Three Black Crows

by

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Abstract

Three Black Crows is an original work of fiction exploring colonial violence and resistance through the archetypal narrative of the hunt and the relationship between big game hunter and native guide. The novel is based in a tradition of Canadian prairie fiction and conventions of the Western genre, but also honours oral traditions of Athapaskan First Nations and the spirit of fireside storytelling. *Three Black Crows* is based on the author's personal experience working in the big game hunting industry of Yukon Territory and on a critical reading of hunting narratives written by dead white males. Challenging conventions of this literature and representations of First Nations characters, this the story of Norman Alexander. Norman's life is imprinted with the marks of racism, residential schools, and appropriation of native land. But it is also shaped by Crow, a trickster who is both magic and real--a maker of the world, and a black scavenger, often associated with an industry that profits off carrion. *Three Black Crows* follows a seventeen-year-old wrangler, Everett Barlow, deep into the wilderness of northern Yukon, a romantic landscape that becomes forever altered when Norman disappears into it, taking with him a dead white moose.

This thesis is an original work by Niall Fink. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

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This telling of the story of crow is a work of fiction. Crow's story is inspired, however, by versions recorded in Julie Cruikshank's *The Social Life of Stories* and in Dominic Legros' compilation, *Tommy McGinty's Northern Tutchone Story of Crow*. Crow's story belongs to a vibrant oral storytelling tradition across the North that is far from extinct. I would like to acknowledge some of the individuals who have inspired me with their skill. To Henry Basil, Jerry Buyck, Jimmy Johnny, and Julia Morberg, and to all the Van Bibbers: mahsi-cho.

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Contents

Introduction

A Personal Narrative.

Like most works of fiction, *Three Black Crows* grows out of a personal story. My story begins with the buffalo stone. It goes something like this.

When my great grandfather first came to the country, running from Chicago with four thoroughbred racehorses, a bullet wound in his heel, and a covered wagon, he could see a beacon shining from four miles away. It was twenty years after the second Rebellion was crushed and the Northwest Territories, which would, a year later, become the province of Alberta, had been neatly parceled into one-mile squares. It must have seemed like all of it had been newly made for him alone. He found his way to what would become the Fink family homestead guided by the buffalo stone.

Stones like these are common across the Alberta prairies. They are called erratics, and they are a kind of spoor left behind by glaciers that retreated at around the same time the first hunters made their way down from present-day Yukon. Each spring for generations the buffalo circumambulated the stone, leaning into it to rub away their winter wool and polishing the surface to a shiny gloss. Their hooves wore a track that was two feet deep. When Great Grandpa Henry first saw it, pieces of their wool still clung to the bottom of the track. So the story goes.

In 1945, American folklorist R.E. Gard wrote of Johnny Chinook, "a personal figment, a certain feeling that represents Alberta" (3). "You know how it is," Gard wrote. "You get a feeling about a certain place. You can't explain the way you feel except to say, 'this place is different from any place on earth,' or 'there's a spell over this country,' or 'it's a mighty mysterious bit o' land" (1). Johnny Chinook, the trickster figure of Anglo-settler folklore, was emblematic of a regional storytelling heritage that was, in Gard's view, intimately linked to the landscape. But by the time I was born, the buffalo stone had long since gone dull. Gard's Alberta was as distant to me as Poundmaker's Alberta was to Gard. I grew up in a south Edmonton suburb, close to a large indoor shopping mall. My family's bookshelves were filled with the likes of W.O. Mitchell, who taught my grandmother grade eight; of Rudy Wiebe, who was a friend of the neighbours; of Howard O'Hagan, whose mythological *Tay John,* my dad related as gospel truth; and, of course, Robert Kroetsch, who played pool and drank beer with Grandpa Fink. I learned a certain reverence for these books that did not extend to other Canlit icons, particularly Margaret Atwood. These authors were authentic in the extent to which they captured the orality of which Gard waxed lyric, and in the extent to which they created a mythology to inhabit a place that was, to us, without one. The arrowheads that my grandparents' ploughs turned up did not disrupt that mythology, but were rather the stuff it was built on. The landscape was numinous with these invisible Indians, who were somehow unrelated to the real Indians that were the subject of cruel jokes in the hockey dressing room. "Do you know the story about why Crow got his wings?" went one. "So he can beat the natives to the dump."

There were crueler jokes, too.

I shot crows, and magpies, and gophers, and other things too, for target practice. Peer pressure was a powerful thing. As much as I cried over it in private, I still aspired to a kind of masculinity that depended, in part, on cruelty. By the age of eleven or so, I had matured enough to adopt a fairly common modern hunter's ethic: I would have to eat anything I killed; nothing could go to waste. So crows were off the firing line, at least. For a while this was enough. But killing one thing sets a terrifying precedent. Suddenly you must establish boundaries around what may be killed, and what may not be killed, and under what circumstances. At first these boundaries make sense, but over time they might start to erode. To maintain distinctions becomes difficult, faced with the troubling questions of "why?" Why kill a buck, but not a doe? Why kill a nuisance bear, but not a nuisance human? Why kill one animal but not another?

I do not claim any answers to these questions. Instead, I believe these are the kind of unanswerable question that is fertile ground for fiction. As Claude Levi-Strauss has famously put it, animals are "good to think with" (40-42). Violence toward animals becomes a frame for understanding other forms of violence that are less immediate and visceral.

Three Black Crows is based on the lived experience of five seasons working as a wrangler and a guide for big game hunting outfits in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. Almost every scene within this story began with a memory, or with a story related by another guide. This novel did not, however, begin as a story about hunting. The novel grows out of a short story that I wrote in the second year of an honors degree in creative writing at the University of Alberta. The class was taught by my supervisor, Tom Wharton. "Norman and the Crow" is the story of a trapper who, near the end of his life, strikes up a friendship with a talkative crow. Norman Alexander (Norman

Martindale in the early version of the story) was first inspired by the late Alex Van Bibber, whom I heard about during my first season as a guide in the Mackenzie Mountains of the Northwest Territories. Guides spoke of him as a kind of legend. Alex guided into his eighties and continued trapping almost to the day he died, on November 12, 2014, at the age of ninety-six. The story I wrote was based on a brief encounter on afternoon in 2008, when I sat down with Alex for lunch. For two hours he drove me around town in his new red Dodge, and told stories about the old days. They were stock stories that did not touch on the personal: stories like the winter he scouted the Canol Road for the American Army, or the time he guided Robert Kennedy. The short story that I wrote was based on a feeling I had about this old man and the dignity he carried into his old age; it was a curiosity with this fierce masculine pride and a sense that maybe, somewhere under it all, there was pain. The Norman I wrote was a work of imaginative fiction. "Norman and the Crow" was also very short: 1250 words in all. But it poked the surface of deep currents of which I was only vaguely aware, the most powerful of these currents being the legacy of Canadian residential schools and the stories of Crow.

I began writing what would eventually become *Three Black Crows* while at the Banff Centre's Mountain and Wilderness Writing Residency in the fall of 2012. These first drafts are entirely unrecognizable from the story presented here. It started as a lightly comic tale about a fictional community of squatters at a place called Nadaleen, just up the road from the also-fictional town of Marrow, and a young chainman (Elliott Borger, later to become Everett Barlow) hired to assist the survey of the region for a proposed bridge and haul road. It was intended as a satire exploring the fantasies of wilderness that people create for themselves, over which the power of the landscape, and the

talkative figure of Crow, loom large. Norman appeared only as a peripheral character, living on the outskirts of town. I was uncomfortable plunging into the unsettling currents of personal trauma I had touched in "Norman and the Crow."

Nadaleen, in retrospect, was an attempt to find a space for myself and for my personal history in the North. I did not realize its resemblance to Robert Kroetsch until after I returned from the Banff Centre Residency. *What the Crow Said* was prominent on that hallowed bookshelf in my parents' basement, but I had only skimmed the book in my teens, getting as far as the third chapter before losing interest. It was only when I revisited the book that I saw how much Nadaleen looked and felt like Kroetsch's Municipality of Bigknife. My crow was disturbingly similar to his crow, and my landscape a northern transposition of his Alberta. Somehow, without intending to, I was trying to rewrite the stories of my parents' generation. The novel presented here has, over countless drafts and false starts, evolved into an entirely different story from the one I began in the fall of 2012. It is one that I have developed, sometimes painfully, into my own story.

Three Black Crows was written in a political climate that was highlighted by the increasingly undeniable impact of climate change, particularly in the North; by Idle No More and a renewed voice for indigenous sovereignty; by the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; by the expansion of the Alberta tarsands; by the fight over a Northern Gateway Pipeline; and finally, by a fierce struggle over the legitimacy of Aboriginal land claims over a 65,000-square-kilometer expanse of what all parties call "pristine wilderness"—the Peel River Watershed in which this novel is set.

The Canadian North has been, and often continues to be, the site of ongoing colonization. It is a modern frontier. Yet unlike the Wild West of history and myth, its violence is more difficult to conceive, or even to name. Rob Nixon has recently described this process as what he calls "slow violence," which is "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). Echoing Raymond Williams, Nixon calls for novels that engage slow violence by exploring both "close living substance," which is to say the lived experience of an individual, while at the same time exploring the large-scale "occluded relationships" that invisibly shape a collective experience (45). To write responsibly about the North, a place where a tree might take a hundred years to grow chest-high, requires a particular sensitivity to slow violence.

The following novel represents my best effort at measuring up to that challenge, using the proxy of big game hunting. It is informed in part by archival research and theoretical readings, some of which I will discuss below, but in particular by personal experience. Since the first draft of "Norman and the Crow," I have had the benefit of another four seasons hunting, wrangling, and guiding, including two moose seasons working with Na'Cho Nyak Dun guide Jerry Buyck. I have also engaged in oral history projects with Tr'ondek Hwech'in First Nation in Dawson City, and have written a memoir with Alex Van Bibber's brother, JJ Van Bibber. I do not, however, make any claim to represent the views of any individual, or any First Nation, in this novel. While writing this novel has required sensitivity to issues of race, gender, and colonial ideology, it is not intended as a polemic, or an extended meditation on these issues. Its first and most important goal is to engage a wide readership.

Three Black Crows is a work of fiction. The characters it contains are also fictional. Everett Barlow is not an autobiographical character, nor do his views necessarily represent my own.

Background.

Three Black Crows has been informed by a wide variety of sources, including archival research and a brief literature review. What follows is a brief discussion of the historical material that informs this novel.

In the most generic terms, big game hunting in remote locations like Northern Yukon represents a quintessential wilderness experience. Hunting literature from the area, both past and present, frequently features familiar tropes of the sublime scale and timelessness and the pristine character of its water and wildlife. This wilderness is particularly vulnerable to the criticisms articulated by William Cronon, James Callicot, Roderick Nash, and many others. Central to these criticisms is the way that wilderness erases human presence from the landscape, particularly aboriginal presence. One of the more egregious and illustrative examples of such erasure was the establishment of the Kluane Game Preserve in southern Yukon Territory in 1943. The preserve prohibited Kluane people from subsistence hunting and trapping on thousands of square kilometers of their traditional territory, while giving permission for paying clients to hunt trophy animals within these boundaries. Ironically, many Kluane people found employment as guides and packers within this industry to help offset the loss of livelihood (Neufeld 244).

Big game hunting has been a significant industry in Yukon Territory since shortly after the turn of the 20th century. Historian Robert McCandless has established that, from its outset, the industry was dependent on the aboriginal men who were employed in it. He notes that in many communities, guiding and packing "was the most interesting and sought-after job available to Indian men and it paid well" (58). Aboriginal guides were themselves sought-after by sportsmen. According to McCandless:

> They maintained the requisite intimate knowledge of the terrain and of the animals' habits. They were available to work at times when white men were most deeply involved in gold mining, transportation, or prospecting, and the working season was perfectly complementary with the trapping season. Beyond these reasons, many of the big game hunters preferred to go with Indian guides. They welcomed the opportunity to learn "woodslore" from the expert, the North American Indian. The books the hunters wrote about their Yukon experiences offer snippets of information on the country and its history that they learned from their guides." (58)

The books that McCandless refers to above provided much of the background reading for *Three Black Crows.* These include, in particular, the work of Charles Sheldon, Neville Armstrong, and James Bond. Additionally, I have included some reading of Dolores Cline Brown, Martin Hunter, and Thomas Martindale's accounts. All of the above texts are remarkably similar. They are collections of "hunting tales;" archetypal narratives that rely on the ready-made narrative structure of the hunt, with its built-in moment of climax, the death of an animal. This is the narrative form that the structure of *Three Black Crows* is built around, often riffing off of its conventions.

In general, I have found that these texts support McCandless's conclusions regarding the relationship of hunters and indigenous guides, though McCandless may understate the racism that is present in some of these texts. In particular, what I found most unsettling about the depictions of guides is how people, like the trophy antlers that are the object of the hunt, become commodified. The most eloquent and also the most vivid example comes, not surprisingly, from what is could be regarded as the piece de resistance of the hunting narrative form: Ernest Hemingway's *The Green Hills of Africa.* Hunting for Kudu near the Somali border, Hemingway and his two companions stop in an unspecified town to hire guides. It begins with haggling over the size of the tips the men will pay their guides. There is an argument over the credentials of each guide and then finally, to settle fairly who gets the most-credentialed guide, one of Hemingway's companions suggests the three men draw lots: "one naked one and one with breeches in each lot. I'm all for the naked savage, myself, as a guide" (416).

That brief passage speaks succinctly to the way native guides may become dehumanized and objectified into types: how a person can become reduced to a type, a "naked savage," later to be drawn as the long straw for his presumed ability to track game. But this is far from being the whole story. The very nature of the hunting situation, which places the guide in an expert role, offers an opportunity to invert the power dynamic. One powerful counter-narrative comes from Johnny Johns, the historical inspiration for the Johnny Joseph who appears in the prologue of *Three Black Crows.*

Johnny Johns became a registered guide-outfitter in 1926. To do so under the laws of the time required that he become "enfranchised" as a Canadian citizen, revoking his rights as status Indian, since it was illegal for an Indian to become a chief guide (what

would today be called an outfitter). These laws remained in place until 1970. Yet Johnny Johns' success in this industry was remarkable. As McCandless puts it, "a list of his hunters' names through his fifty years in the business would read like a *Who's Who* of the sporting world. His personal contribution to the territorial economy through the years from 1917 to 1967 would have to be reckoned in the millions" (60). A community leader, Johns was admired across the territory by all communities, and is still remembered in oral histories more than four decades later.

A startling moment of personal connection occurred in August 2014 when, conducting research in the Yukon Archives in Whitehorse, I came across the ephemera of his 1978 obituary. "I was born under a spruce tree" was the line that, according to the obituary, Johnny Johns often used to begin his life story. It was the same line that JJ Van Bibber used to begin his own story, and which eventually became the title of the memoir we wrote together in 2011. It was the same line that Alex Van Bibber, the early inspiration for Norman, often used himself, and which was repeated nationwide last November when the CBC and the National Post mourned the passing of this officer of the Order of Canada. It expresses a complex kind of pride, paradoxically self-abasing and proud, and oddly mythological in its tone. It is this kind of pride and mythogenesis that my hero, Norman Alexander, embodies, and that my fictional proxy, Everett Barlow, must try to understand.

Craft.

In *Three Black Crows*, real places cohabit with fictional locations. The majority of the narrative takes place in the Peel River watershed at familiar camps and cabins along the

Wind, Hart, and Beaver Rivers. However, the names of camps, creeks, rivers, and lakes have been changed and the geography rearranged, partly to fit the structure of the narrative, and partly to obscure reference to the inspiration for Red Stone Outfitting, Alan Young's Midnight Sun Outfitting Ltd. The town of Mayo has likewise been fictionalized to the town of Marrow, with its geography less specific, in the manner common to prairie authors such as Margaret Laurence, Robert Kroetsch, and W.O. Mitchell.

However, where they appear, references to real individuals (such as Alex Van Bibber and his white moose) are true to fact and verifiable. Nonfictional places, such as Whitehorse, Grindelwald, Hanna, Consort, and Alliance, are likewise checked to correspond to their real geographies.

The novel uses extremely minimalist punctuation. With very few exceptions, punctuation is limited to commas and periods. Minimalist punctuation here encourages a sense of orality both in reading and in the writing process. It also forces a simplified prose that seems suited to the sparse yet expansive landscape of the novel. The novel also consciously avoids using proper names, both to suggest a sense of uneasy familiarity between characters, and to be representative of the way these characters view each other in terms of generic types: as "the hunter," "the old man," and "the boy," for example. Pronouns have required particular attention. It is common for a character like Everett to refer to animals as "it." "It," suggests an objectification that is at times appropriate, and at times is not. In the end I could not come up with a consistent schema for using "it" or "he/she" to refer to animals. The use of one or the other is intuitive, and may speak to the empathy that the indirect narrator, most often Everett, experiences toward that animal.

Early drafts of this novel experimented with Everett as a first-person narrator. Ultimately the decision to use free indirect narration, almost exclusively from Everett's perspective, was an intuitive one. The freedom to have narration broaden at times into godlike omniscience is necessary to evoke the sublime aesthetics of wilderness, which is central to the themes of this book. Norman's first-person monologues were originally conceived as a counter to this all-powerful omniscience. The juxtaposition of these two narrative voices has become, in the final version, an important meta-narrative feature.

Finally, a note on the title: The phrase "Three Black Crows," comes from the stock exchange. It describes a turn in the market--those times, like the ones in which this novel was written, when a bull market turns into a bear market.

Prologue

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.

Foreverandever.

Amen.

Mea cowboy, mea cowboy, mea mexican cowboy.

Ndithak!

A gunshot cracked somewhere over the rise. The boy could not see where. He turned to the horses to calm them and before he was halfway turned three more shots went off as fast as the bolt could shuck them. The horses heaved at the spruces that held them, the treetops suddenly animated. He could tell from the sound it was the Mannlicher, not the .308. This was bad.

Samson and the hunter returned a few minutes later and when they returned he could see that it was very bad. The hunter's hands fumbled four new cartridges into the magazine. Samson's eyes were livid.

Yuhumzhe tetsu, he said.

The boy nodded. They looked over at the man they had just called an imbecile but he had not noticed. Samson rolled a cigarette with one hand and offered it to the boy, who took it and coughed and then handed it back.

They waited half an hour to let the bear die, if dying was what in fact what the bear was doing. The bear had gone off through head-high willows and Samson led them after it. The battered Ross gun was slung under his left shoulder with muzzle trailing forward and the wing turned back at ready. He placed his own feet in each of the bear's prints and did not move until he had found the next. There was blood smeared on a few yellow leaves but it was liver-dark and there wasn't much. The hunter followed right on his heels. Twice he bumped into Samson crouching over a track and jumped back electrified.

The boy held back at a distance leading their horses on foot. He had no rifle of his own. The horses could smell bear and from time to time one would balk suddenly at the

smell, and the men would suddenly grip their rifles and everything would freeze and when after a minute or two the frightened horse made no further sign of danger the boy would whip him with a length of willow branch, harder than he really needed to, and the whole parade moved forward again.

The bear was curled up in a hollow like some giant sleeping dog and they were nearly on top of it before Samson saw it. The two men swung up their guns and trained them on the wide brown head, but it was clearly dead. Samson leaned in carefully and prodded the hindquarter with the muzzle of his rifle. Nothing moved. There were handshakes and there were backs slapped. Samson even laughed, but it was the ragged laughter of wornout nerves and the jokes about stained shorts and grey hairs were only a performance that was part of his job description. His heart wasn't in it. The hunter seemed to realize this after a while and he went quiet too.

It was a she-bear and she was very large. It took all two men and a boy to move her. They propped her chest on a mossy hummock and cleaned the leaves and twigs out of her hair and tucked her tongue back behind her teeth. Samson cleared back some of the stubborn willows to open up the sightline while the hunter showed the boy how to operate the Voigtlander camera. He had him stand ten feet away while he crouched beside the dead sow. He had the Mannlicher in one hand and he threw his arm over Samson's shoulder like a private-school pal, sleeves rolled back to reveal thick hairy forearms. Samson's eyes were fierce and guarded. They looked through the camera and the thirteen year old boy holding it, to any future that dared to judge him or to think that it understood what this moment was. The hunter grinned. The boy clicked the shutter.

It was a hard seven miles back to camp and by the time they reached the headwall it was fully dark. They dismounted and led the horses down a steep jumble of stunted trees and willows and slippery moss-covered rock, Samson feeling a route with the soft toes of his moccasins, the horses all nervous with the drop below them and the bear-smell still clinging about them, the whole dark curvature of the earth dropping away on the offhand side beneath a scatterplot sky.

Their camp was on a gravel flat a half mile below where the stream they followed down out of the high country met a larger but also nameless creek. Three pale walltents were clustered in a half circle and an open fire burned in the middle. The old man sat cross-legged beside it. The others were asleep.

They unsaddled the horses by the firelight. The old man added a few sticks he had saved from the base of a lightning-killed spruce where the wood was thick with pitch, so that the fire flared up hot yellow, bright enough to see cracks the season had worn into the latigos and to set them aside for greasing. There would be enough grease on the hide to do the job. The old man insisted that they unroll it then. His insistance was quiet but unquestionable.

Samson and the old man spoke quickly. Both of them squatted over the hide, close together. In the firelight it was softened, not a bear any more but a rug or a carpet. Samson had been in a hurry when he skinned it. Rather than skinning out the head and paws he had severed them at the joints and rolled them up in the skin, to do the job later, by the comfort of the fire. The old man held one paw in his lap and berated him. Samson hung his head and said very little but after a while he spoke up, and there was

a heat in his eyes. The boy quit even pretending to unsaddle the horses and just stood at a distance with his hands in his pockets.

What are they fighting about? The hunter asked him.

Bones.

They're fighting over bones.

Yuh.

The hunter shook his head. He walked over and squatted opposite the other men, with the hide spread flesh up like a white blanket between them.

What seems to be the problem?

His voice had a drawl and the hint of wide white verandas.

Ihtzi wants us to take it back, Samson said. He says all them bones got to go back together or that bear's gonna be mad.

He thinks we should be afraid of a dead bear?

Yessir.

Tell him we'll take the paws back tomorrow morning. The boy can do it.

He says we got to do it right now.

Tell him we'll do it in the morning. The poor kid needs some sleep.

Major?

Yes.

He says we got to take that skull back too.

The skull?

We got to take all the bones back.

The hunter looked at the old man to see if he was serious. He was.

And what will happen if we don't bring back all the bones?

I don't know, Samson said. Anything could happen. It's dooli, that's bad luck.

That skull is nine inches wide. Maybe more.

I know.

The hunter shook his head again. It was just too ridiculous to believe.

Is there some reason he won't talk to me directly? I know he speaks some English. I heard him.

The old man just looked at him. His face was unreadable. His arms were hugged around his skinny legs. The bones of his knees showed through the threadbare cotton. He wore no jacket at all and his head was bare with white, still-thick hair cut short and shiny with grease.

The hunter stood.

I'm too goddam tired for this right now, he said. Johnny can sort it out in the morning. I'm going to bed.

He looked at the old man and enunciated. You hear me? We'll deal with it tomorrow.

He left them.

The boy was the last to wake and by the time he did the sun was up and the whole camp was eating breakfast. He often slept late but no one seemed to mind. In some ways he really was just a boy to them. He had a name of course but they did not call him by his name around the hunters in case any of them should mention it in town. The matter of his being found was a small concern but it was a real one. Maybe the hunters had asked what his name was at the start of the trip but they had forgotten it by now and in another few weeks when the hunt was finished he would still be just the boy, and that was how he would remain in their memories. The boy, the one who did the things that the men couldn't be bothered to do.

The three hunters ate pancakes and bacon around the morning fire and the guides and wranglers ate porridge down by the stream. This was the way it was. The boy said good morning to the hunters and they waved to him and then forgot him. He joined his cousins by the stream. Samson was there and the old man, whom they called Ihtsi, Jimmy Isaac and Lonny Joseph and the cook, Mabel Joseph. They sat in a line with their legs dangling over the gravel cutbank just above the water. Two grayling in the eddy, brightly damasked, flashed at the stale oats they dropped to the surface.

Johnny Joseph was with them too, boots stacked toe to tall heel. He had a wide black Stetson with an eagle feather tucked into the band, which he told the hunters was for luck but which everyone else knew was because he had seen it once in Sportsman magazine. Johnny Joseph was a very fortunate man. He was the chief guide and everything in this outfit belonged to him, but he ate with his staff whenever he could because they were all family, and because Johnny Joseph understood that blood in any of its forms was the only thing that had meaning.

They made room for the boy and he sat in the middle of them, next to Samson and Mabel. They were talking about the bear. The old man was had not slept at all that night and he was deeply distraught. The rest of them tried to hush him but he would not be hushed. They kept looking in the direction of the hunters.

Dooli, he said. No good. No good at all.

Johnny Joseph said that since it was the hunters and Samson who had killed the bear and kept the skull they were the ones at risk but the old man insisted that it did not work that way. The consequences of a man's actions were not limited to that man. It had always been that way and always would.

Johnny Joseph was quiet for a while. Then he nodded. He stood and motioned the boy to come with him.

The hunters had finished eating and they were talking among themselves. The one that shot the bear, the one called Major, was retelling the story of the day before. The other two called themselves Pop and P.O., and they were laughing. The boy missed the joke. Johnny sat down between them, as if he were right at home in that space.

Well Chief, said the one called Major. What's the verdict?

He won't listen. I told him what you said but he won't. He'll take that skull back himself if we don't. Believe me. He will. You'd have to put it under a lock and key to stop him, and we got neither one nor a box to put it in neither. Some things you just can't explain to them old-old timers. They just don't see things the same way.

I guess that puts us in a predicament, the hunter said.

Yes sir, Johnny said. It does.

I hope you understand we didn't come all the way out here for pictures.

Yes sir, I do.

Well, Johnny, you're the chief in this outfit. What do you propose we do about this situation?

The one named P.O. said this. He seemed to have some unspoken authority over the others.

Johnny held his hat in both hands and his head hung low. He would regret what he was about to do but there was no way around it. He looked over at the boy and for a moment he seemed to forget the company they were in.

Norman, he said. Norman glanced quickly to see if they had taken note of his name. But they were all still looking at him as they had before, the way they might look at some nameless, makeshift tool.

I need your help here. I need to know if you can keep a secret.

Samson had been up into the twilight hours skinning out the paws and the face with his Case pocketknife by the light of the fire and had wrapped up the skinned-out head and paws in an empty flour sack. The packaging did not fool the boy's horse. She had survived several seasons in the country and knew the fermenting scent of a dead predator. Her eyes rolled wildly when Norman tried to tie it to the latigo below her withers, and she would not hold still until Samson gripped the lead shank and pulled

her head down level with his own and looked straight into her eyes and spoke to her firmly. The old man watched the whole thing. He told the boy to be careful.

Norman rode all morning up to the headwall and up the small shallow stream backtracking on their trail. It was a good clear day and it was a fine thing to be out alone on such a day. There was new moose sign and there were ruff grouse in the trees but he had no rifle to shoot them. Maybe after this season he could buy one of his own. Maybe the hunters would leave one of their rifles for him. They did that sometimes, he had been told.

He rode until he was within a few hundred yards of the carcass and the horse smelled it and went spooky again. He tied her to a wrist-thick spruce and carried the flour-sack parcel the last hundred yards on foot.

The bear was still slumped over the hummock much as it had been in the camera frame the day before but without head or feet now and impossibly skinny without its fur, all pale sinews and fat stuck with bits of moss and spruce needles, man-like in its nakedness. Not even the whiskeyjacks had dared to touch it.

He matched the paws to each of their stumps and last of all he took out the head and placed it back against the neck and stood back and looked at the assemblage. His hands were greasy with the fat of the severed parts. He wiped them on his trousers and sat. He sat for a long time on the damp mossy ground hugging his knees and rocking back and forth. The sun was past its peak and shadows sprouted from the chisel stems of the axe-cut willows.

He knew what he had to do but it took him a long time before he could do it and when he did he did it quickly as in a dream. He took the head and covered it quickly

with the flour sack and tried to tie it with the jute string but his hands were shaking too badly. So he held it in one hand and hurried back to his horse. He willed himself not to run, and oriented himself through the tangled branches and broken ground, orienting himself toward the lone tree standing above the willows. A dark circle of raw earth was around the base where the mare pawed into the ground, but the mare herself was gone completely. The shaking took over his whole body then.

She was an old mare and he knew she could pick knots. Samson had warned him of that. But the fear could not be reasoned with that way. So he ran. He ran straight up as if flood-driven, with the flour sack in one hand bumping against his leg with each step, churning up clods of dry reindeer moss with his moccasins. At some point he let go of the bag, never to find it again. He ran until his legs gave out and he fell to both knees panting. Colours melted across his vision.

He had a dozen matches in an Altoids tin in his pocket and the sky above his upturned face was cloudless, and anyway, he could find his way back to camp easily, even in the dark. It wasn't that fear. It was a fear he had not known before. It was a formless kind of fear, a fear of nothing in particular and of everything all at once and it was a fear that would not leave him.

He did what the one called Pop had told him to do if superstition got hold of him. Pop, who said the rosary before breakfast every morning, had told him to pray. So he prayed. He prayed to God the Father and he prayed with all the prayers they had made him say at the school in Carcross and he prayed in English like he was supposed to pray but none of the prayers helped. The fear wouldn't leave him. It only grew. It took form. It became a living, breathing thing.

He knew it was out there waiting for him but he waited for his breath to catch him before he faced it. Behind him the valley spread all ablaze with colour. Bald and open to anyone who looked on it from that height. He laid his head against the earth and just breathed for a time. Then there was nothing else but to turn and see.

He came into camp hours past dark, scratched and hungry and falling off his feet. His shirt was ripped about his ribs and he had lost his hat. Pop noticed him first.

Glory be, he said. He often said this.

I thought we'd lost you.

The painted mare had come in riderless with a frayed length of rope hanging from its halter sometime around sundown. Johnny Joseph had been ready to ride out in the night to look for him but the greater wisdom in the camp had prevailed, Major explained.

We knew you'd make it back alright.

The three hunters had been drinking whiskey and they offered him some. He said he was too tired. He asked where Johnny and the others were and the men shrugged. They had no idea. He moved to leave but the Major patted on the pannier beside him and told him to sit. He poured a tin cup half full and put it in the boy's hand. Some of it spilled over his own hand as he poured. The boy could smell the brandy on the hunter's breath, the same smell as in his own cup.

Tell us what happened, Major said, and moved his seat around so he could face the boy. All three hunters seated themselves before him, expectant.

My horse run off, he said.

Did you hear that? His horse run off.

His horse run off.

That's right. His horse run off.

And why did your horse run off?

Norman shrugged.

Did it spook?

Norman shook his head.

Your horse just run off on you, did it.

He nodded.

And what about the skull? Did it run off on you? Or did you manage to stash it somewhere?

I don't know.

What do you mean you don't know?

I forgot.

You forgot what? You were supposed to bring it back to me. Did you remember that?

Norman was silent.

You lost it.

Norman nodded his head very slowly. He kept his eyes on the gravel between his toes.

Maybe you could tell us how in the hell you lose the one thing you're supposed to bring back?

Go easy on him, said Pop. Can't you see he's upset.

I'm upset, Major said. I had a bear skull that might make Boone and Crockett this year and I want to know what the hell happened to it.

The boy said nothing.

The old man put you up to this didn't he.

Norman shook his head.

Yes he did.

Norman shook his head again, vigorously this time.

Then tell us what happened. Go on, tell us a story.

Norman looked around him at all the faces hot-bearded in the firelight. He couldn't find the words to speak. Memories had found him. Memories of a man in a suit and a crucifix and a rubber hose. Memories he thought he had run far enough to lose.

What the hell is wrong with him?

He's scared of us.

What's he got to be scared of us for? All he's got to do is tell the truth.

You've gone and sulled him up.

I just asked a simple question.

He's too scared to talk. Look at him.

Well I gave him a drink. That should loosen him up.

Take it easy, Harry. He's a kid.

Go on, kid, drink. Drink.

Major was looking straight at him. The boy did not move.

Drink, Major said again. He pantomimed with his own cup, which was not as empty as he thought and spilled all over his shirt.

Drink.

When the boy still did not drink Major jumped up violent and unexpected and grabbed the cup that was in the boy's hand and shoved it against his mouth and forced back cup and head together. Norman held his lips tight together. The liquor ran down his neck and his hairless chest and stung the cuts that were there.

The other two men hauled Major back. They each took one of his arms but he still put up a drunken fight.

Where's my goddam head, he shouted. Where is it?

Jesus, Harry. Lay off it. He's a just a kid.

The hell if he is. He's playing us like a bunch of goddam fools. He's laughing at us. Don't pretend like you don't see it. They all are. Every one of them. They've been doing it since day fucking one. We give them our money and this is what they do. They laugh at us.

His nostrils were flared and his chest was heaving. The two other men still held him firmly. Norman sat shaking on the wooden pannier box with the empty cup still hanging from his fingers.

I'd suggest you go now, Pop said, as calmly as he could. Our friend has a temper.

He did not tell Johnny or any of the others about Major. He did not know why he felt the need to protect him, or to protect them from him. In the morning they gathered around Mabel's breakfast fire and took their different meals shoulder to shoulder and it was like nothing had happened with the whiskey and the fire.

But overnight everything had changed. The men had taken down two of the three tents while the hunters still slept and when they hunters rose groggy and red-eyed they found that the camp they had known had slept in for three nights had disappeared. When they asked what was happening Johnny told them was that the caribou were moving now with the frost, and that they were moving over onto the Little Wind. They said very little to question him. Major, least of all.

They rode that morning in a long line, sixteen head of horse in all with the boy at the very back, mounted on Lonny's sorrel because his feet were bruised, stirrups hitched as high as they would go, looking over his shoulder again and again for all his trying not to. He had told the old man everything, late that night previous, when the men came in from looking for him. All the guides and cooks and Johnny Joseph had gathered together in the dark and shadows of the tent and listened to his story, and

when he was finished the old man said that the place was nan-detsi. A bad place. They all understood what this meant.

They rode out following the creek that left their campsite, the one that most people called Carcajou, crossing back and forth through the gathering water. They did not stop for the game tracks that were thick along the banks. They rode and as they rode the sun climbed into yet another clear and innocent day. Another day uncounted, mingling and losing itself in the deep currents of that place.

There was a time, a long long time ago, when the whole world was upside down and backwards and animals were hunting people and eating them. Ihtsi told me that. He said that crow's the one that made it right. But some of them spirits, they still hang on in some places and maybe that's what I come across that day. One of them spirits. He said it's dangerous for a man to hunt in places like that.

I believed him when he told me that. I was thirteen years old and I'd just run from school and I was still messed up I guess. I was looking for anything to believe. There's things that happened there, at the Choutla school in Carcross, but if you don't mind I'd rather not talk about that right now.

Now I don't know anymore. You'd think after sixty-odd years I'd of settled on one thing or another but every time I think I got it figured out I go and change my mind again. That's the problem. It all just makes less and less sense every year.

There's a cow moose in the museum in Whitehorse, all white except a few spots on her. I went and seen it myself. Alec Van Bibber, he's the one that shot her. I used to know Alec. As good a guide and hunter as they get. Ran an outfit of his own down around Champagne before the tax man come and shut him down. Alec, he told me they get albino like that sometimes. There's been plenty of white moose people seen before. It's just a kind of an anomaly. Like sometimes people are born with a tail. I seen that on the TV. Some kid somewhere over in India was born with a monkey tail. No bones in it or nothing, just a little thing of skin hanging off his ass. I guess some of them over there was sure he was a god come down to earth because of that. People came and prayed to him and everything. Anyway, the doctors couldn't explain it. They said they could take it off no problem with surgery, though. You see a lot of stuff on the TV.

It used to be a man could buy an outfit for six dollars. All he had to do was pay the government to register and he could hunt just about anywhere. That's how Johnny Joseph done it. Then they came in with the concessions. At first it didn't hardly cost a thing to get a concession. You'd just go and register and then you had the rights to outfit in that area and make your profit. That was thirty years ago. Now a hunting concession is going going gone for a million or more. That's bound to change something. The price is gone way up and the clients, they're changing too. They always had money but this is something even different. They always wanted horns but now more and more of them, they're coming up here for something I don't even try to understand.

One of the hunters, he was a good one, he told me that if you want to understand it you got to go to Africa. Over there they own the land, not just the outfitting rights. That means they can decide anything, who lives on it, who mines on it, anything. They've owned it for years. This hunter, he said that it was like they were setting up a farm or a ranch maybe. He didn't know what to think of it. He said they're doing that over here now too, down south. Canned hunting. They buy the land and put up high fences and they put them deer or elk or whatever on hormones so they grow horns like nobody ever saw before. And they make a killing on it. That land makes more growing horns than it did growing beef.

This was ten years ago he said this. I don't imagine it's got any better now. I guess there's a lot of people, they've been saying we should quit hunting animals altogether and if that's what they're seeing and hearing about I can't say I blame them. Maybe they see something I don't see. Like there's a road we're going down and there's no telling how far it's going to go.

Part I

One

Half an hour out of Sundre on Highway 22 a tractor-trailer had skidded off the shoulder and lost its load. The truck was half buried in the ditch with snow curling off the lee side of the deck and half the road was blocked with drill pipe. Traffic was backed up for more than a mile both ways and so he was an hour late when he arrived and stamped his boots and pulled off his toque and searched around the diner.

Three bulging greyhaired men sat under a red silk zodiac in the corner nearest the door talking about the railway ties that CN had left behind, wondering what would become of the stack at the station lot and if anyone would come to clean it up. One of the men looked up at him and nodded politely. He nodded back. In the farthest corner another man, a tall man, sat by himself with a newspaper and a mug and four empty creamers and a three-ex Resistol that was crownside down on the table in front of him. He took a seat opposite. They shook hands.

So you're Tanner's cousin, the man said.

Yes sir. Everett Barlow.

I appreciate your driving all the way out here on a day like this.

I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me.

A waiter not much older than Everett and dressed in a clean white shirt came with two menus sheathed in smudged plastic. Carson Shade recommended the spring rolls and Everett ordered them and a coffee for himself, and handed the menu back to the waiter unopened. The waiter bowed slightly. So slightly it might have been his imagination.

So, Carson said. I take it you're looking for a job.

Everett was.

I suppose Tanner told you a bit about the outfit.

He said maybe you could use some wranglers this year.

He said that did he.

Yes he did.

You done any packing before?

No sir.

Any guiding?

No.

Have you worked with horses much?

Kind of. I used to ride pretty much every day with the 4H club.

The 4H club.

Yes sir. That was about eight years ago now. Before mom and me moved to town.

Carson leaned back into the vinyl seat and laced his hands behind his head. His mouth was tight. Only the corners of his eyes split into crows feet.

How old are you Everett?

Seventeen.

Seventeen.

Seventeen. Look. I'm not going to tell you I'm a rodeo king or an old cowhand or something like that because it's not true. I work hard. You can ask Tanner and he'll tell you I work hard.

He told me. We wouldn't be talking if he didn't.

And I don't ask for much.

You better explain that to me. I'm not sure I understand you.

If you think I'm worth it you can hire me on next year. Maybe I can work my way up to guiding in a year or two. Right now I'm willing to put in whatever time it takes. You won't lose anything on me, anyway.

Everett, let me ask you something. How much do you think a hunt costs?

I don't know.

Guess. Just a ballpark figure.

I don't know. Ten thousand.

A sheep hunt starts at twenty-five thousand dollars. That's before trophy fees, airfare, or incidentals. Or tips. I could ask for more than that too but I don't. At least not yet. The hunters I get will pay that much and they'd pay more than that too because I have a reputation. This business, it's built on reputation, you understand?

Yes sir.

People think outfitters are just raking in that cash but they have no idea what it takes to run an outfit in a place like that. No idea at all about the costs of flying and logistics and all. Some years we barely turn a profit.

Yes sir.

So don't tell me what I stand to lose.

Alright. I won't.

Now if I understand you right, you're proposing you'll work whole season long. For free.

If that's what it takes, yes.

That's two and a half months. You know that don't you?

I'd stay all winter if that's what it took.

In my experience sometimes people find that when they get someplace it's not quite the thing they thought it would be. Sometimes the grass isn't as green as they thought.

I'm not one of those people, Everett said.

Carson sipped his coffee and studied him over the brim.

You want this pretty bad, don't you.

Yes sir. I do.

Everett thought that he would ask him why, but he didn't.

It was still blowing hard enough outside that their goodbyes were carried away mutely. They shook hands again. Carson clamped his hat firmly to his head with his free hand. There were several buildings that still had the old painted clapboard siding that was a rare thing now. A couple of brick buildings too. Further down there was a tin-clad Napa building with a large parking lot beside it that was empty except for an idling Weatherford company truck. He looked around first to see if anyone was watching him and then opened the passenger door and climbed up into the seat. He sat perched on the edge of the bucket seat and he seemed dwarfed by it.

His father lay with his seatback fully lowered and his stocking feet stacked one on the other on the dash beside the steering wheel. The heater was on high and the radio turned down. He lifted the brim of his cap with his thumb and peered at Everett from under it.

Well?

Everett told him.

When he was done, his father bit his lip and drummed on the steering wheel with his palms. The hood of his sweater was pulled over his cap and the bill jutted forward into the storm beyond the windshield. He seemed to be looking for something out there.

Never yet heard of an outfitter that'd turn down free labour, he said. Benny Glysner said he knew one that—

He looked over at his son.

Shit, he said. Don't listen to me. I'm proud of you, Everett. Goddam it, I'm proud of you.

It was dark by the time his father dropped him off in front of the white-stuccoed condominium. Traffic was still moving at a crawl. The snow had stopped but the ploughs had not been out on this street yet and everything was covered with three inches of light powder. The city streets were strangely quiet and empty. Deep ruts ran down the center of the street and cars were buried along the sides. His father parked along the curb and let the Cummins engine run. Everett leaned forward and twisted his neck to see through the windshield. The light was on, three stories up.

You should come in for supper.

I got a few things to do while I'm in town, his father said.

What kind of things?

See a man about a dog. That kind of thing.

She won't mind you joining us. It's chicken curry tonight. She always cooks extra.

His father did not say anything.

I guess you know that.

Everett reached for the handle to open the door but did not pull it. He stopped and held it. I was hoping, he said.

What?

Nothing.

What were you hoping?

Nothing.

Say it.

I was hoping I could take the thirty-aught.

Were you now.

Carson said I need one. For bears.

Anything else you want from me while you're at it?

Just the gun.

You're not short of money are you?

No.

If you are you just need to tell me.

I'm not.

His father lifted his cap and ran his hand through the receding black of his hair as if to check that it was still there and then put the cap back in place. Listen Everett, he said. You need to understand there are some things you aren't ever going to fix. Some things are just broken. They always were that way and that's the way they're just going to be. Alright?

I'm not trying to fix anything, Everett said. I just thought we could eat together, like we were civilized.

We aren't civilized, his father said. Nobody is. Some people are just better at pretending than others.

He took the stairs up to the third floor and when he got there he leaned for a long time with his forehead against the door and his hand on the handle. The sounds of cooking came from inside. The hissing pan and the clap of the robin's egg plates and the

smell of chicken searing. She was humming a song he had never heard anywhere except for her humming.

He turned the handle and went inside. They ate and when they had eaten he told her about the job.

This one time in the spring of the year I was coming down to Marrow with a load of fur and I come across two moose that was stuck together. I mean, it was two moose heads is what I saw. It was in the spring of the year like I said. The antlers was all tangled up together from when they were rutting. They'd been laying like that all winter. Must of starved to death, or maybe the wolves got them first. There wasn't much left of them by the time I got there except them two heads stuck together and some bones lying around. Most of the rest of it got dragged off but them two heads together was too heavy for anything to move so they were just left there, in the middle of a moose pasture just this side of Nadaleen Pass. It was kind of eerie and I don't know why.

I'd pass them tangled antlers every time I went out on the line. It was there about three years before the porcupines chewed it down so the antlers fell apart and every time I come through there, and sometimes I come through there four times in a season, I'd stop and have a look at them antlers. I just didn't know what to make of it. Those moose were just doing what come natural to them.

We used to use them old leghold traps. Didn't think nothing of it because that was all there was to use and so we used it. Now pretty much everybody is using conibears. Conibears is just a kind of a trap that catches the animal around the neck and kills it instant. Snap. Like that. Marten never knew what hit him. People say it's a better way to die. I don't know about that. I don't know if there's such a thing as a better way to die. I bet if you was to ask that marten, it'd go two days with its leg stuck in a trap just so it could live two days longer. No, it makes no sense at all but that's the way it is. But they do keep the fur better. I was always in favour of the conibears.

People say it's cruel the things I done to make a living. Maybe they're right. When you got no choice in the matter the best thing is not to think about killing and dying too much. It's like

the weather. You either get used to it or you stay inside. Some people don't go out when it's forty below. That's their choice. I got used to it a long time ago. I had to. And that's about all I'm going to say about that.

Two

Tanner Barlow lived a mile and a half west of the lath and plaster house where Everett had spent the first nine years of his life and where his father now lived alone in the grey dust and greasy dishes of a relapsed bachelor. Tanner's truck was visible from the moment it left the yard. Everett sat with his father on the porch drinking a nameless brand of coffee and watching the truck and the trail of dust behind split like a comet between the cloven barley fields with the two rusty pumpjacks in Glysner's quarter bowing their bulbous noses to oil and its passing.

Tanner parked in front of the carraganas and hopped out and waved. Everett's father called him up to the porch and offered a coffee but Tanner said he'd get one for the road at the FasGas in Hanna. You ready to go cowboy? He called Everett cowboy the same way he would call the gas jockey a champ.

He didn't notice if Everett answered. He was eyeing the duffle bag beside the door, dubiously.

I thought I said pack light, he said. He sat down on his heels and unzipped the bag.

What the hell is this?

It's a filter.

A filter.

For bacteria and shit.

Tanner shook his head, disgusted. He threw out the quart-size bottle too, and the Thermos. He also threw aside the sleeping bag liner and the inflatable pillow and the two paperbacks and the spare pair of boots and an uncomfortable amount of clothing. Everett dumped it all in the bedroom upstairs. The one that had been his bedroom. The one that was still his bedroom.

Back on the porch his father was still leaning with his back against the railing and his coffee in one hand and a look on his face that Everett could not figure, for all the times he had seen it before.

Well?

Well, his father said, as if this were an answer.

He slung his duffle bag on one shoulder. It was limp enough to do that now.

One thing before you go, his father said. I believe you were expecting something of me.

He tossed Everett the key to the tool shed.

Top shelf above the gear oil. Go have a look.

Everett looked at the leather key fob in his hand and looked at his father again.

He had to pull up a stool to reach the top shelf and he groped around as far back as he could reach before his hand closed on the pistol grip. He brought it down to see it in the sidelight through the open door. It was a Marlin 45-70 in stainless steel and it was brand new. The lever swung open and closed, smooth and factory oiled. He didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

He rode with Tanner two hours west to Sundre and then north the better part of an hour. The sun was already hot and blinding when they passed under the iron arch with the Shade brand at its center and the black welded cowboys riding its curve. Thirty-four horses crowded the fence as they passed the corral.

There they are, Tanner said. Your new family.

They were a mismatched bunch. There were two young horses with some spirit in their eyes, two siblings for whom this would be the first season, Jesse and James. Some were so old their coats were white except for a few speckles of their younger colour and swaybacked like a limp hammock with their spines showing through and eyes that saw everything and were tired and bored by it all. Some were ugly gangly things bought at a meat auction for the price of three sacks of feed and tried out for a season, who had survived and had beyond all odds become working mountain horses, a modern-day cayuse, the kind of horse selected by God or Darwin, depending on which chooser you preferred. Either way there was no telling what would make a mountain horse. Except maybe wide hooves.

Wide hooves?

Doesn't matter what shape or colour you are when you're sunk up to your withers in the skeg. You think it doesn't make much difference, a quarter inch in the hoof, but it does. Size matters.

Tanner was leaning with one boot hooked over the bottom rail of the corral. Size eleven. He had a plug of Copenhagen bulging from his bottom lip and the bony wings

of his shoulderblades showed through the sweat-soaked shirt he wore. He spit a brown stream.

Watch this, he said.

Everett watched. Tanner took off his boots and stood them in the cropped grass this side of the fence and climbed up the rails in his stocking feet. It was a three-rung corral made from poplar poles. Tanner crouched on the top rung like some lanky bird calling out to the horses, here boys, here boys. And they came, all of them, nosing to his empty outstretched hand, black eyes holding the hot electric sky and the dust of the corral and the two human forms within them.

This one here is Sandy, he said. She don't look like much but she'll pack more than a horse twice her size. Just you watch her. She'll be the first one to fuck you and take the whole herd with her if you give her half a chance.

He was speaking to Everett but the tone of his voice did not fit the words because it was meant for the horses, calm and smooth and deep and soft all at once, and it held a meaning that was different but truer than the words themselves. As he spoke he stood carefully, one foot balanced on the squared fence post, and stepped across onto Sandy's back. The mare flitted an eye, briefly.

Them old mares are like that, Tanner said. He hopped over to a chocolate mare.

Lolita over here, you watch out for her too. She picks knots. Tiger, he's only three. I wouldn't use him for anything but pack boxes, and keep him away from the meat.

He stepped from Tiger to Bruiser, and Tank, and Bella, and others whose names Everett soon lost. He paced around on the backs of the animals with his arms outstretched beside him like the painting of some miracle, or maybe every miracle ever

painted, calling each horse by its proper name. He landed on his feet beside Everett, grinning.

He sat down and pulled his boots back on.

Your turn, he said.

It went better than he thought. He got one foot on Sandy's back and nearly got the other one on too. And then in the next moment there were hooves suspended above his head. It was shocking how fast up and down slammed together. Strong meaty legs and horsetails and dust suspended in stop motion and in the yawning time of that frozen moment he thought maybe this is what it was like to die, the world suddenly fixed in one eternal image. It seemed somehow appropriate to have eternity fixed to a horse's ass.

All the horses trotted in a tight nervous circle on the far side of the corral under the shade of some young aspens, struggling to get as far away from him as they could, pressing up against the fence, biting one another and snorting. He spat dirt from between his teeth. Tanner was laughing fit to crack a rib.

You broke anything yet?

I don't know, Everett said. Let me check.

Nothing was, but he lay on the earth a bit longer anyway.

Up at the ranch house there were sandwiches. Seven people were seated at the kitchen table and to fit them all they had to squeeze together and pull in a swivel chair from out

of the office. Carson and Loretta and the three kids, Hector, Charlie, and Jamie. They were old friends from Tanner's rodeo days, strangers to Everett.

They all crowded elbow-to-elbow eating the soup and grilled cheese sandwiches Loretta had made for them and each mumbled the same childlike thanks about how good it was. Loretta and Carson sat beside one another, pressed so comfortably together that at the head of the table. Both lean and tanned and wrinkled, like they were baked in the same oven. Everett tried not to stare. There was a kind of hunger in him that he did not want them to see.

Outside the window the pastures rolled green and pleasant toward the shadow of distant mountains. If he leaned he could just barely see the corral through the window.

Does your family have horses? Loretta asked.

No, Everett said. No one else was speaking.

My mom's allergic.

Allergic to horses? I never knew there was such a thing.

She'll break out in hives just walking downwind of a horse.

That's terrible.

Yes, it is, he said. And it was terrible, even if it wasn't true. He checked to see if Tanner had noticed but his cousin was carrying his plate to the sink with his back to the table.

What does your mom do?

She's a teacher.

What grade does she teach?

She doesn't really teach a grade. She's an art teacher.

Oh.

Loretta asked Hector if he would please pass the ketchup. He did.

They spent the rest of the morning oiling tack and loading the goosenecks on the two hoof-dented horse trailers with feed and caping salt and then finally the horses themselves. The larger of the two trailers was hitched to a flatbed duelli and the other one to a small tractor-trailer with Red Stone Outfitting decals stuck on the door. There was a red Stone sheep on the decal, from when they used to hunt south of Dall sheep country. Tanner and Everett followed in Tanner's truck. They were leaving late on a Saturday because the trailers had only farm plates and on Sunday all the truck scales would be closed. Bureaucrats are the only ones that still keep holy the Sabbath, Carson said. God bless them for it.

The convoy lit out under the iron arch and it seemed like there should be trumpets or streamers or something to match the boiling feeling in his gut but there was only empty highway and the steady ticking of fence-posts and double-tree power lines for ten straight hours. They drove into the night and it was still light at twelve thirty when they stopped in a place called Prophet River on the British Columbia side and filled up at a station with old-fashioned pumps that needed an attendant to start them. Carson ordered food for all of them inside the diner and the waitress there filled the cups with coffee without their even asking. The coffee was fresh.

Everett took the wheel. It was early in the morning and Tanner was asleep in the passenger seat when he pushed the truck over the summit near Muncho Lake and the mountains rolled out beyond, unbroken by power lines or seismic lines or any line at all

except the broken ridge that pushed itself above the green breathing surface. He was at the wheel beyond that too, for the six white ewes licking salt from the empty road and then for ten caribou that trotted across the road as if the pavement was too sun-heated for their delicate feet. On both sides of the chipsealed gravel there remained the meanders of the old Alaska Highway, cut off like ox bows where they curved through the trees. Switchbacks and curves to avoid depressions, and curves just for the sake of curves, to protect the scatterbombing of the convoys that had made the road sixty years before. Along the road allowance there was brome grass that had been seeded to keep the weeds down and somewhere south of Watson Lake there were bison feeding on it. Live buffalo, wild, not painted, not fenced except by the line of campers and RVs 4 Rent pulled over on the shoulder for pictures.

A man in a polo shirt had walked to the edge of the chipseal with his son seated on his shoulders to see better, but the child was not looking at the buffalo. He was staring wide-eyed at the two rigs with thirty-four caged horses nuzzling the gaps in the stamped aluminum grille, rolling in second gear toward pasture still further northward.

Carson pulled his rig into the gas station outside of Marrow. That was what the sign said. Gas Station, painted by hand on peeled plywood. It was closed at eleven PM, windows darkened behind steel bars. A riot of fireweed grew in between rusted bogey wheels and rims and yellow-painted pieces that probably belonged to some kind of grader, all piled up behind the shed. Some geraniums in fuel drums between the pumps were wilted by a summer frost. Tanner was driving then and pulled in just behind. The

four of them took their separate tires to piss on, arched their backs, and then gathered together to wait for Jamie and Charlie to catch up.

Look at that stupid fucker, Carson said. What is he looking at?

On the top of a gravel berm next to the shop a man sat parked on his four-wheeler. A fluorescent vest made a cross over his chest. For some reason one hand was holding a long spruce pole, upright like a lance. Dark hair and greasy jean jacket and a Bruins cap, just sitting and staring the way one might look at so much livestock. Everett took the bag full of coffee cups from the truck cab and carried it over and dropped it in the trashcan outside the shop door. He nodded to the quad rider. The rider nodded back.

Lot of horses, he said.

Everett looked back over his shoulder. Carson and Hector and Tanner were leaned against the truckbed, boots crossed, watching.

Yeah, he said. A lot of horses.

What outfit you working for?

Carson Shade.

The man nodded slowly. Everett realized he had probably read the decal on the tractor trailer door. He touched the brim of his cap and the man just looked at him. He could feel eyes upon him, all the way back to the trucks.

What did he say? Carson asked him.

He said we had a lot of horses.

I'll be damned, Hector said. He can count.

The rider was still watching when the three trucks pulled out of the lot, seated on his machine unmoving with the pole in his hand. Tanner threw the truck into third and the tires spit gravel.

The Indians don't like us much around here, he said.

Us as in Carson's outfit? Or us as in us?

I don't know. Maybe both.

What did we do?

Tanner shrugged. I heard there was a fight a few years back. Before my time anyway. Some of Carson's hands went into the Silver King after the season was over and I guess they got kind of liquored up and got to talking up some local girls. Some punches got thrown and some teeth got broken. Carson did some of the breaking, I think. You know how it goes.

How long ago was that?

About ten years.

They hold a grudge that long?

Tanner shook his head. There's way more to it than I care to know about. Some politics. The band wants a piece of the pie, I think. Like it's not enough we haul three tons of moose meat for them every year.

You mean like jobs.

No. I mean like a cheque in the mail. It's the Indian way.

Come on Tanner. Let's not be ignorant.

Tanner shrugged.

Carson tried hiring one of them, he said. A young guy, I can't remember his name, came up to wrangle for us, what was it, three years ago? Three years. I was just getting started. He was hunting with Armand and one morning, about halfway through the hunt, he just up and disappears.

What do you mean, he just walked?

Yeah. He just dropped it all and walked back to Marrow. Hundred-something miles. Ask Armand about it sometime.

What made him walk?

Who knows? The hunters can be hard to deal with sometimes. I guess Carson can be hard to deal with too. Probably somebody said something he didn't like. Jimmy Alexander.

What?

That was his name. Jimmy Alexander. Seemed like a good shit to me, you know. Another one of the boys. I was kind of sorry to see him go.

Beyond Marrow the road branched and deteriorated until they came at last to an old gravel pit beyond which was more mud and ruts than road. It was midnight and the subarctic light spread molten across black-treed wilderness, a dark palette of cloud along the western edge. The horses emerged stiff-legged and frightened like the captured, unwilling immigrants of a new world. The men trotted them around and got them hay and water and tied them for the night to the sides of the trailers.

Everett lay underneath one, zipped up in his bag and covered in a bug net. Above him mud-darkened grass was wound around the axels, carried three thousand kilometres from its native soil. The strings of his body were screwed too tight to sleep. All about there was the ambient whine of mosquitoes, unceasing and unchanging in pitch.

The sun left briefly and returned and then it was morning. Charlie made a stick fire out of a broken-up pallet some other camper had left behind and set a kettle to brew. The others rose slowly one by one and took a tin mug and waited for the coffee to do its work. Tanner and the Shade kids looking out at horses over their steaming drinks as if just looking at the job made them tired. Everett tried to imitate them.

They grained and saddled the horses and the pack animals. Each rider pulled a string of three animals with one pack animal at the lead and three tail-tied behind, which left fourteen loose-herded animals. They untied these ones first and bound the leadshanks up around the halters but by the time the last was untied the first was already far out of sight down the ruined road. The last horses took off at a run to catch the first horses and then the first horses saw the last horses running and panicked and ran themselves, and then all the horses were running, and the wranglers were screaming, and all the riders were spurring their horses to keep up. At least, this was the logic Everett tried to imagine. But there was also a mad energy that defied reason, as horses have always stood in four-footed opposition to it. He'd imagined something like the trail rides he had known, once. He had never conceived of the sheer ungovernable

energy contained in thirty-four horses and three impatient cowboys, the explosion of such volatile elements suddenly released into the vacuum of open space.

The old mining road crossed a small river deep enough that the horses lost their feet halfway across and foundered and only then, on the other side, settled into a canter. For a while the trail was good where it climbed into sprucy upland above the river. But there was no stopping, and the saddle leather had swelled. He could feel the sodden horseblankets slipping out from under Tanner's old Simco and he could feel the saddle starting to roll. He swung down, mid-trail.

What the hell are you doing? Jamie hollered from behind him.

Saddle's fucked, he hollered back.

Just ride it out, she shouted. We're not stopping till we hit pasture.

But he was already on the ground. Eight horses including Jamie's parted through the bush around him and his own horse tried to follow, dragging him along. The best he could manage was a halfass job with the saddle and he barely managed to climb back into it without it rolling again. He held on a mile, until they hit the first muskeg.

He could hear bedlam up ahead and knew what was coming, but there was no way to stop it. All the horses bogged down nearly to the chest. Scrabbling up the other side his own horse lurched suddenly and he tried desperately to hold on to the horses he was leading but they were stuck too, and that's when the whole thing went upside down. He landed softly and rose to see his horse kicking up a fullblown rodeo with the saddle hanging under its belly. Leadropes were snapping and trees were bending sideways and tails were ripping out where they were tied to leadshanks. He was up and running but the whole mad show left him behind in a matter of a few minutes.

He found two horses not far off in the kind of muskeg that it seemed no horse in their right mind would go anywhere near, let alone straight to the middle of it. It was Tonto and Bella. Tonto was stuck on his side with the packsaddle and its two heavy boxes rolled under him, and Bella, still tied to the packsaddle, had been dragged in after him. The knot was seized.

He waded in and cut the leadshank with the rope and tied her up at a distance. It was a trick untying the pack boxes, but he managed it and dragged them out of the way, but the horse still would not get up. He kicked it. Hard. And when Tonto still wouldn't move his front leg, that's when he noticed it was broken. He sank down onto his knees in the middle of the muck and mosquitoes and plunged his head into the water there. He was so thirsty he drank it anyway.

Finally he sat up and wiped his mouth on his flannel sleeve but the sleeve was already as wet as his mouth. He stayed that way a while, trying to think.

That was how Tanner found him. Sitting on a tree trunk, staring at a ruined horse.

What the fuck are you doing? Tanner said.

In addition to his own string, he was leading Everett's horse, the saddle righted now and the rifle and saddlebags still miraculously hanging on.

Where's Admiral?

I don't know, Everett said. I think he went uphill.

Well fucking find him.

Where's Hector and them?

They're fucking gone. They've got fourteen loose horses to worry about and they sure as fuck aren't stopping cause you can't stay in your fucking saddle. Let's get a fucking move on.

His leg's broken.

Tanner spit. Everett wondered how he could chew snuff in all that heat. Tonto gave a few feeble kicks. Tanner sighed and slid down from the saddle and waded in to have a look.

There was a joint on the right foreleg, above the fetlock where a joint shouldn't be. It was hard to tell how it got there exactly but likely it had something to do with the horse falling with a rigid box wedged under its belly.

Tanner slogged back out of the swamp and gave his diagnosis.

Horse is fucked, he said.

He walked to the offside of Everett's saddle and unbuckled the scabbard and drew out the still soaking 45-70. He handed it to Everett.

Wait till I've got the other horses out of sight.

Let me take them.

Tanner looked at him and there was no sympathy to be found in that look.

It's your horse, he said. And it's your gun.

Tanner mounted and led all the horses away from the horror of Everett and the gun and the writhing horse. Everett looked at the horse and the horse looked back at him. It seemed to know what was coming. Like he had known it would end this way the first time he saw the boy.

This wasn't me, he said to the horse. You did this to yourself.

The horse struggled to rise again. The broken limb flailed sickeningly.

Stop it, he said. Stop. Stop fucking moving.

The horse did not stop. There was something about that stupid, unceasing movement that angered him. Like a fly crawling across a window, a loud dog barking, his mother's way of flipping her hand when she talked. It was too much for him to wait any longer. He levered one heavy cartridge into the chamber and raised the rifle and fired. Through the trees he heard the other horses kicking up another rodeo and Tanner cussing above them.

The first shot shattered the jaw but Tonto was still kicking. Everett levered another shell and fired a second time and this one caught the base of the skull. The horse jerked again and then was finally still, mouth agape and bloody and the one skyward eye bulging unnaturally large with an obscene white rim exposed beneath the glassy brown. He looked at all of this but did not see any of it. There was no time to see.

It took three hours of searching to find the missing horse. When they finally found him Admiral was grazing almost peacefully in a meadow high up the hillside with the dangling leadshank still tied to a torn-off piece of Bella's tail. It took another hour to find the boxes where they had left them and then more time to saddle Admiral with Tonto's load and remount and find the trail again. By then the hoofprints that were stamped into the moss had filled with water and looked like they had faded a year. Several times Tanner lost the trail where it braided into game tracks and they had to

backtrack for a long while to find it again. He had ridden this trail twice in the other direction and it frustrated him that he could not remember where it led. They had no maps.

Backtracking and hesitating they rode late into the night through brief dark hours and still did not even hear the others. Rain came and went, taking the stars with it and leaving them both shivering. Somewhere in the mess of that swamp Everett had lost his rain slicker.

At around eight, and it couldn't have been much later than that though neither one had a watch, they came across some meadows and a trapper's cabin with the roof sunk in under the weight of moss and time, and they found the remains of a camp from the night before. The campfire still warm with flies buzzing around it. Grass trampled.

They really aren't waiting around are they, Everett said. It was the first he had spoken in a long, long time.

Tanner spat a brown stream of day-old Copenhagen and cussed softly.

Tanner tried to spur the horses but the horses would not move faster than a walk. They crossed and recrossed up a gathering river and followed a trail through black spuce that were blazed six feet off the ground where the axe of a man on snowshoes would reach. Some of the trees had martin boxes left by some trapper that nobody could remember that were grayed and either falling apart or stuffed full of pine flakes by squirrels. The streams became smaller and faster and eventually they left the Beaver River and climbed up a bench between two large water systems where the ground was good and the trail etched irrevocably and the land fell away on both sides into green, swelling wilderness.

In the evening they dropped down, just as the rain started, into a floodplain with wide meadows between the willows and they found the other horses picketed there. A pile of horseshoes rusted by the fire pit and the skeletal remains of a wooden cot that might be fifty years old. Everett and Tanner slid from the saddle and struggled to stand up straight. Charlie and Jamie took the mounts, hardly speaking. Hector served some chili he had saved for them.

Figured you'd be hungry, he said. Jamie said we wouldn't see you till McClure, but Charlie and me, we knew you'd put the heels in.

They did not ask what had become of Tonto. Eventually Tanner told them. By then it was raining hard and they had rigged up a tarp which they sat underneath, all of them in a huddle. Everett was sprawled facedown on a pile of horse blankets in his sodden clothing. He was too sore to sit, too tired to unpack his sleeping bag. Before long he fell into a sleep that was the sleep of the dead.

If either Tanner or Everett had held onto any hope they might sleep in the following morning then they would be disappointed. But they hadn't, really. Hector was up before anyone to get a fire going. He woke the others all breaking firewood to feed it. They had eaten and saddled the horses and Everett had drunk four cups of deep black coffee before it was seven o'clock. Loose animals and pack animals and riders trotted out into a fog-baffled and still-raining morning.

They kept the height of land above a series of lakes and streams that were all in deep timber and by noon came to a place where the valley split a long rift, a crevasse

running the whole three-mile width into which earth and streams and whole trees disappeared to a depth that could not be seen, a seam in the structure of the earth, a detail not fully mortared. As if the country had been thrown together without time for such details.

Hector led the party along the edge of the rift for a while until they came to a place where both sides had caved in with a mess of roots and mud. If it were dry and solid it was shallow enough for a horse to scramble up the sides, but it was not dry and it was not solid. Hector dismounted and handed off his string and scrambled down one side and up the other leading his riding horse. The loose horses milled around like they had been driven up against a fence.

Even unburdened Hector's horse barely made it up the other side. Hector had a heavy braided rope that he had brought just for this purpose and had coiled across his chest that morning. On the opposite side of the rift there was a rusty come-along fixed to a treetrunk and left there some years ago. He ran the rope through it and called out to Charlie to bring the next horse up and Charlie fixed the packhorse's lead shank to the rope with a carrick bend and whipped its rump with a willow switch while Hector ratcheted it up with the come-along, dragging the horse face-first over the brink.

One by one they dragged up the loaded horses this way and many of the unloaded horses too, while the loose mounts fussed and nickered and finally followed in a desperate scramble. By the time all the horses had crossed over the wranglers had been at this work for the better part of two hours and the rain had almost stopped. Long hours later they came at last to a small cabin built for the sheep season beside a lake, where fish were rising in the calm of the evening and mountains were laid out in soft, abstract forms on its surface.

Rain-sodden, weighed down in every layer of clothing Tanner had permitted, every movement felt underwater. There was a rusty sheet-metal stove inside the cabin and Everett built a thundering fire in it and the wranglers all hung their clothes on the nails and ropes clustered around it. They had to sit outside for all the steam the soaking clothing let off.

Across little lake a cow moose and her calf stood up to their bellies in the shallows with noses dripping and watched the strange new animals picketed in the rich grass along the shore. Tanner pulled in three grayling on a hand line, all in the space of about ten minutes, and Jamie panfried them on a Coleman stove and they all sat there chewing fish before the freshly washed world, as it faded into twilight and a deep silence that filled the spaces between the clicking cutlery.

The following day dawned cloudless and they rode all through it, up into a high country where there were no trees at all and what brush there was came below the horses' knees. In the shadow of some naked mountains that drew close together there was snow, lingering late into the summer, still white and soft and slippery beneath ironshod hooves.

Close to midnight they came at last to McClure. The lodge and the outbuildings were at the edge of a broad shallow lake in the middle of a broad shallow plateau and the sun at its low angle made all the mountains that rimmed the mesa and towering clouds above those mountains into purple reflections of one another. Coming down from the high country the whole sweep of the land was revealed to them, the improbable mix of good grass among the dwarf foliage and the horse trails threaded through it. The distance that had brought them here fell away behind them.

Hector whooped and Jamie whooped and each of them whooped and whipped their horses with the sharp ends of the reins and they raced down onto the tundra in a drumroll of hooves and bouncing panniers and screaming riders, horses lathered and breathing heavy, the land suddenly awake with the sound of their coming.

Years later he would wonder if it was a dream.

I had all kinds of hunters. European, American, Mexican. Big tippers some of them. I got some mighty tips in my time but I don't like to talk about that. It's not right to puff yourself up on that, you know. I even had one Arab once. Strangest thing I ever saw. This was not so long ago either. He had some kind of interest in what they were doing up at Prudhoe Bay and some oil man by the name of Jacobs brought him out here. It was a big deal. This outfit was five stars. I never seen anything like it before or since. Reynolds outfit, over on the Alaska side. They brought up a cook and a wrangler and everything. We got fruit flown in every couple of days. And me, they flew me in there to act the local Indian. I never even been in that country before. That's getting into Eskimo country, over there.

The Prince, he come with one of them carpets they pray on and he'd tie it to the latigos up front on his saddle. That's what I called him, the Prince. That's not his name, that's just what we called him. I never could pronounce his name right. I guess he was someone important. Had money, anyway.

Didn't matter if we had a caribou out there or anything, every day about noon he'd start praying on that carpet of his. He'd ask me which way was north and I'd line him right up to it. I always had a natural sense of direction. It's a gift, you know. I asked him, how come you point north? And he said, no, Norman, it is Mecca I am pointing to. Like that he'd say it. Mecca. Queen's English. Mecca. I said I heard of Mecca before but I never knew it was up north. I kind of thought it was somewheres hot. Oh, they had a good laugh at that one.

But you know, I went and looked at it on a globe once. There's one in Doc Parson's office in Dawson. Damned if the Prince wasn't right. Shortest distance to Mecca is pretty near straight north of here. You wouldn't think it but it is. It's an upside-down world is what I'm saying, I guess. Or sideways, maybe.

When they come and hit them two towers I was out working with Collins' outfit. This side of the border. Collins was three days late coming in, and it's a bluebird day every day and we were just sitting in the camp and waiting for him going half crazy wondering what's going on. Wondering if he'd forgot us or something. Or if he'd had a crash.

When Collins finally come in and told us the news, that hunter, he just couldn't believe it. Fellow by the name of Davis. Harold Davis. I guess he had friends in those towers. No, I don't know what business he was in. But the way he looked when he heard that, you'd think the martians'd landed. He just couldn't make sense of it all. Somebody to come and try to kill his people. He said, when did we become the bad guys?

I remember that. I remember the way he said it too, we, like that, all indignant. This was not long after the Prince, you know. They said it was Arabs that done it, and I was thinking if this was Arabs then this is a different kind of Arab from the kind I seen. It was a them kind of Arab.

There was a lot of my life I tried hard to be on that we side. Johnny Joseph, he played the we side of the fence like just the best of them. I always looked up to old Johnny. He'd of been a rich man if that horse hadn't kicked his head in. Tragic thing, it was.

You run a risk when you play that game too long. Some time, you try to stop, and you find you don't know how to quit. Like when you been on a boat too long bucking waves and you get on shore and the ground is like it's moving. But the ground's not moving. It's you. You just lost your bearings for a bit.

I never even thought of quitting till Myrtle went to the hospital. That's pretty near two years ago now. One year, eleven months. I took the whole season off just to stay with her, and

I'm glad I did, cause she never made it through to moose season. She was gone by the end of August.

I could of gone back the next year but I never did. That hunt with Harold Davis was the last one I did. And it wasn't even a full season neither. It ended early on account of all the flights being cancelled. Collins, he wanted me back in '02. All the hunters wanted me, he said. They were calling him up and asking for me. But I just couldn't do it anymore. Everybody said them towers changed everything. Maybe they did, but I don't believe it. Maybe some of them woke up and saw what was going on all along. But mostly, I think it was just an excuse.

Three

Norman Alexander was in his usual corner by the window at the Midnight Sun Restaurant in Marrow. He liked the way the sunlight played off the speckled surface of the table. It was like a grayling when it was fresh out of the water. It was twelve in the afternoon. He was drinking tea.

There were some miners in the bar and a couple of families, but the families were Dickson relations and not the type he'd associate with. He sat alone in his corner and watched the door to see who would come through it next.

Walter Joseph came through. Clarance Joseph's boy. Walter saw him sitting in the corner and his face lit up and he hobbled over to take the seat across from the old man. He leaned the spruce pole against the window and kept his right leg straight out from the chair.

Oh my Jesus, Norman, he said. How yuh doing? Been a while since we seen yuh here. Finally felt like some human company or what?

Crow started talking to me, Norman said. When I started talking back, that's when I figured I ought to got my ass down here again.

Walt chuckled. What you doing up there anyhow?

I'm just taking it one day at a time.

Walt nodded soberly. One day at a time.

Outside the window a truck rolled past, weighed down to the axels with gravel.

What you done to your leg there?

Walter Joseph looked at his leg as if he had forgotten he had it. He chuckled again. Walt laughed often.

Dumbass thing, he said. Rolled my quad on a sidehill. I was just heading out to Kalzas Lake to check the nets. I was on the sauce a little heavy.

Norman shook his head. You watch that, you.

Oh, Walt said. That's what I was going to tell you. I seen a horse trailer the other night. I come up that berm behind Marty's gas station, must of been close to midnight, and there I seen Carson's rig. I was thinking, Jesus, my leg hurts. And I was also thinking, well, must be that time of the year again, huh.

How many head they got?

I counted thirty-something.

That herd of his keeps getting bigger and bigger. Sometime they're gonna run out of pasture.

Walt cocked his head sideways at Norman.

Alright you old crow, he said. What's this I hear about you going to work for that cocksucker?

I don't know what you're talking about, Norman said.

Word is you're looking to take some bowhunter back into that Carcajou country again, get a moose or something like that.

Might be true.

Well. That's Carson's country.

Carson don't own that country.

No, Carson don't own a damn thing around here. But he does own that concession. So are you working for him or what?

I'm not working for Carson, Norman said. Carson's working for me.

Walter shook his head. He stared out the window. He grinned.

I don't know what kind of a crazy idea you've got in that old head of yours, he said. And to be honest, I don't really want to.

Norman blew across his tea. It was already cool, but he blew across it anyway. His lips puckered into innocence beneath the creamy white Stetson.

I'm an old man, he said. All I want to do is hunt moose.

His eyes lit into a grin, like he just couldn't hold it together any longer. Walter's own round face split up into a hundred little cracks.

It's good to have you back, Norman, he said.

Over the coming week Carson Shade flew half a dozen times between McClure and Marrow. He flew in his two Piper Supercubs, freshly painted in red and white, one on floats and the other on wheels the size of tractor tubes. He brought groceries. He brought paperwork. He brought more wranglers out to the field. The wranglers shoed the horses and moved them out from McClure in strings of six or seven to the camps at

Three Barrel and Scrogy Lake and at MacMillan Pass and elsewhere. They rigged wall tents and cut wood and patched roofs and swept porcupine droppings and sometimes the dead porcupines themselves out of the cabins to open them for the season.

On opening day, the first of August and the first of the sheep season, the hunters came. Two Otter loads skipping down onto McClure Lake with half a dozen hunters and yet more cooks and guides on each. Everett had by then found a vinyl rainsuit that was three sizes too large, folded in a box at the back of the tack shed. He cut down the sleeves and legs with a belt knife, and he was dressed in this olive coloured clown suit when he met the hunters and shook their hands. He told them their clothing would fit like this too after a week out here and they laughed. After that they just ignored him, as if he were just an appendage to the cousin who swore and spit and joked with them.

They had flown over, in the space of two hours, a land whose hardships they had no reckoning of. Parachuted into a postcard scene. He resented them for this and for other reasons equally ill-defined. They wore camouflage, all of them. They blended together, all middle aged with trimmed beards and heavy eyelids and conversations that started with where are you from and ended with some of the finer points on the ballistics of the .300 win-mag. A slight drawl to the accent. They had a business somewhere that was doing pretty well and that, if you asked or even if you did not ask, they would tell you was built on the sweat of their brow and the grace of God.

McClure was a base camp with a tack shed, a meat shed, a high cache and a log-cabin lodge on a bench above the lakeshore. Around the periphery was a cluster of new quilted wall tents and two painted plywood shacks. The hunters stayed in the wall tents. The guides stayed in the shacks. There was an extraordinary number of nails driven into the pale bare studs of the largest shack and every nail was hung with some

piece of clothing so that, aside from the one centrefold posed like a madonna above the card table and the other centerfold of a huge bull caribou on the opposite wall, there was no part of the wall that was not uncovered. Even without insulation, it was very close inside. Everett and Tanner shared a shack with a team-roper from Chilcotin named Casey and a sometime carpenter named Glenn, and Armand, the Canadien, who came from Gaspé.

They sat on rusted folding chairs outside the open door and shared a bottle of single malt that Armand had smuggled in his duffle bag, telling stories that had been told and retold a hundred times or more. All this rehearsal only loaned itself to the enthusiasm they had for the retelling.

Everett drank a lot and said a little and they seemed to accept him as one of their number. One of them asked if he had a girlfriend. Another asked her name and it felt strange to say it aloud there, in that place. They passed around a picture that was creased by his billfold at the bottom edge and nodded in appreciation.

What's she doing now?

Working for her dad.

What's her dad do?

He's a lawyer.

This impressed them even more.

You got someone tending net for you?

What?

You know. Making sure the other team don't score.

Shut the fuck up Casey. Everett, don't listen to this asshole.

So the answer is no. You don't know what she's doing.

Don't listen to him.

I'm giving the boy an important life lesson.

He don't need advice from your ugly face.

My face has got nothing to do with it. I'm just telling the truth. You come out here three months and you better know what you're in for.

Don't start.

I wasn't going to.

I don't want to hear your drunkass heartache all over again. Neither does he.

That's good cause I don't plan on telling it.

What time is it anyway? We should be asleep for Christ sake.

Everett sat outside for a long time after they had turned in, smoking a cigarette that someone had given him and regarding the few stars that managed to stand against the imperfect darkness.

He had smoked only two times before but decided then that he would start now so that in a few years he would find the right girl and he would tell her his sad story and together they would finally manage to kick his habit, and he would look back on these years and call them his smoking days with a sense of brooding mystery about the time, of secrets about which they would never speak. Then he realized that there was no tobacco or rolling papers except what the guides brought with them and rationed carefully. It left him feeling listless and doubly deprived.

After a while he lost track of what it was that made him feel this way and simply wondered at a new emptiness that was inside him and the lightness that came with it. As if he had carried it all this way just to discover that it was all useless weight anyway. He crawled into his powder blue downfill, clothes and all and felt as if he were floating on a series of gentle waves. The alcohol had much to do with this. In the utter dark inside the plywood shack the other men were snoring and the smell of horses was thick in the clothes that hung about.

He trailed out with Tanner and a hunter from Dallas and a raging hangover. He returned nine days later riding tall in the saddle with Bruiser behind him and a load of meat and the sheep horns piled on top and the rain falling in curtains around the men and the horses and their silhouettes.

Three times he hunted sheep with Tanner. Each hunt was ten days. Three times ten days made a month in that high rocky country. Within each of those ten days was bracketed an entire story unto itself. An entire life and if it went as it was meant to, a death too. For those ten days the hunters would pay thirty thousand dollars, before trophy fees.

At times they would turn the horses loose and hunt for days on foot, climbing up into places where he would swear no living person had been before and maybe no soul of a person either, and then find them again days later and ride to somewhere new. Once, in a squall with a heart surgeon from Delaware, they hid under an overhang too shallow to call a cave and watched the water running over the lip of it and the electric

light of each strike and Tanner told them how he had found an arrowhead outside just such a cave, in a place that took hours of scrabbling on boot edges to reach. He had no idea what that long-ago hunter was doing up there. Whether he was simply desperate for sheep or whether he was driven by something else, some impulse beyond safety.

In the mornings Everett woke before the others and stepped outside the nylon tent and listened for horse bells. Sometimes he would walk for an hour before he found them. He would find the horses in the early light after a cold night when a fog lay heavy in the hollows and their breaths misted. They would look at him with eyes that belonged to wild animals and let him walk among them and feed them grain from his hand and accept him as their leader. He would untie the hobbles and mount up bareback and lead them at a canter back to camp and by the time he returned the willows would be dripping and sparkling in the new-made day.

When it rained they dropped into the timber and at times when the wind was wrong and he could not hear the bells he would move out from camp in circles looking for a track. The older horses were so used to the rope hobbles that they could travel nearly as easily bound as unbound and sometimes he would be gone for hours searching. One morning he looked for four straight hours before he finally found them bunched up in the bottom of a hollow high up on the mountainside.

It occurred to him that everyone and everything was searching for something out here. Every man and animal and plant and seed was searching that wide bare expanse for something it needed for survival. There seemed something profound in this. As if life were stripped of its ornamentation and could be seen clearly and nakedly here. It was a thought he would return to often, though later he would come to wonder if it was in fact so or if this was a way of coping with the harshness of a cold barren landscape

where his kind came only as a visitor. And then he would wonder if that landscape was not in fact the larger truth of the universe revealed, and he would go back and forth that way.

Several times a blue helicopter flew over and they lowered their binoculars and watched its entire flight until it disappeared. Tanner said it was a survey crew and that they had been out the previous season too, searching for cadmium and zinc. He did not seem bothered by it. He said even if they found something it was too expensive to develop anything this remote. Exploration was just a game they played like so many kids in a playground. They being the faceless men in faraway towers. The object of this game was not the minerals but simply the discovery of these minerals and it was the market that kept score. The exact rules of this game were beyond him but he recognized it for what it was and he talked about it like someone who understood and Everett believed him completely.

The sheep they killed were good rams. All of them better than fifty-inch curls. They spent long days climbing high up on ridges where the wind was cold and sharp and glassing the hillsides with the heavy spotting scope that Tanner carried wrapped up in a piece of camping foam. Twice they spent nights huddled together under a piece of nylon tarp shivering through, standing every half hour to try to keep their toes from freezing, waiting through the night for the morning fog so they could move in on a group that had a hillside vantage. They took the second ram this way. It fell a hundred feet onto a ledge and to get it out they tied together three basket ropes and Tanner scrambled down and fixed it to the horns and with two of them hauling from above and Tanner pushing from below they managed to get it up to a place where he could skin and quarter it. That was early in the hunt and the hunter, a lean Austrian man who had

some business in pipelines and spoke very little to either of them, gutshot a record caribou at six hundred yards on the last day.

They spent that whole afternoon tracking and they rode all through the next day to catch the Otter that was coming in the day after, and in the morning when it came Everett was still working on the hide on an orange tarp spread out on the floor of the guide's shack back at base camp. He stood and wiped his hands against the thighs of his dungarees.

It was a pleasure, he said.

The Austrian thanked him and shook his hand and left a wad of bills sticking to his palm. He did not meet Everett's eye. He was looking back into the filth of the guides' shack. The leggy centerfold on the wall. When he had gone Everett unfolded the bills and laid them out in a fan on the card table. He counted them three times. Each time it came to thirteen-hundred dollars.

Carson found him in the meat shed. He was on his hands and knees on the floor rubbing salt into the caribou skin. Tanner was sitting on the rusted salt barrel.

Don't look now, Tanner whispered loudly. But he's got us cornered.

Everett looked.

Carson was leaning in the doorway. He had his hat in one hand.

You boys done with that cape yet?

Everett did the whole thing himself, Tanner said, proudly. He'll get faster after a moose skin or two. He's just meticulous.

Carson nodded and looked around the meat shed. On a table in the corner was a stack of rolled and salted capes reaching nearly to the roof. A tangle of sheep horns and caribou and even a moose that Armand had taken early and still in velvet, all stacked at the back and each one tagged with the hunter's name and the guide's signature. Sheep shanks and hindquarters and long caribou backstraps hung from the rafters, some of it wrapped in cheesecloth and some of it with a skin dried over it, the colour of deep wine. Half a million dollars held in one plywood shack. He'd worked it out with Tanner.

Well, Carson said. What do you think of all this?

Everett wiped his nose with the back his hand.

I like it, he said.

Carson nodded. That's good, he said.

He came inside and sat down on an empty pannier in the corner. He held his hat in his hands and passed the brim around in a circle between them like a penitent.

I got a job for you boys. I think you'll like it too.

Watch him, Tanner said. Carson's an old horse-charmer through and through.

Carson grinned. Don't even start, he said. Two years you've been bugging me to see what's up the head of Carcajou. Careful what you wish for.

There's this place up the back of Castle Mountain where the sheep always go and lick the salt. August fourteenth of every year you'll find them there. Two, three dozen of them sometimes, and some big rams in there too. For a while there, and this was in the sixties, you know, I was taking hunters up every single year. Got so we had a regular trail right up to the ridge where we was shooting. And you know, it's like they never even noticed it. After a while I got so I just didn't mention it. Just kind of pretended like it was something I happened to find. They tipped better when they thought it was new country than when I tried to act like I knew it already. You'd think they wouldn't but they did.

Most hunters don't really want to go someplace that's new. Mostly they still want to kill something and if there ever was a place nobody ever went before there's probably some good reason for it. Most hunters just want to pretend like it's new. Like this one time when little Jean was two. It was hard times. This was back in '49 when the bottom dropped out the fur market. We took out some credit like we always done and we come back to Nadaleein Post in the spring and we find that marten's worth twelve dollars now. That's when I went over to really guiding big game. Guiding's the only thing that kept us above water.

Anyway what I was saying was we didn't have nothing to give Jean that Christmas so Myrtle come up with this idea. There was a little Raggedy Anne somebody'd given us last year. Jean never liked that doll much. So Myrtle takes it a little before Christmas eve and she wraps it up with tissue paper and gives it to her on Christmas morning. And oh, she was so excited. It was like she'd never even seen it before. She played with it all the time till one of the dogs run off with it and chewed it all up. And oh, she cried then.

The point being that, well, I don't know what the point is. I'm just telling stories now. I used to think that's all it was, this thing with the new country. Just kind of a game like you play

with them. But it's not like that and I don't know if it ever was. It's not just about the country being new or not. It's about them knowing more than you do. I mean the hunters. I don't like to talk about that but I get sometimes so I just can't stop it.

When they come and took Jean away from us, we believed what they said. They said it would be better for her. That's what they told us.

Well. Some things have changed. Nobody pretends like there's secrets anymore. But that don't mean they know the whole thing. Not by a long shot.

There was some of them hunters that really believed in new country, especially back in the day. And you know, there was something to that. It's kind of like a faith, it gets into you. Somehow you find you just want to help them find it. You even get so you believe in it yourself. Johnny Joseph, he tried hard. I tried hard. Samson did. We went with those hunters and we took them places we shouldn't of ever gone. I know that now. I just don't think we knew ourselves what we were getting into, back then. At least I didn't. He warned us, though, Ihtsi did. We didn't have no excuse for not knowing better.

Four

He woke to the sound of wolves across the lake. All around him in darkness. He had been dreaming again, but whatever this dream had been it was now forgotten as he lay very still, listening. Cool air on the tip of his nose. An entire disappeared world compressed into a trailing note, a note he strained to hear through the plywood wall, as if by straining hard enough he could catch it and preserve it inside of him.

After a while there was light in the plastic scabbed onto the wall above the door and shapes emerged inside the shack and a watch went off. Tanner groaned.

They took opposite sides of the lake to look for the horses they'd left unhobbled. Trails branched like veins through willow and moss, linking swales of thin arctic grasses close-cropped and trampled. He walked until the sun fired off the mountains and he was sure that they must have taken the other side and he was almost ready to give up and meet Tanner back at the cookshack when he finally cut a wolf's track stamped in the frost. It went coursing like a sighthound ahead of him. He measured the print against his boot. It was hard to tell which was wider.

The track led him up into the bare low willows above the far end of the lake where he had come down from six weeks before. He soon lost the paw prints in a chaos of horseshoes.

When he finally found them all seven horses were tightly bunched at the bottom of a grassy bowl. They cocked their tiny ears and stared back with child's eyes that were huge and liquid black and frightened. He passed among them with a handful of grain outstretched and spoke gently and loosened the lead shanks that were tied up and frozen around their halters.

It's alright boys, he said. It's just me.

They shuddered when he touched them.

He tail-tied three and led the string back to camp mounted bareback on Lolita with the 45-70 slung muzzle-down across his back and barely recognizing the armed and mounted shadow that escorted them over the tundra. Tanner had heard the horse bells coming and he was at the hitching rail waiting. He said he'd followed the horses' track until he saw Everett's prints were already on them. He wondered what had taken so long. He had missed the wolf tracks entirely.

Are you sure? He said.

I saw what I saw.

Tanner stroked the horses with his bare hand and checked their hindquarters for tooth or claw marks.

What were they doing, playing with them? They never even touched them.

Everett shrugged. He headed toward the tack shed.

Where are you going?

Getting a horsebrush.

Quit being an idiot, Tanner said. Go eat something. Marty's holding a plate for you.

Carson flew in from Scrogy camp and he caught Everett as he was crossing the open ground from the lodge to the tack shed.

You're still here?

Everett told him why.

Carson squinted across the lake malevolently as if he could see the whole pack of canids with their tongues hanging out.

Kevin Johnson will be all over my ass if I start using strychnine, he said. He's just waiting for me to slip up again.

Everett did not know what the first slip had been and he did not care to ask.

You and Tanner keep an eye out, you hear. Sometimes they'll get dumb enough to get a shot at them.

Carson reached into his vest pocket and drew out two rolls of orange flagging and handed them to Everett.

I almost forgot. I want you to make sure you mark my margins real good with that. Especially the ends. I want to know one hundred percent clear where I can touch down, you understand? I don't want any questions on the first landing, you hear?

Carson stood for a moment looking out toward the North and the mountains there. He opened his mouth as if there was something else to say. Some piece of advice or some warning. Then he closed it.

You boys better get a move on, he said. You're losing daylight.

It was well into the afternoon when finally they rode out. Tanner led, mounted on Lolita and trailing his string of three and Everett rode behind with his own string, both of them travelling light with only three horses packed with boxes of food and camping gear and some nails and rope and axes and shovels with handles cut to the length of a horse's back. A slight breeze had picked up that kept the mosquitoes off and they rode with their hats pulled low and the shadows of themselves dragging life-size behind them.

The trail they rode was deeply worn into the hummocks, and it ran like a ditch the width of a horse's straddle. How old it was was hard to tell. The ground where it was not rocky was covered in slow-growing moss which only a few passes with a horse train would cut through down to the permafrost below, which the sun would melt, so that in only two or three seasons it was possible to make a trail that would survive for generations. It was the same trail that Everett had taken twice to Castle Mountain with the hunter from Dallas and it followed the edge of the lake and then climbed north along a creek that drained Twitch lake and after a time forked left up another drainage that led them into a high country of stunted willow and birch gone red with the season. The horses knew the trail and the riders left the reins limp in their hands and looked out

over the country around them for anything that moved. There were ospreys and eagles and ptarmigan that exploded in a clucking frenzy and a bear digging high up into the side of the mountain and a moose calf whose mother was hidden somewhere and watched them pass not seventy feet away, too young to be afraid.

The trail was cut with tracks that joined it when its line made a chord in their circular paths and then left it again for reasons as unknowable as the animal minds that made them. It braided out as they crossed over the low pass that they called Twitch Pass and instead of hugging the mountain slopes going eastward as they had done before Tanner took a fork that led down to a river of the same name. The stream that had been only a trickle an hour ago had grown into something that the horses could bury their noses in and after a time it spilled down into a slot it had cut into the bone of the mountains and they breathed deep to keep their voices calm and coaxed the stumbling horses along a steep grassy sidehill angling down toward the river while on the offside the ground tumbled away to bare rock two hundred feet below.

There was trail again when they found the river and they followed it into the night, which caught them fifteen minutes earlier than the day before and would continue to do so, as if somewhere a giant clock was slowing down, its spring unsprung or its batteries gone dry. The last few miles the horses travelled like shadows laid over still darker shadows, their hooves falling softly on the bare packed earth and the diamond ropes and the saddle leather creaking like the rigging of a ghost ship coasting through the dark colonial night.

They picketed in some meadows where a meander in the river separated itself from the body of the stream and made a damp grassy meadow. There were stakes already driven in here from other hunts earlier in the season and the grass had just

barely grown back. There was a camp further up the slope with a cabin and hitching posts but they were too tired to make the trip and simply unloaded near their horses and spread the blankets over some willows and laid their mats and sleeping bags on the ground under a huge old spruce at the edge of the meadows and went to sleep there with the sound of the horses grazing and stamping and blowing a ropelength away.

In the morning they rode up to the cabin and tied their horses to a hitching rail that was nailed down with some galvanized strapping to two stumps outside the door. The roof had been rebuilt recently and the timber was a richer shade than the walls and a collection of shed antlers hung from the ends of the purlins outside. Tanner had to duck to pass through the door.

There was a propane stove and some cooking things inside and foam mattresses hung from the roof where the porcupines could not reach. The inner face of the logs above the woodstove had been hewed flat with a broad axe and was grey with age. It was covered with inscriptions like the walls of a kind of shrine to which generations of pilgrims had come and left their marks and their prayers. The names were of hunter and guides and the scores of the animals that they had killed. Most of the animals were moose. Most of the moose were sixty inches or better in the antlers. Tanner's own name was in the corner in black marker and three different years were below it in different colours. He added the year 1999 below it, and Everett carved his own name beside it with his belt knife.

It was easy going from the cabin and Tanner rode with one leg hooked over the cantle so he could turn back toward Everett while he talked. He was fully drunk on the spirit of the place. With his free hand he had rolled a cigarette on his knee but it remained unlit and he waved it around like a three-inch wand and told of the huge bull moose they got up a draw on the other side of the river about four miles away during his first season, about four years ago, and how the horse that was packing the antlers bottomed out crossing this very creek and went down on its side and how he had gone in with a boning knife in his teeth like a goddam commando. Jerry's just screaming at me. Fuck the horse! You get me those goddam horns! They were a hell of a set of horns. Sixty eight inches tip to tip.

The river appeared as an occasional gleam through the grey trunks of black spruce, and Everett tried to imagine it in full flood at the end of a long day.

You know that wall back there, he said. It says they were sixty-five and a half inches.

Really?

Yeah.

You sure of that?

We can go back and check if you want.

I'll take your word for it.

Do you mind telling me the part where the other two and a half inches come in? Or is that a trade secret.

Tanner put the cigarette to his mouth and then looked at the unlit roll in his fingers as if it had tricked him somehow. Inflation, he said. Must have forgot to adjust for it.

I never knew it was that complicated.

Cousin, you got no idea how complicated a set of horns can get.

They climbed up an unnamed tributary that Tanner called Buckle Creek into another high country where the willows here had deepened even further to the colour of dried blood and the hills were slashed at intervals with gaudy yellow highlights where the streams tumbled down to meet the trail and were overgrown with salix.

They rode all day through that high ground under a woolen sky that threatened but did not let loose and camped at sundown beside a gravel wash above treeline and set the horses out to graze in hobbles. The following day they descended to follow another creek that drained the mountains and branched slightly to the east and climbed again. For a time the mountains narrowed and they rode up slick lichen and shale and then passed into an even higher plane where pools of water held the sky in little circles. What trail there was now was very faint and branched often and disappeared altogether, covered in caribou and moose tracks. It occurred to Everett finally that this was no longer a horse trail and had never been one. They climbed up one rocky knoll near the watershed and Tanner sat his horse and looked back the way they had come. Mountains upon mountains scaled over each other, hot red on the slopes nearest layered onto purple and finally onto the distant blue of the hills farthest south. This is it, Tanner said. Lookout Hill. It was as far north as he had ever ridden.

Tanner had flown the route with Carson and so they had some idea what was ahead of them. They no longer talked but rode silently as if afraid to wake the monsters

that have always lived among the heights. The ground became rocky and the pass they had chosen narrowed into charcoal walls, water running down from peaks hidden still further back from what they could see so that they seemed to drop out of the sky itself. They dismounted and led the horses carefully and slowly through the rock, Everett walking ahead sometimes to ferret out a route. In places the rocks were so large that the horses seemed to burrow between boulders and at others it was loose talus on the side of the mountain and they scrabbled with their ironshod feet for purchase. By early evening they reached a height of land where water had pooled enough to make shallow and dismal pond with a bit of poor grass around it and there were a few chest-high gnarled spruces to picket the horses. They stopped early rather than risk being caught among the rocks and cooked noodles and too many cups of tea and hot chocolate on the small camp stove, huddling around it with their sleeping bags draped about them like monks in silent meditation, and then turned in at the first sign of dark, thankful for the sky that so far had been merciful.

Sometime after midnight Everett stood over a bush to do his business and raised his eyes to see for the first time the band of colour arching overhead. It was green and it flowed in waves across the gap in the mountains where before him, the same gap they would pass the following morning. He stared at it for a long time. It wasn't until noon the following day that he discovered his fly was still undone.

The mountains opened into a wider valley curving gently northwest until it ran out of sight, with a dozen large draws wedged deep into the crumbling mountains that marked its edges. The sun from behind slung shadows of men and horses impossibly far into that distance.

Tanner drew Everett's eye along the stream they were following now and pointed out the section that Carson had chosen for an airstrip, still three or four miles away. The stream that was only a trickle here grew immensely in those four miles and braided over a flat glacial till that was wide enough to land a set of Tundra Tires on. There was dark timber filling the valley bottom around those flats and above the timber were the usual salix and bog birch with some promising meadows for grazing.

Hours later they reached the gravel bar and rode back and forth along it. Tanner muttered darkly to himself. It was overburdened with rocks, some the size of microwave ovens, and with tangle-rooted willows that were far larger than they had looked from the air. They chose a spot on a bench above the stream for their camp and they picketed the horses in the meadows above it. The meadows at least had some brome and wild oats. They limbed some spruces with Tanner's sharp axe and rigged a tarp on a frame made from the poles and pitched the tent. The evening was well advanced by the time they were done this.

They built the first real fire they'd had that trip and cooked the last of the sheep meat on spits above the coals and ate it with packaged noodles and then lay with rounded bellies skyward on their sweat-soaked horseblankets and watched through the trees as the sun slipped into a fall-reddened draw cutting up between the mountains that were close at hand before them and the first stars came out and Everett closed his eyes and tried to imagine a vantage from which he could see all of the country arounding, seeing past the concealing curves of the high draws to reveal the secrets they held. There came the sound of the distant stream. Something too rough-winged to be an owl passed above them and was gone.

You think it's true? Everett asked. What Carson said about this being virgin country.

I haven't seen any virgins yet. Have you?

No. Can't say I have.

I think we've been had.

Everett rolled onto his side and propped up his cheek with his palm.

I mean it though. You think we're the first?

Depends how you mean the first, Tanner said.

The first to hunt it.

This old Indian Carson's bringing in, he's been here before.

Maybe he just passed through.

You believe that?

No. But why would Carson call it virgin country?

Because Carson is full of shit is why. He wants us to check his bags, you know.

Check whose bags?

The Indian.

What are we looking for?

What do you think.

So we're just supposed to go through this old man's bags like it's airport security?

Yeah. I guess.

Are you going to do it?

No. Are you.

It's not my problem if the old man wants to drink.

Not mine either,

Who is this guy anyway? Everett asked

Who, Norman?

Yeah.

Norman is what you'd call a legend, I guess.

Like, the last great hunter?

Yes. You could say that, I guess. He's been guiding since before the war.

Which war?

The War.

You're kidding.

Nope.

Can he even get on a horse?

I don't know. I heard Ryan's outfit had a hunter, about ninety years old. He came up in a wheelchair. Got a nice bull on the fourth day.

A wheelchair?

A special wheelchair. He had a big black guy come with him just to carry him around too. Jim Ryan told me about it.

What, he just packed him around on his back?

I guess so.

Jesus. Who are these people?

Tanner didn't answer him. The last great hunter, he said. Where'd you hear that?

I don't know, said Everett. It just came to mind.

Tanner sat up. He looked out past the edge of the tarp. There wasn't much to see there, now.

Carson flew this valley twice, he said. He didn't see anything except maybe a couple sixty inchers.

Sixty is good.

There's a lot easier places to get a sixty inch bull. I don't know if you noticed yet but by the looks of that gravel bar, Carson's not going to be taking off from it loaded. That leaves me, you, a thousand pounds of moose, and that shit show of a pass back there.

Maybe old Norman will help us.

Tanner laughed, grimly.

Is there a reason Carson never tells me any of this, Everett said. I'm just wondering, you know. Like, is there a reason I have to get everything second-hand?

The reason, Tanner said, is that Carson Shade is a certified grade A asshole. Once you understand that fundamental fact the rest falls into line.

So why do you keep working for him?

Why does anyone keep working?

You tell me. I'm the one asking.

Tanner sighed. You know the truth. The truth is I'm a romantic fool. And so are you. And Carson knows it.

Yeah, well. You know what they say about two fools.

No. What do they say about two fools?

I don't know what they say about two fools.

Goodnight cousin.

Goodnight Tanner.

They climbed up onto a ridge above the camp to see the country. They spent more than an hour climbing with coltish legs eager to be first to the top and when they reached it they stood for a moment breathing deeply, neither one of them able to speak.

The ridge was cloven off the side of one of the mountains on the east side of the valley where they had their camp, and from the narrow rocky top they could see Carcajou creek running ten miles in either direction and they could see the ground they had cleared along the gravel bed and the flagging they had tied along the edge of it and the purple dome of their tent and above that the seven horses that were very small in the meadows below them. The sun dropped below a rim of dark cloud and the valley flooded with colour. Except for the dark secret growth along the stream and gaudy yellow willows lining each drainage that fed it, the land was all rolling slopes covered

in short shrubby birch with teardrop leaves gone red with the season, so that it seemed the whole valley was awash with red, swelling up the sides of the mountains and breaking against the talus and the limestone outcrops, fixed in that surging moment.

Their breath returned and they sat and steadied their elbows on their knees and looked over all of it with their binoculars.

Nothing, Everett said.

You haven't even looked yet. There could be two hundred moose out there now. You'd think it's empty but you'll be amazed how this open country can hide something obvious. A full-grown moose can just disappear somewhere you'd think couldn't hide a gopher.

Yeah. Well I'm not seeing them.

Everett let the binoculars hang around his neck.

This spot needs a name.

Tanner didn't respond.

I was thinking we should call it Moberly Ridge.

Tanner lowered his binoculars. He looked up and down the stream. Everett wished he hadn't said it but it was too late now.

Grandpa's not dead yet, Tanner said.

I know that.

Tanner picked up a chip of shale from the crumbling ridge beneath them and cast it out into the open space below them. Some seconds later there was a faint click as it hit the shale at the base of their ridge.

It sure would be nice if we could call, Everett said. See how he's making out. I heard there's phones you can get that work on satellites.

They've been out for a few years now, Tanner said. Some of the hunters have got them. Just not the kind of thing you or me could afford.

It would be nice to have though.

Yeah. Tanner said. Well, there's a lot of things it'd be nice to have.

For three days they worked steadily from moving the larger rocks and hacking willows and shovelling in holes that would be washed away in nine months at high flood. They worked slowly and tediously and after a while they moved to opposite ends and bent into the task like slow grinding machines each lost in his own private world. It rained off and on and at noon they would stop and stand by a huge open fire in the shelter of a wide limbed spruce and eat out of blackened cans with food scorched to the rim.

By the fourth afternoon they had cleared the strip to Tanner's satisfaction. It was two hundred yards long and more or less straight. They had removed the largest of the rocks along the way and had filled in the washouts as well as they could. The edges were marked with orange flagging and they cut a twelve foot pole and fastened an orange garbage bag to the top for a wind sock.

They looked at all the work they had done and as they looked a breeze came strong enough to lift the trash bag from its flagstaff.

Don't get patriotic, Tanner said.

I wasn't going to. It's not exactly flat is it.

It'll do, said Tanner. Unless Carson wants to get us a D8 he'll have to live with it.

My back's about ready to go on strike.

Tanner shook his head. We just got here and already the unions are ruining this country.

You ready to eat?

Is that all you ever think about?

Only when I'm hungry.

The following day the rain that had been on and off the previous three let loose. It came down heavy and half-frozen. It came down all day and into the following day and in that time they hardly left the tent. Tanner gave up on reading after about an hour and lay on his chest looking out the half-zipped door. He got up.

I gotta do something.

What?

I don't know. Just something. Anything.

He pulled on his rainslicker and his gumboots. He was gone less than half an hour before Everett stopped with his finger on the page he was reading and raised his head and listened. He heard his name called again, the tone oddly plaintive.

When he reached his cousin, Tanner had his back against a pile of the yellow brush he had been cutting. He was applying pressure below his right knee with one hand and the other hand was still holding the axe as if he was afraid to let go. His knuckles were white around the haft.

Son of a bitch, Everett said. What did you do?

What does it look like I did?

How deep is it?

Deep.

How deep?

I don't know. Deep.

Son of a bitch. Son of a bitch. Why'd you pull it out?

I don't know. It was sticking out of my leg.

You're leaking all over hell now.

Well if it's not too much for you, I was kind of hoping you'd give me a hand with that.

Everett ran and came back with the small St John's Ambulance kit and some cheesecloth game bags that were extra large to fit moose quarters. Everything was soaked as soon as he opened the packaging. Tanner was shivering. Everett cut away Tanner's Carhartts with the scissors from the kit but gave up when the handles bent sideways and cut the rest with his belt knife, working it along blade up beneath the pants with two forefingers guiding the tip as he would gut a deer.

The ground spun a little when he looked at the wound. He stuffed it full of gauze as quickly as he could and wadded some cheesecloth game bags over it and bound the whole thing tightly but almost immediately the cheesecloth soaked through.

I really fucked it up this time, Tanner said when they were back under the shelter of the blue plastic tarp and the fire was stoked to warm him. His voice sounded tired and drowsy.

Yeah. You did.

I can't feel my toe.

Everett took off Tanner's gumboot and pinched the toe and watched the capillaries refill. He loosened the bandage a little. Some new blood seeped from under it and trickled down the matted hair on Tanner's leg and he groaned as the circulation returned to his foot. But the blood continued to trickle out. Rain rattled steadily off the tarp and pooled in the corners until it stretched the twine guylines too far and came down in a sudden crash and ran in little braiding streams through fire-scorched cans and scattered tools toward the stream.

I'm gonna need you to do me a favour, cousin, he said at last. I need you to sew that shut for me.

You're kidding, right?

I seen you sew a button on your shirt just the other day. Your mom taught you, didn't she?

That's different.

What's different? You just stitch it up.

This is living flesh we're talking about here. Deep tissue. You can't just sew it back together. You need a doctor.

Well if you can find me one I'll be glad to let him do the job. But I think this'll have to be a do it yourself kind of a deal.

You're crazy.

Nothing crazy about it. People do it all the time.

You need to go to a hospital.

I'm not going to the goddam hospital. We'll just deal with it now.

I can't.

Why can't you?

I just can't.

You can't cause you're scared of blood.

Fuck you. It'll get infected is what I'm saying.

Then keep it clean. Look, either you do it or I'm doing it. I'm not leaving you out here alone on account of one little cut.

Everett stood. He dug through the kitchen box and found the larger of their two aluminum cookpots and took it down to the stream and scrubbed it thoroughly with sand. He filled it with water and set it to boil on a tripod. Into the boiling water he put the needle and thread from his repair kit, a tin mug and a large Ziploc bag, and he let them boil in it for ten minutes. He set the pot aside and covered it and let it cool.

He brought Tanner the baggie that was wrapped in a pair of socks in a corner of his duffle, and Tanner rolled himself a fat roach with some tobacco papers from his

shirt pocket. He offered some to Everett but Everett waved it away. He held the joint between two fingers and stared at the blackened cookpot that was beside him like a dangerous animal that was not to be trusted. They both watched it that way.

Everett put on a pair of latex gloves that were in the kit and tested the water with his finger and pulled it out and shook it. They waited longer. He tested it again and then took out the Ziploc and filled it with water using the mug as a dipper. He sealed it and used the needle to open a small hole in the corner and had Tanner remove the bandaging. Blood leaked out, less than before. He held the ziplock over it and squeezed out a hard stream through the needlehole and washed the wound clean.

Finally he took the needle and thread and held the thread carefully so it did not fall on the ground.

You should look away, he said.

Just do it for Christ sake.

He stuck the needle through one open piece of flesh and ran it through and into the other and pressed them together and pulled the knot snug. Tanner gasped and swore. He squeezed a piece of firewood.

The gloves came away bloody and it was hard to grasp the needle firmly. He breathed deeply and made another whip stitch and then another and in all it was eighteen stitches he made. He finished it off with another knot which he snugged up against the wound and washed it clean with the last of the water and some iodine. The puckered seam ran in a clean zipper-line from Tanners knee cap down the front and side of his shin. Tanner looked it over appreciatively.

Damn, he said grinning. Damn. I think you might of found your calling, cousin.

Everett rolled off his gloves and tossed them in the fire. He was too tired to answer.

Down at the edge of the stream he scrubbed the blood that had dried onto his wrists and arms. The water was a numbing cold. It was raining still and the mountains that had stood across the stream like some painted backdrop were now hidden in the fleecy air.

He had not had a thing to drink since coffee that morning and the thirst hit him suddenly. He knelt down and pressed both hands into the soft gravel and sand by the water and kissed the surface of the water and drank and drank like that until his jaws ached from the cold. When he raised his head a bear was watching him.

It was a young bear, not more than two years old. It was nearly dark by then but he could see its brown hair and the hair was glossy and thick. The stream between them was less than ten feet across and the pitch of that endless rushing seemed to rise and fall like the coming and going of a tide or of pulsing blood.

It was standing on its hind legs with its long arms hanging at its side and kind of slouching. There was a white patch on its chest. He had to crane his neck to meet the small widespaced eyes.

The 45-70 was leaning against a tree that was within easy reach of the fire. That was more than two hundred yards from where he knelt now. He thought of it and then the thought was gone. There was no thought after that. Droplets fell from his mouth back to the eddy from which they were drawn.

For some time they took the measure of one another. Carefully noting the details, the differences. Then an awareness came to the bear like the memory of a story whose half-lives had eroded with generations. It dropped to its forepaws and turned and rolled back gracelessly into the trees and then it was gone.

Everett stayed for a long time as he was, on one knee with water seeping into the depressions made by his palms, until his fingers went entirely numb. He rose unsteadily and turned and walked up the path hacked through the alders and ragged spruces to the heat and light of the fire, willing himself not to look back. There was no way to explain what he had seen in those dead brown eyes. He did not even try.

He lay awake that night listening to the rain roll off the tent fly and to Tanner rolling back and forth in his sleeping bag in the dark beside him breathing shallow and fast. Finally he whispered, you awake? He did not know why he felt the need to whisper.

No. I'm dreaming.

It hurts doesn't it?

Yeah.

You stuck it right to the bone didn't you.

Yeah. Pretty much.

Everett was silent.

What? Tanner said.

I just don't know if we're supposed to stitch it up like that, is all.

Well it's done now.

Yeah.

What are you thinking?

You need to see a doctor, Tanner.

He was quiet for long enough that Everett began to wonder if he had gone to sleep.

I promised I'd look out for you, he said. Everett was not sure if his cousin was in a dream then, or halfway in between. He did not answer. After a while he heard his cousin snore and sometime after that he slipped into a dream of his own. A hazy dream that left him sweating without any cause that he could recall.

After breakfast he cut open three orange garbage bags and laid them out on in a large triangle on the gravel bar and weighed down the corners with rocks. There was nothing left to do, then, but wait.

It rained and it continued to rain all through that day too and sometimes the clouds lifted enough that they could see snow gathering a few hundred feet above them. Tanner lay in his sleeping bag all day and they kept the fire low and drank the last of their coffee. He told Everett everything he could think of about hunting and cutting and packing moose and about how to keep the horses and keep them fed now that the cold was coming on.

Walk if you can, he said. You got nothing to prove. You're better fed than they are so there's no sense in having them haul your ass. They're going to get lean, there's no two ways about it. This is no place for a horse once the snow flies.

He spat coffee dregs. The dregs fell short of the fire.

What day is it?

It's September tenth.

The planes are coming in tomorrow.

Carson said he'd come by now, Everett said.

Probably didn't count on all this rain.

Probably not.

Everett stood and took a stick from the pile and banked up the embers.

What is it?

I don't know, said Everett. I just don't.

A whiskeyjack landed softly on one of the open panniers where their food was. It shook its feathers and then dipped its head inside. Tanner threw a piece of firewood and the bird flew off.

You'll be alright, he told Everett. You will be.

Ihtsi. Old Joseph. They call him Moosey Joe. Everybody called him that. They called him that cause he's the last one that still hunted with a bow and arrow. This is long past when guns was around, you know. Moosey Joe, he fed his whole family shooting moose about as far as you could throw a stone. A big stone.

He said he didn't like guns cause they didn't work in the cold and they make too much noise. Which is bullshit, because everybody knows they only freeze up if you put too much oil in them. And it don't matter how much noise they make when the thing is dead. That bow and arrow was just showing off, that's what I think. Nothing wrong with showing off. Not the way I see it.

When they ask me about Moosey Joe I tell them the same story that everybody tells. Lots of the hunters, they ask me about Moosey Joe. He's a kind of a legend after Major and that book he made. The one's that don't ask, I tell them anyway. They can't hardly believe it but I got pictures. They're in that book. Me and Ihtsi together sitting on that riverbank, real cute. My name isn't on it, it just says Moosey Joe and indian boy. But I know that little boy was me. I know the camera that took it too. Little Voigtlander folding camera.

I tell them the same story about how Moosey Joe, he could call moose so well he could talk to them. No word of a lie. He'd talk a bull so close he'd pull a hair from its bell.

One day some miner bet him he couldn't do it. Bet him a good rifle he couldn't touch a live moose. So Moosey Joe, he goes out there and he pulls three hairs out of this cow moose's neck and brings them back. And there was witnesses and everything. This miner, he says, how did you do that? I told her it wouldn't hurt one bit, says Moosey Joe. And that cow, she believed me.

It's a good story. My favourite.

Truth is, all I really know is stories. I never seen Moosey Joe hunting. He was too old when I knew him. He just stayed in camp and told stories all the time. Just rambling on and on, like he didn't care if nobody was listening or not. I wish I had listened more when I was a boy. Well, everybody wishes that when they get older. There's no point in worrying about it. But now I just wonder all the time how he it was that he done it. How he talked to something before he killed it, and what did he say.

There's a story about a man, he was a great hunter you know. And his family, they're real hungry. One day he's hunting moose and he come across this beautiful woman out in the willows. Dark brown hair. Long beautiful legs. She's got two beautiful kids with her too. They all got baskets with them. He asks them, what you got there that you're eating? And they show him and he sees it's willow buds they're gathering in them baskets. Oh Jesus, the man thinks. He knows what's happened. They aren't people at all.

I don't know where I heard that story, but it was a long time ago. Maybe it was just a dream I had. I don't know what happened in the end. Maybe that man, he just lived with that moose woman until he died. Maybe he killed her and went home and fed his own family. Funny I don't remember that part. Like it don't really matter which way it ends.

Oh, the gun. I almost forgot the part about the gun. Good old thumb-buster it was. But what use has Moosey Joe got for a rifle? He don't need that thing at all. So next day he goes into Marrow again, trades it for something useful. A tin stove.

They told him it was a bad deal. That tin stove didn't last two years. But you know, he had a new baby to keep warm. Elsie Joseph. My mother. Born 1899 at Nadaleen Post.

Five

He heard the Supercub coming from six miles away and ran down to the new strip to meet it. It circled three times before Carson finally tried the landing, bouncing and skiddering violently and stopping just fifty feet shy of the willows with their little orange markers. The engine cut. Quiet swelled up in its wake. Carson crawled out of the cockpit and looked at the rolling airstrip like a dog that had tried to bite him. He spit the bile that had jumped up in his throat. Everett jogged up to meet him.

What's going on here?

It took Everett a moment to realize that he meant the signal laid out in orange trashbags beside the water.

Tanner got himself with the axe, he said, breathless.

Can he walk?

Everett shook his head.

Of all the god damned days, Carson said.

An old man had crawled out from behind the pilot seat and through the folded down plexiglass door. He wore a green mackinaw coat and a white hat with the brim rolled tightly on the sides and a ptarmigan feather stuck in the band. The crown of it wouldn't reach Carson's shoulder. His jeans hung loose and were shiny with wear or

with some kind of grease and were tucked into the kind of rubber boots that went for fourteen dollars at Canadian Tire. Carson turned slightly. It seemed he had forgotten about the old man until he noticed Everett staring.

This is Norman, he said. Norman, this is Everett.

The old man nodded. They shook hands.

Carson was already digging in the back of the plane among the tents and fuel cans and boxes of groceries he had crammed in. Give me a hand here, would you, he said. We got no time to stand around here.

They gathered up Tanner and Tanner's duffle bag from up at the tent site and brought the load to the plane. Tanner's knee had gone stiff and getting him into the small rear seat of the Supercub was a complicated job. In the end they fit him in backwards on top of his duffle with the bad leg pushed back into the tail.

Norman had disappeared.

Where the hell did he go? Carson asked.

I don't know. He was here a minute ago.

You watch out for that one. I wouldn't trust him further than you can piss in a headwind.

They both stood in the shadow of the plane. Carson had one hand hanging off the strut and his head bent to fit under the wing. He took a moment to weigh Everett against the situation.

You think you can handle this alone?

I'm not alone, Everett said.

Yes you are, Carson said.

I can handle it.

If you got anything you want you better tell me now. The last Otter's coming into McClure this afternoon.

We need some more cheesecloth.

Right.

The folding bucket's leaking. We're out of toilet paper. We could use some new picket rope and some hobbles too.

You got paper?

I made a list.

He gave it to Carson and Carson put it in his shirt pocket and buttoned the flap.

I'll be back with the hunter maybe this evening, he said. Maybe tomorrow. Anything else?

Nothing, Everett said. I was just wondering. Am I getting paid for this?

Carson looked down the airstrip. Fleecy clouds were spilling over the peaks from the west.

I don't suppose I'm in much of a position to bargain with you.

I just wanted to hear it from you, that's all.

Well congratulations, Everett. You got yourself a job. You got yourself one hell of a job.

He found the old man back at the fire pit. Norman had taken Tanner's place on the horseblankets by the fire and taken the wood that Everett had cut and built up the fire from embers and set a kettle of water to boil.

Where's the tea? He said.

We're out.

You tell that old cocksucker to bring some more?

No.

Norman muttered darkly to himself. He made the boy look again through the two boxes Carson had brought but there was no tea. He settled on coffee with three spoonfuls of sugar. He said nothing while he made it and when he was finished he held the mug almost daintily between his forefingers.

So I guess you've been here before, Everett said. He was trying to be friendly.

Norman sipped his coffee. He grimaced.

How old are you?

Seventeen.

This is your first season.

Yeah.

I was thirteen, Norman said.

Sorry, when were you thirteen?

In 1937.

Oh, Everett said, as if this explained everything.

There was bear tracks down by that strip, he said. About six feet isn't he.

Everett blinked. How do you know it's a he?

Norman just looked at him as if this were too obvious a question to answer.

You never shot at him did you. Never scared him off like that.

No, Everett said. I didn't.

How come?

I didn't have a gun.

Not good for that bear, Norman said.

Why?

Norman peered at him curiously.

I don't know if you're really that dumb, he said. Or if you're just pretending.

The old man drank the last of the coffee and flicked the mug toward the fire, which had burned down almost to nothing. The drops hissed.

Let's see them horses, he said.

The hunter was a lawyer. That was how Carson had described him, and that was how Norman described him too.

A lawyer, come from out east.

The lawyer had flown into McClure Lake on the same flight as Norman had, early that morning, but it was close to sunset before Carson brought him to Carcajou camp.

Norman came down to meet the plane and stood shoulder to shoulder with the boy as the hunter climbed out. He turned around a full circle looking at the place with his hands in his pockets and breathed deep through his nose.

So this is it, he said. He said it as if he had just been presented with some rare piece of real estate and not just one hanging valley like any of the million others scattered across this latitude. Carson stood by in a hurry to beat the gathering dark. The old man nodded solemnly. As if it were a gift he had carefully prepared. It was only after the ritual was completed that the hunter turned and offered a handshake to the kid.

Mason Harris, he said.

Everett Barlow.

I saw your cousin up at the lodge, Mason said. He said you were an artist with a needle and thread. He said I should ask you about it.

Maybe let's wait till after we've eaten, Everett said.

It was caribou steaks some previous hunter had shot. Norman panfried them himself over the fire with bannock and canned green beans on the side. When they had finished they sat on panniers in a half circle and watched the last colours deepen over the valley and the stars come out above the spruce toothed horizon. Mason filled each mug with a double measure of the bourbon he had picked up at duty-free.

Everett told him about Tanner and the stitches and Mason laughed deep and rich and he felt a warm glow go through him that was not entirely the whiskey. He did not

know why he felt so eager to please this tall, bearded man, but he did. Mason poured him another measure.

You're not like I thought you would be, he said. Then he blushed.

Mason smiled. What did you expect?

I don't know. Carson said you're a lawyer.

A lawyer. Well. Carson would say that, yes. But I don't think a man should be defined by the way he makes his money, do you?

No. I was just wondering, you know.

You were wondering where I get forty grand to throw around like this? It's alright, I'd ask the same question myself. The truth is, Everett, I'm really a selfish man. Some men leave something for their kids. I choose to spend it on this.

How many kids do you have?

None.

Oh.

Mason pulled his seat close to the fire. There's no need to beat around the bush, he said. You're wondering what this is all about. Especially given what happened to your cousin. I'm sorry about that, by the way.

Tanner did it to himself.

Well, that's generous of you. Generous toward me at least. But anyway, the least I can do is give you an explanation after all you've done to get us here, to this place.

That's fair.

Well Everett. We're here to hunt moose. Of course we're here to hunt moose. That's what people do this time of year. But what we're after is particular kind of moose. A kind of moose that might not even exist. A white moose.

Everett looked at Mason grinning slyly, at the old man staring into the shadows in his cup, at the way the campfire made twisting caricatures out of everything it lit.

Is that some kind of a joke?

Mason laughed.

No, I mean it literally. A white moose.

You mean like an albino?

Not exactly. True albinism is exceedingly rare in mammals. Most don't survive past the first few weeks. But you've got the right idea. It's a recessive gene, like albinism. It can be carried, unexpressed for generations, until, under the right circumstances the right two animals come together, and the stars align, and you get something extraordinary.

And you think we'll find one here.

No, said Mason. But I think there's a chance we might.

How much of a chance are we talking about? Everett asked.

Well, it's always hard to say exactly. But I'd put it somewhere between winning the lottery and getting hit by lighting.

I thought those were the same chances.

You're right. The odds are the same. The difference is in the outcome.

Everett tried to puzzle this, and as he was still puzzling, Mason leaned in and whispered. It was a mock whisper loud enough for Norman to hear.

If you want to know the truth, it was Norman's idea.

The old man was studying the shadows in his cup. He made no sign of having heard or of any interest in joining the conversation. Mason shrugged. He continued.

Norman called me up in January. To be honest, I didn't know he had my number. I haven't hunted with Norman for eight, nine years. Norman was in need of my services and in exchange he offered his own services. An hour for an hour, a day for a day. For a typical consultation I would charge four hundred dollars an hour. So you can calculate what this hunt is worth if you want. I haven't. I wouldn't mention any of this except to make it clear what this hunt is worth. The hunt of a lifetime. The hunt of a hundred lifetimes. I've heard that line about a hundred times from a hundred outfitters, but when you hear it from Norman Alexander, you know you've got something special. I've hunted six times with Norman Alexander and I'd follow him to the edge of the earth if he led me there.

So here we are.

So here we are, Mason said. He held up the bottle and raised his eyebrows. Everett reached out his mug again.

Mason called across to Norman, as if calling him out of a sleep.

How about another shot, old man?

Norman raised his mug to show that it was still full. Mason raised his own mug, and then Everett lifted his too, afraid to be left out. They held them there a moment in an awkward toast.

Some time later, when the older men had each gone to their separate tents and left Everett to gather the dishes to take them down to the stream and wash them, he found Norman's red-rimmed mug, still half-full on his pannier. He held it and swilled the contents around the bottom. Weird shapes took form in the light of his headlamp. Constellations and histories and futures untold.

The old man had not drank a drop.

He woke feeling that something had moved. Beside him the old man was still asleep or pretending to sleep, burrowed head and all in the bottom of his army downfill. Like a child on his first camping trip. He checked his watch and then buried himself inside his own sleeping bag and tried to sleep. It was impossible.

He brought the horses down in the cold twilight and had them saddled and a fire going before the sun or either of the two men emerged. When they did, Norman had him unsaddle and take back all but the three saddle horses, while breakfast cooked. He tried to argue but Norman just looked at him.

We're not taking any ponies, he said.

He had thought they would head up Moberly Ridge to glass the valley for moose. It was the obvious thing to do. It was not the thing they did. Norman led along the backside of the ridge, heading northward down the valley, past a chain of lakes and sedgewater marshes that pooled up against the ridge and in the brush beyond it ptarmigan clucked and burst in coveys of six or ten. Mason shot two and missed a third.

They spent the better part of half an hour looking for the third arrow. They never did find it.

You ever consider a rifle, Everett asked. I hear they shoot straighter.

Cheeky little bastard, isn't he, said Mason.

Norman led them on. He rode tall in his saddle for all of his five-foot-two, and his eyes were all over the country. Mason rode just behind with his bow in one hand and the two ptarmigan dangling from his latigos like speckled scalps.

A mile further a small stream came down through talus and willow and light timber. They followed it, cutting wide switchbacks, until the ground was so steep that they dismounted and dug boot edges into the moss and grabbed at the gummy trunks of twisted gnomish trees and coaxed their nervous horses to follow. It was a long climb.

Mason stopped to unzip his jacket. He stood pumping the neck of his sweater, face red and sweat-sheened. Above him the old man was still climbing steadily, back straight, horse in tow. Mason shook his head. Unbelievable.

You know he's showing off, Everett said.

Of course he's showing off, Mason said. That doesn't make it any less impressive, does it?

No, Everett said. I just thought the older you get the less you have to prove.

Mason mopped his forehead with the sleeve of his sweater.

Who told you that?

My grandpa.

Well, Everett, I'm afraid your grandpa was lying to you.

They left the horses tied to some little spruces at the top of the headwall and scrabbled up a talus slope for a look at the country. Even from Moberly Ridge the scale of this basin had been hidden by the headwall's prominence. Now from this new height a hanging valley swelled out before them into a mile-wide bowl of dwarf willow and birch and a sediment of dark spruce near the bottom. Water and willow and everything that was needed, high above the timbers that hurt the tender, velvet antlers while they grew. A moose pasture in a place where no one in their right mind would kill a moose. He had wondered why the old man brought them up that slope but he did not wonder now. What he did wonder was how the old man thought they would get a thousand pounds of meat and horn down that hill. Several scenarios came to mind, all involving ropes they did not have.

How on earth did you find this? Mason asked.

Norman shrugged.

I had a hunter once, he wanted to see new country. Back then they didn't worry so much about bringing back the meat.

Back when? Everett asked.

I already told you. 1937.

Everett lowered his binoculars. He looked at Norman sideways. He raised the binos and tried glassing the valley for a minute or two and then lowered them again. The tone did not invite any further questions.

There were three cows down near the bottom of the bowl in some backflooded bends of the drainage, but it was a full hour before they could see the bull. All of them

were plain brown. He wasn't much of a bull either, maybe fifty inches by Norman's guess.

He won't keep them cows long enough to breed, Norman said. Just wait a little and some big boy will come and take em.

Let's see what you can bring in, Mason said.

Norman shook his head. No. No calling.

Why not?

If we was hunting a big bull moose, then maybe we'd call, bring something up. But a white moose? What is that? Moose, cow, yearling? What kind of call you going to make? Mess up the whole country that way, calling too much. No, best thing is just keep like we're not here at all, wait and see what comes.

Alright, boss, Mason said. Then we'll wait.

They waited but no new moose did come, white or otherwise. The four animals browsed their way up and away from the knoll where the hunters sat, now maybe a mile and a half away. Still the same number as before. Norman put the caps back on his Leica glass and settled himself into the reindeer moss with his cream-coloured Stetson over his eyes and in a few minutes was snoring.

Mason took a diamond stone and began to touch up the arrows he had loosed that morning. He held the shaft braced against his knee and touched it with light, smooth strokes. When he was finished he rolled back his sleeve and shaved the dark curly hair on his forearm with it to check the edge. He blew the hairs downhill.

Everett held the bow in one hand and hefted it. He tugged the string and let it pop. Mason flinched. Please don't do that, he said. It's hard on the glass.

Sorry.

Everett looked at the bow closely.

I thought it was wood, he said.

That's the trick, Mason said. It's a clear figbreglass laminate. Cheating, I know. I tried shooting a wood bow, and they're a beautiful thing, but you just can't get the same speed out of them. Sometimes the modern world offers things you just can't refuse. Of course, it doesn't matter if it was wood or glass. It's very hard on a bow, dry firing like that.

Sorry.

It's alright. You didn't know.

They quit well before sundown, to get down the headwall with daylight to spare, but it was still dark by the time the horses were unsaddled and Everett had rotated the pickets. Norman fried the ptarmigan breasts in Crisco and the grease ran down their faces so that their mouths were orange in the glow of the fire. Mason grunted appreciatively but set his plate on the ground with his knife wedged in the tines of his fork. Everett wondered if that was intentional. Mason rubbed his hands together and pulled his seat in close to the fire.

What day is it, the eleventh?

It's the twelfth, Everett said.

I don't suppose you've heard of fall up here, have you.

You missed it, Norman said. That was yesterday.

I must have blinked.

Throw some wood on that fire, Everett said to Mason, who was beside the stack. This calls for a white-man fire.

Then he caught Norman's black eyes, and he remembered.

I didn't mean it like that, Everett said, too quickly. I just mean the fire's getting kind of small.

The old man poked the little fire with a piece of grey willow.

I like it this time of the year, he said. Bull moose get that chill in their bones and they get two things on their mind. One of them is fighting. The other one you can probably guess. They get so dumb they'll walk right up to you.

He looked up at Mason. You gonna throw some wood on that fire or not?

Mason went to bed early and for a while after he left them, Everett and Norman hunched opposite each other across the fire staring into the depths of it and neither of them spoke. They were both tired but neither one moved toward the tent. Norman tipped back his hat and blinked away the afterglow. He looked up at the open sky above the trees until his eyes had adusted. Everett did the same. A brilliant green lit up the tips of the trees.

Umaskawech, Norman said.

What?

It's just something the old ones used to say. Umaskwakech. Mean's it's burning.

What's burning?

I don't know, said Norman. You tell me what it is they burn up there.

It's some kind of gasses, I think. It's electricity that lights them up. I don't know where the electricity comes from. Something to do with the sun, I think.

That's a hell of a story.

Bullshitting isn't my thing.

No, said Norman. No it isn't.

It was only a faint glow above the treetops, a hint of colour barely visible until you let your eyes adjust.

Can I ask you something? Everett said.

What?

I don't know how to ask this.

Neither do I.

I don't want you to think I'm one of those types.

Right. Those types. Well, now I know you're not one of those types. So you can ask me.

I was wondering if you think animals have, you know, like a spirit.

Are we talking about any animal? Or white moose in particular.

Everett did not answer because it was not a question. When Norman spoke again he spoke slowly, carefully.

Into your hand they are delivered, he said.

Into my hand?

Sure. If you want them to be.

I don't know what you're talking about, Everett said.

I'm talking about all God's creatures.

You're talking about the Bible.

Sure. Why not talk about the Bible?

Because I want to know what you think.

You want to know what the last red Indian thinks.

No. I want to know what you think.

Well how about you tell me first, young man. What do you think? Do animals have spirits?

I don't think I really believe in spirits anymore, Everett said.

Norman seemed suddenly irritated, or tired, or both.

Well then what's the point of asking, he said.

He stood and stretched his back and dug out the tarnished watch he kept in his pocket, tied to a belt loop by a leather lanyard.

It's past your bed time, he said. I want to be gone by seven tomorrow.

Norman looked up again at the clear night sky.

I think I'll sleep outside tonight, he said.

The following morning in the moose ponds behind Moberly Ridge, Norman spotted a bull. He reined his horse suddenly and motioned a stop. It took Everett a minute before he saw it. Just the white tip of an antler was sticking out above a rise two hundred yards away. They tied their horses and took to high ground with a bit of spruce for back-camouflage.

It was an average bull, maybe fifty-five inches tip to tip. They could see this the first time Norman grunted at it. He grunted once, and softly. The bull stood and turned its antlers toward them. For a moment there had been a surge of expectation but the face that stared blindly back through their binoculars was plain brown and stupid.

He grinned at Everett and pointed down to some thicker brush that was downhill and downwind. Everett looked questioningly and the old man just nodded.

He hid himself down there in the cover and almost as soon as he was hidden Norman started to cowcall. He did not use the birchbark caller this close to the bull but simply cupped his hands and pinched his nose and made a long, whining sound. Then he grunted three times, deep from his belly, and scraped a bush with the dried scapula he carried with him.

When the bull came in Norman held the caller and the dried scapula antler-width above his head, rocking back and forth, bending low to the willow bush in front of him and thrashing it with the scapula and grunting from deep in his stomach. And the bull did the same, not forty feet from where Everett was crouched. He could see them both

like mirror images, challenging one another, speaking to one another, circling slowly. The bull was so consumed in this that there was time for Everett to craw toward him, slowly, downwind, on hands and knees through the willows on the soft sphagnum moss, and come close enough almost to touching the huge rut-crazed animal, close enough to smell the piss he had wallowed in and see the flies landing in his twitching ears and hear the asthmatic whistle in his breathing, before finally the bull sensed him there and wheeled suddenly and snorted and ran back down toward the marsh from which Norman had drawn him, looking back over his shoulder every few steps and snorting.

When Everett joined the two men laughing together back up the hill he was still breathing heavy.

Unbelievable, he said. That was incredible.

Nothing like your first time, Mason said.

How did you do that? Everett asked.

Norman shrugged. Something you learn I guess.

Can you teach me?

Norman shrugged.

When they finally mounted and rode on to look for other animals, the bull was still there, maybe a hundred yards away, watching the strange parade of men and horses and groaning after them, lovesick, as if life was only a prolonged and tragic loneliness.

They hunted that day up the headwall and saw nothing, not even the four moose they had seen the previous day, until late in the afternoon when they seemed to rise up out of the ground itself. It seemed impossible that the barren land of scrubby dwarf birches could hide something that large but Everett had been warned of this before. It was the same small herd bull but there was another cow with him too. Where she had come from was impossible to know.

They returned to camp early that evening and Everett tried out the birchbark caller, groaning into it as Norman had showed him. Norman laughed.

Like this, he said.

Everett could not hear the difference.

Listen, Norman said, and tried it again. It came deep from his belly, nose pinched. Everett made the same sound. One was something like a whining toy airplane. That was the cow. The bull grunt did not sound like anything at all.

Norman shook his head.

You gotta put some feeling into it, he said.

He made a performance of it, gripping the birchbark like a microphone and swinging his hips. Mason laughed this time.

How could anything resist that, he said.

They ate. Norman froze with his beltknife halfway through the meat he was cutting. It was dark then but he squinted into the bushes over his left shoulder. There came the sound of breaking branches.

Mason laughed. I don't know why we even bother riding up that hill, he said. We might as well sit right here.

Norman continued to squint, and he did not say anything. No more sound came from the trees.

The weather continued to hold, clear and blue for the fourth day in a row. They rode yet again up the headwall and once again there were only cows and the small bull to be seen. They glassed that round hanging valley all morning for two straight hours, and they glassed back in the other direction too, back toward the Carcajou with all its ponds and hills and braided streams, and up two of the draws on the west side of the valley that they could see from this high vantage, and saw nothing there either. They could see one of the four cows up almost to the edge of the bushes on the far side of the basin, and that was it.

Mason lowered his binoculars and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. He blinked five times with his eyebrows arched high. Norman was still looking into the bowl before them.

I think I'm about done with this spot for a bit, Mason said. That headwall's good for exercise but I think we're wasting our time now.

Norman lowered his field glasses. Not sure what you mean, wasting time.

I mean how about we start looking at some new country.

One place is as good as the next, this time of year.

That's what I mean. I think you're getting kind of superstitious about this valley. If one place is as good as the other, why not see someplace new.

There's that ridge above camp, Everett said. Me and Tanner scouted it out.

How's the view?

Better than here.

Sounds alright to me. I know Norman's got some kind of faith in this valley but I'm about ready for a change of scenery.

Norman sat for a while with his jaw set forward and his arms wrapped around his knees, looking out at that hanging valley as if challenging the land to reveal itself.

We can come back here later, Mason said. Norman nodded, finally.

Alright, he said. Let's see this view of yours.

From the top they could see the whole of the Carcajou valley and five different draws and their camp spread out below them. The two green domes of the tents and the glaring blue of the tarp. Norman peered down at them for a few minutes through his binoculars.

We got some company, he said finally.

Two of the panniers were knocked over and packages of noodles and ziplocks and flour were strewn out across the clearing.

Son of a bitch, Mason said. But he did not sound all that unhappy when he said it.

They tied their horses up five hundred yards short of camp and went the rest of the way on foot. Norman stopped and pointed. It was a small bear and by Norman's estimate the track could not have been much more than a couple of hours old. He mouthed the words. He had his rust speckled forty-four at half cock and Everett had the 45-70 ready too. He forced himself to breathe through his nose. As they came close to the camp, within the circle that had been picked clean of dead wood for the fire where the forest suddenly felt clean and domesticated, they spread out in a fan. The wind was in their favour. Mason was between the two with an arrow nocked.

They waited, standing outside the camp that had become so familiar to them. It seemed like hours that they stood there, so long that the tension began to lessen and Everett found himself shifting his feet. A branch snapped. He could not see where it came from. They waited and when nothing came, Norman motioned them forward with his eyes.

The bear had broken into the pannier in which they kept the bread and eggs and had dragged it, lidless, a few dozen yards on the other side of their clearing, scattering envelopes of oatmeal and granola bars along the way. It was struggling now to open a new package of country maple bacon. It had its backside toward them. Everett drew a bead on it and he could see out of the corner of his eye that Norman did the same. Mason moved a little ahead of both of them.

They watched the bear for what seemed to be hours, as it ate their food. Its ass was toward them the whole time, up high in the air like an oversized dog. It was not a big bear at all, maybe one or two years old, and from that angle it did not look threatening at all. It ate and finally finished off the bacon and sniffed through the rest of the contents spilled on the ground and as it browsed it turned ever so slightly opening a

space between its back ribs. There was a soft thud and then red, white and blue fletching bloomed there. The bear flinched and turned and looked confused for a moment. As if there had been some mistake.

Then it either saw them or smelled them and whirled and went stumbling and scrambling into the bush. There was the sound of trees crashing and bushes and then there was nothing. Mason looked at Norman and Norman nodded.

Mason let out a deep breath. His eyes were alight.

Well boys, he said. That was something, wasn't it.

They all agreed that it was something. Norman made them wait another thirty minutes to be sure. He timed it on the digital watch he kept on a moosehide lanyard in his pocket. In that time Everett brought the nervous horses into camp and tied them there, still saddled, in case they were needed. They were not needed.

When the men reached it the bear was humped over a huge fallen spruce that was mostly rotted and mossy. It had gone maybe a hundred and fifty yards leaving a wreckage of broken branches. They circled at a distance. The head and forelegs slumped over the log. Its tongue was hanging out and there was blood on its chin and dripping down onto the white patch on its chest. The sight of this seemed to hurt in a way that Everett had never expected. It hurt the way such things had once hurt, raw and without reason, back when it was still okay to cry.

Norman shook Mason's hand. Good shot there, he said.

Mason thanked him and then he knelt down in front of the bear and folded his hands on his lap and bowed his head. Norman sniffed and ground his toe into the ground. Everett shifted uncomfortably and looked at the sun low and red through the

trees, as if he were witnessing something unbearably private. He wondered to whom those prayers would be sent. To the god that had delivered the animal, or to the animal that had delivered itself. He felt thankless to both.

The pose Mason chose for his photograph had him shaking hands with Norman across the bear's head. This was the fashion for hero photos, apparently. And apparently Norman knew it. Mason had his bow in his other hand so that it was clear in the picture that this was no ordinary hunt but an act of muscular heroism. Norman had his hat tipped back. They smiled but did not show their teeth.

Everett took a half dozen photos from various angles and then gave the camera back to Mason. It was a new digital camera and it was the first time Everett had ever used one. Mason showed him the pictures on the tiny screen, tiny and pixelated and ready to reproduce themselves endlessly across a digital frontier that had already begun to feel like a fantasy.

Now you get in there, Mason said.

Me?

Yes, you. This is your bear too. I'll email it to you.

Everett crouched down beside the bear. He did not know how to pose beside the bear. How close was too close, and how should one position oneself. The best he could think of was to lay one hand on its shoulder. Norman had wiped the blood away from the fur and put the tongue inside and had opened the eyes with his fingers. The fur was warm beneath his hand.

When the photos were finished they rolled the bear onto its back. It was a male, as Norman had said. The old man touched up his knife on the small steel he kept in his

pocket and stood over the bear with his sleeves rolled above his elbows and the knife in one hand.

Well, he asked Mason. What do you figure? How do you want it done?

It's not much of a bear, really.

No. He's still a little one. Six feet maybe.

Not really worth a full mount.

Up to you, Norman said. A trophy is a trophy, don't matter how big it is. That creamy patch is worth something.

Mason thought about it for a while. No, he said finally. Just skin it out for a rug. It is a beautiful hide, isn't it.

Everett was still staring at the dead thing in front of him and had not moved for some time.

Heads up, Norman said sharply. He made a swinging motion with his right hand as if tossing the knife. Everett flinched violently and jumped back a half step.

Norman grinned. He flipped the knife around his fingers and offered it butt-first to Everett.

Let's see what you can do, he said.

Everett held his hands up. I don't want to mess it up, he said.

Mess it up? How else you going to learn? Anyway, I won't let you mess it up. Not this bear, no.

Just the same I'd rather you did it.

Is there a problem? Norman said.

No. There's no problem.

Yes there is.

I'd rather just take care of the horses.

This is your job, Norman said. This is what we do out here.

I know.

It doesn't mean you have to like it.

There was the slightest softening in his eyes. So slight Everett would not have seen if he had not been searching for it. Norman handed him the knife.

He dreamed that night of steers, newly cut. He was with his grandfather and they were mounted on Max and Lolita, as if these horses now consumed his sleeping as well as his waking life. For some reason they were driving the steers north across mossy caribou tundra with purple mountains sprawled out behind them. His grandfather hauled his reins and spat and swore.

God damn them all to hell, he said. They've built another one.

The steers had piled up against a barbed wire fence that ran in a straight line east and west out beyond the horizon. Those at the rear clamoured over those at the front and mounted them impotently from behind and pressed them bleeding and screaming into the new steel barbs and still the fence did not give. When he woke, there was frost on his sleeping bag. The old man was sleeping beside him.

Three years I hunted up the Carcajou. Four if you count that season with Johnny back in '37. Johnny, he never went back there with that outfit, no. I went there myself and when I went there, I went for me.

It was a few years on, of course. For a long time I was too scared to go back. And when I finally did, well, it was four years later and that moose, she'd probably died anyway.

Pat Dyck, he was my partner. He was a good partner, strong man, big half-breed feller, had ten malamutes he got from his brother when his brother shipped out. We were too young when the war started. I guess we could of joined later on but we didn't. Pretty near everyone our age went off to fight and some of them come back with stories too. And us? We got nothing. I guess we always had something to prove, us two.

We got it in our minds we was going to do it just like the old timers, go in there and trap the whole season through and sew up a moose skin boat and come out on it just like they used to. Prove we could do it, you know.

I seen one of them boats before, when I was real little. Must of been about 1933 or so. Probably the last moose skin boat anyone built there. The old Alexie family, they were kind of backward. They come down all the way to Marrow that year to sell their fur. Sold the skins off the boat too. I went down there and looked at that frame they built. They'd just left it on the bank and so I went and seen how they built it. Not a single nail. They just tied it together with spruce roots. I figured I could do that. And we did, spring of 1941. Just about got ourselves drowned more times than I care to admit but that's another story.

I was seventeen years old. So was Pat. Maybe he was a year older, I can't remember now. He seemed older cause he was always so much bigger. He wasn't scared of nothing, Pat. I told

him everything. I told him about the Carcajou, and about it being nan-detsi and all. Told him about that moose. He said we should go there, see if that moose is still there. He said we should go see if we could kill it, get that skin.

I said, why?

He said, because you're scared, that's why. That was a good enough reason back then. Anyway, we knew it was good country up there for marten, so we'd get a good cache in.

Seems like the only things I really remember is the times I was scared. I don't know if it's cause I was scared all the time or cause those are the times that stick in your mind after all those years. I like to think it's the second one. You pay attention to things when you're scared. You only start forgetting things when you get old and lazy. I always had a good memory, me.

I trapped a good portion of my life and I've been living a lot of years and the thing is, I remember those years up on the Carcajou more than I remember my own daughter, when she was with us, and that bothers me some. I'm not proud of it, no.

Shortest way into the head of Carcajou is up off the Twitch and through this narrow pass above timber. We call it Carcajou pass but that's not any name I ever heard it called, it's just the name we give to it. You go there in the winter and it's something else to see. All them little waterfalls is frozen and it was like some kind of picture of heaven. Like that's the stuff that heaven's made out of. But you couldn't stay up there, not in the winter, no. We went right through there in one big push. I remember that, breaking trail in the dark with the snowshoes. That squeaking sound the snow makes when it's real cold and the dogs breathing behind. I remember that like it was yesterday.

Three seasons I went up that way. Last one I went alone. And then I just kind of stopped. That last year, this was 1944 now, I got going up that same old headwall for no good reason at

all except I felt like I had to go see what was there every year and I just heard this whoomp and then suddenly the whole mountain moved. I was right on the edge of it. The whole mountainside come down, and I was nearly in it. I went for a little slide but I got away lucky. I was buried just up to my waist. I dug myself out and I was just shaky like I hardly never been before or after.

It wasn't that I was scared off that valley. I just got more scared of other things. Told myself I wasn't worried about a goddam superstition no more. I could trap someplace more profitable. Someplace closer to town. Someplace you could raise a family. You get to thinking that way at a certain age. You get older.

The other night I woke up and I had to piss. Must of been about four in the morning I woke up. Cold night, January, you know how it is. You just kind of lay there pretending like you don't have to go, thinking you can just go back to sleep. But you can't sleep. You're just fooling yourself. I find I do that more and more these days. Comes with age. Swear to God that shitter is just creeping a little further away, every night.

Anyway, I think that being scared was kind of like that. Like having to piss, I mean. It doesn't go away when you get older. You still feel it. You just get better at pretending you don't. Sometimes it's easier to just ignore it. Then, next thing you know you're pissing your pants.

Well.

I'm not that old yet. I hope I never get that old.

Six

It took Everett well into the morning to finish the bearskin. Norman showed him how to turn each finger and cut off the claws at the tip, and how to turn the small ears and the eyelids and cut away the grease. There was a great deal of grease. It seemed to work its way into his pores and under his fingernails and his breakfast and lunch were both flavoured with the rank dog-smell of the grease.

Norman hung it, wrapped in a canvas pack tarp, off a pole leaning out from the base of a tree, where bears and hopefully marten could not get to it. They dragged the bear as far as they could from camp. Mason asked about keeping the skull for his mantlepiece but Norman said it wasn't worth it. No pot to boil the brains out. It'd get all rank.

None of that made any sense since it was too cold for the meat to go rank, but Mason let it go. It was a small skull for a grizzly bear, anyway.

By the time they were done these chores and had eaten lunch it was well past noon. The sky had turned a wooden grey, like an old barn left to ruin. Rather than bother with saddling up they simply trudged on foot to Moberly Ridge and sat there at the top with a thermos of spruce-needle tea that Norman had thought to carry with him, tucked in his faded purple bookbag. Maybe at one time the backpack had been dark blue. It was sized for elementary school, but it fit the old man perfectly.

They glassed a few hours, sitting uncomfortably in the deep-sinking chill. There wasn't much to see. A small bull and a few scattered cows. A lone caribou that had wandered up the valley as if lost. Some bird that kept circling. An eagle, maybe, or just a crow.

You mean a raven? Mason said. It's way too big for a crow.

Same thing up here, Norman said. Just a crow.

A flurry picked up, light but just enough to make glassing a dizzying experience. Soon it stopped but by then they had had enough, and went down to camp to get a fire going.

Mason took his flyrod down to the stream to try for some grayling or bulltrout. Everett moved the picketed horses to a new meadow where there was tall grass to feed and then to kill time, spent some time practicing with the birchbark bullhorn. He grunted and wheezed into it for a while, and this seemed to amuse the old man to no end. He was smiling like Everett had not seen him smile before.

What's so funny?

Nothing, Norman said. You're getting better, that's all.

Close to sunset Mason came running into camp with his fly line snarled and his eyes alight. Bull, he said, arms stretched out wide as they would reach beside his head. Big bull. Huge. Everett thought he was joking. He was not joking.

Norman chose a spot just upstream of camp on a high embankment with a view downwind and set Mason fifty yards below him, near the shallow stream with a timber snag as back-camouflage. It all happened very quickly. Before Mason had even settled in Norman had coaxed the bull into the open with a few soft grunts. He did not bother

with the caller now, it was that close. Everett crouched beside him with his rifle gripped tight.

It was an enormous bull moose. Everett tried to measure it, multiplying the width of the ears which were out sideways and rotated forwards. Three times eighteen inches and there was still plenty to spare.

It came forward out of the shadows of a boggy stand of black spruce like some knobby-kneed prizefighter, tines festooned with roots and the rags of its shedding velvet, dropping its head and tearing the willow bush in front of it into pieces with those spectacular horns. Norman thrashed his own willow bush with the dry scapula, which was a left scapula because everyone knew it was bad luck to use a right scapula. Old man and old moose called back and forth in their violent responsory.

Mason had an arrow nocked and his bare fingers on the string and his crusher cap pulled back on his head where it would not interfere and he stood now very still with only his camouflage between him and the nearsighted animal. The bull moved within thirty yards and dropped its head and opened its side. Norman stood.

Don't shoot.

For a moment moose and hunter stood still. Even the trees all around stood rooted in shocked silence. It was something like a wedding called out mid vow by some foul-mouthed second-cousin. A ritual scandalously interrupted. In that suspended moment Mason had his bow half-raised and the moose turned its dim eyes and sharp ears and its gorgeous antlers toward the alien sound. Then something triggered in the bull's mind and he whirled and trotted in the direction he had come with his antlers tossed haughtily backward and his rump toward them and did not once look back.

Mason was furious.

What the hell was that? he said.

That wasn't our bull.

That bull cleared seventy inches or I've never seen one before.

Norman shook his head. They shrink fast when they hit the ground, he said. I had a good look. Sixty-four and piss-all for fronts.

Don't you try that one. I know what I saw.

And I know what I seen.

What makes you so goddam sure?

I'm always sure.

Mason spit. He breathed deeply, loudly, and closed his eyes. It was an ugly thing to see. Not the anger, but this, the theatrical self-control. Everett had seen it before. Not here. At home, years ago. His fingers tightened around the only thing there was to tighten around, which was the 45-70.

Norman, Mason said evenly, eyes open now. This is my hunt. I'll decide when I want to shoot. And when I see a Boone and Crockett bull, I'm not going to pass it up. I'm not holding out for unicorns. I'll kill real moose too.

Norman held his peace.

They returned to camp and restocked the fire and Mason Harris sat and wrote in his notebook by the light of his headlamp. Everett fixed Kraft Dinner, which was one of the few things the bear had not felt like eating. There was no powdered milk and he was sparing with the butter they had left, and it tasted little better than the box it came in. They ate in silence.

Everett could not finish his plate. He set it aside and busied himself cleaning the 45-70. He opened the lever and cleaned it with some cotton rag and a bit of brass wire to drag it through the bore, even though he hadn't fired the gun in weeks. He focussed on the task as if nothing mattered compared to the cleanliness of his bore.

You had me covered there, did you, said Mason. Good man. Let me have a look at that thing. He held it in his hands and looked it over, scratches and all. It looked about twenty years old.

Now that's a guide gun. Shot a few bears in its day, hasn't it.

Everett nodded. He did not mention that the gun had been new that spring. He did not want to doubt Mason's judgement.

Always good to have some backup, Mason said.

He handed the rifle back to Everett.

What do you think, he asked. Was that bull more than seventy?

Norman stood and took his plate down to the stream to wash and did not match eyes with either of them.

Mason shook his head and smiled to himself. His smiles seemed uglier lately. He went back to writing. His pen moved precisely, scalpel-like. Everett could not look

away, fascinated to see this surgery performed. Every now and then Mason stopped and tapped the barrel against his teeth. He raised his eyes. Everett looked away but it was too late to pretend he wasn't staring. Mason smiled his usual smile. It seemed uglier than before.

It's a story I'm working on, he said. The Old Man and the Moose.

What's it about?

It's about an old man. And a moose.

You'll have to change the title, Everett said. Nobody wants to read a story about a moose.

Why not?

Because it's a moose.

I see your point, Mason said. I'll have to think of something else. How about the Old Man and the Sheep?

Everett shook his head. Still no good.

Mason smiled again. This must seem petty do you, this business with the antlers.

No, said Everett. I don't think anyone would call a seventy-inch moose petty.

It is petty, Mason said. Just pissing match between two old men, nothing more. Don't worry about it. It will pass, just like this will.

Beyond the edge of the sagging tarp, snow was falling again. It was not much but in the twin beams of their headlamps it seemed impenetrably thick, a bewildering sheet of tiny reflection. But of course, that was only a trick of the snow.

Everett brought the pot and plates down to the stream to wash. Norman was sitting on the cutbank with his own plate still cheese-stained on the ground beside him, looking out somewhere across the empty space above the water. Everett crouched down beside him and scrubbed the dishes with sand. He did not say anything. After a time Norman asked him, is that asshole still mad?

No, said Everett. He's over it, I think.

In the glare of his headlamp Norman's features washed pale and ghostlike. The old man shielded his eyes with his hand. Turn that damn thing off, he said. Everett did.

He said he's over it? Or you say he's over it?

He said it. More or less. He told me it's just a pissing match.

Norman spit. A sweet and minty smell of chewed tobacco came from the place where it landed. For a time he seemed to be looking for something, staring out into the rugged tripartite of stream and spruce and mountain imagined into being from the overlapping shades of black before them. What it was that he saw Everett could not guess.

That bull is still out there, Norman said. He's been circling us all night. Still can't figure out what the hell kind of animal we are, I guess.

He stood and handed his plate to Everett to wash. He did not even say thank you. When Everett made it back to the fire the old man was already in bed, curled in the bottom of his oversized sleeping bag, as usual, like a child hiding from the night. He crawled into his own bag and lay waiting for the down to warm to his body heat. His thoughts turned without heads or tails. They turned to dreams. They turned to darkness.

He jerked awake. It was Norman, dressed in just his red union suit like the shadow of some half-starved monster, crawling through the open tent zipper. From the outside, not inside. He had not heard the old man leave. He tossed a book near Everett's head.

Read it, he said.

Read what?

Just turn on that damned spotlight of yours and tell me what does it say.

It was Mason's notebook. Two hundred pages of thin creamy paper with a black leather cover.

Where did you get this? Everett asked.

Don't bother about that. Just tell me what he wrote.

Everett found his headlamp and read the entry for the day of September fifteenth. He read it all in a whisper and Norman sat crosslegged at the edge of the light and listened with his head bowed, the two of them like boys again, raptured by the arcana of a bottom-shelf magazine. The entry for September the fifteenth was six pages long, and nearly all of it taken up with the details of that brief encounter with the moose.

What's a responsory? asked Norman.

I don't know, Everett said. Something religious, I think.

He's not religious, that one. I only ever seen him pray over some dead thing.

I know, Everett said. I think he just likes using big words when he writes.

Norman nodded. Go on.

Everett read on. When he was finished, Norman took the book and held it to his face in the darkness outside the headlamp's light. The silk placeholder dangled like a rodent tail. He stared at it as if to force something more from the page.

He had a muff, said Norman. He never saw that. That bull had a muff.

Everett laughed. He couldn't help it.

A muff?

The hell you talking about?

Nothing. It's just, you know, a muff. Like, a muff.

Norman shook his head. He said, sometimes up in these mountains when it gets cold enough that bell on a moose neck, it freezes stiff. It can stay like that for days. And if that moose goes walking around enough looking for food he can bump it and it can break right off just like a piece of candle wax. Then he has this funny looking hole on his neck and that's what you call a muff. That hunter, he never even saw that.

Everett kept his headlamp pointed carefully below the old man's face, so that it remained hidden somewhere in the shadowy corners of the tent.

You really believe it was sixty-four inches, don't you.

It was sixty-one and a half. I just didn't want to make him mad.

What makes you so sure all the time?

I'm not sure all the time. Just ninety-percent of it.

You're sure we can find a white moose.

Yuh.

Why?

Because I seen it before.

When did you see it?

In 1937.

That's sixty-five years ago.

Yuh.

So what makes you think that wasn't the only one?

Because a crow told me.

Everett was not sure what to say. He waited but Norman did not help.

You're not bullshitting are you?

No. I'm not bullshitting.

You mean it was a dream. The crow. You saw it in a dream.

What's the difference to you?

It would help me decide if you're crazy or not.

Which one makes me crazier?

Everybody has dreams.

Then it wasn't a dream.

Norman closed the book and turned for the tent door and started to unzip it. Snow slid through the opening from off of the domed roof.

The bookmark, said Everett.

What?

You need to put the bookmark back.

He handed the notebook to Everett and he replaced the silk ribbon back at the blank space that was the coming day. He switched the headlamp off. He was asleep again by the time Norman returned. Dreaming again, maybe. He never heard the old man enter. Outside the snow continued to fall.

By morning two inches had fallen. Everett woke and pulled on all his clothes and walked out to wrangle the horses. It was still dark as on any other morning yet it all was brighter than before. All the shadows had been erased.

On his way up to the benchland, he passed Mason's tent, which was sagging under the weight of snow. There was only one set of footprints leading to it, which were Mason's prints. The old man must have traced those bootprints both backward and forward during the night and must have known that by morning they would be filled enough to hide the pattern of his soles. Everett stopped in the half-light and smiled in admiration of a job well done. Mason's pack with his gear and his journal was just inside the unzipped vestibule.

Breakfast was oatmeal, plain except for a bit of salt. All their other breakfast food was ruined by the bear and unless another animal died soon it would be oatmeal for five days. Norman wouldn't even entertain the idea of eating bear meat. Mason proposed it. He said he'd heard some natives in Siberia ate bear.

Not even the dogs would touch bear, Norman said. He said that if you kept moving, the hunger couldn't keep up with you. That was the secret, to keep moving.

Norman rode with his little .30-30 slung across his shoulder with a piece of moosehide he'd taped to the stock. As they passed through a stand of old spruce he reined in suddenly and slung the rifle off his shoulder in one motion and shot from the saddle. A spruce hen dropped from the top of a spruce. Lolita bucked and all the other horses bucked but not for long. Gunshots were one thing the horses were used to, by now.

They climbed out of the trees and into the scrubby high ground and when the sun rose it seemed as though the ground they had come to know had been remade out of some purer fabric and they squinted like newborns against the glare. All day they hunted the headwall and saw nothing. Not a single moose. The whole country had been bleached. In the evening they came down again and ate canned fish and ramen noodles, and a few pieces of bloodied grouse. Mason did not say that he was fed up with that empty hanging valley. He did not need to. He spent about fifteen minutes writing in his journal and then closed it.

Everett was still working on a sketch, shading it with number six pencil.

You're just full of surprises, aren't you, Mason said.

What surprises?

I never took you for an artist.

I'm not an artist, Everett said. I just draw pictures sometimes.

May I see them?

Everett shrugged. He handed over the sketchbook. It was an eight-by-ten that he kept with him in a ziplock inside his daypack. He'd used up nearly half of the eighty pages and Mason went through every one of them.

This is our bear, Mason said.

Sort of, said Everett.

I've never seen a bear look like that before, Mason said, head shaking. That expression. It's like he's looking right through you.

I couldn't get the eyes right, Everett said.

I didn't mean it as a criticism.

Mason handed the book back to him.

Look after that, he said. You've got something priceless in there.

Everett blinked. He wondered if this was another coded warning, but when he looked he saw Mason had meant just what he said. Admiration, nothing more. He knew nothing of what had been taken from him the night before. He still believed his own priceless record was secure.

Norman took the teakettle off the embers and poured them each a steaming mug. Keep drinking and you can trick your stomach, he said. It's no good to go to bed hungry. Always gives you bad dreams, you know.

Is that a fact, Mason said. He did not sound convinced. He did not sound like he cared, either.

Three, maybe three and a half days remained in the hunt and they were hungry. Mason's silence was enough of an argument. They weren't really starving, of course. There were cows out there and even a yearling bull, but they weren't that desperate, not by a long shot. There was still enough bread for sandwiches and quite a few granola bars and all of the canned food was untouched. The bear had spoiled maybe half of what they had. It was just the plainness of the food and the possibility of a day or two without eating that bothered Everett. Or rather, what bothered him was that he was so preoccupied with going hungry. It was yet another weakness, like fear, and he wanted to kill it. He just didn't know how.

They climbed up the Moberly Ridge again the following day and sat into the afternoon, glassing and calling. It was a paradox of moose hunting, Everett thought, to hunt harder meant to move less. To sit still and ignore your stomach and wait. Though, when he thought about it, the paradox was not limited to moose alone.

Every twenty minutes Norman would groan into his bullhorn, and thrash a few bushes with the scapula. And then they would go back to waiting and watching. The sun softened the snow and melted it almost entirely. They sat on stacks of willow branches that Norman had cut with the camp axe that always hung from his saddle. After a while Everett lay back on this mattress and put his cap over his face. Dressed in two layers of long underwear and with the sun pleasantly warm, he fell asleep immediately.

He woke to the old man tapping hard on his shoulder. He tipped his cap back onto his head and sat up. Norman passed him his field glasses.

Down the crick about two miles, he said. He was whispering. Further down the hill Mason was still sleeping.

That spot where it opens up again. There's a big tree down on the left. Look a little to the right.

The binoculars were Leicas, an older twelve-power model with objective lenses the size of saucers. A three-thousand dollar set of glass that was almost certainly a tip from some previous hunter a decade ago. Everett took them and braced his elbows on his knees and rotated the focus. Almost immediately he found where Norman had pointed him. He held his breath and the magnified picture pulsed slightly with each heartbeat. He moved the binoculars away and refocused them and looked again. He lowered them.

The look that Norman gave to him was not what he expected. The old man was anxious. Scared, even. He seemed to be looking for Everett to confirm what he had seen. Everett did not know what to say, but his own face was enough confirmation.

Norman nodded, as if both thankful and relieved.

Should I get Mason? Everett asked

The old man nodded again and took back his binoculars and folded himself around them under the shade of his wide black hat, fixed again on the bull moose on the hillside.

Mason was only dozing and he heard Everett's bootsteps before he reached him. He sat up and brushed the leaves off his camouflage jacket and fished his glasses out of his shirt pocket.

Did you see something?

Norman saw it.

A moose?

I think so.

A good one?

I think you should look for yourself.

They climbed back to the top of the hill and Norman handed over his heavy glass and told Mason where to look. He stared at it for a long time through the binoculars. Then he looked at Norman and Norman looked back at him and he exhaled as if he had been holding his breath the entire time.

What would you judge him?

Hard to tell from here. Big.

More than sixty?

Yes. More than sixty.

Mason looked through the binoculars again.

Could you call him in?

Not from here.

So what do we do?

Nothing, Norman said. We watch him.

The bull was moving up the stream toward them, but he stopped often to browse willows along the way. At times he would disappear into the brush and the snow and then sometimes he would move forward and more or less of his white body would be revealed. They sat and none of them spoke, each looking through his own binoculars.

Everett's were an old pair of 10x40s his father had loaned him and it took some imagination to lend form to the tiny white speck, set against the white of the snow. The antlers were also white, a darker white stained by rubbing willows. He imagined them like wings above the huge, heavy head.

As the bull drew closer, Norman turned to Everett.

Make sure them saddles are ready.

Everett obeyed immediately.

He slid down the talus and moss on his bootheels. The three horses were tied to some spruce trees on the backside of the ridge, just before the climb became steep. They knew something was happening, as only horses could know, stamping and sidestepping nervously. He walked among them and stroked their necks to calm them and heaved their cinches tight.

You won't believe what Norman found, he said. You won't believe it. It's a goddam wonder of nature, yes it is. And we're going to kill it. We are. Together. Yes we are.

They looked at him with eyes that were huge and liquid and childlike with incomprehension.

When he returned to the hilltop the bull had disappeared again into the timber along the creek. He was gone for minutes that stretched like hours. Finally Norman spotted him again, and by then he was less than a mile away. He grunted. It was a bull grunt, as

if the old man didn't even realize he was switching codes. Mason and Everett followed his eye and saw it immediately then.

I'll be damned, Mason said. He's headed up that headwall.

It was close to dark by then. Too close to dark. Norman did not try to call the bull but instead they simply watched as he scrabbled up the headwall, not stopping once and passed over the lip and was gone. By then the sun had nearly set. They kept their binoculars on the hanging valley until it was dark, hoping for another sign, but the bull did not appear again.

It was well past dark when they returned to camp. Everett led the three horses up to where the other four were picketed. The grass was cropped down in a circle around the stakes he had driven and the horses knew this was not where they wanted to be and stamped impatiently as he tied bowlines around their ankles. He knew he should find a new meadow for the night but it was too dark to find a good spot and, anyway, they would be going first thing in the morning.

When he returned Norman had a fire going and dinner was hot. The three of them stood eating beans out of charred tin cans, sucking air and turning the food over and over in their mouths to keep from burning their tongues.

Norman looked at Everett squint-eyed.

Do you think you can bring them four ponies up that headwall?

You mean tomorrow?

No. I mean next week.

I can get them up there, Everett said. But I sure as hell can't get them down with a load of moose meat.

Don't you worry about that, Norman said.

I can do it.

I'm not going to be babysitting. The horses is up to you.

I can do it.

Five AM. I want all them horses saddled and ready. Packsaddles and ropes and all.

They will be.

Bring some food, Norman said to Everett and Mason, both. And bring some extra clothes. We're not coming down till we get that bull.

He stopped his beeping wristwatch and checked the time and then crawled out fully dressed and put on his coat and gumboots. It was still fully night, a slight paling through the trees where the moon had fallen. He climbed up to where he had left the horses. The horses were gone.

In the starlight on the open meadow he saw dark scars where the pickets had pulled out. All seven of them, gone. Not just gone, but dragging three-foot stakes tied to their ankles with good diamond rope. It must have happened hours ago because there was thick hoarfrost everywhere, right down into the holes, and there were no tracks anywhere except for his own.

Easy, he told himself, in his horse voice. Easy now.

He followed the bench above the creek, going upstream in the direction they had trailed in. He assumed they would head back the way they came, back toward McClure Lake or back all the way to the trailhead and the horsetrailer with the gooseneck stacked with bagfulls of sweet-feed. He hoped this was the way they were headed. He walked with his head down hoping for tracks, listening for horse bells in the calm moments between gusts. He had at least thought to put bells on them.

An hour went by. Two. Light came. A wind had picked up and the front it pushed ahead of it rolled like a dark tide above the mountains to the west. Crossing a smaller stream with thick boggy alder at the bottom he found the old bay they called George, standing with his ears pitched forward and his knees quivering. The rope was wound around some of the bushes. Nothing broken, thank Christ. He untied the horse's foot and coiled the rope across his chest and let George carry him to the other missing animals. Which George did, at a gallop, Everett clinging desperately to his mane bouncing sometimes painfully against the withers, breathing fast and deep with teeth bared and heart pounding.

Two more horses were tangled up in another draw and the rest were feeding calmly on thin arctic grass a little further on. When they came close George screamed out with such raw joy and relief as only a horse could know. Everett slid to the ground and the horses sniffed at one another.

What the hell are you so excited about? They're the ones that left you behind.

He loosened the frozen lead shanks from around their necks and tail-tied four against another mutiny and led this string bareback across the open tundra. They followed like prisoners, dragging their hooves in tacit protest.

Norman and Mason were waiting for him when finally he led the horses into camp. They had been waiting for four hours. He knew without asking that they had seen his tracks and the missing pickets and there was nothing left to explain. The old man's disappointment was a burning thing in his gut. It kept him warm as they rode.

The wind drove steadily and as they followed along the bench above the river the clouds grew and deepened and darkened. Norman led. The first flakes began to fall as they broke out into the high dwarf birch country again, wet flakes that melted when they touched the ground, gathering more and more, until the plodding soaking horses ahead blurred into shapeless forms and Everett pulled up his hood and turned his head against the flakes that flew in his eyes.

They climbed the headwall in this storm. Norman cut wide switchbacks and Everett followed, leading his saddle horse and a string of four packhorses, each bound to the others and slipping on the wet ground and threatening to bring the whole string tumbling down. It felt like a miracle to reach the top.

They tied all of the horses to different little trees and the animals stood still, snow settling on croups and saddles and withers, looking as cold and miserable as a horse could look. The three men climbed again up the moraine where they had sat for so many afternoons before, but the snow was falling too hard to see more than a hundred yards. Norman would not risk calling.

They moved down again to the relative shelter of the bottom of that hanging valley and found a tangle of dead trees near the streambed. Norman tied up his green rubber poncho for an awning and made a fire beneath, which the three men fed sparingly with

dead branches, turning their heads and blinking and holding their breath when the wind shifted and the stinging smoke blew in their faces. Then either Mason or Everett or Norman would raise his eyes and squint off into the storm to see if he could see a little further than before. Hours passed this way.

Then finally the wind dropped. They rose stiffly and climbed, boots slipping, up the moraine. They did not bother with binoculars. The snow came straight down now in fine sugar flakes, thinner than before but still enough to see only two, maybe three hundred yards, but it was enough for Norman. The old man stuck his finger in his mouth and then held it up in the air and felt for the wind. He spit.

Your best bet is down toward where we tied the horses, he said. Don't go more than sixty yards. I want to see you.

Mason nodded. He took an arrow from rubber rack that was bolted to the side of his bow and tapped it against the leather grip to knock the moisture out of the fletching and then spun it between his palms to fluff it out straight and then stuck the arrow back in its place on the quiver. He did this with each of the five arrows.

You don't have to use that, Norman said. You could use my gun. Or the boy's gun. Whichever you prefer.

I know, Mason said. But we talked about this before, didn't we. Fair chase, right?

Norman nodded. The snow that had gathered on his hat brim stuck fast. Even in this weather he still wore his Stetson.

Mason climbed down and out of sight below them, holding the bow at his chest to keep the fletching clear of the willows. Norman raised the birchbark caller to his lips and pinched his nose with his forefingers and let out a long cow call, then two sultry

little coughs. Then he waited. Everett waited beside him. His knees went numb and his jaw ached from clenching his teeth. He clenched them to keep them from rattling. It seemed that the noise would be enough to give him away. On that muted tundra he could hear each flake fall.

Norman called four more times, and eternity seemed to pass between each salvo and then the light began to leave them. And then, like out of a dream, not a real dream but the kind of dream that came in hazy abstracts and left you with nothing but a colour and a feeling, it came. It came as if enacting a script, one that had been written at the start of creation and that both the moose and the old man had rehearsed their entire lives. The moose raked the bushes with its antlers and grunted, and the old man grunted back at it. Norman stood, but he stayed bent over, moose like, and raised his antlers above his own head, one birchbark and the other dried bone, scapula and bullhorn together, and swayed them. He moved with the bull. They circled one another moving wide but getting closer all the time. Everett stayed unmoving in his green clown-sized rainsuit, hardly breathing, while the old man and the white bull moved closer, the two of them drawing in toward each other until they were close enough that a few steps would lock their antlers together, and in drawing near they drew close to the hunter, hidden and unmoving under the cover of a spruce tree. Their breath made spirit shapes above their heads.

Later, remembering, he would believe that he knew somehow what this moment, this moment that was tens of thousands of dollars and unreckoned hours in the making, meant. As if the meaning of any one moment were something that could be extracted and passed between communicants. Especially this moment, on which the past and the future hinged, before which everything made sense and after which it all became

unhinged, a moment that once loosed was a thing beyond control, flying in whatever direction it had been pointed, a direction that no one ever knew for sure.

The arrow struck low, well back of the brisket. There was the dull wet slap of it cutting home, a bedlam of hooves, and then the bull was gone. It was all in the span of a heartbeat, too fast to contemplate.

Mason had seen the arrow strike and confirmed it was a gutshot. Norman nodded. He had not said a word. The three of them huddled there in the scatter of mooseprints and the fading light. Norman had found blood, but the drops were small and dark and they were three yards apart. The tracks led uphill, which Norman said was bad. A dying animal should run downhill.

If it was a normal animal it should.

What do you mean by that? Mason said.

Norman did not answer.

They left it to die overnight. To follow the animal would be to push it further and never see it again. Everett twisted rope hobbles for the horses and unsaddled them and turned them out to graze on whatever forage they could find on the high tundra. He worried about them trying the headwall with their feet bound but Norman said that if they were that stupid they deserved what was coming to them.

The old man made another little fire that did not warm bodies or dry clothes, only enough to heat water in a billy can that Norman had brought and char a few cans of

chili. None of them talked much, and when they did, it was in the hushed, practical manner of a hospital waiting room, in which people count the hours waiting for the results of a dangerous surgery over which they have no control, hoping that the surgeon can work his magic and wondering at the mysteries of the body and how it could at once be a thing that could be cut and sewn together and yet also be something more than those mendable parts.

Norman stood under the edge of the sagging poncho and looked out into the dark.

What are you thinking, Mason asked him.

Norman shook his head. Not thinking, he said. Just tired.

This is bad, Everett said. Isn't it?

No, Mason said. It isn't bad. It's only bad if you make it that way. It is a wonderful moose we have found. And we are going to find that moose again tomorrow. And if we don't find it tomorrow we'll find it the next day, and if we don't find it the next day then it will be the next, or the next, or the next. We will hunt all day and all night if we have to. We will stay here until we find that bull, and the rest of the world can go fuck itself. We're going to find it. I am, anyway. I can't speak for either of you.

No, Norman said. You won't.

Mason looked at him, livid.

That's a hell of an attitude to have. What the hell's gotten into you?

Norman just kept shaking his head and rocking back and forth holding his knee. He seemed genuinely frightened. The question just hung like the smoke above the acrid fire. Finally he stood.

It's cold, he said.

He left them. He did not say where he was going and they did not ask. When he was gone, Mason spoke.

You don't know what's going on with him, do you?

No, Everett said. I don't. Probably he's got a lot on his mind. This whole thing depends on him.

That's not what I mean, Mason said. This morning, while you were out, he put the coffee on. He filled it right up and put it on the fire. Completely forgot to put any coffee in the percolator. He gives me a cup of boiling water and I just look at him. Norman, I said. You think this one is a little weak? He says nothing. He just throws the water out and starts a new one. I asked him. I said, if you have a problem with this, with killing this animal, now is the time to tell me. He said no. There's no problem. He said there's nothing special about that moose except the colour of its skin. The colour of its skin. What a hell of a thing to say to me.

What did you do?

Nothing. What would you do?

Nothing, I guess.

That's about all we can do, Everett. It's tough, isn't it. One day you just wake up and realize that suddenly you're one of the bad guys. You don't even know what you've done. You've just been doing the same thing you always have. Do you know what I mean?

Everett did not reply. He did not want to hear this any more. Especially not here, with only the fire and the hidden stars as jury, and himself to stand as witness.

No, Mason said finally. I guess you wouldn't know. You're too young, still. Live long enough and you will, I promise. It's our burden, Everett.

Shut up, Everett said. He said it quietly, but the violence in his words still surprised him.

Please, he said. Let's just not talk for a while.

Norman returned and they each collected every scrap of dried willow and tightgrained spruce within a radius of five hundred yards and made a pile of it on the windward side of their fire. Mason and Everett worked by headlamp. Norman had none. They took all the horseblankets they had and made beds out of them and curled up close to the flames, each on his own separate side. Even though they were wet and cold, no one proposed huddling together. Sometimes one side would get a lungful of smoke, sometimes another.

Everett did not even try to sleep. It was impossible. He was close to shivering and his mind ran in tight circles making less and less sense, taking him back to places he had not seen in years. His mother painting a picture of their house, sitting on the lawn, in the summer sun. Brome grass in the foreground. Buffalo prairie, and not a powerline or a pump jack anywhere on her canvas. He lay and did not move, compelled by an animal instinct to save what energy he had for whatever the next day would bring, and

the next. Sometimes he fed the fire. Then, sometime late in the night, Mason started to snore. Softly, just a light rasping on his breathing.

He heard the old man stand quietly, but he did not move. He kept his own eyes closed. There was the rustling of a bag, the muted sound of a zipper. Footsteps leading away. When they had gone far enough he rose himself, careful not to wake the sleeping man.

He followed the bootprints stamped clearly in the snow. It had stopped falling and there was three inches of it now, covering everything. He was so focussed on finding the prints under the cover of dark that he almost ran into Norman, standing at the edge of the little stream, waiting for him.

Get back to the fire, the old man said. His voice was flat, and unquestionable. Everett asked the only question he could.

Where are you going?

The old man just stood there in the dark, silent.

Please tell me what the hell is going on.

I need you to go back to that fire, Norman said. It's nothing to do with you. Understand me? Nothing. There's just something I have to do, for a friend.

He did not realize he had nodded off until he heard the horses screaming. Their whinneys caromed off the rocky walls above, colliding and redoubling. He and Mason

were now straight upright, heads up, listening. Their fire had burned down almost to nothing and the air around them was cold and infinitely black.

Where's Norman?

I don't know.

Did you see him go?

No.

Don't lie to me.

He just said he was going to take care of some business.

What kind of business?

Number two, I think.

He took his blankets with him to shit? Why didn't you follow him? Why didn't you wake me?

I didn't want to bother him. It's cold out there.

I don't like this, Mason said.

Neither do I.

It was a few months after my wife died that the crow started talking to me. This bird, she's an old bird too. She lives on the edge of the trapline, about fifteen miles from the main cabin. She's real friendly, this one. At first I kind of tried to ignore her but she just kept talking to me, real nice, and after a while I just kind of opened up to her and it worked out real good for both of us. I brought her some meat and stuff and she told me where the marten was. That the best catch I had in a long time, last year. Forty-two marten skins I brung in, and five lynx too and a big black wolf. Not bad for an old man, you know.

It was strange for a while, cause none of them birds have talked to me since I was at that school. They just kind of stopped. I always said it was cause I got distracted with girls. But I was nine years old. I didn't give a damn about girls then. The real reason is was cause they finally caught me. I used to keep it a secret, you know. Like we used to talk dan-dha k'e when we thought they couldn't hear us. It was kind of like that. Except, this thing, talking to birds, I was the only one that did it. Which made it a kind of a problem.

There was this one crow that got real comfortable feeding out the compost heap by the garden. I worked the garden mostly. Mornings and evenings they had me working. Seems like all the time I was either praying or working the garden. Didn't leave much time for learning my letters. Which was fine with me anyway. I used to talk to that crow when I was out there alone. She mostly just listened to me. Sometimes she tell a little story now and then. This one time I was talking and I didn't see the head nurse was out there, doing some thing or another, and she heard me and I guess it pretty near scared the daylights out of her. She was just convinced it was devil worship. Mary Connelly, that was her name. She was sort of simple in that religious way they have sometimes. I kind of liked her except for that part.

Anyway, the rector, he was a modern man. He sat me down in that office of his. I was just shaking as bad as I ever shook. You knew it was bad when you went to that office of his. He had this rubber hose he kept up on a shelf above the books. I knew it was there, but you couldn't see it if you'd just walked in to meet with him. But I knew it was there.

But he was different this time. He was just real gentle with me, like he was trying to help me. He said that I was sick. He said they would send me down to a hospital in Alberta. He said, in these hospitals there are no crows. There are no windows there, either. He said you go to that place there, maybe you never get out again. That scared me. Yes it did. So I quit talking to crows. And then they quit talking to me. That's what happens when you stop talking to somebody, you know.

It was only a couple years after that I run away. That didn't have nothing to do with the crows, that part. That was just me.

Look, I know the difference between what's real and what's not and crows talking, that's not something most people say is real. Like I said, I don't really care what most people think anymore. Most people never even heard of a white moose, let alone seen one.

This crow, this old one, she's been talking to me a lot now about going back up there hunting again. Real sly, now and then, she'll bring it up. Of course she would. She's a crow. Tricky, that one. You got to be that way when you live on other people's killing.

Seven

Everett's headlamp was gone. It was not on the branch where he thought he had hung it, and it was not in the zippered pocket of his rucksack, where it should be. He waited until at last the light came pale and flat, not from any one place but as if from the snow itself. It had covered everything, blurring any distinctions upon the land. The wood pile had burned away entirely by then, and their fire had died down. He stood and Mason stood, hunched and rheumatic like men forty years older than themselves.

Norman's saddle was gone from the pile of tack, a hundred or so yards away from the campfire, under the shelter of some clustered spruces. His axe and gun were gone with the saddle. One packsaddle, and a tarp, and a diamond rope were also gone. Neither Everett nor Mason was surprised.

They found the horses easily by their tracks in the snow. The hobbles were, all seven of them, draped neatly over a sideways-fallen tree, and five of the horses were tied by their leadshanks to five separate trees. There was frost around their eyelashes, and their eyes had a tired kind of panic that was not at all relieved by the sight of the boy. He and Mason led them back and saddled them, stiff frozen fingers pulling stiff frozen cinches. The horses blew and puffed themselves out against the cinching and Everett did not have the heart to punch the air out of them.

He picked up the old man's track and he made it seem like an accident when he did, as if he were just wandering along the creek searching for signs and happened to spot the bootprints there, safely past the point where Mason might see his own bootprints beside them. The prints were size seven, cheap department-store rubber that slipped in the new snow.

The new snow was a clean page upon which the entire story could be written. The prints led to a hollow not far from where the pile of saddles was, and there was another set of tracks where the old man had stashed his stolen tack and then returned with the two mares, Lolita and Bella, and then saddled them and struck out mounted. From there the track led back in time. Back to the moment where they had stood with their boots parallel and shoulder-width in freshly laid snow, three men side by side by side on the crest of a small hillock staring into a gathering dark where an animal such as none of them had seen before and none of them would see again had disappeared, leaving only tracks to mark its passing. Norman had dismounted here. He had dallied Bella to the saddlehorn and then led the two horses on foot, close to the ground again so he could clearly see the white bull's track in the light of Everett's headlamp. The track led upward.

It went through willow and dwarf brush and across soft boggy flats half frozen and treacherous beneath the soft snow. At first it climbed but after a while the white bull had begun to tire and it kept low, angling toward the rough midpoint of this hanging basin, where trickles coming down from the mountaintops gathered and it was open and boggy and only a few twisted and long-dead tree-trunks punctuated the emptiness and there was no way to go but up toward the rocks or back toward the headwall and the men who had camped there. The white bull had bedded down here,

at the edge of the moose pasture. It had settled under the cover of dwarf birches with its ears pointed leeward to the wind coming down over the col above it. It had lain there, waiting for the hunters to follow, and it had died there.

The horses were skittish and would not go near. Everett slid out of his saddle and tied each of them to a double-fistful of willow, and went the rest of the way with on foot. He crouched with Mason on the edge of the clearing. The 45-70 was across his knees.

I'll be damned, Mason said. I honestly did not see this coming.

Everett nodded.

The body before them was entirely naked. No trace of the white skin remained. The muscles of its body and the marbling of fat upon them stood out like some kind of museum exhibit, and the dark lidless eyes bulged out of that swirling of white and pink like the eyes of a nightmare. The testicles and the antlers had been cut away with the hide, so that the body that remained was no longer marked even by these normal distinctions. The tongue was gone too, and the fattest sections of the rump, and there was a slit behind the floating rib where Norman had reached inside and cut out the tenderloins.

It had the feeling of something Everett had seen before, in a dream, he thought. Then he realized it was not in a dream but in photographs he had seen, records of the carcasses like these laid out across the buffalo prairie like bodies on a battlefield, each one rendered hornless, skinless, and tongueless. Photos his grandfather had shared of a time that was history even to him. We did this, his grandfather said, and there was neither pride nor remorse in his voice. Just truth.

Sure didn't take him long to find it, Mason said.

Everett looked in the direction he was speaking. A raven had landed on the needle point of a dead grey trunk. He looked for something to throw, but there was nothing. No rocks, no sticks heavy enough. The bird just sat there, watching.

The track led on. They mounted again and followed it upward, angling toward a high saddle that dipped between two peaks at the head of their hanging valley. A talus field led from the brushy highlands to the saddle and as they drew closer to it they could see the track switchbacking up toward it. They dismounted. The talus was loose and its features were lost beneath the snow, so that without the old man's track Everett would never have thought to try it with horses. But it was not as steep as it had seemed from their lookout the day before and the horses followed willingly, catching the scent left behind by the lead mare, Lolita.

At the crest of the saddle the wind picked up and it was colder than they had imagined it could be, that time of year. Above them it was hazy white and the heat seemed to have gone out of the sun but the light was hard and brittle and made his eyes water. Zipped up in their coats they sat in the saddle and glassed the drainage before them, barren white and sunken beneath the cold shoulders of the mountains. They looked for a long time, searching in a grid over it. The track led that way but it became lost in the distance and they could not see the old man anywhere.

Mason let his binoculars hang around his neck and flexed his fingers to bring the blood back into them.

Do you know what this feeds into?

The Arctic Ocean, Everett said.

You don't have a clue, do you.

No, Everett said. I think we might be on the Bonnet Plume side, now.

That's not very helpful, is it.

Carson doesn't really believe in maps.

Mason shook his head. I have two of those Quaker bars and some water, he said. How about you?

Nothing but wrappers. We should have taken some of that moose, shouldn't we.

How much ammunition do you have?

Ten rounds.

Mason looked out over the country. He bit his bottom lip. I can't make you come with me, he said. But I'm not turning back.

Neither am I.

Mason laughed softly.

What?

Nothing. It's not you. It's just something Norman said.

What did he say?

He said this would be the hunt of a lifetime. He wasn't kidding either.

They rode all afternoon down that nameless drainage where there was hardly a bush to soften the rocks. Horseshoes clicked endlessly against loose, broken stone. Norman's track led them on. They hardly had to watch for it. The horses seemed to know where to follow. From the pale glow of the sun over his right shoulder Everett guessed they were heading north and east. By nightfall they had dropped down into timber again and there was still no sign of the old man except the double track of hoofprints.

They stopped when they could no longer see the tracks. It was light enough by the half-moon to see and they tried to continue by the light of Mason's headlamp but stopped when the batteries began to fade. It was midnight by Mason's watch.

Everett tied up the horses and unsaddled them and Mason made the fire. Neither one of them had an axe, They dragged the largest trees they could find and crossed them over the fire to burn them into smaller pieces while Mason boiled water from the stream that was almost large enough now to call a creek. He boiled it in his aluminum bottle with the plastic cap removed and he added spruce needles to take away the taste of smoke.

They huddled close to the flame with the stiff felt horseblankets folded over their shoulders and passed the bottle of spruce tea between them with gloved hands. Mason offered Everett some pieces of spruce gum he had peeled off the side of the tree and they both chewed on it. It too tasted like a lumberyard in the summer.

Not a lot of variety out here, flavour-wise, Everett said.

No.

Everett chewed thoughtfully. It does take the edge off, he said. Reminds me of spruce hen, kind of.

Better if you don't talk about meat.

Sorry. Where'd you learn that trick?

Norman taught me, Mason said. He calls these hungry days. He says they make you hunt better.

The last great hunter, Everett said, leaning heavily on the accent.

Mason grinned across the fire at him. It was the first he had smiled in a long time. When they had a stack of wood large enough to take them until morning they finally laid down on the blankets and tried to sleep, one side always colder than the other, rolling back and forth. There was the sound of something afoot, hunting somewhere out in the night. The stream nearby like a gathering of voices that rose and fell and eddied together. The horses pawing hungrily at bare ground. Then daylight.

With daylight they rode down the gathering stream and then lost Norman's trail for a while and found it on the other side angling up into tall shadowy trees, and came on the cabin that was hidden there. They stopped suddenly and dismounted and moved in quietly on foot, but the old man was long gone.

It was a small cabin with a dirt floor and logs that were unpeeled and dry rotted. Tarpaper showed where moss had fallen away from the roof. Several of the trees had been tied together above this roof so that it could not be seen from the air, and on the

south aspect of the slope leading up to this cabin there were hoops made from birches bound together at the apex, the framework of greenhouses that were overgrown now with weeds that had themselves died and been buried beneath the snow. Inside there was furniture made out of chainsawn planks. A table and two chairs, a bed, a crateful of Mother Earth News with June 1985 on top, and in the corner a small open box that was filled now with a squirrel's cache. It took a moment to realize that it was not a box but a cradle. On the shelf above there were two dusty milk bottles.

The stove was made from a fuel drum and had rusted through around the pipe. Mason opened the door and put his hand inside. It had gone cold already. There was a candle stuck onto the middle of the table and bits of fat and meat were scattered about where Norman had done his flensing by the flickering light. The pieces were small. He had already caped out the face and ears.

They looked around for any canned food but there was none, nor was there any in the mess of logs and kerosene tins and plastic jerry cans where the cache had fallen over, a hundred yards up the hill. A little further on they found where Norman had picketed his horses, and gave their own starving mounts a moment to feed. They rode on.

The old man's track led along a trapping trail that had long fallen into disuse. Often they had to leave it to skirt around some blown-down tree, and at times they lost the blazes entirely, but always the track returned to it.

He knows this trail, Mason said. Everett said nothing, because aside from this obvious fact nothing else could be counted on. Norman's track led straight and made no attempt to lose them, but they could not be sure whether he knew that he was being followed or not. By the afternoon they had not seen blazes for some time and it was clear that once again the old man was cutting cross country.

It was timbered country opening into a wide valley with low brushy slopes rising to the sides, and the trail kept more or less under the cover of the trees. Sometimes they passed through meadows where there was grass beneath the snow and they could see where the old man had stopped to let his animals feed, and they allowed their own animals a few mouthfuls, but always after a minute or two Mason was impatient to keep moving forward. Constantly Everett found himself kicking Maxwell forward and at times it was easier to dally the string of packhorses and drag the horse along on foot, though he found he tired easily now after a couple of days without eating.

Once again they stopped only when it was too dark to see. There was a trickle of water coming down from the slopes above, and they chose the first spot that was flat enough. Everett took his rifle out of the scabbard and leaned it against the tree and loosened Maxwell's cinches. They were both moving slowly. Then Mason stood still, and after a moment Everett realized that he was looking at the rifle.

How well do you know how to use that thing? Mason asked.

What do you mean?

I mean suppose Norman doesn't want us following him.

You're not serious are you?

After what I've seen the last two days I'm about as serious as I can be.

So what are you saying?

I'm just saying maybe I should take it for a while, Mason said.

There was something in his tone that was unsettling. A fracturing, whether of stress or anger.

I know how to shoot, Everett said. And it's my rifle.

Mason stood as he had before, hands hanging empty. Everett took the rifle and slung it over his shoulder. He led the horses along the watercourse looking for feed, and finally picketed three of them in the best place he could find and hobbled the others. There was so little to eat that that it hardly seemed worth the effort, except that he needed badly to be alone, if only for a little while. When he returned, the fire was burning, and Mason had another bottle full of spruce-needle tea. Another night of spruce gum.

He killed a ruffed grouse the following day. It was on the ground, obvious against the snow. Mason shot at it with two arrows and missed both times. It was waddling away from them into the cover of some new growth and he did not even think twice and simply raised the rifle to his cheek and drilled it through the neck. It was only after the gunshot went echoing down the valley and his ears were ringing that he realized what he had done.

Mason's face was simply crestfallen. Not angry, just pained, as if he had just lost something priceless. There was no sense in talking about it. There was no chance that Norman had not heard the shot. They mounted again and rode on.

The track branched off up a tributary of the creek, which had by now grown large enough that it might at some point soon be called a river, though which river it was neither Everett nor Mason knew.

Sometime after noon they passed the place where Norman had camped. His lead had more than doubled since the day before. The air had warmed enough that the snow began to drip off branches and down the backs of their rainjackets and the tracks they found were greying into slush. Some leftover wood was in a small stack on one side of the fire and a short bed of spruce boughs tucked against the bole of a huge old spruce on the other. The scar that the fire had left seemed impossibly small for the chill of the night, and so were the branches the old man had cut. Two sticks were driven at angles into the ground and a spit lay across the notch where they met and the end of the spit was dark with the juices of Norman's roast. Everett clenched the muscles of his stomach. It seemed to make the emptiness lessen a little.

Again that night they slept in an open bivouac. They split the grouse between them and chewed every piece of gristle off the bone, but it was a small bird and hardly enough to fill both of their stomachs. Their conversations now were reduced to single words, or even to single syllables, and they spoke only when necessary. They ate, and then they slept, each alone with his own thoughts to keep him company.

Everett had learned now to sleep in short spells between restocking the fire and the space between waking and dreaming blurred. He no longer dreamed of home or of people he had known before. His dreams were filled with snow and spruce and with animals, some of them living, some of them dying. In one dream he woke by the fire and across from him the old man was burrowed head and all inside his bedding again, only his bedding this time was the white skin of a moose. The body inside the skin

seemed to stuff the skin back into its living shape, so that it seemed as if the slain animal itself had bedded down there and it was only his knowledge of the illusion that spoiled the effect. In his dream he was hungry and he reached out for the old man to wake him. He wanted to ask for some food. But before he could touch the strange fur, he woke. The stars were sharp overhead and the fire had burned down. He was cold again.

In the morning when he left to bring the horses in he found bootprints circling the camp. Even in the near darkness he noticed them, sensitive now to any details written upon the snow after endless hours of reading them. The tracks were size seven and they made a complete circle around the camp. They stopped in an opening a short stone's throw from the fire. He could see where the old man had sat in the snow with his back against a treetrunk, watching through the trees and the night, as close as he could come in the crusted snow without waking the sleeping hunters.

Everett checked on the horses' and found bootprints there too but the horses were still picketed. He could see from the bootprints that the old man had unwound the ropes from the bushes where they had tangled themselves, but beyond that they were untouched. He led them back to camp and showed Mason the signs. Mason squatted with his arms hugged around him and stared at the melted patch where the old man had sat. He stared at it for a long time.

I don't get it, he said finally.

They saddled and rode on. They did not know what else to do.

The drainage they followed led gently up toward a high country and the trees grew thinner and drier. The sun rose and the snow softened and the passing of time was marked by the sound of the horses hooves, brittle splintering giving way to dull crunching as they plodded along. Everett was wary now expecting the old man to backtrack or to try to lose them along the open water of the stream but the track lead straight along the high country, keeping to the crests of ridges where the ground was open and solid. Ahead of them the country narrowed again, and Everett realized that the trail was turning southward now, taking them back and into the mountains again. He stopped.

Smoke, he said.

Where?

There.

It was a thin column rising up straight into the breathless day. The place it rose from was a hilltop that was half a mile ahead of them, standing above the broad valley.

Both men raised their binoculars but they could see nothing except the smoke. They left the trail and approached the hill from the backside keeping under cover in black spruce, stumbling over half-frozen hummocks and stepping through ice into sinking puddles to do so. They left the horses tied and made the final stalk in their sodden boots but the old man was already gone. The fire was still warm. He had made a seat for himself out of spruce boughs and when they stood at this vantage point the entire valley was open to him. He had been watching them the entire time.

What is he doing? Mason asked.

Making sure we're following.

Why?

I don't know.

Everett killed another bird that afternoon, a ptarmigan that flew up practically from under the horses' hooves and startled them. He shot it from out of the saddle and Maxwell bucked but he rode it out with the rifle in one hand and then snatched up the leadshank before his horses could scatter. It occurred to him vaguely that he never would have dared try something like that before. Some distant part of him felt proud. Later he realized it was because the horses were too tired to throw much of a rodeo. He dallied his string and passed Maxwell's lead to Mason and then ran down the wingshot ptarmigan on foot and wrung its neck.

How many do you have left? Mason asked.

Eight shots.

Let's not waste them playing cowboy next time.

Everett looked at him cooly, seeing through the game. He would not rise to the bait. He slung the rifle across his back and he kept it there all day. Sometimes he could feel Mason staring at it, like a burning between his shoulderblades.

Late in the afternoon they climbed into the high country again. As dusk came on they knew they were in trouble. There was nothing up there except snow and the knee-high cover of dwarf birch, and the sky was clouding and the wind was picking up. They rode

on late into the night and soon lost the old man's track entirely. They followed the most obvious drainage they could see and at last they came to a copse of spruce trees with some dead branches in its shelter and tied the horses nearby and cooked the ptarmigan, rationing their wood carefully.

They did not sleep at all that night. In the morning they rose painfully and backtracked to where they had lost the old man's track. It took hours to find it again. The track had not led down the watercourse but had branched instead up into still higher ground where even scrub brush would not grow.

The horses would not move forward now no matter how hard the riders kicked them and flogged them with the reins or with willow crops. They dragged the horses now on foot, and they stopped often to rest. Mason sank to his knees and let his head fall back and his jaw hang open. A jetliner left its trail across the empty sky. Six and a half miles away and yet another world entirely.

What day is it today?

Everett tried to calculate and his calculations seemed to lag from real time. I think it's the 22nd, he said.

Hunt change was yesterday, Mason said.

Carson must be looking for us by now.

I haven't heard the engine, Mason said.

Me neither.

Do you think we've gone that far?

I don't know, Everett said. Maybe we have.

A little further and the ground rose steeper still. The horses refused to move beyond this point. Everett whipped Maxwell savagely with the willow crop and cussed at him but the gelding barely blinked. He heaved on the leadshank until his boots slipped out from under him and he landed on his backside. He tried to stand up but his knees felt wobbly. He sat there a little longer.

Fuck them, Mason said. They're slowing us down now.

The horses stood unmoving, as if they had forgotten how to walk. Ugly, longhaired, white-spotted and swaybacked criollos, all of them.

I'll pay for them if I have to, Mason said. None of them would get more than two hundred at a meat auction anyway.

He looked at them closely.

There is a lot of meat on them.

Everett looked at him and looked at the horses and then looked at Mason again. He felt the horror rising inside of him.

They'll go the other way, he said. If we let them. I'm sure of it.

But we're not going back. I'm not. You said you wouldn't.

Then we'll let them go.

They won't make it through a winter out here.

Maybe they will, maybe they won't.

Just one of them, Mason said. I'll do it. You don't have to watch.

No, Everett said. No you won't.

He stood. He stroked Maxwell's neck and then tossed back the stirrup and began to loosen the cinch. Mason stood sullen, watching him work. He licked his lips, slowly, dryly. Then he turned to his own mount and pulled off the saddle.

They made a pile of the tack and covered it with the horseblankets and shouldered the sagging daypacks that had hung from the saddlehorns. The horses still had not moved. They seemed oddly naked without halters. Only the rafter-S brand on their rumps marked them from the wild animals that they might have been. They were staring at the two skinny men with heads low. Everett took the willow switch and flogged Maxwell across the frontquarters.

Git, he shouted. Git.

The horse turned slowly, reluctantly, and then finally trundled downhill and away from the two men. One by one the other horses turned and followed. He watched them for a long while but they did not stop or even look behind them to see if the men were following.

The old man's trail led still higher into a long open tundra that was some kind of pass, again unnamed. They walked with their heads bent into the wind. There was snow sometimes in small sharp flakes, and the clouds above rolled like an ocean seen from its deepest floor. Everett raised his head. There were caribou staring at him. Fifty or more, each with regal headgear forking skyward. These, the oldest of all the deer, a family

whose peregrinations were older than the land itself, these deer had stopped in their passing and those at the rear milled around those at the front like a crowd gathering around the scene of an accident, or the scene of a crime, coming as close as they dared but held back by the same precise measure of dignity so that they formed a perfect line.

Mason almost stepped on his heels.

So the men and the animals squared off, the latter so vastly outnumbering the former. Then some kind of signal the animals shared sent them trotting with high dancer's steps around the men, a mass of fur and horn and hot breath streaming past not thirty yards away. Both men stared dumbly until it was only a line of creamy rumps a long shot away, and it was only then, far too late, that either man thought of the gun.

At nightfall they came again into timber. It was the kind that they called peckerwood, bad to burn, and bad for cover. They plodded over sodden, sinking muskeg and along sidehills and through snowcrusts that bit the shins.

It was past dark but moonlit enough to follow the tracks, which they did. The tracks led down into a little hollow, and they found there waiting for them two beds made of fresh boughs and a waist-high stack of firewood ready-cut for them with a sharp axe. Neither man said anything. They had come too far to be surprised. Both sank down into their beds and did not rise again until the chill came over them and it was time to start a fire.

Everett rolled his soaking socks off of his feet and hung them over a branch beside the fire. A hole had worn through each of the heels and there was blood soaked into the

dirtstained cotton. He cleaned the wounds as best he could with some snow and then dried them in the fire's heat and patched them over with duct tape. Mason watched blankly.

Funny how much bigger it all feels when you're on foot, he said.

Funny, Everett said.

In the morning they rose slowly, and only after all the wood was burned. Mason's bow and rack of arrows was hanging off a snubbed off treebranch at the edge of the hollow. He regarded it for a while and then sniffed and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand.

Not much use is it, really, he said. He turned to Everett. I'll help you carry the gun.

I'm alright, Everett said. I can carry it.

When they left, the bow was still hanging on its tree, obsolete and abandoned. Left to be discovered, maybe, some hundreds of years in the future in that beguiling provenance.

The land dropped away steeply toward a river fifteen miles away. They could see it from the crest of a hill where the old man had stopped and dismounted and glassed the valley before him. The trail led onward. The snow from five days before had melted away entirely in some places and it was much harder to follow.

Late in the afternoon they heard a gunshot low and distant, a mile or two away. It was almost nightfall when they came upon the carcass. It was a cow moose and it was

lying on its side, shot through the neck among some bog birches. One side had been skinned away and the rump and tenderloins and the backstraps removed.

The two men made camp a short distance away and cooked large pieces of it on skewers and ate it nearly raw and wound up puking some of it. Then they ate more. The weight in Everett's rounded belly was like the promise of eternity.

They did not speak at all that night. It seemed now they had come to the end of something. In the morning they rose and walked a little further down to the river's edge and found a cabin. They did not follow Norman's tracks beyond it.

Inside was a steel barrel and inside of that, a few leftover packages of noodles and some canned tomatoes stashed away for the winter. There was a stack of wood under the eave. Hunters names and their scores were etched into the chainsaw-squared beam above the doorframe. Everett studied them.

I think this is Falls Creek, he said.

That's one of Carson's camps?

Everett nodded.

He made a fire in the stove and Mason brought water from the river and they made noodles on the sheetiron top. In the time it took to cook the noodles the cabin had warmed and there was a heaviness about their movements that was something like the weight of decades.

They untied the foam mattresses that were hung from the ridgepole out of a porcupine's reach and spread these out on the bunks at the rear of the cabin and sprawled out upon them and were asleep in minutes. They did not wake until it was evening, and then they were hungry again.

He woke again in the middle of the night and pulled on his gumboots and stepped outside. It was a clear night yet again, and cold. Wind gusted and it cut through the two hoodies and the Carhartts he wore. He looked to the north and there was the faintest primer of colour there, green and glowing. He peered deeply into the night, to see if the colour would grow. On the edge of his vision, well below the dark perimeter of the night sky there was a pinprick of light coming through the trees. It was so faint as to be nearly invisible. He blinked and looked away but the light was still there. He took his bearing from the sky.

In the dark he came to the edge of the river and listened to the sound of it over the rocks. It was a fast current but it did not sound deep. As if depth had a sound. He found a staff among the trees and probed the bottom of it and finally just plunged in boots and all, leaning heavily on the staff when the water came above his hips and his feet cut out from under him, and then scrambled up the cutbank on the far side shivering fiercely. He emptied his boots and wrung his socks and then carried on, heading a few minutes right of the lodestar.

After a time he could see the campfire glow above the trees. He stopped and listened and moved forward a little and stopped and listened again. Something huge and breathing was in the woods beside him. His breath caught. Then he heard the horse gassing off, quietly, like a small hole in a large, soft tire. He grinned to himself. He moved closer.

The old man was a black shape sitting before the fire. Hat gone. No colour and no definition to his form gave any clue to what animal he was. He seemed to be studying

something on his lap. Everett held his breath and stepped closer still. A branch gave him away.

The old man rose to his feet and snatched up the rifle beside him and slid into the shadows on the far side of the fire. His movement was not panicked. It was the swift, confident movement of the hunter.

Norman, Everett said. He did not have to raise his voice.

Norman, it's me. I'm alone. I'm coming out now.

Everett stepped into the ring of firelight. Everything beyond was rendered impenetrably black. He kept his hands palm-forward and visible.

I just want to talk, he said. That's all.

On the bough bed in front of the fire was his own headlamp. The case was open where the old man had been trying to jury-rig the terminals with tin foil so they would fit a set of triple-A's. There was meat laid out on some cut willows to air it, and the tack was laid neatly beneath a grand old spruce. The white moosehide was rolled flesh outward and set between two branches, out of reach from mice or any other vermin. The antlers were propped below. He saw it and he saw the fire still blazing strong. His jeans were freezing stiff against his legs and he longed to crouch by the fire and warm them but he did not move any closer.

Norman, he said. I'm alone. I swear it. We can be civilized, can't we?

No sound came, and no movement.

Everett walked to the base of the tree and the skin that was there. A wild idea occurred to him, and before he could stop or reconsider the hazards, he crouched

suddenly and dashed to the skin and snatched it out of the branches like some kind of highlight reel. The weight of it tripped him up almost as soon as he tried to lift it, and he fell on his side with the fifty-pound hide cradled in his arms. From the darkness beyond there was, still, nothing. He felt ridiculous. More like vaudeville than Sportsnet.

He picked himself up. The hide had unrolled itself partly. It was the tail end that had unrolled. The tail, like the hide, was white, as pure and white as his grandfather's hair. He bent over it, no longer caring what the old man might think, or what he might do. He stroked the fur, felt its soft hand, marvelled at the feel and at the unquestionable truth of his senses. He pulled out three hairs from the tail, held them close to his eye, and rolled them between his fingers. Carefully he tucked them deep into the watch-pocket of his jeans.

Out in the spruce-scrubbed night beyond a gust of wind stirred the silence.

Norman, he said. Please, talk to me.

But no further sound was to come.

Part II

Eight

Loretta Shade met the helicopter at the airstrip outside of Marrow. She was driving the passenger van with the Red Stone Outfitting decals on the sides. She had flown in on a connection from Calgary the previous afternoon and her face had hardened from the one that Everett remembered. She did not ask questions. The mounted police were with her.

They drove to the station in Marrow and the two officers there took Everett and Mason into separate rooms for their statements. Everett's took three hours, in all. Twice the officer stopped and refilled his coffee. He filled out twenty pages of notes. He was in his mid fifties, cleanshaven and tall with a paunch above his gunbelt. When he was finished he leaned back in his swivel chair and put his hands behind his head. He looked up at the ceiling as if trying to reckon with whatever was up there. Then he returned to Everett.

I never thought I'd ask this question, he said. But do you have any evidence from this moose?

How do you mean?

I mean anything that might prove his existence. A photograph. Anything.

No, Everett said. We only saw it up close the one time. We never got the chance to take a picture. That was the last time I saw it.

The officer nodded.

How old did you say you were?

I was seventeen.

You were seventeen? Or you are seventeen?

I was seventeen. My birthday was the day before yesterday.

Happy birthday.

Thank you.

Is it alright if I say you look younger than eighteen?

It's alright. You wouldn't be the first.

Just to warn you, the drinking age is nineteen up here. In case you were thinking of, you know, celebrating.

I don't really feel like celebrating right now, Everett said.

No, I don't imagine you do right now. You've been through a lot, young man. But in time I believe you will realize that you had someone looking out for you out there. Do you know what I mean?

The officer leaned forward across the desk that stood between them. The good Lord watches over all of us, he whispered. He smiled.

Is that everything? Everett asked.

The officer leaned back again. He shuffled some papers.

Yes. I believe that's all for now.

Everett took his hat off the desk and stood and turned to leave.

Everett?

Yes?

Stay away from the bar, okay?

I will, Everett said.

Loretta was using the payphone in the lobby when he came out. No, she was saying. Tell them to talk to me. No one else.

She hung up and drove him one block down main street and parked again in front of the Silver King. In the lobby she gave Everett his key.

Mason's in the room next to yours. I believe he's on the phone. You were in there for quite a while.

She looked at Everett thoughtfully. He told me most of what happened, she said. As much as I need to know, for now. I am going to be very busy for the next few days, she said. So if you have anything to tell me, you should tell me now.

I tried to save the horses, he said. I had no choice.

The horses are fine, Loretta said. They showed up at McClure yesterday.

All of them?

Five of them. From what I understand the other two are somewhere out there with an old Indian and a dead white moose.

What did Carson say?

It doesn't matter what Carson says. From what I heard you did fine, Everett. You did the best you could.

Everett nodded. He squinted up at her, a head taller than he was and in high heels too. He felt small around her, but it was not a bad feeling.

Your mother called, she said. She's been calling almost every day for the last two weeks trying to get a hold of you. I told her you couldn't be reached.

What does she want?

You'd best hear it from her. You can bill the call to your room.

Does she know about any of this?

Loretta shook her head. She took a tooled leather wallet out of her purse and drew out three twenties.

This should cover you for supper and breakfast, she said. I'm in 203. I'd prefer you don't come by unless you really need something. I'll be on the phone.

Thank you, he said again.

Call her, Loretta said.

I will.

The phone rang four times before she picked it up.

Hello?

Hi Mom.

Oh, thank Jesus. Thank God. I kept trying but that woman kept saying you couldn't be reached. Where were you?

I got lost for a bit.

Jesus, Everett, what happened?

It's nothing. What's going on?

Didn't she tell you?

No. She's preoccupied.

I'm sorry Everett. It's your grandfather.

He wandered down to the bar that was below his room. He didn't know what else to do and he could not be alone in that room with the heater growling and nothing on the TV. There were three people in the bar and a sportscaster on the screen pounding his desk over a point none of them could hear. Everett took one of the tall stools and ordered a beer.

The bartender was lean and deeply wrinkled with grey in the hair and a hat that said Eldorado Mines. He looked well into his sixties, but it was hard to tell if that was age or hard living.

Can I see some ID? He said.

Everett gave him a bright pink federal firearms license with a photo and date of birth on it. He looked at the card and looked at Everett and handed it back.

Strange thing, he said. There was a Tanner Barlow that came in here, what, must of been a couple weeks ago. Kind of looked like you but about a head taller or so. Actually, he didn't really look like you at all. Funny story, he said he'd cut his knee with an axe. Maybe not that funny. There was some kind of a bone infection and it sounded pretty painful.

Everett stood and pushed his seat back toward the bar and turned to leave.

Sit down, the man said. The liquor inspector hasn't come around on any Tuesday afternoon that I ever saw. You're the cousin they airlifted out of Falls Creek aren't you. Elliot?

Everett.

Well Everett, you look like a man who could use a drink. What can I get you?

He asked for a lager and tried to pay but the man waved the bill away. Two older men at the other end of the bar had stopped talking and were both glancing his way. Both bearded and dressed in dark greasy sweaters and dungarees. He held the sweating bottle around its neck and tipped it back and then thanked the bartender. He asked him his name. Jeremy. They shook hands. Jeremy drew up a stool on the other side of the counter.

You were out there with Norman weren't you, he said. It's alright. No need to look all shifty like that. Norman was a friend, you could say. Sometimes I saw him just about every day a year or two back. You see that caribou there? That's Norman Alexander's caribou.

It was a full shoulder-mount, hanging above the piano in at the far end of the tavern. Antlers almost as wide as the piano box with hats hanging off of the shovels and points.

That's a nice bull.

What would you judge it?

I don't know, Everett said. Four hundred class for sure. Maybe four-twenty.

It's four twenty-six.

Almost record book.

Funny story about that one too, Jeremy said. A hunter from Wisconsin shot it, what, ten years ago. Billy Kendrik out of Carmacks did the taxidermy on it. He took half the cost as a deposit. Billy did. Certified cheque for twenty-five hundred dollars. So he does the work and he's got it ready to ship and all he needs is the rest of the payment to ship it down there, right? This guy, this hunter I guess he was some kind of investor or entrepreneur or something like that. You know, one of those types. Every time Billy calls him it's always, oh, I'll get the money to you in a month or two. Well, soon enough it's been about two and a half years and Billy still doesn't have the money and he goes to call the guy again but the number's changed. He sends a letter too and no response. Nothing. Three years ago the guy's a high roller paying thirty thousand for a hunt and now you can't find him anywhere. Gone. Like he's disappeared off the face of the earth. Nobody knows what happened to him. Somebody Bill got a hold of said maybe the guy was working somewhere in a little shit town in Oklahoma, but he never followed up. He figured if the guy still wanted his horns he'd of called him by now. So Billy calls up Norman and asks him if he wants it. He gave it away for a hundred and fifty with a

hindquarter thrown in, I believe. But I ask you now, what the hell is Norman going to do with a head like that? You seen his cabin?

No.

Well you'd understand if you did. I bet you those horns wouldn't even make it through the doorframe. Norman comes in here and he asks me, how much you want for my head. I said, what, you're going to sell it to me? No, he says. But I'll lease it.

Jeremy laughed. Norman Alexander, he said. He shook his head.

I told him, you can hang that head here if you want to but I wouldn't pay a cent for it. It's a nice looking rack though, isn't it?

What's the story with the hats?

Oh, the hats. Nothing much. Every now and then someone goes home and leaves their hat behind so I'd just hang it up there so they'd find it again. It just got so some of them just prefer to leave it hanging there. It kind of makes them feel at home, I guess. You staying here?

I'm upstairs.

No, I mean can I get you another one.

Jeremy did, and brought one for himself too. Jeremy held the bottleneck delicately, between his forefingers, as if either he or the drink were more refined than they at first appeared.

When I first came up here, he said, I worked in a mine. Palliser's mine out of Dawson City. That was back in 1972. Ancient history for you, probably. I was working the trommel once with an old timer the name of Newt Richardson. Newt just managed

to look over as we were running through the trommel and he spots this nugget about the size of your thumb. It was so big it never even made it through the mesh. It was some piece of luck he just spotted it there. He shut down the machine and he showed it to me. Let me tell you, it doesn't matter how much gold you've seen, it does something to see it there all in one lump. Just to touch it. Hold it in your hand and feel it. It'll surprise you how heavy it is. It makes you feel something kind of crazy. You know what I mean?

And here's the thing. If he hadn't of seen it nobody would have even known it. It would have been gone, right off the end of the trommel, buried for another million years or so. So who owns that lump of gold? That's what I want to ask you.

Everett shifted uncomfortably. He wanted to be anywhere else at that moment. Jeremy continued.

Of course the company owns it because they've got the rights to the lease. But you know, there's the discovery principle to contend with. They'd of never known it was there if he never saw it. And anyway, they'd never know if he took it.

So he took the nugget.

Newt? No, of course not. Newt is an honest man. He gave it to the foreman. And the foreman gave him a bonus. He bought us all a whole flat of beer and everyone got shit-faced. It was great.

Huh.

Norman's gotten himself into some trouble, hasn't he.

Everett nodded before he even realized he had. His hand tightened.

It's alright, Jeremy said. You don't have to say anything. Those of us that knew him, we already knew he would try something soon. Norman had what you might call some financial difficulties the last couple years. There were three credit cards he used here. He'd buy rounds for the whole bar, just like that. I'd ring the Visa through and when it didn't go I'd use the Credit Union, and then the Sears card. Sometimes none of them went through and he'd put it on the tab, but that was where I cut him off. Norman's always been like that. He's a wild man. It's their own damn fault, really. They should know better than to give a man like that a credit card. I don't think any of us thought he'd try something like this, though.

Something like what? Everett asked.

You tell me.

The two men held their eyes steady with one another, each taking the measure of the other. Everett stood. He unfolded one of Loretta's twenties onto the bartop.

Sit down, Jeremy said. Is there someplace you got to be?

Yes, Everett said. There is.

He turned to two men watching him from down the bar and touched the brim of his cap. Red Stone was embroidered across the front. He tipped it, ever so slightly, and left them.

He stayed with his father and for a while the empty house seemed to smell different, as if death had marked its territory, though the old cowboy had not lived in it for more

than a year. Grandpa Moberly's chair was still in its place before the television, and neither Everett nor his father would sit in it but they did not move it either and sometimes he fell asleep with his neck kinked sideways to face the TV screen, and in the morning woke with cotton in his mouth and a raging headache.

They still haven't found Saddam? Everett said. I thought this thing was over.

His father looked at him sideways.

You really have been in the sticks, haven't you, he said.

They watched familiar scenes, with the volume low enough that neither man could hear the gunfire.

There's a new well going in on Kroetsch's quarter, his father said. I seen it just the other day on the way to 22-47-15. Damn thing's gassing off again you know. Anyway, I stopped in to chat with the boys. You should see the rig they brought in from Calgary. Six man crew just to run the thing.

I think I'll check up on Chase, Everett said. I haven't seen him in a while.

His father stood and gathered some plates off the coffee table. You know there's jobs out here, he said.

I know.

Well. I just thought maybe you'd want to do something about that.

They were picking rocks one afternoon on the north section. Everett was in the box leaned up against the cab, arm dangling over the side, back to back with his father

except for the metal and glass between. The year was a late one for snow and the fields stayed dry and open nearly to November. Dry and cold.

It was pastureland that should never had been ploughed, but now that it was, other men leased it and extracted what profit they could from it. Yet it was still Barlow land and still their responsibility to clear it. When either one spotted a rock large enough to damage discs or harrows Everett swung over the side and tossed it into the chipped and dented truck bed. They moved this way up and down the fallow field. The wind gusted and his hands in their cowhide gloves ached and the fine dust became a grinding mud between his teeth and the sun was pale fisheye in its haze.

He thought of the mason jar half full of arrowheads, which his grandfather had kept on the top shelf of the closet along with his dress shoes and old letters and other things he could not throw away, but could not find a use for either. He had said that the field was full of them but Everett had not found a single flake, and after a while he decided it was only their way of tricking him into picking stones, a chore he hated because it seemed never to be finished. Every time he thought they were all gone the harrows turned up more.

He stole an arrowhead from the jar. He was eight, then. It was dark volcanic glass unlike any rock he'd ever seen. Nobody noticed the point was missing. For a while he kept it hidden in a drawer in his room and then for some reason he buried it. He could not remember the reasoning exactly. Maybe there was no reasoning to it, it was just something he did, like so many other things he did.

When they were finished his father thanked him and went inside to fix lunch. Everett swept out the truck bed with a corn broom and bolted the tailgate back on the Ramcharger and when he was finished and went to lean the broom back in the machine

shed he saw the long handled spade there leaning in the corner with the other tools. He picked it up.

He walked past the grey withered boards of the weeded-over corral and over the stubble to the slough east of the house. It had filled in gradually and overgrown with aspens that had grown up around the generations of rusty trucks and augers and kitchen appliances abandoned there. The wind was still strong and a crackling of dry leaves attended it.

He braced the shovel under an ancient avocado-green electrical oven and reached his fingers below and flipped it over with one hand. A scurrying of insect life was underneath. He sunk the blade into the ground and pulled up shovelfuls of loam and sifted them out with a kind of gold panning motion to one side.

He remembered heaving against that oven to turn it on its side and the pride he had felt when it rolled and he remembered digging there with garden trowel. But he did not find the arrowhead planted there. What he found instead was a crow. The shovel crunched through some of the hollow bones and it was only when he he had sifted out all the remains and piled them together that he realized what he had found. He squatted over the assemblage and turned the bones with his finger.

He had killed the crow with the Daisy Model 10 that he got for his eighth birthday and he had buried it here. He, and he alone. The certainty of this grew like a living thing. He stood and looked around him. There was a kind of fear he had forgotten how to feel. He scraped the bones back into the hole and packed the earth back over it and laid the oven over top.

His father was asleep on the couch. He climbed upstairs to Grandpa Moberly's room and opened the closet door. Moberly's clothes still hung on the rod and his riding boots with the patched toes still stood on a rack at the bottom. Everett pulled over a chair and dug through the top shelf and found the mason jar and emptied the contents across the patchwork on the bed.

All of the heads had broken points and some were chips that might not even have been man-made at all. There were at least a dozen chips and points and all of them were either white quartzite or a pale red chert. Not a single piece was black obsidian.

Nine

A thousand miles north on a haul road outside the municipality of Marrow, Walter Joseph stopped his quad. He was less than a mile from his own trailer on the edge of town but out here there was no light except what the new moon provided. The Honda four-stroke purred between between his shins as it idled.

He had been visiting Clarence Alexander and he was a little bit toasted but not too much, given that it was a Saturday night. All the same he blinked and then blinked again, harder this time. Two horses were digging in the snow along the roadside. They were both mares.

He dug in his pocket. There was drymeat and there were ju-jubes. He chose the jujubes. The horses looked suspicious, but they were hungry enough to let him approach. Hungry, but not starving either. Neither one had a halter.

He spoke gently and stroked the chestnut brown's neck and kept stroking her as he moved slowly to her hindquarters to check the brand. It was as he had hoped. Carson Shade's rafter-S.

He looked off into the darkness beyond but nothing more revealed itself. He grinned to himself. It was a giddiness that shook him all over. He remounted his

machine and threw it into fourth. The tires turned up frozen bits of gravel. There was no waiting to share this news with the ones who mattered most.

Ten

In November they hunted whitetails south of Alliance, the same as they always had each November, Everett and his father and his uncle Glen and his cousin Tanner. They parked their campers on the other side of the bridge and in the evenings they built large fires and drank Pilsner and recollected stories. Tanner was walking again and finally off antibiotics. It had been a heavy dose. He was eating a lot of yogurt now on the doctor's suggestions, because his guts were gone. The story of Everett and the sewing needle grew greater with each telling.

In the day time they each took separate routes, depending on the wind, and hunted. It was still early in the season, with time to take it leisurely and no need to push deer or hunt in teams. An old railway bed crossed the river not far from where they camped, rising to a trestle that fell short of the river. Two concrete pilings came up from the water. The story he knew was that the line went bust before the steel could be laid and all that concrete poured and all that earth had been moved for a railway that never came.

It was overgrown now with aspens and wolf willow and from the top he could walk along the grade with clear sightlines on either side. To one side there were four improbable maples, planted about the sunken remains of a homestead. The whole area had been kept clean of underbrush by cattle so that it looked as if someone was still

keeping the yard, waiting for some one to come reclaim it, and no one had, and the buck brush had grown around the edges and it was full of deer sign.

Sundown, he settled into a piece of back camouflage on the edge of the grade and took a drink from his thermos and waited for the light to fade to that moment just nearly before it was too dark when the deer emerged like ghosts on the edges of cover.

Three does and a decent buck. He held the buck magnified in his scope for a while, trying to count the tines. He guessed there was about five minutes of shooting light left to him. It was not a great buck but not a bad one either, and it was now three hundred yards away and about to step away out of the sightline down to the river's edge and without thinking he squeezed the trigger. Four white flags went up and the deer scattered. He could hear them bouncing and wheezing through the brush.

He gave it twenty minutes and then found the place he had shot at and singled out the buck's tracks. There only was a skiff of snow that had nearly melted away and it was difficult to follow the trail. The flat light of the new headlamp bleached out shadows and colours.

There was some blood, enough of it to keep him tracking long into the dark. He knew that if he let it be the buck would just hole up somewhere and expire and he could find it easily in the morning. Pushing it would only make him run further and turn the meat stringy and tough. He knew this but he could not leave the trail now that he was on it. It was a compulsion he had never had hunting deer before. Twice he found the place where the buck had bedded down and scattered when he came near and both times there was a good pool of blood about ten inches back of where it should be. He called himself an idiot but followed still, until finally his headlamp went so dim he lost the trail entirely.

He retraced his own bootprints but the headlamp was barely even glowing now and it was impossible to find the track. He tore it off his head and threw it. There was a crack where it hit something solid and the glow from the dying battery disappeared, and he sank to his knees in the snow and frozen leaves and breathed deep. Finally he stood.

He looked for the headlamp briefly and gave up. It was too dark to bother. He found his way in the dim light of a few stars poking through the cloud, pushing bush to the top of the railway grade and then trudging a mile or more to the campers and the hum of the Honda generator and the glow of electric lights.

They found the buck late the following morning. His father and uncle Glen were with him. In the daylight the trail was easy to follow from the point where his bootprints left it. They followed the tracks into a diamond willow thicket near the river's edge. Inside the thicket was carnage. A mess of tracks and blood and viscera were spread about the snow, hanging even in the branches.

His uncle knelt down.

Take a look at these, Wade.

The tracks were as wide as his hand.

I told you I heard them howling the other night, his uncle said. You didn't believe me, but I knew that wasn't no coyote. Bob Weibe said they're coming back up the river, coming up with the moose. Remember that? He seen a wolf going across old thirty-six

just last spring. I wouldn't of believed him either if Marjorie hadn't been there with him. She saw it too.

The carcass had been dragged some distance into the willows. The form of it was just visible through the branches.

Everett, his father said sharply. Stay away from that.

Everett turned. His father had his eyes up and was looking up and across the buckbrush. There was a sandy bluff about fifteen feet high with a clear sightline of about three hundred yards. His uncle saw it too, and nodded.

Looks like you've got karma on your side, he said.

They backtracked quietly along their own bootprints, moving quietly now, careful to keep their scent or their voices from spoiling the bait.

He lay out that evening on the bluff above the clearing where the deer had died and he waited for the wolf to appear. It did not. He was there in the morning too and still he did not see the wolf. On the evening of the second day the clouds hung dark and pregnant. It was cold. He lay on the frozen ground at the top of the bluff in four layers of sweaters with the flaps down on his hat and the scoped-out .30-06 laid over a rest he'd made stuffing a backpack with a blanket from the camper. He considered taking the blanket out and covering himself with it and just shooting prone. He hoped the damned thing would be over with so he could get back to hunting deer. His heart wasn't in it, not this, shooting wolves. But to take the side of a cattle killer meant an argument he did not care to enter into. He wondered if maybe this was how it always

happened, and he wondered how many things had died because it was easier to shoot than not to shoot. He took a sip from his thermos.

Shooting light ended at 5:05. He waited there for a few minutes more. He wasn't entirely sure if legal shooting times applied to animals for which there was an open season. But he was pretty sure it did. When the wolf nosed up to the kill it was only a shadow upon shadows under the cross of the reticle. The heart-quicknening shape of the hunter under the cover of darkness. All thoughts ceased. He held steady and breathed out slowly and squeezed his forefinger and the figure dropped to the ground.

After all he'd heard about the toughness of wolves and how they would run ten miles with four bullets in them, it dropped like a sack of meat. He had hit high and severed the spine. It lay right where he had shot it, with barely any blood from the wound, as if it had just fallen asleep like that on its side. It was a she.

He skinned her out by the light of Tanner's spare headlamp, which he'd borrowed. He case-skinned her, starting with the hindquarters and peeling the whole hide over her head like a long dress. It took a very long time. He skinned out the rear paws first and used the scalpel he still carried in his pack to do the fine work around the toes. There was no need to do the detailing now but this was the only way he knew. It was the way Norman had shown him.

His hands were cold enough that it was hard to hold the scalpel firmly in his hands, so he built a small stick fire in the clearing and held cupped his hands around it until they ached with the forgotten warmth. He kept the fire burning as he worked, turning out the front paws too and the ears and the nose. The smell of the skin was rank unlike anything he had smelled before. A dog-smell of garbage and rot and death. He stopped often to dry his hands of the grease and warm them again, and in the heat of

the fire the smell became even stronger. He turned his head and bent over and retched into the bushes beside the fire. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and waited for a moment breathing through his open mouth, until his stomach settled. He retched again, but there was nothing more to give. He went back to work.

Tanner knew a taxidermist by the name of Napoleon Cardinal. He does good work, Tanner said. You should look him up.

He said he'd sent a lot of his wealthier clients to Napoleon to have their trophies mounted. Napoleon was on the more expensive end of the business but the work was generally worth the money.

Cardinal, uncle Glen said. Half-breed fellow isn't he, lives out of Consort.

Yeah, Tanner said. That's him.

He's not really a queer, is he? That's what I heard.

I don't know, Tanner said. You decide. He lives by himself and grows flowers. I heard he started making them for weddings. A kind of a side business I guess, making bouquets.

Glen crushed the empty can in his hand and tossed it on a growing pile beside the generator. He shook his head.

You think you know a guy, he said. And then you find out you don't know the first damned thing.

The house and the small shop beyond the house were both built with a view over the Castor Creek. He went first to the house and rang the doorbell. There was a bundle of dried pussywillows hanging from the door. No one answered.

He walked across the yard to the shop and knocked on the door. An opera was on the radio inside, and someone turned the volume down. The door opened, and with it came the powerful smell of bactericides.

Hello, he said. I'm Everett.

Ah, I remember. The one with the wolf.

Yes, that's me.

Napoleon regarded Everett closely through his bifocals. He had a tan-coloured apron that was spotless and his pepper and salt hair was tied neatly behind his head.

Do you have it here?

It's in the truck, Everett said.

Bring it in the shop and I'll have a look.

Napoleon moved a tray of paints and waxes off the table and Everett laid down the bundle of black fur and unrolled it. The salt had not yet dried the flesh completely and it was still supple.

You salted it, Napoleon said.

Is that a problem?

No. It's just that most people freeze them.

He reached inside the hide and turned flesh-side out and inspected the paws and the ears and the eyelids closely.

It's already caped, he said.

I said it was, didn't I?

Napoleon peered at Everett over the tops of his glasses, as if he had to see him a second time without the added lens.

This is very good work, he said.

I just need someone to tan it and sew up that bullet hole. How much will that cost me?

How much can you pay?

What kind of a question is that? Everett asked. He felt uneasy, not in a frightened way, just in an unsettled way. Napoleon took off his glasses. He had a theatrical way about it, as if stripping away a mask.

What I mean, he said, is that I think maybe we could make an arrangement. I have a backorder three months long. I could use someone with your attention to detail.

You just mean a job, right. Nothing else.

Relax, Napoleon said. A job, yes. Nothing to get worked up about.

Eleven

Four-thirty-five, the phone went off. Everett reached over in the dark to the empty bed beside him. He squinted at the screen. Blinked. He tapped the screen and put it to his ear, more out of habit than intention, and there was someone breathing on the other end of the line.

Hello? Everett said.

Hey buddy. I'm ready to go to work.

Norman?

Huh?

Is that you Norman?

Yeah. This is Norman. Who are you?

You're not Norman.

Could be. Who's Norman?

Nobody, Everett said. He's nobody. Who are you?

You tell me first.

This is Barlow Taxidermy. It's a business number.

Oh. Is that a wrong number?

Yes, it is.

Did I wake you up?

Yes.

Sorry. Hey, maybe you get paid to get up like that? Maybe you got someone that pays you.

No. That's not how it works.

Sorry. Hey, you don't have a job for me, do you?

You still haven't said who you are.

This is Jerry.

No, Jerry. I don't have any job to give you.

He lay there until five. He picked up the phone and tried to find the incoming call but the number was blocked. He thought about it over and over and in the end he was sure that it was not Norman. Still, he wanted to call. He wanted to apologize. For what, he did not know. He lay back down against the pillow but he knew he would not sleep again and finally he dressed and made a cup of coffee and crossed the yard to the workshop.

He had found that more and more he liked the mornings, being up before the sun. The sense of being alone with it cleared his head. The sense of being up before anyone else made him feel young. Young. He would laugh at that but there was no one there to laugh with him at that hour. Twenty-six years old now and already he was sounding like that.

The workshop was a corner of the old machine shop that his grandfather had built. He came awake under the fluorescent light and the mingling smell of tanning solution and coffee. There was detailing to do on an elk and he would spend all that morning just touching up the eyes. The eyes were the most important thing. The first thing people looked at, without even realizing they did, and it was the first place they noticed something was amiss. It took a fine hand with a brush and careful sculpting to make it work. If you could make the eyes look alive, the rest of the mount hardly mattered at all. Stitches and other interruptions in the grain of the fur just disappeared when you focussed on the right details.

He sat down to work.

He was in the shop two months later when Carson Shade called him. It was now spring outside and drops fell from the edge of the tin roof and flashed outside the window like the prisms his grandmother hung from the windowframe, little birds and flowers cut out of crystal that cast tiny rainbows across the Afghan rug.

Hello? He said.

Carson said it was good to hear from him, though it was Carson who had called him. He asked how the business was going. Everett said that it was going well. Carson would know this also because it was Carson who sent a lot of the business his way now. It was much easier for the hunters to have their taxidermy done in Canada than to cross borders with raw hides and green antlers. There was an edge to Carson's voice and he gave short answers until finally he came to the point.

I just got a call the other day, Carson said. From Switzerland. Hunter asking about a moose hunt in September. He says he wants to hunt with Mr. Everett Barlow. Now what am I supposed to make of that?

I don't know, Everett said. What's his name?

Ernst Voegelli.

I've never heard of him.

Neither have I. I said, I think there's some mistake. Everett wrangled for us the one season, but that's all. He said, oh, I see. I guess he thought you were a guide now. I said no, Everett's a taxidermist. His cousin is a guide. Or was a guide. How is Tanner getting along anyway?

Good, Everett said. He's building a house.

Tell him whenever he finally gets fed up with nine-to-five, he's got a job waiting here.

I'll tell him. Everett waited. After nine years he had learned that dealing with Carson became easy, with just a little patience. He had learned that a lot of things could be managed that way.

He said he wants to hunt up Carcajou Creek, Carson said. I've never heard of the guy before and that's what he asks me. Now I ask you, how is it that somebody I've never talked to knows about that camp?

Everett was silent.

You don't have an answer do you. I didn't think you would. I keep thinking someday I'll be able to forget the whole thing, and then the next day I'm at the hunting

show in Reno and Jim Bob from fuckin Carolina will come up and ask if it's really true somebody shot a white bull moose on my concession and if it's really true an eighty-year-old Indian could disappear into thin air. You know what they're calling it? They're calling it the White Soldier. Don't ask me why. You'd think it's good for business but it's not. It's more like a joke, to most of them. You know, some people are saying I made the whole thing up. As if I would make up a story like that. You won't believe the things people say.

Carson ranted a little while longer about the rumour mill in Marrow and how they were trying to slander him and then finally he seemed to calm down a little. These days at least he was careful not to direct his rant at Everett, so there was nothing to argue against, nothing he could say that would not confirm his guilt. Anyway, Everett was past the point of trying to prove himself to this man. Theirs was a simple business relationship now.

So, Everett said. Is he going to hunt with you?

Who?

Ernst from Switzerland.

Hell, if he's going to pay I won't say no. But he is going to pay for it.

Everett grinned to himself. It felt like a small victory.

I gave him your number, Carson said. He said he wanted to contact you. I think there might be a Euro mount involved here, maybe a full shoulder. I've got him booked for moose, starting on the tenth. I recommended you.

I appreciate it, Everett said.

You're welcome, Everett. But to be one hundred percent frank with you, I want you to shut the fuck up around this guy. I mean it. He's odd.

How do you mean odd?

I mean just odd. You know?

No.

He says some weird shit. You'll see what I mean.

Alright. I'll see.

Carson sighed. It sounded like a rocket passing through the phone.

Everett, he said. I may have said some things I regret, back then. I just want to let you know I never meant anything. You did the best you could.

Did Loretta tell you to say that?

Yeah, he said. She did.

Tell her I said thanks.

Ernst was very pleased to meet Everett. The accent was hard to place. Correct in all the grammar and yet uncanny. It was like Carson had said. Just odd. Like language learned from a book, but stranger still with its directness.

It has not been easy to track you, he said. You are a friend of Norman Alexander, are you not?

I'm not sure how to answer that question, Everett said.

That is fine. I believe we understand one another, nonetheless. I would like for you to meet with my father, Mr Barlow. My father is very old. Many years ago he hunted with Norman, and he has been a great friend of Mr. Alexander. He should be very pleased to meet you, if you could make the time.

You mean to come to Switzerland?

Yes. We would make it worth your while of course. Hospitality is our business, of course. My family owns quite a number of hotels in this country and beyond. Have you ever been to the Alps before?

No, Everett said. I've never been outside the country, actually.

Well, then this is an extraordinary opportunity for you. The Alps are the most romantic of landscapes, Mr. Barlow. Have you read Goethe?

No.

Well, it was Goethe who wrote that Reisen bildet. Travel completes the man. You are not complete until you have seen the Alps.

Everett laughed. Do you always talk like this?

It is my business. I understand you are a taxidermist, are you not? Mr. Shade recommended your work very highly. So I come to you with a proposition. In September I will kill a bull moose, God willing. I should like for you to mount that moose, and when it is mounted I would ask that you to deliver it in person. My father and I should very much like to entertain you here, at our home. You will be paid well, of course.

Everett said he would think about it.

When he had finished the call, he put the phone back inside his shirt pocket and buttoned the flap over it. He sat down on his work bench and pressed his palms against his eyes until constellations formed. He blinked them away. On the shelf above the double standing freezers were a half dozen styrofoam forms and they stared back at him, eyeless and white and truncated at the shoulders. He went back to work.

Twelve

It was almost a year to the day since that call when he landed in Zurich in the spring and met the driver at the arrivals gate. The man was balding and wore a grey suit. He was both friendly and distant in a professional way and he maneuvered the airport staff with a natural authority as they collected the oversize baggage. The moose head he had packaged in a packing crate that he had ordered specially for this purpose and reinforced layers upon layers of duct tape and filled with a dozen bags of styrofoam packing material to keep it safe. Two men wheeled it outside on a heavy steel dolley and loaded it into the back of a large white van that was immaculately clean and still smelled fresh off the line.

Everett took the passenger seat. The driver apologized for the quality of the ride, but the van was most expedient under the circumstances.

It's fine, Everett said. Really. It's just fine.

They drove for two hours along the forested ranges of Obwalden and then climbed into mountains more stark and severe than any he had seen before, save in pictures. His hotel was a new building in the town of Grindelwald that for all its heavy timber gables had the finest modern bathrooms he had ever seen. The windows opened onto a postcard view, a mountain whose shapes were cut according to some classic mold of what a mountain should be. The bed was enormous, large enough that he felt more

alone in it than in any other bed he had slept alone in over the years. He decided not to think of that, and spent the next twelve hours sleeping off the jetlag.

In the dining room he ate breakfast a la carte and the waiter informed him that all of it was on the house. He had the entire table to himself. He tried to look busy reading a travel magazine from his room. When he stood to leave he left five francs on the table and the blackhaired waiter met his eye with a kind of pitying look that he could not quite read. He did not try again to tip, after that. He spent the morning wandering the town appalled at the prices of chocolates and cheeses and souvenirs and then took a walk along one of the trails that climbed up above the town but he felt strange out there too, among all the honeymooning couples, and he returned to his room and watched some movie or another on the TV until it was time to dress and meet the driver at reception, in order to join the Voegellis for dinner at six.

The Voegelli home was on the waterfront against the Brienzersee. It was smaller than he had come to expect, by now. Not much larger than many he had seen in the suburbs of his own country, yet so much more dignified.

He had not met Ernst Voegelli face to face. He too was smaller than Everett expected. No taller than himself, trim even in his middle age, dressed in a collared shirt and muted slacks and slippers. His father stood with him. Rudi Voegelli was the image of his son, only ripened another few decades. He had thought this old man, who let his son do the hunting and the talking, would be bound to a chair but this too was not so. He wore his age with dignity and pride.

Welcome Mr. Barlow, Ernst said.

The voice that had sounded comical over the phone now seemed appropriate, even while Everett's own accent now sounded affected.

Pleased to meet you both, he said.

Ernst cooked in the kitchen adjoining the dining room, where Everett sat with Rudi. There was red wine on the table. The window looked over the lake and there were small sailboats upon it. The surface was ruffled by a wind and it was cool enough that evening to be more comfortable indoors.

The conversation was all on Everett's life and the place he came from, never specific, and there was no opportunity to ask more than the most basic questions about the Voegellis. The dinner was moose. The same moose that Ernst had shot that fall. He had cooked it in a simple bourginon that he served with bread and braised organic carrots from Italy and another bottle of pinot. Everett had finished one serving, and Ernst offered him seconds, which he accepted.

I wasn't expecting moose on the menu, Everett said.

You expected something different?

I kind of thought maybe you had a private cook or something like that. I just had this image, you know. Of what it's like.

I have always enjoyed cooking, Ernst said. It is one of those simple pleasures that makes life most fulfilling. I hope it meets with your satisfaction.

It's very good.

I am glad to hear that. It is a small taste of home, I hope. That is always a rare treat, when travelling in a foreign land. Haven't you found? Sometimes you just long for the

food of your country. I suppose that moose may be very common in your country but here, it is a delicacy. There have not been moose in this country for a thousand years. I have researched this. The thing that I cannot understand is how so many hunters can leave that meat behind. As if it were only the horns that matter. To me it seems like making a cake with only the icing. Don't you think? I could not imagine leaving it behind. Granted, it is not easy to transport wild game across borders, but we manage. Sometimes it takes special arrangements, but nothing is impossible.

The older Voegelli was watching Everett intensely.

My son tells me that you do not guide, yourself.

I'm not much of a hunter, Everett said. I just do taxidermy.

There are many who do both, are there not?

Yes. I'm kind of unusual that way. A lot of taxidermists guide part of the year.

But you do not.

I found the industry just wasn't for me.

You hunted with Norman Alexander.

Yes, Everett said. I figured that was why you invited me all the way over here.

Please, I hope this is not rude of me. I do not mean for this to be an interrogation. Norman was a very good friend of mine. Eight years I hunted with him, when he was a younger man. I hope you appreciate how fortunate you were, being one of the last people to hunt with him. That is a rare privilege. Priceless, I should say. I am only curious about your impression of the man.

My impression of Norman?

Yes.

I'd say he was the best hunter I ever saw. But I haven't really seen a lot of real hunters, I guess.

May I ask what you mean by real hunters?

Everett shrugged. People like Norman, I guess.

You believe that there is more than one person like Norman, I take it.

No. I don't mean that at all. Norman was one of a kind.

I would like to hear your story, if it is not too much trouble to you, Rudi said. He said it with deference, but in that deference there was an unwavering expectation.

So Everett he told them. He told them everything. Everything he could remember, in every detail, details he had not shared with anyone, not even his own family. He did not know why he did this, exactly. Some part of him believed, maybe, that secrets were a currency that might be traded, and that to trade in that currency here, among these people, required an investment that went down to the core of himself.

By the time he had finished the sun had nearly disappeared and the bellies of the clouds were stained red with it and another bottle of pinot was gone.

Rudi was quiet as he took the time to absorb all that Everett had said. Then he nodded to himself.

Yes, he said. Norman did say you were candid, almost to a fault. And I do appreciate it, Mr. Barlow. You have been quite patient. But I suppose you would like to know the rest of the story now, would you not?

The trophy room was about the size of a large parlour room, which at one time it may have been. They did not call it a trophy room, though. They called it a memory room. It was in the basement. Ernst unlocked the door with a key from his pocket and flicked a switch inside. A hundred eyes came alive.

All the walls were covered with shoulder mounts. There were kudu and gemsbok and heavy-horned Pamir sheep. A bearskin in front of the fireplace, which was swept clean and had not been used in many years. A lion, one paw reaching upward, frozen forever mid-roar. Many of the mounts were simply the bleached skulls, mounted on shellacked chestnut. Some of these were old, red deer and ibex from a century before. There were artifacts too, souvenirs to fit the room. A collection of leaf-bladed spears in the corner that looked vaguely African. A bow and a rawhide quiver that might be also come from that continent. Gwich'in beadwork from Marrow or further North, a cabinet of antique rifles too. The shoulder mount he had made was already installed above the mantelpiece, one of the largest heads in the room. It was a fine moose, sixty-five inches with wide palms and heavy fronts. Still, it was the white moose that dominated the room.

It was mounted mid-stride on a painted tundra. There were dwarf willows around it that were preserved with shellac and red droplet leaves made from paper and attached to each stem with glue, and toward the back of the mount there was a dead tree trunk on which a raven was perched. The white and the black and the red all were put together with an eye toward contrast. He inspected the work closer and he could see that it was all meticulously executed, the arrow wound cleverly concealed by the curve of the moose's body, as if it were just turning to see some movement beside it.

Rudi took a bottle of seventy-year scotch from a cabinet in the corner and poured three glasses out on the coffee table. He took a seat on the couch to one side, and his son sat beside him. The couch on the opposite side he left empty, for Everett.

What do you think? Rudi asked him. Does it pass your inspection?

It's excellent, Everett said. Who did the work?

A contact of mine in Russia. Of course much of the thanks must go to Norman. He kept the fur in excellent condition, given the circumstances.

You shipped it all the way from Russia?

It's not as difficult as you think. A thousand moose or more come out of that country every year. This is just one more. All you need is a permit.

It's just, I thought a white one would attract some attention.

You mean a little strangeness in the colour. No, that is hardly a problem. Very easy to explain, when it came to that. Surely you know the kind of magic that a good taxidermist can conjure. You can make holes disappear, match hides and antlers that never went together in life. To change the colour of a skin, that would be nothing at all. This moose is a joke, you see. It is a trick of the taxidermist's trade. Or a marvelous work of art, depending on how you choose to see it. We call it our Elfenbeinengel. Our Ivory Angel.

But this one was real, Everett said. I saw it.

Yes, but who else could tell the difference?

Ernst seemed to be enjoying this. He sat with his leg across one knee and a glass in one hand while his father gestured vaguely around the room.

To be honest, Rudi said, I do not care so much for these lifelike mounts that have become so popular. My son does, but I do not. I prefer the old style trophies. You call them European mounts I believe. There is an elegance to a simple skull. It does not try to hide the fact that what it represents is dead. It does not strive for illusion. It is what it is. There is a beauty and a dignity in death. But then, I am an old man, after all.

In particular, I do not like these ostentatious trophy rooms you see so often among the newly rich. You see them in particular, I am sorry to say, in your part of the world. It seems these days that bigger is better, and that more is better. Always it is about more points, more width, more species. These hunters make a menagerie of their trophies, as if it were only a zoo they were creating. It is tasteless. A real trophy is not a thing in itself but a story, and one cannot put numbers on a story and compare these numbers, one to another, like the points on a scoreboard. You could say that our Ivory Angel, it is a statement. It says so much about the state of this most ancient of pastimes. Don't you think it is wonderful?

I didn't come here to talk about taxidermy, Everett said.

No, Rudi said. You came to hear about Norman Alexander. Well, now it is your turn to ask. What would you like to know, Mr. Barlow?

Where is he?

Where is Norman? I'm afraid you are getting ahead of yourself now. We will get to that eventually. Be patient. Let the story unfold. You would like to know what happened to Norman after he left you, wouldn't you? You would like to know what happened after you snuck up on him at the fire. He was very surprised by that, by the

way. The audacity. I think he was rather fond of you. Did he ever tell you the story of how crow stole the sun?

No, Everett said. He didn't say all that much when I knew him.

Then I suppose he had changed a great deal when you met him. This happens. It makes me sorry to hear this, for your sake. Norman was a wonderful storyteller, one of the best I have ever heard. Every night around the campfire he would entertain us with his tales. Those are some of the fondest memories of my life. The story he told of crow, that was one of the finest.

Like so many stories it occurred in a time long ago, before the world was ordered according to the way we know it now. That was a time when the forms that were given to the earth and its creatures were even more malleable than they are now. The earth at this time was a dark and gloomy place, for there was a race of people who lived far above it in the sky, and they kept the sun hidden away in a box. On that dark earth there lived an audacious bird with white feathers. He was a bird that did not respect any order imposed by any race or kind of life.

The leader of these people had a daughter, and it was in this woman that this crow saw a weakness. He transformed himself into a pine needle. This pine needle found its way into the girl's tea, and in time she grew and became pregnant with the crow. So he was born to this girl, and he was given all the privileges that a child of such a family might have. He was free to play in and around their lodge as would any other sky child. He was free to play with the fine toys that these people had. But above all other things, what he most wanted to play with was the sun. He made a terrible noise, as crows often do. Indeed, he made such a racket that finally the leader of the sky people, who

assumed himself to be this crow's grandfather, took the sun out of the box and gave it to the crow to let him play with it.

Now we come to the part of the story that you may have heard before. The crow took the sun, and before any person could stop him, he took off with it through the smokehole of the sky peoples' home. However the sun was so hot that and the smoke through the hole was so thick that his feathers became singed and tarred, and every crow ever afterward would be blackened.

Rudi was looking at the raven that was perched on top of the dead tree in the corner of his room. This, it seemed, was part of the performance. Everett wondered how many times he had told this story before, and to what audiences, and to what effect.

Ah, Rudi said. But you should have heard Norman tell it. He was a truly gifted storyteller.

He looked at Everett, and for the first time Everett felt fear. There was nothing in that look that spoke of violence, but it was there, suddenly, in the room around them.

What is it you would like to know? Rudi asked.

This may sound strange, Everett said. But, did he sleep in the hide?

Sleep in it? I'm afraid I do not understand, exactly.

Like a blanket, I mean. You know, to keep warm.

I think skin would have been too frozen for him to sleep inside it. Quite aside from the damage to the fur. And, of course, the discomfort. I believe he simply slept in the open and built fires. Norman was quite used to the cold. But you would know that better than I.

Rudi paused, glass in hand, contemplating Everett.

Would you like to see something? He said, finally.

He did not wait to see if Everett consented. The base of the coffee table was a cabinet with sliding tigerwood doors and from out of that cabinet he took a large photo album, the kind of thing that was becoming rare to see these days, each page made up of two clear plastic envelopes to display a pair of four-by-six prints. He opened the album on his lap and leafed through the pages carefully, head bowed, while Everett watched uneasily.

Ah, yes, he said. Here we are. Bwana Norman.

He placed the book on the table in front of Everett. There were several photos, all variations of the same pose. It was Norman in the photo, hat and all. He was posing with a rifle in his hand over a large cape buffalo on a dry savannah somewhere far away. It could have been any year, by the look of it. He was smiling. In one of the photos there were two other men behind him in ragged shorts and t-shirts, unarmed, but also smiling. A tracker and a gunbearer, by the look of them.

I love that picture, don't you? Rudi said.

Where is this?

It is Africa, of course. That is Mozambique, in the Zambezi Delta. We all shot some fine buffalo but it was Norman who shot the best bull of the lot. I was very proud of him. He shot that bull on the run at two hundred yards. I would say that it impressed us all. Ernst was there, weren't you. There were a couple of my colleagues with us too.

You're not going to tell me how he got here, are you, Everett said.

No, I'm afraid I cannot share those particular details with you. I hope you can forgive this necessity. It was not easy to get Norman and this rather large artifact of his out of your country. But it has been my experience in business that nothing is impossible, given the right motivation. After the journey he had already made, you could say it was easy. More complicated, certainly, but easier.

To be entirely honest, I was not thrilled about this—

Rudi squinted at the display in the corner.

This thing. I thought it rather large and ungainly, and we hardly have the room for it, in here. Though I must admit it has grown on me. Ernst was more excited than I was. I believe he sees more value in taxidermy than I do. For myself, I was motivated foremost by a desire to assist my old friend. As you might imagine, he was in quite a predicament when he called me, and I always felt a special connection to Norman.

You may be surprised to learn this but the Voegelis were guides too, not so very long ago. My own great-great-grandfather was a guide to some of the first tourists that came to this country. They came for the Chamois, which is the standard against which your Bighorn and your Dall's sheep were once judged. And found quite favourable, I believe, given the popularity they have received. But you see that none of this is very new. First they came for the animals on the mountains, later they came to see the mountains, and later still they came to climb on top of them. Our people were there to guide them all. The name Voegelli very rarely appears in the books of those English gentlemen. They all wrote about their adventures of course, in their sportsman's journals and their alpine journals and their memoirs and letters. But we were there, invisible and yet always ahead of them.

Many fell or died in any of the number of terrible ways a man might die in the mountains, and there is scarcely a gravestone to remember them. You must know where to look to find them. Perhaps we can go for a walk above the Lutschine and I can show you where some of them were buried, if you would care to see it. They were paid a pittance for their work. But to a poor herder it must have seemed like a great deal of money or they would not have done it, would they? They had families, many of them. Yet for all the difficulties, my great-great-grandfather recognized the great opportunity that had been given to him. He built a small chalet at the foot of the Wetterhorn and offered a bed and a meal. That is how we began, humbly, in that year of 1862. The Alps were just being discovered, as they say. Within a few years the new railways brought more and more visitors and the chalet grew into one of the first resorts in this country. We still own that resort, here in Grindelwald.

This is what I had hoped for, with Norman. I hoped that Norman would recognize the opportunity that was before him. I thought that the money I left with him might grow into a business of his own. That was many years ago. Nearly forty years ago now. I was still naïve enough to think that I might change the world with something as simple as charity. In fact I saw the man I wanted to see and not the man that was there. As we are all wont to do when we are young. As we do when we are old too, I suppose. Norman disappointed me.

Rudi took the photo album and closed it again and put it back inside the coffee table. He sat again, and then he spoke.

There is a darkness over Norman's life that I believe neither you nor I may fully understand. There is a violence that he has inherited that worked its way from the inside out. He hung himself.

Everett blinked.

That is what you wanted to know, isn't it? Soon after that photograph was taken, he used an extension cord and did the job himself. I don't know if I should spare you the details.

What did you do with him?

He is here, Rudi said.

Where?

Rudy nodded to Ernst. The younger Voegelli stood and walked across the room and took a silver jar off the mantelpiece and a letter that was tucked behind it. The jar was roughly the size and shape of a large bird. He set the letter and the silver urn on the coffee table in front of Everett. Both men reclined and watched him with faces that were utterly unreadable.

Everett felt a horror rising in him again. It occurred to him then that there was nothing that he could hold on to with any measure of confidence in anything he had heard. Their stories, their business and the source of their wealth, all of it was stitched together in such a way that what lay beneath it all was impossible to know and the possibilities were as terrible as they were unknowable. These men in front of him held all the answers and yet they held them out of reach, and he felt any illusion of his own power that he might yet have held onto slipping away from him and never again would it return.

I am sorry for your loss, Rudi said.

You bastards, he said. You sons of bitches.

I appreciate that you are upset. However you must understand that we did all we could to help him. But Norman was beyond our help. This was not our doing. Indeed, all of this has been quite a taxing affair for us, as you might well imagine. Since Norman was not a citizen of this country, or of any country, we have had to be very careful about whom we tell. You are one of the very few.

Why did you bring me here? Am I just another little amusement for you?

I am not sure what you mean, Rudi said.

You know goddam well what I mean. You kept him here like some kind of circus animal, didn't you.

You assume such cruel things. Why?

Tell me you didn't kill him.

We did not. Nor did we treat him as anything but a friend and a guest. We brought you here, Mr. Barlow, because we would like your help. These remains do not belong here. They trouble me deeply. I would like for you to return them to some place where they are better suited.

Rudi gestured to the envelope that was on the coffee table.

There is fifty-six thousand dollars enclosed in that envelope. The money is in two certified cheques. Six thousand is payment for your services. Consider it a tip, on top of what we have already paid you. The remainder is what remains owing on the services that Norman provided to me, with respect to our Ivory Angel. What you do with that money is up to you. You could keep it of course. You could donate it to whatever charity seems appropriate. They accept anonymous donations, I believe. No organization has such high ideals as demand to know where its money comes from. But

I would prefer that you find the family. Not that I have any say of course, but I think that would be most appropriate.

What makes you think I won't just spend it all myself?

An intuition. I believe you have what they call a moral compass. I've always liked that English phrase. It sounds so adventurous, like you are an explorer searching for the Northwest Passage, or the Nile headwaters, or a New World.

Why don't you give it to his family yourself?

I do not know his family.

You could find them.

I don't think that would be appropriate, given the circumstances. They would not understand.

So you give it to me.

Yes.

I could just tell the police myself.

Rudi laughed lightly.

Yes, I suppose you could do that. But I should caution you, it will be more trouble for you than it will be for me if you report this. I'm saying it simply as a matter of fact. You are the one with fifty-six thousand dollars and a cremated body.

Everett looked at him sideways. You're afraid, aren't you. Afraid to talk to them.

Prosperity is a burden, Mr. Barlow. This is something you may learn, if you take the opportunities that present themselves. The more you have, the more the world becomes your enemy. In time, you come to realize that the world has more to take away

from you than it has to give you. The only solution, in the end, is to choose wisely which things you hold onto.

I could refuse.

Yes, Rudi said. You could. But you won't.

Thirteen

At the check-in counter in Frankfurt a woman in a navy blazer asked him, would you like to declare your baggage?

Everett blinked.

In the unlikely event that your baggage should go missing and we are not able to return it to you within five days, a baggage declaration may help us locate it. The declaration may also be useful in a claim, should the search prove unsuccessful.

She was repeating the words by rote, as if too bored to use her own.

Sorry, Everett said. I haven't flown business class that much.

The service is available to all our customers, the attendant said.

He blinked a second time. His head was starting to hurt.

He spent two days sleeping off the jetlag and in that time he did nothing but watch the television screen. He ate what he could find of the canned goods in the pantry. His father was on shift most of that time. The first evening he came home from his shift, he cracked open a beer and sat down beside Everett on the new leather couch.

How was Switzerland? He asked.

Expensive, Everett said.

Finally he called. He called first for a Mary Alexander in the Marrow directory and she put him in touch with another cousin. The latter was a Joseph, not an Alexander, and she made this point clear. Everett called himself a friend of Norman's.

Norman had a lot of friends, she said. Some of them he'd of been better off not having.

He said that he had something of Norman's that he would like to pass on to a wife, or a son.

If you was really a friend of Norman's you'd know Myrtle's been dead ten years now and he never had any son, she said.

Well, I guess I was more of an acquaintance.

She snorted.

You can get in touch with Claire, I guess. That's his granddaughter. She'll know what to do with you.

Everett asked for the number.

That's an Edmonton number, he said.

Yeah. She's been living outside awhile now. That all you need?

Yes, Everett said. That's all I need.

The apartment was on the North end of the city near Belvedere. The elevator was out of service with the doorway cordoned with duct tape and a warning that was scrawled in

marker. He took the stairs. Hers was on the fourth floor, at the end of the hall. He knocked.

He had hoped to see the resemblance of her grandfather in her but she was much too tall. She smiled a friendly smile and shook his hand. It was a firm handshake. There was a curry on the stove and since it was nearly ready she sat him down at a formica table by the window that was just large enough for two, and she offered him a Pepsi. He said water was fine.

They ate. Outside a long train pulled into the railyard, very slowly, and its passing made tiny tremors in the water of his glass. She was finishing a degree in social work, she said.

And after that?

She shrugged. Back home, I guess.

She pushed her plate aside, unfinished. The sharpness in her dark eyes was something he did recognize. You came to tell me about my grandfather, she said. Well? Where is he?

He went to Switzerland.

We all knew that. Those of us that knew him well enough. Even some of people that knew just the rumours knew that part. Old Norm's hiding out in Switzerland, you know. It was kind of a joke. I never was sure if it was true. He said he was going to stay with friends. That's all he would say.

So nobody tried to contact them?

Nobody had any names or numbers. I think he kept that part a secret, for our own good. Some of us, uncle Walter especially, we tried to track them down after he hadn't come back for a year but it was too late. Who were we going to ask, the police? We had nowhere to go.

I'm not sure how to tell you this, Everett said.

Go ahead, said Claire. I'm used to bad news.

When he had finished telling her it was dark outside the window and the train had finally stopped moving. He did not want to look at her, directly. She was not crying, though. He knew that.

They both stared for at the bag of organic Colombian dark roast that was on the table between them. A little sticker in the corner declared that it was fair trade. The Voegellis' house blend, from their hotels. It was necessary, Ernst had explained, to package it that way. It made it easier to avoid difficult questions at customs.

Is this some kid of joke? Claire said.

I wanted to repackage it, Everett said. I just didn't have the balls to do it. To open it, I mean.

This is sick.

There's money, too.

There's always money.

He took the envelope from his backpack and laid it on the table beside the bag of ashes.

How much is it? She asked.

Fifty thousand.

For what?

He said it was the payment they owed Norman.

And what does the man propose we do with his blood money?

I don't know. It's up to you.

Up to me? You're not afraid I'll just drink it away?

Everett tried not to flinch at the question.

No, he said. I'm afraid that I will.

She nodded and held the envelope in both hands.

I don't believe it, she said finally.

You don't believe me?

No. I believe you told me all you could. But I don't believe them. I can't.

I'm sorry, Everett said. But that's all I have to go on.

That's always the way it is, isn't it. It's always their version you have to go on. They decide what's true and what's not. That's how they can do the things they do, again and again.

I have something else, Everett said. He reached again inside the old knapsack with its precious contents and drew out an envelope with three long hairs in it. He put the three hairs on top of the envelope and slid it across the table toward Claire. The hairs were finger-length and coarse and yet almost invisible against the paper surface.

It occurred to him then that she was only a year or two older than he was. She had seemed much older, before. Her face was lit with a wonder that was a glimpse of the child she once had been, and it was a beautiful thing to see. She took one of the hairs in her forefingers and held it to the bare fluorescent light.

He never showed it to you? Everett asked.

No. He kept it hidden from us. I don't know why. I think maybe it was to protect us. We were safer if we knew it as just another one of Grandpa's stories. But me, I always believed it was real.

She looked a little longer at the hair. Then it was his turn to be examined.

How did you get this?

He told her. By the time he had finished telling her the whole story the plastic clock on the wall read close to midnight, and she said she had to work the next day. She did early mornings at the grocery store, before classes. They both held empty tea mugs in front of them with both hands cupped around the still-warm ceramic, mirror images of one another, and the darkened window to the outside world was another mirror upon this mirror, and he had a feeling that a weight he had been carrying was finally dropped, a feeling he had not had for a very long time.

Can I ask you something? He said. I've never been able to figure out how he knew that moose was out there, in that specific valley. How did he do it?

She smiled again. You don't know that part of the story, do you.

I always assumed he had a pilot or something that had spotted it for him.

You know he was there before, don't you?

Yes. In 1937.

But you don't know about the crow.

Is this the same crow that stole the sun?

Yes, it is, Claire said. But that's just the beginning of the story.

It was Rudi who told me that one.

Well, then you should hear it properly, sometime. Ihtsi, that's what we call him, that's dan dha'ke for grandfather. He was a wonderful storyteller.

So I've heard.

You never heard him tell stories?

No. He was different when I knew him.

Us kids made some recordings, Claire said. Just before he left us the last time. It was my sister's idea. She had a good recorder for that, a digital one. Joan's into that kind of thing, that oral history. She went to school for it. This one, though, this was just for us. I think it would be alright to share it with you, though.

You have it here?

I've got some of them on my laptop. I listen to them sometimes when I'm missing home.

I would like to hear them, Everett said. I would like that very much.

It will have to wait till some other time. I'm up in four hours.

I'm sorry, Everett said.

Stop apologizing. I'm glad you came.

Everett stood to leave.

Take that with you, she said. She meant the coffee bag that was on the table between them. I don't want to look at it.

I can make something nicer for it, Everett said. Some kind of display, if you want. Or just a box. I have the tools.

She shook her head. I'm still not sure what to make of it, she said. I need some time to think about it.

You don't believe it's him, do you.

No. I can't believe that.

I wish I could have your faith, Everett said.

You mean my lack of faith.

He put coffee bag back inside his rucksack and slung its familiar weight over his shoulders. The little pack was in poor shape by now, sunfaded and stained with spruce gum and much abused. But he had grown attached to it after all the distance it had covered with him.

She walked him to the door.

You'll be be back soon.

I will be, he said.

In the hall outside the room another man was leaving another apartment three doors down. He was wearing a Carhartt sweater. He winked knowingly at Everett. Everett tried to pretend he had not seen this.

Because the elevator was broken and because there was only one flight of stairs he had to take the same exit as the man, and the man went so deliberately slow that he would have had to stop not to catch up. The man grinned at him.

How was Pocahontas? He said.

You shut the fuck up, Everett said.

A little testy tonight, are we? Not quite what you'd expected her to be.

Everett threw the first punch. He bloodied the man's face with his fist, but the man was larger than he was and came back hard and in the end Everett blacked out for a few seconds and then it was over. A woman who heard the commotion in the stairwell next to her second-floor apartment called the police and they were there in minutes. They were always close at hand, at this hour, in this neighbourhood.

They took his backpack and handcuffed him and put him in the back of the squad car.

Be careful with that, he shouted, when the officer tossed the tattered rucksack into the trunk. He was still pumped full of fiery hormones and in a great deal of pain from his bloodied knuckles and his aching head. He shouted more loudly and aggressively than he had intended. Don't you lose it.

Keep your fucking mouth shut, the officer said. For your own sake this time.

He spent the night in a cell and in the morning his mother came to pick him up. The man he had beaten dropped the charges. He still didn't know the man's name or where he came from. He collected his belongings from the front desk and then his mother drove him to pick up his own truck, which by then had a parking ticket tucked under the windshield wipers. He followed her across the traintracks and then across the river to the south side where she owned a condominium now. It was not much larger than the apartment they had once lived in together, but it was more comfortable. The walls were covered with paintings, some of them hers, some of them friends of hers. She preferred watercolours, with a boldly colourful palette.

She changed into her housecoat, the one she usually wore only on Sundays, and scrambled some eggs and made bacon even though it was already well past noon, and served them on the same blue plates he remembered. He bowed his head while she said grace. Then they ate together.

They did not talk about what had happened the night before. It was easy to forget, like the memory of a dream. They talked instead about the spring, and about the chickadees that were coming to the feeder she had placed outside the window. There was an expression on her face that he had no name for. But he would have done anything to preserve it, if only he had the tools to render it properly.

You've grown, she said. Not taller, I mean, but older.

I hope that's not a bad thing.

No, she said. It's not bad. It's good to have you home again.

A lot of people, white people mostly, they say that crow is evil. They say that mostly because she eats dead things. Which I find kind of funny, seeing as how there isn't any other kind of thing to eat.

I think the thing that bugs them most about crow is that she don't give a damn for the things they call sacred. She'd of pecked the eyes right out of Jesus if they'd of let her. Hanging up there on the cross, he must of looked pretty appetizing. And then every Sunday they made us eat this awful stale bread and this wine that you wouldn't give a horse to drink and they told us that this was his gift to us. Crow, she just don't wait for gifts. Gifts, even big gifts, are just a way of telling what you can have and what you can't have. Crow knows what she wants and she goes for it.

This one, this one is for me.

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