

1/3, 1/3, 1/3

IT was all to be done in thirds. I was to get 1/3 for doing the typing, and she was to get 1/3 for doing the editing, and he was to get 1 /3 for writing the novel.

We were going to divide the royalties three ways. We all shook hands on the deal, each knowing what we were supposed to do, the path before us, the gate at the end.

I was made a 1/3 partner because I had the typewriter.

I lived in a cardboard-lined shack of my own building across the street from the run-down old house the Welfare rented for her and her nine-year-old son Freddy.

The novelist lived in a trailer a mile away beside a sawmill pond where he was the watchman for the mill.

I was about seventeen and made lonely and strange by that Pacific Northwest of so many years ago, that dark, rainy land of 1952. I'm thirty-one now and I still can't figure out what I meant by living the way I did in those days.

She was one of those eternally fragile women in their late thirties and once very pretty and the object of much attention in the roadhouses and beer parlors, who are now on Welfare and their entire lives rotate around that one day a month when they get their Welfare checks.

The word "check" is the one religious word in their lives, so they always manage to use it at least three or four times in every conversation. It doesn't matter what you are talking about.

The novelist was in his late forties, tall, reddish, and looked as if life had given him an endless stream of two-timing girlfriends, five-day drunks and cars with bad transmissions.

He was writing the novel because he wanted to tell a story that had happened to him years before when he was working in the woods.

He also wanted to make some money: 1/3.

My entrance into the thing came about this way: One day I was standing in front of my shack, eating an apple and staring at a black ragged toothache sky that was about to ram.

What I was doing was like an occupation for me. I was that involved in looking at the sky and eating the apple. You would have thought that I had been hired to do it with a good salary and a pension if I stared at the sky long enough.

"HEY, YOU!" I heard somebody yell.

I looked across the mud puddle and it was the woman. She was wearing a kind of green Mackinaw that she wore all the time, except when she had to visit the Welfare people downtown. Then she put on a shapeless duck-gray coat.

We lived in a poor part of town where the streets weren't paved. The street was nothing more than a big mud puddle that you had to walk around. The street was of no use to cars any more. They travelled on a different frequency where asphalt and gravel were more sympathetic.

She was wearing a pair of white rubber boots that she always had on in the winter, a pair of boots that gave her a kind of child-like appearance. She was so fragile and firmly

indebted to the Welfare Department that she often looked like a child twelve years old.

"What do you want?" I said.

"You have a typewriter, don't you?" she said. "I've walked by your shack and heard you typing. You type a lot at night."

"Yeah, I have a typewriter," I said.

"You a good typist?" she said.

"I'm all right."

"We don't have a typewriter. How would you like to go in with us?" she yelled across the mud puddle. She looked a perfect twelve years old, standing there in her white boots, the sweetheart and darling of all mud puddles.

"What's 'go in' mean?"

"Well, he's writing a novel," she said. "He's good. I'm editing it. I've read a lot of pocketbooks and the *Reader's Digest*. We need somebody who has a typewriter to type it up. You'll get 1/3. How does that sound?"

"I'd like to see the novel," I said. I didn't know what was happening. I knew she had three or four boyfriends that were always visiting her.

"Sure!" she yelled. "You have to see it to type it. Come on around. Let's go out to his place right now and you can meet him and have a look at the novel. He's a good guy. It's a wonderful book."

"OK," I said, and walked around the mud puddle to where she was standing in front of her evil dentist house, twelve years old, and approximately two miles from the Welfare office.

"Let's go," she said.

* * *

We walked over to the highway and down the highway past mud puddles and sawmill ponds and fields flooded with rain until we came to a road that went across the railroad tracks and turned down past half a dozen small sawmill ponds that were filled with black winter logs.

We talked very little and that was only about her check that was two days late and she had called the Welfare and they said they mailed the check and it should be there tomorrow, but call again tomorrow if it's not there and we'll prepare an emergency money order for you.

"Well, I hope it's there tomorrow," I said.

"So do I or I'll have to go downtown," she said.

Next to the last sawmill pond was a yellow old trailer up on blocks of wood. One look at that trailer showed that it was never going anywhere again, that the highway was in distant heaven, only to be prayed to. It was really sad with a cemetery-like chimney swirling jagged dead smoke in the air above it.

A kind of half-dog, half-cat creature was sitting on a rough plank porch that was in front of the door. The creature half-barked and half-meowed at us, "Arfeow!" and darted under the trailer, looking out at us from behind a block.

"This is it," the woman said.

The door to the trailer opened and a man stepped out onto the porch. There was a pile of firewood stacked on the porch and it was covered with a black tarp.

The man held his hand above his eyes, shielding his eyes from a bright imaginary sun, though everything had turned dark in anticipation of the rain.

"Hello, there," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Hello, honey," she said.

He shook my hand and welcomed me to his trailer, then he gave her a little kiss on the mouth before we all went inside.

The place was small and muddy and smelled like stale rain and had a large unmade bed that looked as if it had been a partner to some of the saddest love-making this side of The Cross.

There was a green bushy half-table with a couple of insect-like chairs and a little sink and a small stove that was used for cooking and heating.

There were some dirty dishes in the little sink. The dishes looked as if they had always been dirty: born dirty to last forever.

I could hear a radio playing Western music someplace in the trailer, but I couldn't find it. I looked all over but it was nowhere in sight. It was probably under a shirt or something.

"He's the kid with the typewriter," she said. "He'll get 1/3 for typing it."

"That sounds fair," he said. "We need somebody to type it. I've never done anything like this before."

"Why don't you show it to him?" she said. "He'd like to take a look at it."

"OK. But it isn't too carefully written," he said to me. "I only went to the fourth grade, so she's going to edit it, straighten out the grammar and commas and stuff."

There was a notebook lying on the table, next to an ashtray that probably had 600 cigarette butts in it. The notebook had a color photograph of Hopalong Cassidy on the cover.

Hopalong looked tired as if he had spent the previous night chasing starlets all over Hollywood and barely had enough strength to get back in the saddle.

There were about twenty-five or thirty pages of writing in the notebook. It was written in a large grammar school sprawl: an unhappy marriage between printing and longhand.

"It's not finished yet," he said.

"You'll type it. I'll edit it. He'll write it," she said.

It was a story about a young logger falling in love with a waitress. The novel began in 1935 in a cafe in North Bend, Oregon.

The young logger was sitting at a table and the waitress was taking his order. She was very pretty with blond hair and rosy cheeks. The young logger was ordering veal cutlets with mashed potatoes and country gravy.

"Yeah, I'll do the editing. You can type it, can't you? It's not too bad, is it?" she said in a twelve-year-old voice with the Welfare peeking over her shoulder.

"No," I said. "It will be easy."

Suddenly the rain started to come down hard outside, without any warning, just suddenly great drops of rain that almost shook the trailer.

You sur lik veel cutlets dont you Maybell said she was holding her pensil up her mowth that was preti and red like an apl!

Onli wen you tak my oder Carl said he was a kind of bassful loger but big and strong lik his dead who ownd the starmill!

Ill mak sur you get plenti of gravi!

Just ten the caf door opend and in cam Rins Adams he was hansom and meen, everi bodi in thos parts was afraid of him but not Carl and dad they wasnt afraid of him no sur!

Maybell shifard wen she saw him standing ther in his blac macinaw he smild at her and Carl felt his blod run hot lik scalding cofee and fiting mad!

Howdi ther Rins said Maybell blushed like a flouar while we were all sitting there in that rainy trailer, pounding at the gates of American literature.