1972

The Old Road

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Colby College

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The Old Road

by

Dennis C. Gilbert

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Senior Scholars Program

Colby College

1972
APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

Because of the form of a novel it is impossible to abstract. In place of the abstract, I will give a very short plot summary and an outline of the main characters.

The plot consists of the progression which the characters undergo. For the old man, the plot is his movement away from the earthly existence of the farm and into the physical process of the seasons. For the older grandson, it is the movement away from past, symbolized by the farm, and into the present symbolized by his marriage and coupling with society. For the younger grandson, the movement is from childhood to the maturity which alone demands in order for him to survive.

In a sense, the three are one character, representing different ages in the same man. Their struggle and development is representative of the constant struggle to establish some sort of order that is necessary for existence. In another sense, though, the three are completely different individuals, living in three different worlds. For the old man, the world exists in the past, in society as it was once. For the older grandson, the world is that of the present society. For the younger grandson, the world is the wilderness from which he must construct his order. Death of the old man's order and the establishment of the older grandson's order, constitute the birth of the younger grandson into the wilderness. As the old man's order has fallen and the older grandson's will fall, the younger grandson must establish his own.
Chapter One

David and the girl sat on the seat of the pick-up, their bodies twisted to face each other, kissing, her arms wrapped around his neck, his hands under her buttocks in the process of maneuvering her into position. With his knuckles resting against the seat, he lifted her easily, pressing his fingertips into her soft ass, moved her toward him, and then forced her backwards. Holding the kiss as he pushed her slowly down, he turned his eyes to the left as far as he could and stared through the windshield, across Main Street, at the skinny figure of his brother leaning against the bridge rail. Ronnie stood in the middle of the bridge, equidistant from the lights at either end, gazing blankly into the black water below. David trembled, holding back a snicker, and sank below the dashboard. He turned his gaze back to the girl. Her eyes were squeezed shut. She bobbed her head rapidly, grinding her mouth against David's as a sign of her passion. David responded to her signal, pressing her against the seat. He unfastened her slacks and pulled them slowly off, exposing her black pubic hair. He straightened and pulled off his shirt, staring at her naked parts. The kinky hair glistened, the skin surrounding it appeared soft and green under the parking lot's mercury vapor light. Suddenly she reached for his crotch and squeezed his genitals. He gave a start, straightening further
and banging his head against the ceiling of the cab. He pulled his pants down to his ankles, spread her legs, and struggled onto her. They wriggled and squirmed toward each other until he was slightly in her. She moved rapidly up and down, getting more and more excited, rubbing her hair against his belly. But this wasn't enough! David straightened again, grabbed her by the hips, and turned her over onto her stomach. He pulled her toward him, back onto her knees, and mounted her. After guiding himself from the front with a hand, he gripped her and thrust himself forward. She stiffened with the pain and gasped, "My fuckin' Christ!" David held her, his arms around her waist and his fists clenched, and pumped against her ass. Soon they lost their balance and fell forward against the seat.

Ronnie felt his nausea passing. He pushed himself away from the rail. Slowly turning his head to the right, he stared at the red and white truck, hard and shining under the light. David's greenish-white ass bobbed above the dashboard, appearing and disappearing in quick succession. Ronnie turned away and looked in the opposite direction, up the hill, toward home. He wished he was there.

The downward tilt of David's position had stuffed up his sinuses, and he couldn't breathe. He turned his face to the side, gasping and panting. Suddenly he felt the climax rising inside him. His thoughts were gone, withdrawn deeper
into the back of his mind. He gripped the girl harder, squeezed her waist, and gave out a long, nasal moan. All his muscles tightened, and the load shot out of him with what seemed like enough force to go right through her. His penis felt like a cannon.

Ronnie suddenly felt sick again, even weaker than before. He held onto the cold, metal rail and leaned his chest against it. His neck was limp and his head hanging. The vomit rose in his throat, forced upward by the contractions. He choked it out, and it flew downward, slapping on the black water below, between the two pools of light, and disappearing under the bridge. He spat out what remained in his mouth. The taste of it made him sicker. He gagged and, unable to stop himself, vomited again and again.

David sat back against the seat, exhausted, looking down at the naked body. The girl lay motionless. David suddenly felt that he had to go. He pulled his pants up and fastened them. He picked up the girl’s slacks and started to dress her. At this she started to get up.

-Wait- she said weakly, -what about my underpants?-

David searched the floor and seat but could not find them.

-Do you really need them- The girl began looking for them. David switched on the light. He remembered Ronnie and looked toward the bridge. But he saw only the blurry reflection of his own half-naked figure in the windshield.
Here they are—

Okay, then, sweetie. Hop into them and get moving.

I've got to get my little brother home—

Oh, don't hurry me so much. Oh, I'm so sore....

Well so am I. C'mon. I'll see you tomorrow... sometime—

David turned off the light and lit a cigarette. When the girl had dressed, she opened the truck door and crawled painfully out. She looked back at David and smiled weakly.

—Bye—

—So long— David watched her as she walked stiffly along Main Street and disappeared onto Mill Street.

—She'd sit bareass on a rock pile if she thought there was a snake in it— Again he looked for Ronnie. His brother was there, unmoving against the rail. David still couldn't breathe. He rolled down the window and took a deep breath of the cool air. He cleared his nose and throat and spat a thick mass of rubbery phlegm onto the pavement. He looked in Ronnie's direction again, but this time his eyes followed the straight line of the lamp post to the glaring, clear-glass bulb at the top. Replacing these old-fashioned street lights with new mercury vapor area lights was on their list of assignments. Maybe they'd do it tomorrow. He hated those old lights. They were practically useless as far as covering any decent-sized area was concerned. And the light was too hard. They were something out of the past.
David looked down at Ronnie. Now he lay in a heap on the sidewalk. Ronnie's physical weakness disgusted David. But he didn't think it was Ronnie's fault. He blamed it more on the farm. And George. He felt sorry for Ronnie now. And suddenly the idea that Ronnie might have hurt himself came to mind. David did not want that. He started the truck and raced across the street and onto the bridge, screeching to a stop beside his brother. Soon David was kneeling over Ronnie, gently shaking his shoulder with a big and powerful hand.

-You all right, Ron?- David could hardly keep from laughing, even though Ronnie looked very sick. Ronnie opened his eyes halfway and looked up.

-Hunh?-

-C'mon, now. Stand up and let's get going home.-

David lifted him carefully, supporting most of his weight as he struggled to his feet. But when David let go, he began to sink to the pavement again. David caught him, held him by the shoulders, and shook him to consciousness.

-C'mon, Ronnie. What's the matter with you? Can't you stand up?- Ronnie moaned an answer and moved slowly to the truck. David opened the door for him and shut it after he'd climbed in. As David got behind the steering wheel and started the truck, Ronnie slouched down in the seat and, with much effort, rolled down the window beside him. The
cool air blew in against Ronnie's face as the truck carried
them swiftly up the steep hill that was the beginning of the
back Dover Road. The light in the cab grew bright as they
approached the street lights, faded as they moved past.

As they passed the church David looked ahead at the big
white house on the left. There was a light on in the living
room. Maggie was probably working on her gown. He honked
the horn as the truck sped by, but seeing that Maggie's car
was gone, remembered that she was at the hospital tonight.

The house was surrounded by dead flowers. David had
always been impressed with the house, from the first time
he'd driven past it. But he thought the dead flowers were
a blemish that canceled the beauty of the house. He'd never
been able to figure out why Mrs. Abbott left them there after
they were dead. Even George chopped his flowers down after
they had died. Mrs. Abbott was a good gardener. And she
didn't always leave loose ends like that. David wished that
she'd cut them down.

As they passed the final street light, David glanced
over at Ronnie. His face brightened, staring out the window,
then faded. He seemed half-awake. Now was a good time.

"Jesus, my prick hurts!" Ronnie made no effort to
move or speak. David glanced at him again and then back to
the road.

"Feels like it's about to fall off" David spoke louder.
This time Ronnie responded. He turned to look at his brother and then said hoarsely

-My head feels like it's about to fall off.- He turned back to the window. David laughed.

-Didn't you have a good time tonight? You were pretty happy earlier this evening.-

-Well I didn't plan on ending up like this.-

-Well, did you have a good time or did I waste my money on you?-

-Yeah, I guess I had a good time. But will I be able to work tomorrow? That's what I'm worried about. I'm not too horny about the idea of pulling beans tomorrow.-

-If you had a decent job you wouldn't have to. You'd ought to find one where you can make some money. Get into a better sort of life....

-Are you going to start that again?- Ronnie turned further away.

-But don't you want to have money? I could maybe get you a job with the company if you'd only finish school.-

-I don't want to finish school. I don't belong there even ask Granpa.- David was growing angry. He hated trying to help and having his efforts thrown back into his face.

-He's your answer for everything! What are you going to do when he's gone?- Ronnie whirled and stared contemptuously at his antagonist.
"Just what do you mean by that!"

"I'm only telling you that that farm is a dying place. It's falling apart. He loses money every year. It's just not what it used to be when...."

"It might be if you'd stayed home like you should have."

"Oh, don't give me that, George."

"If you hate it so much, how come you're still living there?"

"I'll be out soon enough. After November fifteenth I'll never set foot on that place again. Jesus Christ, Ronnie, do you want to die with that farm? Don't you want to have a life of your own?"

"No!" In frustration David switched on the radio and soon the cab was filled with music.

"Her lips are warm while yours are cold,
So release me, my darlin', let me go."

David looked at the receding road in the side mirror, a dark gray road, the reflection of an even darker sky, separated by black woods. The stars and moon were hidden. Only the town lights glowed faintly in the distance.

"That was "Release Me" with Engelbert Humperdinck. That's right, a little please release me let me go, and you're listening to WDEE here in Dover-Foxcroft with yours truly, Mack Williams. The time now is eleven-thirty and time for the news...."

David broke from the hypnotic voice of the radio and
thought about the farm. At times he felt almost as if he should give them a hand with the place. But then the idea made him sick. He didn't like living there and would have moved away long ago if he had had someone to live with. But he'd needed every cent he could get his hands on to build his new house. Living there was bad enough, but working that dead farm was a repulsive thing to him. He'd promised himself long ago that he wouldn't sweat for it. And he never would. He didn't even like thinking about it.

—and now on the local scene, we've just gotten a report on an accident in Greenville. A car carrying several unidentified youths skidded off the Rockwood Road and...

Suddenly the headlights flickered. David instinctively switched off the radio. He looked at the generator gauge. The needle slanted toward discharge. David was stuck in amazement as the lights flickered again. Then the engine began to cut out. David switched off the lights. Guided by the picture of the road in his mind, he let the truck coast, nearly reaching the crest of a little rise bordered on both sides by large fields. Ronnie sat up and looked around.

—What's the matter? How come we're stopping?—

David paused and then tried starting the truck. But as he turned the key, he got only a click. David took the flashlight from the dashboard, went to the front of the
truck, and opened the hood. Ronnie followed, finally realizing that this brand-new machine had broken down.

-That'll show the fucker,- Ronnie mumbled. Talking constantly, his voice getting louder and louder, he joined David over the engine.

-Well? What's the matter with this thing? Hanh?- David shone the flashlight at the battery and shook the lead wires.

-Now you see what happens... when you're mean... when you think you're always right?- Ronnie became very confident in his drunkenness. -What's wrong with your goddamn truck!-

David ignored the flurry of questions and instead, without turning away from the engine, asked in a soft voice what the man on the radio had said about the accident. Ronnie was silenced. He looked at David quizzically, and his voice dropped.

-What about it?- 

-Did he say that the car had cut off a utility pole?- 

-A what? I don't know. Never mind that! I want to know what's wrong with this thing!- Ronnie placed his hand on David's shoulder and tried to talk intimately. -Well, I'm going to help you out... this time....- David walked away, and Ronnie's hand fell to his side. -I said, I'm going to help you out! See that field? I know these woods. The old road's right in there... on the other side....- David returned with a wrench.
-Don’t shout, Ronnie. I can hear you.- Again Ronnie was silenced. David began tightening the lead wire clamps.

-Well listen to me then.- Ronnie no longer shouted.

-I’m going to drive back here and start yours for you.-

David continued to tighten the clamps. Ronnie gave up trying to get a response. He went across the road and into the field, mumbling to himself as he went. -Don’t worry...I’ll be back in about twenty minutes.-

Finally David looked up, just in time to see Ronnie fade into the darkness.

-Ronnie! What in fuck are you doing?- Still confident, Ronnie continued, no longer visible, mumbling to himself, David strained to catch sight of him but could only hear him, the mumbling and the swish of the tall, dry grass against his legs.

-Come back here, you fool! You’ll get lost!- David searched the field for another minute and then turned back to the engine. -To hell with him. A night in the woods will do him good.- Besides, David thought, he could probably start the truck without his brother’s help anyway.

Satisfied that the connections were sound, David tried starting the truck once more. Still only a click! He leaned forward against the steering wheel, gritting his teeth and snorting in exasperation. The battery was nearly dead. It was obviously the generator. Probably the brushes had gone. There might be enough juice to keep the truck going once he’d
started it. But certainly not enough to run the lights at the same time. David was furious to think that they’d sell him a truck with a defective generator. He’d get it back, though. That was for sure.

Had there been the least bit of moonlight, driving home would have been easy. But as dark as it was, David had a problem. And with Ronnie trying to make his way to the farm on foot, it was imperative that David get the truck started. More unpleasant than the idea of wasting his own energy helping George and Ronnie was the idea of either of them helping him. Getting to the farm was now a race, and losing it was a threat to his independence.

David jumped out and looked at the road ahead. It was maybe twenty feet to the top of the rise. From there momentum would come easily. He reached in and pulled the lever to neutral. The truck began to roll back, so he stopped it momentarily with the brake. Then letting it off, he strained against the heavy truck. In a moment it was moving. David, with his arms rigid against the door jamb and occasionally turning the wheel, took long, slow-motion strides. At the top of the rise his pace increased until he was running. When the time was right, he leaped back into the cab, turned the key to "on", and jammed the lever into first. When he popped the clutch, the engine caught and started. He pulled to a stop and raced the motor, a satisfied smile on his face.
Three Ronnies couldn't have done it. As he switched on the lights, however, the engine again began to fade. Switching them off, he raced the engine. The image of the road ahead flashed repeatedly into his mind, as a flash-bulb or the arc from an overloaded cut-out caused visual echoes in the moments afterward. David snapped the headlights on and off quickly, and following the image in his mind, started for the farm.

The road was for the most part a series of hills. Only twice did the road flatten out. It was nothing but bad luck that had caused David's truck to stall on one of the flat stretches rather than on a hill. And on the second flat section, David's luck seemed equally bad. As he came down Lewis Hill and the stretch came into his echoing vision, he saw a vehicle approaching at top speed. It couldn't have been Ronnie! David was disappointed and even embarrassed to think that the shit could have beaten him. But as the truck roared closer and closer, its headlights locked onto his eyes, David's disappointment faded. His stomach rushed. Ronnie was drunk out of his mind! David flicked on the lights. Instantly the engine began to die out. He'd never get it started on the flat. He turned off and raced the engine, bringing the truck to a stop at the edge of the road. The oncoming truck sped closer. David flashed the lights on and off, managing to keep the motor running and hoping that Ronnie was aware of his presence. Just before the truck
reached him, it started to brake. As it rushed by, David recognized it as one of the line trucks. He breathed a sigh of relief. Looking into the side mirror, his face was illuminated with the red glow of the taillights as he watched Francis back up the huge, orange truck. David rolled down his window.

-Hiya-

-Didn’t recognize you until I got by. How in hell did you know it was me?-

-I didn’t. I thought you were someone else. What makes you think I knew it was you?- 

-Weren’t you signalling for me to stop?- 

-Oh! No, I wasn’t. The brushes in my generator are gone, and I can’t run the engine and lights at the same time.-

-Huhh! When’d that happen?- 

-Just now. Where’re you headed?- 

-Rockwood Road. Some kids cut off a pole.- 

-Oh yeah. I just heard it on the radio.- 

-I just came from your place. Thought you might like some overtime. Light was on, but no one answered the door. Kip and Jake are already up there. I understand it’s quite a mess.-

-Well, if you can get me back to the farm, I’d be glad to help you.-

After turning around, Francis drove to the farm. David followed closely, feeling secure under the red lights of the
company truck. As he rounded the curve in the long driveway, David saw the pale light from the kerosine lamp in the kitchen window. The black figures of the house and barn and surrounding trees were barely visible against the dark sky. David drove up to the house and shut off the truck. George's pick-up was parked near the barn. Ronnie was probably still in the woods. In the house David got his jacket and blew out the lamp. Then he joined Francis in the line truck.

-George will burn this place down yet! You'd think he'd learn. I'll go nuts if I don't get out of there soon.-

Francis started out the driveway.

-Why doesn't he get electricity?-

-Who knows!-

-Where were you out this late, anyway?- 

-Ronnie and I were out drinking. It was his first time. It's about time he started doing things. And wasn't he funny! I'll tell you one thing, though. There'll be electricity on this land before November fifteenth.

Ronne sat on a rock in the little valley at the woods edge of the field, his elbows on his knees and head in his hands, and stared at the barely visible web of thick vomit hanging in the tall grass in front of him. The cool breeze moving over the grass of the field played on his short hair like a mother's weightless hand soothing her ailing child.
The night was getting cold. Ronnie shivered and rolled down the sleeves of his thin shirt. The strength he'd summoned in his attack on David had been kicked out of him by this last spasm of nausea, and he really didn't feel ready to get up. Courage and confidence were gone, and he dreaded walking home.

Ronnie thought he'd heard David drive off. But he wasn't sure. He'd been throwing up then. And even if David were still there, he wouldn't go back to get a ride. He thought of the old road waiting for him just through the bushes. It had at one time connected Sangerville and Dover, before Dover had joined with Foxcroft, and went right through the Hall farm. When the new road had been built, the townspeople had decided to include the cluster of houses and farms of East Sangerville, so they had departed from their parallel at that field and embarked on a long curve that rejoined the old road only after it passed George's farm. The few hundred yards of the old road had become more than a mile in the new road.

George and Ronnie had walked the old road many times, on days when George didn't feel particularly stiff. The abandoned Page house was on the road, and George never tired of going there, sitting on the crumbling steps, and telling stories. The new road might have been safer, but the older one was quicker, and Ronnie felt more familiar with it.
David had talked as if George was getting really old. But Ronnie couldn't believe it.

-Not since I can remember anyway. He's always looked just like he does now. Acted the same. David's just miserable because his truck broke down. And always has to make everyone else miserable too. Though maybe Granpa is stiff more often than he used—Oh, my fuckin' head. He's still strong and can work as well as anyone. Though not as strong as David. What a farmer he could be. He should have been a farmer. What a place we could have with all three of us working it. It'd never work though, cause David can't get along with anyone. God knows how he takes orders working with a whole bunch of people. He should have been a farmer, though. Should've taken over when the old man died. It was his place, not mine. That's a laugh, me taking over before I could even walk, I can't even do it now. Oh, my god! The beans! Pulling tomorrow! My god! I hope I feel more like working then. I gotta get home!-

Ronnie jumped up, but unable to hold his balance, he immediately sat back down. Again he stood, more slowly this time, and somehow managed to urinate in the grass, breaking the web of vomit. Climbing out of the sheltered little hole, he emerged into the cold breeze and entered the woods. In a moment he was standing on the old road. It was even darker here. The upper branches of the trees on either side of the
road extended above it, blocking out the sky, giving the road the appearance of a gigantic tube. Ronnie shivered. It wasn't a pleasant looking task. He strained to see some spot of gray at the end, but it was all nearly black. To orient himself he lit a match and held it high above his head. It flashed and died instantly in the wind, revealing for a split second the weed-covered canal between two borders of trees. Ronnie felt for another match, but the book was empty. He could turn back now, he thought, but this way was so much shorter than the new road. And he must get home soon. He must get some rest before tomorrow. It would be no lighter on the other road. The only advantage was the pavement. And because of David, Ronnie would not turn back.

He thought of his grandfather. -Granpa's probably worried sick, me never being out so late before. And David probably made it sound like I was lost out here, too drunk to handle myself. Granpa knows though. He taught me about the woods himself. Enough so's I'll be all right.-

Ronnie edged forward, stepping with one foot and bringing the other up to it, feeling his way with his boot as he'd done on the ice of the pond that winter he'd been sick. He held his arms extended ahead of him, brushing the soft tops of the weeds with his hard-skinned hands. The going was easy, and gradually his confidence returned. He increased his pace until he was walking. Suddenly his hand hit against
a dead branch, but too late for him to stop. He stumbled forward and fell through a mesh of sharp, dead branches to the soft ground. Almost as suddenly there was nothing but pain, the burning and smarting of deep scratches near his mouth and on the right side of his head. He wiped his face, feeling for blood, pressing onto the cuts to ease the pain, gritting his teeth until the throbbing passed.

Trying to figure out what had happened, Ronnie sat up and looked around him. Finally he realized that he'd strayed off the path. But he wasn't exactly sure where the path was. He began to worry again, wondering how long it would take him, or for that matter, if he'd get home at all. He hurried out of the woods, protecting himself with his arms. Standing bewildered among the weeds, Ronnie tried to think of a way to prevent straying off the road again. His matches were gone. He moved back to the trees, felt for a good branch, and finding one, broke it off with a loud crack. He was immediately aware of the silence. The wind had died, he tried to control his breathing, straining to hear. Ronnie had never been alone in the woods at night before. He didn't like the darkness, or the threatening silence. He was scared, and his fear pushed him onward. Holding his cane in both hands, he swung it back and forth in front of him, feeling his way and knocking the tops from the weeds. Slowly the sounds of the woods returned, dry leaves falling and
rustling, branches snapping. Ronni was conscious of them
between swishes of the stick, but he tried to put them out
of his mind, tried to concentrate on finding his way and
ignore the invisible bats and other beasts of his imagination.
But his fear grew with each stroke of the stick, and he
moved faster. Even worse was the fear that he'd lost his
way. He wasn't sure that he'd even chosen the right direction
after he'd come out of the trees. Where was the Page house?
He should have reached it by now. Where was the black out-
line against the sky? He moved faster and faster, and sud-
denly there it was! The clearing! The house! He'd see the
light from George's lamp soon. He moved faster. Tried to
forget the road behind him. But he couldn't believe that
there was nothing there. Over the rise, just past the clear-
ing where the land sloped downward, he'd see the warm little
house with its friendly lights. Dropping the stick he
hurried forward. But then he was on the ground, holding
his ankle in unbearable pain. He'd stepped on a rock that
had rolled out from under him and brought all his weight
down on the side of his foot. He'd fallen forward, driving
his face into the moist soil of the road and getting his
mouth full of mud. He lay curled on the ground, squirming,
holding his ankle with both hands and trying to choke back
the tears that had formed in his eyes. He tried to spit out
the dirt. It was horrible. The thought of what it might be,
and the taste of it made him sick. He gagged and his stomach tried to heave something up. The contractions ripped at his throat and his whole abdomen was afire.

When the sickness had subsided and the pain in his ankle was no longer intense, Ronnie crawled to his knees and wiped the tears and mud from his face. He walked forward on his knees, then on all fours, through the weeds to the far edge of the clearing. There, he managed to get himself up onto one leg, and he looked down the road for George's lamp. But it wasn't there! Ronnie gave up hope. He was lost. He broke into tears again and collapsed onto the ground. Cold and exhausted, he hurt all over. He just wanted to be home, and he couldn't get there. He just couldn't keep going.

He turned and looked at the house behind him. He'd played in it when he was a few years younger, found all sorts of treasures from old pictures to beer cans full of bullet holes. But he'd never seen it at night. It was awesome. And who knew what might be in there. It was getting colder, though, and he was shivering. He was even more scared of the woods. He crawled to the front of the house, moved along the wall to the hole of the window. Pulling himself up to the sill, he looked in and listened. Still quivering from the crying, he crawled in and moved across the plaster-strewn floor to the nearest corner. There he huddled, whimpering, to await the coming day.
After dressing and spreading the quilt over his bed, George went into the kitchen and lit the lantern on the back of the stove. His little bedroom lamp sat unlit on the table, on the wall above it the tall pendulum clock hung silently, stopped again. Seven minutes past four. George opened the door and started the pendulum swinging again. He didn't know what time it was, but he was sure it was later than that. He glanced out the window. It was still dark. He'd try four-thirty.

George knelt before the heavy Atlantic stove, the hair in his nostrils tingling with the cold. He breathed with a slight sound, resembling that of bellows, in two smokey streams that shot downward, rose and dissipated into the hard air of the kitchen. As he opened the doors of the stove, he saw that it needed cleaning. He took the little metal shovel from behind the woodbin and thrust it under the ashes, shivering as the edge of the shovel scraped against the iron stove. Then, with the hatchet that lay on the floor, he hacked slivers from a piece of birch and stacked them neatly in the stove. He swept up the chips with his hard, thick hands and threw them at the bottom of the pile. With a match from the yellow dispenser on the back of the stove, George lit the stack of wood and watched it burn, the smaller chips turning quickly to ashes, and when it was hot enough, placed two larger chunks of wood on the fire.
At the opposite side of the kitchen, George pumped water into a pail, gazing out into the dimness of the early morning. There in front of the window sat David's new truck, shiny even with so little light. It was a nice truck. But somehow it didn't seem to fit on the farm. George had decided he'd be glad when David moved out. When the pail was full, George emptied it into the kettle on the stove. Then he filled the coffee pot with water and coffee and placed it on the fire to cook. He yelled to Ronnie at the bottom of the stairs, took the lantern from the stove and his hat and coat from the hook by the door, and went out into the morning air. On the porch he stopped and set the lantern on the rail, stretching and gazing at the barely visible field that spread out in front of him. He was stiff today. His leg ached. As he pulled on his jacket he looked toward the opposite end of the porch, past the railing at the pine grove at the edge of the woods, some hundred yards away, a little island of trees that stood beside the entrance of the old road. It was distinguishable from the rest of the woods. Either it was particularly light for this time of year or George was late again. He took up the lantern and started for the barn.

George walked slowly, partly by necessity, but mostly, he said, by choice. He liked to enjoy things. As he limped across the barnyard, he heard between the crunches of his
footsteps the muffled clucking of the hens inside the barn. He pushed the sliding door open and stepped up onto the cement, holding the lantern at head level and looking about the room. There was a general commotion as the four younger hens scrambled for hiding places, half flying, half running to the far corners of the room. Even though George came every day and at the same time, they always had to keep a substantial distance at first. George turned and looked up at the three stately veterans, perched complacently on the upper horizontal bar of the stanchions and eyeing him back, unmoved by his entrance. George thought that these three commanded respect. They always seemed more concerned with keeping themselves apart than with running from him or to the food.

Hanging the lantern on a spike in one of the ceiling beams, he went to the grain sack, sitting with several unopened ones in the corner nearest the door. Reaching into the brown cloth bag, he withdrew his arm and a dipper of light colored grain. He poured it into the little feeding trough in the center of the room, and the younger hens, satisfied that it was safe, strutted quickly to the trough and began pecking. The old man eyed the others as he took the battered pail from its hook on the wall and went out to the pump. They would always wait until he left.

While he was pumping the water, George gazed up at the
hill high above the farm past the end of the bean field. He suddenly realized that the sun was nearly above the horizon. Already the deep pink glow surrounded the hill, chasing the dark blue and gray from the sky over it. He hurried to fill the pail, then limped quickly back to the barn.

George hated hurrying. He considered it one of the greatest sources of discontent. When anyone tried to hurry him, he deliberately moved slowly. But there were some things that wouldn’t wait. And they were often the only things worth rushing around for. The sunrise was one of them. When he couldn’t sit in his chair on the porch and watch it, he invariably went through the day in an ugly mood. Even if the day was a gray and rainy one, if he didn’t watch the light spread itself over the sky, he wouldn’t talk to anyone, only grumbled to himself that he might just as well have stayed in bed.

Collecting the eggs was George’s favorite chore. He’d been delighted with it ever since childhood, and even now, as old as he was, he still felt that same delight. It was more of an egg-hunt than a collection. He always did it before sunrise, and as he poured the clear, hard water into the watering tins, his eyes searched the room for eggs. Right away he found three and placed them gently in his hat. These belonged to the older hens who were resigned to the life of the barn and laid in certain places, usually out in
the open. To the younger hens, however, the life of the
barn was comparatively new. They still retained some of
their natural motherly instincts and so laid their eggs in
hidden places. (When George was a small boy, his father had
told him that they were embarrassed in front of the others.)
These younger hens made the egg-hunt fun, but today they were
bothersome. George moved quickly around the room, bending
and tilting his head and squinting, looking in all the hiding
places he knew. And yet he came up with only two more eggs.
He was sure there would be six in all. He made another
quick swoop around the room, and this round proved nearly
disastrous. As he thought he'd found a new place, in a gap
in one of the crossbeams of the low ceiling, he moved back
to get a better look. An old potato basket leaned against
the wall behind him. He stepped on it and stumbled backwards,
nearly dropping his hatful of eggs. Fortunately, the wall
stopped him, and he was able to keep on his feet. When he
pushed himself away from the wall, he noticed that there was
a little brown egg nestled into the chaff of the floor, ex-
posed when the basket had been kicked aside. George placed
it in the hat, grabbed the lantern, and raced across the yard
to the house. In the pantry he transferred his treasure to
a heavy bowl, yelled up the stairs at Ronnie, thinking he
should have been up by now, and hurried to the porch to watch
the sunrise.
Today, George thought, would be even more beautiful than the day before. It seemed that the days were getting prettier and prettier. They always did in the fall. Perhaps he was appreciating them more as he grew older. But the colors would get livelier before they finally dissolved into the white of winter. He looked at the trees on the hill, at the end of the field, brown and yellow elms, red and gold maples, a thousand shades of each, blending and melting together into a fiery, unearthly orange. Farther up, past the trees was a second field of light brown hay bordered by the dark, everlasting green of the fir and pine that covered the crest of the hill.

When he'd caught his breath from the race across the yard, George took out his pipe and lit the tobacco that remained unburnt from the night before, striking a match against the scarred, faded railing in front of him. He held the pipe in the corner of his mouth, firmly between his teeth, and the thick, blue smoke rose above him, swelled, and dissipated into the air.

The glow that had surrounded the hill was fading. It was higher now, absorbing the gray, and the sun was partially above the horizon. George gazed at the field, at the wide rows of bean plants, dead and tan against the dark brown of the soil. As the sun rose, the shadows withdrew, and when the first rays fell upon the plants, the tan turned to gold
and they seemed to move, as if awakening. The formation of a tiny dust devil at the opposite end of the field caught George's eye and pulled him out of his trance. Though it was a small one, the leaves and stems and dirt that it picked up gave it substantiality, and he could see it clearly from his seat. He watched through tiny eyes, at first gravely and then smiling, delighted with the devil's antics. It danced through the field, spinning wildly, moving gradually closer to him, leaping through the rows, lifting and dropping the plants. It made its crooked way halfway to the house. But there it staggered, dropped its cargo, and disappeared. Again the plants and dirt that it had carried lay frozen on the ground.

George refilled his pipe and put the crumpled Oranger pouch on the railing. As he lit the pipe again, he looked up at the sun, now completely above the horizon, a big golden globe lighting his garden. The pink had faded out, and the gray was moving quickly out of the sky, giving way to the pure blue of the heavens. It looked as if a clear glass dome covered the farm, encasing George's paradise, everything that had been his whole life, and the sun was clearing away the mist, exposing all that was beyond. The old man sat and gazed at the dissolution, hypnotized, and felt that he was floating toward it, dissolving with the mist into the invisible air.
At the foot of the stairs George yelled to Ronnie for the third time.

-Ronnie. Ronnie! Get outta bed. We've got to milk and feed up.- Still no answer. He must have been out late if he's not up yet. George didn't like the idea of Ronnie running around with David. He was sure that David would eventually get him into trouble. Slowly he moved up the stairs, one step at a time, until he was looking across the floor at the empty bed in the corner. He was startled at first, but George wasn't one to worry, and he decided that there were probably a hundred reasons why he might not be in bed. More than likely, he was out taking a shit. But as he descended the stairs, George remembered that Ronnie would have had to pass him on the porch, unless he'd already gone out back before George had gotten back from the barn. It seemed unlikely that he would be out there so long, unless he'd fallen asleep or something. George would check anyway.

At the end of the porch nearest the pine grove, the old man leaned over the rail and yelled again. Still no answer. Now George began to worry. He'd have to ask David. He should have been up by now anyway. In the kitchen again, George tapped on David's door. Getting no answer there either, he opened the door and looked in. David's bed was empty too! George was beginning to feel deserted. Finally he decided that they must be around somewhere and that they would turn
up sooner or later.

George kept two cows and two veal calves. The calves fed from one of the cows, and the other cow supplied George and Ronnie, since David would no longer drink it, with enough milk for their own purposes and some left over to sell to one of the neighboring families. George usually milked while Ronnie fed and cleaned the gutter. The old man could do most of it himself, all of it if there was hay. But he needed Ronnie to get the hay down from the loft. It was difficult for him to climb the ladder. After letting the calves onto one cow and cleaning the gutter, George stood before the ladder and looked up to the second floor. He counted the rungs twice, ten to the top. Finally he started, stepping up with his good leg and bringing the stiff one after it. At the top he threw down two bales that broke and spread out on the floor. Getting down was harder, for he had trouble guiding his leg onto the rungs. On the fourth or fifth he miscalculated and missed the step. The unexpected weight made him lose his grip, and he fell backwards to the floor. He was furious with himself for being so clumsy. Had he landed on the hard wood of the floor, he would have hurt himself badly. He wished he knew where Ronnie was.

George fed the cows and did the milking and then returned to the house, carrying the heavy pail of milk. In the kitchen he strained the milk into two big earthenware jars and put
them in the pantry.

While standing in front of the sink, he'd seen himself in the round mirror hanging between the two windows and decided he needed to shave. He poured two dippers full of hot water from the kettle into the wash basin and added some cold from the pump. With a large, white bar of soap from the window sill, he scrubbed his hands and face, rinsed, and dried. Again he slopped the dull, soapy water on his face and stared at himself in the mirror. The excess water dripped from his chin, ran down his sagging, wrinkled neck, and was absorbed into his shirt. With his beard, he thought, he looked like an over-aged bad man in a western. The corners of his mouth turned up into a grin. Over the prickly growth of his beard he spread thick, puffy lather, rubbing his face with the soft brush. As he scraped away the lather, he cut himself above the corner of his mouth, and dark blood dripped to his chin. He stopped it with a wad of toilet paper and finished shaving, scraping away the lather to reveal in the mirror a new face.

At the table he cut a thick slice from the loaf, pushed out the center, and laid it into a sizzling fry pan on the stove. Into the center hole he cracked two eggs and stood watching them fry, lifting the edge of the bread with a knife to see that it didn't burn. When he was satisfied with its brownness, he flipped the concoction over. A little stream of eggwhite flowed over the black surface of the pan,
solidified, and turned white, then crispy, shiny brown.

After breakfast George finally realized why he'd been so preoccupied with the pine grove ever since he'd gotten up. Today was John Hall's birthday, September thirtieth. When John had arrived there in the last part of the eighteenth century, staked out the land, broken the soil, and built the first house, he'd started a custom that the Halls had carried on through every generation right down to George himself. On a grassy little hill which had once been a natural clearing but was now the corner of the field, he had planted a pine tree for himself, one for his wife, and one for each of his children. When the members of the family died, the trees stood as monuments to them. Though not as precise as the stones in the cemetery on the hill, they were much nicer in that they affirmed life rather than signified death. It was part of George's upbringing to learn the names of all the trees. No one planted them anymore, though, but they multiplied themselves.

At the moment when George came out of the house, Ronnie emerged from the woods next to the grove, battered and scratched, and hopped toward his grandfather, supporting his weight with a long stick. George didn't see him at first, but surveyed the field, making calculations for the day's work. He rubbed his newly-shaved face, and feeling the piece of toilet paper, pulled it off, rolled it into a ball, and snapped it to the ground. But the cut was deep, and the
blood hadn't clotted. Several drops trickled to his chin. Just then he caught Ronnie's jerky motion in the corner of his eye. As Ronnie yelled out to him, he scrambled down the steps and limped as quickly as he could to meet him. As they approached each other, Ronnie smiled feebly, grimaced as he put his weight on the sore foot, and then smiled again.

-It's nothing, Granpa. I just twisted my ankle, and it was too dark to find my way home.- George opened his mouth to say something, but before he could speak, Ronnie spotted the blood on his face and cried out in alarm.

-Granpa! Granpa! What's the matter!-

-What? George screwed up his face. -What are you talking about?-

-The blood! The blood on your mouth!- Ronnie pointed.

George dabbed his finger in the blood and looked at it.

-Oh, I just cut myself shaving.- He wiped it away with the back of his hand. -But what happened to you? You all right?-

-I'm all right. My foot's just a little sore.-

-Well c'mon back to the house and soak it a while.-

Ronnie told George what had happened as they limped back to the house. Inside, George filled a pail with water from the kettle and placed it in front of Ronnie. Ronnie was sitting at the table, about to wash the cuts on his face.
He stepped into the pail, but the water was so hot that he jumped, pulling his foot out, and knocked the mirror from the table. It fell to the floor and shattered.

-Oh! I'm sorry, Granpa. But the water was so hot.

-That's all right. Don't worry about it.- George took the broom from the pantry and swept it up. -What I can't figure out is what happened to David.-

-He didn't come home either, huh?- 

-Well I don't know. His truck's here. Anyway, you soak your foot and I'll fix you some breakfast.- George fried two eggs and put them on a plate in front of Ronnie. Ronnie ate hungrily as his grandfather disappeared into the pantry to get the bread. Ronnie heard the rumble of a truck on the driveway outside. He looked up from his plate as David came into the kitchen.

-Well, you did make it back! But what happened to you?- David took water from the kettle and filled the wash basin. Ronnie glanced at the floor.

-Turned my ankle.- As David began washing, George came into the kitchen and stood behind Ronnie, leaning against the side of the doorway. He was cutting a slice from the loaf of bread.

-What's the idea of getting this boy drunk and leaving him out in the woods all night?- David continued washing his hands.
-He didn't leave me, Granpa. I left him.-
-That's right, George. He walked right off and left me. I would have gone after him, but I met up with Francis and had to go to work. Accident up in Greenville.- After drying himself, David ran a soft hand over his face. -Where's the mirror?-
-I broke it.-
-Uh-oh. Seven years bad luck. Guess I don't have time to shave anyway.- David went to the pantry and cut a thick slice from a smoked ham. George took his breakfast dishes to the sink and began washing them. David reappeared in the doorway, chewing the ham violently. When he'd finished, he cleaned his teeth with his tongue and lit a cigarette.
-Awful mess it was, too. A carload of young kids, no more than Ronnie's age, out drinking. Cut the recloser pole right off. Took us all night to fix it. Crazy kids. Killed one of them.- George turned toward him.
-It's pose there's a difference between them drinking and Ronnie drinking.-
-But I was with David, Granpa.-
-And he wasn't driving, either.- Ronnie took out a cigarette, searching his pockets for a match. David handed him his burning cigarette, and Ronnie lit his own from it. David glanced at his watch and then disappeared into his bedroom. George finished his dishes and then Ronnie's,
wiped them, and went to sit at the table, opposite his grandson.

-Feel anything like working today? Maybe you should take the day off. We could start tomorrow.-

-Oh, no, Granpa. We gotta get the beans in. I'm all right. Really. Would you give me that towel?—George handed Ronnie the towel he'd pointed at and sat back down. David returned to the kitchen wearing a clean shirt and went to stand by the sink, looking at the truck. He grumbled something to himself and scratched his crotch. Ronnie put on his sock and boot and began lacing.

-I don't know. It might be a good idea to stay off it for a while. Looks a little swollen.-

-Oh, Jesus Christ, George! He's all right. He's not a baby.-

-Look! Just because you're nothing but muscle don't mean he is. I don't think I like....-

-Here's Francis. You'll have to tell me later.—David started out the door but stopped and looked back. —By the way. Your clock's wrong. It's twenty-five past. —Then he disappeared out the door. George and Ronnie looked up at the clock. It read ten past seven. George had missed by fifteen minutes. Ronnie tied his boot and stood up.

-I'm all right, Granpa. See?-

-Are you sure?-

-Of course. Let's go get to work.-
Chapter Two

It was still quite cold when the old man and his grandson went out to work. As they stood on the porch and looked out over the field, Ronnie watched his breath spread out in front of him, much thinner now than it had been earlier. He looked at his grandfather. George seemed to be calculating.

-What do you think, Granpa?- 

-I was just trying to decide whether or not I should go shit now or wait. I guess I'd better go now.- George went into the kitchen to get the toilet paper. Ronnie yelled after him that he'd get the bean poles.

Trying to keep his limp as slight as possible, Ronnie walked to a door in the side of the barn nearest the field. He had laced his boot as tightly as he could, and that helped. He lifted the rawhide loop from the nail in the finish board and opened the door. This part of the barn had once been used for slaughtering livestock. Now it held equipment. And George and Ronnie stored their beans here after they had finished picking them over. The poles lay on the cement floor, in a stack next to the wall. Ronnie bent down and wrapped his arms around as many as he could hold. He carried them horizontally, out the door and to the edge of the field. There, he set them down in the tall grass. He made several trips to the storage room, carrying as many each time, until
he had transferred most of them to the field. Gazing out at the field, Ronnie thought of starting, but then decided he'd better wait.

He looked down at the pointed, gray, cedar poles. George had told him that David and their father had cut them, when Ronnie had been too young to leave the cradle, and what a good little worker David had been. Ronnie didn't know the whole story. No one really did. But somehow, after the fire, David had never wanted anything to do with the farm. He hoped David wasn't mad at him for running off. Bending down, he picked up one of the old poles and stood again, holding it against his shoulder with both hands. They looked weak because they were so old. But they were still quite strong. Ronnie leaned his weight against it. Surprisingly strong. Raising the end of it from the ground, he ran and pole vaulted along the edge of the field. But he landed too much weight on his sore ankle, and the pain returned, less intense but there. Rubbing it eased the soreness, but Ronnie remembered his grandfather and stood up, glancing toward the house to see that he hadn't been caught. George was still out there. It seemed that he was taking a long time. Ronnie was worried about him. He lifted the pole again, trying to raise it by the end with only the strength of his wrists. But he could get it only slightly off the ground. David could raise a nine pound sledgehammer in the same way with only one hand.
Ronnie tucked the pole under one arm and galloped a few steps forward, jousting with the air.

-I guess your foot must be all right now, eh?- Ronnie turned, embarrassed to be caught at his childish game, and watched George coming toward him, bent forward as he walked. As the old man passed the corner of the porch, he stopped, changed directions, and disappeared into the house. In a moment he emerged again, carrying a large hammer.

-Forgot the hammer.- He joined Ronnie at the edge of the field.

-I told you it was.-

-What?- George looked up at the sun and squinted.

-Better.-

-Oh. Your ankle. Well, come on. Grab an arm load of those poles and let's get to work.- Ronnie picked up several poles and followed his grandfather into the field. George walked a short distance, stopped, and pointed at the ground.

-Right there.- Ronnie dropped all the poles but one, placing the point of the one he had selected into the ground where George had indicated. Holding it vertically, he blinked as the old man hammered the pole into the soil. With the first one firmly placed, George winked and then turned and continued along the field, singing to himself. Ronnie followed, carrying the poles to the next stop, and together they drove another one into the ground.
-What time did you wake up this morning?-  
-I don't know. Why?-  
-Was it light out?-  
-Yeah, I guess so.-  
-See the sunrise?-  
-Nope.-  
-Boy! You missed a nice one.- George pointed to another place in the ground and Ronnie placed a pole there.  
-That right?-  
-Yup. One of the best I've seen for some time.- They moved on. George sang gaily.  
-Oh, if my true love knew what I'm really like....- George only sang lines. He never finished a whole song. And they were always lines that Ronnie had never heard before because he seldom sang the same thing twice. Ronnie suspected that he made them up.

When they had erected a line of ten poles, they went back to the edge of the field, moved over several rows, and began another line.

"Well, I went down cellar, looking for some cider,  
There was a bed bug dom da dum a spider...."

Soon they had covered the first few acres of the field.

-I'd forgotten what that looks like.- George stood, using the hammer as a cane, and looked at the group of scattered poles. Ronnie stood beside him, his weight on one foot.
—Me too, Granpa. Which end do you want to start from?—

—Oh, don’t make no difference. Start anywhere. George continued looking at the poles, speckled about the wide rows of beans. Ronnie leaned down to begin pulling, but before he could start his grandfather tapped him on the shoulder. He looked up, his hands dug into the dirt.

—Take that back to the house.— Ronnie took the hammer and walked quickly to the house. After depositing it on the steps, he returned. George had already begun. Ronnie began again.

—Think that’ll be enough poles to last us today, Granpa?—

—Don’t worry. There’s plenty enough for the two of us.—

They worked slowly at first, taking two rows each, straddling them, bending at the waist, and pulling handfuls of bean plants out of the earth. When they could hold no more, they stacked the plants on the poles and spread them out evenly. Then they returned and worked along the rows again, leaving the earth bare and dark behind them.

Each time George glanced up, or walked back to the row after stacking plants on the poles behind him, he found himself looking at the house. That bothered him, and he tried to keep from doing it. The house, though it was their home, struck him badly on certain days. It had been his once before, when he was first married and his father was living in the big house that stood near the grove. After his father's
death, he had moved into the big house, and his son, newly married, had taken the smaller one. But after the fire, George had had to move back and raise his two grandsons. He didn't have the heart, nor the energy, to attempt rebuilding the big one. He had made a few changes in the little house, and it had been a good home. It was only on certain days that he hated it.

-Ronnie! What in hell did we start on this end for?- Ronnie looked back, bewildered.

-I don't know.-

-Well let's go to the other end so we can see some land and sky in front of us.-

It made no difference to Ronnie. He stacked the beans that he had pulled and followed his grandfather to the house end of the field. Here Ronnie picked up his pace and moved quickly ahead. George told him to slow down.

-No need to go so fast, Ronnie. We ain't in any big hurry.-

-Well... What if it rains or something?-

-Neow it ain't going to rain. Look at how clear the sky's getting. Besides, how can you enjoy working if you hurry so fast?- Ronnie shrugged.

-I don't know.-

-You're worse than your brother. Didn't I ever tell you the story of the young bull and the old bull?-

-I'm not sure. How's it go?-
Well, the young bull and the old bull were out grazing one day, and the young bull all of a sudden went up to the old bull and said, 'Let's run down to the pasture and take...'

Yeah, I guess I told you before.

Oh! And the old bull says, 'Let's walk...'. Yeah, I guess you have told me that one.

Well anyway, don't tire yourself out.

Ronnie made an effort to go more slowly. His ankle was beginning to bother him. Still, it was difficult to hold back. Maybe George was getting older. Or maybe it was just that he was worried about the farm, worried that it would not work if he went too slowly. He thought of David and his constant attacks on the farm. David was a good man to have on your side, and Ronnie wished he were there now, helping them. Holding himself back, Ronnie managed to keep pace with George, keeping himself aware of his grandfather's location with an occasional glance in the old man's direction.

George absorbed himself in his work, paying little attention to anything but the ground and the plants in front of him. Once, though, Ronnie had stacked an armload and turned to go back to his row, and he saw that his grandfather was half-standing, his hands full of beans and resting on his thighs, gazing intently in the direction of the woods on the left side of the field. He was frozen in that position, the only movement the whispy stream of his breath caught by the breeze.
Ronnie looked back at George's expressionless old face, at the small eyes, and saw that he wasn't looking at the woods at all, but at the sky and the few thin clouds above the tree tops.

-Granpa! Ronnie took long strides in the dirt and stood beside George.
-Something wrong?
-Hmph? No, nothing.- George bent down and resumed pulling.
-Just looking.- He filled his hands and walked to the nearest pole. Ronnie shrugged it off and continued his work.

Shortly after, George suggested they take a break. Ronnie didn't feel that they needed to, but he knew better than to suggest differently. His ankle was still bothering, though not unbearable. As they walked to the house, he made an effort to keep from showing his limp. Inside, he hurried around, heating and pouring the coffee, and buttering the bread. Then he sat opposite George at the table.
-How's the ankle.-
-Good. Doesn't feel at all sore.-
-That right?- George cut his bread into small pieces.
-Where'd you two go last night, anyway?-
-Just into town. Spent most of the time riding around in the truck.-
-David drunk when he was driving?-
-I wouldn’t say so. -

-He used to be an awful reckless kid. Enough to drive you crazy. You get drunk?-

-Not really drunk. At least not from what I hear being drunk’s like. I only had a few beers. I was feeling pretty good.-

-Were you feeling pretty good this morning?-

-Well.... Ronnie felt uncomfortable. He wished they could get back to work.

-I remember the first time I got drunk.- George sat back in the chair and crossed his legs, lifting one leg over the other with his hands. Both he and Ronnie were aware that he needed to use his hands, and both tried to ignore it.

-My two brothers and I got into some of the old man’s dandelion wine. Ever have any?— Ronnie shook his head.

-Well, it’s about like drinking lightening, only it don’t taste it. It was one of those hot days when the water was so thick in the air that you’d get soaked just walking outside. And we were haying!— Ronnie felt more at ease now, allowing himself to be taken into the story.

-We’d hid the bottle, Carl had stolen it from the cellar, and we had it hid in a stream up back. Well, after we loaded the last load onto the wagon, we headed for the stream. We sat right there. It’s a bit cooler in the shade, and we guzzled that whole quart bottle. Now I’m telling you,
that stuff went down smooth. It took just about fifteen minutes for Carl to pass out. Bill and I were sicker than dogs. I threw up in the stream. We thought something bad was wrong with Carl. So we had to get him back to the house, no matter how mad the old man was bound to be. Now that was a sight! The two of us, each with one arm, dragging him home. Stumbling and falling down all the way to the house. Turned out Carl was all right. But didn’t we catch hell! -

Back in the field again, Ronnie felt much better. They finished the rows they’d been working on and went back to the edge of the field to start again. The breeze had disappeared, and the sky was now cloudless. Ronnie was content to work at George’s pace.

Toward noon they were interrupted by one of the neighboring farmers, Elmer Holt. Elmer drove into the yard with his two husky sons, parked beside David’s pick-up, and walked across the field toward George. George stood near one of the poles, an unfriendly look on his face, and watched Elmer stride across the field.

—Morning, George.— Elmer always had a cigarette in his mouth, a bottle of Ox-Head Ale in one hand, which he probably left in the truck, and spoke slowly, as if it pained him to talk. He approached George, stepping on the plants. Drops of sweat appeared from under his hat and slid down the side of his leathery face. He stood in front of George, touching
his face with his fingers as if he were shooing a fly away. George looked into his watery eyes. Elmer puffed on his cigarette as he spoke.

-George, I got a problem. My digger's broke down. I got a whole field of pickers down there, waiting for me to dig, and the bed to my digger's gone to hell.- George kept his unfriendly expression.

-What about it?-

-Well. Now I know you got all that equipment sitting in there. You ain't touched it since Don died. All I want to do is borrow your bed.- George let him finish.

-You probably'll never use it again, George. And I'm in a spot. That bed would save me a lot of time and trouble.-

When his son had died, and George was left alone with two young grandsons, working the farm had been next to impossible. He had had to cut operations down to practically nothing. Just enough to keep them alive. He had the equipment and the land, but no one to run it. So he had to let the fields lie, and he stored the equipment in the tool shed behind the barn. During the winters he worked on it, keeping it all in good working order in case they ever wanted to use it again. He taught David everything he could about it, hoping to expand again when David was old enough to help him. But as he grew older, David became more and more reluctant to learn. George's hopes diminished, and with only
Ronnie, who was then so young, he lost sight of the idea of restoring the farm and retained only the memories. The hope was still there, but hidden deeply inside him. Elmer threatened to smother it completely.

-No.- He returned to his row and started pulling again. Elmer followed, standing beside him, and pleaded.

-George. It ain’t hurting you none, and I ain’t got the time or money to replace that bed otherwise. It’s just sitting there, falling apart. You’d probably forgotten all about it....- George straightened and faced Elmer.

-Elmer. Get out of here.- Elmer was speechless. He spit out his cigarette and rubbed his face, unable to look at George.

-Go on. Get off my land.- Elmer glanced up at George’s face and then at Ronnie, standing behind his grandfather. Then he turned and started toward his truck. As he reached the edge of the field, he turned toward them.

-Wait till you’re in trouble, George.- He got into his truck and turned around, throwing his empty ale bottle onto the yard as he drove off. George returned to his work.

-Why didn’t you let him take it, Granpa?-  

-Because he just would have ruined it. And I hate people that are always bothering you and borrowing things from you. That’s the only time he’d ever come over here is to borrow something. And they never bring anything back. Half the equipment he runs that farm with belongs to someone else.-
George stood and rubbed his back, leaving the plants he'd pulled in a heap in front of him.

-It's a shame to have people like that walking the same earth. He makes me sick. He's the biggest jerk in the world. He would walk clear'n to Dover in the middle of the night to make a penny. He's just in it for the money. But you almost feel sorry for him in a way. He'll be rushing around and trying to get his hands on money till the day he dies, and he'll never once know what he's missing.-

-What is he missing?-

-The enjoyment of it! Come on. We might as well go eat. Must be close to noon.-

The meal consisted of reheated beans, fried tomatoes, bread, and milk. While Ronnie did the cooking, George sat in his chair and cleaned the shot gun. Ronnie stirred the beans.

-How much do you think we'll get done today, Granpa?- George held the barrel up to the window and looked through it.

-Oh, I don't know. Close to an acre I suppose.-

-But we've done practically that already, haven't we?-

-Kahow. We'll work for a couple hours after dinner.- He wiped the barrel with an oily cloth. Ronnie set the table.

-Shouldn't we do more than that?-

-Nope. No need to. I thought we might do some hunting.
How's that sound? George snapped the barrel back into position. He leaned the rifle against the wall beside him.

"Yeah, but don't you think we should get as much done as we can?"

"I like the idea of a fat little partridge for supper better." Ronnie served the food, and they began eating.

"Today's John's birthday. We ought to celebrate. So we'll have a big meal for supper. How's that?" Ronnie shoveled beans into his mouth.

"Good, I guess."

After dinner they worked for only a half hour, just long enough to finish the rows they were on. Then George called a halt, and they returned to the house to get their guns. Ronnie took the .20-gauge that his grandfather had cleaned before dinner, and George got the .410 from the rack in his room. He gave Ronnie the canvas game bag, and they started out across the field, George going deliberately slowly and Ronnie trying to enjoy the walk and forget his ankle.

The afternoon was bright and sunny, much warmer than the morning. The breeze was still at rest, leaves fluttering only occasionally. The woods would be extremely quiet. They would have no ground shots. Walking on the dry leaves would give them away before they could get close enough.

The two walked through light colored dirt toward the spectacular trees above them, halfway up the hill. George carried his gun under his arm and puffed on his pipe.
Ronnie looked at the weightless, twisted bodies of the bean plants and felt rather lifeless himself. He would have felt better if they’d worked for the rest of the afternoon, even though there was something about hunting that he really enjoyed. But George had always been very strict about certain holidays. Ronnie hoped that they would stay in the fields. He didn’t relish the idea of struggling through the woods with his sore ankle.

George always scanned the horizon when he went for walks, watching the ragged line between the trees and sky. At times he let his gaze float above the trees into the sky, often becoming so absorbed in it that he lost his sense of balance and stumbled. He stared at the trees.

—Old John was quite a man.— Ronnie looked at his grandfather. He knew what was coming. And he loved to hear George talk about the old days.

—He had to be to survive. He had no way of knowing about living around here. He was the first one, so he had no one to teach him. Like you or I’ve had. He had to learn it all for himself. Then he passed it on right down to us. We’d be lost here. Probably he was when he first got here. And he didn’t have anyone to run to for help, either.— Ronnie watched the horizon.

—Now you take Elmer. He’d’ve been dead before the first winter was out. People weren’t like that then. Didn’t have
time to worry about money. They had to work hard and learn about the land and the climate. They had to clear away the woods and the rocks so they'd have fields to plant in. You suppose you or I would be able to make it?—George smiled.

-Gee, Granpa, I don't know.—

-Well, maybe we would. Guess we better load up.—The two of them had reached the end of the field and stood at the tree line. Near them was the entrance to a short road which led to the next field. George was breathing heavily as he took a shell from his pocket and pushed it into the chamber of the gun. He snapped the rifle shut, holding it at his side, and stuck his pipe in his back pocket.

-Now. When we get to this next field, be as quiet as you can. Don't talk or even whisper. There's a few apple trees near that right hand corner. I'll point them out to you when we get in sight of them. Just move along the stone wall towards that corner and be ready when the birds start flying.—They walked to the edge of the field and turned right, moving much more slowly and cautiously toward the corner. When they were within fifty feet of the trees, George pointed out their bright yellow leaves to Ronnie. He let his grandson go on ahead, their guns cocked, giving Ronnie the first shot, but ready to back him up. Ronnie moved too quickly at first, and George slowed him down, holding his shoulder. Moving so slowly was difficult, and more than
once Ronnie found his weight on his sore foot. But he didn't make a noise. He scanned the ground under the apple trees, searching the shadows for birds. Suddenly a partridge left the ground directly in front of them. The air was filled with a loud, low rumble as its wings beat furiously. The bird stayed low and headed into the deep woods. Ronnie was stuck, unable to move. Before he could get the gun to his shoulder the partridge had disappeared into the woods.

—Jesus, Granpa. That just about scared the shit out of me.

—I know. That's one of their biggest advantages. We're trying to be so quiet and all of a sudden they make such a racket. Scares you so much you can't move.—

—Well, should we maybe follow it?— Ronnie lit a cigarette.

—Nah. No need to. There are plenty of other places around.—

—Yeah, aren't there some apple trees on the hill?— Ronnie pointed at the top of the hill, in the direction of the cemetery.

—No, we ain't going up there. We'll follow that tote road over there.— He pointed past the entrance to the field at the adjacent corner.

As they walked along the edge of the field toward the woods road, George took out his pipe. Ronnie had forgotten the beans and let his imagination wander through the distant
past, trying to picture the place as it had been in those
days. But even though it was attractive in many ways, he
didn't think he'd like living then. It was too uncertain.
And he couldn't see doing nothing but working from dawn till
dark. He was doing little more than that now, but things
would get better.

-Of course, you have to understand that things were a
lot easier for the next generation. And easier for the next
one after that. And so on down. I came along right in the
peak of things. Why, we must've been ten or twelve families
living on this farm. It was quite an operation. Now I still
had to know the land and everything about it. But it wasn't
a question of life or death. Like it was for John. I learned
it because I wanted to. And I needed to so I could take over
when the time came. But by then the family had built practic­
ally a whole town out here. We were practically self-suffi­
cient. That is, we could take care of almost all of our
needs. We didn't have to run to the neighbors like people
do now. We built this whole thing and worked and reaped.

They entered the woods and walked leisurely along the
overgrown road. But Ronnie thought of the beans, lying dead
in the field, waiting to be pulled up. He only half listened.
David's advice kept running through his mind. The farm was
a dying place.

-And didn't we have some celebrations! We'd all gather
in the big house. You probably don't remember the other house. But we'd all sit around in that living room and have a hell of a time.- George stopped here and let his memories take over. But he didn't feel sad about them. He felt a sense of the overwhelming beauty that the farm still retained, even after most of the human life had disappeared.

Their arrival at a large section of recently cut-over land brought the two of them back to the hunt. George told Ronnie to be ready. If there were birds hiding in the brush, and they succeeded in flushing them out, they were sure to get a shot at them. There was no cover for the birds once they hit the air. There was no need to be quiet here, either. It would be the noise of their approach that would flush the birds.

The break was an eyesore to George. It had once been a stand of some of the finest soft wood on the farm. When David had decided that he couldn't be a farmer, he'd started cutting lumber. The old man had gone along with it at first, but finally he had had to put a stop to it before David stripped the whole farm bare. Including the pine grove, if he'd gotten the chance. But Ronnie found it very pleasing. He liked the combination of the dry, dead brush, the occasional maple or elm, and the small soft wood trees. He lead the way, taking in the whole area at once, and picked his way through the brush. He stepped down on a dead fir branch, and
it snapped with a loud crack. Instantly, the pounding of the birds' take off startled him again, and four partridge were off and flying for the woods, keeping together as if in formation. But Ronnie was ready this time. He raised his gun, caught one of the birds in his sights, and followed its flight. He waited until he was sure. George was ready too, and waited and waited for his grandson to shoot. Finally Ronnie squeezed the trigger, and the shot hit one of the birds with a splash of feathers. The partridge tumbled into the brush, and the slam of the shotgun echoed from the hill. Ronnie turned to his grandfather, a grin on his face.

- I got him!-
- Yeah, but why'd you wait so long? -
- I don't know. I just wanted to be sure. -
- I was almost ready to shoot. Well. Did you see where it landed? - Ronnie raised his eyebrows.

- I never thought of that. -
- Well, I think I know where he is. You walk over by that cedar. - Ronnie followed George's directions. When he reached the cedar, the old man yelled to him and pointed.

- See that stump there? Go about ten feet beyond that and see if it isn't right in there. Then he dragged through the brush, searching the ground as he went. Then he suddenly reached down and lifted a plump bird from the brush, holding it up and smiling as if George were taking a picture of him. He deposited it in the bag and returned to his grandfather.
Well. There's one. Two more and we'll have a good start on a meal.

Why two more?

Well, we ought to have one for each of us.

There's only two of us. Can't you count?

What about David?

David ain't eating with us.

He's not?

No. He told me last night he was going to Maggie's house for supper.

That right? Well. Good. All we need is one more then.

Let's get onto the old road. I bet we'll find one by the grove. They made their way through the break and continued along the tote road to a stream. There, on the Hall side of the Page house, the road they were following joined the old road. They stopped at the stream to rest. George sat against a tree, and Ronnie went to the side of the road to urinate.

You know, Ronnie, all of this is going to be yours forever long.

Don't say that, Granpa. I wouldn't know what to do with it.

What do you mean! Of course you'd know what to do.

There are a few things you've got to learn about. Deeds and taxes and all that. This stream here used to be the boundary between us and Page before he had to sell out. You've got to
know boundaries. When we get back to the house, I'll explain some of that to you. And you know, we've got all that equipment in the shed. A man could do something with that if he was o' mind to. That's something for you to think about. You'd ought to expand.- Ronnie sat near his grandfather.

-God, Granpa. I could never do that.-

-Well, you never will if you keep talking that way, Seriously. We'll talk about it tonight.-

Ronnie felt very uncomfortable about this sort of talk. He was perfectly happy with things as they were. Without his grandfather he'd be lost. He didn't even want to think about it. George wasn't always the best company for a boy. But even when he was grumpy and did nothing but bitch and stay silent, he was still there. And his presence was something Ronnie needed. At least until he was old enough and confident enough to take care of himself.

-Of course you can't do it all alone. Nobody could.

What you need is a wife and family.-

-Oh, Granpa.-

-I'm serious. You can't really be a farmer unless you've got someone who loves you and who you love so you can work for each other. You can love your land and it can love you back. But that don't come until you get to be old. No, you need a family to be a farmer. Some day fore long you'll have one.-
-You and I love each other, don't we, Granpa?—George chuckled.

-Yeah. Sure we do. But I don't think I'd make much of a wife. Even if I wasn't two or three hundred years old, but you'll have one someday. And you'll love her enough to put some life back into this farm.—Ronnie stared at the ground in front of him. George's last remark made him uncomfortable again, and he grew nervous. He darted his glance about the surrounding woods and down the road, took a shell from his pocket and examined it. George looked down the road at the patch of sunlight at the end.

-Well. Using his gun as a cane, he raised himself to his feet and rubbed his back.

-I guess we better get that other partridge.—Ronnie scrambled up.

-I'll tell you what. There are those apple trees at the edge of the woods by the grove. If you go in the woods here and wait for me to get out in the open, then drive through toward the field, I got an idea one or two might come flying out where I can get a shot at them.—Ronnie waited as George emerged into the field and the sunlight and went to stand by the grove, leaning against one of the giant trees. The ruins of the big house that had once been the center of farm life lay behind him, mostly hidden now, grown over with tall grass and some twisted shrubs and bushes. George didn't turn
to look, but he thought of the house. And he was happy thinking of it now. His hope had found an agent in Ronnie. His grandson was growing up. Through him, the farm would find its renewal. Perhaps he'd even rebuild the house.

The explosion of Ronnie's gun yanked George out of his daydream. He looked to the woods and raised his shotgun to his shoulder, expecting the birds to come into his sights. But it was Ronnie who came into the bright sunshine, holding another limp partridge in one hand and his gun in the other, smiling once again. George was extremely happy at the sight of him, and he grinned so hard that his eyes nearly closed. Ronnie ran up to him and showed him the bird. George examined it for a moment and turned to Ronnie. Neither spoke. They just stood there and smiled great smiles at each other. George put his arm around Ronnie's shoulder, and they walked back to the house.

At 4:45 Francis' old, brown station wagon rolled into the yard, and David got out. Carrying a small box, he went into the house. George was standing over the sink washing the birds. David sat at the table and took the new generator from its box.

-What are you washing, George?-  
-Partridge.-  
-That right? Went hunting this afternoon?-
-Yup.- David examined the device.
-Turned out to be a nice day after all, huh?-
-Ummm.- David took the printed instructions from the box and read them over.
-What's the occasion?- 
-Oh, no special occasion.-
-Ever replace a generator?- 
-Not that I recall.-
-Well, I guess I better get going.- David went outside again and, placing the generator and instructions on a fender, opened the hood and looked at the huge engine. Just then Ronnie came out of the barn carrying the heavy pail of milk.
-Hiya, David.-
-Hi, buddy, How you doing?- 
-Good. Are you fixing your generator?- 
-Sure am. How's the ankle?- David went to the tool chest in the back and unlocked it with a key from his belt.
-Good as new. Can I watch?- 
-Sure.- David returned to the engine.
-Okay. Don't start till I get back. I just got to go strain this milk. Okay?- Ronnie hurried into the house and rejoined his brother a minute later. David was removing the broken generator.
-Have to pay for this one?- Ronnie looked it over.
-I should say not! I went to that bastard Harrington and started swearing, right in front of a crowd of customers,
and the next thing you know, he was handing me this new one.-

-Really! Shit. I could never do that.-

-Well, I'm telling you, you got to at times.- Ronnie watched David work, watching for a chance to help. He asked him if he'd seen the birds that he got, and David said he had and praised him.

-David, do you think we could maybe go drinking again sometime?—David grinned at him.

-Sure we could, Ron. We'll go sometime soon. Maybe this weekend.-

-Really! That'd be great!—Ronnie leaned against the truck and supported his head with his hand.

-Want to do me a favor, buddy?—

-Sure. What?—

-Go get George's truck and his jumper cables and bring them over here.—

-Yup.—Ronnie turned and started for his grandfather's truck but stopped short. He yelled at his grandfather who was still at the sink in front of the window.

-Granpa!—George looked up from his work.

-Keys in the truck?—The old man nodded and pointed in the direction of the truck. Ronnie ran and got the truck, turned it toward David's and drove over, easing it close enough so that the cables would reach. Together, they got the new Chevrolet started and left it running to recharge the battery.
Inside, David washed at the sink while Ronnie and George prepared supper. But when David was ready to shave, he had to take his razor and the wash basin outside and use one of the truck mirrors. Then he hurried back inside, changed his clothes in his room, and returned to the kitchen. Ronnie complimented him on his looks. He wore black boots, tight-fitting tan slacks, a white shirt, and a light brown suede jacket. Every hair was in place, and wherever he walked, he left the sweet odor of his cheap aftershave lotion. At the cupboard he took a pack of Camels from his carton, said good-by, and went to his truck. As he was driving out the driveway, he met Ralph Labree coming to get the milk. They waved, and David turned right onto the road to Sangerville and drove to Maggie's house.

David was in an exceptionally good mood, and the idea of marrying Maggie Abbott was more attractive to him tonight than it had been since he'd proposed to her. He had gotten word earlier in the day that he would receive his first-class rating at the next safety meeting. He had worked up the ladder to first-class faster than anyone on the crew. And he would get a raise with his new rating. They might even give him his own truck. But after all, he deserved it. He worked as hard and as well as any man on the crew. Better than most. As he drove to the top of Lewis Hill, he took a cigarette from the pack and lit it. The view at dusk from the top of
the hill was beautiful. He rolled down the window and shifted to neutral to let the truck coast.

As he turned into the Abbotts' driveway, Maggie, who had been waiting on the porch, jumped up and bounded down the steps to meet him. David glanced down at the seat to see that he'd left no incriminating stains from the night before, drove up behind Mrs. Abbott's Buick, and shut off his truck. He jumped out and watched Maggie run toward him, her long, wavy, red hair bouncing. Besides being the doctor's daughter, a highly paid nurse, and the kindest person David had ever known, Maggie was also the most beautiful. Everything about her was filled with life. She was tall and strong and extremely energetic. She was the kind that would be faithful in marriage. To the end. David got an erection every time he saw her. She ran up to him, flung her arms around his neck, and kissed him.

-Oh, I'm so glad to see you!- She smiled.
-But what took you so long?-
-Well I had to fix the truck didn't I? And I had to clean up. I couldn't walk in front of your parents looking like a garage mechanic.-

-Oh, you worry too much about impressing Daddy.-
-Anyway, I'm glad to see you, too. And I've got good news! I get my first-class rating the next safety meeting!-
-Oh, David, that's great!-
-Isn’t it? I made first-class faster than anyone on the crew.-

-Really? That’s great! Come on. Let’s go sit on the porch.- She held his arm, and they walked to the steps.

-Are your parents inside?- 

-Yes, but let’s not go in yet. Daddy’s just sitting in there and reading. Let’s sit for a while outside here.-

-But Maggie. I’m tired. I’ve worked all night. And besides, I want to tell him my good news. Let’s go in and relax before supper, and we’ll sit out here afterwards. Okay?- 

-Oh. Okay. But we’ll come out here right after we eat?- 

-Right afterwards.- They climbed to the porch and started into the house. But David stopped Maggie before they entered.

-Maggie, how come all those dead flowers are still standing?- David pointed to the row of dead plants in front of the house.-

-Oh, those are Mother’s. She’s really strange about them. She won’t let anyone else touch them. I’ll explain after we eat.-

Inside, they went to a large living room where Dr. Abbott sat reading. The doctor greeted David, getting up to shake his hand and offering him a drink as he always did. David usually accepted Dr. Abbott’s offer, but he had had no rest
and was afraid the liquor would put him to sleep. They sat and chatted, and Dr. Abbott congratulated him on his good news. After a while, Mrs. Abbott came in to say hello. She looked very tired. She never seemed to share the strength or healthiness that were so characteristic of Maggie and her father. She too congratulated David and then disappeared back into the kitchen to finish preparing the meal.

After eating, David and Maggie returned to the porch and sat on the couch. Maggie snuggled up to David, and he put his arm around her. It was nearly dark but still quite warm. David puffed on his cigarette.

"Maggie, I really can't wait until we're married. I've felt really good about it all day."

"Oh, David. I can't either. We can move into our own little house. It'll be so much fun."

"That's right! I forgot to tell you! They start setting the poles tomorrow for the extension from the road to the house! The best part of my news, and I forgot to tell you."

"They're really starting tomorrow?"

"Yes! We'll have electricity pretty soon. And the house will be complete. Maggie, I can't tell you how much this means to me. - David threw his cigarette down onto the driveway.

"To finally be getting off that farm. It seems like it's taken me forever. But soon it'll happen. And I'll be out of the wilderness. I'm telling you, Maggie, that farm is a
dead place. Everything about it is lifeless. I'll feel so alive.-

-Yes, we both will.- David lit another cigarette.

-But don't you feel sorry for your grandfather and your brother?- 

-Not for George. It's his own choosing. I do for Ronnie, though. I took him out drinking last night.-

-Did you? What did you do?- 

-We just drove around and drank beer. He got sick. But I think he liked it before that. He wants to go again.- 

-That's good.- 

-Yeah. It's a good thing for both of us. It gives me something to do when you're working.- 

-Yes. That's good. You could take him Friday night. I have to work until three in the morning.-

-Oh! Not again? Well, maybe he'd like it.-

-David?-

-What?- 

-I wish you would try to cut down on your smoking. I don't want to nag, but even Daddy said something about it.- 

-He did?- 

-Yes. He'd never say anything to you. But he mentioned it to me once. It's really not good for you.-

-I know. I've got to cut down.- David snapped his cigarette to the ground.
Well, I suppose I should get home. Thank you for the supper.

Of course. Mother says you're always welcome at her house.

Oh, by the way, what about the flowers?

Oh! Let's walk to the truck and I'll tell you. You see, with Daddy being a doctor and always working, Mother never has anyone to be with. Before I was born she was always alone so she started drinking. David, please don't tell anyone about this.

Maggie! You know I won't.

Well, after I was born she stopped because she had me to be with her. But when I went to nursing school, she started up again. And now that I'm getting married, things are worse again. Oh, she doesn't really drink that much. But she's so lonely. Don't you think it's sad? Maggie squeezed his arm.

Yes it is. David sounded grave.

But why are the flowers like that?

Because she loves flowers. And she can really make them grow. But when she's unhappy and lonely, she just lets them die.

Come on, Maggie. It's sad, but don't cry. She'll be all right. You don't think it's our fault, do you? You won't let her hold us back, will you?
-No. Of course not. But I think it's really sad.-

-Come on. Now when will I see you again?-  

-I don't know. Tomorrow?-  

-I'll call you at noon.-

-Okay. Good night.-  

-Good night. I love you.-  

-I love you, too!- They kissed good night, and David got into his truck and drove to the farm.
Chapter Three

David usually left for work at 7:05, giving himself plenty of time to get to the shop by 7:15. He liked to get there early enough to catch all of the local gossip. And he liked to keep his reputation for punctuality. He left earlier today, though. News of his promotion had renewed his company spirit. Besides, he wanted to stop on the way and look at the new house that he and Maggie would soon make their home. He turned out of the driveway and drove about a half mile toward Dover. At the top of a small rise he brought the truck to a stop and looked up through the neatly cut right-of-way at his white ranch house. With a little help from his friends on the crew, he’d built the house himself. Jake had helped him do the wiring, and now it was nearly complete. They would be moving the furniture in soon. And today work on the power line would start. Soon he’d have the energy to run all of those appliances in the house. David thought it was the nicest house that a young, newly married couple could move into. He gazed at it, sitting halfway up the hill and nestled in the bright, autumn trees.

David’s watch said nearly seven o’clock, so he put the truck in gear and headed for the shop. He’d never gotten to work this early before, and he didn’t expect to find anyone there. But Barney’s jeep was sitting in the parking lot as David drove in. After parking his truck, David went into
the shop. There was Barney, sitting on the old couch by the furnace.

-Morning, Davey.- Barney crossed his arms and tilted his head back, watching David as he walked in.

-Morning. Where is everybody?- 
-Bob's the only one that ever gets here before now.
You're a little early yourself.-

-Yeah, I guess I am.- David sat in an old, wooden desk chair beside the couch and lit a Camel.

-Peanut should be here pretty soon. He's usually the next one in.- Someone came down the stairs, and David looked up to see Bob walking toward him.

-Well, it looks like Peanut won't be in today.-

-Oh? Why's that?- 

-Dow just came in. Says Peanut called him about six-thirty and told him he had to take his wife to the hospital.-

-What's wrong with her?- 

-She's pregnant. Didn't you know that?- 

-Yes I knew that. But she isn't supposed to have it until next month. Isn't that what Peanut said the other day, David?- 

-I think so.-

-Maybe when you've had as much practice as that little lady has, it doesn't take you quite so long.-

-That could be true. But anyway you look at it, he doesn't plan on coming in today.-
Gradually, the other members of the crew arrived, some going upstairs and the others sitting around the shop. Each was told that Peanut expected to be a father for the fifth time. All nodded in recognition of the event and told their stories and bits of news. At 7:30 the truck drivers came down from the office upstairs, got their trucks, and everyone went to work loading the equipment for the day ahead. Then, when each truck was ready, the crews left for their respective work locations and the coffee break.

Charlie and Pat were always involved in the first step of each new job. All work had to be sketched, and if it was construction, locations for poles and anchors had to be staked out. At 9:05, after the long drive to Greenville and the coffee break, they loaded a bundle of stakes, an ax, a tape measure, and sketch books into a rented boat and set out across Moosehead Lake for Black Point. They were completing the job of staking out and sketching the new line that would run to Beaver Cove. Pat sat in the bow of the boat while Charlie drove across the glassy surface of the giant lake. A few minutes later they landed on a little, rocky beach, took up their equipment, and tramped through the woods to the right-of-way. Starting from the last stake of the day before, they measured the distance to spot where the next pole would be set, and Charlie drove a stake marked "CMP #34" into the ground.
As Francis and Barney, in truck #535, turned onto the back Parkman Road, Francis glanced at his watch. It was 9:45. They would have plenty of time to finish this job before dinner time. They were on their way to hang a transformer and run a service cable for Elsie Patterson, better known as Eveready Elsie. They drove several miles, during which the road became steadily muddier and narrower, before they reached Elsie's shack. As they started down the hill toward the shack, Francis shifted to a lower gear.

-This where Elsie lives?- 
-You'd know that better than I, Francis.-
-I didn't even know there was a line way out here.-
-Oh, sure you did. Don't you remember that time we had to come way out here last summer, two summers ago, way out to that farm out there. It was after that hail storm....-
-That's right, that's right.- Francis shifted again.
-Well, why do you suppose Elsie's waited all this time before she decided to get power?-

-Probably because that man of hers thinks she's prettier in the dark.- Francis laughed and brought the truck to a stop, half on Elsie's shaggy, junk-strwn lawn. Elsie stood in the doorway, as if she'd been there waiting for them, hands on her hips and her rosy, flabby face puckered into a frown. She tapped one foot on the dirty boards of the step. Francis got out to look the job over.
-Morning.- He nodded at Elsie.

-What's the big idea of parking that truck on my lawn, butch?- Barney laughed to himself. Francis tried to be sympathetic.

-Sorry, ma'am. I'll move it onto the road.- Elsie smiled as Francis moved the truck to the opposite side of the road, just past the pole, into position to hang the transformer. As he and Barney set up the bucket and prepared the transformer, Elsie advanced, a step at a time, and watched them work. When Francis took the serial number from the transformer, Elsie stepped to the road.

-What's that thing?- 
-It's a transformer.-
-What's it do?- 
-It steps the voltage down so you can use it in your house. You wouldn't be able to use it without this. It'd be too hot.-

Elsie watched attentively as Barney got into the bucket and maneuvered into position for drilling the holes for the transformer pole mount assembly.

-I love to watch a man work.-
-Lot of good in work for a man.-
-I s'pose it'll be a lot easier living out here now with electricity.-

-It certainly will. I don't know how you've made it
until now.

-Oh, it ain't so bad. Lot better than living in town.
Here you can come and go as you please without everyone buzzing about you.

-It's a good thing to have no matter where you live.
For the price you're getting a lot. Lights, heat, radio,
T.V.... It's clean, there's no danger, and it's dependable.
It'll take care of all your problems.

-You don't have to sell it to me, Butch. You sound like them Jehovah's Witnesses that come around.

Bart and Jesse were the oldest men of the crew. They had worked together for more than twenty years. Bart was the working head lineman of the crew. Jesse could have had his own truck long ago. The offer had been made several times. But he had always declined. Always decided to stick with Bart. The two understood each other. Days would go by with hardly a word spoken. But the two always seemed to have a certain air of satisfaction, as if they shared some vast secret that concerned everyone but that they would never tell. As if a man would have to find it out for himself.

Today they had begun the construction of the line to David's new house. It was difficult because the house lay so far from the road. And since the driveway angled off from the road and it was cheaper to build the line directly through
the woods, Bart and Jesse were unable to use their digger truck to dig two of the four holes. David had cut the path clean of all trees and brush, but they still could not get the truck close enough. So they had to dig the holes by hand. The sketch called for three sections of line. That meant three poles and an anchor at the house end. They had had trouble at first, digging into a maze of tough tree roots. But the soil was soft, and there were few rocks, so after they chopped through the roots, it was relatively easy. That sort of work was tedious, especially with the digger truck sitting so uselessly beside the road. When they had completed the first hole, they covered it and took a break. They drank coffee from a thermos. Jesse read his paper and Bart made out a time sheet.

-Well, I guess that took longer than usual.-
-What's that, Bart?-  
-Well, it's twenty minutes of eleven. Almost three hours.- They would get all four holes dug, though. They had only one more to dig by hand. The stakes for the other two were close enough to the house for them to use the truck.
- Peanut's expecting another one today, hanh?-  
-Yup. Says he wants a boy this time.- Bart ripped off the time sheet and placed it in his notebook.
-Well. I guess we better bust some more sod.-
David worked with Roger on the ladder truck, replacing the old street lights on the Sangerville bridge. He resented not being able to work with Francie. And he didn’t especially like Roger. They had finished by eleven o’clock and had one more light to install before dinner. On the road to the farm, at Bob Church’s place. David sat in the truck, parked on Main Street. While he waited for Roger to finish talking to one of the selectmen, he listened to the radio.

—America is criticized these days for its involvement in Southeast Asia. Other nations ask why we are there, if not to claim other territories. Even some people living in the United States today raise their voices to the cry against what they term American Imperialism. These people are not Americans. They would rather sit in dark rooms and carry on this intellectual hogwash. It was not these anarchists that built this great nation. Nor will they lift a finger to preserve it. These people don’t even realize what real Americans are. They feel no admiration for the people who settled this country, those first settlers who staked out the land, who planted the first crops, and who started the greatest nation in the history of the world. We must not give these anarchists a free hand. They will grow like a cancer until they smother the light of civilization. We must police this land and exterminate these pests....

A movement in the side mirror caught David’s eye, and
he watched as one of the local women, dressed in tight, knee-length, dungaree shorts came out of the grocery store and started up the hill toward Guilford. The shorts gave shape to her ass, making it appear very muscular, and it moved as she walked in a way that excited him. He watched her until she was out of the mirror.

Roger opened the door and crawled into the truck.

-Let's see.- He thumbed through the stack of service requests.

-Robert Church. Know where his house is?- Yeah, I know where that is.- David started the truck and drove up the hill.-

-This has been Liberty Talk Number 34. Copies will be made available through this station at the rate of three for twenty-five cents.-

As they drove past Maggie's house, David sounded the horn. The dead flowers were still there. He thought of Mrs. Abbott. She might be the source of some trouble. She worried him.

-That where your wife-to-be lives?- That's right. Nice place, isn't it?- I suppose.- David shifted again and picked up speed as the truck came over the crest of a small hill. As the next hill came into view, David noticed a small boy standing under a street light.
-Hey! That kid's throwing rocks at the street light.

-Where? By Jesus he is. Let's go get him! Roger sat forward on the edge of the seat and glared at the small boy, straining his eyes as David pushed the accelerator to the floor.

-Yessir. Look at the hair on that kid. He's the one that's been breaking all our lights. Roger took the microphone from the dashboard.

-Five three four to five four four. He's seen us. Don't let him get away.

-Five four four to five three four.

-Theron, we're down here on the back Dover Toad, just out of Sangerville, and we've found the kid that's been breaking all these street lights.

-Okay. I'll be right there.

-KA three one o six off.

-He ducked into the woods up above there. I saw where he went in. David pulled to a stop beside the road, just past the pole where the boy had entered the woods. The two big men jumped out and stood at the side of the road and looked for the boy. But there was no sign of him.

-He must be hiding in there. He couldn't have gotten away this quick. Roger was whispering. David nearly laughed aloud.

-Well? What do you want to do? You want to go after him?
-Well the only way we'll get him is to go after him.

He won't come to us.

-It doesn't really make much difference, does it?-  
-Shhhhh!-

-Jesus Christ, Roger. He's seen us. He won't be back.-  
-Of course he will! These kids won't stop at anything now. I'll circle around the back through that field and you chase him out.-

Before David could protest, Roger had started off through the field. David reluctantly entered the woods to find the boy. He walked in a zig-zag pattern for several minutes before he finally hit upon a path. He followed the path in the direction of the field, and before long there was a rustle of bushes just off the path ahead of him. David looked in that direction and caught a glimpse of the boy running off toward the field. David began to run, and he was soon closing the gap. The boy ran into the field and was trapped in Roger's waiting arms.

-Let me go! I'm telling my father!-

-Come on, kid. Let's get going.- Roger dragged the boy across the field; David following, and after a while the boy decided that it was useless to struggle. When they got back to the truck, Theron, the local rep, was waiting for them.

-Here he is, Theron. You know him?-  
-Yeah, He's Johnny Carey's boy. Isn't your name
Fred Carey? The boy didn't answer.

-Well, I'll take him home and see if we can't straighten this out.- Theron put the boy into his pick-up and drove back toward Sangerville. Roger watched as the truck disappeared from sight, a look of satisfaction on his face.

-Roger, hadn't we better get this light up?

As Peanut was with his wife at the hospital, Paul had remained in the shop to help Bob take stock rather than go in his truck alone. They had worked all morning putting away the newly arrived materials and taking the inventory of what was already there. By eleven-thirty they were tired enough of their job and decided to go into town and eat. They took Paul's jeep and drove to Goulette's Restaurant.

Friday was a busy day for the restaurant. Besides the regulars, many working men who usually brought lunches splurged on Friday, cashed their checks, and spent some of the money before taking it home and turning it over to their wives.

The place was crowded, and the two men had to look for a table. Paul spotted one in the back, and they went to it and sat down. Paul lit a cigarette and crossed his arms on the table.

-We going to work tomorrow, Bob?-  
-I don't know. I haven't gotten any word from upstairs
about it.-

-I guess Bobby will let us know tonight.- Bob turned around and looked towards the counter.

-Where is that waitress, anyway?- Paul yelled to the owner's wife.

-Hey, June. How about some service for us over here?- Be right there, be right with you.- June filled two glasses with water and placed them, with two menus, on the table in front of the men.

-I'll be right back to take your order.-

-What are you up to tonight, Paul? Going out to the widow's?-

-Not tonight. I'm going to the hospital to see Roy.-

-Is he in the hospital again?-

-Yeah, and I guess his wife's pretty shook up this time.-

-Isn't he supposed to have a retirement dinner right off?-

-Yes, but they'll probably have to postpone it.- June returned to the table.

-Okay, boys, what'll you have?- I'd just as soon have that little girl you got working for you.- June turned and looked at her daughter.

-You wouldn't know what to do with it if you had it.-

-I could at least look.-

-I think I'll have the halibut, french fries, peas, and
-Okay. How about you, Joe Pete?-  
-Clams.-  
-French fries or mashed?-  
-Okay.- She took the menus and returned to the kitchen. Paul went to the jukebox and dropped a quarter in the slot.  
  Back at the shop, the two settled down on the couch to relax for the remainder of the noon hour. Bob read the newspaper, and Paul looked through a men's magazine.  
  -Jesus, Bob, look at the knockers on that one!- Bob looked over his glasses at the picture.  
  -Well, I should say. I see here they got two more kids in Greenville for possession of marijuana.-  
  -Some of the nearer-my-god-to-these? Hey, I'd like to try some of that.-  
  -There are enough people getting caught with it.-

At one-thirty the crews converged on the Rockwood Road for the change-over. There were eight new poles, the new section beginning about a mile past the recloser pole. The job consisted of moving the three phase wires from the old poles to the new ones. Kip and Francis would use their bucket trucks, Barney and Jake would climb. Roger and David would cover the recloser and then join the rest to do the groundwork. Bobby, the foreman, kept the operation running
smoothly. The interruption began at one thirty-five. David and Roger opened the line and shut off the recloser. The crew worked like a team, moving each wire two sections at a time. Voices buzzed on the radio; men scrambled around the ground dismantling the materials that were stripped from the old poles. When the transfer had been made on the first two poles, the crew moved to the next two, and so on until the job was finished. David and Roger returned to the recloser, and on signal from Bobby, closed the line again. When he was sure everything was all set, Bobbie jumped into his pick-up and started for home. The others gathered their trucks into a convoy and drove into Greenville to get a beer for the ride home.

The trucks arrived at the shop at just after four and lined up at the gas pump. Kip and Jake were first. As Kip began to refill his tank and Jake started for the shop to make out his time sheets, Peanut emerged from the shop with a paper cup in his hand and a cigar in his mouth, whooping and yelling and grinning. He staggered across the yard to meet Jake, greeted him with a cigar, and walked with him to the gas pump.

—Here. You better take two.— The others gathered around the pump.
—Was it a boy?—
—A boy! Better than that. Two boys!—
-Twins?-

-That's right. Here, Kip old buddy, have a couple cigars. You boys come on into the shop and have a drink.-

Soon, all the men were gathered in the shop. Peanut sat on a box in the middle of the floor, pouring drinks from a half gallon whiskey bottle and passing out cigars with "It's a boy" printed on the wrappers. The shop echoed with waves of laughter, roaring jokes, and broken explanations in celebration of the birth of Peanut's two sons.

-How's your wife, Peanut?- 

-Oh, she's all right. Damn fool can't even count. Thinks six comes after four.- Peanut laughed till tears came to his eyes, and then sighed.

-Two beautiful boys! Eight-pounders!-

David stood in the background and sipped his drink. He was jealous of Peanut's fortune.
By eight-thirty David was ready and went into the kitchen where George sat tuning his Gibson rosewood guitar. George struck a string with the pick and tightened one of the keys.

-Where you boys going tonight?- David lit a Camel and threw the empty pack into the stove.

-Probably just out riding around. Have a few beers and drive around town.- He went to the cupboard next to the sink and got a new pack of cigarettes. George played a chord. One string was still out of tune.

-How's it happen you're not seeing what's-her-name tonight?- David leaned against the sink.

-She has to work until three in the morning.- After a pause, George said solemnly,

-David. Watch out for Ronnie, will you?- 

-Sure, George.- Both turned toward the stairs as Ronnie started down from his room. First the old work boots came into view through the hole in the ceiling. Then the new pants, light blue, and the dark blue sweater. David had given the new clothes to Ronnie for his birthday, but this was the first chance Ronnie had had to wear them. He stood at the foot of the stairs, picking his nose and smiling.

-Well I guess we'll knock 'em out tonight.- Ronnie looked at George, embarrassed.
-You look real nice, Ron.-
-Thanks, Granpa.- Ronnie took a dingy, white comb from his back pocket, and feeling with his fingers, tried to make a straight part in his hair.
-Already to go, Ron?-  
-Yup. Just a minute.-
-Well I'll go warm up the truck.- David went out the door, and George started playing his guitar. Ronnie walked toward the door and stopped in front of his grandfather. George stopped playing and looked up at him.
-I won't be out so late this time, Granpa.-  
-Don't worry, Just have a good time and don't hurt yourself, okay?-  
-Sure, but are you going to be all right?-  
-Course I am! Now go on. Your brother's waiting for you.-  
-Okay. But don't worry, okay?-  
-You have a good time. I'll leave a light on for you.-  
-Okay, good night.- Ronnie ran out and joined David in the truck.

As he opened the door, David turned the radio down and switched on the headlights. He backed the truck around, and soon they were driving towards Sangerville, on their way to Abbot. David drove with the window rolled down, his arm hanging out, smoking a cigarette. He liked the feel of cool
night air against him.

-What kind of beer do you want to get?-

-Oh, I don't know. I thought we might go to a bar instead of just riding around.-

-I can't go to a bar. Anyone could tell I'm not twenty-one.-

-Oh, don't worry about that. Most of these people know me. I don't think they'll say anything. We could just tell them you just got out of the army. That'll do it.-

-Do you think so? Jesus, I can't get into any trouble. I don't want to let Granpa down.-

-Look. Do me a favor, will you? Just forget about George and forget about the farm. Okay?-

-Don't get mad.-

-I'm not mad. I just want you to have a good time.-

David cleared his throat and spit out the window, glad to be getting Ronnie away from the farm. He only hoped Ronnie appreciated it.

As they drove past Maggie's house, David honked the horn. He knew she wasn't home. He did it for the benefit of her parents. Other than Francis, David had never tried to impress anyone more than Dr. Abbott.

David let the truck coast past the church and down the hill into town. He stopped at the end of the bridge, admiring the new lights, and then drove up the hill on the opposite
side of Main Street and on to Guilford. When they got to
Guilford, David turned onto the Abbot Road and headed for
the Handy Tavern, a large, pre-fabricated building about a
mile before the village.

Abbot was a dead town during the day. It had no industry.
Only a few scattered farms. Most of its people worked in
either Guilford or Greenville. But at night it came alive.
Especially on the week-ends. Abbot was the only town in the
county that had voted to allow the sale of beer in taverns.
So many of the people in the surrounding towns congregated
in one of Abbot's two beer houses.

David turned the truck into the gravel parking lot.
It was packed. He wondered how much Frank was making. Not
even nine o'clock and he had to park in the field beside the
lot.

- Are you sure we won't get into trouble, David? -
- Don't you worry. Just act like you own the place. -

The two of them went into the large, noisy room that
was lit only with beer signs and stood near the door, looking
for a place to sit. At one end a woman playing an accordion
and a man playing a guitar, both wearing cowboy hats, stood
on a small stage and sang into a microphone. One of the
speakers in the sound system was cracked and their nasal
voices were fuzzy. Nearly as loud was the hum of conversation.
Ronnie looked about the room, through the smokey atmosphere, at the half-drunk patrons squeezed around small tables. Everyone seemed to be old. He saw only a few that were even as young as his brother. Ronnie was nervous and uncomfortable, even scared at these strange-looking people. He didn't recognize anyone he knew. He didn't even look directly at anyone. He was afraid they'd think he was staring. He just kept scanning the room and waited for David to do something. Finally David found an empty table, elbowed Ronnie, and started toward it. Ronnie followed closely, and they sat down, out of everyone's sight and into the safety of the crowd. Ronnie glanced at the people around him.

-Jesus, David. This is something else. Is it always this crowded?-
-Oh yeah. Usually more.- David watched two women leave their table and walk toward the rest room in the back. A big, dirty-looking man came towards them. Ronnie watched, petrified, as the giant approached David's back. He carried a glass of beer in one hand and slapped David hard on the shoulder with the other, at the same time yelling in a powerful voice.

-Hey, you old son of a bitch!- David looked up and the two stared at each other for a moment. Ronnie was sure this was the end. But suddenly David was smiling and standing up, and the two were shaking hands.
-Phil! Phil! How long have you been back?- Ronnie sunk down in relief.
-About a week.-
-Well sit down. Jesus Christ!- David and Phil sat down, and David introduced Ronnie.

-Phil, this is my little brother. Ronnie, this is Phil, an old school mate.- Phil roared with laughter.
-You two are brothers? I never would have believed it.-
He shook Ronnie's hand.

-So tell me, Phil? What are you doing back here? You on leave?-

-Hell no! I got kicked out. They thought I had something to do with this nigger getting his throat slit. But I didn't really. You know I wouldn't do a think like that.-

-Of course not. You would've just broken his neck.-
Phil and David roared at each other. Ronnie felt very conspicuous.

-Tell me, Phil. What do you have to do to get some service here?-

-I'll get someone for you. I've got to get back to my table. Might have something lined up for tonight and I got to protect my interests. I'll see if I can get a waitress for you.-
Phil stood up to leave.

-Well, shit, Phil, too bad you can't stay longer.-

-Oh, I plan on being around for a while. I'll catch
you later. Nice meeting you, little feller.­

-Yeah, you too.- Phil returned to the other end of
the room.

-David, what if they find out I'm not old enough? What'll
they do?-­

-Don't worry. They won't. Just don't be nervous.-
-But what if I get caught? Won't they be pissed?-­
-Will you take it easy. Look, here comes Vi. Just don't
worry.- Ronnie lit a cigarette, but his hand shook so much
he had to hold it under the table. He watched as a fat, mid-

dle-aged waitress with teased, bleached hair walked toward
them.

-Evening, Vi.-

-Hi, David. Who's your friend?-­

-This here's by brother Ronnie. Just back from the Army.
Ron, this is Vi.- Ronnie smiled nervously and said hello.

-How old are you, Ron?-­

-Twenty-one.-­

-Got at I.D.?- Ronnie felt his back pockets.

-Damn it. I must have lost my wallet. I guess I don't
have one with me.-­

-Well I can't serve you then.-­

-Oh, come on, Vi. I'll vouch for him.-­

-Sorry, I can't do it.-
-Look at him, Vi. Anyone can tell he's old enough.-
-He looks about eighteen to me.-
-Goddamn it, Vi!-
-Don't swear at me, Mister, or I'll call Frank.-
-Get him over here and I'll call you both a few things.

Come on, Ronnie. This bitch makes me sick.- Vi went off to get her husband. David stomped out, gritting his teeth and swearing, Ronnie was close behind. They got into the truck, and David started and raced the engine. Ronnie watched out the window.

-Sorry, David. I knew something like this would happen.-

-Oh, it wasn't your fault. It's that stupid Vi that kills me. She's so fucking stupid.-

-Well, do you want to just go and get some beer?-

-Now we're not going to let this stop us. We'll go to Joanne's.-

-What's that like?-

-I don't know. I've never been there. I hear they have a rock band there. Want to try it?-

-Oh, I don't know.- Ronnie shrugged.

-We might as well.- David drove onto the road and into the village. In the middle of town he turned right, across a small bridge, and got out on the back road to Guilford.

They continued along that road until they reached a bend in
the river. There, on a small hill stood a big shack with "Joanne's" painted on one side of the roof. It was as crowded here. David didn't bother with the lot. He parked beside the road, and he and Ronnie went in.

Joanne's was more like a camp than a beer hall. There were several small rooms, one having a bar, and a larger one for dancing. Ronnie and David entered the well-lighted room with the bar and several booths against the wall. All the seats were taken, and many people stood in the aisles. Even here the music made talk difficult. People were yelling into each other's faces. The two brothers managed to get to the opposite side of the room and went into another of about the same size. There were even more people here, drinking and laughing, crowded around small tables. Over the noise the two were greeted by a friendly voice. It was Paul.

-Hey, David! Come on over.- They joined Paul, standing by his table, and Ronnie felt a bit more secure. Paul and David yelled at each other for a few minutes, but Ronnie couldn't hear what they were saying over the music. Then David led the way, down the steps, to the room where the band was playing. This room was twice as big as the others, but still quite small for dancing. It was much darker here, with only the light from the doorway and a long ultraviolet light on the ceiling. People were hopping about the dance floor as the band played "Joanne's Place."
It's just a little place on the Abbot Road
Where the drink is cold and the lights are low.

Jammed around the dance floor were more little tables with
benches against the wall. David looked on at the dancers
and smiled. The crowd seemed to be much younger. Ronnie
felt more relaxed.

-Jesus, David, this sure is a wild place.-
-I know it. I didn't realize it was like this. Awful
crowded, though. Looks like we'll have to stand.-
-There's a table over there.- Ronnie pointed to the
far corner.

-Where? Oh, yeah. Let's go get it quick.- David forced
his way through the crowd and took possession of the table.
A minute later, Ronnie arrived. As soon as he sat down, a
lively, little blond waitress came over to them. She smiled
at David.

-What'll it be, boys?-  
-Bring us some beer.-  
-You want a pitcher?-  
-Yeah.-
-Schlitz or Miller?-  
-Schlitz.-
-Okay, be right back.- As she turned to leave, David
yelled after her.

-Better make that two?-
-Okay.- She disappeared into the crowd.

-You see? No trouble at all.- Ronnie couldn't help smiling.

-I know! I couldn't believe it.-

-Jesus look at that one with the long, black hair.-

-Wow!-

-Awful lot of nice looking women here, ain't there.-

-There sure is.-

-That waitress wasn't bad either. Here she comes with the beer.- Ronnie pulled a crumpled bill from his pocket.

-I got a dollar.-

-Forget it. Put it back in your pocket and save it. It's on me tonight.- The waitress set two pitchers of frothy beer and two glasses on the table.

-Two dollars and seventy cents.-

-There you go.- She fished for change.

-There's three, four, and five. Thanks boys. I'll see you later.- She winked at Ronnie and disappeared again.

Each poured a glass from his own pitcher. David drank his down and refilled the glass. Ronnie sipped, leaving the white froth on his upper lip. David went quickly through his pitcher and ordered two more. Within an hour, Ronnie had finished his first. David had gone through three and ordered the same again.

-I don't know about you, buddy. But between drinking
this beer and watching those women dance. I'm getting a little bit horny.- Ronnie laughed. He was confident now.

- Me too.- David elbowed him again.

- Hey, let's find a couple of these women and fuck 'em. Want to?-

- Sure, anything you say.- David looked around the room for two girls without dates. But they were all dancing. After the waitress had brought their beer, though, two girls came down the steps to the dance floor and looked around the room for a table. David pointed them out to Ronnie. One was medium-size with large breasts and long, straight, mousy-brown hair. The other was much shorter and on the fat side with short, dark hair teased into a bubble and oval, black-rimmed glasses. They wore sweaters and slacks, and their faces were thick with make-up. Neither was very pretty, but David didn't care. They couldn't find a table so they had to sit on one of the benches next to the wall.

- Ain't I getting drunk, David?- 

- Which one do you want?- 

- Hanh?-

- Want the one with the long hair?- 

- Oh, no, I don't care. You go ahead.- 

- I'll ask one to dance and you ask the other, okay?- 

David stood up. Ronnie looked up at him.

- Gee, I don't know....- He gritted his teeth.
-Come on, come on. I can't get anything worked out if I don't have someone for the other girl. You'll do it, won't you? After I brought you up here and all?-  
-Oh, okay. I'll try.-  
-Try! There's nothing to it. Just go ask her to dance.-  
David went to the girls, spoke to the tall one, and took her to the dance floor. But Ronnie didn't move. He watched them dance, now and then glancing nervously at the other girl. David and the tall one danced until the band's break and then returned to their places.  
-Her name's Candice, and her friend's name is Doria. I'm going to ask them to join us.-  
-Gee, I don't know...-  
-Oh, it'll be all right.-  
-But I don't know if I'm ready.-  
-Come on.-  
Then he took their beer and led them to his table. Ronnie lit a cigarette.  
-This is my brother, Ron. Ron, this is Candice, and this is Doria. Sit down, girls. Sit down.- Everyone sat and began drinking.  
-This is a nice place. You come here often?-  
-Every Friday and Saturday night. Sometimes more. Isn't that right, Candice?-  
-That's right.-  
-You boys from around here?- Ronnie blurted out an
answer before David could think of anything to say.
-Yeah. We live in Sangerville. On the back...
-How long is the band's break usually?
-Not long. Five or ten minutes.
-Well maybe we ought to have more beer, eh?- David spoke to the waitress as she walked past him. She brought three pitchers. David paid her and tipped her a dollar.
-Thanks, mister.- She sized up David more carefully.
-Think nothing of it, Sweetie.- David filled the glasses.
A few minutes later the band returned to the stage and began playing a loud, fast rock number. David grabbed Candice by the wrist and took her to the dance floor. Ronnie watched the dancers and the band, unable to speak to Doria except to answer her questions.
-You work?- 
-Course I work! On my Granpa's farm.-
-In Sangerville?- 
-Yup.-
-I work in the mill office in Guilford.-
-That right?- 
-How 'bout it Ron? You want to dance?- 
-Oh, I don't know. I'm not much of a dancer, Gloria.-
-Doria. But never mind. You just get up there and move
to the music. Follow your instincts.

-I'd be embarrassed.

-Don't be bashful. Come on.- Doria rose and took Ronnie's hand. Ronnie gulped down his beer as he got up, and Doria led him to the dance floor. She made a place for them near Candice and David and began shaking her flabby little body to the music. Ronnie joined in, and soon he forgot everything else. Doria hopped around, shaking her big ass and moving closer to Ronnie. David watched for a moment, grinning and still dancing, and then turned back to Candice. When the song was over, they all remained on the floor, and Ronnie talked to Doria as if they were old friends, only half aware of what he was saying. The singer announced that they were going to slow it down and the band began playing. Doria flung her arms around Ronnie's neck, buried her face in his chest, and led him around the floor on her tiptoes.

"Every day I wake up
Then I start to break up
Lonely is a man without love."

Ronnie held her close, and she pressed herself against him. Ronnie tensed his ass and pressed back, closing his eyes and forgetting everything but the feel of her body.

When the set was over, the band began packing up the equipment. The drunks finished off as much beer as they could get down and filed out, stumbling across the parking lot to
search for their cars. Ronnie hated to see the evening end.
He had had a good time. He said good-by to Doria in the
parking lot and bent down to kiss her. He held his lips
tightly together and pressed them against hers but drew
quickly back when he encountered her wet, open mouth. He
felt as if a dog had lapped his face. Doria giggled and
said she'd see him later. Ronnie said good-by again and
joined David in the truck. David got behind the girls'
white Ford and followed them toward Guilford. Ronnie was
too excited to be tired and began talking.

-That really was fun. Thanks a lot, David. I really
liked Doria. She's a nice girl.-

-Well, I'm glad you've had a good time.-

-How do you like Candice?-  

-She's all right. Nice body.-

-Too bad it had to end so soon. Maybe we can see them
again sometime, hanh?-  

-Look in that car up ahead.- David flicked the head-
lights on high-beam. Ronnie strained his eyes and sat forward
in the seat.  

-What about it?-  

-Just look.-

-Hey! That isn't them, is it?-  

-Sure is.- David stayed close behind them all the way
into Guilford. At River Street, instead of continuing straight
towards Sangerville, he turned in after them.
Hey, David. Where are we going?

To their apartment.

Really! What for?

To have a drink and get laid?

What! Wait a minute!

Don't be nervous.

But they didn't even ask us over.

Yes they did. I've already talked to Candice about it.

But Doria didn't say anything to me.

Don't worry. She wants to fuck you.

How do you know?

I can tell. Don't worry. Ronnie had no time to protest, for the girls had turned into a driveway beside a white apartment house. David parked on the side of the street, and they followed the girls into the building, into a small living room with a kitchenette on one side.

This is where we live. Have a seat anywhere, and I'll fix some drinks. David and Candice sat on the couch and started kissing. Ronnie sat silently in the big chair beside the stereo. Doria brought whiskey and ginger ale for David and Candice. Then she brought the same for Ronnie and sat on the hassock at his feet. She talked and Ronnie listened, sipping his drink and glancing nervously at the couple on the couch. Before he knew it, David and Candice had disappeared into another room.
-Where'd they go?-
-To the bedroom, Dummy.- Doria went to the stereo and put on a record. Ronnie tapped his fingers to the music and looked about the room.

-Let's sit on the couch. Want to?- 
-Yeah, I guess so.- On the couch Ronnie finished his drink and placed the glass on the end table beside him. He turned back towards Doria and as he did, she moved closer, threw her arms around his neck, and began kissing him. He sat stiffly and closed his eyes as she ran her fingers through his hair and caressed his neck. Suddenly, she drew back.

-Come on, Ronnie. Loosen up. And for God's sake, open your mouth.- She moved in on him again. This time he responded, putting his arms around her. She moved her hand up the inside of his thigh and darted her slippery tongue around the inside of his mouth. After a minute she pulled away and stood up.

-I'll be right back.- She disappeared through another door. Ronnie wiped his face on his sleeve. He heard the sound of a toilet flushing, and Doria reappeared. She turned out the lights on her way by, and soon they were kissing again. She ran her hand under his sweater and rubbed his chest. He squeezed her breast, and she took off her sweater and bra and threw them to the floor. Ronnie strained to look at her
in the dark room. She took off the rest of her clothes and helped Ronnie out of his. Suddenly he was lying on her pudgy body, between her soft thighs, moving quickly against her and driving his cheek into the couch.

-This your first time, Ron?- 
-No. Course not.- Doria reached down and guided him into her.

-It's much nicer this way.- Ronnie said nothing. Her softness was too exciting. He didn't even have to move. He just lay there and stiffened as the orgasm took over.

Sometime later, Ronnie was snatched back to consciousness as he heard with alarm his brother whispering loudly from the bedroom door.

-Ronnie. Ronnie. You about ready to head home?- Ronnie jumped to his feet and pulled on his pants.

-Just a minute! Don't turn on the light yet!- Doria pulled the couch cover around her and sat up.

-You can't take him, David. I'm going to keep him here with me.-
-No. Really, Doria! I got to go home....- Doria giggled.

-I was only kidding.- David went outside and started the truck. At the door, Ronnie said good-by to Doria.

-I like you Ron. You're funny. Maybe we can get together again sometime.-
-Gee, I don’t know, Doria. I work a lot. I’m awful busy. But...yeah, maybe. Listen, I got to get going.-

-Okay, but kiss me good-night.- Ronnie pecked her on the lips and dashed out the door into the pouring rain.

-So long, Doria.-

The drive home seemed long. Ronnie had sobered off a bit, but David’s driving didn’t have its usual precision. They drove to Sangerville and onto the back road. As they went over the bridge and up the hill, David noticed that the street lights along the road were out. He thought of that kid he and Roger had caught earlier. As they approached Maggie’s house, he turned to his brother.

-You remember I told you Peanut, one of the guys on the crew, had twin sons today?- Ronnie looked out the window.

-Yeah? What about it?- 

-Paul told me tonight that one of them died.- 

-That’s too bad.- 

-Yeah, but he’s got five kids already. I don’t know how he supports them. Not the way he drinks.- 

-Rain’s letting up some. It’ll still take a long time for those beans to dry out again.- 

-Yeah, I guess it will. Well, you’ll have some time off then.- 

-Ha. Who needs that?- After a pause, Ronnie turned to face his brother.
-David?- 
-What?- 
-How come you hate the farm?- 
-I don't really hate it. I just don't want to be a farmer for the rest of my life.- 
-That's really it? It doesn't have anything to do with Granpa?- 
-What makes you say that?- 
-I don't know. I just got the idea somewhere that you didn't like him. You're always fighting.- 
-It's not that. We really don't fight. We just argue. I just don't like the idea of him trying to make me into something I don't want to be. Do you?- 
-I never thought he was?- 
-Well, if you don't do something about it, you're going to end up living there for the rest of your life. That farm is just a death trap. It's a piece of the past, a place where George can live like it's still the old days and get the life sapped out of him for nothing. And the same thing's going to happen to you if you don't do something about it.- 
-But what makes you think anything else is any better?- 
-Because I've seen how other people live. No one else has just enough to survive. Besides, don't you think you're wasting your life there? Don't you want to feel like you're doing something with yourself?-
-Like what?-

-Like being part of civilization instead of living in the woods. Don't you want to make this place better to live in? He won't even have electricity in that place. Do you like living in the dark? Wouldn't you rather be alive than dead?- 

-Yes, but if it's such an awful place, why didn't you move out a long time ago?- 

-I would have if I could. But it was cheaper to just pay George room money. Even if he wouldn't take it, I've been putting it aside. But, I needed every cent I could get to build my house. And I didn't have anyone to move into an apartment with. I would have moved out long ago if I could have.- 

-Boy, my dink itches.- Ronnie squirmed, pushed his hands down inside his pants, and scratched. David lit his last cigarette, crumpled the pack, and threw it out the window. He had gone through a whole pack since they left the farm. That was ridiculous. He had to cut down. He wondered how long it had been. Ronnie withdrew his slimy hand and raised it to his nose.

-Peeeyew!- David chuckled and turned on the cab light to check his watch. Almost two-thirty. Six hours. That was more than three cigarettes an hour.

-Blood! David, I'm bleeding!- David looked over to
see what was wrong and realizing what had happened, burst into laughter.

-David! What are you laughing at? I'm bleeding!-

-Don't worry, Ron.- He switched off the light.

-She was just having her period. All girls bleed when they have their period. It happens every month. It is kind of rank though. I can smell it way over here.- Ronnie was relieved. He really didn't understand, though. He sat back in the seat and wiped his hand on his pants.

-But didn't you have a good time tonight, Ron? I mean, you got drunk, you got a piece of ass.... What more could you ask for?- 

-Yeah, I had a good time. It was fun.-

-Well, you see. Things like that aren't part of a farmers' life. And think of all the good things you can do for people. I mean, for your friends. Like some of the guys on the crew helping me build my house. I expect I'll help them out someday. It makes me feel good just thinking about it. Just the same as it makes me feel good hooking up services so people will have electricity. When was the last time you did something like that for someone?- 

-I don't know.-

-You've just got to start living for yourself and not for the farm.- David started coughing. He swerved to the left side of the road. He brought the truck back to the right and nearly gagged as he hawked up a gob of phlegm. He
rolled down the window and spit it out onto the wet road, throwing the cigarette after it. Ronnie slouched down in his seat. He stared at the reflection of the dash-board lights and the driver and the rain drops streaking down the window. Suddenly he caught the flash of something in the corner of his eye, something light against the black woods, and there was a loud crash against the truck body behind his door. David hit the brakes.

-What was that!?

-I don't know. I think something ran into the back.-

David stopped the truck, turned on the emergency blinkers, and the two of them got out. David searched the ditch with the flashlight, and Ronnie followed. Soon they came upon the broken body of a deer, bleeding in the ditch. Its breath, forced and harsh, steamed in the light rain. David kneeled next to it and examined it under the beam of the flashlight.

-Will we have to kill it? We will, won't we?- 

-I don't know, Ron. It doesn't look good.- David gave the flashlight to Ronnie and ran back to the truck. Ronnie looked down at the bleeding animal, struggling for breath but not trying to get up. He switched off the flashlight, but the image was still there, red and awful with each flash of the truck's emergency lights. David returned with his three-pound hammer and knelt beside the deer again. Gripping the hammer with both hands, he raised it high above his head and brought it down as hard as he could, driving it through
the animal's skull. Blood splashed onto his jacket. Ronnie could not turn away. But the sound made him sick. David wiped the hammer against the tall grass of the ditch. Together they walked back to the truck. David replaced the hammer into the tool box and, taking the flashlight from his brother, examined the dent in the body. He ran his fingers over the cracked paint.

-Hope my insurance will cover this. Can't report it tonight, though.- He went around to the driver's side and got into the truck. Ronnie stood, looking back along the road until the blinkers stopped. Then he got in, and they drove to the farm.
Chapter Five

It was not until the beginning of November that George and Ronnie had managed to get their crop of beans pulled, dried, thrashed, and winnowed. The beans sat in burlap sacks in the barn, except for the two sacks which George was picking over in the kitchen. Ronnie had gone to work for Elmer, helping him pack his potatoes. That made little difference as far as picking over the beans was concerned. There was only one rack, and only one person could operate it at a time. And Ronnie hated to work alone. It was lonely for the old man, though, and he was feeling the strain of having no one to relieve him.

George sat at the rack, next to the wall opposite the table, picking over beans and glancing occasionally out the window at the snowy yard, the driveway with the tire prints two inches deep in yesterday's melting snow. Then back to the rack and the white and brown beans moving slowly toward him on the conveyer belt.

The rack was very old, built by his grandfather in the barely remembered days of George's childhood. It consisted mainly of a small wooden frame, which could very well have been the frame of a small table, and a hopper at the end opposite the operator, large and open at the top and narrowing to a small open square at the bottom. The beans were poured into the hopper and slowly released onto a conveyer
belt run by a sewing machine pedal. They moved with the belt toward the operator, and he picked out the bad ones, the stems, and the small ones, and placed them in the little wooden boxes which lay on either side of the belt. The beans passed along the belt and fell down a chute at the near end, into a coffee can on the floor. George worked slowly, watching the parade of beans, pumping mechanically with his legs, selecting, and keeping the beans moving on their course from bag to rack to coffee can to bag again. He had trouble with the pedal. It was often difficult to keep the rack running smoothly with so little strength in one leg. And he was weary. The crop was a bad one. Much of it was waste, and from two bags he could barely get one that was marketable. He was late, too. By now the prices had dropped considerably. He'd have little more than enough money to pay his taxes. It would be a hard winter. For the first time in his life, George wished that it would not come. He yearned for spring.

Suddenly, there was the splatter of beans on the wooden floor. George looked under the rack at the coffee can, heaped over and surrounded by the beans that had scattered on the floor. He knelt on the floor, gathered the strewn beans, and threw them into the burlap bag. They landed with a swish. He replaced the can under the chute and sat down in the chair. But before he could start the rack again, he heard the rumble
of his truck coming up the driveway. He stretched his neck to look out the window over the sink. The green ton-and-a-half rounded the bend, Ronnie at the wheel.

-Oh shit! The stew!- George went to the stove and poked the fire. When it began to blaze again, he moved a covered pot over it. He turned around as Ronnie came in the door and began scraping the sticky snow from his boots. The boy had something in his hand.

-Hi, Gramps.-

-Howdy.- George nodded. Ronnie moved to the sink and hung a new shaving mirror on the nail. He could see George's face in it. He smiled at his grandfather.

-Got us a new one.- Ronnie pumped water into the wash basin.

-Yuh. I see. Looks like a good one.- Ronnie looked at his watch for a moment, then glanced at the clock over the table as he unfastened the strap and placed it on the window sill. He began washing.

-Getting warmer, ain't it?- George moved to his seat at the table and poked the ashes in his pipe with his little finger.

-Seems to be.-

-Boy, you ought to see Elmer's new potato rack. What a beaut! Got it all set up last night.-

-That right?-
-Yup. Says it'll increase his profits five percent.
- Hunh.
- Yup. Five percent.- Ronnie wiped his hands and put his watch on again.

-Oh, I didn't show you what I bought with part of last week's pay.- Ronnie crossed the room and modeled his new watch for George. The old man bent down and examined it.

-See those green dots? They shine in the dark. Nice one, hanh?-
-Well I should say.-
-What's for dinner? This stew?- 
- Yup. But I don't think it's warmed up yet. I just put it on.-

-Don't matter. I'm in kind of a hurry.- Ronnie filled a bowl from the pot, sat across from George, and began eating.

-I got to get back into town to pick up Elmer's wife at the grocery store. We ain't had anyone to tie bags all morning, and we're getting way behind.- George went into his bedroom and returned with his guitar. He sat down and strummed a chord.

-You ain't going to eat, Granpa?- 
-No, not now. I'm not too hungry. You didn't happen to pick up that string for me this noon, did you?- Ronnie looked up at George and screwed up his face.

-Goddamn it! How could I go and forget that! I'm
sorry. Really. I'll pick it up when I go get Alice.- George continued strumming on five strings.

-Don't matter, really. I wasn't in any hurry for it.-

-I won't forget it this time. Maybe you and I can play some before I go to Doria's tonight. Oh. No. I promised David I'd help him move some furniture. But after I do that maybe we can. Okay?-

-Don't matter. I got plenty to keep me busy. You been seeing a lot of Doria. She a pretty nice girl?- Ronnie finished eating and placed the bowl in the sink.

-Oh, she's all right. You know, a nice kid and a lot of fun.- He took a mug from the cupboard, filled it with milk in the pantry, and returned, drinking, to the kitchen.

-Well, I guess I better get going. Let's see, it was the little 5 string wasn't it?-

-Yeah. But don't worry about it.-

-Don't worry. I won't forget. See you tonight.-

Ronnie went out the door and ran to the truck. The old man sat watching as he turned around and drove off.

George looked at the guitar in his lap. Like everything else on the farm, it was old, a memory of better times. With a stiff left hand the old man fingered a chord and played. But as he changed chords, his hard, clumsy fingers missed the strings, and the guitar gave out a harsh, buzzing sound. George held his hand in front of his face, closed it,
and then opened it again. Farming wasn't the best work for a guitar player's hands.

George leaned the guitar against the wall behind him and lit his pipe. He stayed there only a short while longer, put down his pipe, and returned to the rack. When the can was filled, and the beans spilled on the floor again, he got up, letting them lie there, and returned to his chair. In the middle of lighting his pipe, he got up quickly, grabbed his coat and hat, and went outside.

It was considerably warmer than it had been the day before. The snow was melting, soft and sticky underfoot. The few icicles that hung from the eaves dripped in steady streams of cold water, into holes in the snow. George looked at his feet, at the snow surrounding them. His gaze followed the length of the field, past the brown spot of mud to the opening in the trees that led to the field beyond. His eyes followed the trees, to the very tips of the uppermost branches and higher to the unbearable brightness of the sun. Squinting to protect his old eyes, he dropped his gaze down to the pine grove. Suddenly a clump of melting snow broke loose from the roof, slid, and fell to the ground. It landed near his feet, and George could almost see it melt into the snow on the ground.

George began across the field, stepping with his good leg and the old, smooth staff and then drawing the stiff leg along. He gazed ahead at the trees on the hill, trying to
remember this day's place in the year. It was a time of year which was very dark, when the woods are a mixture of the dull, reddish-brown and the dark green of the spruce and fir trees, made darker by ribs of birches and the whiteness of the snow; a time that falls between autumn and winter but can't be said to belong to either season, having neither the fire of the fall nor the purity of winter, but more of death than any time of the year. If on any day the earth seemed dead and unrenewable, it was on this day.

George moved over the snow, making odd tracks with his bad leg and walking stick, occasionally picking up clods of mud on his boots. He reached the beginning of the slopes in the middle of the field and walking was more difficult. Still watching the horizon, he moved into the little area where the snow had melted and turned the soil to mud. Suddenly he was sliding, the pull of the earth forcing him into awkward positions. His legs spread, struggling to keep his hold and move forward, he dug his stick into the soft ground and pushed himself up the hill. When he had nearly gotten out of the circle of mud, he stepped, and in bringing his leg along, kicked the back of his forward foot, stumbled, and fell into the mud. He got up as quickly as he could, wiped the earth from his jacket with a muddy hand, and rubbed the hand against his pants. With some difficulty he got his stick and moved on, pushing upward to the crest of the hill.
His tracks were brown as he trudged through the snow.

At the woods, George moved more quickly, through the opening and into the field where he and Ronnie had hunted. At the end of this second field he stopped before the path that led to the top of the hill and the cemetery. He looked up through the woods, along the overgrown path. He didn't have the strength to climb to the top. Certainly this day was full of death. He might even die on such a day. The idea frightened him, made him light-headed, and he sat down on a rock at the edge of the woods. He was breathing heavily. He felt as if he might pass out. Somehow that was a pleasant thought, sitting there and just not getting up, turning to stone.

He was tired and weak and at the same time angry with himself to have gotten into such a state. Greasy drops of sweat slid down his face, dipping into the wrinkles and sticking to the stubbly, gray hairs of his beard. Bits of mud turned light and hardened on his cheeks.

From his position on the rock, he could see a large part of the land which belonged to the farm. As he looked down at the sagging, faded house, his eyes filled with water, and his vision became blurred. The landscape blended into a green brown flow, and the shack disappeared into the snow. Unconsciously, he held his breath. His heart beat even faster. He sat hypnotized until in his stomach he felt the
sensation of falling. The feeling swelled, and he was con-
scious of nothing else.

This sensation was not new to George. He had experi-
enced such feelings before, though he never really understood
them. He thought that they might be related to his death,
but when they had passed, he always felt much more alive.
Or that he was closer to understanding something or at least
feeling something that was much more alive than himself. His
mood changed as his eyes came into focus again, and he looked
down at the house and the land around it. This day was the
day after the first snowfall that melts and creates the illu-
sion of spring, with its promise of vitality. It was only
a reminder, before winter put everything to sleep, that spring
would follow.

Soon George felt strong enough to continue. There was
no need to turn back. He wanted to walk on the old road so
he crossed the field and entered the tote road, following it
through the break to its junction with the old road.

The old road held many memories for George, memories
which grew sweeter and sweeter with age. So many times he
had traveled the distance between his own farm and the Pages'.
In his childhood, he and his brothers had gone there to learn
to read. And when he'd grown older and fallen in love with
Ginny, he had gone everyday to see her. They would walk to
his house and then back again. And then he would return home,
alone and happy in the dark, peaceful woods.

When the old house came into view, George stopped to look at it. He hadn't been to the house for a long time, and its disintegration seemed to have picked up its pace. When he had walked the road more regularly, he'd watched the house fall apart so slowly that it seemed only natural. But not seeing it for some time had restored his older memories, and now the sight was horrifying. The roof and walls were sagging and partially caved in. Even the chimneys were falling down. The wood was gray and faded, and the windows were no more than black, gaping holes in the walls. The thing stood there, big and dead. Only the cement steps at the front door, cold and hard, were resisting the disintegration.

George moved closer, to a window hole in the gray wall, and peered in. Much of the ceiling had caved in. Plaster lay on the floor where it had fallen. Strips of wall paper hung stiffly, exposing the guts of the house. It was no more than a carcass. George ran his fingers down the rough inside of the window casing, brushed the dust from his fingers, and walked away.

At the pine grove George paused, leaning against a tree, and gazed at the remains of his own farm. In his imagination he reconstructed the bustling place, the great barns, the silo, the smoke house, the master house where he had been born. It had been a civilization within itself. So many families
had lived there at that time. But then all those dry summers and brutal winters, diseases and fires. Though it had happened over the course of sixty years, it seemed now that everything had vanished suddenly, even his wife and his sons. Only he remained. He leaned forward against his stick holding it with both hands, gripping so tightly that his hands and arms trembled. He looked at his shack with squinting, tiny eyes, suddenly remembered the beans and started home, thinking that spring would never come.
With the wedding only a week and a day off, David was on his way to the new house to add the finishing touch: he had stopped at Williams' in Dover on his way home from work and gotten the new Zenith color television that he and Maggie had picked out and now drove along the back road with it wrapped in a blanket and tied in one corner of the truck body. It was the latest model, a big, beautiful television with a walnut cabinet and a twenty-four-inch screen.

David was feeling particularly good, as he always did when he bought something expensive, and he hummed and sang to himself as he drove, enjoying the last rays of the sun and the long, blue shadows of trees and houses spreading over the white landscape. Ronnie would be at the house to help him unload, he'd hook it up, (Ronnie would be dazzled), and then he would drive to get Maggie and bring her down to see it. David thought about telling her.

Maggie, you'll love it. The picture is crystal clear. It's solid state so it comes right on. Four channels, maybe more with a better antenna. And what colors! It's by the green chair in the living room. We'll sit on the couch and watch the games. And movies. And drink. And make out. Eat hair pie. Pie, pie, hay-er pie. P-I-E-E-I-P pie. David suddenly realized that, since Maggie's hair was red, that her pubic hair would be red too. He was struck by the image
of her in his mind, standing nude, those long, beautiful, strong, white legs converging in a clump of soft, auburn bristles. Oh my God! That made him horny. His erection, pushing against the tight crotch of his dungarees, increased his excitement. Can't get enough of that hay-er pie!

Distracted, David forgot his driving and the road ahead. Suddenly the left front tire dropped into a pot hole. The truck gave a sudden bounce and jarred him out of his dream. He pressed his foot on the brake and twisted around, looking through the back window to see that the television was all right. It seemed still to be securely tied, and he hadn't heard it slide or bounce, so he turned back to the road, shifted, and continued toward the house.

Wouldn't want to lose that baby off. Better slow down and watch the driving. David switched on the headlights. Not much good this time of day. At least other people can see you. Red hair pie! Mmmmmmmm! Sure sounds goo-ood. Solid. Great body. Last a life time if you treat it right. Don't cost much to run. Soft reds. Bright green. Real nice. Hope Ronnie's there. Better be, the little bastard. Can't get enough of that hair pie.

I'll have to put on the plow. Don't want to rely on that old rattle-trap of George's. Don't want to rely on him for anything. I'm finally getting away. Free as a bird. No more trips outside for a midnight shit. No more looking
at that ugly place. And listening to him ramble on. Just me. And my wife. And my house and truck. And my new TV! No more living around somebody. Who'd ever think he'd let it fall down around him like that? It's a dead place, nothing left but the rotting. What am I thinking about that for? Oh shit! I've got to see him about that deed!

David drove to the top of the rise where the entrance to the right-of-way met the road. He looked up at the two primary wires that stretched from the road to his house, shiny aluminum in the last rays of sunlight, bright against the dark brown poles. The whine of two small engines caught his attention, and he looked to the opposite side of the road, down onto the field behind Elmer's house where two snowmobiles raced through the shadows, their paths lit by two weak headlights. David thought of the time he'd ridden with Jake. It was fun. But they hadn't better try riding on his land. He watched them for a moment longer and then turned onto the long, snow-covered driveway and drove to the house. At the end of the driveway he backed around and came to a stop a few inches from the wide garage door.

No sign of Ronnie. Where in hell is he? I told him five o'clock and it's ... five past. He better get here. Wonder if I should leave it out in the cold. David got out and went to examine the television. Jesus, it's cold. Might do something to the picture tube. Or the circuits. He ran
his hand under the blanket. Ice cold!

David unlocked the garage door and pushed it open. Then he backed his pick-up in and closed it again. It's just as cold in here. Might crack the cabinet or something. Where in hell is he! Nothing I hate more than that. If you can't be on time, why bother? David climbed into the truck. Better get it inside. He untied the ropes and pulled the blanket away. Come on, baby. We'll get you inside where it's warm. David lifted it enough so that it would slide and struggled to the back of the truck. Heavy fucker. How'm I going to get it to the floor. I could lift it all right. But it's so bulky. Hard to get a grip.

David jumped to the floor and spread his arms around the big television. He drew it close to him and leaned back­ward, arching his back so that the weight of the television fell on the upper part of his body. He managed to get to the aluminum outer door but misjudged the size of his cargo and banged the cabinet. The sudden stop threw him off balance, and he nearly fell over. But he managed to get it onto the truck body again. Phew! That was close! He took a deep breath and rubbed his hands. Almost lost it. Wonder if I hurt it. He leaned over the body and looked for some sign of damage. On the other side, near a lower corner of the screen, was a deep scratch an inch long showing the light wood under the dark brown stain. David was sick. A scratch!
Fuck fuck fuck! Brand new and ruined already. And it's right in front where everyone can see! David ran his finger over it, brushing away some of the chipped wood. Maybe I can cover it up. But it would still show. That fucking Ronnie. I'll kick his ass right up around his shoulders. He's probably out lapping Doria's cunt. Eeeyuk! Maybe I can get a rebate on it though. Look, Williams. Your boys loaded it and it's on the side that was away from the side of the truck, so it didn't happen on the ride. You ask your boys about it. No. That would never work. He's too hard a businessman.

David wrapped the blanket around the television. Where in hell is he? If he's late because he's been with her, I'll kill him! David finished wrapping and got his cigarettes from the cab. God, she's ugly. I'll be damned if I'll have her at my wedding. He must think something of her though. He's with her all the time. Maybe he just likes fuck.... No, I doubt it. He'll find out about her kind sooner or later. Oh, that fucking scratch! David lit a cigarette.

What if he decides to marry her? Try to get him off the team and look what he gets into. We'll have a beer.

With the keys from the ignition David unlocked the tool compartment in the side of the body and took out a sixteen-ounce can of Schlitz. He tapped the can several times, pulled the pop top off, and guzzled half the beer.
That first drink! Ahh! That can is cold on the hand. David placed the can on the truck body, pulled his jacket sleeves down over his hands, and picked up the can again. What am I doing? Freezing my ass off and drinking beer? He set the can back down and shoved his hands in his pockets, squinting to keep the cigarette smoke out of his eyes. I bet I drink a six-pack a day! I got to cut down. End up like Mrs. Abbott.

Hearing the sound of a truck outside, David opened the door and watched the headlights move slowly up the driveway. Ronnie pulled to a stop at the doorway and got out. David stood silently leaning against his truck.

- You unloaded it already? Hey what's the matter?- 
- Where in hell have you been?- 
- On my way down here.- 
- You been out fucking Doria?-
- Come on, man. I had to stop at the farm and I couldn't get away as soon as I wanted to.-
- I'll bet. Jesus Christ, Ron. I asked you to be here to help me.-
- So I'm here. Come on. Don't get mad....-
- All right, all right. Never mind. Let's get this thing into the house, okay? I'm in a hurry.-
- Sure. I got to get going, too. - The two managed to get the television into the living room with no trouble. An
antenna wire stuck up through the carpet, and David began hooking it up. Ronnie stood and watched for only a moment and then said he had to get going. David grunted in recognition but continued working as Ronnie started out the door. Ronnie turned at the door to say good-by.

-Hey, David! Look! There's a scratch on the cabinet!- David looked up at Ronnie who stood pointing at the television.

-Look. Why don't you just get to fuck going. I got enough problems as it is.-

-Sure. I'm going. I just thought you should know about it. You ought to get a rebate for it.- David's threatening expression sent Ronnie out the door. He was glad to see his brother go. He really didn't like the idea of him being there.

David's good mood returned on the drive to Maggie's house. He had succeeded in getting the television all set up and was delighted with the reception. He was especially excited about showing it to Maggie. One of the best parts of buying things was showing them to her. She knew how to be appreciative.

She'll love it. Maybe I should get a couple of skidoos. Nice wedding present. Two big ones. We'd have them paid for by next summer. Shit, I'm going to be married in another week! Who'd believe it? Now why in hell is he building his house right there? Honest to God! Some people just never know anything. We should celebrate. Maggie can cook supper
for me at the house. We'll watch television. Lay around and.... I'll have to say we'd be going for a drink after. They ought to plow these roads wider. Dim your lights you asshole! Click click. There. I'm hungry as hell. A nice quiet evening at home. Suddenly that sounds great. Got to stop this smoking though, or I won't live to enjoy it. Probably got lung cancer as it is. Why don't I stop! David threw his cigarette out. I'm too young. Guess I'll be all right for a few years yet. If Paul doesn't have it, I sure don't. Or Peanut. Can't wait to get back to the house and relax.

It was just past six when David turned into the Abbott driveway, raced the truck engine, and shut it off. Stepping lightly from the cab, he went to the porch and rang the bell, peering through the glass of the door into the dimly lit hall. In a moment Maggie appeared, snapped on the porch light, and greeted David at the door.

-Hi, Honey. What are you doing? What are you grinning about?- She stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed him.

-You guess.-

-You're just thinking about next Saturday?- 

-Come on. That wouldn't make me grin.-

-Very funny. Now what is it?- 

-The TV! The TV came today! I picked it up after work, and it's all hooked up.-
-Oooh, that's wonderful! I can't wait to see it. Does it come in well?-  
-Great! You should see it! The colors are fantastic.-  
-I can't wait to see it!-  
-Good. Then get your coat and we'll stop and get some food and you can cook supper for me. We'll watch TV. Maybe have a drink later.-  
-Oh, I'd love to. But I really don't have time. And besides, what would my parents think?-  
-Well Jesus Christ. We'll be married in another week!-  
-But we're not married yet. And I don't think they'd like it. Besides, I have to finish up my dress.-  
-What's it to them, anyway? Couldn't your mother finish your dress? I've worked hard. I'm tired and hungry.-  
-Oh please let's not spoil it, David. I want everything to be new for after we're married.-  
-That's stupid. One night won't hurt anything. Just tell them we're going for a drink and ask your mother if she'll work on your dress for a while.-  
-No, David. I'm not going to lie. And I'm not going to throw everything onto her. I have a little respect for my parents, and I don't plan on getting them to do everything for me.-  
-Just what do you mean by that! That's all right. You go ahead and work on your dress. Don't worry about me. I'll
find something to keep me busy. — David turned and stormed out the door, down the steps toward the truck. Maggie followed to the porch.

-Wait David! Don't go!— Tears formed in her eyes.
-See you next Saturday.— David slammed the truck door and started the engine. Maggie ran down the steps and toward the pick-up. But before she could get to it, David backed out and started for town, spinning all the way down the hill.

The streets in town were a bit more bare than the back roads. Still, David was going too fast. At the bottom of the hill, as he entered the bridge, he was doing forty. He jumped on the brakes and began to slide. Wrestling with the truck all the way across the bridge, he managed to keep it away from the rails. But he was still going too fast to stop at the sign. Just as he slid onto Main Street, a white 4-door Ford rumbled past the store to his right, bearing down on him. He jammed the truck into low and hit the gas. The Ford tried to avoid the collision, braked, and started to slide, coming at him broadside and then tail first. David watched it coming on, his engine racing at top speed and tires spinning furiously. As the car was about to hit him, he turned back to the road in front of him, still hoping that the slow movement of the truck would be enough to get him out of the car's path. Fortunately one of the back tires hit a patch of bare tar. The truck jumped forward and out
of the way, into the parking lot. The car finally came to a stop, facing the direction from which it had come. The driver pulled it into the parking lot beside David's truck and got out. It was Ronnie. David relaxed and got out of the truck. The two walked to meet each other.

-What in hell you trying to do, kill me? Or yourself?- I thought that car looked familiar. Doria's, ain't it?- Yeah--me and Doria and Candice are on our way to Bangor.- What are you doing there?- Oh, just thought we'd go get something to eat and then maybe have a drink or two. Doria knows some place there. She and Candice used to go to it before they moved here.-- What are you doing?- Nothing. Just out riding. Well, actually, I was thinking of going to Greenville to have a drink or two.- Where's Maggie?- Oh, she's home getting ready for the wedding--there's a lot to do, you know. Can't just decide you want to do it. Lot of work.- Hey, what did she think of the TV?- She likes it, of course. What do you expect? She picked it out. Seven hundred and some odd dollars.- Wow! Listen, why don't you come over and say hello to the girls?- David lit a cigarette and followed Ronnie to the car. Candice rolled down the window.
-Hello, David.-

-Hi, Candice. Hello, Doria.-

-Hello, David. Come over to speak to us lower-class people?-

-Oh, I thought I might.- What a bitch! I hate this.

-Have to practically kill us before you'll speak?- 

-Heh heh. Next time it might not be practically.-

-Nice to see you again.-

-Thanks, Candice. It's nice to see there's a friendly one in the crowd.- Candice isn't bad. Nice tits. She understands.

-You busy tonight?- 

-Oh, I don't know. What have you got in mind?- She wants it.

-Oh, nothing. We're just going to Bangor. Wanna come?- 

-Yes, David. It's a free ride.-

-All right.- David went back, got his keys, and locked the truck. When he returned to the car, the back door was open, and Candice sat waiting for him. Doria was sitting in the driver's seat, and Ronnie sat close to her. David slammed the door, and soon they were on the road to Bangor. Candice moved close to David. She reached down and picked up a paper bag from the floor. In it was a bottle of whiskey. She broke the seal and passed it to David.

-Here. This'll warm you up.-
-Thanks.- David took a drink, staring past the bag at Candice's breasts. God she's got some of the nicest tits I've ever seen. He passed the whiskey back to Candice. Plenty of room here, too. These old cars. They knew how to make them then. And plenty of time. It'll take an hour to get there. David took another drink and put his arm around Candice. As he turned to her she took a drink of whiskey and lifted her face up to kiss him. That whiskey tastes so good in her mouth. She understands. He ran his hand up the inside of her nylonned leg. Her thighs were soft. That nylon makes them feel so smooth. Maybe I'll get some hair pie after all. But who knows where she's been. Moving to her crotch, David rubbed through the layers of nylon and panties. She's no beauty. Plenty of zits. But what a body! Something about these poor ones, too. So much energy for fucking. They love to take it. Whatever you want to give them. Makes them feel like women. Brings out the animal in you. And that's what they like. Ten Secrets of Seduction. Where'd I read that? Doing it with a dog. Wonder if she...

David unzipped her dress from the back and pulled it down over her arms to her waist. Then he unfastened her bra and stared at her magnificent tits. Slowly he moved downward, kissing her neck until he had one of her nipples in his mouth. He sucked it and played on it with his tongue. She lay back and instinctively spread her legs. He squeezed her other
breast and slowly got her out of her clothes. She lay back on the seat as he moved lower. Pyoo! Wonder where that's been. Maybe she's on the rag. Better not go any further. She's horny enough as it is.

David got out of his clothes as silently and as quickly as he could, and in a moment he was in her and pumping away. Oh, she always feels so good. And she's such an animal. Wonder how she'd like a little of her own.... David pulled out and maneuvered toward her. When she got the idea, she took his penis into her mouth, moving quickly back and forth. He ran his fingers through her hair, pulling her closer and shoving it farther into her mouth. Suddenly he was having an orgasm. She began to gag, and he pulled away. He offered her the whiskey, and she washed out her mouth.

When the four of them got to Bangor, they drove to the Chuck Wagon for a quick supper of cheeseburgers, french fries, and beer. They all ate and drank their fill and left. No waiting around. David didn't like being there. He felt uncomfortable. Confined. So they left, and Doria took them to Leslie's, one of her old hangouts. She'd grown up in a small town near there and so knew most of the local hot spots.

Leslie's was a small place, at the edge of town, frequented by the same kind of energetic, rowdy people as Joanne's. Dimly lighted, it consisted of two large rooms on either side of a U-shaped bar. As it was only eight-thirty,
the place wasn't filled. They had no trouble getting a table. David led the way when they walked in, taking them to a far corner, away from the lights of the bar. David and Candice sat next to the wall, facing the crowd. They all ordered beer, Ronnie had to show his false identification and David paid.

-Well, Doria, this is kind of a nice little place.-

-Oh, I used to come here all the time when I was home. I really like it. Did I ever tell you about the time I....- God! she never stops talking. Wonder if he ever gets a word in when they're alone together. I hate that. Women all have a streak of that in them--dominance. They want to be on top. Those that don't come out and say it do it in other ways. They're the worst. Pyoo! Is that me! Oh, it itches too. Cross your legs your breath stinks. Oh shut up Doria. Wonder if I caught anything? No, she's clean - I hope. That'd be a hell of a note--come down with something a week before the wedding. Especially since Maggie has never, guess maybe I'll go wash it.-

-Doria, where's the bathroom?- 

-Over there.- Doria pointed to a door near one side of the bar.

-So I ended up here....- David walked to the bathroom. Over here. He wasn't sure if there was anyone there, but the door wasn't locked so he went in. After locking the door he pulled down his pants to wash. No paper towels. Have to
use toilet paper. As he began there was a knock on the door. David half turned around.

-Just a minute.- He finished, threw the paper into the toilet, and fastened his pants. The knock again.

-Jesus Christ, if it's that bad, piss on the floor.- David was finished and unlocked the door. Standing there as he opened it was the ugliest human being he had ever seen. He stopped short and stared in wonder at the horrible face, made even more ugly by its belligerent expression.

-You took your time.- David didn't answer. He returned to the table.

-Hey, Ron, did you see that guy that came in the bathroom after me? That big fucker?- 

-Unhuh.-

-Wasn't he ugly!-

-Really?-

-I guess! didn't you see him? Watch when he comes out. He's disgusting! Really!-

-Hunh.--What were you saying, Doria?-

-Well, this guy was sitting at the bar, and I mean, you could tell he must have been there a while from the way he kept almost falling off the....-

What ails him. He must just sit there and listen to her old whore stories all the time. I'll have to have a talk with him about that. It probably wouldn't do any good,
though. He'd just get pissed off and think I was telling lies. But God, Ron, can't you see what she's really like--ha!-lot of good that would do.-

-There he is, Ron, look at him!-

-Jees!--Big, ain't he?- 

-Yeah, and look at that cat he's sitting with.-

The four of them watched as the big man sat down. He talked to his friend, a slender man, rather young looking, (it was impossible to tell how old the other one was), with shaggy brown hair, and blood-shot eyes. They sat drinking beer and talking, quietly minding their own business.

-Henry! That's Henry! Remember, Ronnie, I told you.- Doria jumped up from her chair and ran to the table where Henry and his friend sat. Henry recognized her immediately, and a smile of surprise flashed onto his face. He kissed her on the cheek and introduced his friend. They sat down and Doria and Henry began talking.

-You mean Doria knows that guy?- 

-I guess so. I think she knows the nice looking one. Has she ever talked to you about Henry, Ron?- 

-No. Not that I can think of.- 

-I think she knew him before I met her. I don't know. He's kind of nice looking, though,- 

-You think he's nice looking?- 

-Yeah, kind of.-
-My, god, looks to me like he'd cave in if you farted on him.­
-Oh, I don't know. I have to go to the bathroom.­
-You don't know him, huh Ron?-­
-Nope.-
-She never said anything about him?-­
-No.-
-Sounds a little funny to me.-­
-What do you mean?-­
-Well, look at her.-­
-So what?-­
-Well,--don't you think she's overdoing it a bit for an old friend? Especially since he looks like such a tramp?-­
-I don't know....-­
-Look at the way she's looking at him!-­
-Yeah-­
-Well, you're not going to let him do that are you?-­
-Do what?-­
-Do what he's doing! Don't you care anything about her?-­
-Of course. But what am I supposed to do?-­
-Well, go over and tell him to lay off.-­
-I can't do that.-­
-What do you mean you can't do that? What's the matter with you? You don't have any backbone?-­
-Doria would just get pissed.-
-No she wouldn't! Girls like strength in a man. It's just a way of showing her that you want her around, that you care something for her. Go ahead!

-Oh, I couldn't. Besides, look at the size of that guy with him.

-Look, don't you worry about that guy. I'll take care of him.

-Well, maybe I ought to go over. Just to make sure she doesn't forget me.

-Go ahead.

Ronnie got up and walked toward Henry's table, David following closely. When Ronnie was nearly there, he stumbled over something on the floor next to Doria and fell forward onto Henry. The big man stood up quickly, as if in alarm, pushing his chair backward with the motion. David immediately sprang into action. He darted forward and smashed the ugly man in the middle of the face. For a moment neither Ronnie nor Henry realized what had happened. But when Henry saw David punching his companion and knocking him to the floor, he lashed out at the boy who lay sprawled on top of him, trying to get into a better position. Ronnie was forced to defend himself. He had the superior position, and he and Henry exchanged several punches before Henry finally managed to throw him off. Suddenly, Henry was standing above him and gave him a hard kick to the stomach. Ronnie hunched over in pain, trying to protect himself. But then David was on
Henry, and knocked him out with one punch. David grabbed Ronnie under the arm pits and lifted him to his feet. By then the bartender was coming at them with a club. David grabbed Ronnie by the wrist and started out. As they passed Henry's friend, the ugly man began to rise. David kicked his heel out, smashing him in the temple, and he collapsed. Then the two rushed out, Ronnie trying to resist. He turned and saw Doria, kneeling over Henry with tear-filled eyes. She looked up when they were at the door, caught Ronnie's gaze, and in a hoarse voice yelled, "You fucker!"

In the parking lot David ran towards Doria's car. He let go of Ronnie's arm and told him to get in. Ronnie protested that he wanted to go back, but David told him that the cops would be there soon and that they'd better get the fuck out. Ronnie hesitated but finally got in.

-Where are the keys?-  
-They're not in the switch?-  
-No, now come on and give me the goddamn keys.-  
-I don't have them. The ashtray. Here they are.-  

David started the car, threw it into gear, and screeched out of the parking lot. In a moment they were out of Bangor and headed for home.
Chapter Seven

Snow had started falling heavily just outside East Corinth, and the winds were high. By the time they got to Charleston traveling was extremely difficult. There were at least two inches of dense, powdery snow on the roads, in solid drifts here and there that splashed into bright haze as the car hit them, slowing it nearly to a stop. David gripped the wheel with both hands, sitting on the edge of his seat, straining to make out the road ahead. The car would go into a spin, and David would have to let off the gas and steer against it, in an effort to stay on the road. Like driving on a bottle, as they said.

On the stretches that were bordered by fields, with no woods to protect the road, the wind blew a solid sheet of white crystal in front of the car, reflecting and amplifying the glare of the head lights, blinding David so that much of the driving was guess work.

Charleston Hill was a bitch. David knew that it would be the big test. If they could make it to the top of the hill, they had a good chance of getting home. Doria's snow tires were old and worn, no more effective than summer tires. There was no protection from the wind. David was forced to drive from memory. The hill was so long and steep that he didn't dare to let off the gas in the spins, fearing that the car would lose its momentum. So he had to wrestle with it
all the way, gritting his teeth and hoping that no cars would be stuck in the road, praying that no one would be coming toward them. To make things worse, the wiper blades became clogged part way up the hill, impeding his vision even more. But David was a good driver. And luckily, Doria's car had a standard shift. He felt much more in control.

When they had finally succeeded in getting to the top, David stopped the car in the middle of the road, and he and Ronnie got out and cleaned the windshield and wiper blades. With his hankerchief, David wiped the snow from his side mirror. It was impossible to keep the back window cleared. The mirror was the only way that he could see behind him. As he drove he kept glancing into it, making sure no one was behind. They were making good time, but he didn't feel safe without the mirror.

With vision partially restored, and with their confidence renewed from the conquest of the hill, they started cautiously down the other side, David keeping the car in low gear to avoid using the brakes as much as possible. His face smarted from the wind and snow. His cheeks felt hot when he returned to the warmth of the car, and his fingers were icy against them as he wiped away the melting snow.

The incident in the bar ran through David's mind again and again. He couldn't figure it out. He had deliberately started the fight. And he'd been as brutal as he was able to.
He was glad that he had ran when he saw the bartender coming, though he didn't really know why he had. But that last kick. Right in the temple! What if he'd killed the guy? Or even hurt him permanently? What would the consequences be? Once, on one warm summer night before he had gotten his truck, David was walking along the road from the farm to Sangerville. It was very dark, and there were no street lights. A car came toward him. He was blinded by the headlights. Just before it reached him, someone in the car threw out an empty bottle, and it landed in the bushes near him. He was suddenly struck with the thought that that bottle could have hit him in the head, or in the chin, and he would have been dead. One moment he could be walking along, feeling every muscle in his body and his head full of thoughts, and the next moment there would be nothing. Everything would disappear in that one second. Now he felt the same way. Everything he had worked for, everything that he had accomplished and everything that he had to look forward to, even the wedding, could suddenly disappear. And all because of those few stupid minutes in that bar.

Ronnie sat sideways on the edge of the seat, supporting half of his weight with his curled up right leg, one clenched hand warming in his crotch and the other resting protectively against the dashboard. He stared at the road as if he himself were driving. With each spin he gripped tighter, made stiff the muscles in his leg and arm, biting his lower lip
when he was sure they were going straight into the ditch. He and David chain-smoked.

Ronnie was more scared than he had ever been in his life. But the worst of it was that he had lost Doria, and that hoarse scream kept coming back into his head, so vivid that it seemed he was actually hearing it. YOU FUCKER! YOU FUCKER! He had lost her without hope of ever getting her back. He would have to try to explain. Surely she would listen. But who was this Henry? Had she tried to help him when Henry was kicking him? Why had she run over to their table? What was the connection? And why had David started the fight? Or had he? Everything had happened too quickly. And he had been on the floor, face down and unable to see.

Neither of them had talked much since they had left Bangor. That made Ronnie even more nervous. Finally, he had to speak.

-David?-

-What?-

-What happened? - David glanced at him.

-I don't know. You jumped on that Henry. The big guy started to get up. I thought he was going to grab you so I jumped on him. I was only watching out for you.-

-Oh. But see, I didn't jump on him. I fell on him. I tripped over something and fell.-

-Well, it really doesn't matter either way, does it?
As long as we can get home.

-Yes it does. In a way. I'm just trying to figure out what I'm going to tell Doria.-

-Jesus H. Christ, Ronnie. Will you forget about her. She's the trouble-maker that started this whole thing. And even if we do get out of it, she'll probably blab it all over the fucking county. If you can't stop thinking about her, at least don't talk to me about her.-

When they got to Dover the storm was even worse. But they both felt a bit more relaxed with home so near. Only the eight miles to Guilford and four miles back to the farm. There they would be safe. The main road between the two towns would probably be plowed, and it was much flatter than the roads they had been traveling. The road back to the farm was a difficult one, but their trucks would handle this bad driving much better than Doria's old Ford.

The town crews were out trying to keep the main streets cleared, plowing and loading the snow into trucks and hauling it away to dump into the river. As the two started up Main Street, they saw the flash of the orange light on the top of a huge loader on the bridge ahead. David drove quickly but cautiously. As they reached the bridge, he saw that he would have to stop for the big machine and wait until it moved out of the road to let him pass. He got as close as he dared, came to a stop, and waited. Several minutes passed, the
loader filling a town truck with the heavy snow. David swore
to himself, cursing the operator, impatiently looking for an
opening to shoot through. Finally he sounded the horn in a
long, loud blast. The loader operator turned and looked
through his steamed back window at them. But he continued
working until the truck was full. When the truck rumbled away
to a dumping station, the man moved his tractor slowly to the
side of the street. David drove the car past, sounding the
horn and waving in appreciation, and started for Guilford.

David's fear had driven him to the point of self-examina-
tion. For the first time in his life he asked himself why
he did such things. He drank and smoked so much. He fucked
anything that walked. Suppose he'd gotten something. He
hadn't worried about that. He hadn't even thought of it.
And now this fight. He was so thoughtless. He was throwing
everything away.

But David's revelation had short-lived effects. As he
drove out of town and onto the Dover-Guilford road, he
catched sight of a pair of truck headlights at the shop. He
had been so worried about the police that he had completely
forgotten about the power lines. On a night like this one,
the whole district would be in trouble. They needed every
man they could get. They had probably been trying to contact
him all night. David slowed as they approached the shop,
looking through the snow to see some sort of activity. He
pulled the car over to the edge of the road and switched on the blinker.

-What are you doing, man? The cops could be right on our tail! We lost enough time waiting for that tractor!-

-Don't worry, buddy. I'll only be a minute.- David got out, buttoning his thin wool jacket, and disappeared from Ronnie's view into the snow. The boy sat smoking a cigarette and waiting nervously. Several times he rolled down his window and looked back toward the town. Twice he saw the headlights of an approaching car. But the first time the vehicle turned off before it got near enough for him to see what it was. And the second time it was only a wrecker that jingled past on its way to pull someone out of the snowbank. Ronnie began coughing. In the past few weeks he had developed a cough. George said that it was from working in Elmer's potato house and inhaling all that dust. But Ronnie was sure that the cigarettes had something to do with it. He left the window open an inch to let in some fresh air. Finally David returned.

-Listen. I've been ordered to help these guys. They've been trying to get me all night. Half of the district is out of power, and it looks like we'll be out working until tomorrow morning.-

-But David! What am I supposed to do? You're not going to leave me out in this blizzard alone, are you?-
-Okay. Now this is what I want you to do. Now listen. It's very important that you get this car back to Doria's house.

-But....-

-Just don't worry. You can handle it. You're a good driver, and you've driven in this kind of weather before. And besides, it's not bad from here to Guilford. The roads are good. But the important part is that you get both trucks back to the farm.

-How am I supposed to do that?-

-I don't know. But you've got to do it. If you don't, we're both going to be in a lot of trouble. But if we get their car back and our trucks to the farm, they won't have anything to support their story. And I'm pretty sure I can get some of the guys to vouch for me. Then you'll be in the clear too. No one is going to believe those two, or even the guys they're with against anyone respectable. But you've got to get them both back to the farm.

-But David. How can I do that?-

-Look. If I hadn't stepped into that fight, you'd be lying in some snow bank bleeding to death. That big guy would've killed you. And I've gotten you this far. If I don't go to work I'll lose my job. You'll have to go the rest of the way alone. Here are my keys. You can figure something out. But you've got to do it. Okay?- David stared at Ronnie's face for a moment. Then he shut the door and
disappeared again into the snowy night. Ronnie sat there for a short time. Then he slid over behind the wheel and started for Guilford.

David climbed into the warm cab of the line truck. He breathed a sigh of relief and suddenly was shaken by a violent shiver. Francis asked if he was sure he didn't want his extra coat, but David refused again. Francis shifted, and they started out of the yard for Dexter.

Ronnie made his way without trouble. At least for the first few miles. Having to drive was bad enough. But being alone was awful. He had to be doubly careful. If he got stuck he would have no one to push him out. That knowledge made him more nervous, and keeping on the road seemed much more difficult.

David was a better driver, but Ronnie had had his share of experience on bad roads and in bad weather. It was harder for him to drive Doria's car. He was more used to a truck. About three miles past the shop, when his confidence had increased and he felt it was safe to drive faster, the car went into a very bad spin. The road was straight, bordered by a deep ditch on one side and a snow bank on the other. Ronnie took his foot off the gas as he entered the spin and steered against it. But the car swerved more violently each way, moving closer and closer to the gaping ditch. Finally he steered toward the bank long enough for the car to move that way and lodge itself into the border of snow. Choking back his panic, he sat there spinning desperately, trying to free
the car but only sinking it deeper into the snow bank. Finally he got out and walked around the car, trying to see what was holding it. With his bare hands he scooped the snow away from behind the wheels, and then jumped back in, rubbing his freezing, raw hands and holding them over the defrost blower. He consciously slowed himself, trying to control the fear, taking as much time as he dared in easing the car out. He pushed the excellerator only slightly, let out the clutcho slowly and evenly. The car crawled an inch or two backward, climbing out of the ruts, but the tires suddenly slipped and fell spinning back into the holes they had made.

Ronnie jumped out again and stood behind the car. He looked down the road, toward Dover, and then in the opposite direction toward Guilford. Nothing. No help in sight. And already the snow was beginning to drift against the car. He couldn't contain himself. He had to get out. There could be someone along any minute to take him off to jail. And there was the horror of it. Because to get out, all he could do was wait for someone to come along and give him a hand. He could only wait. But he was too nervous and too scared. He scooped away more of the snow, digging with his fingernails the hard, packed snow behind the back tires and got into the car again. He made it farther this time, but the tires still slipped into a spin. He tried rocking, going forward and then slamming it into reverse, forward and back,
forward and back. But still no success. He was still rocking when the beam of a flashlight hit him in the face and someone knocked on the window. Ronnie started and looked out at the man. It was a game warden! Ronnie nearly fainted from the shock. But he kept trying to free himself, ignoring the man outside. The tires spun more furiously than ever, and he pictured himself finally getting out of the snow and driving right past the warden to freedom. But the car went nowhere. The warden tapped again with his flashlight, yelling this time. Ronnie rolled down the window and looked out.

-What in hell's the matter with you anyway? You saw me. You heard me tapping, didn't you?-

-Sure,. But I thought I was almost out, and I didn't want to lose the momentum.- Ronnie was shivering. Why didn't this man slap the hand cuffs on him and get it over with? At least then this possibility of escape would be gone and he could stop struggling. What was he waiting for?

-Looks like she's stuck pretty bad.-

-Yeah.- Ronnie was ready to give himself up.

-Well I'd try pulling you out, but all I've got is my car. And that would never do it. I could never push you myself, not the way the front end's buried like that.- The warden looked the situation over.

-What do you think I should do?- Ronnie had finally realized that this man was not looking for him.
-Not much you can do. I guess you'll have to wait til I can get to Dover and send someone back after you. Have you got any flares?-  
-Jesus. I don't believe it.-  
-Well I got some in the car. I'll give you one so no one will run into you.- As the warden started for his car, Ronnie got out to wait for the flare, holding his jacket close around him. In a moment the warden returned carrying the lighted flare, bright and red in the darkness. Ronnie watched as he placed it on the road, close to the back of the car.

-How long do you think it'll be?-  
-Oh, I don't know. I'll be in Dover in a few minutes. It shouldn't take too long if I can get a hold of a wrecker.-  
-I guess there must be plenty of people stuck. Not a very good night, is it?-  
-We're supposed to get ten inches before morning. So when... and if you get home, you better stay there.-  
-Don't worry. I'm about froze to death now.-  
-I'll send someone back for you. Better stay in the car and keep warm.- Ronnie watched as the warden disappeared into the falling snow. Slowly, the red tail lights of his car receded and faded from sight.

Ronnie stood holding his jacket around him, his shoulders raised so that the collar protected his throat and chin.
The flare was too bright for him to look directly at it. Even in this dark night it must have been visible from great distances. It made him nervous. He felt too conspicuous.

Enough snow could fall to hide the car, to make it look like part of the snow bank, and that flare would still be a signal for the police, telling them of his hiding place.

Parallel to the road was the Piscataquis River. It was down over the bank, no more than fifty feet away. But he couldn't see that far. Across the river, if Ronnie's calculations were right, was the eastern boundary of the farm. Less than a quarter of a mile past the river was the hill with the cemetery on it. And the farm house was no more than a half mile from there. It was too late for George to be up. But there would be a lamp burning on the kitchen table. Ronnie could be there, snug in his bed, in less than half an hour. He could get up at dawn and finish picking over the beans.

He looked back at the car. And then at the flare, spraying that bright, unbearable light through the darkness. It was enough to drive him crazy. He ran for it, grabbed it, and flung it toward the river. It twirled through the air and landed near the river. Sinking into the new-fallen snow, it disappeared from sight, and Ronnie was hidden in the darkness again. But he felt no better.

A moment later, Ronnie heard the roar of a huge engine.
He looked toward Dover as two bright headlights and an orange flasher came into view. It was the snow plow, clearing the Dover end of the road. Ronnie flagged him down. With a chain from the back of the plow, the driver hooked on to the Ford and pulled it easily back onto the road. Then he continued his plowing. Ronnie still had a chance to get home! What an unbelievable stroke of luck. He jumped back into the car and followed the plow to the town line. There the plow turned off to return to Dover. As Ronnie passed it, he sounded his horn to the driver. The Guilford end had already been plowed. Ronnie continued quickly and confidently on his way.

Most of the way to Dover, David and Francis were silent. Francis concentrated on the driving. The visibility was very bad. David sat staring blankly at the dark window beside him. He felt much more secure now. Even a bit embarrassed for having questioned his own actions. There was no need for that. The only fear left was that of the police catching his brother. Ronnie would not be able to handle them. The storm was bad, too. David was worried that Ronnie would be stranded and unable to get the trucks home.

The big problem now was getting the power system together again. It was going to be a difficult night. The combination
of snow and such strong winds was the worse thing for the sys-
tem. Trees would be down. A thick coat of ice would be
covering everything, and the weight of the ice alone would
be enough to bring many of the wires down. Such strong winds
made working in the buckets very dangerous. Maneuvering
would be practically impossible. And though David preferred
climbing the poles to using the bucket, that too would be
dangerous. And miserable.

David lit a cigarette, and the first drag sent him into
a fit of coughing.

-You all right?-   

-Yeah, I guess so. These fucking cigarettes are going
to be the death of me.-

-Why don't you quit?-   

-Ha! That's easier said than done.-

-I did it. You'd ought to be able to.-

-You used to smoke?-   

-I used to smoke a carton of cigarettes, five packages
of pipe tobacco, and five packs of cigars a week.-

-You did! How in hell did you quit?-   

-I just decided I was going to do it, and when the
cigarettes and cigars and tobacco was all gone, I didn't
buy any more.-

-Really. I wish I could do that.-   

-Nothing to it, really.-
-Huh!- From anyone else, David would have had a hard
time believing the story. He did think that it would be more
difficult for him. But there was comfort in the fact that
someone he knew had done it. He smoked the remainder of his
cigarette though.

It was well past midnight when they reached Dexter. They
were accompanied by two other crews, Kip and Jake, in the
bucket truck, and Barney and Paul with the ladder truck.
Everyone else had gone north. Guilford, Abbot, and Greenville
were all out of power.

Though much of the town was in darkness, the three crews
repaired the trouble easily and quickly. A large tree had
fallen on the three-phase feed from the substation to the cen-
ter of town. David and Francis opened the feed at the sub-
station while Kip and Jake, sliced the huge old tree into
maneuverable pieces with their hydraulic saw, and Barney and
Paul disposed of it. Fortunately, none of the wires had come
down. As soon as they were cleared, David reclosed the cir-
cuit, and the town was again within the protection of its
lights.

With their work completed, the men started back to Dover
to await further orders. Before they had gotten a mile out
of Dexter, however, a call came on the radio.

-Dover Line to 532-
Kip answered. -532. Go ahead Bob.-
-Kip, the Phillips Road in Carmel is out.
-Okay, Bob. We'll get right on it.

Francis picked up the microphone. -Bob, do you want Dave and I to go along with them? Before Bob could answer, another voice came over the radio. It was Mack.

-Francis, you and Barney bring your trucks back to Dover. I'm here now and things are getting worse.

-Okay, Mack. KA3106 Off.- Francis replaced the microphone. -Guess he must figure it's going to hit somewhere closer to home.

-Yeah. I'd say the center of the storm is heading that way.

-You really ought to have a different jacket.

-Oh, this jacket ain't that bad. You'd think it might be, from the looks of it. But it's really pretty warm for just a regular fall jacket.

-Suit yourself. You all set for the wedding?

-Yeah. Oh, that's right. I meant to tell you. Rehearsal is at 6:30 Friday and supper after will be at the Abbotts'.

-Six-thirty, huh? Well I guess I can make it all right.

-You'd better!

When Ronnie finally reached Guilford he was exhausted and had more trouble driving through town than he'd had get-
ting there. He was even more nervous than before, coming to
the realization that rather than follow him all the way from
Bangor on such a stormy night, the police would have radioed
ahead, and every deputy in the whole county was probably
right there at Doria's waiting for him. The street lights
were out, and he thought that that was to his advantage. They
would have a more difficult time recognizing his car in the
dark. He watched ahead for road-blocks.

This whole affair was adventurous in a sense. But nothing
could make up for the fact that he had lost Doria. Of course
he was scared. He didn't want to be arrested and hauled off
to jail. But as he reached Guilford he felt so deeply in
love with her that, had he lost her, jail seemed the only
place for him.

Driving past Doria's street, he tried to get a look at
her dooryard. But it was too dark. He turned around and
drove past again, more slowly this time, but he still could
see nothing through the snow. He thought of driving past the
house itself, but the street came to a dead end, and he would
have no chance to run for it. But that was the only answer,
and after two more runs past the entrance to the River Street,
Ronnie drove right up to the house.

There was no one in sight. Without lights the place
seemed dead. Ronnie left Doria's car parked beside the road,
still running, and made it quickly to his truck. He got in,
shutting the door quietly, and turned the key. The engine took a long time to start. He backed out of the driveway and then replaced Doria's car in its place, leaving the keys in the ashtray. Then he ran back to his truck, jumped in and started for Sangerville.

It was a relief to have made the switch, but Ronnie was now faced with an even more difficult problem. He had to get both trucks back to the farm. It would have been so much easier if David had not been forced to go to work. Or if he hadn't stopped at the shop. He was an odd one. What kind of person would worry about going to work when they were running from the cops? On a night like that.

-I don't know when I've seen it this wild.-

- Me either. I hope all this snow melts before the wedding.-

- Or that it doesn't storm like this next Saturday.-

- 532 to Dover Line.-

- Maybe they got more than they expected.-

- Dover Line. Go ahead 532.-

- Well, all we have to do is get from the church to the Abbott's house any way.-

- The Phillips Road is in power again. Do you want us to come in or stand by here? -
-But you've got to get to and from the church.
-That's true.
-No, you go to the Carmel Road in Stetson, pole 32.

There's a service down there. Man that called said it's pulled right off the building. Sparks are flying out of it. He sounded pretty concerned.

-Okay, Bob, we'll head right down.
-Dover Line to 535.
-535. Go ahead.
-We've just got a report from Dexter. Main Street is out again.

-Okay, Bob, we're on our way.
-Probably another tree.
-And us with no saw.
-Dover Line to 537.
-537. Go ahead.
-Barney, would you go to Sebec Shores. The Tim's Cove Line is out.

-Will do Bob.
-Now that's one place I wouldn't want to be on a night like this.

-I bet Barney's swearing.
-KCB759 Off.

-I doubt if they'll even get there.

Francis turned the truck around and drove back to Dexter.
At Main Street David switched on the spot light and directed it at the three parallel wires. They drove to the substation, but found nothing wrong with the lines. Only the cut-outs at the substation end were blown on all three phases. There were no breaks in the line. The wind must have blown the wires together. The job that remained was only that of re-fusing the cut-outs and closing the line.

-There really ain't much sense in setting up that bucket just for refusing those three cut-outs, Francis.-

-Well, there isn't if you want to climb in this blizzard.-

-I'd rather climb than set up the bucket. Besides, you can't see shit floating around in that bucket.-

-Go ahead and climb, then. Let the arms down, and I'll re-fuse them for you.-

David jumped out into the blizzard and went to a door in the side of the truck. From the compartment he took his yellow hard hat. It was shaped very much like an American W.W.I. helmet and had a liner which snapped under his chin and covered his head and ears. Kneeling in the snow, he strapped on his hooks. Finally he pulled on the belt with all his tools and the strap which held him on the pole. Grabbing the hot line stick, a long, fiberglass stick with a hook on the end of it, he went to the bottom of the pole and looked up. Francis got the fuses and tools from the tills in the other side. At the bottom of the pole he gave David
a handline. David started up, digging his hooks deep into the dry cedar, and Francis went to the back of the truck to direct the bright ray of the spotlight at the row of three grey cut-outs. He then returned to the cab and switched the radio to the rear speaker. At the top of the pole David dislodged the three arms from their hinges, tied them at the end of the handline, and lowered them to Francis. He stood leaning back against his belt, huddling with his head lowered against the icy wind as Francis worked at the back of the truck below. In a short time Francis returned to the bottom of the pole and tied the arms onto the end of the handline. David pulled them up to the top of the pole and placed each onto its hinge. Then he lowered himself a foot or two, and placed the hook at the end of the hot-line stick in the ring of the cut-out arm on the field side. He glanced down at Francis. Francis gave the signal to go ahead. David set, turned his head away, and pushed the arm back into place. But the load on the line was too great and the cut-out arced. Bright green and pink flames shot out, engulfing half the cross arm. The cut-out exploded into a thousand pieces that showered David on their way to the ground. In his surprise one of David's gaffs cut out of the wood, and he began sliding down the pole. He hugged it as hard as he could, stopping his fall but driving long, sharp splinters into his chest and arms.
-FUCK FUCK FUCK-
-You all right?- 
-Yes, I'm all right. A few splinters. But now we have to replace this fucking cut-out.-

David returned to the ground, and he and Francis drove to the substation to open the recloser.

By the time Ronnie got to Sangerville the storm had gotten worse. Even here the road crews were out. He stopped at the bottom of the hill and looked across Main Street at the bridge and the road to the farm. Then to the parking lot to his right. There was David's truck, covered with snow. He had a plan for getting both trucks home, but it was going to be hard and miserable.

Ronnie drove through town, across Main Street and onto the bridge. He went as fast as he could to get a run for the hill. At the top of the hill, out of the town's sight, he parked his truck beside the road and started back to town to get David's.

It was ungodly cold, and the zipper of his jacket was broken. He held it close to him with his hands clenched in the pockets. His boots were high and kept the snow out, but he had only a thin pair of socks, and his feet were freezing already. The wind blew snow in his face as he walked down the hill.
With the snow brush from the cab Ronnie cleaned off the windows. His ears were so cold they ached. He looked around him as he worked. The town was such an ugly place. God, he wished he were home! He was so cold that he really didn’t care if the cops got him or not. He was more disgusted than afraid, disgusted to have gotten into such a mess.

With the windows cleared he jumped in and started the engine. He had no trouble getting the truck out of the parking lot. He turned around and went up the hill. He went about a hundred yards past his truck and pulled over. Again he emerged into the snow and started back to get his truck.

Fortunately, Francis and David had an extra cut-out with them. After they had opened the feed to the center of town, they returned to replace the one which had blown up.

_I said Hermon is out and Fred is all alone down there. Can you go down and help him out?_

David was replacing it. He was younger and stronger. Francis had offered his coat, but David had refused. Francis had made the lead wires and attached the hot-line clamps. David's hair was frozen and his face raw from the wind.

_-Pittsfield to 511-

_-535 will take care of Dexter. You go to Parson's Land- ing, pole 27, and help Paul and Barney._-
David's hands were cold, his fingers freezing even in his gloves. But he worked as quickly as he could, considering the weakness the cold had brought to his hands. He listened above the roar of the wind to the tinny sound of the speaker.

-Dover Line to 535.-

Francis ran to the cab to answer the radio. After a moment of silence Bob's voice came over the speaker again.

-Dover Line to 535. Come in, 535.- A moment later, Francis reappeared and yelled at David through the wind.

-The radio's broke. I can't reach him.-

-What?-

-Dover Line to 535.-

-I said I can't reach him.-

-I can't hear you.-

Ronnie had only two more switches and he would be done. He could crawl into bed. Without thinking, with his eyes closed, he walked back, against the wind, to David's truck. He only could drag his legs, he held his arms close against him. He felt like crying. The race for home was now reduced to a physical struggle. He was so cold and stiff he could hardly move. His face was raw. He couldn't see. Though he was only a few hundred yards from the farm, he would give
all the Dorias in the world if he didn't have to make those walks.
The day of the wedding was just what everyone had hoped for. It had not been so warm and sunny since the summer. The sun seemed to have risen to its zenith and stayed there. The shadows seemed stationary. No breeze was blowing. The church, standing at the top of the hill and surrounded by sparkling snow, was a scene of postcard purity that was perfect for a wedding.

Like many country churches, it was small and plain. But above all, it was strong. It was the fortress of God and his people. Its simplicity, as well as its strength, were reflections of the lives of its builders, and therein lay its beauty. It was the symbol of a past that was remembered only in the ceremonies which took place there.

-Yup. I helped build it. We started on the fourth of June. I was fifteen. Or sixteen. I don’t know. It was two or three hundred years ago. (Ronnie laughed.) It was the fourth of June. Everybody had decided we needed a church. So we all got together and started building. We worked evenings and Saturdays and Sundays. The preacher came and visited us during the weekdays, just to keep us interested. He talked to the women. Sometimes he even helped the men with their work. At night he’d have a little supper with us. Then we’d all sit around and talk afterwards. He always talked about the church. Told us what a lovely church it was going to be.
He traveled a lot, and he'd seen a lot of churches. Of course, he thought this would be the nicest. He drew up the plans himself. A fitting house for God, he'd say.

-Well, by the end of the summer that thing was built. The whole town was proud of what they'd done. And at the first service, we used to go all day long back then, have a picnic on the lawn and sometimes supper. At the first service he said that this church would stand forever as a monument to our response to God's calling. And of the unity and brotherhood of all men. Well let me tell you, that church caused more bad feelings between people than anything I've ever seen. Oh, those were fine words and sounded good then. (Ronnie shifted to make the hill.) But it wasn't too long afterwards that we stopped going. No sooner was that church built and this preacher, Lee I think his name was, started asking for money. Lot of people started reaching in their pockets. Not my father, though. He was madder than hell. So we stopped going. Now some people in town took a dim view of that. Most people weren't as friendly to us as they'd been before. That's how things like gossip and hypocrisy get started. These people began to look down on us. We looked down on them a mite, too. I could never understand why they felt like they had to give their money to this preacher. They didn't feel right unless they did. And all this talk about the glory of God. What they were doing was lean-
ing on God's shoulder. And once they started, they couldn't
stop. I don't like churches much.

-Didn't you get married in a church, Granpa?

-Well sure I did. But it wasn't my doing. In fact, my father almost wasn't going to come. It was Page's doing. Before the church was there, he and my father were close friends. He wasn't going to let his daughter be married anywhere else. Didn't really like the idea of her marrying me. But it was only because my father thought so much of Page that he ended up going.

-Those are the only times I've been back. The weddings and the funerals. (George paused and gazed out the truck window at the bright, snowy fields. The glare hurt his eyes.) You don't suppose I'll be seeing your wedding, do you?

-Oh, I don't know, Granpa.

-Well, I better keep this white shirt out. There'll be one or the other again fore long.

-Oh, I didn't mean it that way, Granpa. I wish you wouldn't talk like that. What I mean is, I don't have any definite plans right yet.

-No plans with Doria, huh?

-Not hardly.

-Well, your turn will come. I wouldn't mind seeing that one. The weddings are usually better than the funerals. I don't know about this one, though. What's this Maggie
look like.

-Couldn't tell you.

-She must be a pretty one. I'll tell you one thing, though. When my time comes, don't feel any need to cart me up here so people can sit around and listen to some preacher that don't even know me go on and on about what a good man I was and how I've gone off to a better place.

-Granpa!

-You just dig a hole on the hill for me. That's the best place I'll ever know.

-Come on. This is supposed to be a happy occasion. You'll get me out of my good mood.

Inside, the church was one large room with smaller rooms at the front for the minister. There were simple stained-glass windows on either side and one large one high above the pulpit in the back wall. The two rows of side, oak pews were separated and set off from the walls by narrow aisles.

The Abbott side was decidedly different from the Hall side. Everyone in Maggie's family was well off. The doctor was the poorest of all. Of course, he lived in the country. The others were city people, and money was more plentiful in the cities. They were all dressed in the height of fashion.
The women had elaborate coiffures and wore expensive looking jewelry. The men had long, styled hair, and wore conservative shirts.

The Hall side was filled mostly with the linemen and their wives and a few farmers, wrinkled, strong-looking men and women with hardened faces, faded suits, and gawdy hats.

Maggie was the sweetheart of the Abbott family, so everyone was there to see her take the great step. Of course, there were many misgivings among the women upon being escorted to their seats by middle-aged men. They were somewhat worried about this David, having never seen him. It was certainly a hardened-looking crowd across the aisle. Didn't he have any younger friends who could have been ushers? And how old was he? There was whispering on both sides of the aisle.

The church was nearly filled by the time George and Ronnie arrived. Paul showed them to their seat in the front row. George sat on the inside and looked ahead, having no interest in anyone there. Ronnie, on the other hand, sat almost sideways in the pew and kept looking back, diagonally across the aisle at the beauties of the Abbott family. And there were many of them. It seemed that a male offspring was a rare occurrence. But the girls were all pretty, physical beauty being one of the family's stronger points.

In the front row, just across the aisle from Ronnie, sat
Mrs. Abbott, with her sister and her husband, and the doctor's two sisters and their husbands. Ronnie looked at Mrs. Abbott, sitting so composed and waiting for the service to begin. She seemed happy enough. In the pew behind her were two girls of about Ronnie's age but very poised and mature acting. Ronnie would have described them as well developed. Farther back there were several others, equally as pretty and equally as well developed. But he could not get a very good look at them. When he turned around that far, it seemed that everyone was staring at him. After another good look at the two in the second row, Ronnie faced the front to await the commencement of the spectacle.

He thought of Doria. She was a rather sad sight compared with these exotic city girls. She was willing, though. A point in any girl's favor. Suddenly, Ronnie remembered that he hadn't told David of his talk with Doria. He hadn't really had a chance. David had not been at the farm for the last few days. Well. It would be a good wedding present.

Ronnie had been so stupid about the whole affair. He'd been miserable for the last week, worrying himself to death about the police and losing Doria. He'd gone to her place every night and hadn't been able to find her. He even tried the mill. Neither she nor Candice had been at work since that Friday. He had been just miserable. Waiting to be arrested was maddening. He couldn't do anything without
expecting to see a police car pull up to take him away. Driving to Elmer's potato house and to Guilford to look for Doria were like the ride home from Bangor all over again. Once he passed a state trooper's car and nearly drove into the ditch. But when he finally found Doria and got the story from her, he was embarrassed at his paranoia. And seeing her again had dispelled his love-sickness entirely. He had no desire to see her again. Oh, he might drop in occasionally, when he got horny enough. Sitting in the pew with such an erection from seeing these new girls, he thought perhaps it might not be long before he saw her again. But he would see what developed at the reception.

The organist finally started playing. Ronnie looked at his watch. It was past two already. Finally the minister came out of his room and stood at the end of the center aisle. Everyone straightened and quieted down, making themselves proper for this serious occasion.

When David and Francis entered, the Abbotts ceased to worry about Maggie's choice of mates. On the contrary, the women were impressed and even delighted. He was absolutely dashing in his tuxedo. It was closely fitted at the waist, and with his broad shoulders David looked very military. He stood tall and straight. He didn't appear to be nervous at all. With clear eyes he gazed at the congregation and then looked to the back of the church for the procession.
David had spent a horrible week. The only time he could relax was while he was working. The evenings would have been unbearable without Maggie. He didn't dare to go back to the farm. He half-slept the nights away at his new house. His thoughts were filled with fantasies of being hauled off to jail while all the linemen and Maggie and her family looked on. Even now, while he stood there waiting for his bride to march down the aisle, he expected men in uniform to break into the church and put the handcuffs on him.

David hadn't had the courage to tell Maggie. Though she probably would have comforted him, he knew what admitting to such vile acts would do to her image of him. So he kept up a good front. He stood straight and proud, hoping no one would discover the sickness he felt.

But when the organist began the wedding march, she had the organ too loud. The first note startled David. Mrs. Abbott looked up at him. The movement of her head caught David's eye and he turned to her. As they looked at each other, for that moment, while she stood up, David suddenly felt friendly to her. Now that it was all happening, he no longer saw her as a threat to his plans. She smiled at him, as if to welcome him to the family, and he felt that she was being sincere. He thought he'd like very much to get to know her, to spend some time with her, to rid her of her loneliness. They would have her come to their house, once they were settled.
He smiled back, secure in the feeling that he was going outside himself for her.

She had kept her shape quite well, for a woman of her age.

As the doors opened, everyone turned to face the back of the church. To be sure that he could see the whole show past the people in the pews behind him, Ronnie moved to the right, standing with one leg out in the aisle.

The first couple in the procession was a good match: Jake, who, aside from David, was the youngest member of the crew, still young enough to resist the effects of the hard work, and Jane, the prettiest of Maggie's cousins. Jake showed his bashfulness, straining to look serious, but Ronnie's eyes were on Jane. Without a doubt she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She had long, wavy, blonde hair and perfect breasts. She smiled as she came down the aisle, and her movements were so graceful. Seeing her, Ronnie felt that he'd never really known what a woman could look like. He pressed against the edge of the pew, trying to tame his erection.

Next were Paul and Louise. Louise was taller than Paul, very slim and elegant. She was not as pretty as Jane, but she seemed to be much more sophisticated. Paul made no attempt at seriousness. He grinned as he strolled along, taking everyone in and feeling very important.
The last couple marched in. Kip escorted Pamela. But Ronnie paid little attention to them because Jane was moving by, only an arm's length away, and Ronnie couldn't take his eyes off her. She was equally as beautiful in profile, and even more exciting. At the front, the ushers and bridesmaids separated and moved to the sides away from the center aisle. And finally, Maggie and her father appeared and started, amid the clicks and flashes of cameras, toward the wedding party at the front. Everyone was awed by Maggie's appearance, but no one more so than David. He stood open-mouthed, looking into her eyes as she moved toward him. He was seeing her in a completely different light than ever before.

Of course, it was her physical appearance which set off the whole reaction. Though Mrs. Abbott's smile might have helped set the mood. There were no words or thoughts to describe her. It was the experience of seeing her, so tall and strong, so graceful, of seeing that red hair surrounded by so much white that brought David to his revelation.

It was the emotion of the moment, of seeing the incarnation of all his dreams finally coming to him, ready to surrender everything to him, that made his realization possible.

David would finally be part of the world. His coupling with civilization would soon be complete. His old self would be dead. All ties with the farm and the past would be cut. Here and now would he be born anew.
David had worked for it. He'd suffered for it. But now he saw that he hadn't attained everything by himself. Without Maggie, he would still be nothing. She was making it all possible. She was giving it to him. Everything. Her parents. Her possessions. Her place in society. But above all, herself. And how had he treated her? Like a fool. If she only knew, she would stop dead in her tracks.

But she was real. She was a human being. And she was coming. She would give him children. His move to the new location would be the beginning of a whole new civilization of which he, and Maggie, were the creators. It would all be his, made possible through her. Right then and there David vowed that he would be forever true, faithful, and loving to her, and with each step she took, he felt the vow grow stronger in his heart. He repented for his sins against her, hoping that they would be forgiven.

He prayed that the police wouldn't show up.

In a few hours he would be in bed with her, proving his love.

Mrs. Abbott cried all through the ceremony.

The wedding had been too fancy for George. Or so he told Ronnie as they came out of the church and followed everyone to the Abbott house. Of course, that was just a polite
way of saying he didn't like the people there. He hadn't been in the company of that many since his son's funeral, so the association was a bad one. But he didn't know much about any of these people. And what he did know, he didn't like. On one side were the linemen, skidoo-riding fools. On the other were the Abbotts, the city people. One kind cut down the trees to make toilet paper for the others. He didn't like them. Elmer was there. But he didn't like him either.

The last thing he wanted to do was to go to the reception with those people. But he knew Ronnie wanted to go and went along without mentioning it.

As the newlyweds moved up the walk toward the front door, David noticed that the dead flowers, which Mrs. Abbott had left standing even after the snow had fallen, had finally been cut down and hauled off. He was delighted.

-Maggie! Who cut down the flowers?-  
-Mother did! I don't know what got into her. She got up early this morning and cut them all down.-  
-That's great! The house looks so much better.- David felt so good that he took his pack of Camels out of the inside pocket of his tuxedo and threw it on the ground as he started up the steps. They landed in the flower bed and bounced under the porch.

The Abbott house was hardly what George had expected.
He'd seen the outside many times before. But never the inside. It was hardly as elaborate. Hardly as modern. It was quite cozy. It was very much like the house in which he had been born.

They followed the throng into the living room where it broke up into smaller groups, many moving into the adjoining rooms. As they sat in folding chairs next to the wall, George didn't hear a word Ronnie said. He just sat there, crossed his legs and placed his hat on his knee, looking at the brick fireplace; the ceilings, the old portraits and landscapes, imagining his home as it used to be. With so many people talking and laughing, it was easy to recall the harvest celebrations and the family holidays. As he remembered, his eyes went out of focus and he floated, trance-like, into the past, with the pine grove and the old house. God, how he had loved that place. Every day was a holiday there. Even breaking his back in the fields was wonderful, because it meant coming home. Walking along the roads to the top of the hill where the house came into view. And letting gravity, as if the house had some sort of force, lengthen his stride and pull him down the hill. He liked nothing better than coming home. That house had seen the Hall family through every generation, every hard winter and dry summer, all the way back to old John himself. Every Hall had been born in that house and had died in that house.
After some time, Ronnie finally got a chance to take David aside.

-What is it, Ron?-

-I got a wedding present for you.-

-Really? What is it?-  

-Well, I would have told you before now, but I just never got a chance. I haven't seen you since last Friday. You probably have forgotten it.-

-Oh! Did something happen? Come on over here.-

-Well, I been worried sick all week, trying to find that damn Doria. So I finally found her yesterday.-

-Yeah?-

-And it turns out that she and Candice had run off with those two to somewhere. But anyway, come to find out, those two guys were running from the cops or something, cause they didn't want that guy Leslie or whatever his name was to call the police. So Doria told him that I was a minor, and that if he got the police in there, she'd tell them he served a minor, and he'd lose his license.-

-Really!- David was ecstatic. He laughed aloud.

-Well, I guess old Doria had more brains than I gave her credit for. Pretty good. You're not mad that I didn't invite her, are you. You understand.....-

-Oh, shit. I'm not mad. I don't care much about her anymore, anyway.-
-Good. I'm glad of that. Come on over and have some punch. It's really good. Besides, there's someone over here I want you to meet.-

-Who's that?

-Come on. I'll show you. Her name's Jane. She's really nice.-

-George. George.- George came out of his daydream and looked up to see David and Maggie standing in front of him. He struggled to get up, but David told him to keep still.

-George. I want you to meet my wife, Maggie Hall.- George looked at her beautiful, smiling face.

-How'd you do. It's good to have you as part of the family.- George reached out his hard, old paw to shake her hand. She took it in her soft white hands, bent down, and kissed him on the cheek. The old man looked at her as she stood up again. Then to David's face an back to hers.

-Oh, Mr. Hall, I've been waiting so long to meet you. I feel as if I know you already, David's told me so much about you.- George stared at her, open-mouthed.

-See, I'm not all bad, George.- David left to find an ashtray for his cigarette and returned.

-I've never really had a grandfather of my own and I'm
just so happy to be part of your family. - Maggie was on the verge of tears. Though George felt a little like crying himself, finally he smiled. The laugh lines in his face made his eyes seem to twinkle.

-Won't you let me get you some punch? And some cake?- 
-Oh, no thanks, don't bother with me. Those things don't settle too well with a man my age.- 
-Are you sure? I'd love to do it.- 
-Thanks anyway. How'd you ever get tangled up with a feller like that one, anyway? - Maggie took David's arm and smiled.

-Oh, I don't know. I saw him walking by the house one day, and he was so handsome, I couldn't resist him. - She looked at David and then back to George.

-I can see an amazing resemblance between you two.- 
-Well, maybe in another couple hundred years, he'll look just like me. - Maggie laughed.

-Oh! I don't want to forget to thank you for that beautiful music box! I just love antiques. Has it been in your family long?- 

-Actually, it was bought by my wife's great grandfather. I got another one something like it home that my great-grandfather had. They got married at about the same time, I guess, and they gave them to their wives as wedding presents.- 

-Oh, that's really nice! But you shouldn't have broken
up the set. You should keep them together.

-No, I don't have much use for them now. I'll give the other one to Ronnie when he gets married. If he ever decides he wants to settle down.

-Oh, he will, George. Don't worry about that. And by the way, thanks for the land to build our new home on.

-You don't have to thank me for that. It's just as much yours as it is mine. It's part of the family.

-It was still nice of you to let us have it.

-You probably want that deed, too, don't you? I been meaning to get that fixed up. I'll do it next week some time.

When David and Maggie finally moved back into the crowd of laughing, half-drunk people, George fell back into his daydream, unable to believe what had just happened. He felt light-headed. He'd been thinking about dying, and suddenly there was that wonderful, new granddaughter that brought back so many things about living that seemed to have slipped his mind over the years. All at once, being unable to die in the fine, old house that had been his birthplace didn't really seem to matter much, and he realized what a good home his little shack had been. He looked forward to going back and finishing off the year's bean crop, poor as it had been.

The idea of dying wasn't so bad now either. Before he had been scared of it. Now it seemed close and feeling that it was coming had a way of evening you out.
The people didn't bother him any more, either. This was the first time since his son died that he had felt good being with so many people. It was not just being happy. It was that strange feeling that, even with their pettiness, as much as they were like the people he had once gone to church with, they were still people all the same. And their just being there made them good in a way.

-Granpa. This is Janie. This is my grandfather.- George looked up at Ronnie and Maggie's blonde cousin who had let the procession.

-Howdy.-

-Hello, Mr. Hall. I'm glad to meet you.- Jane sat in the empty chair next to George and puffed on her cigarette.

-Are you really a farmer, Mr. Hall?-

-Sure I am.-

-I've never met a farmer before, though I've read about them. Oh, Ronnie, would you get me another cup of punch?- Ronnie took her cup and went toward the refreshment table.

-It is a terribly hard life?-

-No harder than you make it.- For some reason, she found George's reply humorous and began laughing. But in the middle of her laugh she started to cough. She held her hand in front of her mouth and turned away. As he saw her, coughing, in that particular position, George suddenly felt that he'd seen her before, that he knew her from some other
place. The feeling was extremely strong. He felt sure he knew her, but of course, that was impossible. She had never met a farmer before. So he didn't pursue it.

- Excuse me. That was funny. But the idea of a life like that seems fascinating to me. It's very romantic.
- I don't think I'd use those words to describe it.
- Of course not. It would be that way to you if you live it. Ronnie returned and handed her her cup of punch.

George pulled out his watch and glanced at it.

- I really ought to be getting back for chores, Ronnie.
- Oh! Not yet. Can't they wait a while.
- Nope. But maybe David can get a ride home for you.
- Okay. I'll go ask him. Ronnie disappeared again.
- Must you go so soon?
- I'm afraid so. Some things just won't wait.
- Oh I wish we had more time to chat. Ronnie returned.
- He says it won't be any problem.
- Good enough. I'll see you later. George stood up painfully, put on his hat, and started out.

- I won't be long, Granpa.
- Don't worry.
- Nice meeting you, Mr. Hall.
- Yup. George found his own way out and started for home.
Chapter Nine

The ride home was difficult. And cold. George could no longer see well in the dusk. He had trouble distinguishing things. And often saw outlines of things that were not there. He'd had to close the window beside him because of the cold, and he caught the play of the dashboard lights in the corner of his eye. He tried to sit still. Moving made him shiver. And that was difficult, too. He was stiff. Shifting and steering were painful. It was easier as he neared home, though. He knew the roads better. He hadn't been to town for some time, and though he could remember the places when he saw them, he could not picture them in his mind before hand.

The wedding and reception had been much better than he had expected. He was almost reluctant to leave. But there were chores to do. They had to be done. No. It wasn't bad at all. The Abbotts seemed to be nice people. And he liked their house very much. And there was that one girl there who looked so familiar to him. She wasn't just someone that he'd seen before. She was more familiar than that. She was someone who'd been a part of his life at one time or another. But he couldn't for the life of him figure out who it was she resembled. He would get out the family album after supper and look for her.

George drove by Hanscombe's. Merrill was out front,
hitting his dog. The truck strained climbing the hill.
George had to shift to second. It pained his shoulder. At
the top of the hill he shifted back to third. He steered
with one hand and rubbed his shoulder with the other.

It was still not yet dark when he got home. But the
house and barn were black and deserted, shadows of buildings.
Under the dim truck lights they looked like home, but when
the lights were switched off, they looked haunted, much like
the Page house out in the woods. George was later with the
chores than usual. The cows wouldn't be happy about it. He
hurried into the house, not bothering to light a lamp, going
on memory, grabbing the milk pail. In the barn he lit the
lantern that hung from the ceiling and quieted the animals
with a few soothing words. The calves refused to be quieted.
The remainder of a bale lay at the foot of the ladder. He
gathered the hay into his arms and spread it in the trough
in front of the two cows. On top of the hay he poured grain
from a burlap bag. That was the end of it. He'd have to open
a new one tomorrow night. He untied the calves and put them
on one of the cows. Then he sat on an overturned tar bucket
and milked the other cow.

George's thoughts were still on the girl as he returned
to the house. He moved cautiously with the pail of milk to
keep from spilling it. When he'd placed it safely on the
sideboard, he lit the lamp on the window sill and went into
his bedroom. A moment later he emerged with a dusty old album of family pictures. Lighting the lantern over the stove, he sat down at the table and began paging through it. George hadn't looked at the album since the fire, and as he went through the first few pages, exchanging glances with his ancestors, he felt as if he'd neglected it. When he came upon a picture of his father, he suddenly remembered the cemetery at the top of the hill. He'd neglected that, too.

Before George could resume a knock came on the door.

-Come in,- He yelled and strained around to see who it was. The little figure of Bobby Labree came shivering through the door, sparsely clothed with a large jar under his arm. He pushed the door shut behind him.

-Some change from this afternoon, eh George?- He made a whistling sound. -You got the milk ready?- George had sat motionless, staring at him, then jumped up and went to the sideboard. -Bring your jar here, and I'll pour it right in. I'm a little behind schedule tonight.-

-Here you go. You better hurry up. The old man's out in the truck, and he ain't in a very good mood.-

George spread the cloth over the mouth of the jar. Bobby held it, and George poured the milk to the top. He set the pail back down on the sideboard and laid the cloth on the rim.

Bobby threw two quarters on the sideboard. -There's your money. The old man told me to tell you that this is the last
night we'll be getting milk for a while. - He screwed the cover onto the jar. said -See you, George-, and disappeared out the door.

George shivered. It was cold. He built a fire on the stove and placed the beans in the oven. There was only enough in the beanpot for one more meal. George took a double handful of the hard beans from one of the sacks next to the wall and threw them into a pan. Pumping enough water to cover them, he set the beans on the sideboard to soak. He used the last of the coffee making a fresh pot.

While the beans and coffee were heating George returned to the open album at the table. He turned up the wick on the lamp. Looking through this album was another way of remembering the past. In that, it was related to the pine grove. But as it was more precise than the grove, depicting specific memories, showing precisely the forms and manners in which the past had existed, it was a more painful form of memory. Or at least it had been until now. He remembered when his grandfather was dying. He was in his teens, so he had tried to take it like a man. But it was hard. They all knew he was dying. But no one had said it. People were like that then. He remembered going into the master bedroom to see the old man. He was lying on his bed, sunken and white and unable to move. He smiled at George and said that seeing him, and knowing that all he had worked for would be carried on in his
children and grandchildren made it much easier. When George came out, he walked with his father. They had kept silent most of the way. Finally, George had said, -It just won't be the same without him.- His father had looked at him for a short time and then said, -No. No, it won't. But things won't be the same tomorrow as they are today.- There was comfort in that, he supposed. But it still didn't make up for it.

Now George felt different. Maybe it was because he was so old. Maybe he couldn't see things as well. But it all seemed much less important. The loss was not as great as he thought it was. There was comfort in it somewhere. He didn't understand it. He wasn't even sure why he felt comforted. Or where the comfort came from. He could look through this album, though, and feel, sadly, that he hadn't let them all down.

George couldn't find the girl. There was no picture of her in the album. But he could nearly see her face in his mind. She was someone that he had known. He should be able to remember her. He sat back in the chair and signed. His memory was failing him. He really was getting old. He was decaying with the farm.

Before he began eating, George took off his jacket and hung it on the back of the chair. He ate only a small amount of the beans. He would leave the rest for Ronnie. He wasn't
hungry. He finished his coffee and went to the rack. It was too early to go to bed. He had only an hour's work to finish up the beans. Then they would be all picked over and ready to be sold. He filled the hopper, sat down and began the rack. The beans came bouncing at him like little soldiers advancing. Or cows running from some danger. His neck grew sore from bending. He worked until the coffee can on the floor was full. But when he got up to empty the can into a bog, he was so stiff and his neck was so sore that he had to stop. He stood beside the rack and surveyed the room. After extinguishing the lantern and turning down the flame in the lamp on the table, he took the album and went into his room to bed.

The next morning George rose before sunrise and went to the barn to do the chores. The lamp on the table was still burning. Ronnie had not come home. His neck still hurt. The chores were especially hard. He was unable to give the cows hay because he could not climb the ladder to the loft. He gave them grain instead. He had to make two trips with water. He couldn't carry both pails at the same time. The hens were difficult. He could find only half as many eggs as he had calculated for. He had trouble getting the calves
away from the cow. He was very tired and very sore by the time he got to his seat on the porch to watch the sun rise on his fallen empire.

That, too, was disappointing. He had hoped for a good one. He needed a lift. But there was really no sunrise at all. Thick clouds covered the sky, blocking any possibility of a single ray of sunlight. There was only an increase in the amount of dull, gray light, a whitening of the grayness. It would be that way all day long. Such clouds could not be burned away. It was too cold for the sun even to effect them. They would pass. Tomorrow perhaps. All he could do was wait.

He didn't even feel like smoking his pipe.

George spent most of the remainder of the morning finishing off his work with the beans. He wondered where Ronnie was. He began to worry a bit. But he put that aside. He was being too much of a mother. Ronnie had done this many times. He was grown up now.

He also thought of the girl he'd seen at the party. Not so much about her as about her half-remembered counterpart. Still George could not bring back exactly who she was. He would go to the cemetery in the afternoon. There his memory might be better.

Finishing the beans, George sewed up the last bag with heavy white cord and dragged it to the wall beside the others. When Ronnie came home they would carry these last bags to the
store room. They would take the rack out too, and another
season of beans would be over. That was a frightening
thought, an uncomfortable one. George took the two boxes
of waste from their places on either side of the conveyer
belt and emptied them into the stove. After replacing the
boxes, he swept the floor under the machine and threw the
sweepings into the fire.

There was no sign of Ronnie. It was just as well. He
could not pack the rack away or move the beans by himself.
Still, the season was over. George was only kidding himself,
He had nothing to do. Only little repair jobs and the mechan­
ics of keeping alive. Things that a wife would do. But
nothing of importance. Nothing that George could look up
from and say he was working. Or running a farm. If he were
young enough he could go into the woods. There was plenty
of lumber to cut. But he was just too old and too tired.
He could do nothing but wait.

George had bread and butter for dinner. He got out the
album again and looked at all the pictures, but he still
could not find the girl. He smoked his pipe for a few min­
utes. Then he took his coat and hat and the snowshoes from
the corner beside the door and went out.

It was still very cold, promising to be even colder to­
night than last night. George picked up his stick and went
to the edge of the driveway. There he fastened the straps
of the snowshoes around his boots. His hands were clumsy
with the cold. Pushing himself off with the stick, he began
the long walk to the cemetery.

The snow on the surface was soft, four or five inches
of powder. Under that was an ice-covered crust, but it could
not support a man without snowshoes. George walked up the
hill, following his usual route along the middle of the field.
He went to the opposite end of the next field and entered a
passageway that led to the top of the hill and the cemetery.
He had not traveled it for years, but it was very familiar.
There was less snow there than in the open fields, protected
as it was by the trees. But it was far from bare. The brown
stalks of weeds stuck up through the snow, little maple trees
and evergreens. As he walked, George remembered his grand­
father's burial. It was in the spring and most of the trees
had begun to show leaves. The grass on the path had turned
green, and there were spring flowers scattered about. It
had been very hot and he'd helped carry the coffin. The
whole family was there. All the way up from the house he'd
been afraid he would slip or fall and upset the procession.
His father and uncles had dug the grave. They lowered the
coffin with ropes. Then his father spoke and said a short
prayer. Afterwards, they all filed past, one by one. His
two brothers had carried their grandmother because she was
too old to make the journey. She looked so sad and lifeless.
But she didn't cry, and she didn't say a word. His father stayed behind to fill in the grave. George wanted to stay and help, but it was not his place. He carried his baby cousin back down the hill. She was scared because all the women were crying. But he calmed her down. He gave her a piggy-back ride. It was a good excuse to run down ahead of everyone else.

The cemetery was really a lovely spot. Knowing that you would be buried there made the idea of dying much more attractive. It lay on the very top of the hill, the highest point of all the Hall property, and from there you could see everything that they owned. It was surrounded by fir trees, but not enough of them to make it seem that you were in the middle of the woods. The whole area looked more like a lawn of long grass spotted with firs. At the back of the cemetery were some ancient apple trees. In the spring they blossomed, and when the blossoms fell, they scattered over the graves.

George approached slowly, reverently. Only the tops of the gray, moss-spotted stones showed above the covering of snow. On the upper surface of each slab of white marble rested a whiter pile of snow, in the exact shape of the stone itself. The apple trees looked bare and stunted. Only the fir trees indicated any sort of life in the scene, and then very little. As he neared the edge of the yard, he singled
out each grave; his parents', his grandfather's and grandmother's, and the rest, and made a kind of prayer to each in remembering them. He was ashamed that he didn't know all of the graves, but he went around to them all, knocking some of the moss away, reading each name and the dates. Some had little sayings on them like, "At rest with Jesus" and "Home at last." Some in the family had been very religious. Others hadn't thought much of those things. One stone had broken sometime during the winter. The top was jagged, revealing the original color of the stone. The piece that had broken away lay in the snow, only the corner of it showing. George got to his knees and cleared away the snow that covered it. Then he lifted it slowly and carefully from the hole, brushed the snow from the surfaces made by the break, and fit the two pieces together. He moved his hands away and the stone was complete again. Standing back, he looked at it for several minutes. Then he took the piece off again and replaced it in its hole. It wasn't something for him to do. It would only fall over again.

Next to the broken stone was an older and grayer one with letters which read "Their Daughter" across the front. Below, in smaller letters, was the name Faye. Here was what George had been looking for. The broken stone belonged to a cousin Aubrey and his wife. Their daughter Faye was the one he couldn't remember, like the girl at the reception.
George scraped away more of the moss. "Born April 14, 1902 - Died May 2, 1919." It was Faye, the only offspring of Aubrey and his wife. She'd died at such an early age, when life was the most joyous and people felt most alive. George had never been able to cope with her death, even less than he could with his grandfather's. The two deaths had been very close, hers in early summer after the old man's. He must have put her out of his mind somehow. But George's grandfather had been very old. He'd had such a long life. There was some satisfaction in that. But nothing could ease the fact that Faye had died at the time when she was most alive. George had known her very well. She and her family lived in another part of the farm. And she was older than he was. He had only observed her, seen her during holidays when the whole family got together. He had watched her, too shy to say anything to her. Then, suddenly, one day he heard that she was dead. This encounter with death was more shocking. Their closeness in age made it more difficult for George to understand the loss.

George unfastened his snowshoes and placed them beside the stone so that he would not have to sit in the snow. He turned around and let himself slowly down on them. Then, with a release, he landed. A sudden impulse sent George into a panic. He felt paralyzed, that he wouldn't be able to get up. He made an attempt to rise, but then got control of
himself again. That was stupid, to have felt like that. He relaxed and got himself together. It was getting much colder and the wind was rising. He leaned his shoulder against the side of the stone.

Now only Ronnie was left. Ronnie would bury him and that would be the end. In his heart George couldn't really believe that. This life, this existence would not end with him. It would be carried on in Ronnie. Oh, David had made a superficial attempt at reconciliation. George had almost felt that David wanted to be his grandson. But he would never consider carrying on the tradition. He was starting his own. George felt that he was losing Ronnie, too. Or had already lost him. He would explain to his grandson what all this meant. He would try harder to make him see.... No. That would be contradicting himself. That spirit that had held generations together was something inborn, something in the blood. If Ronnie failed to see it, it was because of a failure in the blood, a biological failure to carry on that unifying spirit. But George couldn't believe that either. Ronnie was a Hall through and through. He could have been born fifty or a hundred years ago and not been out of place. Perhaps the break in the line, or the diluting of the spirit was due to his own failures. He could not imagine growing up without a father or mother, much less without both. In any case, he could not help feeling that the break in the l
line was there, and that the shame for it rested on him alone.

It was colder now that dusk was approaching. The street lights along the road towards town suddenly came on. George caught the change in the corner of his eye and turned his gaze to the direction. Then he remembered David's new house. He had not seen it from the top of the hill yet. He searched the woods to the left, closer to Dover. Finally he spotted the vague shape of a picture window, illuminated by the glow of a television.

George thought of the land on the other side of the river which had once been part of the farm. He had had to sell it, bit by bit, to pay the taxes. Alone, or with Ronnie, he was unable even to hold on to what they had. But David had all the ability in the world. He could have restored the place to its former self. But if it was Ronnie that David was hurting most, for the two of them, David and George himself, were leaving Ronnie in the worst possible position: one in which he would have no more than George had had, perhaps less, so that his life would be no better than the end of George's had been. George was weary.

It was nearly time for the chores. He didn't want to be late again. He tried to raise himself, but he could not. His legs were too stiff and numb. Again he tried, but to no avail. The panic returned, and George saw himself stranded up there in the freezing cold, unable to do anything but
wait for the icy wind to work away at him, as it had worked on the Page's house, until he was absorbed into the frozen covering of the earth, forming just another layer that would melt when spring came and sink with the rest into the ground. His panic gave rise to a surge of strength. He began to rise. But he seemed to be dead from the waist down. He used the top of Faye's grave stone to pull himself upward. But before he could raise himself high enough to swing some sort of support under him, the stone gave way at an ancient crack, and the two of them went tumbling backward into the snow. He was sorry to have broken the stone, and his sorrow dispelled his panic. He sat there silently, motionless, looking at the crumbled stone. He could not get up. It was ridiculous even to try. For once in his life he would accept what was coming.

Darkness came soon, and George grew very cold. He huddled himself together and lowered his head against the wind. Faye's gravestone could have given him some protection, but it lay broken beside him. He looked up occasionally, to gaze at the farmhouse, to see if Ronnie had come home. George wished he would return. He would feel less alone then. After some time, when George felt his coldest, the wind became less harsh and finally disappeared altogether. George's neck hurt. He propped his head up, resting his chin on his arms and knees, and fixed his gaze on the house. Where was Ronnie. Why
would he not come home?

George was far gone when Ronnie finally arrived home. He could not move. He could barely breathe. He felt neither warm nor cold. His sight had blurred. But he could still see the lights in town. And when Ronnie arrived, George could see the light from the lamp he lit in the kitchen. He felt much better now. Not that he expected Ronnie to follow his tracks and retrieve him. On the contrary. He knew that he could not be saved. He had resigned himself to it, and he wanted no one and nothing to change it. He regretted not seeing Ronnie one last time. But he was confident that Ronnie would do all right and do what was best.

The cold was gone from him now, and he was beginning to feel very warm. In the darkness, with only the lights from the town and the two houses, it began to seem very much like spring. That was a welcome thought. Not that George did not like the winter. It was perhaps his favorite season. He felt comforted by the fact that his farm could fight back and undo all the damage he'd done in the other seasons. The land deserved a rest, and under the layers of ice and snow that rest was really a regeneration of all the powers that had been expended during the growing season. And it now seemed that that regeneration was nearly complete. George smiled. It was getting lighter now. A soft breeze was moving over the tops of the trees. He looked down at the little
house and felt very warm. The breeze moved over the ground, making waves in the grass. George felt it play with his hair from behind. Then a little soft, white bud from the apple tree floated down, over his shoulder, landed in his lap, and disappeared. And then another. Soon there was a shower of them, covering George's head and shoulders and falling in his lap and all around him.

Then Ronnie arrived, walking briskly up the hill. George greeted him with a smile.

-Hiya, Granpa. What are you doing?-

-Nothing. Just sitting here looking down at the farm. Watching the spring come. I've never seen it from this angle.-

Ronnie sat down beside him. -It's nice from up here, isn't it?-

-Sure is. Just beautiful.-

-Hey, Granpa! You got apple blossoms all over you.-

Ronnie brushed the buds from George's shoulders.

-What's all that...? Oh, before I forget, Ronnie, you remember how I always said about what this place could be if David had taken over. You know how I used to carry on? Well, in case I forget, will you tell him that that don't amount to nothing. That it was just and old man carrying on?-

-Sure I'll tell him, Granpa, but it's a little too late for that.-

-What do you mean too late?-
-Well, take a look down there. He's still working. He's on the last building now. He wanted to surprise you, so when you go down, make like you're surprised, okay?

George looked down at the cluster of buildings. Everything had been rebuilt. The huge house near the grove, from which the great family had come. The two barns that had stood beside the slaughterhouse. The silos. The smoke house. Uncle Nick's house, down by the road. Everything just as it was.

-Well, now ain't that nice? That's real nice. George grinned.

-Did a good job, didn't he? Hey, you ain't crying are you, Granpa?

-No, I ain't crying. I'm a little tired, though. I think maybe I'll take a little nap. It's so nice and warm up here. And I feel so good. I'll just lie here under this tree and take a little nap.

-You'd better if you're tired. Big doings tonight. You haven't forgotten it's John's birthday, have you. The whole family will be there.

-No, I ain't forgotten. I'll be plenty rested up. I'll just lie back here and take a little nap. You wake me up when it's time, okay? Will you do that?

-Sure, Granpa. I'll wake you. Have a good nap. So long.
Ronnie went down the hill, smiling over his shoulder at his grandfather. George watched him go, and when he was out of sight, nestled back against a tree and fell asleep.

Ronnie did not arrive home until well after chore time. It was dark and seemed colder than it had been all winter. But he was still sufficiently drunk to take it in his thin sport jacket. He had been drunk, except for a few hours of sleep, since the reception the day before. He had spent the night at Doria's. Maggie's cousin had gotten him so excited that he put the idea of returning home out of his head. So he'd gotten a ride to Guilford and stayed with Doria. She was bitchy but he'd been able to talk her out of that. He'd brought her a piece of the wedding cake. He'd ridden to the farm with a boyfriend of Candice's who lived in Dover.

Ronnie got out of the car at the road end of the driveway, thanked the driver, and started toward the house. He sang as he staggered along.

"Every day I wake up
Then I start to break up
Lonely is a man without love..."

He felt that his attitude toward Doria had changed. Matured was a better word. He certainly didn't love her. He was almost ashamed to remember telling her that he did. But now he knew better. You couldn't go around telling just
anybody that you loved them. And besides, he knew that she really didn't love him, either. No matter if she said she did or not. He could tell. By the way she acted. And by the things she said. And by the way she would only say it if they were fucking.

"La la la la dying,
La la la la crying,
Lonely is a man without love."

Ronnie stumbled onto the porch. Strange that the house would be dark. He reached for the door knob. Granpa must be doing the chores. Ronnie turned and started for the barn. He should have come home earlier. He hoped that George wasn't trying to get hay out of the loft again. Ronnie had thrown three bales down. But that was a few days ago, and it was probably all used up by now. He could feel the cold snow through the thin soles of his shoes. At the barn he flung the door open and looked in. The animals began their racket. But no lantern. It was completely dark.

-Now that's odd. Oh, shut the fuck up.- He slammed the door.

Back at the house Ronnie lit the lantern above the stove. The house was bare. He was sure that George would be around when he got home. Oh well. Ronnie had done nothing but drink for nearly twenty-four hours. He'd eaten nothing but those little sandwiches at the reception and some of the cake. Now he was hungry for something substantial. There was no
fire in the stove, so he quickly built one and placed the bean pot in the oven. He was very tired and afraid that he'd fall asleep before George returned. And he wanted to talk. Washing his face would wake him up. Cold water would be best. At the sink he filled the basin with water, took the soap and washcloth from the window sill, and threw them in. He stared into the mirror. He felt very grown up, but he didn't look any different. He still had few whiskers. His face hadn't really cleared up as it was supposed to when you got older. He still had that babyish look that he felt he'd never get rid of. He had let his hair grow, thinking that would make him seem older than he was. But the length had only exaggerated his cowlick, making him look even more like a young country boy. Oh well. He really didn't mind anymore. He was through with his town life, and age didn't make much difference on the farm. After washing, he dipped his comb in the soapy water and parted his hair.

The beans were hot. He ate them quickly, right from the pot. When he had finished, he pushed the pot to the middle of the table, rested his head on his arms, and fell asleep.

When Ronnie awoke it was dark and cold in the kitchen. He didn't know how long he had been asleep. But the fire
had died down and the lantern had used all its kerosine.

He stood up quickly, jarring the table and knocking over the lamp that was sitting unlit in front of him. It rolled off and landed on the floor with a crash. He hurried to find it. But by the time he had lit a match and gotten around to the other side of the table, all the kerosine had spilled out.

-Granpa. Granpa, you here? Where are you, Granpa?- He should have been back by now. Ronnie lit another match and looked at his wrist. But his watch was gone. Where in hell had he left it?

-Granpa? Granpa!- Ronnie groped his way to George’s bedroom. He was probably sleeping. But why hadn’t he awakened Ronnie? Unless...he had been sick and hadn’t gotten out of bed. Ronnie was suddenly afraid. He stumbled to George’s bed and ran his hand over the top of it. Where could he be? Maybe something had happened to him. He could be hurt somewhere, and Ronnie had been rolling around in bed with that little slut Doria. He could have been hurt, and someone had taken him to the hospital. No there must be some more sensible answer. Maybe he was at David’s. Maybe David had invited him for supper. Fat chance of that. Ronnie tried to be calm. He should get some light anyway. He felt his way to the kitchen, and opened a drawer at the sideboard. He felt around for the candles, but they were not there. There was a flash-
light in the truck. He had to have it to find the candles. It was as dark outside. There were no stars. No moon. As Ronnie stepped down from the porch he felt thick snowflakes landing on his head. He looked up and they hit cold and wet on his face. It was snowing hard. From the light of the flashlight he saw that it had snowed at least an inch. How long had he been asleep? He started back to the house, but as he was about to enter, he saw through the doorway that the snowshoes were gone. His stomach jumped. The blood rushed to his head and suddenly he felt dizzy. Slowly he backed out of the doorway. He spun around and rushed to the railing of the porch. Scanning the snow with the flashlight, he looked for tracks. He couldn't tell. He jumped over the rail, landed in snow above his ankles, and ran to the edge of the field. There, in the snow in front of him were the faint imprints of snowshoe tracks. He searched for the returning tracks, but there were none. George had gone on one of his walks and hadn't returned. He could be stranded in the woods. The thick falling snow was covering the tracks. Ronnie plunged forward, yelling "Granpa! Granpa!" as loud as he could. The crust would not support him. He had no boots to protect him, and with each step, as his feet went through the crust, his ankles were slashed and bleeding. He ran the whole length of the field, following the faint tracks with the dim beam from the flashlight. At the top of the hill
he nearly collapsed. He fell forward cutting his face on the ice, but quickly regained control and rushed onward through the next field. The flashlight flickered and grew dimmer, but he saw that the tracks entered the path in the corner. "The cemetery!" He rushed desperately up the path, his ankles hurting so much he could hardly bear it. By the time he reached the end of the path his head was spinning. He fell, face first into the snow. He was soaking wet to the skin. And exhausted. Slowly, he looked up. He shone the light in the direction of the cemetery. But it was too dim to see anything. With hardly enough strength, he raised himself, and began to move cautiously forward.

-There he is! My God!- Ronnie looked toward the body and fell to his knees in front of it. It was there against the broken base of the gravestone, all huddled together, arms crossed on one knee, chin resting on the arms, eyes hideously open, gazing down in the direction of the farm. Little piles of snow had collected on the top of his head and arms.

Ronnie dropped the light in the snow and grabbed George's arms, shaking him hysterically. "Granpa! Granpa!" he sobbed trying to raise the slightest sign of life from the stiff figure. "Granpa, don't do this. Don't leave me like this." His voice was hoarse and screaming. His throat swelled, and he tried to awaken his grandfather. In a fit of violence Ronnie shook him harder and harder. "Stop it! Stop it!
Stop it, Granpa!" Then he embraced him, rubbing his face against the rigid skin of the old man. He drew back and then moved his face closer again. "Oh, please, Granpa."

Brushing the piles of snow from his head, he spoke tenderly, tears streaming down his face. "I can't do it on my own! Please look at me. Granpa, I love you! All the things I've done, they don't mean anything. That's all over now. Granpa, don't leave me all alone! I need someone, I need someone. Look at me. I'm nothing but a kid!" Ronnie embraced him again, running his fingers over the frozen gray hair. "Oh, I'm so cold, Granpa. And my feet hurt so much. My ankles are all cut up. Oh, they hurt! I don't want you to be frozen, Granpa! Oh, Granpa, I'm freezing too. I'm so cold." Ronnie rested his weight against the stiff body, shivering with the cold and his own sobbing. He couldn't stay there. His hands and feet were freezing. He had to get back to the house and warm himself. Finding the flashlight in the snow, he tried to make it work, but it wouldn't come on. He felt for the snow shoes. They were not on George's feet. Finally he found them under the body. Laying George over on his side, he pulled the snowshoes out of the snow. Then he set George upright again, leaning him against the stone. With shaking hands he fastened the snowshoes onto his freezing and bloody feet. Again he crouched near the body. "I'll be back, Granpa." His voice was soft and controlled. I'm just going
down to get warm. But I'll be back. Don't you worry. I'll come back as soon as I get warmed up. Oh, I'm so cold. And I'll come back tomorrow and the next day and everyday, okay?"

He stood and looked down in the direction of the house and then toward David's house. He saw the glimmer of the television go off, and there was no longer any sign of David or his house. As loud as he could, Ronnie screeched down at the blackness.

- David. You prick! How can you be fucking her now? -

When the sound of his voice had faded, he knelt and ran his hands over the surface of the snow. "Now where'd you put that light, Ron? Oh, that's right. It doesn't work. Better take it back, anyway." Ronnie found it again and put it in his back pocket. Shivering, he began down the hill. "Jesus, my legs hurt. And I'm so cold. I just remembered. Those poor cows haven't been milked, have they? I guess as soon as we get warmed up, we'd better get that milking done, don't you think? Jesus I'm cold!"