

from "In the Lay of the Land," a novel-in-progress

Matt Pavelich

Burdened by his equipment and the heat of the day, Calvin Teague walked out of Red Plain at four-forty-five of an August afternoon carrying an old Boy Scout backpack to which he'd strapped a loosely rolled flannel sleeping bag. Weeds rattled in dead still air—grasshoppers—and the tar of Highway 200 was soft underfoot. Too shy and too well brought up to hitchhike, he marched through an indifferently farmed mountain valley with his back turned to oncoming traffic to discourage the offer of a ride. Sweat rolled down his neck. A road map of Montana showed at his hip pocket. Teague had no hat for his freckled head and hadn't thought to bring any water.

For some miles he continued to smell cut alfalfa, but as he walked he never actually saw this harvest. Pastel homes had been trucked in and flung around the landscape to subsist on ten-acre plots in gardens of dead machinery; they were, some of them, also beauty salons or second-hand stores or shops for small engine repair. Concrete figurines of Mother Goose and Snow White were offered for sale on someone's tiny lawn where a hand-lettered sign said,

U paint or We paint

Always You're Choice

He passed a herd of squat black cows, several grain fields plowed under. From the shade of a fading barn a barnyard dog fired out to bark and bare teeth at him. Teague retreated through the far borrow ditch. Drenched in a new, clammy sweat, and extremely alert, he went on, and when he came to an astonished cat lying flattened on the road he raised his eyes for relief, for the larger vista.

Even the mountains had been molested. Square tracts had been cut into the mantling forests; in the clearcuts gray undergrowth was revealed, and gray shale and gray dirt; the clearcuts looked, in fact, like vast incrustations of mange. The people who lived on this land were corrupting a great beauty, and Teague, raised on judgment and forgiveness, could not help but dislike them for it. Time and again cars bearing local license plates politely slowed for him; time and again, also politely, he waved them on.

His legs, unaccustomed to much light at all, soon tinted pink, and he ducked into a culvert to change back into his long pants. In the pipe Teague smelled wet loam, and he supposed this was it, he thought this must be a piece of the adventure he'd vaguely intended. On the strength of this notion he went on, his own man now, and he achieved a certain hardihood, a pleasing, groundeating lope that brought him quite late in the afternoon to the mouth of a long canyon at the valley's western end. Here the highway and a railroad track converged to run close along the north bank of a river. On either side of him slabs of rock reared thousands of feet out of the scree, massively the broken crust of the earth. In the canyon he smelled creosote, a field of mint, alfalfa still, and even the rocks seemed to breathe some cautionary odor. He walked under, and then into the sun for hours, storing the day for use against all those impending beige days, all the plodding days and years that lay just ahead of him. He must be certain to remember exactly how far he'd walked, how tired he'd been, remember how once, one endless day of his twenty-fourth year, he'd exceeded himself out in a wild place where nature held him in benign contempt. So Teague was proud of himself, proud even of his raging thirst until he realized that the answer to it had been with him all day, that he'd been walking

beside the river, more or less, for about as long as he'd been walking. Adventurer? Not really.

He crossed the railroad tracks and climbed a high mesh fence; he caught on its top strand and fell to the other side to lay for a long moment on his back, on the railroad's vicious red roadbed rock. He crossed a field that caked his socks with burs. The river at this point was a solemn green thing sliding by like muscle under flesh, and there were no easy approaches to it. Hips working like a skier's, Teague slid down a steep gravel bank, his shoes filling intolerably with sand and small pebbles. He stood one-legged on the little bit of beach and had removed a shoe and was brushing at his foot when he lost his balance; the naked foot escaped his grasp to rest very briefly on a round, slick stone in the river. Then he was sitting in the river, chest into the current and cooling rapidly.

The water didn't bear him away at first, but he found he couldn't stand. Each time he scrambled and fell back he landed a little farther into the current with his mouth a little nearer to going under. Then he was flailing, his butt bumping backward on the rocks, so Teague, not quite gone to panic yet, slipped off his backpack. Away it went, the weight of that wet sleeping bag, away the backpack and the sleeping bag, and his shoe, and, as would soon come to light, everything, sinking out of sight, sliding downstream. Teague rose only to fall back again. He fell hard and deep and then, breathing river, finally managed to collect his feet under him and stand. He could only just stand at first, the current was to his thighs and powerful here, but then, with much the same caution with which he'd taken his very first steps, he took the few steps to the treacherous little beach where he climbed the crumbling bank.

He lay down in knapweed, a new misery. Thirsty. Worse, much

worse than before. The turban he'd made of his tee shirt was still wrapped round his head. So thirsty, but with every searing breath he was freshly resolved not to try the river again. Limping a bit for want of the shoe, he made his way back to the road. He thought he was between fifteen and twenty miles from Red Plain and about that far from the next town on Highway 200, a town whose name he had already forgotten. He'd retained his roadmap, but it was useless, fuzzy and illegible when he peeled its leaves apart. He could locate himself to the extent of knowing he was at some far edge of Montana. His eyes, he thought, might be just a little out of focus. He stood at the side of the road in his wet shoe, and his crotch was wet and chafed him, somehow, even standing stock still. Usually no one's fool, Teague hoped and expected that this would serve as the worst moment of his life. Nose blistering, lips pale, he was filled with all the old doubts and many new ones. He'd confirmed himself now as a little hometown fellow fit only to run a small circuit through thoroughly expected events, to live a prudent life. Why had he ever made himself available to all these accidents? Teague recalled his mother mentioning that as a toddler he'd suffered night terrors, and he remembered them, the feel of them at least, because they were all he'd known that might compare with being so much alone. He prayed, but not for deliverance, as he wasn't sure he deserved it. More sunset. It seemed stalled. For as much as he feared the coming dark, he liked the long and lengthening shadows even less.

From the direction of Red Plain an engine labored toward him, the first familiar sound since he'd been standing by the road. A truck came out from the pines to the east of him and onto the open flat, a ponderous load of cordwood cinched to its bed. A chainsaw and a gas can and a mongrel rode on top of the load. Teague raised

his arms like a referee signaling a touchdown. He felt foolish about the gesture, the extent of his problem. The truck came on—behind the wheel, under a black baseball cap, a pretty mouth round an “o” of decent concern. Someone female. The truck slowed, accelerated again, passing him, then stopped a hundred yards down the road. Weaving half on and half off the pavement it backed toward him, and very fast for reverse, and the big load rocking laterally, and if Teague had been healthier then, or more capably concerned for his survival, he’d have been running well before it finally, abruptly stopped, its bumper not ten feet from his knee. A bumper bent by previous misuse, a mottled dog grinning down at him. The driver leaned out. “Hey,” she said. It was a statement, a question, whatever he wanted it to be. She seemed friendly.

She stepped out and came back to him. Teague’s throat was parchment and he could not trust himself to speak. A woman, a girl, a person of about his own age, whatever that made her, she closed the small distance between them. Wide suspenders framed her breasts and she wore heavy boots that made her throw her legs in a rolling gait. Some kind of logger’s get-up. Over her right shoulder lay a thickly plaited chestnut braid. There was a pack of Marlboros in her tee-shirt pocket, and she walked like a tough at the county fair. Two-cycle gas, sawdust, beer—he smelled her drawing near. “Hey,” she said again. Gently, so gently. Her hands were larger and rougher than his own, but for all that she conformed to some very latent and very odd idea of femininity he’d been carrying around with him, and he never knowing or so much as suspecting his own secret tastes. Accustomed to the company of plainer, softer women, Teague could think of nothing to say to the handsome one now regarding him like a found lamb.

“You okay, honey?”

Teague’s instincts, such as they were, were never of much use to him, but he was ready to trust the belief he’d instantly formed, more than that, he meant to rely on it, that the girl was the soul of kindness.

“I saw you when I was going into town,” she said. “What happened to all that stuff you had? That pack and . . . where’s your other shoe?”

He’d wet his tongue enough to ask for, “Water?”

“Don’t have any. Except in the radiator, which has probably got some antifreeze in it. Got beer, though.”

“I’m a pharmacist,” Teague declared. “Or I will be. And alcohol, if you’re already dehydrated, alcohol . . .”

“It’s Miller High Life,” she said, “champagne of bottled beer. You better have some.”

His education fell away from him, useless. Teague reached for his wallet. He’d left it in his cutoffs, and his cutoffs were in the pack, and the pack—“I couldn’t pay you anything, I lost all my money in the river. I’m really getting to be in a bad spot.”

“Pay me? What kinda person you think I am?”

He’d never seen anything like her, eyes as beautiful as Easter eggs, and sweetly and cautiously glancing off Calvin Teague as if he were someone of interest. In the cab of her truck she pulled two sweating bottles from her cooler, twisted their caps off. She toasted him, and the report of that faint collision traveled well up Teague’s arm. This girl was the biggest surprise he was ever likely to encounter.

“Where you coming from?”

“Courville, Iowa.” How fondly he said it. How fondly he meant it. Home. “And Iowa City, too. School, you know.”

“So, whadda they say? In Iowa?”

“Say? About . . . ?”

“Cheers? Or, Here’s to Mabel? Or, what?”

“Oh. To good health?”

“Sure. You could use some.”

It tasted, he thought, like superior bread, and felt like quicksilver at the back of his throat. Teague tried to savor it, but his thirst wouldn’t let him. He drained the bottle in three long pulls, burped in rapture. “Oh, excuse me. But that is quite the . . . Are you Mabel, then?”

“Am I . . . oh, no. That was just an example. Of something they might say.”

“Well, you’ll think this is kind of funny, but I took a vow. When I was thirteen. I was at church camp, and I told Pastor Stenvold I’d never touch a drop. Of alcohol. And I haven’t, either. Until now. You wouldn’t believe the grief I sometimes took at school. Even the real Christian guys in the house, everybody, they all loved this stuff. Now I see why. But, anyway, I wasn’t too good at baseball or camp crafts, so I just took that vow. I was sort of caught up in the Spirit.”

“What that preacher don’t know, can’t hurt him.”

“No,” said Teague, “They say at home, what my folks always say, anyway, is ‘Ignorance is not bliss.’ So I think I’ll have to tell him, if I can still find him. I think if you make a vow, and then break it, you have to tell the person.”

There was wonder in the girl’s eyes. “You are a square shooter,” she said. “I like that. Or I think I do.”

Teague’s hands felt as if they were floating above his lap.

“I’ve never met a pharmacist,” she said. “Except for the ones in

the drugstores, when they hand you your pills.”

“If I’ve passed my boards.” Teague, gaudy in his honesty now. “And then when I’m certified, then I’ll be, you know . . .”

“Certified. Wow. I’ve never met anybody from Iowa, either. Where’d you say you were goin’?”

“I wanted to see the ocean.”

“The ocean? The Pacific?”

The girl opened each of them another beer and drove off with him, her wrist hooked over the steering wheel. Some of her braid had worked free and issued like vapor from behind her ear. Everything he noticed about her was new to him, and extravagant, and sweet. It occurred to Teague that if she was tender at all it must be because she thought him an idiot—Calvin Teague, the third generation of Teague Drugs in Courville and Handy, Iowa—he expected eventually to live in a brick residence on Mill Pond Lane and to serve on the school board and the boards of the better local charities, and he thought he’d probably marry the deeply loyal Janice Hartnett who stood to inherit Hartnett Seed; Calvin Teague, whose shapely and placid life had rarely needed explaining. He was unfailingly pleasant and utterly obvious and, really, there was not much to be explained. But he urgently wished he might convince this girl what a capable fellow he was, despite present evidence to the contrary, in spite of how she’d found him.

“You know,” he said, “I had it all planned out. Everything. I checked all the fluid levels and belts and the spare tire and everything before I left home. It was going along fine, too. Until this morning. I stopped to take a picture of an eagle I think it was, a real big bird—oh man, the camera’s gone, too—but anyway, when I got back in to go, the K car wouldn’t start. So there I was, middle

of nowhere, about a mile the other side of that Pair O' Dice bar. Must've had three cups of coffee before the tow truck finally came out from Red Plain. There was some old guy, didn't even work there, an old farmer who kept filling my cup; such a nice guy you couldn't say no to him. While I waited."

"K car? That's one of those old . . . what is it? They're those real ugly Plymouths, huh?"

"It was a Plymouth," Teague conceded. "But mine's been . . . it's held up really well so far. I've made zero major repairs to it. Until now. Then in Red Plain I find out it's the wiring harness, a fuse failed and the whole thing burnt out, the wiring harness did. They said it might be as long as a week before they can get another one. Because of the age of the car, which is not so old, or so I thought, but it seems there's so few of these left on the road they're like antiques already—you should've seen the rubber on those wires."

"I bet you went to Larry's Conoco, didn't you?"

"They were the ones that sent out the truck. The only ones in that little phonebook who had a tow truck."

"And I bet you talked to Larry." She was finally dumbfounded at his haplessness.

Teague had been captive in Red Plain to a man with a prominent adam's apple, a grave manner, and his name stitched on his shirt. Larry. It had never occurred to him to disbelieve the mechanic. Now if, along with everything else, he'd been swindled, he didn't want to know about it. It seemed he was an oaf in nature, lost in the lay of the land, and also, possibly, a poor judge of character. "I only had a week and a half to make this whole trip. So I thought I'd just set out kind of hiking."

"To see," she said, "what you could see?"

"Exactly."

"But you're still quite a ways from the coast. Especially without your shoe."

"Well, I wasn't . . . I didn't intend to . . . As I said, I'm in kind of a spot."

She hummed a tune having to do, he thought, with a faithful dog, something numbing from kindergarten or Bible school, barely audible over her ratcheting engine. She turned off the highway and onto a dirt road threading first through birch and cottonwood and then into an endless stand of ragged pine that crowded the road so closely as to form a corridor. A girl in huge boots. He never would have imagined. He was enveloped by her.

"Sorry," she said. It did not seem to him that she was yelling, though she was. "Scraped the muffler off last week. I got kinda high centered. It's pretty loud if you're not used to it."

Less anxious about love than anyone he knew, Teague had always expected that it would come to him, eventually, in some stately way befitting his patience. A comfortable, durable love. He leaned out his window to clear his head; the air was turpentine. His sober self floated near, there in the gummy ether with Janice and his mother; and they were all disappointed in him. He was another man entirely than the boy he'd been this morning, but he knew that if he said so the girl would think he was getting carried away. As he happened to be.

"Are you married?" she wondered as if from far away. "Got a girlfriend or anything?"

He felt much as he had felt while sitting in the river; the girl had asked a simple question, she'd want a simple answer. "No," he said.

“Any kids?”

“Kids. . . .” She was in earnest. “What?” Teague could not remotely see himself as a family man, but this girl seemed to think it feasible. Girls. Women. They were to him the farthest, strangest end of biochemistry. This girl, at least, did not seem deliberately to confuse. He liked her very much. She made a second turning and they began to mount a road that had in some recent season been a streambed, the surface was still channeled and the truck wallowed over it like a boat. “Forest Service always wants to close this road,” she said. “But so far they can’t. Cause it’s our access.”

“You sure have a lot of privacy.” He failed to ask how much. Could she be alone here?

“Yeah,” she said, “I’ve always lived somewhere off in the woods. Always will, probably.”

“That’s good.”

“Oh? Why’s that? Good?”

“It’s sort of everybody’s dream,” though it was not particularly his own. “Off on your own, like Walden Pond.”

“Never heard of him.”

“Make your own rules, be responsible just for yourself. That’d be pretty ideal for a lot of people.”

“Oh,” she said, “that. I think it’s been way overrated.”

They came to a small clearing where an antique bulldozer stood mired at the end of its ugly work, the end of the road, the utter end of civilization. The girl’s dog flung itself from the top of the load, and Teague flinched as it flew past his window. The dog buckled on landing, bounced up, and pranced to meet three penned goats, and these, in their own odd, stiff friendliness, pressed themselves to the edge of their enclosure in greeting. “Ethel, Gene, and Victoria,”

said the girl. “You just hate to get too attached to the little buggers, cause they don’t survive real good up here, but they get to be pets anyway. And then, the minute you’re a little bit sweet on ‘em, then along comes a cat and chews ‘em up for you. Those cougars got long memories, too, they’ll come fifty miles outta their way once they’ve had a nice snack on Fitchett Creek. Cats, coyotes. Man, we even lost one of these little guys to a hail storm.”

Teague, unequal to so elemental a place or to her great pride in it, followed the girl’s magnificent back and backside as she walked him toward the old travel trailer that had to be her home. There was a considerable garden enclosed by chickenwire strung on tall poles; he recognized staked tomatoes and feeble stalks of corn. There was a great pile of cordwood on a pitch of high ground, better situated than the trailer and about as big. “Fifteen cord,” she said, “give or take. And I’ve already sold quite a bit right off the truck, too.” She said she dealt only in larch, that even partly cured larch would fetch ninety, a hundred dollars a cord. “Bought a winch last year, and it’s been the best investment I ever made. I can go after the downhill stuff now, snake it right up on the road. I’m dumb as a post, really, but I do know where to find the premium firewood. Keeps me in beer and Cheerios all year long.”

Her residence, parked in mud, was thirty-eight feet long, eight feet wide, and sheathed in naked aluminum. Once it had resembled a bullet, but now laying coops were built along its flanks. A sleeping porch also sagged alongside, a slapdash of gray plywood and green plastic netting; the girl led him into it and offered him the use of an aluminum chaise lounge, and when he settled on it she stood above him, her fist on her hip. “You hungry? You like venison?” Teague so adored the color and pace and inflection of her voice that

his pleasure in it often cost him the thread of what she was actually saying. It didn't matter. And if his legs ached for having walked so many miles on asphalt, that was also of no account. He was soaring; least of all was he hungry.

"Don't go to any trouble. You've already been so nice. I should probably try and call my folks, see if they'll wire me some money. I'd call collect, of course."

"You're miles from the nearest phone, honey." As if he were a child wanting comfort and direction. "Why don't I just feed you? Myself, I've been dreamin' since noon about some fried spuds and a little bite of backstrap. Also, I forgot to mention, there's that outhouse if you need it."

The girl went inside the trailer and shortly, through the open door, Teague heard ironware resound dully on a burner. "We run most of our appliances off propane," she called, "the rest off the generator. When you hear that motor kick in every so often, that's the generator keepin' the meat and whatnot froze. People don't know how good they got it, just bein' able to hook up to the power line." She began to hum again. He heard chopping, oil spitting; then there was the odor of frying onions. "This guy's quite lean," she said, as if in courtesy to narrate what he couldn't see from the porch. "I took him outta season, poached him. You don't mind eatin' illegal?"

Teague had never even legitimately shot a deer, though he'd been on several expeditions for that purpose in which he and all his party had happily failed. He recalled himself walking through stands of brush in the narrow ravines that drain upstate grainfields, dutifully, dubiously manful—Calvin, clumsy and loud, his borrowed rifle sleeping like a babe in arms.

"I was out fishin'," she said, "and there was this little spike

buck, and he kept hangin' down by the creek; I drowned a couple three worms, and there he still was; so I walk up to the truck for my .270, and when I get back down to the creek, he's still standin' there, not even browsing, just standin' there kind of waitin' for me. So I shot him. Heart shot. Felt like I 'bout had to."

He tracked the sound of her boots on an insubstantial floor, heard her perform some rasping or grinding chore, heard a wood partition slide open at the far end of the trailer, which was not so far from him. The girl quietly lay down a scolding in terms he couldn't make out. Her voice. No answer. Her voice again, a long pause, no answer. Talking to herself. Terribly, terribly lonely. He hoped so. Taking herself privately to task. But why? A cat, he thought, she must have a naughty cat, or perhaps a captive forest rodent living back there.

Teague's thoughts veered wretchedly then toward Janice. His Janice, more or less, lodged in his imagination wearing a peach pants suit she'd undoubtedly sewn herself, and serving coffee and sandwiches to ladies they'd both known all their lives. She stood behind some endless, paper-covered serving table, offering food and pleasantries and subsisting nicely on her sense of duty, in her fog of old-fogey cologne. Because she was a nice person. A very nice person. Janice, who deserved better than his slim enthusiasm for her. Guilt rose up and sloshed back to the floor of Teague's being, all muffled. He felt very well. Drunk, perhaps. Unafraid, and yet acutely aware that he'd got himself pretty far into the wilderness.

"We," the girl had said. She'd said it several times. Or, "our." "Our road," "Our appliances." There was a car parked in the clearing with the trailer, one more vehicle than she absolutely needed, especially if she lived alone. But why should it matter if they were

alone? Acts of civil kindness, that was all. And though he was in love with her, he was in love so preposterously he wasn't about to reveal it. So they had no need for privacy. Teague craned to see her. He saw more of the trailer—black pots, an enameled kettle, blond cabinets. A half-finished cigarette, a half-finished beer. Neither Teague nor anyone he'd known had ever lived so austere as this, and he ached at seeing her so meagerly provisioned, but then it must be thin living that settled the girl so wonderfully within herself; she was, he believed, of some slightly different species, one better evolved for having never lost sight of its origins. He smelled the onions caramelizing. This girl, it seemed to him, could make a home anywhere. Be a home. She'd claimed the very word and slipped it off its mooring.

She appeared at the door, all but blocking the lamplight from inside. "How bout another beer?"

"I've had enough. For me."

"Yeah, I forgot you're kind of a teetotaler. I know you're still thirsty, though."

Moving quietly now, she'd removed her boots to walk around barefoot, she went back into the trailer and brought him out a tall glass of tea. "Sun tea," she said. "You put the bags in a glass jug and let the sun color it up. Somethin' about it, you just get a real nice do this way, maybe it's more natural. You like?"

He liked the curvature of her jaw, the way her neck swelled from her shoulders. And her eyes, of course, though their particulars, color and so on, were mostly memory in the new, diminished light. Before he said another word he should really ask if they were alone. The girl wouldn't be frightened or offended, no, the girl, bless her heart, would hear any question he might care to ask in exactly the

spirit he intended it. But what, exactly, did he intend, or want to know? Do you live by yourself? Are you alone? Are we alone? His intentions had always been so plain to him, and his motives and his curiosity always entirely manageable; and, for all its color and novelty, he was none too fond of his present confusion. "It's good," he said, raising his glass. "My mom makes it this way, too. I've always preferred it this way."

She fed him a meal swimming in grease and salt, and powerfully savory. The venison, his first, was as dense as liver and tasted like the decaying floor of the forest. They sat knee to knee on lawn furniture, their plates balanced in their laps, and they ate without much comment. Teague was entirely sober again, beginning to see how the beer had never been all that responsible for his glow. The girl sopped primitive gravy with bread. He did the same.

"What was that song you were humming before? In the truck? That was so familiar."

"Oh," she said, "I don't even recall. They kinda spill outta me. I remember every tune I've ever heard, to hum it, but usually not the words. Hardly ever the names of 'em. Strange, huh?"

"No, I don't think so. I'm not too musical myself. Not at all, really. You should be grateful for whatever little gift you've got that way. I mean, they kicked me out of the church choir, if you can believe that. Tin ear."

"That was mean. You're big on that church thing, aren't you?"

"My family is. No," said Teague, "I guess I am, too. Or at least I try to be."

"That's wild."

"Wild?"

"Different. Than me. Around here, seems like it's mainly

assholes that pack them churches every Sunday. Aw, that's not quite it either. But you know what I mean."

"Maybe. But I have to say, the majority of the people in our church are really nice. It was the same in Iowa City. I'm a Congregationalist."

"I probably don't know what I'm talkin' about," she said. "I just don't like bein' looked down on. If I think of it, though, there's plenty of other assholes, too, the kind who don't go to church. My family, for instance. You must think I'm pretty bad, the way I talk."

"You've been very nice to me," he said. "Very Christian, I might say."

"I've got somebody you really oughta have a little chat with. 'Cause, with your education you could sure tell him—some of these people, you know, they give out them pills like they were candy. Real expensive candy. Never saw a pill cure anybody of anything."

"Deeply Christian," Teague emphasized. "I'm humbled." Her mention of someone else had brought him up short. It implied a future. He was not interested in her future, or his future, or anything beyond this moment and its lovely dyspepsia, this perfectly populated world. He did not wish to know who she knew; nor did not want the day or even the hour to end.

"You're what? Humbled, did you say?" The girl was satisfied, entertained. "I never had that effect on anybody before. You're a lotta firsts for me. That what I said about my family—I don't want you to get the wrong impression or anything, or take it the wrong way. I really do love 'em. Most of 'em. But, religion-wise, you know, I'm nothing. Must be nice to be a believer. If you really believe."

Gently she was invading the borders of his cosseted life. All his easy decency was built on second hand assumptions, he saw that

now, and he knew he'd never again be just as he had been; but how, exactly, he'd changed was not yet clear. The girl undid her braid and ran her fingers through it, and it was a wave, unbelievably abundant, nearly a cloak on her shoulders. Teague was forming a new faith.

"Love," she said, "is a very tricky deal."

"I've heard that. But for me it's been just Mom and Dad and the grandparents. My little sister. Pretty straightforward stuff."

"Some guys have a way of keeping things simple. I bet you're one of 'em."

"I was. Simple. But that might be a nice way of saying stupid. Because, I think if I'd been paying attention, I would have known better. I would have known that things are not simple."

"No. I meant nice," she said. "You seem very nice."

"Oh, gee."

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. But it doesn't seem to count for much, either. Especially if you don't know any other way to be."

"I can't believe you don't have a girl."

"I do and I don't. I guess I should have said so before."

"Oh."

Teague wallowed in. "I don't love her, is the thing. We're friends. Or just companions you could even say."

"I'm never sure if guys even need to be in love. I think that's way down the list of what they're looking for."

"I'd need it," he said. "I see that now. And with Janice—that's her name, Janice—we've been off in different schools, and we always see each other when we're home, summer and the holidays, but . . . we don't date anybody else, at least I haven't . . . but . . . and we have a lot in common, you know, we're both going back to good jobs

in Courville—she'll be teaching kindergarten—and she's a very admirable person, and sort of attractive, I think. Really, I'd always thought this whole 'love' idea might be a load of hooley, or certainly not something you'd need to get quite so worked up about. I was wrong."

"You've had quite a day," said the girl. "You should have seen yourself, standin' there by the road—one shoe off and one shoe on, diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John."

"My mom used to sing that one."

"You must be awful tired," she said.

"No. I could go on quite a while longer. I like talking to you. A lot."

"I'm kinda bushed. Usually, by this time of year the woods are closed. Fire danger. But it's been a rainy summer. Means a hard winter's on the way, probably. And, greedy me, I'm gettin' in all the wood I can. Hauled two loads today all by myself. 'Bout wears you out."

He heard for the first time a sorrow or reluctance in her voice, something not to do with what she was presently saying. She leaned down to take up his plate and her face hovered near him a beat longer than necessary, within reach he thought. His heart bumped in him, amplified almost to menace, and as the girl went into the trailer with their dishes Teague thought to offer her his help but found that he was mute again, just as he'd been in the moment they'd met. He imagined watching her from behind, that her hands would move with the economy of feeding birds, that living, shining fall of hair would be swaying in the rhythm of her work. He heard her at the sink, and very shortly she had finished up and he heard her move off to the back of the trailer, back to where she'd been angry before.

She hadn't said good night.

She hadn't put out the lamp in the trailer.

The moon began to float up over the trees and shine in at him through the plastic screening. A breeze, waxing and waning in the pines, whispered, "Foooohl. Foooohoohl." He strained to hear anything else, anything of her, but from where she'd gone there was only that silence, and it persisted so long and was so complete that it seemed to him it must be intentional. He'd have heard the water running if she'd brushed her teeth or washed her face, he'd have heard the bed springs if she lay down—he was that close and that attentive, but instead he heard nothing at all. In high country. Nightfall had already brought a penetrating cold. Teague curled in on himself, held himself. He thought God must be offering him a miserable night so that he might remember himself, his entire sense of himself, and quit wanting what was not his to want. He threw his arm over his eyes and could only too easily imagine how silly, how pathetic and melodramatic he must look.

"You asleep?"

The girl had floated to the door. Her whisper brought him well up off the chaise lounge.

"Sorry," she said. She stood in the doorway, blankets draped over one arm, towels over the other. "Didn't mean to scare you or wake you up or anything."

"I was just laying here, thinking. Kind of thinking over the day."

The girl didn't move. She didn't speak, though she seemed to want to.

"I was thinking about you. Mostly."

She wore a long tee shirt for her nightgown. It bore the

ghostly imprint of a frolicking unicorn and was so threadbare he could see through it, there was a remarkably detailed shadow between her legs.

“I’m just filthy,” she said. “How bout you?”

Teague yawned, or faked a yawn to keep from panting.

“You one of those morning shower people?—Cause I like to take my shower at night. Hate to go to bed dirty. All sticky and, you know.” She lay the blankets over the back of the chaise lounge. “Come on.”

He followed her out of the sleeping porch and over a short wooden walk to a shed; she cast a flashlight on the shed, and a fifty-gallon drum was mounted on its roof, and a garden hose fed into that. “If you fill this thing in the morning, by night the water’s nice and warm. Specially on a day like this one was. Some people’ll go to quite a lotta trouble for a warm shower.”

“That’s very clever,” said Teague in a voice he’d never heard before.

“Oh, yeah. One of his . . .” The girl lay her towels and the shining flashlight on a rock near the door of the shed. “Wasn’t my idea. Come on, I’ll show you how to work it.” She drew the tee shirt up over her head and lay it on the towels. Revealed she was unearthly, suffused with the same interior light as the moon. Teague’s legs threatened to give way beneath him. His eyes strained as the girl entered the gloom of the shed. “All you do,” she said, “is pull on

this deal.” Her hand moved to a sort of lanyard, seized it. A trickling sound. She swept water over her face. “Come on,” she said. “There’s room for two, and only so much water.” Then she demanded it. “Come on.”

Teague stepped into the shed, partly under the fall of the water.

“Well, you’ll have to take your . . . you’ll get your things all wet.”

He would need at least a moment more to overcome a lifetime of modesty. This was a thought far too complex for his present powers of expression. His clothes began to cling to him.

“You goof. Well, if you’re . . . Here, soap me up, okay?” She put a bar of soap in his hands, turned her back to him, reached behind her to find his hands again, drew them up and around and placed them on her breasts. The home of all promise. He soaped them. And breathed, and the roar of it was beyond disguising now. The water seemed to have found a particular course down the inside of his right pant leg, he was slightly aware of its tickling. “Rub-a-dub-dub,” she said, and he regretted it, but then she sighed enormously, and the top of her head drifted back until it touched his chin, and he moved the soap lower, circled her navel with it. She pressed back at him until his arms were full of her. She owned him. Their ragged breathing was everything until, from just behind him, he heard another voice, a third voice, raised in fear or pain.