

ROBERT REED

THE SLEEPING WOMAN

YOU BRING PEOPLE BY. YOU invite family, friends. Whoever you can rope in. The two-dollar tour begins by admitting that there's an enormous amount of work to be done, and then you skate right into your plans for the place. For the future. This is where you'll pour the foundation, up here on this high ground. With hand gestures and lines cut "in the dirt, you position your front door and kitchen, and over here, on the downhill side, your bedroom windows will stand better than thirty feet above what's now brown brome and wind-beaten cedars. You've got a view up here; everyone can see that much for themselves. This is a quarter section of old pasture laid out along the river bottoms. You bought these bluffs for next to nothing. With the bank's help, of course. Because you have to work for a living, these tours usually happen after nightfall. Your guests have to trust you when you describe the machine shed and long graveled drive and the perennial beds planted with tough natives that won't quit on you with the first hundred and five degree day. You talk about the dream house that you've just about sewn up -- a hundred-year-old farmhouse twelve miles south of your future front door -- and all it's going to take is a truck and trailer of suitable size, and a hired specialist to lug the house along some twenty miles of back roads, plus the assorted governmental clearances and the lifting of a couple or three power lines. But all that's nothing. That's just the easiest part of the work. Because your dream house needs a new roof and plumbing, and wiring, and replastering and paint, and more paint, and probably new windows and insulation and whatever else the two of you haven't had the courage to imagine yet.

You are two people, but you've been a functioning unit for what feels like forever. You went to the same one-room schoolhouse as five-year-olds. You grew up playing hide-and-seek and dodge ball together. You first fell in love at the consolidated school, in eighth grade. Then came that ten-month stretch in high school where love failed, and the only compelling emotion that you shared was a deep, perfect hatred for each other. Looking back, you can't remember what the fight was about, or even if there was a genuine fight. What matters is the day when she got stood up by her bitch-mother. It was after school, after band practice, and he saw her standing in the parking lot, her face quiet and tight and a little too focused to notice him. He drove off, down the highway and into the Gas 'N Shop, telling himself that he was dry and needed a Mountain Dew. But he didn't park. He watched himself turn around and head back up to the school. Winnie was easy to see, what with the cars all gone. What with her standing in the middle of the new white concrete, looking betrayed. Her mother was a drunk, and worse, and Jake knew more stories than anyone. Maybe that was why he drove back. He knew Winnie too well to abandon her, however much she pissed him off. But would she take a ride from him? He pulled up slowly, and he made sure to give her a warm strong look. No smile, and nothing that could be confused for pity. Then with a flat voice, he said, "Get in," and reached across the front seat, popping open the passenger door. She came around and shoved her clarinet case into the back seat, and then she was inside, closing the door hard, breathing hard and sitting with her hands in her lap and her face tight and sad, and he said, "Where do you want to go?" They were sixteen. He couldn't remember when he'd last spoken to her. "I'll take you home," he offered. But then she gave him a long look, and quietly, Winnie said, "No." She looked straight ahead, saying, "Let's just go for a drive."

They're in their mid-thirties now. They were married ten days after graduating from high school, and their twentieth anniversary is bearing down on them. It's been a durable, wild business, this marriage. No children, and there can't be any. But there's talk about adopting once they get their house up and running. Jake has gotten a little heavy in the middle and in his face. But

Winnie still has her looks. Rust-colored hair and smooth clear skin that never tans and eyes too green to seem real. She has the kind of face and figure that would make the most trusting husband crazy, watching other men watch her. But Jake isn't that tolerant, and he's had his troubles. Out and out wars. There's a tidy scar over his right eye, but the asshole that gave it to him has got at least four of his own. Worse, Jake has fought with Winnie over her wardrobe. Her walk. Everything. She likes being pretty, and she says it's for him, but somehow that doesn't feel like enough of a reason, since she's already got him sewn up and helpless. Why does a person need black underwear to buy groceries? That's what their last fight was about. Her black bra and panties. In the middle of the fight, she yanked off the offending bra and then drove to the store that way. Then she came home laughing, telling Jake how she couldn't get up the courage to climb out of the truck and jiggle her way down the aisles, every old woman and sixteen-year-old boy giving her their best stare. They're two absolutely different people, except for what's the same. Winnie thinks about kitchen gardens and kitchen countertops and the fine shades of house paint. Where Jake thinks about the big things -- the foundation and the house moving and who he knows who will dig them a new well at a fair price. He has his own business moving earth and driving dump trucks, and ever since she quit her nine-to-five at the bank, Winnie's worked for him. With him. Jake knows machinery better than she does, but not much better. And better than anyone else alive, he can judge volumes and weights. How many loads will it take to do the job? He can tell his customers exactly, without a calculator or even pencil and paper. How he does the trick is a mystery. Jake doesn't easily see what happens inside his own head. Sometimes it's Winnie who tells him, "You're worried about bills." Or whatever is wrong. She almost sees his thoughts, telling him, "You're pissed at your dad, aren't you?" And sure enough, he is. It's almost as if he can't plumb his own feelings until she points the way. Which used to be strange. And then it was halfway reassuring. And now, after thirty years of being wrapped up with each other, it's something that he accepts without second thoughts. That's Winnie. She's knows his mind like Jake knows earth-moving, and in those rare moments of self-reflection, he realizes that most couples never reach that sense of belonging.

The quarter section and dream house are everything to them. Six days of work means that there's Sunday and seven nights where they can do what they want, provided that they can stay awake. To save travel time, they live on their new land. Jake brought in a third-hand trailer, setting it up in a little valley near a long-abandoned farmstead. The original house was burned up ages ago, but there's a shallow well and a working hand pump, and up the slope is a root cellar where they can store their overflow possessions -- things that belong in damp, dark basements. It's a clear March day when Jake takes off early from a job, driving up to the county seat to see about the latest batch permits. It's paperwork and bullshit, and he wishes that he didn't have to go. But Winnie, home nursing a cold, promises him dinner, and she's a fine cook. Better than Jake by miles. And things go pretty well in town. The first person that he talks to actually knows things, and by the third person, everything's been taken care of. It's all set. He drops by the Gas 'N Shop for a cold Dew, and he gets Winnie her Diet Coke, and then he's back on the road, driving just a hair over the legal limit until he's off the highway, then taking the graveled roads too fast. The pickup's rear end gets a little crazy, and he makes himself slow down. He drives nice and easy, thinking about nothing consciously, then realizing that he's thinking about work again. They've had a dry, warm winter, which means there's been no shortage of paying work. It's put them behind schedule on the acreage, but there's plenty of money in the bank. Which is different. Which is fine. He smiles as he turns down the long rutted road, bouncing past the tall No Trespassing sign that marks the start of their land, and now he's thinking that he needs a half-day to dump gravel and flatten their driveway to where it can hold up a huge old house riding on a long trailer.

The foundation has been finished. Their front-loader and a fourth-hand John Deere bulldozer are parked near the gray walls of new concrete. Jake drives past and down to the trailer, and climbing out, he notices nothing. Not the silence. Not the smell of last year's grass warmed by the sun. Not even the hard ticking of the truck's engine. He climbs into the trailer and says, "Back," just before the screen door slams. And again, he doesn't hear the silence. He walks into the bedroom, halfway hoping she'll be there, changing clothes. But she isn't, and he pulls off his dirty crap and jams them into the hamper, and he puts on clean work clothes, planning to push some earth against the new foundation. There's enough daylight for twenty or thirty minutes of work. Minutes that won't come again, ever. Then he walks into that little space that passes for a living room, with the kitchen in the corner, and again, in a voice that can't be missed, he says, "I'm back."

There is no dinner. The realization comes like a slap, and that's when Jake stops breathing, and his heart bucks, and the sensation of falling takes him. He has to check the stove twice, just to make sure that there's no pot hiding somewhere. Then he steps into the fading sun, shouting at nobody, "Winnie! Winnie!"

It's a hundred and sixty acres, if she's here. And night's falling. And Jake can't imagine any reasonable explanation. Her little Chew pickup is parked where it should be, so she's got to be here. He starts up the hill on foot, planning to look inside the foundation. But that's crazy. She would have heard him pass and come out the basement door. So he turns and goes back to her truck. Touching the grill, he feels nothing but the sun's heat, and his own. He considers walking down into a nearby stand of cedars where she's never gone before. But instead, he looks at the dirt in the driveway, reading the tire tracks until he's mostly sure that nobody else has been here. Finally, he thinks of the root cellar and the promise of a good dinner. Jake's mother has loaded them down with home-canned apricots and peaches, and Winnie likes cooking with fruit, and that's why he starts hiking toward the cellar, moving with a slow, measured gait that betrays nothing of his mood. Asked, and he wouldn't have known that he was worried. He would have turned to Winnie, and she would have told the world, "He's scared for me." Is that what he is? Because he doesn't feel it. He just feels pissed that she's playing hide-and-seek, and he's pissed when she doesn't pop out of the cellar when he gets there. Then he stops at the open door and looks down the sagging wooden stairs, seeing her at the bottom of them, lying there, lying on her right side with her long reddish hair pulled away from her face and one white arm reaching out for nothing and the other arm tucked under her body to make a narrow pillow, and her legs and little feet are stretched across the bottom steps. And his first conscious thought is that damn, isn't that the strangest place to be taking a nap...?

EVERYONE NEEDS to be annoying, telling him how awful and unfair it is, and how it's the Good Lord's will. His brother, who can be relied on to say stupid things, tells him, "It was an accident. Nothing but. How could you know that that step would give out? And she'd hit her head like she did?" It was the second step from the top that had come loose. "You didn't know," Morgan has to keep promising. But Jake had known. He had climbed those stairs a few times, and it was easy to feel the soggy plank twisting around those rusted nails. A quick fix would have been easy: A couple cheap brackets nailed in from below. But easier still was realizing that you couldn't trust the step, and Winnie had known that full well. What astonished and infuriated Jake was that his wife, smart as she was, could have forgotten something that simple, and with a sharp honesty that makes his brother pale, Jake says, "I don't know what she was doing, but she wasn't thinking. Of all the clumsy-ass things to do!" "You don't mean that," his brother insists. "Don't even kid, Jake. That sounds awful!"

Jake's response is a determined shrug, and silence.

Morgan can't stop playing the older brother game. "If you need anything," he says. "Anything." Which is nothing but noise, charitable-sounding but meant

only to make him feel better. "If you need to talk," Morgan says. "Or maybe you can come stay with us --"

"Shit," Jake exclaims. "I've got a business to run. How in hell can I do my jobs from your guest room?"

Morgan gives him a long look, and then he says, "Sure."

"Want to do something? Leave me to myself," says Jake.

"Sure."

The funeral is at Winnie's old church. She's got sisters and a brother who take charge of everything, and there's a family plot in the cemetery out back, and Jake endures all the praying and misery right up until they carry her box to the hole dug beside her mother, and that's what breaks him. Seeing her set there, knowing the history between them...well, it's too much. He starts to break down, blubbering into his cupped-together hands. Then Morgan has to throw an arm at him, trying to make things better that way. Which is when Jake backs out of there and heads for the parking lot, doing thirty when he hits the street and eighty-plus on the highway.

Their land stretches along the south side of the river for most of a mile. There are long stretches where it's nothing but brome, with blotches and clumps of cedars in the gullies, looking black-green against the dead spring grass. Three days ago, they drove this road and talked about their plans, and Jake finds himself feeling for her now. Aren't the dead supposed to hover nearby? That's what he's always heard. When Winnie's mom died, her poor suffering father couldn't stop weeping, jabbering on about how he could feel his wife's presence. Jake knew it was stupid grief talking; he didn't believe in ghosts or souls that lasted an instant past death, and he still doesn't. But filled up with grief like he is now, he expects to feel Winnie sitting beside him. He deserves the illusion, the false comfort, and when it doesn't come, he gets furious all over again. Maybe he's not miserable enough. Is that it? And then he pushes the big diesel until he's doing ninety, and the pickup rattles and dances, and he looks out the passenger window, eyes staring, watching their bluffs passing to the south.

Three turns puts him home again. He means to change out of his suit and tie, but suddenly he doesn't have the energy. Ten or twenty minutes of sitting, thinking about nothing, does nothing for him. So he makes himself stand, crossing the tiny living room of that awful little trailer, aiming for the bedroom but turning instead, heading out the screen door with his brown suit still on, and his good shoes, and that bright big tie that Winnie bought for him some five or six Christmases back.

He feels as if he's watching himself from far off. Both of his bulldozers are parked nearby. The old John Deere and the new D6 Cat. He climbs into the Cat and cranks the engine, letting it warm for maybe a minute before he starts, knowing where he's heading but knowing it as if it's something that he's read somewhere. He feels far away and cold and sure. Arriving at the place, he drops the huge steel blade, and he pushes. Loess soil is soft by nature, easily dislodged and shoved around, and the job takes about three minutes. Then with the root cellar covered and that old staircase collapsed, he finds a threadbare curiosity, wondering what important treasures got buried in that goddamn hole.

He doesn't care. He realizes that he doesn't, and better than that, he feels something that might be confused for satisfaction. His instinctive need for motion, for work, has been fed. He can head home again, coming across the gray faces of the new foundation, and the easiest thing in the world is to change directions, climbing up and around and coming at the concrete from the safest angle, tearing into the wall and cursing under his breath when it refuses to shatter with a hard nudge. Jake stops long enough to consider the surrounding ground, and then he backs up and comes around and attacks from underneath, beneath what would have been the bedroom windows. A dull crack announces the collapse of the wall. Then he drives through and slams hard into the opposite wall, and it splits and then hangs there long enough to let him back away before it tumbles. Then he drops the other walls from outside, making a neat

pile of slabs and dust that lets itself be covered with the floury brown soil that paints Jake's face and suit and the scuffed black leather of his shoes. He keeps working, breaking up the surrounding sod and pushing the ground beneath it, transforming the shape and appearance of better than half an acre. Then it's too dark to see, and he staggers into the trailer and eats a cold can of spaghetti and strips and busts open a package of Oreos, barely eating one before falling into bed, trying to think about Winnie but finding nothing left of her lurking in his head. So he lets his thoughts drift, discovering a clean and vivid awareness waiting, knowing what needs to be done, and how he can do it tomorrow and through the long days still coming.

Dirt is a simple thing, and reliable, and the simplest, finest dirt is loess. Violent winds carried it here during the dry centuries at the end of the Ice Age. Loess is an obedient, compliant soil that welcomes the chance to be cut and carried, pushed where it is needed, and then piled high and packed with the hard churning treads of the Cat. But driving a big Cat is not easy work for most people. Even a natural talent, someone like Jake, requires years of practice and sloppy mistakes before the hands know how to move, steering the Cat where it needs to be. Before the feet know how to let up on the pedal, borrowing just enough of the big diesel's muscle to keep things moving but under control. Before the mind always knows what the simple brown earth is doing on the other side of that tall steel blade, even when the sun-scorched eye can see none of it.

People are the complicated ones. They seem compelled to bother him with questions and opinions and barbed comments. It's the usual gang at the Gas 'N Shop, and it's the clients whose work isn't getting done as fast as they'd like, and then it's those assholes with the checkbooks who come out to Jake's to buy what he doesn't need anymore. They want Winnie's dump truck and her little pickup and that tractor that he bought for haying. Plus there's an assortment of half-built and half-demolished machinery -- the treasures that he was planning to fix up or tear down for parts. He's brought them up here from their old house. All that he demands is a fair price; that's what he tells everyone. But no, everyone wants to change the subject. They'll stand outside the trailer door, eyes walking along the tom-up hillside, and they'll ask him, "So what exactly are you doing here?" Everyone wants to buy time, hoping they can nudge Jake's price down by outwaiting him. "It's quite a project you've got here," they will admit, making it sound like a compliment. Then when he refuses to answer, they nod and fidget, pulling their eyes off the raw dirt, saying, "You're terracing your land. That's what people are saying."

"The price stays," Jake tells them. "You know it's fair enough. So don't even think about clicking me."

His attitude is offensive. Alarming, even. But these men have been forewarned. The county is buzzing about Jake, everyone offering a favorite theory, and most of the theories sounding the same as the rest. Prospective buyers don't come here expecting to find a sober, sane man. Which means that they must really want what he's selling, and they're in no mood to war over pennies. It's better to crack open the checkbook and fill it out fast, and then claim their prize and run for safety. That's what Jake wants them to think. He stares at each of them, and waits, and only the bravest few clear their throats, pushing up the courage to say, "It doesn't make sense. I mean, if you're terracing your land...well, then...why haven't you built any real terraces...?"

"It's a fair price," Jake will say again. Staring without blinking. Which always rattles them. There is something in his voice, in his eyes -- a quality new to him and invisible to him-- that makes the bravest man panic. The checks are ripped loose and handed over, and regardless of the amount, Jake says, "This'd better be worth what it says. Because if it isn't " Then he lets his new voice trail away.

Nobody wants Jake's help with the loading. Which is fine. He can return to his work, and the assholes will load up their treasures themselves, and after a

little while, he will see them vanishing up the long, half-finished driveway, leaving a tail of dust that mixes with Jake's cloud of dust, everything swirling together in the warm spring wind.

Maybe he has gone crazy. That's the general consensus, and Jake has never been one to doubt the wisdom of men gossiping over coffee. But if this is insanity, then it's a hard, keen thing that everyone should experience. It feels as if he has tapped into a well of energy, and it bubbles up under pressure. It feeds him. It lifts him. It makes his sleep light and efficient, waking him before dawn, no trace of grogginess in his step. When he eats, he eats quickly and as cheaply as he can manage. Canned foods and cheap cookies are his staples, and it doesn't matter what time of day. Instead of sugary pop, he drinks the water from the shallow old well. Chilled or warm, it tastes foul. But he doesn't need anything else. And the pounds that Winnie used to nag him about have turned to motion and moved earth and wiry muscles wrapped around a simple nervous energy.

Jake isn't happy. He doesn't pretend to feel anything that resembles joy or pleasure or even grim satisfaction. But he isn't unhappy, at least not in any normal sad way. And he does manage to function. His business is smaller without Winnie, but he has retained the fattest of his old clients. Plus there's a little stockpile that was Winnie's retirement fund. Jake can pick the days when he works for money. He likes jobs that can be done in the rain, since he doesn't dare ride his Cat down his own muddy hillsides. And there's more money from selling topsoil that he won't ever need. For the first few months, he trucks it up to the mouth of his driveway, selling it to city gardeners who don't know better. Peeled off an old pasture, the earth lacks humus for growing good tomatoes. But still, he takes their dollars, in cash, and that goes toward paying off the bank, which lets him peel up and sell even more of the goddamn hillside.

But then it's summer, and he's working too far from the driveway to make trucking the soil worthwhile. When he needs to remove topsoil, he dumps it on the river bottom, slowly and methodically building a new hill pressed snug against the stripped old hills. That's what he's doing one blistering afternoon when he spies a familiar figure walking toward him. He shoves at the soil and takes his Cat over the new surface, pressing it down while he shapes it. Then he climbs down and says, "What?" to his brother.

"Hey, Jake," says Morgan, with a mixture of wariness and pity, and anger.

"It's been a while."

Jake doesn't reply. Except to agree, what can he say?

"You didn't make it to Mom's birthday," his brother has to tell him.

"Yeah, well. Things came up."

"Yeah." Morgan looks ready to weep. Or maybe scream. Either way, he has to work with his face, finding the right expression before saying, "Anyway. Mom asked me to come out and check on you." Jake wipes at his face with an oily bandanna.

As if there's a gun to his head, Morgan grimaces. "She sent you a care package," he says with a tight little voice. "Yeah?"

"She made me bring it. It's a box up in my car, if you want it."

Jake doesn't want to play this game all afternoon. So he says, "Okay," just to get things over with.

They ride up the hill in Jake's dump truck. Morgan doesn't ask questions, but he's got them. His staring eyes say as much. He watches the worked-over earth and notices the uprooted cedars piled to the east, covering that end of Jake's property, and he almost asks everything. He looks tired and scared and sorry. He holds tight to the door handle as the truck climbs over a smooth ridge that didn't exist last week, and he glances over at his younger brother, clearing his throat before saying nothing but, "It's good seeing you."

Jake rolls his shoulders, saying, "I guess."

Which puts a good chill on everything. Jake parks and climbs down. Morgan retrieves a big cardboard box that is filled with Mom's canned fruits and tomatoes, following him up to the trailer. The ceiling fan is turning fast and

swaying, working as hard as it can to move the stale dark air. For the first time in a long while, Jake is aware of the clutter. The empty cans of stew and spaghetti. The trash sacks filled to bursting. The ceaseless black buzz of flies. He anticipates sad words. An argument, even. If it's not a fight about the way that he's living, then it will be questions about his sanity or lack of it. But no, Morgan just sets the box on the last little bit of free counter space, squinting at a certain photograph hung on the wall. His mouth hangs open, and then he says, "I forgot. How pretty she was."

He means Winnie. Jake looks at the same photograph, framed and overly colorful in that phony, portrait fashion. She had it taken at Wal-Mart as a cheap birthday gift for him. When did he last look at the picture? He can't remember. And Morgan's right. She is beautiful, smiling out at him, wearing a summery dress that shows off her legs and her cleavage and that narrow sweet waist that he can almost feel when he lets his hands remember.

Something grabs him by the throat here.

No, he shakes it off. Gets rid of it. Then he turns to Morgan, saying, "I've got to get back at it."

"Back at what?" his brother asks. Blurts.

Jake hears him, and doesn't.

Morgan says, "I'm asking. What in hell are you doing out here?"

Jake picks up a jar of pale tomatoes, watching the seeds and meat floating lazily inside their thick salty liquid.

"You're angry," Morgan offers. "That's natural. You're pissed at this place...because it killed her...and now you're ripping up the ground just to get even "

Jake glances at him. "Is that what you think?"

Morgan's hands make tight little fists. His eyes jump from Winnie's picture to his little brother, and then back again.

Then Jake nods and starts for the door, saying, "Maybe you're right." Just to shut him up. "Maybe that's how it is."

There is no such creature as a buried treasure, either on Jake's tilted land or anywhere else in the world. Value comes only once the precious object is unearthed, held close and carefully appraised. Anything hidden by an inch of dust or buried beneath a solid black mile of stone is useless, existing as nothing but conjecture and hypothesis right up until the steel wrenches it free, letting it feel the dry heat of sun and the soggy heat of blood.

In the course of the days, dozens of little treasures catch Jake's eye. He can't count all the bison skulls, most of which have been shattered by the Cat's slicing blade -- impossible puzzles of white bone shards and worn teeth and the black sheaths of old horn. But there are larger, harder objects that shrug off the abuse. Teeth as big as melons occasionally roll out from the churning earth, each yellow and massive, their working faces covered with an intricate network of canyons and valleys. These are mammoth teeth, each one twice as old as civilization. Jake won't stop for much, but he will climb off the Cat to recover a good tooth, keeping his growing collection in a neat row that stretches across his bedroom floor. He also finds a shiny-faced stone that his second-hand geology book identifies as a rare and valuable meteorite. He likes the stone's look and its slick, immortal feel. In an earlier day, he would have sold the meteorite and every tooth to the highest bidder; but today, for reasons that don't quite announce themselves, Jake can't even consider the possibility.

There are enough pennies for what he wants to do here. What is scarce is time, which is why he quits working for hire by mid-August, using every moment of daylight and the moonlit nights, too. Then by late September, there isn't enough day to accomplish everything, which is why Jake rigs up a system of headlights, working with them as well as with his near-perfect memory for the land's shape.

People watch him at night. In the day, too. But he notices them best in the darkness. He sees the headlights of the cars parked on the distant highway or on the bluffs adjacent to his property line. Curious locals are keeping tabs

on his progress, making their hopeless guesses about his mysterious goals. On occasion, usually at night, teenagers sneak past the barbed wire marking his property line. Usually there are two or three or four of them, all males, and this is a game and an adventure, and Jake mostly ignores them. The only harm they can manage is to waste his time. But if they creep too close to where he's working, or if they look as if they'll monkey around with his machinery...well, he turns the Cat and chases them back where they came from, the steel treads groaning and screeching as he climbs the hill, moving just fast enough to almost, almost catch those panicky bastards.

Not everyone is so easy to scare. In October, on a bright warm afternoon, Jake notices a farmer harvesting his corn out on the river bottom. The man is riding back and forth on his fancy combine. When Jake looks again, he notices that the combine has stopped and nobody is sitting in the cab. Then he starts pushing a few dozen tons of soft earth into a convenient gully, and he notices nothing else. The farmer walks up the same ridge. He's a sturdy, low-built man, past his prime but still strong. Still capable. And he must be furious. That's what Jake thinks when he finally looks back over a shoulder, backing down the gouged and flattened ridge, expecting nobody and seeing nobody until some dim little voice warns him, and he looks again. Looks, blinks. Stops the Cat, and locks the brakes, and turns around in his battered seat, watching the farmer marching toward him.

"Get down," his neighbor shouts.

Jake knows better. He gives his head a little shake, saying nothing.

"Haven't you got it?" the farmer asks him. "The court order. Have you even looked at it?"

There have been legal snarls and tongue-talking, but that's why Jake has a lawyer. He can say with a perfect honesty, "I don't remember." The diesel is still running, meaning that the men have to shout to be heard.

"What's this order about?"

"You can't keep doing this," the farmer tells him.

"Doing what?" Jake asks.

"Shit, if I knew that... !" The farmer's hands lift high, and then fall to his sides again. "You're making a damned mess here. You see? When it rains hard, the first time, I'm going have mud instead of a cornfield. Is that what you want? To goddamn ruin me?"

Jake can tell him, "No," with ease. Then he adds, "But it's been dry now. Since last June, really --"

"It's going to rain," the man interrupts.

Jake makes a show of shrugging his shoulders, then screams back at him, "It won't move much. I'm packing it down good --"

"It's going to pour," says the farmer, flinging his hands up again. "You can't tell me it won't someday, and you can't tell the judge that you can stop it from happening. So you damn well better stop this... this bullshit... !"

Jake needs to work again. The westernmost acres are waiting, those last bluffs lower and steeper than everything before. He stares out over the ugly brown grass, planning what he needs to do first and next and after that too, the quiet smart little part of him effortlessly predicting exactly how much time it will take. He nearly forgets about the farmer. Then a clod of dry earth hits him above the right ear, and the trailing voice says, "Listen to me, goddamn it!"

Without a backward glance, Jake releases the brake and picks up the blade and turns and lets the slope as well as the diesel carry him along, rapidly gaining speed. The stocky farmer is ahead of him, and running. He looks frantic and slow, the stubby legs working and the arms pumping uselessly. And then Jake can't see the man beyond the nose of Cat. He is a hypothesis, an abstraction. Maybe he doesn't even exist anymore. A seductive possibility, that. Then Jake lets intuition tell him when to depress the pedal, stopping himself just enough, just at the last possible moment...and after a little while longer, he spies the farmer down on his own land again, staggering more than running now, twice stumbling forward into the twisted brown rains of his

com.

THEY'LL COME BY the trailer while he's at the far end of his land, working. His mother and brother, and maybe half a dozen friends, leave care packages and little notes written on the spot and long letters on good stationery neatly folded, his name in big shouting letters. They are concerned for him. They are worried and puzzled, and some of them admit to being angry with his behavior, and everyone begs him to seek help, asking him why can't he just listen to reason.

What Jake listens to is nobody's business but his own. What he wants is too large and far too consuming to let words or misspent kindness distract him. That's what he knows, standing beside the kitchen counter, eating sweet peaches out of a wide-mouthed jar and drinking up the juice, then wiping his whiskered mouth dry with the filthy sleeve of his coat. It is November now. The weather has turned raw and cold, an ominous dampness hanging over everything. He folds the latest note and lets it glide to the floor, then he wanders into the bedroom, stepping over the low wall of mammoth teeth and sitting on the edge of his unmade bed, realizing that he is far too tired ever to stand again. A tall cheap mirror hangs on the opposite wall. Winnie hung it there, and she used to pose before it, wearing nice clothes or wearing nothing at all. Jake glances at the mirror, seeing himself. His hair is long and his face is gaunt and his hands are nothing but bone over which is pulled a thin red skin. His coat and oily trousers hang limp on his shriveled body. But worst of all are his staring, mad-dog eyes. The eyes scare him enough that he closes them for a long moment, taking long deep breaths. Then he looks again, seeing Winnie posing from inside the mirror, her little hands riding her bare hips and her expression warning him that she's a long way from happy. Jake stands, somehow. He stands and breathes again, then walks out into the failing late-day light of November. The Cat needs fuel. But the tank in the back of his pickup is empty, and there aren't two gallons left in the big tank behind the trailer. A quick search of his pockets finds no cash, and he seems to remember that his bank account is empty, too. But there is money. There's a last little gasp of dollars in Winnie's retirement fund. Except this is a Saturday, Jake discovers. He stares at his watch, realizing that the bank is closed and will remain closed until Monday. No, that's Veteran's Day. He won't be able to get what belongs to him until Tuesday, and that's a long ways from being soon enough.

Jake drives to town. The pickup runs rough, stalling out at the first light and pretending that it won't start after that. But he cranks until the engine kicks its throat clear enough to run. Then he leaves it running at the Gas 'N Shop. In the near-darkness, he starts pumping fuel oil into the big tank, and he walks into the bright clean lights. The girl at the counter is new to him. Good. She stares and says nothing, even when Jake says, "Hello," as he passes by. He fills his deep pockets with jerky and dried apricots. As a treat, he takes a cold Dew from behind the glass door. Then he makes a show of patting his trouser pockets, telling the girl, "My wallet's in the car. Be right back."

The big tank is halfway filled. That's enough, easily. Jake shuts off the pump and climbs into the warm cab, pulling away exactly as he's done for twenty-plus years. Too tired to think, he forgets to watch his mirrors for the sheriff. But nobody is chasing him, and before it's eight o'clock, he's back up on the big Cat, working those last few acres of steep ground.

He sleeps for moments, dreaming intense and wild, twisted dreams. But the cold always wakes him, and he sits up in his seat again, shoving another cylinder of jerky into his mouth, taking a deep swig of well water from the gallon milk jug sitting between his feet, and then chewing the salty meat as he picks his next swipe, navigating with headlights and his increasingly soggy memory. By morning, he can imagine being finished. At midday, he parks on the last high ridge and climbs out, gazing down at a surviving patch of brome and cedar. How did he want to do this part? He must know, but he can't remember now.

Bewilderment moves into a simple rage, and he discovers that he is crying, and

maybe he has been for a long while. His face is soaked and cold in the sharp north wind. He wipes it and wipes it, then gives up. He lets himself cry. He collapses where he stands and closes his eyes, and maybe he sleeps, or maybe it's something other than sleep. Either way, when his eyes pull open, he remembers. The rest of it. This is how he will do it.

The cedars put up a fight, but he mows all of them down and covers them over with raw earth. Then he makes a series of long curved gouges that he has to cut more than once before they look pretty much right. And by then, night is falling again. He has half a thousand little jobs left waiting, but every job is delicate and separated in space from the others, and the Cat won't help him. So he navigates down to the bottoms and cuts the headlights and sets the machine free, pointed toward the trees that mark the river. Alone, the big machine chugs its way forward, vanishing into the gloom. If he hears it tumble and crash into the channel, the sound doesn't register. Jake is walking back toward his pickup, and that's when he notices new lights that don't belong there. Headlights seem to carry voices with them. A name is called out. His name. Jake doesn't listen well enough to recognize any one voice. What he does is walk quickly toward the east, sensing that they haven't seen him and won't, if he's careful. A quarter section is a lot of land, particularly when you've shaped every inch of it yourself.

Half a mile east is a tangle of dead cedars. Jake laid them out with care, forming a dense tangle of interwoven branches and rusty red needles. That's where he hides. He climbs inside the tangle, feeling warmer by the moment, and he eats the last of his dried apricots and drinks the two last swallows of water from the milk jug, and he closes his eyes sometime later, and sleeps, and he sleeps without being bothered by dreams, hours passing in a blink. Then a hand touches his shoulder, and he wakes with a start. And Morgan says quietly, firmly, "Come on out now. It's over."

Maybe it is done now. Jake can't believe that it is or ever can be, but that dangling hope urges him to climb out of the dead little forest. A light snow is falling. The first snow of winter. It lends a hush to the various men standing uphill from him. There's the sheriff and a couple deputies, and between them is a hound dog who couldn't seem more pleased with itself. It greets Jake by wagging its stubby tail. Jake offers his hand, asking the sheriff, "Is it the fuel? Is that why?"

One of the deputies starts to answer, but Morgan cuts him off. He clamps a hand on Jake's shoulder, saying, "You're going to behave, right? You aren't going to do anything stupid?" Jake glances at him.

Morgan says, "No cuffs," to the sheriff. "Please."

The sheriff drives a boxy Jeep. Cautious to a fault, it takes him what seems like hours to reach the empty trailer. "All this work," he keeps saying. "God, what were you thinking, Jake?"

The ground is wearing a thin inch of new snow. Except where the dead cedars poke up through the snow, of course.

"What were you trying to prove? Can you tell me that?"

Jake sits between deputies. When he leans forward, everyone is nervous. Morgan is up front, and he jerks as if startled. The deputies get ready to grab their prisoner, and if need be, strike him. But then he peers out the windshield, remarking with the calmest voice possible, "It looks like the sun's breaking out."

The little snow is finished. The cold north wind is dry and cleansing, pushing away the last of the clouds before they reach the highway. They turn in the direction of town, but that means nothing. Maybe he's going to jail, but there's also a hospital up in Lincoln where people can find special help. Jake doesn't ask about their destination. He couldn't care less. Again, he shuts his eyes, expecting to sleep; but this time the sheriff barks out, "What in hell?" as he hits the brakes.

Even on a Veteran's Day, the highway carries a fair amount of traffic. And most of the traffic has pulled off to either shoulder, people standing in the chill wind, cold hands pointing south, moving side to side as if drawing the

same curving figures in the air.

One of the deputies says, "Oh god."

Morgan makes a low grunt, and then looks back at his brother, trying to speak and finding no breath in him.

"Do you see it -- ?" the deputy starts to ask.

The sheriff says, "Now I do."

He pulls across the far lane and parks on the wide shoulder, the cherry tops flashing as he climbs down. Everyone climbs down, forgetting all about Jake. He's left to himself, slipping out into the suddenly bright sunshine, miles of fresh snow making him blink, making his tired eyes tear up.

A strange woman standing nearby points and says, "What's the hair? What makes it?"

"I don't know," says the man next to her.

A group of teenage boys are past them. Laughing, one of the boys says, "Look at that tit! Isn't it a beauty?" "It is," a deputy agrees.

Morgan looks at Jake. Looks at him, and then he stares south at the long white hillside. Dead cedars are clustered up at one end, looking red and shaggy. A second patch of cedars -- a small red mound-- caps the end of the rounded hill that Jake built months ago. That hill is white with the snow. White and smooth, and perfect. Then comes the third patch of cedars in the middle of the reshaped bluffs. Triangular. Tucked closely between a slope that rises on a curve, and then rises again on a matching curve.

"Just like legs," says Morgan.

Jake is standing beside him, staring like everyone.

"And knees. And look, feet!' His brother practically giggles, his eyes sweeping back toward the east end of the property. "And her hair, and face. lust right. That's Winnie! You did the face just right."

Jake stares at where Morgan is staring.

"I couldn't see her before. When she was just bare dirt." Morgan can't stop shaking his head in astonishment. He has to touch Jake on the shoulder, asking, "What is she doing there? Sleeping?"

The sheriff says, "That's what it looks like. Sleeping naked."

"Christ," says a deputy. "Is she ever beautiful."

"Jake," says Morgan. "Jake? What are you thinking?"

"I don't know," he admits.

"Aren't you proud? You've got to be proud!" Morgan laughs now, tears leaking free of his blinking eyes. "It's Winnie out there!" Jake shrugs his shoulders. Then with a quiet and firm, almost indifferent voice, he tells everyone, "I don't know. I'm looking, but I can't see her."