But she was so out of reach, so interesting, so, there wasn't even a word for it. Maybe he ought to leave town and get going, find a woman like her. She'd be perfect for him. He'd be so proud.

He was beginning to spend a few moments in the library each time -- the visits were becoming more frequent -- and stare at her quietly, making sure she didn't know, and the other two women wouldn't see to tell her. One afternoon she spent a lot of time out of her office, and he had a chance to study her. For what? Maybe as a model, for the woman he wanted to find.

Eve was what? Maybe this nordic goddess. Not exceptionally tall, not thin, but ample without being heavy, or better yet, more lightly, filled-in without being ample. He figured her about 35. She always wore these loose Berkeley-style dresses, usually like a dark blue or denim, that disguised her thighs but did not fail to suggest she had full, rich breasts. Her stomach looked flat enough, maybe a little pudgy but not much; hard to judge exactly. A little full in the rear, but nice. Handfuls. Something to hold on to. She wasn't sexy in a provocative way, but feminine. Female. Womanly. He rolled these words in his mind, silently, savoring their meaning. Her hair was that kind of flat gold-brocade that could be cut in a page

boy and look like a helmet. Color of butter. Color of northern sun on snow. Only, her skin wasn't snow, it was honey from the California sun. Lots of these western blondes, Tom thought, had more than Europe in their genes. He looked closely at her face, whose features were not quite what he would call delicate. They were more what he would call robust, almost a little odd. She had that squarish face, but the oval jaw and darned if there wasn't a nice dimple in the chin. The wide mouth, but the long thin nose. The nose looked regal. The mouth contained two of the nicest, sexiest gapped upper front teeth he'd ever seen, and she sometimes ran a hungry pink tongue around them while she listened, thoughtfully, to a customer. The eyes were of that grayish cracked blue that captured the light one moment, and looked glassy empty the next. She had a nice high forehead, fringed with that delicious heavy-looking gold hair. And she had cheekbones. Now did those mean she was part Indian, part Japanese, what? Scandinavian, he thought. Some of them had Mongol in them, he remembered. She was just delightful to watch. She had an inner glow that filled the library, even when the sun had passed around the corner. She had a perfume, too, that he came to know: a faint bit of violet, made robust with a tinge of just enough musk without offending. The sun wasn't shedding its light directly into the library anymore, but lay low and golden against the outside of the other wing of the building, glimpsed through a plate glass window. Tom felt a melancholia suddenly, not a hunger anymore, and not the contentment that had been his cocoon the past few months. There must be a thousand Eves in the world, and he'd find one who was free, who was attainable. Maybe not with a Mercedes or a ranch or Librarian. But with that aura. Then he would be part of that aura too, he would glow inside, people would look at him, a single lonely man in a library would stare at him and wonder how he'd done it. What it was she saw in him. What you had to do to possess such a woman. To be possessed by her. To shine from her countenance as the moon drinks the radiance of the sun and gives off a second daylight.

Hawkin came by again. He was waving a sheet of paper. He backed Tom behind the garage. It was just getting dark and nobody saw what happened next. "I got a sheet here," Hawkin said sharply. His crisp lines radiated fury. "You phony goddamn bastard. I got fingerprints off you, man, and I ran them. I ran them, man, and they came back Anthony Dwayne Fariello. And sure as shit, I said, please dear Mr. Kansas City police chief, send me a picture of this Fariello. And this is what came over the internet." He waved the picture close to Tom's face. "This is you, Anthony Dwayne Fariello."

Tom felt himself stepping out of another man's body, and his fists were balled. "Okay, you stupid cop. So what? What if I change names every day? So what?"

Hawkin's dark eyes glittered. His angry, decent face rippled with emotion. "I watch this town like a miser watches his coins. That's my job. I protect this town, man, and I smell someone like you from miles away. I knew it the day you ran into that tree. You know what else, Fariello, or should I say, A.J.?" Tom didn't answer, and the cop went on: "The car you ran into the tree. It was used in a robbery. Armed robbery. I checked every inch of the car and I couldn't find the gun, but I've got cops from here to Kansas City looking, and when they find it, I'm hauling you in for attempted murder."

"I tell you, I bought the car from a guy."

"Right. Don't we all. The guy you shot is alive, you'll be pleased to know. The bank guard. Remember him? Little old French guy? Children, grandchildren, all the things you'll never enjoy in life because you don't deserve them."

"Are you going to tell Antonio?"

"I'm planning to. Unless you leave town now. Right now."

"So you don't have anything on me."

"I'm working on it. Meanwhile, just get out of town."

"This is a game for you, isn't it? I don't have a car."

"Damn." Hawkin looked aside. "I feel like buying you one, but that doesn't go with the job description."

"I'm saving up to buy one," said Anthony. He held up a wad of bills. "At the rate Antonio pays me, it will take a while. I'll just buy an old car."

"All right. What did you do the last five years?"

"Drove around."

"You're too much. Why do you want to piss me off like this?"

"I really don't know that my past is any concern of yours."

Hawkin stuck his face in close. "Yeah? Well I have news for you, Mr. Fariello. I'm making your life my concern, okay? I'm making -- ."

A.J. hit him twice, once on the eye, once on the cheek. Suddenly he didn't care the other man had a badge and a gun. Fury filled him like a drug -- adrenaline made his limbs tremble with energy. His vision sharpened tenfold as he hopped in close for another one. Only he tripped on a slippery spot and fell backwards.

Hawkin was quick though, up in a crouch with his gun in both hands, cradled like an object of love. "One more step, Fariello. One more step and I'll empty this thing into you."

A.J. stared up the barrel of the gun. He felt his face contract into a snarl. He lay on one elbow, rubbing his bruised knuckles in the other hand. "Go ahead, Hawkin. Kill me. I beg you. Make it easy for me. Give me relief, man. Go on, pull the trigger."

Hawkin's eyes were like bottle caps. His jaw was corded as if his teeth were trying to crush each other. His nostrils moved rapidly with the pace of his breathing. His stance remained frozen, crouched, the large black automatic aimed straight into the center of A.J.'s head. The center of his soul.

"Go on. Kill me right now. I'm showing you respect, man. I'm not laughing in your face. This isn't funny at all, and I'm serious. Pull the trigger. Pull it. Now!"

Abruptly, Hawkin lowered the gun and stood straight. "I'm not done with you yet." He turned to walk away. "Next time, give me some warning, and I'll box with you. You might last half a round with me if I just play with you."

Tom waited until the headlamp came on and the Harley-Davidson engine kicked into its patented growl. He waited until the motorcycle pulled around in a tight turn and headed up the hill, out of the canyon.

Next day, at the library, Tom encountered Antonio's children. The little serious girls took him by the hand and towed him to the story corner. The boys, who were bored with their homework, whooped and joined them. The older library assistant came with a stern mien and told them all to be quiet. She glared at Tom and walked away. Tom told a story about how he'd been in New York, Times Square, one New Year' Eve, and watched the giant apple drop. How giant?one boy asked. Was it really an apple?asked one of the serious little girls. On and on. When he finished, he was out of fibs for the moment. It was like being out of breath. The children were all quiet, with a glow as they imagined New York City. And when he looked up, he saw Eve leaning on the children's bookcase, watching. She too had a glow. It was the

first time she smiled at Tom directly.

"Very good," she said checking out his books after shooing the younger assistant away. "I didn't realize you are such a talented story teller."

"I didn't realize it either."

"You should come and tell stories more often."

"Well, I don't know any stories really. Just what I make up about where I travel."

"You don't have to know any stories. You can read them out of a book. We need readers, Mr. -- ?"

"Smith. Tom Smith."

"We need readers, Mr. Smith. I'd really like it if you'd come back some time for story hour."

"We'd like it too, a lot," said one of the serious little girls.

Tom did go back a few days later. He made arrangements with Eve ahead of time, and there were actually a dozen children. He told them a story about his travels in Oregon, along the fog shrouded coast where trucks hauled away gigantic logs big as houses. Then he read from a book. Eve thanked him heartily. She had a clear voice, a rich voice that was kind of like an instrument, not deep at all, but rich, like an oboe maybe. He loved listening to her, and wished he could hear more. "Maybe we could have lunch sometime," he suggested. He'd already inquired by now. She was divorced and lived alone.

She made a little 'hmm' for a second that made him think she was going to say no, but then she had a twinkle in her eyes and said: "Okay. I'd like that."

So a few days later they had lunch in a little Italian place, nothing fancy, just pizza and colas. "I was hoping you wouldn't think I was -- intruding," he said. "I mean -- ."

She laughed. "I see. Well, there is a Mr. Somebody who has been around for some time, but he's not around just now."

"I see. Well, I don't want to intrude, is all."

"We'll just let this go in little tiny steps, okay?" she said, sort of wrapped around her cola like a young girl.

"So what is it you do when you wear the jeans and the old jacket?"

She laughed. "Oh, that's how you first saw me. Well, on weekends, and whenever there is time during the week, I try to do gardening. Keeps me feeling good."

"I used to like gardening," he said seeing darkness, and stray lights moving about.

"Hello? Tom?" She was peering intently at him and when he realized it she laughed. She laughed a lot, and it made him feel relaxed. In a certain mood, sometimes, she had a reckless, naughty laugh.

Next time they met to eat, it was a picnic high up in the field above Antonio's station. They drove her car into the shadow of the trees and left it hidden. Few people ever wandered up here, so big and spread out was the land and so thin the population. It was a warm day, not too hot. He wore a crisp white shirt, jeans, and deck shoes. She wore one of her long dresses, this one a dark brown corduroy that left her shoulders bare, and some sort of awkward looking but obviously very comfortable sandals. They walked at a steady pace through the woods, he carrying a basket she'd made up, and she a bottle of wine which

he'd bought at her request. "It's so quiet here," she said. They heard a bird fly by. They heard a twig drop from a tree a hundred feet away with an echo as though it were in a large room. Then they came out in the clearing. It was warm there, and the wind hummed in their ears. "I've never been here before! And it's so gorgeous. Oh Tom, thank you. It's so wonderful."

"I'm glad you like it."

They sat overlooking the miles of green, the velvety dark shadows between the far peaks, the gently furling lines of sedimentation in distant limestone cliffs. A pair of eagles whirled high up, their wings gently undulating. "Boy," Tom said, "this is quite some lunch. Wow, look at this. Look at that." She'd brought little crocks with all sorts of good things in them. Brie, which they set in the sun, on a plate, to melt. They sat with the basket between them and ate quietly. They washed it down with bottled water. Afterwards they opened the wine and had some crusty french rolls and some tangy cheddar cheese. The wine was a medium pinot noir, a little rough, but not too dry nor too sweet. She studied the label. "This looks interesting. Oh I love the color, Tom. It's like garnet."

"Hold it up to the light."

She did. "It is just like garnet. Look."

Heart beating a little faster, he moved the picnic basket out of the way and slid close beside her. He smelled garlic on her breath, felt her warmth by his side, felt his thigh touching hers. "It's a beautiful color," he agreed.

"Will you open it?"

"Sure." He looked around.

"Corkscrew's in the basket."

"You thought of everything."

"I planned a picnic. I'm good at planning things. Some men don't like that."

"I don't mind." He held the bottle and turned the corkscrew.

She smiled to herself, holding her arms around her knees, contentedly looking into the distance. Without further instructions, he found the wine glasses -- real crystal, with roses engraved in the sides -- and poured. The wine had a heady bouquet.

"Thank you," she said, raising her glass.

He clinked his glass against hers.

They sipped slowly, savoring. She sighed and stretched, yawning. Then she laughed. "I'm sorry."

"It's the oxygen up here," he said. "The wind makes me sleepy too. It's very relaxing up here."

"Hmmm," she sighed, closing her eyes and turning her face to the sun. It was late, and just warm enough. She folded her arms together and cupped her bare shoulders in her hands.

He found her sweater in the basket and held it up. "Would you like me to -- ?"

She nodded and turned her back to him. He put the sweater over her shoulders and then, somehow, she leaned against him and he put his arms around her, careful not to touch with his hands. Without knowing

what he was doing, he bent down and nuzzled behind her ear, letting the dangling hair tickle his nose. He smelled violets and pinot noir. "I'm sorry," he said without conviction. His eyes were closed and all he saw were wine blots. She felt soft yet still solid in his arms. She was very still. "I love to hear you talk."

She uttered one of her cutting laughs that said she was well in control, and sat up. "Maybe after a while you won't anymore when I really get going."

"I meant, I love the way your voice sounds."

She rose and walked toward the edge, where the ground gently sloped down before disappearing into the canyon. Somewhere far below, Tom heard barking. He walked up and gently put an arm around Eve, ready to desist if she said no. But she didn't. Her arm slipped around his waist. Her hand was heavy, and her fingers were solid, drumming with their tips against the ticklish skin of his waist. "I hear Sapphire barking," Tom said.

"Is that her? Your dog?" She turned toward him, trusting him. He knew something about the world.

"Antonio's dog," Tom said, taking her in his arms.

She laughed. "Tom's girl."

She had good rounded shoulders, blunt, and a nice straight back. She stopped laughing. Looked serious. Hungry. She embraced him and thrust her mouth against his. Their tongues entwined and they couldn't get enough of each other.

"My, you know what you're doing."

"It's been a long time. Too long."

"Me too."

"Mr. Somebody?"

"Long ago."

"Good."

"We can finish the wine at my house." And they did. She lived a couple of miles out, at the edge of town. It was a good little house, he could see, had some money in it. "My husband was a lawyer," she explained as they pulled in. "Then he found someone else and it's the same old story. I got the house and he's in L.A. with his third new wife. We rotate the kids between us."

"I was going to ask."

That laugh again. "If it doesn't turn you off. But you were so sweet with the kids at the library."

"I like kids."

"You'll get to meet them. Maybe. If you stick around."

She showed him the house, which was surprisingly large. Six bedrooms. Three full baths. Living room with cathedral ceiling, and so on. Light switches, doors, sliding this, electric that, pictures everywhere of her four children. She gave him a quick tour, and then they came to the back patio. "Endless rolling nothing," she said pouring another two glasses of wine, "with some cows in it."

"It's very peaceful."

"You should see the sunsets. Of course, when the kids are here -- ."

"They're in L.A. now?"

"With their dad. You'll have to make up your mind if you want to meet them. All four of them. It can be a handful."

"I'll bet they're good kids."

"They are." They clinked glasses. "I want to get to know you better. Before you meet them. If you stick around."

"I wasn't planning to go anywhere."

She turned on a little soft music and they danced in the dark. It got cold and they danced through a sliding glass door into the house. She locked the door and pulled the drapes shut. The only light was a very faint one, from a night light two rooms away. He heard a clock ticking, or was that their hearts. He took her close and kissed her. Her tongue worked in his mouth and her hands strayed up and down his back.

She pulled away. "Please don't misunderstand."

"I hope I'm not."

"I don't do this a lot." She was very firm and very sincere, and he believed her. "I don't normally do this -- I'm just -- It's been a long time and I really like you very much."

"I can say all those things too. It's true for me too."

She put her arms over his shoulders, hands around his neck and brushed her lips against his. "And I'm not committing myself here. If I don't like you I'm throwing you out."

"That's okay with -- , " he started to say, but a knee gently pressed against his balls made him shut up.

She moaned, writhing against him, and kissed his chest. She pulled his shirt open, kissing each of his nipples. He felt her hunger coming like an express train, and his own hunger rose to meet hers. She took his hand and led him, blind for the darkness, to another room. There, under a faint milky glow, was a large bed. They stepped out of their shoes and crawled up on the bed together, kissing, rolling around. She stripped off his shirt, the project she'd begun in the livingroom. She was struggling with his belt buckle when he could stand it no longer. He dropped to his side, pulling her down with him, still kissing. He hiked up her dress to just under her breasts, exposing her except for bubblegum colored briefs. She put her arms behind her head and writhed sensuously, eyes closed, head to one side, lips pursed like some harem dancer's. Her body glowed and when he looked up he saw it was because there was a skylight that was full of stars. Her fine womanly body, which he had not dreamed of holding in his hands, glowed in pure starlight. He ran the palm of his hand along the planes of her belly, her thighs, her belly again, this belly which had borne four children and was just the tiniest bit pudgy and he kissed it. She had solid thighs, with smooth rich skin. He rolled back, pulling her with him, so she was on top. She raised her arms and struggled out of the dress. A sturdy bra followed, and she held her full breasts forward. "Massage me."

He drew her closer, lying on his back. She straddled him as if he were a horse. His fingertips sailed up the faintly stubbly, otherwise smooth expanse of her thighs to hold her breasts in his palms. He bent up to

kiss each ripply brown nipple. "Oh baby," she whispered, "baby." She pulled with surprising strength on his belt buckle. He felt his trousers come loose and his erection strain for freedom. She pushed his pants away as she slid down a few inches and there, his largeness made a speed bump that her wetness could not possibly miss. And once the two were near each other, the one found the other, and the other was promptly inside the slippery warmth of the one. "Oh baby," she said, this prim Librarian who was a sun to all, a guardian of all the world's written words, a keeper of order and dispenser of justice, "oh baby, do me, do me baby, come on! Come on!" And that was where they started making love.

In the morning, there was a spot she dropped him off where nobody could see him get out of her car. He understood this, as he got out and shut the door and leaned in. "Thank you."

"That was wonderful," she said, kissing her fingertip and pressing it against his lips.

He kissed her fingertip. "I'd like to see you again."

"Hmmm," she deliberated, making him think for a moment the answer was going to be no. Then she brightened. "Okay. In a few days."

He waved as he watched the Mercedes slip away. She waved once, a flex of the hand, as she looked in the rearview mirror. He waved again. Then he walked the three or four country blocks to Antonio's house.

Antonio, if he even knew Tom hadn't spent the night, said nothing. Later that day, when Tom had the van, he stopped on his way into town. He pulled into the junk yard and inquired his way toward the real bad wrecks they kept in the back. There were a few burned out hulks like his station wagon, but most of the cars had been sheared apart in really bad wrecks. There was a hose to one side for washing blood away, but one car smelled like bad meat and its seats were all stained with serum. Tom's station wagon was the one above it in a stack of five wrecks. Tom held his nose as he poked around his old vehicle. It was the first time he'd seen it since hitting the tree. Had he done this a day earlier, it would have grieved him to see what was left of his former life. Now he could have thanked that tree, maybe bought it a sixpack of plant food. He recognized charred scraps of his old clothing; no big loss there. Pulling out some brownish foam rubber someone had stuffed in there from another car, he found the glove compartment. The plastic knob crumbled to the touch, and he had to use a pencil to push the remaining metal stud in. The little door fell open. The cardboard backing inside was mostly gone, leaving a charcoal skeleton. Papers inside had turned to dust. But the lump there, hard and brittle and about the size of a mouse, was what he was after. His spare wallet, the old one where he put his registration and other papers. He thanked the attendant on the way out, tipping him a few bucks. His other chore, on the way back from town, was to bring a pot of flowers to the library. "For the children," he lied to the sour assistants. He placed the flowers on the little table where he read stories to the children and walked out. Secretly, from the back office, Eve cast a glowing smile (the silent grinning version of her cutting laugh) and then turned away so only he would know she understood the little gesture of thanks.

He and Eve started seeing each other every chance they got. She introduced him to her friends, mostly young couples, Dr. This and Mrs. This, Lawyer That and Mrs. That. Tom knew he was being checked out and for once he didn't mind. He walked gingerly, keeping Antonio happy, reading stories to the children, helping Eve replant her garden. She had horses, too, and they rode together.

They were on the horses one day, side by side, he casually holding his hand on her thigh, when she said: "Tom, you're a smart man. How much education have you really had?"

"I seem to remember I have a B.S. in Engineering, but it's been years since I even thought about it."

"We could make a swell team together if you'd sort of pick up where you left off. I mean, I love you just

as you are, and if you want to work for Antonio, that's okay, but for heaven's sake, you're a smart man."

"Let's talk about that some other time." He spurred his arabian and pulled ahead. Seeing that she looked a bit hurt or confused or both, he added: "It will all work out, Eve."

"Why, because you shine it on? Because you're in a rut?"

"No, because it has to." He waited for her.

She spurred her horse and came along side. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean that."

They did not see each other when the children were with her. She asked that of him for a few months until they were better acquainted. He could see the reason in that.

On night, around eleven, there was a knock on the sliding glass door. Tom had been watching the late news and was getting groggy, but he went to peek. It was Hawkins, in his uniform. "Open up," Hawkins mouthed. Tom saw a patrol car in the driveway with another officer in it. It was the town's only patrol car, with an extra blue light for some reason in the emergency flasher bar on the roof.

Tom let him in. "How nice to see you again. You working nights?"

"I work different shifts." Ollie swayed about uneasily, as if carrying a great burden and didn't know where to put it down. "I came to apologize, Fariello."

"Sit down, why don't you?"

"I can't stay long." But Hawkin sat at the small table, which had two chairs and doubled as A.J.'s desk.

A.J. took the brittle, charred wallet from his socks drawer. "Look here. It's from the station wagon." He laid it on the table and opened it. It fell apart into two chunks. There were all sorts of papers inside, from movie tickets to parking stubs. "It was my wife's. It was in her purse the night of the fire. She'd left her purse in the car and this wallet made it all the way until I hit that tree and you came along."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fariello."

"Tom. My name is Tom."

"I'm sorry, Tom."

"It's okay -- ?"

"Oliver. Ollie to my friends."

A.J. gently picked apart the zipper pocket. Out came a browned, brittle piece of looseleaf paper. On the blue lines one could still make out the awkward penmanship: Rec'd \$200 from T. Smith fur Car. "I didn't know I was buying a stolen car, Mr. Hawkin."

"Ollie."

"Yes, Ollie. I suppose ignorance of the law is no -- ."

Hawkin tore up the paper. "That's all history, man. I'm sorry, I didn't know what happened. I read you wrong. It doesn't happen to me very often. You can stay here all you want and nobody will bother you again. We'll help you get on your feet."

"We?"

"The town people. Eve. Yes, I don't care if you get mad. She had me check you out. You're getting to be an important person to her. I just got my call back from the detective in Kansas City. Says you were at work one night and your Christmas tree tipped over."

A.J. sat with his hands dangling between his knees, reliving what terrified his dreams and which he could not face during waking hours. Hawkin's mouth was moving and sounds were coming out. A.J. heard them and yet did not hear them.

"She called you to say the house was on fire. You told her to call the fire department and then you raced home. By the time you got home they were dead. Your wife and your little boy and your little girl."

A.J. felt hot tears dribbling down his face. "Susan. She should have called the fire department first."

"It was nobody's fault, Tom. A.J. "

" Markie, he was six. Allison, she was eight. I wish they were all here again."

"Listen, I'm going to stay here with you. Just let me tell my partner -- ."

A.J. felt himself slipping away into another world. He felt himself walking down the street into the fire, to die in the house with them. But he couldn't get there because somehow he was trapped on the ground in a fetal position...

* * *

In the morning, Tom Smith awoke to the sound of soft music and the smell of hot coffee. He sat up.

"What?" He was in her bedroom. Eve's. She wore jeans and a green sweater that hinted at her lightly swaying breasts. She had no makeup on and looked as though she'd been gotten out of bed at an unusual hour. "You were out for over a full day, darling. Ollie called me to come over to Antonio's."

"You're joking. What about Antonio?"

"He understands. He was surprised when Ollie and I hauled you out of there." She sat down on the bed and stroked his head. "You want to move in with me, sweetheart?"

He kissed what he could reach, which was the surface of her jeans. He felt weak.

"Doc Agler stopped by on his way from the hospital -- he's the last of the great old GP's -- and he gave you a shot. You were in some zombie state there. He said to call him if anything changes." She stroked his head. "Nothing is going to change from now on, is it?"

Tom reached up to touch her face. "A month ago I wouldn't have dreamed that I could be in love again, much less with a beautiful woman like you. I can't imagine ever changing that."

"That's good. Well," (she laughed her cutting laugh) "we'll see when you meet the kids. Let's see how that goes." She swung around and gave him her most earnest look. "I am still young, Tom, and all my plumbing is in good shape. From what you've been doing to me here nights, I'd say yours is too. We could probably make room for another little head or two. The house is big enough."

He watched her as she cleaned up. She was more beautiful than ever. She'd caught her blonde brocade hair in ivory combs.

"I have some contacts, honey. You can get some engineering work or whatever you want to do." Her

face looked scrubbed and youthful, at peace inside.

"I'd really like all that," he said.

She turned wistfully. "O had my wedding here, ten years ago. You and I could do the same, Tommy. We could make our life together. Think how happy we'd be."

"It would be the best thing that ever happened to me," he said. "I'd like to take you out dancing and to dinners. We'd dress up. When I first saw you, I thought, wow, would I be proud to be seen with a woman like that." He held up his arms and she walked into his embrace. "I really love you," he whispered.

* * *

Later that day, he went to see Antonio at the garage. He took the cigar box along. Tonio drove him over to the apartment. There, Tom got his cardboard box of things out.

"Congratulations," Antonio said as Tom. "Wait until you see what I got for you."

Tom shook Antonio's hand. "I appreciate all you did for me." He handed Antonio the \$350 he'd saved up.

"No, no, you keep. Pay me back for the car when you rich and famous."

"Well, I don't know about that," Tom said. They walked to the car together, a little VW beetle Antonio had fixed up for him.

"Gets good mileage," Antonio said proudly.

Tom gave him the money. "I'd feel better knowing I don't owe you."

Antonio the money back. "A gift from me. Good luck, Tom. She's a wonderful lady. And beautiful. Like a queen of the surfers. You can be proud."

"Sorry I can't help out around the garage anymore."

"Oh no sweat. I knowed you. You like a cat, you got to move on. You done all right for a cat. I am happy for you." Antonio embraced him. Tom put the cardboard box and the cigar box in the back seat. He was just about to climb into the car to drive away.

By chance, Ollie Hawkin was riding by in the other direction on his motorcycle. He pulled in and stopped for a minute. Took off his glove and shook Tom's hand. "If you need anything, Tom, you just call. Anytime. You're part of this town now."

"Thanks, Ollie." Tom waved as the motorcycle and rider took off.

It was late afternoon now, and the days were getting shorter. October in California was still warm, though it was cold around Antonio's station already, and by five the sun was almost gone from the sky. As he drove up the hill in the strange new car, getting the feel of it, the fast 1600 cc. Engine, he glanced outside and saw the gravel blurring by. He felt the wind rushing through the open window. The sun began to set as he drove by the hill where he and Eve had picnicked and suddenly it was like a memory of long ago. He remembered his mother's kitchen, smelling of chlorinated cleanser and fresh roses. Long ago, in the grave, taken in a car crash from which he'd barely survived, an only child. He'd built a life for himself, gone to college, found a good job, married Susan, had the little -- and then, the fire. Starting over from

nothing wasn't going to be so easy again. Driving gave him that sense of running from something and going somewhere at the same time.

It was dark when he turned the corner and stopped. There was the house, barely 100 feet ahead on the cul de sac. He could hear the children already. In a minute he could meet them. He started to put the car in first, and hesitated. This was just how it had been: coming around the corner, seeing the fire engines, seeing the house engulfed, his heart torn out, no, he could never go through anything like that again.

In the lamp light, he saw Eve step outside wiping a pan with a cloth. "Tom? Is that you? Is that your new car?"

He saw the flames. He saw the firemen running backward as the second story collapsed into the street in a sea of cinders. A dry summer wind had blown sparks from someone's chimney and the sparks had lodged in the dryness under the eaves.

"Tom?"

He heard a woman screaming. That was Susan, dropping the phone as flames and smoke shot up the stairwell from the first floor, pushed by fresh air from open windows and venting through the upper story skylights.

A.J. put the VW in reverse and backed out in a circle on screeching tires. Then he shifted through the gears, forward, as the car took on the rhythm of the road. The familiar streets of Cougar rolled by under the car. He heard the singing of the tires, and his heart felt free again. Or not really free, but running from something and at the same time running toward something. Some shining hope over the horizon. He put Cougar behind him, running on the open freeway, toward Los Angeles.

He drove fast and straight, A.J. tightly in panic stricken control, Tom begging him to turn back. It was A.J. who kept the car flat out so the wind buffeted it along the miles. It was Tom who glanced back and saw the distant wink of flashing lights, the wailing and keening and howling of a siren so far away he could only hear it when the wind was right. It was A.J. who kept blindly driving as fast as he could, never looking back, totally wrapped in the fog of his panic. It was Tom who kept peering back to make out the police car with the extra blue light in the emergency flasher bar on its roof. It must be going flat out 95 or better, slamming back the wind like a jet going doppler, tearing up the road with its steel belted tires, with its siren growing louder and closer, gaining on them but surely, minute by agonizing minute.

(Acknowledgment and thanks to Wonder Bread, Inc. for use of their ad slogan)