



*As I sit and ponder earlier days  
I lurch through a quagmire of thoughts  
Of my lost unharmonious ways  
And of my corrected faults.*

*—Al Hamby*

# *Choices*

## *Battling the Beast Within*

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Note to the reader:

Most of the book is written from Al's point of view, in the first person (I, me, my).

When someone else is speaking in the third person (he, him, his), *italics* are used.

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## Why This Book?

*My husband Dennis and I first met “Trapper Al” Hamby in 1996 at Tangle Lakes Lodge. He was one of many interesting local characters who’d hit the “reset” button on life and moved to Alaska.*

*A few years later, on February 11, 1998, we left Anchorage late for a trip to the lake. At about Mile 10 of the Denali Highway, we found a snowmachine abandoned in the middle of the road. A trail of footprints led off to the west. Apparently the machine broke down and someone continued on foot. It was windy and bitterly cold.*

*We followed the tracks to Al, full of smiles and wearing a fox fur hat he’d made. We took his photo (on the cover of this book) and offered him a lift. He said he was happy to walk the remaining miles to his cabin, but we insisted. We had mail to deliver to Ron Holmstrom. It would be on our way. He accepted a ride.*

*We had a great visit with him that day, and thereafter stopped in to see him often. Occasionally, he’d ask us to drop an envelope in the outgoing mail for him on our way through Paxson. Once in a while, we’d bring him a treat from town.*

*We talked a lot about books and ideas. I offered to pick up books for him at Title Wave, a used bookstore in Anchorage. The titles he listed were intimidating: *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Thucydides*, *Ancient Civilizations*, *The Trivium*, etc. He seemed to be getting a better classical education on his own in the middle of nowhere than either of us had gotten in years of university classes!*

*Al was amazing with plants and animals. He domesticated a pigeon that flew in from who knows where? Before long, “Charlene” was living in his house and laying eggs, which he’d fry up for breakfast. He tamed a local fox, Buddy, and named most of the local wildlife. He cultivated delicious vegetables and gave us a raspberry bush that thrives in our garden despite our “brown thumbs.” He kept chickens and rabbits for years and graciously shared free-range eggs with his guests.*

*When Tangle Lakes Lodge went on the market in 2005, we wondered what would happen to Al. He said he had a plan, a dream to live way out in the woods in a tent. It didn't seem feasible, but a few years later, he did it! He chose a place a mile or more off the highway that was line of sight to the Paxson cell tower so he could continue his online classes in sentence diagramming, algebra, opera, and the like.*

*Unfortunately for him, the homesteading era was over. In August 2012, Troopers arrived at his hideaway accompanied by a National Geographic cameraman. Al ended up "starring" in an episode of the Alaska Troopers TV show, "Armed and Squatting." It first aired on December 16, 2012 (Season 4, Episode 10).*

*Dennis had told him in 2005 if he ever needed a place to live out the last of his days, he'd be welcome at the homestead. On September 11, 2012, Al became our next-door neighbor.*

*I'd started writing a history of Dennis' homestead in 2011. Al was now part of that history, the first ever full-time resident. I interviewed him for information on what brought him to this part of the world. He told me he was working on a book about his life. He let me read part of it. I was looking forward to reading more.*

*The book was never finished. On February 13, 2015, Al's neighbors Peter and John dropped by to say hello and found him dead on the floor.*

*The day before, he'd taken his snowmachine to Paxson to pick up fresh groceries his friend Gary brought from Anchorage. He prepared a delicious dinner—pork loin—slept, and got up early as usual. Apparently, he was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee listening to the radio when something happened, suddenly. The Medical Examiner ruled the death accidental. No autopsy was done.*

*As we went through Al's things, we found his manuscripts. Since books are what I do, I decided to do a little minor editing and compile what he had to share with his friends and family. My guess is they'll hear his voice as they read his story.*

*Al's is an amazing story about choices—choices that trumped circumstances more difficult than most of us ever face, thankfully. Choices that saved his life after almost destroying it.*

*When Al made up his mind about something, nothing could stop him. He made up his mind not to be a victim of circumstances. He had a characteristic sought by Special Forces, an iron will. The flip side is an iron "won't." Al's iron will got him into trouble. His iron "won't" kept at bay the beast within and brought him to Alaska to become our friend.*

## Introduction

I've had two epiphanies in my life, both of which surely saved it. The first came thirty-seven years ago, in 1975. The next came seventeen years later, in 1992.

I was thirty years old when I drew a line between myself and the beast within. I declared a personal war against the animal in me, a war that continues to this day.

For years, I fought the beast. Sometimes he would win a battle. Sometimes I would. Neither of us ever walked away unbloodied or unscathed.

Eight years into the foray, I found a weapon (A.A.), and with it and "white knuckle force" (force of will), I kept the beast at bay for two and a half years. But I didn't wield the weapon properly. In an inattentive moment, he was on me. This battle he won decisively. He took me by the throat and dragged me to my knees, where I remained for years. He never loosened his grip. I never resisted or defended myself.

I knew I was falling deeper into the abyss. Out of the darkness of insanity, I reached out blindly and my searching hand found the weapon once again.

My desire was to do what most psychiatrists and psychologists profess to be impossible. I wanted to change my very nature and character. I didn't want to just alter my behavior pattern, I wanted to totally reverse it.

A three-month battle ensued. The beast and I were bloodied with the debris of need, shame, insanity and volition. I finally beat him to the ground. At his weakest point, I dragged him into a corner and locked a chain of truth around his neck. He fights, whines, cries, howls and strains at the end of his short chain, but he can't break it.

Sometimes, not thinking, I wander too close to him. In a heartbeat, he's at the end of his chain, nipping at my serenity. Those times serve as warnings, reminders of what I have chained inside.

The beast: I, me, and mine.



## Timeline

- 1945: Al was born in San Antonio, Texas on February 10
- 1950: Al's father savagely beat his mother and the marriage ended
- 1953: Al's mother met and married the "Old Man," George Ward
- 1957: First arrest for drunk and disorderly conduct
- 1960: Left home at the age of 15 to the streets and prison
- 1971: Paroled to Lake Tahoe
- 1973: Arrested for parole violation, jail break, return to San Quentin
- 1975: Released from prison for the last time in August
- 1977: Living in Hawaii
- 1978: Moved from Hawaii to Wyoming
- 1990: Arrived in Bend, Oregon
- 1992: Last drink of alcohol on June 10
- 1993: Came by ferry to Alaska and camped outside Tok
- 1993: Hired by Paxson Lodge for the winter
- 1994: Went mining at Backelor Creek off the Steese Highway
- 1995: First worked at Tangle Lakes Lodge in May
- 1995: Tried mining with a bigger dredge
- 1995: Winter caretaker for Tangle Lakes Lodge.
- 1996: Winter caretaker for Tangle River Inn. Started writing.
- 2000: Moved to Paxson for a couple of years
- 2003: Back at Tangle Lakes Lodge working for Allen and Suzy
- 2011: Moved to a tent in the woods
- 2012: Moved to Swede Lake on September 11
- 2015: Died on February 13, three days after his 70th birthday

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## Growing Up

**H**uman beings learn morals and ethics in their youth, from their parents, relatives, and society. Aristotle said that virtues in some cases are inherent and in others are dictated by society. The inherent form of virtue is not prevalent. The force that keeps most humans ethical and moral is fear—fear of breaking societal laws that result in punitive consequences, fear of being ostracized, or fear of theological laws.

The chances of life made me a prime candidate for the school of hard knocks. I was born on February 10, 1945 in San Antonio, Texas. My family lived on on a bean and cotton farm owned by my grandfather. Having an older brother by three years and a younger sister by one set a pattern in life for me—always in the middle of something.

I was a happy, smiling, intelligent kid, willing to learn and eager to help with anything, a beaming, towheaded boy right out of a Rockwell painting. I learned Mexican before I learned English and spoke both fluently. (I kick myself for forgetting the Spanish later in life.) My half-brother, Oren Derrick Pangle, had dark hair and was often mistaken for a Mexican. Mom had married Derrick Pangle when she was nineteen. While she was pregnant with my brother, his dad was killed while fixing a tire. A few years later, Mom married Porter Randall Hamby, my dad. He was an employee on my grandfather's farm.

One of our ancestors, Pierre DeLamarands, was a French knight sent by King Louis XVI to protect the first French settlement in Quebec. He had seven sons, one of whom married a Powatamane Indian, our great great grandmother. Nowadays, the family name is Lamarand.

We moved to the back woods of Aranass Pass, across the bay from Corpus Christi. We lived in a little one-room cabin with an outhouse. The three of us kids slept in the same bed. Dad worked on a shrimp boat with my mom's brother, Delmer Rice.

Our only neighbor and babysitter was a big, happy, black lady we called Aunt Jewel. She had five boys and a daughter named Margaret. My brother and I spent a lot of time with her boys, chasing rabbits and horny toads across the sand dunes and through the swamps. Aunt Jewel had a slingshot she used to shoot horny toads herself!

My parents drank, a lot. When I was four or five years old and Mom was twenty-seven, they got into a drunken brawl that ended their marriage. They kicked the shit out of each other. Us kids watched, crying, screaming and hugging each other. He pulled a knife on her. We thought for sure he'd kill her. She grabbed the knife and threw it out the kitchen window. He stomped her and broke her nose. After that day, I never saw him again.

Mom knew she couldn't raise three kids on less than seventy-five cents a day. She had a twin sister in Hayward, California, near Oakland. Opportunities and money would be better there.

She took my sister with her and moved in with my aunt. My brother and I went to Rockport, Missouri to live with Uncle Harold and Aunt Jessie. We stayed there for a year and a half while Mom got herself together. I started school at Toler Heights, a one-room school in West Bend with different rows in the schoolroom for the different grades. I was already a year behind. Kids in Missouri started school a year sooner than in Texas.

School wasn't far from Uncle Harold's. We could just run across the pasture, jump the fence, and be at school.

After my mom got an apartment of her own and a job with a dry cleaning company, my brother and I moved to California. Mom didn't own a car. My aunt had a '51 Chevy we called "the gray ghost." She'd pick us all up every morning, then drop Mom and work and us at school. After school us kids would walk a mile or so to my aunt's house. She'd take us all home after she picked up Mom after work.

In California, my street education and hardening began. A country boy taken off the farm and transplanted to downtown Oakland. At the time, not only did I not know what television was, I didn't know what a Nigger, a Pachuco, a Jew or a Wop was. These terms were as alien to me as war, robbery and burglary. It didn't take the city long to teach me.

When I was about seven years old, Mom met the “Old Man,” George Dewey Ward, in a bar right across the street from our apartment. He was willing to share the responsibility of raising three young kids. It was his fifth marriage and her third. We moved from our apartment to Tarman Avenue on the east side of Hayward.

Unfortunately, George was a sick, domineering alcoholic. His ego fed on the conquests in his past. Over the years, it was an endless tirade of his sexual prowess and his physical combative achievements. In other words, he was good at fuckin’ and fightin’. We endured endless years of his bullshit.

The ass-kickings we took (including Mom), the hypocrisy and the deceit that poured over us like molten steel hardened to cast our roles in life. My brother’s cast shattered and exposed him to reality. He put a twelve-gauge shotgun in his mouth and created his own reality. My sister still spits on the ground at the mere mention of the Old Man.

I hardened inside and out. With no feelings, there was no pain, no emotion. I was impervious to the feelings of others. The only emotion I sustained was the need and demand for immediate gratification. I wanted it all and I wanted it now.

At twelve years old, I started my record with a bust for drunk and disorderly. The Old Man tried to whip my ass with a belt. I stood my ground and told him, “Up yours!” I’m only 5’6”, but he never touched me after that.

At thirteen, I tried running away. I told the cops who found me to tell the fools to quit drinking.

I left home for good in 1960. I was fifteen years old.

The games escalated, as did the time. Over the years, I went from the minor to the major leagues—auto theft, burglary, forgery, robbery and drugs, everything short of murder and rape.

For seventeen years I fought against all powers that be—the authorities, social structure, accepted standards. I did what I wanted and always paid the price. I lived hard and heavy when I got out of jail and hit the streets.

I knew I wouldn’t be out for long.

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## Lake Tahoe

In 1971, I was paroled to Lake Tahoe, Nevada, unsupervised. I made it on the streets there for longer than ever before, a little over a year. Usually five or six months was tops. I got busted in Minden, a small town south of Carson City, for a parole violation, “Ex-con with a gun.”

While they bided their time in sending me back to the joint, I talked fast and furious with a half-crazy lady I was running with at the time. The main tank where I was being held had a barred window overlooking a small parking lot for the Sheriff’s car and visitors. The glass was broken in most of the panes and the mesh that covered the outside was pulled loose at one corner. It was an old building without much upkeep or security. The sheriff there dealt mostly with Paiute Indians off the reservation and drunks from the casinos now and then. In the main tank was an old steel door that led out to the alley behind the jail. If I could get through that door, I’d be home free. My old lady came to visit me on the weekend. I told her what I needed and what she had to do.

The following Monday night I sat on a table that allowed me to look out the window. Along about 9:00, I saw a hand come up holding a rolled paper bag. It scraped across the mesh, making a sound like a kid with a stick running along a picket fence. I jumped off the table, went to the window, and by standing up on my toes, got my hand over the window sill in the bottom left hand corner where she, on the outside, had pulled back the weakened mesh. She pushed the bag into my hand.

Speaking loudly enough for her to hear, I said, “You did great, honey. Come back Wednesday and visit me. Now get the hell out of here.”

There were fourteen Indians in the cell with me. They watched the action come down with curious eyes and silence, in on this.

I went over to my bunk and opened the bag. There were two thirty-two teeth-per-inch hacksaw blades made for cutting hard steel. With them there were six fat bombers rolled up in a plastic bag.

At the end of the long table I had been sitting at were six inmates playing cards, two of whom I had gotten to know to a degree. Thomas and Richard were federal cons on their way back to the joint. I walked over to them. They all looked up. Thomas said, "What's happening, man?"

"Ain't nothing to it but to do it," I said, as I put a bomber between my lips and lit it. Smiles broke out on all their faces. I took a hit and passed it to Thomas. When the joint reached the third man, I lit another one. By the time that first joint had made the rounds, four other guys had come to the table. I lit a third joint. We sat silently and smoked. When the last roach was just a wisp of smoke, guys drifted back to their bunks to enjoy their break in the humdrum existence of lockup. Four guys began to play cards again.

I sat down across from Thomas.

"I'm not going back, Thomas."

"What you gonna do?" he asked.

"I'm going through that door right there. If anyone wants to come, they can, but I want an hour head start."

Thomas and Richard exchanged looks of desire, then Thomas shook his head no.

"We'll be doing light time, a fire camp, no more than a year. It ain't worth it to us."

Looking over to the door and back to them, I said, "It's going to take me awhile to get through it. Some of these guys are on work detail around here."

Five of the guys were doing county time. They were let out each day to wash the Sheriff's cars, do maintenance work, and clean up around the jail.

Richard spoke up, "You do what you gotta do. Ain't nobody going to do nothing."

The next morning, Monday, after breakfast and after the workers were called out, I went to work on the door. There was no cover plate on the lock between the door and the jamb. I could get a blade in the crack and from the feel of it, I could tell the deadbolt was about an inch thick and two and a half inches high. Behind the bolt were door stops that allowed me less than three eights of an inch of stroke with my blade.

I wrapped toilet paper three inches back on the blade and commenced to cutting with short, even strokes. When the end of the blade dulled, I moved the toilet paper back an inch or so and broke off an inch of

the blade in front to keep sharp teeth working on the bolt at all times. I worked most of the day, taking breaks now and then. The pressure I was exerting on the blade kept cramping and numbing my fingers, and the bull was taking prisoners in and out the main door at the other end of the tank.

That night after chow, I passed around the last joint and asked around about what was outside the door. From the window, I could see the backs of buildings along the alley. I was told there was a gas station with a parking lot at the end of the alley I couldn't see, and then the stores began.

I worked on the door off and on through Tuesday. I could tell I was almost through the bolt. Wednesday, the old lady came to visit. I told her to get her shit together and Friday night to be in the station parking lot after 10:00 in the evening.

I'd know what time it was because they turned off the lights in the main tank at 10:00. Thursday afternoon I got through the bolt. I decided to wait until that night to try and open the door. If there were alarms attached, I'd have a better chance in the dark, and I wouldn't get the old lady popped either.

That night after lights out, I went to the door and slowly pulled it open. I stuck my head and shoulders outside. It was a clear, starry night. I looked up and down the alley. I could see the gas station and parking lot down on the end. I fought hard to keep myself from stepping over the threshold. I knew if I did, there'd be no turning back. I'd be gone. I jerked back through the door and closed it silently.

All day Friday, I moved around the tank as restlessly as a breeze caught in a box canyon. Slowly, evening came. Eventually, the lights went out in the tank. I walked into Richard and Thomas' cell and said with a short salute of my hand, "Later, guys," and I was out the door and gone.

The old lady said her grandparents lived in the small town of Hamilton, Montana, about a hundred miles south of Missoula, and she had friends there.

What I didn't know was that she had talked to her mom, a dealer at Harvey's Casino in Tahoe. A week after my escape, she heard about it, got worried about her daughter being with an escaped convict, and called her parents in Montana. I was an easy setup. I was only out three weeks when they popped me. This time, they didn't fool with me. They kept me locked down until they extradited me back to Quentin.



Although Richard and Thomas didn't go with me, they escaped in their own way. Saturday morning when breakfast came, they took my tray of food as it came through the door. I wasn't missed. They did the same thing at supper.

When the lights went out Saturday, Richard went into the night. He had friends not too far from the jail. He picked up a stash of pot and three bottles of whiskey. On the way back, he had his friends stop at a drive-in where he picked up a bunch of hamburgers and French fries. Jailhouse food consisted of two "TV dinners", one in the morning and one at night. He came back into the main tank the way he left and those guys in there partied until Monday morning.

The Sheriff didn't know I was gone until Monday when he called me out to sign extradition papers.

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## Life in Prison

**P**aranoia? When not an hour of the day or night passes without the man looking into your cell from the tier or the catwalk. With all the violence happening, you spend a lot of time just watching each other. It heightens your animal instincts. Unless you're a total space case, you're exceptionally aware of sights and sounds. You know what is normal and what isn't in your enclosed environment.

Tension flows through the convict population as thick as the fog that comes in off the bay and closes down the prison from time to time.

One afternoon I'd gotten off work and started across the lower yard with the other cons to make lockup when paranoia struck, a feeling that bad things were happening. I walked up the two flights of stairs, each about sixty feet in length. They ended at a guard shack where the bulls searched you down before you got into the upper yard, which was in the center of three main housing units. After being searched, I walked towards the South Block. The feelings got stronger. I knew I was going to get hit.

I turned my back to the wall of the mess hall. The hair on my neck began to rise. My hands broke out in a cold sweat. I stared intently at the cons passing me. Nodding my head at those I knew, I thought, "Who's the asshole and what's his problem?" As I stood there sweating and waiting, Smiley came trucking across the yard.

When he was standing in front of me, he saw the way I looked and asked, "What's going on, bro'?"

"I don't know, man. Watch my back on the way in," I replied, and started into the South Block.

Smiley was buzzed up immediately. He started looking around, covering every direction I couldn't. We passed through the rotunda and made our way up the stairs to the fifth tier.

If either of us had walked any lighter, we'd have had to hold onto the rail to keep from floating away.

Smiley's house was only three doors down. We stood with our backs against the cell walls and waited. Just as the bull yelled out, "Fifth tier! Lockup!" and threw the cell doors open, a shotgun blast reverberated through the building. Whistles started to scream as officers signaled a need for assistance. The bull at the end of the tier began yelling, "Lockup! Lockup! I'm closing them!"

The trouble came from the far end of the building. This part of South Block had twenty-five cells on tier. We couldn't see what was going on but that night at chow call we found out that a buzzed up little asshole called "Speedo" had gotten stuck by his cell partner who couldn't take his actions any more. News travels fast inside. The physical description and the proximity of the hit was so close to me that a lot of cons I knew thought it had been me. Was it paranoia or a sixth sense that warned me of danger? I never tried to understand it. I only lived with it.

Denny's first scream resounded loudly off the grey concrete walls and echoed up to me on the fifth tier. The shit's coming down again, I thought as I was snatched back to reality. I stepped back and looked both ways, left and right, up and down the tier I was on. With a practiced glance I knew nothing was going on up here.

I had been leaning on the guard rail with my elbows spread out and my chin resting on my hands, looking out the barred windows onto the upper yard. Daydreaming. I hadn't been just looking outside. I'd been looking "outside" outside, something guys doing time were prone to do. The cons were coming in to make the mandatory three o'clock lockup for the statewide count of prisoners.

The first tier, four stories below, was crowded with prisoners waiting to get into their cells. It was as noisy as a New York subway station. Men talked loudly and yelled back and forth to one another. Doors clanked open and then slammed shut with a crash. Bull keys rang like the bells in an old cash register.

Another scream pierced the chattering hubbub of lockup. I stepped forward, leaned out over the rail and looked down.

I watched as two Chicanos, members of the Mexican Mafia, advanced on Denny. Their right arms worked in tandem like the pistons in an engine. In their clenched fists they held bright, sharpened pieces of steel, eight to ten inches long. The handles were wrapped in heavy

tape to ensure a good grip when the blood began to flow. Which it did. In great abundance.

They were punching holes in Denny's chest like a Singer sewing machine making stitches in a seam. He was picked up on his toes and pushed backwards with the force of each hit. Red rosettes kept blossoming on his once white tee shirt.

Not being able to retreat further, his back slammed into the wall under the windows I'd been looking out of. Slightly bent over and looking down, his knees began to buckle. Slowly, as if he were an old man sitting down, he slid to the concrete floor. He sat there with his hands spread open on his chest, trying to hold in the precious fluids of his body. He realized, somewhere in his terrified mind, that death was coming.

He reached down, got his palms on the floor and tried to raise himself.

In slow motion he crumbled onto his side and rolled over onto his back to stare blankly up at the high ceiling above him, or at me. I never knew which. In the last moments of his life, it seemed to me, an ethereal wisp of smoke escaped his lips, or it was my imagination that saw the spirit of life leave his body?

His eyes closed. His mouth worked like a fish out of water, opening and closing. Either saying his last good-byes or gasping for the air that his lungs surely needed. In a matter of sixty seconds from the onslaught of the attack, he was dead.

Denny was twenty-two years old, with brown eyes and sandy colored hair. He was slim and of medium build. He was too good looking to be a con without "heat." The joint pressures were getting to him. There are many ways to die in prison, but he couldn't kill himself. So he opted to let someone else do it.

He had money on the books and if you've got money, anything can be had. He started to buy heroin from the Mexican Mafia. When his money ran out, which it does quickly buying jailhouse dope, he started getting the "stuff" on the "come." The Mexicans didn't mind. They wanted his ass and his money. He bought a few "papers" and made good on his debts. Then he went for the big one. He got into them real heavy and when pay up time came, he told them to "Fuck off." The end result was a foregone conclusion.

The years I spent in and out of San Quentin Prison were some of the bloodiest in its history. Murder and mayhem occurred seemingly on a daily basis. It was the time that George Jackson made his deadly bid for freedom. A time when the condemned men on "Death Row" were

reprieved and released into the general population or transferred to other joints like they did with Charlie Manson.

Quentin was a gladiator school, a Roman arena in fantasy land where young men brandished their swords like phallic symbols to proclaim to everyone that they were, indeed, men.

Tips and cliques (gangs) were in full force. The Mexican Mafia, made up of streetwise Chicanos from in and around the Los Angeles area, were in a bloody war with Nuevo Nostros, the “New Family.” They were Mexicans who worked the fields in the “Valley” or were from other states. They had banded together for the protection of numbers. A lot of them died in the struggle for control over one joint or another all through the prison system.

The Aryan Brothers were a group of white boys who believed that white was right. As self-appointed policemen of the white prison society, they stabbed or killed anyone they thought needed it and guarded the distinct lines drawn between the whites, the blacks, the browns, and any other color that might come to mind. Their motto: “Whites are all right. Browns stick around. Blacks go to the back.”

The Panthers were so immersed in killing each other trying to establish leadership that they presented no problem to anyone except themselves.

The bikers, mostly Angels, had no time for jailhouse bullshit. They did their own numbers. But you didn’t go fronting them off; they wouldn’t back up an inch. If you hurt one of them and somehow got away, they’d take it to the streets with their connections outside.

Me? I had literally grown up in the system. I knew a lot of guys who had come up through the Youth Authorities with me. Now we were walking the “Big Yard.” I was a loner, though. I had no need of tips. I wasn’t going to kill a man because it was my turn or I had to make my bones. Like most of the cons, I didn’t mess with anyone unless, of course, he messed with me or mine. Then I’d loose the beast. I usually kept it on a short leash, but where self-preservation was concerned I’d let it rampage. If a con didn’t respond in a forceful way to confrontation then someone would own you. In every respect.

Warriors can sense strength, as well as weaknesses. Underlying my non-aggressiveness the cons could see the lid of Pandora’s box that none seemed to want to open. I’d gotten along these last fifteen years in this manner. The cons knew I was solid, in or out of the penitentiaries. Over the years, I’d not had many serious mishaps.

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## Epiphany #1

Denny was killed a week ago. It was the last killing I'd see for awhile, hopefully. Nervous as a whore in church, I'd been on pins and needles for two months. The Parole Board had given me my walking papers. In less than an hour I'd be on the streets.

I was standing in the yard in front of the administration building. On the right side was a bordering lawn with a few trees and shrubs that ended against a long low building, the prison church. All faiths were observed there.

On the left side rose a building where there was no faith at all. It was the Segregation Building, where guys considered too volatile for the general population were kept. It was out of this building that George Jackson had run with a nine shot automatic into the sights of fifty armed officers.

Two of my partners were waiting with me outside the doors to the administration building. Moe was the clerk in the laundry where I had worked. Not able to say he was glad for me or that I'd be missed, he gave me a light punch on the chest and said, "Weak. Can't take the pressure no more, so you're going to hit the bricks. Two weeks, man! That's all I'm givin' ya! All that stuff and dope out there, you ain't going to know what to do. I'm gonna keep your spot open on the presses. You'll not be gone long."

"In your ass," I replied. "I'm going to spend the first two weeks loaded and in bed with the first sweet thing I meet."

Smiley flashed those teeth of his that had gotten him his name, and said, "You only got a hunder'd and half. Whores don't work that cheap. You're going to have to do some ripping off to go two weeks."

We all laughed at that. Whenever anyone close to you got out, thoughts of the outside were infectious. It seemed as though you were going with them, by proxy. You could feel that first rush of freedom, taste

that cold beer, light a fat joint. You could feel the hot sweat of passion and the soft sensuality of that first woman you knew he was going to find. To be able to walk a hundred yards in any direction without running into a thirty-foot stone wall, on top of which walks a man with a riot gun who will shoot to kill, if need be.

All these years spent in a five-by-nine cell, sixteen hours a day. When you play the game of cops and robbers, it comes with the territory. I was tired of playing the game. I was thirty years old, and since I turned thirteen I'd had maybe five full years on the streets. My track record as a thief showed I had been good, but the law of averages says you're going to get popped. When I did, I paid my dues. Now a new suit of clothes and three locked doors were all that remained between me and a new run at freedom.

Only this time there was a difference. Moe couldn't see it. He still had a couple of years to do on a five-to-life. The idea was so far out of reach for Smiley that he couldn't see it. He was doing a life on life. In California, if your partner gets killed in the commission of a felony, you, his partner, get a murder beef. Smiley was doing a life for armed robbery and a life for his partner who was shot and killed by a San José cop.

The difference this time around was that the State had kicked my ass. I wasn't coming back.

The first of three doors opened. A bull stuck his head out and yelled, "If you guys are rolling up, you better get your asses in here."

At that I stuck my hand out to Moe. As we shook hands, I said, "Take it slow man. You ain't got nothing left to do."

Shaking Smiley's hand, I told him, "Keep walking it off. It ain't nothing for a stepper."

"Don't forget to get ahold of my sister," he said with urgency. "She knows where Red is at. You get on his case for me."

Red was a so-called friend that was supposed to be doing "things" for Smiley but hadn't shown up in a couple months. I told him I'd call. With a little sadness in my heart, knowing my intentions and knowing they still had a long way to go, I put a tight smile on my face. I nodded my head to each of them, turned, and entered the open door.

Inside, Sergeant Henderson took my ID card and started looking down a long row of clothes hanging from a steel rack. Four other cons were already half dressed. They were putting on those dismal colored, loose, off-the-rack suits that the state issued you on release.

What the Sergeant pulled off the rack for me was a black, long sleeved shirt, a pair of faded boot cut jeans with a pair of new white socks and a blue tee shirt. I had worked in the laundry and had manufactured my own clothes. I paid a box (a carton of cigarettes) to the guy in shipping and receiving to send them over as my dress-outs, along with a new pair of white, low-cut tennis shoes that I had traded a hit of acid for down on the “Yard.”

I didn’t want to look like a con just getting out of the slammer. When you first get out of the joint you have what I call the “Scarlet Letter Syndrome”. Everyone out there knows by looking at you that you just got out of prison.

While the other cons were putting on their white shirts and tying their ties, I had slipped into my clothes in minutes and walked up to the desk where Sergeant Henderson waited. I hadn’t brought anything with me to take out so like on the airlines, there was no delay. The Sergeant, not having anything to search, pushed my release papers across the counter and said as he marked an “X” on a line at the bottom of each paper, “Sign here, and give me a thumb print in the box next to it. Do all three copies.” There was an ink pad permanently mounted into the counter.

I complied hastily and pushed them back to him. He scanned all three copies, tore off two of them and handed them to me with my ID card. He pointed to a door at the end of the counter.

“Go on through there.” I walked over to the door. As I waited, there was a loud electronic buzz, then a metal-on-metal clanking as the hidden bolt was opened. I pushed the door open and stepped across the threshold of the second door.

I was standing in a vaulted archway built of stone blocks that curved together and met twelve feet over my head. The hall was at least twenty-five feet long. To my right was the main gate into the prison. It was a massive, archaic thing, built to fit the arched entrance and made of iron strips four inches wide, a quarter of an inch thick, and held together with massive rivets.

The sun came in from the outside, imprinting the grill’s long shadow on the concrete floor. Alongside the door sat a bull. As I approached him he got off the stool he was sitting on and pulled a huge key from a leather scabbard on his hip. I handed him my papers and ID card. He gave them a quick look and tore off one of the copies, clipping it to a board mounted on the wall behind him.



After he handed me my last copy and my ID, he turned and unlocked the gate. As he pushed it open, it screeched ominously.

My heart was pounding so loud that the noise of rushing blood filled my ears. I never heard the door. I just stood there, long after he had opened it. The paper he'd given back to me was clutched in my sweaty hand in a death grip.

The guard smiled to himself and shook his head. It wasn't the first time for him. He raised a hand to my shoulder and gave me a gentle shove.

"I ain't got all day," he said. "Get on out of here, man. Good luck, huh?"

Cautiously, I stepped out into the morning sun, like a young deer warily entering an open meadow to feed. My mind was racing. I'd made it through the third door..... I was free!

I slowly walked down the sidewalk, my eyes taking in everything around me, especially the gun tower over the visitors' entrance. No shots rang out. No whistles blew. I made my way across the parking lot to the guard shack. Again I presented my ID and the last paper I had. He looked at them and smiled as he looked back up to me. Reaching over to a console, he thumbed a button and said, "Well, looks like you're doing it. Nice day for it."

"There could be a foot of snow out there and it'd be a nice day for it," I said. We both laughed in agreement as a fifteen-foot chain link fence topped with razor wire rolled back three feet on the driveway.

I wasn't rehabilitated in the social sense. I was just tired of waiting for that piece of steel to come slicing into my back between the ribs behind my heart. I was tired of the endless stretches of time and the nothingness of it all

I slowly raised my hand to the prison in a final salute to it and all it entailed. I extended my middle finger and made a vow. "That's the last time you get me, you M\*\*\* F\*\*\*."

I took a deep breath of fresh, free air, turned and walked up the hill to the halfway house clustered amongst the buildings that crowded the narrow street leading from the prison.

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## Going Home

*Neal looked down the hill past the halfway house and watched Lil' Al Capone's release. He knew he had to wait to talk to him. Al was going to have to make it through these first few days of freedom on his own.*

*Al was only five-foot-seven, but he weighed one hundred and sixty pounds with no fat, flat blue eyes, wavy blond/brown hair that was beginning to thin and recede. Relatively good-looking and muscular, broad in the chest and shoulders. There were a few who claimed he was six-one and two hundred pounds, but they'd seen a different side of him.*

*Neal knew that Al's nerves were stretched tighter than the cables on the bridge behind him. He had the first day jitters. The very idea of just walking around outside, eyes and mind taking in the scene of an unlimited view. After two and a half years of being told when to eat, sleep and shit, he would be confronted with the almost overwhelming process of making decisions for himself. Do I go left or right? Do I go up the hill or stand here stupidly? Choices! Almost a physical mental shock. Welcome to reality.*

*Neal had known Lil' Al most of his life, though he hadn't been closely associated with him until 1973, when Al began to contact him regularly, something Lil' Al never did before. When Al's family or friends didn't hear from him for long periods of time, they knew he was doing just that, long periods of time. Somewhere. He didn't want anyone involved with his incarceration. No letters. No visits. No help.*

*Neal had visited Al a few times in the last couple of years. The first visits were rough. Al's outlook was as sour as a green persimmon. His attitude and understanding were akin to the iron and concrete that held him captive. He was as stubborn and hardheaded as a mule. If you built a fire under him to get him going, you were more apt to burn his ass off than make him move.*

*He was a maximum security prisoner. In other words, he had a "rabbit jacket." Given any daylight at all, he'd run. He had a number of escapes and attempts on his record. Consequently, he spent a lot of time in his cell being accounted for.*

*Sometime in the last visits, Neal had noticed changes, almost imperceptible at first and then graduating to the point where Al actually enrolled in educational courses: Math, English and Creative Writing.*

*Although Al kept up his "Fuck you and leave me alone" attitude, Neal sensed a softening in his heart. Before he could approach Al again, he had to let him get his feet on the ground and take a good look around at freedom.*

I walked up the steps to the halfway house. From the porch I could hear someone talking on the phone. I opened the screen door and went inside. A thin guy with a beard, wearing Levis and a tee shirt, was leaning back in a swivel chair with a phone to his ear. He was just finishing his conversation. He looked up and gave me a small wave.

"OK! OK!" he said. "I'll be over there in a few. Yeah, right. See ya' later." He hung up, got to his feet, and extended his hand to me.

"How you doing, man? I'm Mike. What can I do for ya'?"

I wiped my sweaty hand on my pants and took his. "I'm Al. I just got out. I need a ride to the BART station in Richmond."

"No problem, man. That's what we're here for. I've 'just gotten out' a few times myself. I got out eight years ago and set this place up. I ain't been back in since. I've got a couple of rooms in back for people to stay in when they're visiting someone inside."

"Well, all I need is a ride across the bridge." I cut him short. It sounded like he was going to lay the whole spiel on me. I didn't want to hear it. I just wanted to get the fuck away from here. His smile dropped.

"OK, Al, when Tom gets here to watch the place, I've got to go over to Berkeley to see a friend of mine. I'll drop you off on the way."

I nodded, turned, and went back out on the porch. I sat down on the first step and lit up a smoke. As I looked out over the bay and prison, I thought, "Outside five minutes and you're already on someone's case!" I thought about some of the things Neal had said. "People are people. You don't want them to try and change you. Why try and change them? There's a lot to be said for taking people as they are, and there's no headaches involved." Mike would understand what's happening, but a citizen would be offended.

I had just finished my second smoke when a heavy-set man came down the sidewalk and turned up the steps. He nodded to me as he went through the screen door. That must be Tom. I heard them talking for a few minutes, then Mike came out the door and said, “We’re on our way, man.”

We piled into an old Chevy at the curb. In no time, we were on the bridge.

“Looks good from this side, don’t it?”

“You bet it does,” I said, looking back down on the joint.

In ten minutes he pulled up in front of the BART station. I got out of the car, leaned down to the window, and told him thanks. He said, “There’s good things out there, man, you just gotta hold on to ’em. Take care.” He pulled into the traffic and was gone. My last prison contact was broken. I was on the streets, and on my own.

I walked over to the train schedule banging on the wall of the terminal. As I checked the departure times, I kept side glancing at the people near me. I used the reflection on the glass to check behind me, looking for those certain gestures or movements or eye contact that would warn me of danger. I did this, tense and wary, for twenty minutes before the BART train arrived. Once in my seat, I slowly realized these people didn’t have any idea who I was or where I’d been and they wouldn’t know unless I got crazy with them.

As the BART made its stops through Oakland, I began to relax. I started to enjoy the scenery, the ladies—tall ones, short ones, and those in between. They all looked and smelled so good. I didn’t stare. I didn’t want to spook anyone, but after living two and a half years with nothing but hard ass cons, a friendly smile and a nod of the head coming from something so soft and fragile was hard to handle.

In no time at all, I was standing on “B” Street in Hayward. I pulled Mom’s address out of my pocket. She lived on Main. I turned uptown and began to walk the mile or so to her place. All my senses were excited, listening to the traffic, hearing parts of conversations, smelling the sun bake the sidewalk and asphalt, odors drifting on the air from restaurants and drive-ins. I couldn’t help but stop and look into the store windows I passed. Not an all-time record but it must have taken me three hours to walk that mile uptown.

I came to Main, crossed it, and turned north after checking some of the address numbers. It had been over three years since I’d been in

Hayward last. I hadn't talked to Mom for that length of time either. The parole board said I needed an address to parole to. They weren't going to let me parole out of state as they had in 1971 to Lake Tahoe, Nevada, unsupervised.

Three blocks up Main, I came to an old gray painted house, narrow but long. It was obviously split into a duplex. Mom had said in her letter that she lived in the back part of it. I made my way down a small sidewalk between the building and a fence and went up some steps to the door. I took a deep breath and knocked. I heard a baseball game being broadcast over the radio or TV. When Howard Cosell was broadcasting baseball games on the tube, Mom didn't like it. She'd turn the sound down and turn on the radio to get the play-by-play description from another announcer.

The door scraped open and there stood Mom, all four-foot-eleven inches of her. Her eyes widened.

"Jesus! Albert!" she exclaimed.

Her arms went around my neck. She began to give me those motherly hugs and kisses.

"Come in! Come in!" she said.

I stepped into a small, enclosed porch, with a bed in it and stored boxes. It wasn't six feet wide. I followed her through another door that led to another small room, a kitchen / living room combined, about ten by twelve. She pointed to a small table with two chairs at it.

"Here! Sit down," she said. "Good to see you back." Like I'd been on a trip somewhere. Our conversations pertained only to the streets. I never talked about the joint, only the in between times. She didn't expect more than that.

"Have you got a cold beer?" I asked. I knew she would. Beer and baseball were her passions. She knew all the teams and their players by their stats.

She went to the fridge, got one, and came to sit at the table with me.

"How you been doing, Mom?"

"I've been all right. I'm only working part time here and there now. When they sold the place I worked at, the new owners brought in their own help. So now I'm on unemployment and looking for something steady."

She was a presser in a dry cleaner. She'd worked eight years at her last job. Now she was sixty-one years old and lost. Not knowing how to

do anything but work, idle time was weighing on her, making its mark.

We sat for an hour and talked of the past, then she asked, “What are your plans now?”

“I don’t know. First, I’ve got to see my parole officer, then I guess I’ll get to looking for a job, a real one.” You can’t tell moms that your real desire is to get high, eat a steak, and get laid. I didn’t really think I’d be doing anything for the first two weeks except enjoying my freedom.

“Well, Leigh is coming by in the morning. She works nights at the Branding Iron. She can help you look during the day,” she said.

Leigh was my younger sister only by a year. She was short on everything—short in height, 4’11”, short in temper, and short on conversation if you bothered her. It didn’t her take a paragraph to tell you to fuck off. But these traits were on the inside. Generally, she was friendly, smiling, and easy to get along with. She made a good cocktail waitress because of it.

We sat until late in the evening, drinking beer and talking. She made a late supper and was off to bed. I went to the bunk on the porch and laid down, but night sounds kept me awake most of the night—cars passing, people talking on the street as they walked along, and just the sounds of a city that I never heard locked up.

I woke up early, confused for a moment. No “reville.” No “Chow in thirty minutes.” I laid back and laughed at myself. Nobody’s going to be beating on the bars this morning. I smoked a couple of smokes and heard Mom in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I said as I walked in.

“Good morning,” she replied. “I hope that old rollaway was comfortable. It’s a bit saggy.”

“Mom, if I’d slept on the floor out there, it would have been like a feather bed.”

“Coffee’s almost ready,” she said. “I’ve got a couple of days work at a small shop in San Leandro. You can call Leigh later. She doesn’t get to bed until late, you know.” Then she went into her bedroom to get dressed for work.

When the coffee was ready, I poured myself a cup and sat down at the table. Well, you’ve got time on your hands again, only a different kind. I thought about some of the people I knew in town, but with each picture brought up in my mind, the warning lights would blink. I knew if I got ahold of any of them, I’d be back into the same trick bag I’d always been

in. It had to be done differently this time, but I didn't have a clue as to how, other than get a lunch bucket and get lost in the working crowd. I didn't think I could do that, not here in the city.

After Mom came in and had coffee, she headed out the door to the bus stop. She said she'd be back around 5:00, and there was something in the fridge for lunch.

I sat for awhile, smoking and drinking coffee. The guys would already be at work, hustling and talking the talk.

Thinking of them reminded me of Smiley. I decided to make that call for him. I'd have to go out. Mom didn't have a phone.

I put on my shirt, checked my pockets for change and the number, and hit the street. Walking along Main as it was just gearing up for the day was almost a high. I walked four blocks before I came to a booth. Stepping inside, I closed the door, put the number on the shelf, dropped in the coins and dialed. Four rings and a woman answered.

"Hello."

"Hi, Sandra?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm a friend of your brother's. I just got out. He asked me to give you a call."

"He hasn't been hurt, has he?"

"No! No! He just hasn't heard from Red Donnigan in awhile. He wanted to know what's up."

"He's not going to be hearing from Red for awhile longer. I haven't written him because I've been trying to find out where Red was, too. He turned up out at Santa Rita. He's doing six months for receiving stolen property."

"Well, that's cool. Smiley was just wondering. You know, when the mule quits packing, things get slow in there."

"I told Smiley that I'd buy and set things up, but I wasn't doing no packing."

"Hey, ain't nothing. He knows where you're at. You just write him and let him know what's happening. Tell him that I contacted you, OK?"

"Well, OK. Thanks, man. Later."

I hung up the phone and got lost in some wild memories. Smiley had been getting "Blue Barrel" acid, a hundred lot at a time. I had spent a lot of days and nights in the Twilight Zone."

Once after final lockup at 5:00, I decided to fix some acid. I'd never done it before. No one else had, either. I borrowed an "outfit" from a friend of mine and cold cooked half a tub. The tier-tender was waiting outside my cell to get the "outfit" back. Well, I stuck that puppy in my arm. By the time I had doused the glass, I could barely see. The hairs went up on my neck and the closest description I could come to was "Instant Insanity." I had to put my hand on the wall to walk those four steps to the bars and pass that outfit through.

By six in the morning the electricity and vibrations were gone, but I was still buzzed up. When they cut us loose for breakfast, my partner caught me on the yard. I was full of motherfuckers and cocksuckers. He'd bought some heroin and when he'd gotten the "outfit" back, he "geezed", but all he got was an acid rush. I hadn't been able to clean the "fit" as good as I thought.

Breaking off my thoughts, I left the booth and went back to the apartment to kill some time and wait for my sister. I didn't want to call and wake her if she'd had a hard night.

I sat around the apartment until ten. The waiting was driving me up the wall. In the joint, your mind was at a different level. You knew you had a lot of time to do. Your cell became a quiet sanctuary. Out here I felt I should be doing something.

The urge to go make a hit somewhere and get onto the fast track kept coming to me. Two or three grand and I could get a clean-looking "short" and go cruising, get me some good dope and a lady, but was I ready for a run? The only way to fuel a run is to feed it money. That meant ripping and tearing until some stupid mistake that always came brought you down. I remembered standing outside the prison and my promise to "it." That was the problem with most cons. Once they were out, they did their best to forget where they'd been. In a few short weeks, they'd have buried the memories. The weight of the haves and have nots were so immersed in the now that they were totally distorted and soon forgotten.



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## First Day of Freedom

I was on my third beer when I heard voices outside. I went to the small window that overlooked the walkway at the side of the house. Leigh was laughing and talking to another woman with a small boy holding onto her hand. A foxy lady, no doubt. She was just a little taller than my sister, with dark thick red hair cut short and brushed down over her ears. She wore a summer tank top, yellow with a small blue emblem over her left breast. She was deeply tanned or she had Latin blood in her. She had the body that Latin ladies seem to have—narrow waisted and flared at the hips. She filled out those white shorts she was wearing just fine.

I didn't waste any time getting out the door. Smiling, I stepped down to the walk and started toward them.

Leigh looked over to me. "Al!" she exclaimed as she took a couple of steps toward me and threw her arms around me. "Good to see you!" she said as she hugged me. I was looking over her shoulder as I hugged her. The lady's brown eyes stared at me as I undressed her. She didn't move or blink until my eyes shifted from her body over to her boy, then she looked down at her son, a small smile on her face.

Leigh let go of me, turned and said, "Rose, this is my brother, Al."

"Hi, Rose! Nice to meet you." She nodded her head. "You live up front here?" I indicated the apartment with a jerk of my head.

"Yeah, I've lived here three years. I helped your Mom move in. That's when I met Leigh. This," she said as she raised the boy's hand up, "is Kevin. He's four."

"Hi, Kevin!" Shy at meeting people, his head dropped and his dark eyes looked up at me. He mumbled a soft, "Hi."

"Look, Rosie," Leigh began. "I'll be by in a couple of days to do that shopping with you. I've got to get out to the ranch and clean some things up out there. I'm going to take Al with me and show him around. That all right with you, Al?"

“Sure,” I said. “Beats sitting in that room in there.”

“Let’s go, then,” she said. “I’ll drop you off later.”

Walking past Rosie and Kevin on the way to the car, I said to Rosie, “I’ll see you later if you’re around.”

She smiled and said, “All right.”

We got into Leigh’s car, an older Volkswagen. She swung around the block, caught “A” Street, and headed towards Castro Valley. In twenty minutes, we were in the foothills that surrounded the Valley, winding up a canyon road lined with older farm-style homes. She slowed down at one of these and pulled in. It wasn’t a ranch—just a house, barn, and stables set on about five acres with a ten-acre pasture across the street—but it wasn’t the city, that’s for sure.

Getting out of the car, Leigh stood for a moment watching a bunch of chickens run around the yard.

“Let’s see if Clyde or Mary’s here,” she said as she walked toward a side door on the house. “They could be in town.”

After knocking on the door a couple of times, she said, “They must have gone in. That’s all right. We can go do what we have to.” She turned and led me down to the barn, going through it and into the stables beyond. From a small corral attached to the stables, a huge horse whinnied and came in. He stood shaking his head and blowing through his nose as we came down the aisle of stalls.

As we walked past his stall, Leigh reached up and patted his cheek, saying, “Afternoon, Red. Did you miss me yesterday?” Clyde had fed him for her yesterday. We went to the end of the stable where there was a room filled with bales of hay. She pulled off an eighteen-inch section of the bale, brought it back, and broke it up in his feeder in the stall.

He was nose down immediately as he began to chomp, his huge mouth full of the sweet alfalfa hay.

“He’s a registered thoroughbred,” Leigh explained. “Almost sixteen and a half hands. I couldn’t have afforded him if he wasn’t so old, seventeen that year. I ride him but not a lot. I use him more for stud services. I’m trying to get a couple colts out of him.”

We stood for a moment watching him eat. Leigh patted his neck and scratched his ears, then said, “Well, I haven’t cleaned this place in awhile. I guess I’d better get busy. You wanna help?”

“Sure,” I replied. “I don’t have pressing engagements at the moment.”

We started cleaning stalls, the corral, the hay bin and the water tank. I wondered what my partners would think. A week ago I was selling

dope on the yard and being cool. Today I was sweating, covered with hay chaff and ankle deep in horse shit. I knew they'd be laughing and "raw-jawing." It didn't bother me, though. There was something gentle and pleasant to the work and the smells of the barn, nostalgic maybe of my days in Missouri and Texas—a cleaner, easier time.

We worked until three o'clock and Leigh said she had to get home. Tina, her daughter, would be getting home from school soon and she always made sure to be there when she did.

During the ride home, she said she'd pick me up in the morning if I wanted. She had the next two nights off. I said that sounded good to me. She pulled in front of Mom's and dropped me off. Mom wasn't home yet. I went in, stripped down and showered. I had hay everywhere you could get it. I was shaking off the hay from my pants when I realized that these were my only pants. After drinking a couple of beers, I went uptown to Penney's. I picked out a couple of shirts, two pairs of Levis and some socks. This was something different. I couldn't just go down on Tuesday shower night and get clean ones like I'd been doing for so long.

It was later than I thought when I got back. I had stopped at a small bar and had a couple of beers. Not much was going on in the middle of the week and early in the day. I bought a six-pack at a liquor store and headed home.

Mom was there when I got back. She had supper ready and was waiting for me. As she got dinner together, she told me about her day and that she had to go back there tomorrow. As we sat and ate, I told her what I'd done with Leigh and that I'd help her a couple more days.

After dinner, I did up the dishes, then sat and watched some of her favorite television shows and drank a couple more beers, which on top of dinner and the previous beers put the lights out. I gave Mom a hug and kiss and hit the sack.

The next morning as I sat drinking coffee with Mom, I once again enjoyed the luxury of not having to make chow call or work call looking at three thousand discontented morning faces make their way to their assigned jobs. Mom finished her coffee and was off. I didn't wait long until Leigh was at the door and we were off.

We continued our general cleanup of the place. That day I met and had lunch with Clyde and Mary. It amazed me to find country folk this close to the city. Neither of them had regular jobs. They boarded horses and every few years they'd sell off an acre or two, which took care of them quite nicely considering the real estate prices in that canyon.

The beer Clyde offered was cold and dripping condensation. A little bit of heaven right in a can, I thought as I opened it.

“Thanks,” I said. “This is just what the doctor ordered.”

“Well, don’t thank me yet. It’s going to cost you.”

“How’s that?”

“I need you to crawl into a dark, deep hole in the ground half filled with ice cold water.”

“Is that right? I think it’s gonna take more than one cold beer to do that.”

Laughing out loud, he said, “I can fix that up, too, but really, it ain’t that bad. My well spring is clogged up and I need to get it mucked out. Could ya’ help me with it?”

“Yeah, I can do that, long’s I don’t need diving gear.”

“Nah, nothing like that. I’ll gather up what we’ll need and have it ready tomorrow.”

“OK, I’ll be here with bells on.”

We talked and drank our beer until Leigh finished grooming Red. It was almost three and we had to go. Clyde stood in the driveway and waved as we left. On the way home, Leigh told me I was coming to dinner tomorrow night at her place. Tina would be glad to see me. She’d been asking about me since I’d gotten out.

When we pulled up at Mom’s place, Rosie was sitting on her porch looking as good as a suitcase full of money. As I got out of the car, she came walking down to it. The Levis she was wearing fit her tight and the tee shirt she wore tucked in accented her narrow waist. She sat down in the passenger seat and talked with Leigh. Leigh told her she’d be by tomorrow to pick her up and that she and Kevin were to come to dinner tomorrow night.

She climbed back out of the car and shut the door. We told Leigh bye and we’d see her in the morning. Rosie turned to me as Leigh drove away.

“You want to smoke a joint?”

“Yeah, I could get into that.”

“Come on.”

She’d left a small leather purse sitting on the porch. We went up the steps and sat on the top one. She picked up the purse, set it in her lap, opened the flap, reached in and brought out a big bomber. She smiled as she handed it to me.

“I’m picking up a bag for Leigh tonight,” she said.

“Great,” I said. “If I had a few more bucks, I’d get one myself.” The hundred and fifty I had when I got out didn’t last long.

“I’ve got a bunch,” she said. “Leigh’s going to have a gab, too, so not to worry. You’ll get high. Must be strange walking around out here.”

Giving her a quizzical glance, I asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well, Leigh told me you were getting out.”

I didn’t reply. I lit the joint, took a few good tokes and handed it to her. I guess I felt a little relieved that she knew I was a con. I didn’t have to tell her or hide it from her, and knowing it, any decision she came to would have to be based on that knowledge.

I watched her smoke and finally just said, “Good.”

“What did you go down for?” she asked.

“A cheap shot. Ex-con with a gun. They violated me and sent me back. I compounded it by breaking out of jail in Nevada.”

“How long were you down for?”

“Almost three years.”

“That’s a long time for a violation. Were you fucking up inside?”

“No, not any more than usual, but with an indeterminate sentence they can hold you all the way up to the top of your number. They can max you if they want, but one of the new laws they passed helped me get out. The law says that a parole violator without a new beef can’t do more than eighteen months. I had two years in when the law passed. They took me back to the parole board and set me a date.”

We sat silent for a while, passing the joint back and forth. This was my first real taste of freedom, sitting outside with the warm sun beating down, smoking some good dope with a good-looking lady. Main Street was busy, but no one paid any attention to us. I was out here, man! I was out here!

Sitting close together, I felt the heat from her body. I could smell that good womanly smell that emanated from her. I wanted her bad, but there are a few things a convict won’t do. You don’t rat. You don’t fuck with kids, and you don’t rape. Me being an old school con, I’d have to put up with the teenage “blue-balls” until the situation presented itself and could be remedied accordingly.

It was a good smoke. We sat without talking until Kevin stuck his head out the front door and said, “Mom, I’m hungry.”

“OK, honey,” she replied as she stood up. “Hang on a bit. I’ll start your dinner.” Looking down at me, she said, “I’m going to feed him early. I’ve got friends coming to pick me up.” She took a joint out of

the purse she still held and handed it to me.

“Here’s something for later,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow, OK?”

“You bet! Thanks, Rose.”

She turned around and went inside. I stood up and made my way back to Mom’s house. I showered and decided to get supper started and give Mom a break for one night at least. I cut up potatoes and onions and laid out some pork chops and a can of corn. Inside the joint, you didn’t get a lot of fresh meat, and when you did, it was usually cooked all to shit. It got so that I’d barely ever go to chow hall. I’d buy what I wanted from the cooks and workers in the kitchen and fix it in my cell.

When the potatoes were started, I turned on the TV, got me a beer, and waited for Mom.

It was 5:30 when I saw the top of her head go by the side window. I heard her fumbling with the door on the porch, and got up and opened the kitchen door. She had a bag of groceries in her arms, which I took from her.

“Stopped at the store on my way home,” she said.

“You should have told me what you wanted, Mom. I could have picked it up today, you know. I wasn’t doing nothing.”

Mom, being Mom, said, “Well, I didn’t know what I wanted until I got into the store!”

She went into the bedroom to change out of her work clothes. I put the groceries away, opened a beer for her, and put it on the table. I dumped the can of corn into a saucepan and fired it up, then breaded the chops and dropped them into a skillet.

The news was just coming on as I sat down at the table. Mom came in and joined me. She finished the cooking while we watched the news. After we’d eaten, I told her I was going for a walk around town and to leave the dishes. I’d get them.

When I got on Main Street, I broke out the joint. I smoked and walked, enjoying the feel of the night. In the dark you always seemed incognito, the town all aglow with lights. I wandered around for a couple of hours and finally went into that small bar again. There were a few locals sitting at the other end of the bar. I sat down and drank some beers and just thought and listened to the conversations.

It was after eleven when I got home. Mom was in bed. I crawled into my rack and crashed.

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## Cleaning Clyde's Spring

The closing of the kitchen door woke me up. Mom was on her way to work. The beer and pot had put my lights out. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept late.

"Sorry to wake you. You were sleeping so good!"

"That's all right, Mom. I should have been up anyway."

"Well, see you later tonight," she said as she went out the door.

I got up and went into the kitchen. I hadn't had but a couple of cups of coffee after getting the kitchen cleaned up when Leigh came in with a cheery, "Good morning, good morning!"

Rosie followed. I said good morning to them both. I poured them both a cup of coffee as Leigh was saying, "I figured since we have to help Clyde and do some shopping, we'd better get started early."

"No harm in that," I replied. "Where's Kevin?"

"He's over at the house. We'll drop him off at day school when we leave."

The ladies sat and chit chatted until we'd finished our coffee. Rosie got up and said she'd meet us at the car. She was going to get Kevin ready. As she left, I got up, put the cups into the sink and wiped the table. Leigh and I then stepped out into the warm morning sun. Kevin and Rosie were already in the car. I climbed into the back with Kevin. Leigh got in, fired it up, and we were off.

It only took a few minutes to get to Kevin's school. We let him out and watched him disappear into the building. Then Leigh headed to Castro Valley. Rosie broke out some smoke and rolled one.

Clyde's water was a gravity-fed system starting at a spring up the slope of the hill behind his place. He wasn't getting the pressure he needed, so he figured it must be clogged. When we got there, he was standing by the porch with a pitchfork, a long knotted rope, and a number of five-gallon plastic buckets arrayed at his feet.



“Howdy do!” he said as we walked up. Looking at me, he said, “You ready to get wet?”

“‘Bout as ready as I’m gonna be, I guess.” He turned his attention to Rosie.

“Ain’t seen you in awhile. Where you been hiding?”

“Well, you know, just doing what I do. I don’t get out and around much with no car and taking care of my kid,” she replied, almost apologetically.

Not allowing Leigh to go unscathed by his nature, he said to her, “Why is it you always bring these good-looking ladies over when Mary’s around? I thought I talked to you about doing that.”

As we chuckled, Rosie, with her hands in the back pockets of her Levis, lowered her eyes to the ground and smiled in enjoyment and amusement at the offhanded compliment.

“If we’re going to get this deed done today, I guess we’d better get after it,” said Clyde as he began to load the rope into a bucket.

I picked up the pitchfork and reached for the bucket with rope in it. “I’ll get this stuff. You ladies can handle those other buckets.”

Clyde turned and started leading the way up a narrow trail. It was a short hike to the spring, not more than five hundred yards. On a somewhat level spot sat a circular well head, built out of river rock and concrete, about four feet in height. Stepping up to it, I looked down inside. The walls were rough, made of the same materials as the well head. Twenty feet down, I could see the surface of the water as it reflected light from the three-foot opening above it.

Clyde got the rope out of the bucket. After laying it out, he took one end over to a stunted oak tree and knotted it around the trunk. He came back to the wall, picked up the rest of the rope and slowly let the end of it down inside.

“It’s not but a couple a’ feet deep down there, Al,” he said. “In the wall on this side,” he indicated the side we were standing on, “there’s a wire mesh screen about a foot and a half square. That’s where the problem is. After you get in there, I’ll send down a bucket. Fill it with the muck down there and I’ll pull ’er up and empty it for you.”

I climbed over the edge of the wall, got myself turned around, and using the knots in the rope, worked my way down to the water below. As my feet and legs disappeared into the water, a cold chill ran through me. I could see where the expression, “Colder than a well digger’s ass,”

came from. But by the time I'd gotten secure footing under my feet, the chill had passed.

What drew my immediate attention was what seemed to me like hundreds of "Daddy Long Leg" spiders. They and some type of slug covered the inner walls from the waterline to about two feet above it. I stood for a moment watching them and wondering what they were doing down here. Maybe it was the coolness. It got them out of the summer sun and raised the humidity a bit. I for sure didn't think they needed that much water.

Well, so much for the nature study, I thought as a bucket settled in the water next to me. I commenced to work. Over the years, the wind had blown dead leaves and broken limbs into the water. I had to be standing in at least eighteen inches of muck and I was thigh deep in the water. I began by running the bucket under the water along the bottom and scooping handfuls of debris into it. After I drained off the water, Clyde would pull it up and empty it.

Two hours of stuffing buckets did the trick. The reservoir and the screen were clean. It was a pleasure to climb out of that dank well and into the warmth of the sun. The girls had wandered off while we worked. We picked up our gear and went back to the house. Once inside, Clyde turned on his faucets, draining the debris from the lines. He watched the flow with a critical eye and proclaimed the pressure just fine.

Mary offered us lunch but with apologies we declined, explaining that we had a lot to do in town. We took our leave.

No sooner were we in the car and down the road than Rosie lit a joint. Leigh took a couple of hits but let us finish it. The midday traffic was light. Leigh had no problems as she wove her way through town to "The Carousel," the care center where we'd dropped off Kevin. It was after lunch and we could see kids out in the yard on the swings, slides and small self-propelled carousel.

Leigh and I waited while Rosie went inside. People were coming and going, mostly women with a child in hand. We'd only sat ten minutes or so when Rosie came out with Kevin, who once outside gave a few jumps and hops in excitement and ran to the car. He piled into the back with me. Rosie settled herself into the front seat and we were off and running again.

The first place we pulled into was a large Safeway. I tagged along, helping Kevin push a cart. I felt somewhat comfortable. I didn't have

to deal with anyone or shop. I just followed them around watching them do what ladies do, shop. After all the times I'd just slid a list through the canteen window and gotten the things I ordered pushed back out to me in a box, shopping was a chore. The rows and rows of groceries would have kept me there all day. I mentally added up the "bucks" I could have made selling this stuff on the "main line." More Christmas packages were sold in the joint than eaten. Demand was high for tasty tidbits that came in only once a year.

An hour later, we were stuffing all we could into the front end of the "Volks." The rest went into the back seat with Kevin and me. The next several places we visited were secondhand stores. Women raising kids by themselves couldn't afford "uptown" stuff for their kids, not all the time, and to the kids anything new was just that, new.

By four-thirty we had made the rounds. Everyone was ready to get on home. After a short stop at Rosie's place, we cut across town to Leigh's apartment. She pulled into a parking space under a roofed area behind her building. We grabbed up her bags and followed the sidewalk around the corner of the building.

It was a nice complex, enclosed on each end with lush California vegetation. Walkways ran the length of both units with an intensely green lawn between them. In the center of the lawn was a good size swimming pool, which at the time was in use. Leigh lived on the ground floor.

Coming to her doorway, she turned and into it. With a key she had in hand, she unlocked it, then stepped inside and called "Tina?" From a room in the back, an exuberant voice answered, "Hi, Mom!"

Walking into the kitchen, Leigh put her bag down on the table and told us to do the same as Tina came out of her bedroom. A tall, gangly young kid with dark brown hair to her shoulders, her glittering deep blue eyes were filled with merriment and mischievousness. She ran over to me and threw her arms around my neck. "Uncle Al!" Innocent, loving. She had no idea where I'd been. I felt twinges of regret and guilt. I'd only seen her a couple of times. I'd missed her growing up years. But she had a lot of years left. With any luck, I'd be around for them.

I stood back and looked at her. "You've grown a bit since the last time I saw you. You're not still afraid of Jeeps, are you?"

With her head slightly cocked to one side, she looked at me questioningly. She did remember her ride in a snowstorm.

"Your mom and you came to visit me in Lake Tahoe," I said. "It was snowing to beat the band that night when I picked you up at the

bus station. I had an old red Jeep. It growled, rattled and banged. You stood in the front seat just a-hanging onto your ma.”

“It was at night!” Leigh said. “That old Jeep sounded like a tank, and all that snow!”

“That’s right,” I said. “The snow was so thick it was almost a white-out. With all the noise and the snow, you somehow figured we weren’t going to make it. It took your ma five miles to get your tears stopped.”

I sat down at the table. Rosie brought over the beer she’d opened for me. Tina grabbed Kevin by the hand and said, “Let’s go! I’ll show you my new horses.” She collected horses—pictures, plastic, and some cast. She led Kevin off to her room.

Leigh started putting the food away. Rosie sat down across from me. When Leigh put some stuff away in her refrigerator, she brought out a bag of pot and tossed it to me. “There’s a pipe in that drawer at the end of the counter,” she said.

Rosie was close enough to reach it without getting up. It was made of soapstone, with a fairly good-sized bowl. She handed it to me and I packed it full. After I got it burning good, I passed it to Rosie. She took a few hits and gave it to Leigh.

“Oouu!” Rosie said, letting out her breath. “That’s good smoke! It doesn’t taste the same as my bag.” The pipe made its rounds until the pot was burnt out. Having gotten her groceries put away, Leigh started arranging things for dinner. Leaning back against the sink with a package of spaghetti in her hand, she began to laugh. “You remember the first time you got me loaded, Al?”

Smiling at the memory, I said, “Yeah. You were almost eighteen.”

“You’d just gotten out of jail then, too. You brought that girl from across the street over.”

“Lorraine, the Polish, Hungarian Sophia Loren. You were ironing your school clothes in the front room when we lit up a joint.”

Looking over to Rosie, I said, “She said she wanted to try it, just to see what it’s like. I told her no problem and I gave it to her. She helped smoke the whole thing.”

“Did she get high?” Rosie asked. “Some people just go to sleep.”

“Well, not according to her,” I said. “She got to giggling and laughing. Lorraine and I could barely keep it together.”

Leigh burst out laughing and said, “I fried one of my good blouses.”

“All the time,” I said, “she was running her mouth about ‘I don’t feel anything’, she’d left the iron on the sleeve of her blouse.”

“What’s for dinner?” Rosie asked as she got up with the intention of helping Leigh fix it.

“Spaghetti,” Leigh said. “You can make the salad if you want, you know where everything’s at.”

They started to get dinner ready. I went into the living room and turned on the boob tube. The news was on. I sat watching it, not really paying much attention to what was happening in the world. I was entertaining thoughts of Rosie as I watched her move around in the kitchen. No harm in what a man thinks as long as he’s civil and doesn’t try to force an issue. I guess that would pertain to about anything.

I was also trying to sort out all the confused thoughts of what I was going to do now that I was free. There’s no getting around the fact that you’ve got to “work or steal” and I knew where stealing had gotten me. There had to be more to life than the part of it I was playing. I’d have to go and look for it and give it a try if I expected to make it out here.

I watched the ladies set the table. As they began to set out the food, Rosie came to the opening between the kitchen and the living room and said, “Go get the kids for me, please? And have them wash up, OK?”

“I can do that,” I said as I got up and went to Tina’s room. I went through the amusing affair of all of us trying to wash at the same time—six hands in the sink at once. I enjoyed the banter and the playing, something from a starved nature, I thought. Involvement in domestic affairs.

We crowded into the small kitchen and sat down. Spaghetti, salad, fried zucchini with onions and garlic bread made their way around the table.

In the midst of the amiable talk and laughter, I sat quietly, eating and listening. Rosie’s eyes caught mine and she said, “You’re not used to this, are you?” as she encompassed the table with a circular motion of the fork in her hand.

“No, I’m not.” I couldn’t say much more than that. Not with kids sitting there. I knew Rosie understood the uneasiness I felt. This was a semi-family situation. I’d never learned how to make small talk. What I wanted and needed was the extent of my concern for most of my life. Wanting to fit in was a new desire, and my ignorance was a stumbling block.

Leigh smiled at me and said, “This has got to be new to you. Give it some time and you’ll come around.”

On that note we finished dinner. The kids got up and went into the living room. Rosie got up and got an ashtray along with the pot and the

pipe. Rosie and I lit up cigarettes while Leigh packed the pipe. After the “smoke” break, I got up to help clear the table and do dishes.

“We got it,” Leigh said. “Go on out to the living room. There’s a good movie coming on with Lee Marvin and Clint Eastwood. It’s on Channel 4. We’ll be there in a minute.”

I went in, changed the channel on the tube and sat down on the floor. The kids were on the couch stretched out end to end with their feet together, playing some kind of game. The last part of *Starsky and Hutch* was on the tube. About the time it was over, Leigh and Rosie came in. Leigh went to the overstuffed chair on the other side of the TV and sat down. Rosie made herself comfortable on the floor next to me.

It was almost bedtime for the kids. Leigh sent Tina in to take her bath and get ready for bed. The movie “*Paint Your Wagon*” came on the screen and we all settled back to watch the story unfold.

An hour later Tina came in and said goodnight after giving us all a hug and a kiss. Kevin was already asleep on the couch. Rosie let him sleep until the movie was over, then took him into Tina’s room where she had made a pallet on the floor for him to sleep on.

At the foot of the bed on the floor, Tina was curled up in her sleeping bag, sleeping the sleep only children seem to accomplish. Her bed had been reserved for Rosie.

Rosie came back in with a blanket and pillow, tossed them on the couch and said, “That couch isn’t real comfortable.”

Looking up at her, I smiled and said, “If it’s not bolted to the wall, it’ll be just fine.”

“I’m going to bed,” Leigh said as she got up and went toward her bedroom. “I’ll see you two in the morning.”

Rosie picked up the empty beer cans and a full ashtray and took them into the kitchen. I got up, turned down the TV, and put some music on the stereo. On her way back out of the kitchen, Rosie shut off the lights. As I settled down leaning against the sofa, Rosie sat down next to me.

We sat quietly in the glow of the TV with the soft music of the *Moody Blues* playing in the background. The space between us was vibrant with the heat of mutual attraction. Knowing I’d probably not make any overt moves, Rosie committed herself.

Peripherally, I saw her hands move up, but being stoned I didn’t realize they were coming towards me until they softly and warmly alighted on my cheeks to gently turn my head to her. It wasn’t hard to read the

intent in those beautiful eyes. I turned, gripped her sides and said, “You know what you’re doing, don’t you?”

In a low husky voice, she answered, “Yes I do, and it’s all right. I really like you, Al.”

I pulled her to me with all the strength of pent up, denied desires and kissed those sweet soft lips. The urgency of my lust and passion caused her to lean back. She dropped her hands to my chest and gently pushed me away. “I know it’s been a long time, honey, but we’ve got all night.” Then she leaned forward again. With our lips softly sealed and our tongues doing a provocative dance, I slowly laid her back on the floor. My lips broke away from hers and made their way down the smooth arch of her neck. As I caressingly kissed the soft mounds of her breasts, she whispered, “Welcome home.”

I spent the next two days with Rosie running around town, meeting her friends, getting loaded and ballin’. It was on Saturday that I met Chuck Jenkins, a three-time loser just out of Folsom two months past.

I was coming out of Leigh’s place, heading to the pool. He stopped me on the walkway with a question. “You movin’ in here?”

Standing silent for a minute and looking him up and down, I said no and started to move away from him. Before I could get past him, his hand came out. Looking him in the eyes, I warily shook his hand.

“I’m Chuck,” he said. “I live down in the end apartment. I couldn’t help but notice your tattoos. Where’d you get them?”

I had tattoos all over me, the jailhouse signature that most cons carry, serving more as warnings than as decorations, like the Texas flag: “Don’t tread on me.” Backing up at the intensity of my look, he brought up his hands and said, “No sweat, man. I just got out of Folsom.”

“I’m Al. I just got cut loose from Quentin.”

“Hey, let’s go down to my place. We’ll drink a beer and cut up touches.”

On our way down to his place, I decided I wasn’t going to tell him much at all, much less about my past scores and planned ones. Once inside, we went through preliminaries, like two roosters strutting their stuff. Handing each other our verbal resumes on our qualifications for being a bad ass or just plain fucking nuts, we circled each other like a couple of dogs, sniffing and bristling until we got our respects in line. Then we began earnest talk.

His kitchen and dining room were filled with masks, figurines and plaques made from clay and some cast from Plaster of Paris. The completed ones were in different stages of paint and color.

"I learned this at Folsom," he said. "I sell them through a small workshop over on "B" Street and I take them to all the flea markets I can get to. I make a few bucks, but mostly it's a front for my parole officer. Gives me room to move around and looks like I've got a nine-to-five. What you got going?"

"I don't know yet," I replied. "I got to see the man in a couple of days. After that I'll figure something out."

"I've made a couple of nice hits," he said with a grin and a querying note in his voice. "I've got another one lined up, worth three or four grand. A neat little set up, about a fifteen minute job."

Thinking it over as the offer it was, I shook my head and replied, "No, I don't think so. I'd better get my P.O. mellowed out and a place to live before I cut loose."

I didn't want to tell him that I wanted out of the whole jive-assed business. Just wanting out didn't stop the desire for easy money. In fifteen minutes I could make what most people worked three months to get.

"I've got two 'pieces' stashed. An Army 45 and a short-barreled 38, if you want to go for it."

"I'll think about it, man."

"Well, you get your shit together and let me know. That egg will still be in the nest when we want it."

Well, I'm heading out to the pool, man," I said as I got up and made for the front door. "I'll catch you later."

I walked out to the pool and sat down in a chaise lounge. It was kind of strange. It was Saturday and no one was at the pool but me. I fired up a doobie, shaking my head at the discussion I'd just had. It sure doesn't take long, I thought, not out a week and I was fitting right into the pattern again. Good dope, a woman, and the prospect of a chunk of money. I'll never fuckin' make it.

I was looking skyward, following the "con" trail of a jet leaving the airport in San Francisco, when Neal said, "Doing some of the 'it for shit' thinking again, are you?"

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Well, I didn't want to talk to you over at your mom's, so I've been waiting to catch you alone. Good to see you on this side of the wall."



“Yeah, one more time through the hoops. How long do you think this old dog’s got before he gets sent back to the kennels for more training?”

With a little anger and sarcasm in his voice, he said, “That depends on you, now, doesn’t it?”

“You’re right, but I just don’t know how to get off this merry-go-round.”

“You’ve got choices, and that’s a start. A week ago, you didn’t have any.”

“Look, man, I ain’t got nothing. How the hell am I going to get along?”

“As I said, choices. You’re not a train on a track, going the way you’re pointed. You can ‘take’ the Cadillac right now and do a life sentence on the installment plan, or you ‘buy’ a Chevy and spend that life saving for a Caddy.”

“You’re saying go to work?”

“I’m saying instant gratification is learned early. By kicking and screaming, you knew Mom would be quick to put a nipple in your mouth. The idea of ‘having it all and having it now’ just doesn’t work in the real world unless you’re born with it, and you’re not.”

“I have a hard enough time just talking with free people. How am I going to live and work with them?”

“The has and has not is an old story in itself. You can have what you want; it’s all in how you get it. Choices, my man, choices. You’re sitting on the turntable right now and you’re running this train. You can keep on this track like all the losers with their easy money and life sentences or you can let the table turn. Head off in a new direction. It doesn’t have to be a one-eighty, Bible thumping and such, but at least enough to get you away from where you’ve been and at least long enough to see the differences.”

I sat in the warm sun watching the sparkle of the sun off the blue waters of the crystal clear pool. I let what he said sink in. Down through the macho, the acceptance by my brothers, the status I’d built over the years in the prison system.

Inside, I was someone, Lil’ Al. Out here if my status were gasoline, I’d not have enough to drive a piss-ants megacycle around the inside of a Cheerio.

“How do I tell my partners I’m punking out? Am I going to say, ‘You guys do what you do and I’ll be just hanging out.’ You know I won’t say nothing. I’m no rat. I’d be dead meat in a week.”

“Get new partners,” he said. “This isn’t the L.A. County court line. You’re not chained to anyone. You’ve got to make some changes, heavy ones, or you can kiss your ass good-bye.”

I sat for a while, not saying anything. Then he spoke again. “Just saw your sister’s car go past. Looks like they’re home. I’m outta here. I’ll talk at you later.”

It wasn’t long before I saw Leigh, Tina and Mom come around the end of the building. Leigh had taken Mom shopping and was having her over for dinner. The evening went well and I accompanied Mom when Leigh took her home.

Sunday we spent in front of the tube, drinking beer and watching the ball games. Rosie and I went out for a while but I wanted to be in bed early that night. I was going to see my P.O. the next day. I wanted to be ready for him. I wasn’t going to tap dance and shuffle for him, but I wasn’t going to hard ass him either. There wasn’t any percentage in it. “You fuck with the bull, you get the horns.” I didn’t need any of that.

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## Parole Plan

I got to the BART station at seven, waited a while, and caught it to Oakland. I spent half an hour walking around checking addresses before I found the building I wanted. The cute little thing working the desk looked up and smiled at me as I came in.

“I’m, uh, Albert Hamby. I’m looking for Mr. Hodges,” I said, stumbling over that smile that almost dazzled me.

“Hold on. Let me give him a call,” she said as she lifted her phone.

I stepped back from the desk and looked around the room. It was a rat trap. The walls were cracked. Near the ceiling the paint had begun to peel in spots. Well, I guess it didn’t matter. They were only seeing cons there anyway.

I heard the conversation end and turned back around.

“Go up the stairs two floors,” she said as she pointed to the stairwell, “and have a seat in the hall. Mr. Hodges will call you, Mr. Hamby.”

“How about that shit! Got a ‘Mr.’ out of the deal,” I thought as I told her thanks and went up the stairs. The hallway was the waiting room. I sat down on a steel-framed couch and smiled to myself. These couches had been made in the furniture factory at Quentin. I imagined that all the state offices in California were decorated with them.

A half-bald, heavysset man came out the third door on my left and looked at me. “Hamby?” he asked.

When I stood up he waved me into his office. He was behind his desk when I walked in.

“I’m Hodges, your parole officer,” he said, not bothering to offer his hand. “Sit down. I’ll get your file.”

He turned and started to sort through a stack of manila folders. He sat down with one and began reading. “OK, I know who you are now,” he said as he continued to read. Chubby-cheeked and red-faced, he looked up at me over his glasses.

“You got lucky a couple of times, didn’t you?”

“I’m out, if that’s what you mean.”

Straightening up in his chair, he looked directly at me.

“That’s exactly what I mean. Nevada never filed charges on you. Then the State passed this new law and the board practically had to let you out.”

With anger rising, I stared back into his eyes. “I didn’t make any of the laws, as you can plainly see,” I said. “I only broke them.”

He didn’t smile. He didn’t like my attitude any more than I liked his. This wasn’t going to be easy. This fool could send me back on the slightest provocation. But then it wasn’t his job to like me. And I’d seen worse attitudes from people who’d seen my track record. This guy couldn’t believe anything until he saw it happening, good or bad. I’d just have to take it. But he didn’t have to come on so strong. I’m a convict, but a human being, more or less.

“You’ve been into about everything. You have a ‘rabbit jacket’, too. I’m going to keep a close rein on you the first few months, aside from your regular monthly written report,” he said as he tossed a monthly report book over the desk to me. “I want you physically in this office once a week. If you’re working, I’ll see you and I want you to phone once during the week. I’ll give you a couple of weeks to come up with a job. If you don’t get one, I’ll find you something.”

I just nodded my head in acceptance. He sorted through the folder and handed me three of the papers. “Sign these while I go get the money you got coming.” I looked over the papers as he left the office: a parole agreement, an initial contact report, and a property release form. I had them signed by the time he got back to the office. He stood and counted out one hundred eighty dollars on the corner of his desk. I recounted it while put my file back together and placed it on top of a smaller pile to his right.

“That’s it. Call me Wednesday or Thursday and be here next Monday.” He sat down in his chair. Leaning back, he looked like a frog with a shit-eating grin on his face.

“In your ass, fat boy,” I thought as I walked from the office and hurried out of the building into the street. All the way back to Hayward, I thought about the meeting. The guy had a right to come down on me hard, but he seemed to enjoy it! The way he was smiling when he pressed his authoritative thumb down on my life wasn’t right. I didn’t have to

listen to that shit, and I didn't have to go back to the slammer, either. Neal was right. I've got choices.

If I jumped parole, I couldn't stick around here. That was the biggest mistake cons made. They'd start running but they weren't going anywhere. Running in circles that got smaller and smaller until the only road out was the one that led back to prison. It didn't have to be that way.

I'd have to get out of state, maybe find a small town and, oh boy, get as "straight" as I could. People only know what you tell them and if you keep your actions good, no one will doubt you. They may sense a difference, but if you aren't hurting anyone then differences are accepted. If I never got a new "beef" or got fingerprinted, I could make it.

I'd have to cut loose everyone I knew. The man would be on me like "stink on shit." I could get lost in the sea of humanity, become one of the numbers rather than a "number."

I got back to Hayward and checked in at Mom's. She wasn't home. Neither was Rosie. I rolled a couple of joints, sat on the back porch, and smoked. It wasn't long before Neal showed up.

"You've talked to your P.O., I see."

"Yeah, he laid out the game plan," I replied.

"You don't seem to be much in agreement with his plans," he said as he looked up at the stretch of blue sky between the buildings.

"No, I'm not. He's not cutting me much slack, but I expected that. What I don't like is that they demand that I be civil and obedient, yet treat me like a redheaded stepchild."

With his head bowed and his eyes closed, he rubbed the temples of his forehead with his hand and spoke softly.

"You don't have any civil rights, Al. You're a con. Your record doesn't allow much room for respect except from other cons. You can use your P.O. or society as an excuse to get real stupid or you can go out and try to balance the scales by letting respect gain more weight through the virtue of your actions."

"I'm getting the fuck out of here, I know that."

"When you were in Tahoe, you stayed out longer than you ever had before, until you ran into Snake and his ole' lady. Then you got that jailhouse attitude again. As long as you keep that attitude, society is going to want you in a cage. They're afraid of you. They've got enough to worry about just living without having a madman running around ripping, tearing, kicking ass and taking names."

“I don’t plan on doing anything like that. I want to stay out. I can’t change twenty years of thinking overnight, but I can work on it.”

“You can keep your ideas and your opinions, but you’ve got to respect those of others. You’ve got to give people a little more respect. If not, it’s going to kill you—with a bullet, a knife, or a slow death in prison.”

I started remembering the pleasant times I’d had running over the open land in Texas. The great summers I’d had as a kid up at a cabin my Uncle Jess owned in Placerville. Those were gentle, easy days. Neal began talking again.

“You can’t lose anything by taking off. You know you’re going back to jail here. A small resort town would be your best bet. They’ve always got new faces showing up. They’re not too suspicious of the coming and going of new people.”

“I was thinking along those lines myself. When I escaped from Nevada, I went through a small town on my way to Montana—Ketchum, Idaho. It was only two or three miles from Sun Valley, the ski resort, if I remembered right. It was kinda pretty there. It sits down in a valley with naked upthrust mountains around it. A small river runs the length of the town and trees crowded up to a not-so-high timberline. I used to think of places like that when I was dream-scaping.”

“It doesn’t much matter where you choose,” Neal said, “just as long as you maintain when you get there.”

We talked for two hours. Neal left me sitting there contemplating my future. It was after two o’clock when I got up and walked down to the bus stop. Straight down Main was an Army Surplus store. Rosie and Leigh had taken me there on their shopping trip.

An hour later, I was walking through the store. I found an old duffel bag with shoulder straps. Searching around, I found the hardware I needed, a metal coffee pot and cup, a metal plate with three sections in it, silverware and some aluminum pots that nested inside each other. While paying for my gear at the counter, I looked at the knives in the locked display case. I chose a single-bladed Scharade Walden with a six-inch Lok-Bac blade and holster. I put everything into the duffel bag, went outside, and caught the bus home.

On the porch by my bed were a number of boxes with blankets folded neatly inside. I took two of them, dark green Army wool, rolled them up and put them in my bag with the other gear, along with extra clothes, toiletries and the gear I’d bought at the Army store. As far as I knew I

was ready. Except for buying a couple of cans of Buglar rolling tobacco, all I needed was a highway headed north.

In '65, I'd hitchhiked across the United States, mostly through the South. I had found out then some of the things you had to have to make it just riding into a town with a pack on your back.

I had to give Leigh a call before she went to work. I needed her help in the morning. I walked down to the phone and called. She said she'd be over around ten o'clock.

I was sitting on the porch again when Mom got home.

"Whatcha been doing, Ma?" I asked as she walked up.

"Oh, I spent the afternoon at the employment office. Every time I get a little work, I have to go down and go through a rigamarole with them in order to keep my check. Did you see your P.O. today?"

"Yeah, I saw him this morning. Neither one of us was real enthused about the meeting."

"You got along with him, didn't you? You know you can't be fooling with him."

"Sure, Ma. We got an understanding between us. It's going to be all right. I'll tell you about it in the morning after I sleep on it."

"OK. Are you going to be here for dinner?"

"I don't know. I'm waiting on Rosie right now. I don't know what we'll be doing."

I moved over on the steps and let Mom go into the house. After she closed the kitchen door, I lit up another joint. The sun was getting low when a dark green '68 Chevy pulled up to the curb. Rosie and Kevin got out of the back. I didn't recognize the two women in the front seat. Rosie didn't see me as they walked up and into her house. I waited a few minutes and went over.

After she let me in, we smoked a bit and I told her what I was planning. The only comment she made that meant anything was, "I'm sorry to hear that. I really thought we were going someplace." Those were my sentiments, too, but this time out it had to be all or nothing. I told her I'd take her and Kevin to dinner and if she wanted to go, get ready. I went over and told Mom not to wait up, that I was spending the evening with Rosie.

The next morning Rosie fixed breakfast. Kevin was buzzed up. He talked and giggled all through the meal, while Rosie and I sat silent. We'd said everything that needed to be said last night.



After the dishes were done and Kevin went outside to play, Rosie and I made love again in a tight and stringent way, knowing that the near future wouldn't allow us the joy of it any too soon.

Leigh showed up on time. I went with her over to Mom's. Once again, I explained my desires and plans. Neither was too happy about my decisions.

"Well shit, Al!" was the first thing out of Leigh's mouth. "You mean you can't make those changes here? You got to run off somewhere?"

"Leigh, it would be like an alky trying to reform by working as a bartender in his favorite bar. There's some who could do it, but I can't."

"You're running away just like all those times when you were a kid. I understood it back then, but not now!"

"No, not this time," I said. "I'm not running from anything. I'm running *to* something. I've eliminated all the odds. There's no guesswork. Having a parole violation hanging over me means if I screw it up, I'm gone. No ifs, ands or buts about it. There'll be no considering the chances. If I get arrested for anything, it'll be all over, period."

I then told her if she didn't want to take me out of town that was cool. I'd jump a bus and walk out to where I could hitchhike. Disliking it, but acquiescing, she turned and walked out the door saying, "If we're going to do it, let's get with it."

Guilt and shame rose like a bitter bile as I put my arms around Mom and looked into her sad eyes. Shaking her head, she said, "I hope you find what you're looking for, son. God bless." I gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

I took my bag out to the car. Leigh and Rosie were in the car waiting. It was quite a ride out of town. They dropped me off at the freeway that ran through Livermore Valley and connected with Highway 50.

A solemn good-bye for Leigh and a gentle kiss through the window for Rosie and they drove away.

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## Escape to Ketchum

Two days later, I got out of the ninth car I'd ridden in, pulled my pack out of the back and thanked the guy who gave me a ride from Twin Falls. With a final wave to him, I shouldered my pack and looked around the town of Ketchem, Idaho. It was a pleasant, rustic-looking place. Rough lumber sidewalks with overhanging roofs. All the store fronts done up in the old frontier style. I was about in the middle of town on the crossroad that led out to Sun Valley. Four blocks in either direction was the extent of town. I recalled seeing people camped a mile or so north of town. I headed that way.

Just past the last real cross street, I saw on my left across the highway a large open tract of land. On the extreme eastern side of the tract at the base of the mountains that rose behind it was a thick line of trees—pines and cottonwoods. I could see the faint glimmer and sparkle of water.

I crossed the road and headed down into the field. Halfway through the field, I crossed a set of railroad tracks. They went to my right up to an old abandoned shed sitting in the middle of the field. As I neared the trees, I began following a dusty dirt road that ran along the treeline for as far as I could see. There were signs that people had camped here. I turned into the woods looking for a place to set up camp. In twenty-five yards, I came to a crystal clear mountain stream. Out of sight of the road and with water right here, I knew I'd found my spot.

The late August sun was dropping behind the mountain peaks by the time I'd gotten my camp put together. There would still be a lot of daylight left, though. The mountains here seemed to grow straight up off the valley floor, hiding the sun early.

I built a fire pit out of river rocks and gathered up broken pine limbs for a fire. While I was at it, I cut green pine boughs to make a bed that would keep me off the ground when I slept. I took my coffee pot to the stream along with my largest cook pot and filled them with water.

I started a fire and put on some coffee. Sitting on a chunk of log that I'd moved closer to the fire, I rolled a joint. I was tired. I'd had to walk through most of Twin Falls to get outside of town. Then I'd walked and hitchhiked for two or three hours before getting my last ride.

Then there was the mental strain of having to converse with people I was riding with. I had no past that I could mention and I couldn't fabricate one, not knowing how long I was going to know the people I was talking to. So I built conversation around the truth of my experiences when I'd been out on parole in between the years. There were a lot of holes, but no one saw them but me.

It was peaceful and quiet here. With the aid of the smoke, I began to relax. I knew I wouldn't have heat on me until Monday. I could see Hodges sitting at his desk mentally preparing another blistering for me. It wouldn't take him long to make the connection. He'd be after me with a passion. No sense bitchin'. I bought the ticket to this roller coaster.

I'd picked up some groceries in Lake Tahoe when I passed through there on my way to Carson City to get to Battle Mountain on the Idaho / Nevada border. I fixed a late dinner and turned in.

I spent the next day "casing" the town. (That was one of the terms I had to get out of my vocabulary. I wasn't looking to rip anything off.) Walking up and down the short streets, I got to know where things were. There were three gas stations, one major grocery store, a number of small mini-marts, a lot of curio shops for the tourists, some ski shops for the snowbirds, and two large bars, Slavey's and Mullvaney's.

I took a hike out to Sun Valley. A river ran next to the road. Just outside of town, I saw a huge cabin-style home, part of which was built over the river. I sat down on the guard rail to rest and smoke a cigarette. A car pulled off the road twenty feet down from me. An older couple got out with cameras around their necks. They came down to within a few feet of me and started taking pictures of the house.

"It's a real pretty place, isn't it?" I said to the old guy.

"That it is," he replied as he took a couple more shots of it.

I'd seen quite a few mountain retreats, but not many that I'd stop to take pictures of. These folks were, no doubt, on vacation, just taking pictures of everything on their route.

The old guy spoke again. "Too nice a place to be left empty. They say it hasn't been used in a few years. I guess his daughters have no use for it, but they won't sell it."

“Is that right?” I said, not knowing what he was talking about. “Who owns it?”

“Well, that’s Ernest Hemmingway’s place. The book I have says that’s where he killed himself.”

Surprised by the fact, I replied, “I’ll be damned. I remember reading about that in the paper. I didn’t know he’d done it here.”

After they took their pictures and left, I smoked some pot and thought about the scene that must have gone on in the place below me. I never could understand someone killing himself. It seemed to me a cheap shot and an easy way out. I didn’t think I had the balls to snuff out my own life. Death was going to have to come after me. I wasn’t giving up nothing easily. Something would have to forcibly take my life.

Two, three times a year they’d find someone dead in their cell. Cons were cold. If you heard someone whining in the night, you’d hear a con yell out, “Send that fucker a new Gillette so we can get some sleep!”

Fate is a hard thing to bet on. A few years from now my brother would follow in Hemmingway’s footsteps.

On the way back through town, I bought a bottle of whiskey and a couple of six packs. I stashed the beer in the stream to keep it cold. I fixed something to eat and spent the evening drinking, smoking, and writing letters to Rosie and my sister. Leigh would pass my words on to Mom. I didn’t want her knowing where I was. I couldn’t be forcing her to lie when they came looking for me.

Saturday morning came in a blur, with the worst case of cottonmouth I’d had in a long time. I walked over to the river and brushed my teeth. I washed away the cobwebs in my head with cold mountain water.

I got the fire started and put on some water for coffee. I lit up a cigarette, pulled the money out of my pocket, and counted it. Fifty and change. I had something new to think about. I’d be broke soon. Then what? In the past if I needed money, I just went and got some, like most folks buying bread at the store. But it was a new ballgame now and the rules were different. I’d have to, heaven forbid, go find some work. That in itself presented another kind of problem. I didn’t know how to work anywhere but gas stations and laundries. I’d worked the kitchens in the joint when I was younger. Maybe I could get on with a restaurant.

I poured myself a cup of coffee. Reaching down by the fire pit, I picked up the bottle of whiskey and poured a shot into my coffee. A little “hair of the dog.” Might as well get the day started with a bang.

All day Saturday I explored the river and chased the “dog.” In town, I’d learned they called the river the Wildwood.

Sunday I decided I’d better get cleaned up if I was going to look for work this week. I heated up what water I needed to shave and bathe, then washed my socks and shirts. As I still had some pot and booze, it wasn’t hard to kill the day.

For a week I pounded the pavement, putting in applications at the resorts, the two gas stations, and the restaurants around town. As I didn’t have a phone, they all told me to keep checking back. Another week went by with me checking on the places every two days. It didn’t look good for the “home team.” From what I was told, things didn’t really start happening around here until winter set in. Most places just had summer crews on.

I was sitting in camp on a Wednesday afternoon. I’d just gotten back from making my rounds in town. I was rolling up the last of the pot I had, three joints, when I saw someone working his way down the bank of the river with a fishing pole. He’d stop and cast a few times, then move down the river before casting again. Turning to walk on down further, he noticed me. I smiled and raised a hand in acknowledgement. Seeing the gesture, he smiled, nodded his head and walked into camp. I stashed the pot.

“Afternoon,” he said, coming up to the fire pit.

“Howdy!” Getting up from the log, I extended my hand and said, “My name’s Al. Pleased to meet you.”

Taking my hand in a firm grip, he said, “I’m Harold Mackey. Just call me Mac.”

“You catching anything or just drowning worms?”

“I’m not doing real good but I ain’t skunked either,” he said as he reached into a canvas creel hanging off his shoulder and produced two rainbow trout. Each was twelve to fourteen inches long.

“Those are beauties! Fat, too!” I said. “What are you using for bait?”

“Worms!” he said incredulously, like any damn fool would know that. “As fat as they are, they’ve had a good summer so you got to offer them something special.”

I couldn’t help grinning at the old boy as he put the fish back into the creel.

“Are you living here or just camping? It don’t make me no never

mind either way. This here is old railroad land. They used to turn their engines around out in that field. This was the end of the line.”

“I just came up from California. I got tired of living down there with all the people, traffic and bullshit that goes on. One day a couple of weeks ago, I packed up my stuff and left. I didn’t figure I’d get it done any other way. I thought I’d camp here until I found some work, but I guess this is private property, huh?”

“The railroad owns it, but they let people camp on it as long as you don’t go cutting trees down or nothing. What kind of work you looking for?”

“Oh, most anything, I expect. I’m not afraid of working. I’ve got applications in all over town.”

“You have? Well, have you been up there?” He pointed across the field. Up on a small rise on the other side of the road was a Holiday Inn.

“No, I haven’t. What have they got going up there?” Being’s it was a motel, I never checked it out. I don’t know nothing about motels.”

“I work there. It’s got an all-night restaurant and a bar. I’m the dishwasher on the swing shift. I used to cut timber but I can’t do it anymore. My back’s gone out on me. But I couldn’t sit around the house all day, either.”

“Are they looking for help?”

“I know for a fact the night man quit. I’ll be working half his shift tonight. The morning man will work the other half until they get someone hired.”

“That sounds good to me. I’ll go on over there and see about it. I appreciate the information. Thanks!”

“Well, if you’re going up there, I’ll tell ’em when I go in that I talked to you today. Maybe it will help.”

“Great! Thanks again, Mac. I believe I’ll just go on up there and see what I can do right now.”

“I got to get on home myself and get ready for work tonight. Nice talking at ‘cha. Maybe will see you later on.” He walked on through camp out to the road and back to his truck parked far up the river road.

It didn’t take me half an hour to wash up and get over to the Inn. Stopping at the reception desk, I asked the girl for an application. She gave me one. I filled it out on the spot and handed it back to her. She told me to sit tight for a minute and she’d be right back. Taking a seat in the lobby, I waited.

In a few minutes, she returned with another woman who came over to me while she scanned the application.

"I'm Marcy Williams, the kitchen manager," she said, looking up from the paper in her hand.

"Hi, I'm Al," I said nervously. I'd fabricated most of the jobs I had listed on the form. I just hoped she'd go for it.

"I see you've worked in a few kitchens."

"Yes, ma'am. Pantry crews, prep and dishes. I don't know much about cookin' though."

"Well, we don't need cooks anyway, just some kitchen help. You don't have a phone. Can you come back in a few days? I'll know what I need for sure then."

"About Friday, then?"

"Sure, that'll do."

"Any particular time?"

"Oh, why don't you make it in the afternoon sometime. Can you do that?"

"No problem, ma'am, I'll be here. Thank you kindly," I said, and with a nod of my head I said good-bye and walked out through the lobby.

"Yes!" I said to myself as I cut across the parking lot to the driveway leading down to the road. This one, I thought, is in the bag. I was sure of it. I'd be working in two days.

I went into town and spent the last of my money on a cheap bottle of whiskey and an expensive steak. I celebrated that night. Like I really needed a reason. But now, I just knew I'd have some bucks coming in. It felt good and it took a load off my mind, especially when I looked at the alternatives, those that I didn't even want to consider.

Friday afternoon came slowly. I'd had to restrain myself from going up to the Inn at eight that morning. I hadn't realized how much it meant to me to get a job. It was a step in the right direction, at least. A chicken shit dishwashing job and I felt like I was going to be promoted to the head of the Ford Motor Company or something. Oh well, I'd be working and not thieving.

Two-thirty, I thought as I looked at my watch. That's fair enough. I left camp and took my time walking up to the Inn. I got into the lobby just after three. I asked the receptionist for Mrs. Wilson. She told me to wait again and left. In a few minutes, she returned with Mrs. Wilson.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," I said as she approached me.

“Hi, Al,” she said. “It looks like you’re in luck. We haven’t had anyone else fill out an application yet and I definitely need someone right now. The night man disappeared and that’s what I need, a night man. The pay is \$3.85 an hour. Naturally, you get meals with it. If you’re still interested, I can take you into the kitchen, show you around, and explain a few things.”

“That’s fine with me, ma’am!”

“Well come with me then,” she said, and led me through the lobby and into the dining room. We walked past a counter on the right with about twenty stools. On the left were about fifteen booths and tables. We entered the kitchen through an open doorway. The grills were on my immediate right and in the back lefthand corner of the kitchen, I saw Mac standing at a big Hobart dish machine putting dishes into a tray.

“Mac!” she called as we walked up.

Mac turned and, seeing who it was, smiled and said as he looked at me, “You made ’er, did you?”

Mrs. Wilson smiled and said, “Al’s going to start tomorrow night, but I’d like you to show him what he needs to know tonight. He can work your shift with you, OK?”

“You bet! No problem there,” he said.

“I’ve things to do, so I’ll just leave him with you. I’ll be back later with W-2 forms for him to sign.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Wilson. I appreciate the opportunity,” I said as she turned to leave.

“That’s all right, Al,” she replied. “And do me a favor. Just call me Marcy. I don’t feel so old that way.”

“OK, Marcy. Thanks again.”

I was on a roll. Mac showed me what to do, which amounted to almost nothing. I guess that’s why they call it menial labor. But the price was right and I wouldn’t have to worry about eating. I worked the shift. Marcy came in later with my W-2s, which I signed. Later, I met the swing shift cook, Bill Johnson. I wasn’t bussing tables, and unfortunately I didn’t get to meet any of the waitresses. One was a tall slim thing, long brown hair tied back in a ponytail with big brown doe eyes and a smile that just dazzled you. She wouldn’t be on my shift, but it didn’t matter much. There were a lot of good-looking women running around this town and it was best for me to just get my feet on the ground.

A month slid by in the newness of my routine. I had gotten worried about not having any identification if the need for it arose. Knowing me,



it probably would at one time or another. I had saved up enough money to buy an old truck. I couldn't be driving it around without a license. If I happened to get pulled over for anything, I'd be in for a hassle from the man. Maybe busted.

After reading the forms and the driving booklet that I'd picked up at the Department of Motor Vehicles, I knew it was going to be a cakewalk. They didn't require any other ID to get a license. You just filled out their main form and took a written test, which I did and passed. I used the name Paul A. Jenson.

The night cook Pete Henderson was wasted most of the time. He'd lost his license for D.W. I. His wife would drop him off at work and pick him up. He showed me the night shift "perks." The bars in town closed at one o'clock and we always had a bar run in the restaurant. The Inn was the only place open that late. Around twelve-thirty, we'd begin to fill up and by one, we were jammed. Every table and stool would be occupied. Strangely enough, by two-thirty the place would be practically empty again. After the rush, Pete and I would go into the already-closed bar. The hard liquor was locked up but the beer taps were open. We'd sit and drink beer until the morning shift showed up at five-thirty.

Some nights Pete would come in pretty well ripped and I'd take over the grill for him. I learned to cook well enough to know that if Pete got canned, I'd have his job. I wasn't scheming on him or his job, but at the rate he was going, it wouldn't be long before he blew it.

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## Cindy and Dave

Tuesday and Wednesday nights, I was off. Sitting in camp one day, I noticed I had neighbors. They had set up a camp four hundred yards down from mine. Their black '56 Chevy station wagon cruised in and out a few times, but I never got a look at the people.

It was Tuesday and I was off. I'd taken my laundry into town and bought some booze. I was back in camp by one o'clock and was in the process of getting hammered when I saw a girl walking down the road. It was a broken scene because of trees and bushes in the way. She had a dry stick in her hand that she used like a staff as she walked. She seemed totally lost in thought, not paying much attention to anything around her. Taking slow, even steps, looking at the ground, she neared my camp. I got up and walked out from behind the trees to watch her. Some bells got to ringing in my head. I knew that I'd seen her up at the Inn.

I remembered scoping her out. She stood at about five-one or two, with long strawberry-blond hair in a ponytail tied halfway down so that it parted from her head and flowed down to cover her ears and neck. There was a sign of strength and stoutness in her body as she moved. She had come through the lobby and stopped at the stairs leading to the lower floors. After looking around for a moment, she disappeared down the stairwell.

I leaned against a tree and waited until she was even with me, then said, "Nice day for a walk."

I saw her body stiffen and heard a small, "Oh!" come from her as a moment of fear and surprise came over her face. Then those dark green eyes flashed at me almost in anger, though the corners of her mouth were curved in a small smile. "You scared me, huh? I wasn't really here," she stammered. "Yeah, it's nice out."

"My name's Al. What's yours?"

"Cindy. Cindy O'Brien," she said, half reluctantly.

“You live down in that camp?” I asked, pointing down the road with the can of beer in my hand.

When she answered, “Yeah, me and this guy got here last week,” I was sure I heard displeasure in her voice.

“You folks driving that black Chevy?”

“Well, he does. It belongs to him.” As she spoke, she glanced back to the Chevy parked in the trees with a “drop dead” look in her eyes.

I was a bit confused at what was going on and what I felt. Maybe they had a fight or something. Worst thing in the world you could do was get in the middle of a domestic fight. Before you knew it, you’d have both of them on your ass defending each other!

“A couple of nights ago, you were up at the Inn, weren’t you?” I said, trying to change the subject.

“Yes I was. I go in there late and use their showers downstairs, the one by the sauna.”

“I thought I remembered you. I work there, night shift. I saw you and thought you were a guest.

“That’s good,” she replied with a smile. “I hope everybody does. I need my showers, especially living out here. Have you lived out here long?”

“Oh, a month or so. My camp is back in there,” I said, swinging my head in the general direction of camp.

“Are you hassled here by the cops or anyone?”

“No, this is open land. It belongs to the railroad. Look, I just copped a bag of pot. You want to smoke a bowl?”

I saw a glimmer of “want to” sparkle in her eyes, then she refused. “Nah, that guy I’m with isn’t the brightest thing in the world. He wouldn’t like it, me getting high without him.”

Either the dude is a rumpkin or she’s making a play to get him stoned, too, I thought. I said, “Why don’t you just go on down and get him and the both of you come on back. I’ll be right there in my camp. I’d like your company.”

She stood for a moment with her chin resting on her hands over the end of the staff, lightly swaying back and forth. Weighing the odds, I could tell.

“OK,” she finally said. “I’ll go ask him.”

I watched her walk away. She was a solidly built lady. I hadn’t noticed until I talked to her a while that her skin was a soft hone color and she had a string of light freckles across the bridge of her nose. What a

cute thing, I thought as I went back to camp and loaded a bowl, getting ready for company

I hadn't been with a woman in over a month and I wasn't pressing anything. "Sex, drugs and rock 'n roll" is what kept me in trouble and I damn sure wasn't going to try to get next to a lady who had an old man. That was dangerous ground to be walking on unless you really didn't give a fuck. But I did.

I had a couple of youngsters who came to camp on their days off. They lived and worked at the Elkhorn in Sun Valley, a ski lodge that Paul Anka had just bought. Jerry was a tall, good-looking kid of nineteen, intelligent but naïve. His wife Donna, a short little blonde just turning eighteen, wasn't the best-looking thing you'd ever seen but she had a body that would stop your heart. She loved to display and use it with abandon, almost to the point of nymphomania. It seemed like it was a game between them. She'd come on to you anytime he wasn't paying attention, and you were bound to get laid if he wasn't. I tried to keep my distance from her to maintain peace around camp. I didn't need any headaches.

I had just put the pipe down when Cindy and her old man came down the trail to my camp[.

"Just in time!" I said. "I was going to get another beer. You two want one?"

In unison they replied, "Sure!"

As they settled themselves on the logs I'd rolled up to the fire pit, I went down and got three beers.

"I'm Al," I said as I got back to them, handing each a can and sticking out my hand to the guy. He stood up and took my hand and the beer.

"I'm Dave," he said, and sat back down on the log.

I sat down and began to load the pipe. "Where you folks from?" I asked.

"We came up from Carmichel. That's a few miles east of Sacramento," Dave said as he looked at me through washed-out blue eyes. He was a little taller than me but thin, no meat on his bones. He wasn't more than twenty years old.

"What are you doing up here?" I asked as I offered him the pipe.

"Cindy wanted to come up here," he said, and started to light the pipe.

"I wanted to check out the ice rink in Sun Valley," Cindy said.

“To go to work?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “To skate.”

“Skate?” I said, questioningly.

“Yeah, I’m an ice skater. I race.” Taking the pipe from Dave, she added, “I want to get back into training.”

“That’s cool! I came up from Oakland and Hayward. I had to get out of the city for a while,” I said as Cindy passed the pipe to me. I refused. “Naw, you guys go ahead. I just did a bowl. Knock yourselves out.”

“What are you going to do, Dave?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t really know just yet,” he said as he took another hit and glanced over to Cindy.

Cindy looked away and stared at the river. The corners of her mouth were turned down in a small but perceptible grimace. I wondered what was happening between these two. Again, I thought that maybe they’d had a fight earlier. They sure didn’t seem all that happy together.

“I’m going to barbecue a couple of steaks later. I picked them up at work. You want one?” I asked, looking at Cindy.

Dave answered, “Sure. If you’ve only got two, Cindy and I can share one.”

Still looking at Cindy, I said, “They’re good steaks. It’s part of the perks at the Inn. On the last night before I’m off for two days, I take some groceries and double wrap them in a plastic bag. I take them out with garbage at night and pick them up when I leave in the morning. I don’t spend much money on food.”

The afternoon passed quickly in spite of the pot we smoked. That evening, we got a fire going and put the steaks on. Cindy went back to her camp to get some lettuce and tomatoes they had for sandwiches. She made a salad. I had a loaf of French bread that I wrapped in foil and placed near the fire to warm up.

Sitting near the fire to turn the steaks, I said to Dave. “She doesn’t seem too happy. She got something on her mind?”

“I don’t know what the fuck she’s thinking about. She hasn’t said much to me since I brought her up here and she ain’t gave me no pussy either. Is that any way to act?”

“Humph,” I grunted. It didn’t seem to me that was any way to talk about your old lady. All day, I’d picked up on the feeling that they really weren’t together, but that was none of my business. What they

had going was just that! Something they had going. I couldn't help but wonder though.

We ate, drank and smoked. The party ended late with all of us pretty well ripped. They cautiously made their way home in the dark. All I had to do was crawl over to my bed and crash.

They stopped by on their way to town the next day. I saw them load before they went and come back about two o'clock. They went to their camp and I didn't see them the rest of the day.

Saturday night, I saw Cindy go down to shower again. When she had finished, she came into the restaurant. I saw her sitting at the counter, went out, and sat next to her, saying, "Where you been, stranger?"

"I've been up to the rink, just looking around and hanging out at camp. I was going to stop a couple of times, but I didn't want to wake you or nothing."

"You should have. I don't sleep but four or five hours anyways. Next time, just come in hollering. You can bet I'll get up."

"Well, next time I'll do that. Dave will be with me, though. He told me not to go over to your place by myself. I guess he's just looking out for me," she said somewhat dubiously.

"You can do what you want. I like having you over. In fact, Tuesday night let's all get together and go up to Slavy's and party a bit."

"All right, I'll see if I can get Dave to go for it. It'd be fun for a night," she said without any thought at all.

"I've got to get back on the job," I said, getting up and starting back to the kitchen. "Stop by! We'll get buzzed up."

By Monday night, Dave and Cindy still hadn't shown up at camp. I didn't want to go bustin' into their camp bothering them. It didn't really matter. Tonight was my last night at work for the week and I was looking forward to my days off, with or without anyone's company. It was a dead night at the Inn. Pete and I went out to the service dock, smoked a couple of bowls. The bartender closed up shop and was out of there at one-thirty. Pete and I were in there at one-thirty-five.

I had a pretty good head of steam going by the time I punched the clock at six. As usual though, I always caught a second wind and seemed to get wired up by the morning sun. By the time I walked into camp, I'd be ready for the day, sleep or no.

The mornings were getting cool. I started a fire. By eight or nine the sun would burn off the night chill and dampness. Late September and winter were just around the corner. I'd have to start thinking about a place to live. I didn't particularly cotton to the idea of living within the boundaries of four walls again. I was at ease living the way I was. It was total freedom as far as I could see. But winter wouldn't allow it, especially if I got hooked up with an old lady.

It was around nine o'clock and I was watching the sun sparkle in the dewdrops that it was slowly drying on the pup tent that I'd set up after getting soaked in a summer rain when the youngsters, Jerry and Donna, pulled off the road in front of my came in their dark blue '68 Pontiac.

They got out of the car. Donna pulled a big brown grocery bag out of the back seat on her side. On the other side, Jerry reached in to retrieve a black guitar case and a couple of six packs. With arms loaded and big smiles on their faces, they waltzed right toward camp.

Halfway there, Jerry yelled out, "What are you doing, Big Time?"

"Oh, everybody once," I said, laughing. "The easy ones twice!"

Laughing out loud, Donna said, "You ass! Give me a break or you won't get any of the breakfast we brought."

Jerry set down the guitar case and handed me the beer. "A little surprise," he said.

"Ah," I replied, looking at Donna and holding up the beer. "Breakfast of champions! Thanks!"

She just shook her head and continued to unload the bag she had carried in. She arranged bacon, eggs and hash browns on the log next to the fire.

"I don't suppose anyone will be real hungry unless we smoke a bowl or two," I said, offering the pipe and a bag of dope to Donna as I picked up the six packs of beer to put them in the stream.

Jesus! I thought, walking down to the stream. She was looking super good today. She'd poured herself into a pair of hip-hugger jeans. That heart-shaped ass of hers stood out like a beacon in the night. The lace on the white, sleeveless cutoff blouse she wore barely covered her midriff and there was no doubt about her not wearing a bra. I'd have to mind my P's and Q's today. It wouldn't be hard to get into trouble.

They were standing by the fire choking and getting red-faced when I sat back down. I helped them finish the bowl and things got real quiet, all of us lost in our own thoughts. Donna busied herself with cooking. I busied myself watching her. Jerry broke out his guitar and began to

go through his songs. He started picking out a tune, “Blackbird singing in the dead of night...” He had a light mellow voice that seemed to fit the mood of the morning. Nobody was ready for “Jumping Jack Flash” quite yet.

I had to turn away and look at the running river. As Donna cooked, she bent over the grill on the fire. The lace on her blouse would fall away from her body and flash me with those firm-looking stand-out boobs.

She finally got the food ready. She took a plate for herself and told us to go for it. We ate quietly, washing it down with milk they had brought. On finishing, we threw our paper plates into the fire and settled back. I lit up a smoke.

“That was great, thanks!” I said. “It don’t seem to taste the same at the Inn.”

“Yeah,” replied Donna in agreement. “The Inn doesn’t have leaves, dirt, or ants in theirs.”

Jerry asked me for a smoke, saying, “I forgot to get some at the store when we were there.” I told him I didn’t have any either. “I’ll just run down to that little mini-mart at the end of the road and get some.”

“If you’re going down there, Jerry, will you do me a favor?” I asked.

“Sure. Whatcha need?”

“You see that black Chevy setting down the road?”

“Yeah.”

“Stop in there and tell Dave and Cindy to come on down, would you? Tell them I sent you.”

“I can do that,” he replied.

He got up and walked to his car. When he got it running, he took off down the road. Donna put her hands behind her neck, arching her back in a stretch that forced me to look at her as she pushed her breasts tight against her blouse. She asked, “You want to roll a joint? I like them better than a pipe.”

I took the pot out of my can of Buglar, rolled one, and lit it. After I got it going, I stood up, leaned across the smoldering fire, and gave it to her. She took a couple of hits and, not getting up, reached out and handed it back to me. I was taking a toke when Jerry came back and passed on his way to the store.

Donna didn’t wait for me to pass the joint back. She got up, came around the fire, and put one knee on the log next to me with a hand resting on my shoulder. I raised the joint up to her. She took it, and at the same time swung her leg over mine to straddle me on the log.



Well, boy, you're in deep shit now, I thought as my hands went to her hips, steadying her as her mouth pressed against mine. Out of control for a moment, I moved my hands up her bare sides and under that short blouse. I took a firm breast in each hand and gently squeezed as my tongue slid between her parted lips. I let my thumbs glide softly over her nipples and felt them swell and stiffen.

Coming to my senses, I drew back. "Whew! Slow down, mama!" I said in a raspy voice. "You got my stuff harder than jailhouse bars. But there's two things wrong with this picture. One, you got an old man."

"He don't care," she said, encircling my face with her hands and kissing me again as she slowly began to undulate her hips. Catching my breath after that smothering open-mouth kiss, I dropped my hands to her hips and slowly pushed her off me, saying, "Two, it's not going to take Jerry long to get down there and back. There's an old saying, 'Don't start no shit and there won't be none.' Besides that, I like Jerry."

"OK," she said, taking her hands off my shoulders and stepping away. She tilted her head back, shook out her long hair, and said, "I can dig that. It's cool ... for now."

As she went over to sit down, I drew in a couple of deep breaths, trying to get my heart to slow down, thinking that I had to start my changes somewhere. Three years ago any willing woman would have been fair game, regardless of the consequences. Now the ante in the game had been raised. If I lost the hand, I'd lose the game. Plus, I had some strange urges running through me, like how would it feel to be *trusted*?

Donna lit up the rest of the joint that she'd hung onto, and about that time Jerry came cruising in.

"Hey now!" he said in greeting. "I talked to them down there. They said they'll be up in a while." He sat down next to Donna and she gave him the roach to smoke.

It was after three before Dave and Cindy showed up. I introduced everyone. Jerry and I went into the trees and found another broken-up tree trunk, which we dragged to camp. We were short on sitting space. Jerry gave them the pot and the pipe. I went to the stream to get everyone a beer.

The next few hours went as expected for a group of people partying. Ribaldry, loud talking, and playing as everyone got half wasted. The guys got into an axe-throwing contest. I had bought a short-handled axe to cut wood. We took turns trying to stick it into a tree. The ladies,

acting as an audience, applauded or booed and hissed, depending on which end of the axe hit first.

Dave was hot on the scent and heat of Donna. With long hungry looks, he directed most of his conversation to her. I'd glance over at Cindy and all I'd see was that curious half-turned-up smile. It didn't seem to bother her at all.

Evening started coming on. Jerry gathered up his gear and said to Donna and the rest of us, "We're out of here. Both of us have to work tomorrow."

As Jerry took his guitar and stuff out to the car and loaded it up, everyone said their good-byes. After they'd pulled out, I asked Dave. "Well? Are we going to Slavy's or what? Shoot some pool? Suck some suds?"

"Sounds good to me," he said, looking over to Cindy. "You for it?"

"Yeah, I'd like to go," she said hesitantly, then added, "If you guys will wait a minute, I want to change clothes and get a sweater." She got up and started out of camp.

"Wait a second!" Dave said to her, putting his hand into his pocket and bringing out his car keys. "Bring back the car."

"No need, man," I interrupted. "I've got my truck here. But we don't need them. It's a short walk up there. Why hassle with driving?"

It was less than half a mile up there. Shorter still taking the narrow trail I'd found that cut straight across the field.

"OK," he agreed. Looking at Cindy again, he said somewhat demandingly, "Bring me back that black nylon windbreaker. It's in the car." She didn't say anything in return as she left.

It didn't take Cindy twenty minutes to get down there and back. She had changed into a pair of dark brown cords and a long-sleeved flannel shirt. She carried a sweater over her arm. Dave put on the windbreaker she'd brought and we were off.

Slavy's wasn't busy, but it was early yet. We went to the back of the bar and took a table by the pool table. The waitress came over, asked what we'd like, and requested Dave and Cindy's ID, which they produced.

I laid some money on the table to pay for the drinks and then went to the pool table and racked the balls. Dave and I lagged for the break. He won. I went back to the table when the waitress brought our drinks and got a couple of dollars worth of quarters. I handed them to Cindy. "Here," I said. "You can put on some music if you want."

"Sure," she said, holding out her hand. "Anything special you want to hear?"

“Music,” I replied. “Whatever you want.”

Dave and I got into the game. The first song she played was Elton John’s “Michael.” The rest was a mix of country and rock and roll. We had the pool table to ourselves for a couple of hours, then the place started to fill up. One group, four guys and their ladies from Montana, stopped in on their way back from Battle Mountain, Nevada. They’d gambled and partied the whole weekend away and weren’t ready to quit. They put their quarters up on the pool table for winners.

I’d won a few games and lost a few to Dave and Cindy. When Dave won the game we were playing, I was relieved. It was still difficult for me to get to know and interact with people on a social level, much less try to handle a whole new group. I went over and sat with my back to the wall across the table from Cindy. She sat quietly, spinning her Tequila Sunrise between her thumb and fingers in the moist rings of condensation on the table in front of her, staring into the glass with a vacant, faraway look in her eyes.

“Hey!” I said, snapping her out of her thoughts. “You doing all right?” She was leaning forward, resting on one arm. She looked up at me, “I’m cool,” she said. “Just tripping out some.”

“You weren’t here, that’s for sure.”

“I’ve got a lot of things going on I can’t help but think about.”

A country song came on. “You want to boogie a little bit?”

“OK. Just don’t go throwing me around. I’m not that good.” It was a fast Western boogie.

Laughing out loud, I told her, “Honey, I haven’t danced since my last sock hop, so I’m not up to anything, that’s for sure.”

We boogied and drank. Dave lost a few times and we went outside to smoke a joint. By eleven o’clock, we were all pretty tight, considering the day we’d put in. Dave was starting to get loud and obnoxious. After he knocked over his beer, Cindy said, “I’m pretty well burnt. You guys want to go home?”

Standing up, I finished the beer in my glass. “I’m game! It’s been a heavy day.”

We walked out of the bar into the cool night air. The sky was clear, the stars bright and abundant at this elevation. The clean air was easy to breathe after the stuffiness of the smoke-filled bar.

There wasn’t much traffic out this late and we walked three abreast along the road to the field. The trail was narrow, so I dropped back to let them walk together.

I strolled along enjoying the night. Cindy wasn't hurrying, but she wasn't dallying around, either. They were about twenty yards in front of me. Dave's arm came up and rested on her shoulders. I could see the whiteness of her hand as it came up and pushed it off. Dave's voice rose. I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I could hear the angry inflection in it.

I stopped to roll a smoke. I didn't want to listen to or be involved in their argument. They slowed down and Dave's arm went around her again. The menace in his voice grew stronger. Cindy stopped abruptly and twisted away from the encircling arm, standing face to face with him now.

Well, hell, I thought as I lit my smoke and started towards them. Maybe if they see me coming, they'll break it off and cool down some. If not, I can just go on back to camp. I was only fifteen feet away when Dave grabbed her by the arms and pulled her to him. I heard the last part of what he said, "And you ain't gave up shit."

Cindy jerked back out of grasp and yelled at him, "You got nothing coming. That wasn't a part of the deal."

Dave reached and caught her with both hands by the front of the shirt. He yelled back at her, "You're giving it up, one way or the other."

This time when Cindy tried to jerk away, her feet caught in the low shrubs on the edge of the trail. Not able to catch herself, she fell backwards over the bushes and landed in the rocks and dirt on her back. I was on top of them by then. Dave took a step forward. "Hey! What the fuck, man?" I said as I took hold of his shoulder.

"I got her ass out of a jam in Sac. When I brought her up, I thought it was understood that it was me and her," he said venomously. "But all she's been doing is prick teasing. I'm going to take some of that snatch if I have to!"

Cindy was sitting up now. "Asshole! I paid you to bring me up here. I didn't promise you nothing else."

Dave leaned over and slid his hands inside the top of her shirt where it was unbuttoned, getting ready to rip it open. I took another step and was right beside him. I said with authoritative calmness in my voice, "Let her go, man."

He turned his head to look over his shoulder and said between clenched teeth, "Fuck you, man!" and went back to what he was doing.

I reached down with my left hand, gripped the collars of his shirt and jacket, and jerked back as hard as I could. He came up and away from her,

spinning around and falling back. My right fist shot up and landed on the side of his face. Most of the shock was lost to his backward motion but it still planted his ass pretty hard in the dirt. He rolled over and slowly got up on one knee, trying to stand up. His right hand was behind him, digging into his hip pocket. I knew he carried a four-inch knife there.

I reached to my side and got out my Scharde. Pulling the blade open, I told him with deadly seriousness in my voice, "You're not taking nothing. Your best shot is to get the fuck on out of here."

Finally making it to his feet, he saw the knife in my hand and yelled at me almost defensively, "I got a knife, too, and I can use it." He sounded like a ten-year-old.

Looking at him for a moment and shaking my head, I knew it was over. I decided to drive a final nail of fear into him. Standing there relaxed with my knife hand down by my side, my arm hung easy and slowly swung back and forth. I said to him slowly and evenly, "You do and I'll cut your fuckin' head off." Realizing I meant what I said, he yelled, "Fuck that bitch. I'm outta here!" He turned and stomped off down the trail, fading into the night, muttering profanities to himself.

I stepped over to Cindy and offered my hand. She reached up and took it. I helped her to her feet. She wasn't crying. There was a look of resignation on her face, mixed with that of hate and disgust. As she brushed the dirt, twigs and leaves from her pants and sleeves, she said, "Asshole, I should have seen this coming. I hope he doesn't go back to camp and tear up my stuff out of spite."

"I don't think he will. He might dump everything out in the road, but that'll be about it. He's a kid. He's got no balls except where women are concerned."

"I hope so," she said questioningly.

"You're not hurt, are you?" I asked.

"Nah, I landed on my ass. Plenty of protection there," she replied jokingly.

"If you're ready, let's go on back to camp."

As I entered camp, I could see nothing had been disturbed. I asked Cindy if she wanted a fire as she sat down by the pit.

"I'm fine, thanks," she replied, in spite of the coolness in the air.

I went to the stream, filled the coffee pot for morning and snagged me a beer. Adrenaline had stolen the light of that soft comfortable glow I'd had going when I left the bar.

"I'm pretty buzzed up. You want to smoke bowl?" I asked her.

I sat down on the log beside her and handed her the bag and pipe. She opened the bag and nervously began to fill the pipe. While looking down at what she was doing, she said, "I appreciate your stepping in to help me. Thanks." Keeping her attention on her task, she continued. "It's happened once before. I didn't have any help then."

"That's cool, Cindy. Ain't nothing but a meatball. I never was much of one to rape no ladies. Too many ladies walking around giving it away. No need to take it."

By way of thanks, she swung her arm around my shoulder and gave me a small hug when she handed me the pipe.

We finished the bowl in silence. I swallowed the last of my beer and asked her awkwardly, "Well, huh? Where you want to sleep? I've got a sleeping bag and some extra blankets."

She hesitated a moment as she searched my face with her eyes and then locked onto mine and said, "With you, I guess, unless you want me to sleep out here."

Not expecting an answer nor waiting for one, she got up, went over to the tent, crawled in and began straightening out the sleeping bag that I always left bundled up in a knot. She sat down with her back to me, took off her shoes, placed them beside her on the ground, and worked her way into the bag.

I went to the side of the tent and pulled a woolen blanket out of a plastic bag. I opened it, reached in, and threw it over the sleeping bag. The sleeping bag was only a single. It wouldn't keep us both covered all night. I sat at the head of the bed and took off my shoes, then crawled in beside her and pulled the covers up.

She was lying with her back to me. I spooned in close to her and put my hand on her hip. I could feel the heat radiating from the whole length of her body. With my nose and mouth at the nape of her neck, I could smell the fresh sweet fragrances of shampoo and soap. I kissed her on the neck. She reached down and took my hand off her hip, moved it up and pressed it hard to her chest between her breasts. I opened my hand and caressed the left one. She moved her hand over to cover mine and as she pressed it to her, she turned her head slightly back to me and said in a husky whisper, "I'm really sorry, Al, but we can't do anything for a few days."

"No sweat, sunshine. When you're ready is fine by me," I whispered in her ear. I didn't understand what she meant until she said, "No, that's not it. I'm on my period. It'd be real messy, OK?"

“Good night. We’ll chat in the morning,” I said as I kissed her on the neck again.

She murmured good night. I thought, shot down twice in one day. Once by conscience and the other by nature. Oh well, before Rosie I’d gone a long time without and it didn’t hurt me none. Time was a thing I had a lot of now, and I didn’t mean the jailhouse “waiting” kind either.

When the sun came up the next morning, I was up with it. I got the fire going and the coffee boiling. Then I walked out of the trees to check on our friend down the road. The car was still there. Hopefully he had slept it off and thinking back, had mellowed out some.

I came back to the fire and sat so I could watch the road. Drinking my coffee, I watched Cindy sleep. She was tossing and turning. I’d not slept much, due to her steady moving around and me raising my head at every sound in the night. Just checking! Even though he had no heart in a face-to-face situation, he might try creeping in the night to even the score. Guys tend to act pretty weird when their self image is destroyed or their manhood is shamed. They can get as squirrely as an old bull left out on his own too long. You can’t trust a thing they do.

Looking out at my old, lime green, ’49 Studebaker, I decided I’d have to build a camper shell on it sooner than I thought. If she decided to stay with me, the least I could do is get her up off the ground. I could build a bed back there and store our gear. I’d started to save up for an apartment. In another month, I’d have it.

An hour later, in the quietness of the morning, I heard a car door slam. I got up and walked to the road to have a look. I could see Dave taking things out of the back of the station wagon and carrying them into his camp. He must be unloading Cindy’s gear, I thought. He made three trips in and out. On the last one, he started up the Chevy before he went in with his load. Returning to the car in a few minutes, he got in and backed it out of the trees. Putting it into gear, he came towards me, driving slowly because of the bumps and dips in the road. It only took him a minute to reach where I stood. When he got close, he finally saw me. I could see his face through the windshield, sour and disgruntled. He stared at me with vengeful, hate-filled eyes. As he passed, his hand came up to flip me the “bird” but he didn’t stop nor slow down.

Then he was gone. I was more than relieved to see him go. I didn’t like things just hanging in the air. The tension of waiting and watching wasn’t worth it. If you had a problem then you just got after it so it was over and done with.

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## Cindy and Mike

The next three weeks were a period of adjustment. Cindy and I learned to live together. I built the camper on the truck, which was a welcome addition. The leaves had begun their change into a riot of autumn colors and had started falling from the trees. The mornings were frosty.

We spent a lot of hours by the fire, talking and getting to know each other. I didn't tell her everything about my past. She didn't need to know anything about that, not yet anyway. One night I asked her how she got hooked up with Dave.

"I'm running and hiding," she said as a matter of fact.

"What's happening? What did you do?"

"I didn't 'do' anything. Two guys I know did. They took two girls from a party I was at and drove them up to the North Shore in Tahoe, by Truckee, and killed them."

"Were you with them or what?" I asked, worriedly. That's all I needed to do, get involved in a murder beef.

"No!" I had talked to one of the girls, Linda, before she and Carol went with them. She told me they were going. My girlfriend Trish and I were outside watching when they left. They were found three days later, all cut up. My friends around town told me that Tim and Cliff had been looking all over for me. They were spooky guys and no one would talk to them much. Trish took off for her aunt's in Sac. I told my folks that I wanted to get back into skating. Dave was the only guy I could get to bring me up here and stay while I figured out what I was going to do."

I could see myself fighting these two fucking fools already. "Where are these guys right now?"

She heard the intensity in my voice and read the look in my eyes. She reached out and gave my shoulder a light squeeze, saying, "Don't worry, man. That phone call I made day before yesterday was to a friend of mine. She told me Tim and Cliff were busted last week. They're both in jail."



"I'm damn sure glad to hear that," I said with a sigh of relief.

"Well, I won't feel good until they're both in prison. They can't make bail, but they've got some crazy friends."

It was a week before Halloween when Cindy and I traded places. She got a job at the Mini-Mart. Relief work, two days morning shift and two nights swing. I quit the Inn and got into some serious fucking off. I had a few bucks saved up and she got a discount on groceries.

I met a youngster named Mike Love while I was shooting pool one afternoon in Slavy's. He was living out of his '68 Plymouth. I told him about the camps at the river and he moved down there with Cindy and me. Just what I needed, someone to be wasted all day with.

Halloween night, the town was packed. Cindy, Mike and I made the rounds to the bars, where everyone was flat getting down. We were in Mulvany's when we heard that the bar and restaurant called the Timbers up in Snow Valley had a live band. We hotfooted it up there. We wanted to hear some live music.

The front door was huge, made from log slabs with great wrought-iron hinges. I swung it open and we stepped into a foyer. A bouncer stood leaning against the door jamb leading into the bar. He turned as we came in, held up both hands, and said, "Sorry folks, we're right to the max. We can't let anyone else in."

"Oh man, what a bummer," Mike said dejectedly.

"Sorry, just got no room," replied the bouncer.

"Well, let's hook it up. We'll find something else to do," I said.

Standing outside in the parking lot, I looked the building over. I knew the restaurant would be closed. I also knew they had to have a back door to the kitchen.

"Hey!" I said to get their attention as I started to walk to the back of the building. "Let's check out the back door."

There was a kitchen door, but it was locked, naturally.

As we stood there discussing what to do next, I noticed a louvered air vent low on the wall ten feet to the left of the door. I could see a faint light coming through it and hear the loud voices of the people inside under the din of the music.

I walked over to it and squatted down to look through the louvers. I was looking into the dishwashing area, lit by one small bulb on the ceiling. I could see between the shelves of a metal rack holding pots

and pans. On the right side of the room was a doorway leading into the kitchen. Through the doorway I saw a wall that was the end of a hallway. People were coming and going at irregular intervals. The bathrooms must be in that hallway, I thought.

I stood up and using my knife as a screwdriver took out the screws holding the vent in place. Once I had them out, I slid my blade under the lip of the vent at the edge and slowly pried it loose. "All right! I'm as good as in," I said to myself, and called Cindy and Mike over.

"If you're game, we can get in," I said to them.

"How?" asked Mike, looking at the vent, then at me.

"Just follow me," I said. "And don't be dragging ass."

I pulled the vent away from the wall. The hole was two feet wide and at least two and a half feet tall. More than enough for what I needed. I reached inside and took hold of the metal rack. It was on wheels, which made it easy to push away from the wall. I had just enough room to step through the opening and stand up.

"You're fucking nuts, man!" I heard Mike exclaim.

Leaning down to the opening, I said, "Shut your face and get on in here. Push the rack back after you're in."

I walked over to the hallway. Directly in front of me was the men's room. Down on the other end was the women's.

Acting like a point man, I waved to Cindy, who was looking through the vent. She stepped in and crossed the room to me. I told her, "Go into the head for a minute and wait," She wasted no time in doing just that.

Mike had pushed the rack back by the time I looked around again. In a second he was beside me. We both barged into the bathroom and started to crack up. Leaning against the walls and laughing hard, Mike said, "You are totally out of it!"

Catching a breath, I said, "Yeah, but we're in, aren't we?"

"I don't believe this shit! OK, now what?" he asked.

"I'm going into the hall to wait for Cindy. You give it a minute and come on out. We'll be in the bar somewhere. Just look around and stay away from the front door."

I was sitting on a number of boxes stacked against the wall in the hallway when Cindy came out. She was grinning and shaking her head, but didn't say anything. I lifted the lid to one of the boxes and pointed. She looked down and seeing the full bottles of "Blue Nun" squinched her eyes and shook her head no.

We walked into the bar. It was wall to wall people. The band was

on a raised platform in one corner. The tables and chairs were pushed to the outer walls, with people standing on both. We had to fight our way through the crowd, weaving in and out between party-goers to get to the far left side of the room where it was darkest and farthest from the front door.

“We’d never get a drink at that bar,” I said, yelling almost directly into Cindy’s ear.

She leaned towards me to let two girls get off the chairs they were standing on behind her and said, “We can wait for the cocktail waitress if you want. No sense fighting this crowd.”

“That sounds like a plan. Let’s get up on these chairs the girls left.” Both of us being on the short side, we couldn’t see the band without tiptoeing or when the crowd in front of us parted to let someone through.

With only three waitresses working the crowd, it took twenty-five minutes or so before one fought her way back into the corner and took our order. Fifteen minutes later, Cindy had her “Sunrise” and I had my beer.

From our elevated height, we watched Mike come through the crowd. As he passed a table, we saw him reach out and snag a full drink off of it as he continued through the crowd towards us.

“Looks like he got tired of waiting for a drink, the little shit,” I said to Cindy as I looked around. Everybody else was watching the band.

He finally recognized us through the darkness and cigarette smoke. He had a big shit-eating grin on his face when he got to the spot right below us. Stooping down, I asked him, “What are you drinking?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It tastes like whiskey and soda. The first one I had was a Screwdriver. I like whiskey better.”

The band got into a long set, with everyone clapping and singing along. When a space behind us opened up, Cindy and I got up on a table. Mike took one of our chairs. Now he could see what was going on. He was shorter than I was.

When the band got around to taking a break, I decided I wanted another drink. We’d only gotten one in the last hour and it wasn’t doing my buzz any good.

I told Cindy and Mike to hold my place; I’d be right back. But that wasn’t the case. The bar was stacked four deep. I waited for half an hour and said, “Fuck this shit!” I made my way back through the crowd towards the bathrooms. When I got into the hall, I grabbed a bottle of wine from the boxes stacked there and went into the bathroom. Stepping

into a stall, I shut the door, sat down on the toilet, and put the bottle between my knees.

I took off the tinfoil wrapping and used my knife tried to pry the cork out. No such luck, I thought, as the floor got littered with small pieces of cork. I settled on just pushing it inside the bottle and took a long gulp. "Now, this'll work," I said to myself, standing up to slide the bottle into my pants and cover it with my shirt.

When I got back to the table, I found a bunch of guys in front of it. Mike's chair was against the wall. He got down and let me use it to step up on the table again. Cindy still had her glass in her hand, sucking on the ice in it.

"Give me your glass," I said. Reaching for it, I turned around to the wall and filled it from the bottle I'd pulled out of its hiding place. I handed it back to her, then filled Mike's glass and my own. On tasting it, Cindy said accusingly, "You snatched one of those bottles, didn't you?"

"Hey, it's pretty good stuff and I didn't have to wait forever to get it, either."

That first bottle actually started the party for us. After all the other drinks we'd had and the dope we'd smoked, we started to get pretty loose. Getting real friendly with folks around us, we'd pass the bottle. Those little bottles didn't seem to last long. Mike and I started taking turns running back and forth to the head for full ones.

Standing on the table behind us were three girls who were well on their way to never-never land. Mike had just opened a new bottle and given it to Cindy. After she filled our glasses, she handed the bottle back to the girls behind us. The band kicked in with a hot tune. Everyone started clapping hands and stomping feet. The young thing behind me was really getting into it. She'd raise the bottle up in the air and squeal, "All right!" keeping time with the music and splashing me with wine.

I turned to her, looked up at the bottle and said loudly, "You'd best keep that bottle down. We don't want nobody seeing it." Either she misunderstood me or just didn't give a shit. The next thing I now she's turned that bottle upside down and is pouring wine on my upturned face. Under other circumstances, that would probably have been cool, but my immediate reaction was to reach up and snatch the bottle out of her hand. That action set in motion an incident that would take a month and a fist fight to get cleared up.

I hadn't jerked the bottle down when I grabbed it, just pulled it away from her. Not being in real good shape, my back swing connected me

with a home run. The bottle smashed on the back of a guy's head in front of the table. It didn't take long for things to get real lively.

The guy spun around and landed one in my gut, but it didn't have any power. He shot up to get me. I was already moving back when he connected. Doing the easiest thing, I brought my knee up and caught him in the forehead. That sent him crashing back into the crowd.

His two partners didn't much like that. They both reached up and grabbed me by the belt. Mike came flying off his chair and tackled the guy nearest him, taking him to the floor. The guy that still had a hold on me let her rip. He leaned back and tried to pull me off the table. Cindy and the other girls had crowded onto another table so the one I was on went with me. About the time it crashed to the floor, I was doing a midair turnover because of the lead in my ass. Everybody had moved back by now to get out of the way and watch what was going on. I came slamming down on the small dance floor and ended up with my head under a small table on the side wall.

In a second, a heavysset guy reached down for me. I bent my knee and just before he got me, I buried my foot in the middle of his chest. He would have gone over backwards had the crowd behind him not held him up. Regaining some wind and composure, he stepped up to me again and bending over so he could see my face, said, "Be cool, man. I'm trying to help you up. Are you all right?"

Realizing the dude was a bouncer, I said, "Yeah, I'm fine. Just everybody keep their fucking hands off me and I'll get on up."

As I got to my feet, I saw six or seven guys being held back by another bouncer in front of the bandstand. I didn't see Mike or Cindy anywhere in the crowd. The bouncer stood back and said, "You're going to have to go outside man and get some air." In other words, "Leave."

Not saying a word, I walked to the entrance door and went outside. There in the parking lot stood Cindy and Mike.

"Shit for brains! What the hell were you doing?" Mike yelled as I walked up.

Ignoring him, I turned back around at sounds from the bar. The guys I'd seen inside were filing out of the door. They started to walk our way. I heard Mike exclaim, "Oh, shit!"

They got to within twenty feet of me. I pulled out my knife. They all stopped abruptly.

"I'm not taking an ass kicking from all of you unless it's one on one," I told them.

“Ya need a fucking knife, asshole?” one of them said bitterly.

“Well, my friend,” I replied. “I don’t think so. You want to step over to the side there?” indicating an area fifty feet to his left. We can talk about it, just you and me.

Mike stepped up beside me. I could see he had out a little three-inch pocket knife.

The guys turned around and walked back to the bar, grumbling out loud between themselves for our benefit.

“Assholes.”

“We’ll see ’em around.”

“Can’t fight without a knife.”

When they were all back inside the bar, I put my knife away and turned to Cindy. She took a good look at me and we both started to crack up.

“That dumb chick,” she said, taking a deep breath. “Lucky those guys weren’t serious.”

“Not serious?” Mike shouted. “We could have got fucked up!”

“Naw,” I said. “They’re ski bums and wanna-bes.”

“Let’s go back to town. The night’s not over yet,” I said.

That’s enough for me,” Cindy said. “Let’s go back to camp, OK?” In mutual agreement, we headed back to camp.

Two weeks later, Mike came flying into camp one afternoon flat buzzed up.

“I found a place to live, man,” he announced excitedly.

“That’s great, Mike! Whereabouts?” I asked.

“It’s up on Warm Springs Road.”

Warm Springs Road was an old dirt road that led up into a small valley in the mountains. There weren’t many flat spots up there but people had built homes along the road where they could. The road followed a creek for about six miles.

“All right, Mike!” I said. “What’s it gonna cost?”

“Ain’t nothing, man! It’s an old thirty-foot trailer and they only want a hundred and twenty-five a month. Piece of cake, Bro.”

“Cindy will really get into that. A soft bed and hot water when she wants it,” I said as I took out my wallet and started counting money. “When can we do it?”

“I can pay them right now. We’ll be in there tonight.”

I handed Mike sixty-five bucks and said, "Go for it man! I'll go and tell Cindy. She's only got a couple hours left on her shift. We'll meet you back here."

"I'm gone, man," he said, taking the money.

After he'd left, I got into the truck and went to Mini-Mart. I told Cindy what was happening and then went up to the big store. I bought steaks and booze. This event called for a celebration, but then again the sun coming up in the morning was reason for celebration, too.

I went back to camp. When Cindy got off, I picked her up and we both waited for Mike to show. We had everything cleaned up around camp when he pulled up in front on the road and honked his horn. Cindy and I went to my truck. As we got in, Mike yelled out of his window, "Follow me."

It was a neat little trailer that set about twenty-five yards off the road, nestled in amongst pines and aspens. It had one small bedroom in the back. Mike let us have it. He said he could handle the couch. Three days later, the first snow came. Just a light dusting that melted right away but served as a gentle warning that winter was almost here.

Mike and I continued to party. Cindy kept on working. Mike had money. I figured he must be getting it from his folks. I didn't have that option and my money was getting short. It had to do with all the partying we'd been doing.

I started putting in applications at ski resorts and anywhere else they'd take one. Twenty miles south is Hailey, Idaho. There was an old hotel in town and I had talked with the dishwasher there. He said that he was going to start working in Sun Valley in a few weeks as a ski lift operator. His job would be open then. I didn't want to go back to dishwashing if I could help it, so I kept it in mind while I continued checking out the resorts.

It was two days after Thanksgiving and I was standing at the counter in the Mini-Mart talking with Cindy when two guys walked in. We glanced at them and continued talking.

They walked past us and went to the back where the coolers were. They were there only a minute. I heard them walk up behind me. Then, in a low, hostile voice, one of them asked, "You remember me, asshole?"

I turned around and stepped back at the same time. Not saying anything, I looked him over. I didn't recognize him but there wasn't any doubt in my mind that this was the guy from the bar. He was a tall, lanky

kid, the young college type. I could sense that he didn't really want a part of me, but now that he'd run into me again he had to say something. He couldn't let it pass, not with his partner standing right there.

"Don't start no shit in here," I said, not taking my eyes off of him. "There's a parking lot out back." I walked out of the store, turned right, went to the end of the building, made another right into the lot, and waited.

A minute later, they came around the corner. I started to get pumped up. As the adrenaline began to flow, I nervously and unconsciously raised up on the balls of my feet, balancing. As they walked up to me, I said to the kid, "Whatcha gonna do, man?"

He looked at me for a moment, then said, "Take off that knife and I'll show you."

Looking at the other guy, I said, "What about you?" as an open invitation or to see where he was at.

Raising his hands to me, he said, "I got nothing to do with this."

I reached down and unbuckled my belt. I took it and the knife off. I tossed them on the ground by the wall at the back of the building and walked out into the parking lot. The kid followed me.

When I stopped and turned around, I raised my fist up level with my shoulders. He was ready, or thought he was.

"Let's do it, guy," I said as I started to circle him. I could tell he didn't know much. His feet were flat on the ground. Both his fists were right up under his chin and he hunched down to get level with me. As I circled him, he shuffled around flatfooted. There was no way for me to box this long-armed kid, so I just thundered on him. I took a couple of lucky good ones as I waded in, but once I was on the inside, I began to hurt him. My head was just under his chin so I couldn't get in an effective head shot, but his stomach and midsection were taking some serious abuse.

I drove him back up against the wall, never letting up. When his ass hit the wall, he tried to turn sideways to keep from getting pinned to it. As he did, his right foot slipped in the gravel. He landed on his right knee and that brought his head down to where I could get at it. The left I threw landed behind his ear. His head bounced off the wall and met my right that was just blazing in. I dotted his eye for him.

Knowing he was in trouble, he pushed off the wall into me. I caught him with another left to the jaw before he could get his arms around and effectively tie me up. Hanging on to me for dear life, he worked his way behind me and just tried to hang on. I knew he didn't want no more of



it, so I stopped trying to get away and told him over my shoulder, “We ain’t getting nowhere this way. Cut me loose.”

He let go of me and jumped back about four feet like he’d just lit a short fuse on a stick of dynamite. I was already turning by the time he let me go. I stood there facing him and said, “Now, do you want to know what happened up there that night?”

His right hand was covering his mouth, his thumb and forefinger pinching his nostrils to stop the flow of blood running over his mouth and chin. In a muffled voice, he said, “What?” I told him what really came down that night as we walked back over to his partner, who had gotten a paper towel out of his car for him. As he listened, he cleaned up his face, then took a cold can of Sprite and held it to an eye that was swelling shut.

I said to him, “I’m sorry things worked out like they did. I didn’t mean you no harm.”

“Well, I didn’t know what was happening. I was half wasted and just reacted,” he said.

“I can dig it, man. I didn’t let no grass grow under my feet, either,” I said. With that, his partner said to him, “We got to get going, Jay.”

There I was, in the middle of shit again, I thought. When are you going to lighten up? Every time you do something stupid, you stack the odds a little higher. You ain’t going to get nothing by this, man, except a one-way ticket back to the slammer.

But things didn’t change much. After we were settled in the trailer, Mike started to get possessive and pushy about “his” trailer. I’d already formed an opinion of him. He was a weasel. As a matter of fact, he looked like one. Small and slim with a pointy face. He was steadily trying to run head games, but he wasn’t that qualified. I’d overlooked most of his bullshit because he had money and liked to party. When we had a bunch of people over partying, he’d be gaming on the ladies. When he thought I was smashed or not looking, he’d come on to Cindy. He was balling Donna whenever he could get her away from Jerry.

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## Cindy and Trish

I didn't last but two weeks in the trailer. Mike and I had been getting blazed all day and he'd kept bickering with me for most of it. I finally left to pick up Cindy. When we got back, a guy and girl were just leaving. I'd seen them with Mike before but I didn't know them. We got out of the truck and went inside.

"What's happening, Cindy?" Mike asked as we walked in.

"Not much," she said. "I see you had company."

"Yeah, those two have been hassling me about some dope I was supposed to get them."

"Did they give you the bucks for it yet?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I just haven't been able to get any other than for us."

"Well, fuck 'em, then. They ain't got nothing coming," I said.

Mike came unglued. "See what I mean?" he says, looking at Cindy for confirmation. "I been telling him all day that his attitude is fucked. You don't go downing people like that for no reason."

"Hey, man," I countered. "I didn't whip 'em or nothing. I just made a statement."

Taking an up front shot at trying to get Cindy to think about our relationship, he said, "There you go, getting hostile with me. Cindy, you keep hanging out with this guy, you're going to be in deep shit."

I said, "I'm not getting pissed. I'm just telling you the facts." Not wanting to hear more, I walked back into the bedroom to get away from him because I was getting pissed now. He couldn't let it alone and followed me.

The room was small, and the twin bed Cindy and I slept in took up most of it. There was a space on each side of the bed. I was in between the wall and the bed when he came into the room.

He had me blocked in and I didn't like it. I had no room to move and he was still in my face.

“You don’t give a fuck about anybody but yourself, do you?” He was hollering now, making sure Cindy heard him.

“Think so?” I asked. “I cared enough to come back here to keep from messing your ass up. Get on out of here and let me be.”

Then the little shit took a swing at me. I ducked. His fist caught me on the temple but I was down far enough that the punch slid right on over my head. I came flying up out of a crouch, reached up with both hands and grabbed him by the neck. My momentum carried us both over the foot of the bed onto the floor, with me on top. I proceeded to choke him out just to let him get the feel of it. Then I brought my face down close to his and said, “There’s an old saying, numb nuts, ‘Don’t start no shit and there won’t be none.’ You’re too light in the ass to be fucking with me, anyway.”

I turned him loose. As he was getting his breath, I got up and went into the front room.

“I’m out of here, Sunshine,” I said to Cindy. “If I don’t, that dickhead is going to get hurt.”

Mike had gotten up and come into the front room. I pushed past him and went to pack my gear, which wasn’t much.

Mike didn’t say anything until I got to the front door heading out to my truck. As I went through the door and kicked it closed with my foot, I heard him start talking to Cindy. I got everything loaded and went back in. Cindy was in the back room. Mike was standing in the doorway to it saying, “You don’t have to go. I don’t mind you being here.”

“You can do whatever you want, Sweetheart,” I told Cindy. There’s eight inches of snow out there and it’s cold. I can understand if you want to stay, but I’ll not be coming back up here, that’s for sure.”

Cindy didn’t say anything. She just started to pack her stuff. When she had it all together, I helped her take it outside and load it. I didn’t go back in, but she did. She had some things in the bathroom she wanted.

In the past two weeks, we’d had two good snowfalls that had stuck. The heater in the truck kept the twenty-degree temperatures outside. I had a double down sleeping bag and there was a bed in the back. We’d be warm enough until we got up in the mornings. I’d have to find a place real soon. I could handle the cold but I didn’t want to put Cindy through it. I was just about out of money. We were living on what Cindy made at the store. Not having any choices now, I’d have to take the first job that came along.

Cindy finally came out of the trailer and got into the truck. With

that half grin of hers on her lips, she said, ““We’re having some fun now, huh?””

I backed out of the driveway and we headed back down to our old camp on the river.

We froze our butts off for the next four days.

Depending on what shift Cindy worked, we’d either spend the evening in one of the bars or wander around Ketchum or Sun Valley during the day visiting ski shops and knick-knack stores, smoking dope and sucking on peppermint schnapps.

On the fifth day, I got lucky, real lucky. Cindy was working. I decided to go to Hailey to see about that dishwashing job at the Hiawatha Hotel.

I was introduced to Jim Hanson, the manager, a clean cut young guy about twenty-five years old. We went into his office and sat down.

“I’m looking for a job,” I said after shaking his somewhat limp hand.

He stood for a moment thinking, then said, “I don’t need anyone right now, but in a couple days my dishwasher is leaving, if you’re interested.”

All right, I thought to myself. He’s got rooms here. Maybe I can wheel and deal with him. I took a shot at him by answering, “You bet I’m interested. I need to go to work. Me and my old lady are living out of my truck. We got into a hassle with the folks we were staying with.

“You’re what?” he asked.

“I said we’re living out in our truck.”

“Not good,” he said. “It’s too cold for that kind of stuff.”

I smiled and shook my head in agreement, then said to him, “I’ll definitely go to work for you. Would it be possible to get a room from you until I get a check?”

“As a matter of fact,” he said, settling back into his chair, “I’ve got a trashed-out room by the pool that I never rent. You and your wife (I didn’t correct him) can use it if you want to.”

I hadn’t seen a swimming pool from the outside. Maybe it was covered. It didn’t make any difference. A room was a room. “That sounds like a winner to me. When can we move in?”

“Right now if you want.”

“Great! Where’s it at?” I asked enthusiastically.

“Come on, I’ll show you,” he said as he got up.

We left his office and crossed the lobby-dining room, then turned left into a long hallway with rooms on both sides and an exit door at the far end.

I got a surprise when we went through the door. On my right was a huge pool with sulfurous-smelling steam wafting up from it. It must have been at least fifteen by thirty feet. Walking along the end of the pool, we came to a door. Jim grasped the doorknob and opened it, saying, "There's no key but nobody wanders around back here, anyway."

We went inside. It wasn't a typical hotel room. It had a double bed in it and closet space, but instead of a bathroom, it had a small kitchenette.

"Where's the bathroom?" I asked.

"It's out by the pool. There's a shower out there, too."

"I appreciate this, and the old lady will be ecstatic! Thanks."

"No problem, Al. There's a gate out there. You can use it to bring in your stuff. I hope the smell doesn't bother you."

"What is it, anyway?"

"It's the pool. Years ago, they set a pipeline to a mineral spring three miles away and built this pool. The guests can't use it now—we can't carry the insurance—but employees are free to use it." Looking at his watch, he said, "I've got to get back up front. If you're all set, I'll see you later."

"OK. We'll just hang out until you need me. If there's anything you want me to do, say so. I'm ready."

With a smile and a nod of his head, he took off. I went around the pool checking things out. After finding the gate to the outside, I took off, happier than a hog in shit. I went back to Ketchum to tell Cindy the good news. I couldn't wait to see the expression on her face when I told her.

We moved in that evening. It wasn't hard. Back the truck up and unload. After we got somewhat settled in, we hit the pool. What a luxury! The water stayed at a steady one hundred degrees, even though the air was below freezing. The showers had steam heat in them, as did the building. When we went to have dinner, I only had to pay for Cindy's meal. Technically, I was on the job. My meals were free.

The next few days, I drove Cindy back and forth to work. Then we ran into problems. I worked the day shift, which started at eight in the morning, the same time she had to start work when she worked days. I worked until four. On swing shift, Cindy had to get to the Mini-Mart at the same time. I talked to Jim about it. He let me juggle my shift enough to get her back and forth to work.

This worked well through Christmas and New Years, then the temperature dropped below zero and my old truck just quit running. Once

again, Jim came to the rescue. He told Cindy that he needed a maid. If she was willing, he'd hire her. She had no problems with that. She'd done maid work before.

We had it all covered now, both of us drawing wages plus room and board. Jim liked to get high and play his electrically wired flute. He'd close the bar down at one o'clock for guests but leave it open for employees. His friends who played other instruments would come in and they'd have an all-night jam session.

We breezed right through January, working, making money and partying. Cindy told me she'd been talking to Trish in Sac. Trish wanted to come up for the rest of the winter. She could get a bus ticket to Twin Falls. We'd have to pick her up there.

I talked to Jim about it. Knowing my truck was down, he offered the use of his car to pick her up. Cindy and I got our shit together and headed south to Twin Falls. I was drinking beer and smoking dope, but I was trying to pace myself for the round trip.

We sat around the parking lot for an hour before Trish's bus came in. When it finally arrived and people started to get off, a big girl framed the exit door. Cindy exclaimed, "There she is!" Trish had long brown hair falling over wide, sloping shoulders. She stood at least five-ten and carried her weight well. With huge breasts and a barrel chest, she was a big-boned girl that in a few years would become seriously overweight.

Cindy jumped out of the car yelling and waving her hand at Trish. I got out of the car when Trish started walking over. They met in a flurry of hugs, smiles, and excited talk.

"This is Al," Cindy said, introducing me.

"Hi, Al!" Trish said.

Laughing, I replied, "Not yet, but I'm working on it." Then I said, "Let's get into the car. It's warmer."

"I have to get my suitcase," Trish said.

"Give me your baggage claim," I said. "I'll go get it for you. You girls go ahead and get in."

She produced the needed claim and I went to the bus while they loaded up. I retrieved her bag and went back to the VW, reached in, pulled the hood latch and stored her gear.

When we pulled out onto the highway, I offered her a beer. She didn't refuse. "I'll go you one better. Here," she said as she held out her closed hand between the seats. I reached back and took what was

offered. In the palm of my hand lay two Quaaludes. With only a slight feeling of reservation, I washed them both down with beer.

About halfway back, Cindy lit up the pipe and passed it. "I can't do that," I said. "Those 'ludes are coming on. I'm doing good just to cruise." I'd slowed down because of the ice and snow, but so had all the other traffic. I just kept the front end aimed down the road and hoped like hell I'd make it.

I didn't. Just outside of Ketchum, the front wheels caught in a rut. Being wasted, I couldn't react in time. The VW spun three-sixties as we slid down the highway. The snow and ice in the middle of the road kept us out of oncoming traffic and finally I was able to get her straightened out. The girls sat with eyes wide and mouths open. Trish let out a long breath and said, "Whoaaa! That was freaky, but we're cool now." She thought we'd make it. The city cop who was two cars behind us didn't think so.

He flashed his lights and I pulled off at the next road. He wrapped me up for drunk driving and asked Trish if she could drive. She told him she could. He took me to the police station in town, which, as luck would have it, was just across the street from the Hiawatha.

While they were booking me, Cindy went over and got Jim. I kept looking around to find the easiest way out of there. I had the money to make bail. If I could get out of there before they ran my prints, I'd be long gone. Otherwise, I was going to get busted.

I watched Jim and Cindy come in and stop at the booking desk. They were talking with the cop that sat there, looking up and back at me from time to time. Jim had to know all these cops. I was hoping he could work something out with them.

When I was finished being printed and signing all the papers they had, they led me back to the front desk. The cop working it told me to sign some release papers and said, "We're keeping your license, but you're free to go with Jim. We're letting you out on your own recognizance since you're employed across the street. Here's a ticket. It's got your court date on it. Be here!"

Smiling at Cindy, I picked up my property from the desk. I turned and headed for the door, Jim and Cindy by my side.

Once outside, I breathed a sigh of relief. That was too close for comfort. They'd had me locked up and never knew what they had. I knew I needed to run before they ran my prints and found out I wasn't Paul A. Jenson.

After a few apologies and thanks to Jim, Cindy and I made our way back to the pool room. Trish was waiting there. I didn't need to explain to Cindy what I had to do. She knew my past.

Her first words were, "We'll have to find a car somewhere."

"That's a fact," I replied. "We don't have a hell of a lot of time, either. I can pack my bags and head on down the road and meet you somewhere outta state."

"No! I'll come with you. I want to see my folks in Sacramento anyway."

"What the hell is going on?" Trish asked, somewhat confused. "I just got here and we're talking about going back to Sac?"

"Al's got warrants," Cindy explained. "We've got to get out of here before they run his fingerprints through a check and bust him."

That night we put out word around the lodge that we were looking for a car, a cheap one.

The next afternoon, after I'd gotten the kitchen cleaned up, Mike the day cook approached me with an offer. He had an old '68 Chevy station wagon that wasn't much to look at but ran pretty good. He said he'd swap me for my truck if I threw in a hundred fifty dollar kicker. I didn't hesitate. I made the deal with him. After our shift was over, we traded titles and cash. I went looking for Jim. I found him upstairs, checking inventory in the maid's closet.

"Jim," I said as I walked up to him. "I need our pay checks. Cindy and I have to go."

Shaking his head sadly and somewhat disgruntled, he said, "You looked like a snared rabbit yesterday. I thought you might be leaving. Being's my name and no bail money is involved, there's not much I can say except that you're leaving me in a bind, but I guess that can't be helped. Come on downstairs. I'll make out your checks."

That evening, Cindy and I packed our belongings into the car. It was snowing pretty heavily. We decided to wait until morning to leave. That night, we partied heavy with everyone in the place. Any excuse to party was a good one.

The next morning, we woke up hung over and cotton mouthed, but managed without much confusion to get the car loaded and say our good-byes. It was still snowing hard, but I wasn't taking any chances this time. It was going to be a long, slow ride, at least until we hit the state line.

When we got out to the main highway, we headed south toward Twin Falls. I contemplated the last six months with both pleasure and



displeasure. I'd made it on the streets for six months by the skin of my teeth. On the other hand, I hadn't done any ripping and tearing. I had worked for a living, but I couldn't seem to get out of the "balls to the wall" mode. I knew I had to slow down and lose the jailhouse attitude. I'd blown off this state. Maybe the next one would be better.

In a few hours, I was feeling a lot better physically and mentally. I breathed a sign of relief when we crossed the state line into Nevada. We got on Interstate Highway 50 and turned west toward Sparks and Reno.

A few miles down the road, I flipped on the turn signal and pulled off the road. Cindy looked over at me and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I replied as I slowed the car down and put it in park. "One of you ladies is going to have to drive now and through California."

It only took Cindy a minute to understand. I'd told her about my past in this state.

"If the man pulls us over for any reason, you guys just picked me up hitchhiking. If I up and disappear on you, just head on down the road and wait for about four hours, then come back to where I split from. I'll be there, OK?"

They both nodded their heads and answered, "OK."

Cindy took over the wheel. She drove us on through Reno and Carson. She had friends living in Heavenly Valley on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe. We decided to stay there for the night. I knew a lot of people in Tahoe but I wasn't too worried. It was late and I wasn't about to go and do up the town.

At my request, we left early the next morning. Trish drove. She took us around the lake to the North Shore and into Truckee, where we caught Highway 80 over Donner Pass. It was a straight shot into Sac from there.

We spent a week there with Cindy's folks. She and Trish gathered up their winter gear to take with us. They also got the latest news on the two guys who killed their friends. Both of the killers were in the county jail, held without bail. But some strangers were still asking about them in the neighborhood, and that was enough for the girls. They didn't want to stick around any more than I did.

In deciding where to go, I left it up to the girls. I didn't care where we went as long as it was far from California, and soon. They debated for a couple of days on the matter and finally settled on Steamboat Springs, Colorado. It was a ski town, and with winter here, we could find jobs fairly easily. Three days later, we packed up the old Chevy and headed for the state line, much to my relief. Being in California was the height

of paranoia. I wouldn't even walk down the street for fear something stupid would happen.

Here I was, heading down the road again, runnin'. New name, new place and new people who knew nothing about me or my past. Once again I was going to try to be like "them," the "good people." The last few months had taught me the basics on how to become part of the social structure and be accepted at face value. It was like a heavy "scam." If you kept up the right appearances, you could almost do what you wanted to and be accepted. My chosen refuge was to hide among everyday people, and to do that, I still had some serious changes to make. My past clung to me tenaciously. The walls, riots and bars were too much a part of me to be changed easily.

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## Steamboat Springs

I-80 took us straight to Colorado and Steamboat Springs. In itself, Steamboat wasn't that big. Years ago it would have been called a "one horse town." Main Street was barely half a mile long, an old ranch town that had gotten rich when the ski resort and the Village Inn had been built.

We cruised Main a time or two just to check it out and look for a place to crash for the night. Cindy and I had a bed made in the back of the station wagon. We weren't going to spend any money until we could find something permanent.

We went back to the west end of town where we had come in and drove up to a set of condos situated on the side of a hill overlooking the town. After parking the car, we crossed the lot to the main entrance.

Most condos had a recreation room for their guests, and usually there was a coffee machine. You could spend the evening in there and no one would say a thing. Cindy and I sat discussing what we'd do for the next few days. Trish decided to wander. In less than an hour, she was back with two guys in tow.

"Hey," she said. "We've been invited upstairs to a party. Come on!"

There were eight guys up there, four to a room. They were pretty well hammered. All of them were running around with tongues hanging out and a "let's fuck" look in their eyes.

After a few beers and some pot, Cindy leaned over to me and said, "Let's get out of here." I agreed. Two chicks and nine guys getting slammed was a good brew for a lot of trouble. Trish was playing them all and digging it. It didn't take me long to figure out that Trish was a "Hose Monster." You could bet that she'd not be sleeping in a cold car, then or ever.

So much for our first night in Steamboat. Cindy and I went back down to the car. I fired it up and let it run awhile to get things warmed up a bit while Cindy rolled out our double bag and loaded it down with

heavy blankets. We crawled into the warm bag and settled down, each of us hoping this wouldn't be home for too long.

We lived in the car for a week before Cindy landed a maid job at the Westerner Inn and Trish got turned on to a small trailer parked behind a motel unit eight miles out of town. We had enough money for two week's rent and with Cindy working, the rest was guaranteed.

A week later, I got a job at a small commercial laundry. I'd gotten some good out of the joint in spite of myself. I'd learned to run washers and extractors on a commercial basis before I'd gotten on the press crew. In a few days, I had a good handle on what I was supposed to be doing. Not only was I washing and drying incoming laundry, but two days a week, I made pickups and deliveries to some of the resorts.

At home, things weren't going as well as at the job. Trish and I were constantly bumping heads over one thing or another. I had decided I didn't like her or her "pushy" style. As hardheaded as I was, I wouldn't take much pushing. I didn't give a fuck what other people did, as long as they didn't include me.

Bad went to worse. Cindy was put in the middle. When I (literally) threw Trish out of the house, she rented one of the motel units. Cindy, trying to keep the peace between a lifelong friend and a guy she'd only known for six months but cared about, decided she'd move in with Trish but spend most of her time at my place.

This arrangement didn't work for either of us. We drifted apart.

I let Cindy and Trish use the car. I had to hitchhike back and forth to work. Knowing this was going to get old real quick, I started to look for a place in town. Having to work for a living made a definite difference in the places I looked at to rent. After a couple of weeks of searching, I still couldn't convince myself to pay the outrageous prices they asked, even for a small studio apartment.

In my wanderings around town, I had taken a road that led south out of town. About ten blocks down the road, I spotted an abandoned house on a hillside. Walking around it, just looking it over, I could see the top floor was crapped out. Seeing a door that led to a basement, I went inside to investigate. The downstairs was in decent shape and there was building material stacked in one corner. I wondered if the owner had plans to remodel.

I could see the potential in doing so. I could also see living quarters. By putting up a couple of walls, installing a wood-burning stove and a few other things, I could call it home.

I spent the next couple of days finding the owner. On locating him, I laid out a plan. I'd clean the place up, help him refurbish it, and keep out the vandals and kids if he'd let me put a small living area in the basement.

He thought it was great. He had no insurance on the place and was constantly worried about someone getting hurt.

It was another lesson learned. I could have just as easily ripped off the money I needed and not worried about rent at all, but in society you had to live within your means. In a week, I had a place to live that was comfortable and warm. I didn't have all the modern conveniences, but then again, I didn't need them. And I didn't have a rent payment!

Steamboat was a party town. "Ski bunnies" packed the bars every night and there was always a party going on somewhere. After moving into my new place, it didn't take long to get in on the action. Work all day, fuck and party all night. Nothing else seemed to concern me much. I had pushed my desires for material things to the bottom of the barrel for the moment. My need for immediate gratification of the "high times and the good things" in life had kept me in prison most of my life. What I had now was far better than the five by nine cell I was used to. The fact that I had been on the streets for seven months allowed me to believe that I was doing something right.

The rest of the winter was like a blurred spot in my mind, doing "coke and crystal" with large amounts of alcohol to wash them down. The highlights of the "happenings" were three or four fist fights I'd been involved in. Fighting in this half-cowboy town was a normal part of Saturday night. No one ever got arrested unless someone was seriously injured.

I still couldn't cut "fools or idiots" any slack. As soon as they'd open their mouths, I was trying to put my foot in it. It was something I was going to have to work on, but not right away, it seemed.

When the spring thaw came in April, the "bunnies" and the party people melted away with the snow and ice. There would be summer tourists coming in, but they were of a different breed—families and sightseers.

During the winter months, I'd managed to save enough money to buy a '59 four-wheel-drive pickup truck. At the end of April, I ran into another deal. A guy I'd met in a bar sold me a small homemade camper trailer. Now, I had a house and a truck. I was mobile. A couple of miles out the road past where I'd been living, ranch lands began. I found an old dirt road that led into some trees, and there I parked the trailer.

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## Jackson Hole

*The chronological account broke off here. Al told us that in 1977, he lived in Hawaii with Mary Radmon. He moved with her to Lander, Wyoming to work for her father who was a contractor. It was in Wyoming that Al learned carpentry. The plan was to work, save money, and move to Alaska. In the end, Mary decided she couldn't be that far from her mother.*

*After breaking up with Mary, Al worked on oil rigs in Rock Springs and spent two months living in a cave in the hills. He loved the open frontier and did a lot of walking, sometimes following wild horses. He liked living alone away from people.*

I wasn't just wandering aimlessly. I had chosen Jackson Hole for the simple reason that it lay almost due north of Lyman. With dead reckoning, the north star, and the morning sun, I knew I wouldn't be far off my target. There'd be no north star tonight. The winds were blowing the light dry snow of these high plains to such a degree that I had a difficult time even finding enough sagebrush to burn to keep from freezing.

I had chosen my camp well, at the base of a butte among some high red rocks. One particular rock had eroded to create a four-foot overhang about three feet off the ground. By building my small fire against the rock, I could curl around it with my back to the opening.

I could sleep as long as I kept the fire burning. When it dropped down to coals, the cold would bring me out of my fitful slumber. On awakening, I'd turn slightly over and pick up a few more pieces of sagebrush that I had stacked behind me before the dark set in.

One nice thing about the high plains of Wyoming is there are few dismal gray days. Either it's storming and blowing or the sun is out.

Morning came, and with it the sun. The winds had quit. The plains were still and quiet. The mere sight of the sun breaking over the butte sent tremors of joyous warmth through my body.

Still crouched down behind the rock, I threw the rest of my sage on the fire. I took my coffee pot out to a pocket of hard, wind-drifted snow and filled it to melt and make coffee. I knew I had to get my bearings with the first light of the morning sun. I walked out to a reasonably flat area of snow and drove my hunting knife into the hard crust. Its shadow cut itself from the point out to about ten inches on the snow. I marked this line, and as close as I could manage, made a perpendicular line across it using two pieces of sage that were reasonably straight and as long as I could find. I stuck them into the snow at each end of my cross line, and getting down on my knee, sighted across the tops of them to a point on the horizon.

Luck was with me on this sighting. In the distance was another butte. I now had a point to walk to that I could always see. As the crow flies, it was probably twenty-five miles away, but here in the high plains, looks could be deceiving. With the canyons and rising knolls, it might be a thirty-five or forty mile trip.

As I sat and drank my coffee, I took apart my 22 Marlin Magnum rifle, cleaned the snow from it, and got it ready to use.

By the time the sun got high enough to warm the land a bit, my gear was packed. Throwing my pack over my shoulders onto my back, I picked up my rifle and headed off towards the distant butte. I traveled up and over knolls, down and across deep valleys. Coming across one valley, I spotted movement up in front of me. I froze, watching, waiting, with my rifle up and ready.

Sure enough, it was a flock of sage hens out about twenty yards. Without hesitation, I dropped to one knee and sighted in on one—not hard to do with twelve of them standing there. I shot. The meat would go good with the dried vegetables and rice I carried with me. I quickly cleaned the bird and put it in my pack.

With the sun directly overhead, I stopped and built a quick fire to make some coffee. The butte was getting bigger. I wouldn't make it there today, but I'd get close.

Putting my cup and pot back into my pack, I headed for the butte. An hour later, I came to a small creek, dirty brown and rolling slowly. It was a bit too wide to jump, and with the 20 degree temperature, I didn't want to wade. The banks were deep. The creek had cut its way through sandy soil until it hit bedrock about eight feet down. I turned upstream, hoping to find a narrow gap. After about a mile and a half, I came to a

spot where the far bank had eroded out, leaving a four-foot-square area flat enough to jump to. That I did, landing with both feet as close to the upper edge as I could. It gave way a little toward the creek, but not enough to worry me.

Reaching up, I put my gun and pack on the lip of solid ground, jumped up, and pulled myself onto the bank. I sat for a moment and rolled a smoke. My leg wasn't bothering me much, but I didn't want to push it.

I'd better start looking for a place to camp, I thought. I knew I'd have to gather some brush to burn, but without the wind blowing, it wouldn't be nearly so cold. I finished my smoke and started walking.

About the time the sun was well to the west of the butte, I came up on another arroyo. This one was dry. As there wasn't much chance of a rainstorm, this would be a good campsite. The sage was tall and thick. In the spring, runoff must come boiling through here.

*In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Al worked as a cook. "You can get a job anywhere as a cook," he said, "with money coming in and free meals."*

I liked working the morning shift at the restaurant. It was always busy—lots of people and lots of work. I'd walk in at 5:30, have a beer for breakfast and smoke half a joint. 90% of cooks are drunks. When I made biscuits and gravy, I'd pour half a beer into the gravy. People loved it.

In the 1970s, you could file for a mining claim and get up to 40 acres. You could only patent it if you produced each year. I had that idea in the back of my mind.



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*High mountain meadow vivid green  
Filled with flowers, red, blue and gold.  
Yellow warmth of the spring sun  
Grows the tall slender daffodil.  
Birds sing the chorus to the song that  
The small, clear stream sings.  
In the forest, mother mountains  
Daughters, fair maiden nymphs lie.  
Silently slipping from tree to tree  
Squirrels chitter endlessly throughout the day.  
Scurrying busily to gather and store winter's life.  
As in all life, there is constant change.  
Encroaching masses, harbinger of an end.  
Where shall go the hermit?  
Perhaps his mind will turn to time and space.*

*—Al Hamby*

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## Bend

The sun was just setting over the Twin Sister Mountains as the south-bound Burlington Northern ground to a screeching halt in the yard of the depot in Bend, Oregon.

Two bearded faces appeared in the doorway of the fifty-sixth boxcar in the line of one hundred ten cars. Their eyes searched up and down the tracks furtively for a moment, then the faces disappeared back inside. In a moment, two backpacks were lowered to the crushed rock of the rail bed in the yard, followed immediately by two tramps.

Standing by the car, they hoisted their packs to their backs and after some minor adjustments they began walking south along the track. They noticed a couple of campfires here and there on both sides of the yard—other tramps waiting for their trains to come in.

Pollock Vic and I didn't want to wait around. We were headed a mile out of town to the tramp camp at the lower south yard. After crossing a bridge over a small creek, the single track spread out to eight different tracks. It was here that the Burlington Northern brok up its trains according to where they had to go. The "Switching Yard" and the land around it was owned by Burlington. They allowed tramps to camp in amongst the cedars without being bothered. Citizens nor the law could make them leave. It was private land.

Even though it was almost dark when we reached the camp town, we had no trouble following trails in through the sagebrush to the quarter mile stretch of trees beyond.

When we reached the camp we had used before, we were pleased to see that no one else was there although it had been used recently. We took our packs off and leaned them against a tree. I spoke first.

"I'll find some wood and get a fire started," I said.

"OK," replied Pollock. "I'll go fill the water jugs."

Five hundred yards down and across the tracks was a small nine-hole golf course. On the outer edge of it by the tracks was a faucet used to water the course. Pollock Vic set off in that direction after gathering up the water jugs that every tramp carried wherever he went. No tramp had escaped the horror of having partied half a day or night smoking dope and drinking wine while waiting on a train, then getting on one with a ten-hour run and no water.

I moved quickly and efficiently. I had the fire going good and the camp cleaned up long before Pollock got back with the water. I'd had plenty of practice. Having lived in camps like these for the past six years, I could set up or break down a camp in no time at all.

I was setting up my tent by the time he got back with water. I stopped what I was doing, turned and grabbed my tramp coffee pot—a large #10 tin can from a restaurant with a piece of wire run through the top for a handle. We called it a “gun-boat.”

Filling the gun-boat with water, I set it on a wire grate over the fire and finished setting up my tent. After my sleeping bag was inside with the rest of my gear, I turned back to the warmth of the fire.

It was October. The days were getting colder. There was frost in the mornings. Pollock Vic made cowboy coffee. I brought out the bottle of whiskey we bought in Havre, Montana. After we poured the hot coffee, we added whiskey, generously. We sipped and sighed as the hot mixture raced through our already-soaked systems.

“Any smoke left?” asked Vic.

“Yeah,” I replied. I pulled a crumpled plastic baggie from my shirt pocket and handed it to him.

Vic took the bag and began to roll a couple of joints. It wasn't the best pot in the world, but beggars can't be choosers. Between it and the whiskey, you could get a pretty good buzz going.

“I guess we'd better do some dumpster diving tomorrow,” I said as Vic passed the joint to me.

“Yeah,” replied Vic, “and we'll have to sign up for food stamps.”

I didn't reply. My lungs were full of “get high.” When I'd held it long enough, I exhaled slowly and said, “You go first. I'll camp sit.”

You always had to leave one guy in camp. If you didn't, there was a good possibility that your stuff would be gone by the time you got back.

“I'll truck up to the office early in the morning and do some diving on the way. I should be back here by twelve or one. Then you can head on out,” Pollock said.

“That sounds cool to me,” I replied. “I have some real dirty laundry.”

After we finished the joint, Pollock Vic rolled out his sleeping bag and brought his pack to the fire. From it, he pulled an assortment of McDonald’s burgers and placed them on the side of the grill away from the flames to heat. We had hit a McDonald’s dumpster in Spokane, Washington when we had to switch trains there to head south to Bend.

“I got two apple pies left. You want one?” he asked.

“You bet!” I said. “You know I’ve got to have my sugar fix.”

“It’s starting to get cold at night. Do you remember that time we got caught in the snowstorm? Damn near froze to death!”

I remembered it well, March of ’90. We’d decided to make a short twenty-four-hour run to Ogden, Utah to pick up a welfare check. We’d caught the only car we could get in Roseville, California, a flatbed carrying huge iron pipes. We threw our gear into the back end of the pipes and crawled in.

Things were comfortable until about three hours out of Sparks, Nevada. The train had cut to the south into an oncoming snowstorm. The freezing wind and snow blew directly into and through the long pipes.

I’d put my backpack crosswise in the pipe to block the onslaught, laid out my sleeping bag feet to the wind and climbed inside. The cold iron pipes stole all the heat I produced and the bitter wind and snow blew it all away. All night we prayed for an unexpected crew change or an air line to break that would force the train to stop. I guess the old man upstairs was too busy on that stormy night to hear a couple of tramps.

The next morning, we pulled into Ogden, Utah so stiff we couldn’t jump off. We had to use the coupling to get down on the tracks.

I said, “Yeah! We were right in the middle of town when that train stopped. We were so cold we started a fire right there and made coffee.”

Pollock Vic sat on one of the rocks by the fire. He took another drink and said, “Well, we’ll get some food stamps here in Bend and then catch a ride to some place warm. Maybe Winterhaven.

I thought about Winterhaven. It was on a reservation just outside of Yuma. For twenty-five dollars, the Indian Council would let you set up a camp for the winter, where no one would bother you or run you off. It was a good spot for the winter if you had some “bucks” coming in. If you didn’t, the “pickin’s” were slim. Pollock didn’t have to worry much. He had a Social Security Insurance check coming in every month. I had never tried for one. I couldn’t sit still long enough to go through the program or put up with the red tape involved in playing the game.

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## Epiphany #2

May 19, 1991. It was dark. A cold, steady rain beat down on the plastic roof of the home I had made by stretching garbage bags over low-hanging vine willow branches. It wasn't much, but I stayed high and dry.

I reached down from the bed I had built and grabbed the neck of my "wake up" bottle of Nightrain. Taking a couple of deep swallows, I cursed the drenching wetness coming down. I hated going out to do my "dumpster" run in the rain, but I was going to need a couple more bottles and something to eat to make it through the day. During the past few weeks, I'd been getting tired of the routine.

On the first of the month, I'd get my food stamps. I'd take them, plus whatever I could gather up on cans (5¢ return) and my plasma money (\$12.00 to \$15.00 twice a week) and go see my connection for a couple bags of crank. Being the nice guy that he was, he would take my food stamps in lieu of money at the going rate of 50% of face value. For a few days I'd be rockin' and rollin' with the "good times." At least I thought of it that way.

The rest of the month was spent "dumpster diving," drinking wine and buying a ten-dollar bag of pot now and then. It was getting old. I kept remembering the time in Wyoming when I'd been clean and sober for two and a half years. At that time (1983-85), I had what other sane men have, a home and toys (horses, a truck, some sporting gear). Now, though, here I was, sitting under black garbage bags in the rain. Literally pissing my life away.

I'd been on a long, hard, treacherously drunken run, tramping and riding trains all over the country. I knew what had to be done to get things turned around. So, with all the fervor and honesty that sound resolutions bring, I decided to do something about my situation.....

Tomorrow.

**June 19, 1992: The Buckly House, Eugene, Oregon**

I slowly raised my head from the padded floor and rubbed my sticky eyes. Through the blur I could see enough to know where I was. The police in Eugene didn't take drunks to jail. They took them to the Buckly House, where they would put you into a heated, padded cell and let you sleep it off. When you were up and as coherent as you could be under the circumstances (meaning you could stand on your own and knew your name), they'd release you. Apparently I'd been picked up somewhere, wasted and in a blackout.

I stood, looking out through the small, shatterproof glass window in the cell door. I had been here before.

In a brief moment of sanity, I knew I didn't want to be here again.

Finally, a young guy sitting at the desk outside the cell noticed me looking out. He got up and walked over to the door, pulling a key from his back pocket. The door silently swung open and I looked into his knowing smile.

"Well," he said. "It lives! Do you want some water or juice?"

Smiling at him, I answered, "I could use more than that."

"I'll just bet you could. You ready to hit the bricks?"

Not smiling now, I shook my head. "I don't want to go back to the streets yet. Have you folks got some place I can go to get my head on straight?"

His smile broadened. "You know, about two years ago I stood right there and asked the same question. Come on over here," he said as he pointed to a chair by the desk. I sat down as he went around the desk. He sat down, reached over to a small filing cabinet, pulled out some forms and handed them to me.

"I've got to have you sign some papers and I'll need some history on you, medical and otherwise."

In the building was a "detox" center. I enrolled and spent a week there. I had counseling and at least two A.A. meetings a day. I signed up for a "Rehab" program that would last six to eight week, but the list was so long that I'd have to wait for an opening.

I hit the streets again on a bright warm day, clean and sober. Physically, at least. I still lived in a tent and I was still broke, but I had tools to work with: A.A. meetings, my books, the Twelve Steps, and the most important tool of all, the desire, deep down, to become a civilized human being once again.

For the next two months I continued to “dumpster dive” and go to the Plasma Center, but now my money was spent on food, clothes, and bus fare to get to local A.A. meetings.

My “running dogs” on the street figured they knew and understood what I was going through. Hell, everybody got a case of “religion” now and then. They knew in a week or so I’d be in downtown Springfield sitting under the trees by the bridge that crossed the McKenzie River, getting wasted and passing around a joint or a bottle.

This time they waited in vain. In August, I did something that I hadn’t done in seven years. I shattered their illusions. I got a job.

After work and on weekends, I did my Twelfth Stepping. I talked to my partners on the streets and still visited their camps. I didn’t sermonize. I could only show by example the changes that were occurring in me and answer whatever questions they’d ask.

For nearly two years my partners had listened to me go on about moving to Alaska. “Yeah, right,” they’d say. “Shacking up with an Eskimo, eating whale blubber a hundred miles from the nearest bottle of Nightrain.” The thought would get lost in laughter.

A year later, two of my street partners would be in the program and I would be living in the Bush in Alaska. It wasn’t just a “geographical change.”

Now I spend summers gold mining and winters a hundred miles from the nearest town. I continue my program with my books and correspondence.

For me, there was no real “bottom” that I hit. I just got to a point where I decided I didn’t want to do that anymore.

I realized I had choices. If someone put a shot of whiskey in front of me, I had to pick it up. It was *my* responsibility, 100%.

Every morning I tell myself vehemently, “Nobody ever *made* you do anything!” I say that every day. It’s the truth. No excuses.

I traded the “good times” for a dream, and like they say, “Fair exchange is no robbery.”

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## Alaska

*In about 1995, Al wrote from Alaska to an old friend:*

Hello! This may come as a pleasant surprise or an unwanted intrusion, I don't know. I guess I'll find out, won't it?

The last time I saw you was in '89. I was a mess. From Carson City, I went on a treacherous drug and alcohol run. I sold everything I owned and hopped a freight train out of Reno. For the next two years, I rode the rails all over the United States, from Spokane, Washington to Duluth, Minnesota, Havre, Montana to Houston, Texas.

I got off my last train in Eugene, Oregon. It was there that I decided I'd had enough. I went into a detox center in Eugene. I got the drugs and alcohol out of my system and began the struggle to keep them out.

After a couple months of programing, I went to work for a construction company building a small set of condos there in Springfield. the company was based in Vancouver, Washington and when the job was done, I followed them north. We had a contract to build some units on the Columbia River just outside of Vancouver.

I bought an old blue '64 Chevy truck and built a camper on it. I was living in it on the job site as night security and building during the day. It worked out well. I saved a few bucks and bought a boat and prospecting equipment including a three-inch dredge. At the close of the job, I had everything prepaid and all the gear I needed.

In July of '93, I went to Bellingham and caught the ferry to Haines, Alaska.

That was a mistake. From Haines, I had to go through a border to get into Canada and another border to get back into the United States. I had less than \$200 and a lot of gear, mining gear. I told the border officials I was driving straight through to Alaska. Luckily, he said, "Go ahead. Just don't let us catch you mining here in Canada!"



I drove through Northway to Tok and turned right on a loop of the original Alaska Highway that was cut off when they rebuilt the road. It was July 4, 1993. About twelve miles from Tok, I got to the Tanana River and set up camp. I spent almost three months there, camping, prospecting, picking berries, and just enjoying myself. I wrote at the time:

*Alaska at last! I sit here as eighteen hours of daylight pass. I gather wood for the fire and walk the forest of alder, birch and aspen. There are a few tall tamarack trees left from the logging days, and some smaller ones that never saw loggers at all.*

*Without the interruptions from modern-day entertainment devices, the mind actually begins to function in the realm of abstract thought. Not being crowded out by the everyday thoughts that are normal: work, rent, the car, what Joe or Lisa said, making ends meet. Not crowding in desires alongside ever-present necessities.*

*Through the somewhat blurred and troubled vision of retrospect, I can no longer tell whether man labors daily for a living or just lives daily to labor. I cannot in the recent past recall anyone who awakened in the morning excited and enthusiastic about what the day's labor might produce. I guess the common law of social living demands that someone must shovel the manure while someone else counts the coins.*

In late September, winter was just around the corner. I'd put a wood stove in my camper and I had six months worth of provisions but no money. I could try to make it through the winter where I was, or I could get a job.

I drove into Tok, a small town with about two hundred residents. They had an employment office. I told Patty there that I wanted unemployment or a job. I filed for unemployment benefits out of Oregon, but Patty had a better idea. There was a lodge in Paxson that needed winter help. I signed on but didn't have enough cash to put gas in the truck to get there. Patty gave me a voucher for \$25.00 and the Troopers used it to fill my tank. When I got my first paycheck, I sent Patty a check for \$35.00 with a thank you note. She said nobody had ever done that before.

Paxson is a lodge town with about thirty year-round residents. The lodge offered three hundred a week with room and board. I learned that this wasn't phenomenal. It was standard pay for most lodges.

I worked relief. Two days of the week I'd cook. Four days I'd attend the gas station and keep watch over the town's power source—two

huge Caterpillar Turbo Diesel Generator sets. I split the days, morning shift and night.

I lived in that camper through two winters at Paxson. My little stove wasn't enough. I had to stoke every four hours. No insulation.

Paxson is seventy-five miles from the nearest town. The employee turnover rate was horrendous. Twenty people went through the lodge the first winter I worked there. I had no complaints, though. The owner paid overtime. When someone left, I was called upon to make up their shift.

When I went to work for the lodge, I told them that in June I was going mining. That winter I picked up a partner who wanted to mine, too. He had equipment of his own but things go easier with two people. We researched a few areas and found a creek that was designated State Select, meaning it was open for recreational mining.

Ed and I took off June 1st. My truck was loaded down. Ed had a Jeep Wagoneer that we used to get to the mining site, which was a hundred miles northwest of Fairbanks off the old Steese Highway to Circle.

We spent four months prospecting Bachelor Creek. With a three-inch dredge, we recovered a quarter ounce of gold a day—that is, when we finally found the deposits.

A three-inch dredge is a lot of work in comparison to the amount of gold you recover. We decided at the end of the summer to get a larger dredge.

We both got winter jobs back at the lodge. They were glad to see us. They knew we'd be there all winter.

During the winter, we got our supplies back together and bought a huge eight-inch Keene dredge. The three-inch dredge could move (maybe) five yards of material an hour. The eight-inch with twin 16 hp engines could move at least twenty-five.

In May, I went to work at another lodge twenty-two miles from Paxson up the Denali Highway. I'd gotten laid off from Paxson early and couldn't get in to the mining site until June. I got involved in some renovations here at Tangle Lakes Lodge and didn't get to the mine until the middle of July.

It was a sorry year, to say the least. An engine on the big dredge wouldn't run and up here it takes forever and a day to get new parts, not counting the two-hundred-mile round trip to town.

All was not lost. I still had my three-inch to work with. We found another lucrative spot on the stream to dredge. We couldn't get the big dredge into it, but the little one fit just fine. We'd gotten two ounces out when the engine on it burnt a ring. That was that. We packed up and went home.

Ed took all my stuff and hawked it. I found a receipt showing he hawked my \$350 Pentax camera for \$40. I do my best to forget him.

I spent the winter here at Tangle Lakes Lodge. It's shut down in the winter. The Denali Highway isn't maintained. The only traffic out here is snowmachines and small planes, weather permitting. I spent the winter learning to trap and write. I've got several chapters done in a book I'm working on and I'm getting my feet wet in the writing world by submitting articles to a couple of magazines.

I've thought about you over the years. If you feel like responding to this letter, please do so. If not, I can understand.

## **Of Foxes and Otters**

I sat looking out the window of the main building at Tangle River Inn. It's twenty-some miles from Paxson, Alaska, which is seventy-five miles from the nearest town. In other words, in the "Bush." I was going to do some "lodge sitting" for the winter.

Mentally, I was going over my financial status, which took about four seconds of serious contemplation. As I watched the heavy snows of early November gently fall, changing the countryside to deep winter, I considered that at the going rate for "lodge sitting," room and board, wasn't going to get me any trips to Europe, much less fund the gold mining trip I had planned for the next summer when spring thaws would come and allow me into the back country.

After some broad thinking on the matter, it appeared the only available source of income out here at this time of year would be trapping. I'd tried to do some trapping back in Wyoming, but the coyotes there were of a special intelligent breed. I never caught much of anything except a cold.

Based on animal sign I'd seen around the area, I felt sure I could make me a fortune. With all the critters running around, how hard could it be? Set and bait your trap, then wait for the fur to stroll on in.

The next day, I got on my snowmachine and rode in to Paxson, where I borrowed a truck and went to my friendly hardware store just eighty miles down the road in Glennallen, Alaska. I bought some one-and-a-half

Victor traps and a two 220 Coni-Bears, and with a little friendly advice from a couple of old boys there, I headed back into the Bush.

I'd never seen a Coni-Bear in my life. It took me three days to figure out how it was supposed to work, then over an hour to get my hand out of it.

I was told that if I didn't have a "gut pile" or a "kill" to set around, then "scent post" sets were pretty good. On the frozen lakes, I had seen a number of "push ups" caused by muskrat houses and fluctuations in pressure making the ice buckle. Around these high spots, I'd seen fox tracks. That's where I thought I'd try my luck.

I took short logs (firewood sized) and nailed two traps to them, loaded them up on my sled, and headed out.

I started out small. I only had three logs with the double sets. I placed them out on the ice where I could watch them from a ridge running along the lakes.

Well, I got them all set. It was not far from the lodge to my sets, so I had no problem eyeballing them every day. Every day, they were empty.

I could see tracks leading towards them in the fresh snow, so I knew the animals were at least checking them out. But nary a one had gotten into the set. I thought I'd better not go poking too soon. I let them sit for two weeks and still, nothing. Finally, I had to go see what was up.

It was the damndest thing. I could see their tracks come to about four feet from the sets, then it looked like they had hit the brakes on all four feet. The paw prints had skid marks. The tracks at that point took a ninety-degree right angle turn and headed off to some other part of the country. I knew right then that something wasn't right.

Well, I couldn't see any sense in leaving the sets out after that, so I loaded them up and took them back to the cabin. I was going to Paxson the following week. I'd ask someone about it then.

It was January 20 before I got to town. A friend of mine had brought the parts I needed to get my snowmachine running again. Talking to the old boy who sold me the traps, I told him about the strange way those animals were acting. Don't you know the first thing out of his mouth was, "What'd ya boil them in?"

"Boil 'em?" I said. "You told me they was already boiled."

"Nah," he said. "I told you they was boiled in alder and spruce bark to dye 'em."

"Oh." After I got my foot out of my mouth, I headed back up to the cabin.

I took the sets apart and boiled them and the cotton gloves I was going to use to set them back out with. After a steam bath in my cabin, I got the traps ready again and took them out the next day. I went to different areas this time, but the idea was the same.

I broke trail to a drainage between two low-lying hills that had a lot of tracks. "This has got to be the place," I thought as I stepped off my machine and immediately sank to my waist in the snow. I was real glad to have followed advice to make sure I brought my snowshoes with me.

After an hour of wallowing in the snow and wrestling with the traps, I got them set. I made my way back to the cabin to wait, knowing that this time I was going to catch something.

When the sun went down, the temperature began to drop and a slight breeze came up. By twelve o'clock that night, it was thirty-five below zero and wind was howling at about thirty miles an hour. It never let up for three days.

When the wind and blowing snow finally quit, my first priority was to dig out the trails around my cabin that the drifts had filled in.

*Unfortunately, Al didn't finish the story! I guess we can make up whatever ending we want!*

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## The Final Choice

I include this final chapter with hesitancy. Al now knows more about the subject than I will until my day comes. But based on the Biblical story in Luke 16:19-31, I'm confident that *if I'm right* on this subject, Al now knows that and he'd want me to say this because he wants what's best for you.

Al drew a line between himself and the beast within, and held the beast at bay (most of the time). But his original desire, you remember, was to *change* his nature and character. He didn't want to just *alter* his behavior. He wanted to *reverse* it, to root out some aspects of his personality.

Not many career criminals choose to stay out of prison and succeed. Not many alcoholics choose to quit and stay on the wagon *on their own* for twenty-three years. Al's iron will brought him more success than most. Still, the desire to separate the "good" from the "bad" in himself reminds me of the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. (Get quote)

Freedom to choose is an incredible gift, one we can never take for granted. Not choosing when a choice has to be made is itself a choice. Procrastinating is a choice. Deadlines can sneak up and bite. We don't get to choose when our number's up.

A lot of choices have minor consequences. Others have major, even lifelong consequences. A few have consequences that extend far beyond our all-too-short lives on earth.

Al and I shared an interest in ideas and philosophy. We had some great conversations, read each other's books, and exchanged letters.

A few weeks before he died, Al told me he was writing me a letter. For more than ten years, I prayed daily that Al would have one more epiphany (#3) and make one final choice. The draft of his letter indicates he did make a choice. Not the one I hoped for, but a choice nevertheless. *His* choice. A choice I honor.

In January 2004, I read *Stools and Bottles*, one of the A.A. books that kept Al sober. I wrote a letter in response. Eight years later, he showed me that yellowed letter, which he kept inside *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Principles* between pages \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_. He told me he read the book and the letter at least once a year.

I'll going to close this book with that letter. Of all the letters I wrote to him, this was the one he saved and reread so I hope he'd approve. You can read it or not, of course. You have a *choice*. As Al told himself every day, no one every *makes* you do anything. I don't expect anyone to agree. Al and I disagreed about a lot of things. Our *choices* are our own. No excuses. No one else to blame.

January 10, 2004

Dear Al,

I just read *Stools and Bottles* and I'm impressed with how much practical wisdom is there. I was also impressed at how "Christian" it sounded, how many of the same principles are in both. I did a little research to learn about the roots and beginnings of AA. I printed off a couple of articles and found a book about the connection.

The saying, "Know the truth and the truth shall set you free" is straight from Jesus' mouth in John 8:32. (In John 14:32, Jesus claimed to *be*, not just *speak*, the truth.)

Just as alcoholism is an incurable and deadly disease, sin (our natural rebellious nature that hates God) is an incurable and deadly disease. Not everybody is born alcoholic but everybody is born with a rebellious nature—rebellious against God, against truth, against anything that doesn't benefit us personally. It manifests in different ways. Alcoholism is no worse and no better than the pride of that preacher who made you get out of his car because you didn't believe the Lord's Prayer. A difference is you've realized that alcohol is bad for you and repented (changed the direction of your life), whereas the preacher may still be lost in the delusion that what he did was good.

The principles are exactly the same. Until you realized that alcohol is a deadly poison for you, you had no interest in a cure. Sin is a deadly disease that most people don't acknowledge they have. James 1 (a favorite chapter of AA founders) says our natural desires give birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Romans 3:23 says all have sinned and fallen short (the word "sin" is an archery term that means "fallen short"). What A.A. calls "character flaws" the Bible calls sins.

An alcoholic remains an alcoholic even when he's not drinking. The disease is latent, but incurable. It can be arrested and brought under control with the Twelve Steps.

Sin is a hereditary disease as well. Just like with alcoholism, there is a way to arrest it but not to completely cure it (at least not in this lifetime). Just like for alcoholism, not everyone with the problem wants a solution or thinks they need it. Sin is compared to leprosy in the Bible, silent, painless, deadly. When people have leprosy, their skin gradually rots away and falls off. They don't feel pain even when they burn themselves because their nerves are dead.

We watched a TV show a while ago about a family-owned company in Texas (I think). They hired alcoholics and gave them all the booze they wanted. Then they took out numerous life insurance policies on them, naming themselves as beneficiaries. When the alcoholic inevitably drank himself to death, his former employers raked in the cash.

The ironic thing is, the alcoholics working for that company thought they had the greatest "job" in the world. They were getting what they *wanted*, all the alcohol they could consume, a place to stay, and a job where nobody cared if they came in drunk. All they had to do was sign a paper naming their generous employers their beneficiaries.

It was completely legal. Authorities were only able to stop it after one many didn't die fast enough and was "helped along" by his "employers." That led to a murder conviction. In truth it was murder in *all* the cases. What we want is not always what we need. As you know, sometimes the most loving thing to do for someone is tell him/her a hard truth.

Of course, you can't trust people to always tell the truth. You have to check out any truth claims for yourself. When you commit to AA, you are desperate enough to put some faith in the proposed truth/cure before you experience the beneficial results. You can observe others that have gone before you, and that helps, but you can't be sure it will work for you until you personally work the steps.

Renouncing alcohol is like being "born again". It's turning from a march toward death to a march toward life. The analogy is practically perfect. AA as an organization doesn't deal with anything beyond this life, consistent with its mission. But if there IS life after this life, people have to make the same kind of choice. They have to renounce slavery and choose freedom, even though it may not be the freedom to always do what we feel like doing at the moment. The Bible calls us "slaves



to sin.” An out-of-control alcoholic is a slave to alcohol, but that’s just one particular variety of the same fundamental flaw everybody has, a *sin nature*.

If you have worked Step 3, you have experienced spiritual power beyond that of yourself. It’s there for anyone who follows God’s moral laws, whether or not he/she believes in God. But assuming there is a real God and the Bible is His message, it is important to know what He has to say. We can always choose to reject the proposed truth/cure, but unless it’s all a lie, it’s not a good idea to just ignore it. Truth is not always what we like, agree with or want to hear. Sometimes it’s the exact opposite of what we like or want to hear. (Too often it is....)

The attitudes and rationalizations talked about in *Stools and Bottles* are not just alcoholic, they’re human. Pride, self-pity, rebellion, the intolerant “holier than thou” attitude that people can display to each other, and the “to hell with everybody but me” attitude are characteristic of a lot of people who aren’t alcoholics! At least the alcoholics in AA acknowledge their flaws, where others may not. Jesus was always much more gentle to people everybody else shunned and called “filthy sinners” than to those who were prideful and sinned in the name of God while regarding their personal variety of sin as good. Jesus detested hypocrisy and self-righteousness, the same qualities of many “religious” people throughout history. Those attitudes are not unique to religion....

As *Stools and Bottles* says, remorse alone doesn’t heal injuries done against others or against God. God promises to forget, forgive, blot out, erase, and eliminate all our sins if we accept His offer of a cure. We are supposed to change our lives, make amends for past transgressions as best we can, make better choices in the future, and trust Him to repair whatever is beyond our ability to repair. Some things from the past we can’t repair. All we can do is apologize, repent, turn them to God and do better in the future.

The original sin of man is aspiring to be God. That hasn’t changed. One of the things AA says to do is give up your attempt to be God.

AA seems gentle yet firm. It doesn’t strive to push you around but to offer a gift, which is your choice to take or to leave. If you reject the gift, it doesn’t cease to be available. You are always welcome back to consider it one more time. It’s a perfect analogy of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

AA seems a lot more Christian than some “Christianity” is. God (unlike some Christians) is a gentleman. His greatest gift to us is freedom,

and that includes freedom to reject Him, break His heart, even hurt other people He loves (for a time, not forever). He waits for us to choose to return. He speaks softly to our conscience and soul. If we ask Him to leave us alone and get out of our lives, He will, but He's there when/if we seek Him, acknowledge our failings, and give up our desire to be God and to have Him do and be what we want Him to be rather than what He IS.

It reminds me of the old saying, "If you love something, set it free. If it comes back to you, it's yours. If it doesn't, it never really was." God loves us. He set us free. He longs for us to come back, but He will not hunt us down or trap us, or imprison us in a gilded cage. He will restore a right relationship between us and Him if we ask for it. Within that relationship, there's a lot of love from the Author of love, and a lot of life, freedom and security that extends long past what we call death.

Like you say, it's more important to walk the walk than talk the talk. That's the beauty of anonymity. You aren't supposed to crow about your success, just live it. Nevertheless, we congratulate you for turning your life around and becoming an inspiration to us and to others.

My prayer, for myself, is that I will want to do what God wants me to do. And one of those things is sharing Jesus with others. I don't really *want* to do that because I hate to offend and I prefer to "live and let live." But I want my friends to have the chance to choose what the Bible calls "the life that is truly life." (I Timothy 6:19) If no one had shared it with me, I wouldn't have had the chance to choose. In retrospect, it's the greatest thing anyone ever did for me.

We don't want to bother or push you. We're always willing and eager to talk, answer questions, whatever. I hope you don't mind that we pray for you!

Love, Susan

While researching A.A., I found a book that I ordered for Al, *The Big Book and the Good Book*, by Bill, the founder of A.A. Bill and many A.A. members are Christians who believe there is a *real* and *trustworthy* Higher Power, a Creator God and Judge to Whom we are accountable.

I once asked Al, "Since you don't believe in God, who is your higher power?" His answer? PEOPLE, including friends and A.A. members around the world. In my experience, people aren't very powerful. They certainly aren't very trustworthy!

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.

It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.

In his last letter to me, the one he never sent, Al wrote, “Your beliefs are based on the Bible and faith in that belief sustains you. I don’t have that belief.” He was offended by the tiny text on a “trillion dollar bill” I enclosed with my Christmas letter. He wrote, “Although I WAS guilty of all those accusations in that first paragraph, I don’t think that I’d use that particular terminology to sinners I was trying to win the hearts and minds of for my savior.

“The Twelve Steps of A.A. and the Ten Commandments have sustained me personally for over twenty-two years. I don’t consider or take personally that which Jesus spoke of in that evangelical material you gave me, although I lived most of my life pursuing lust, lies and theft. I’ve paid my dues and made my amends where I could, and I continue to do so.

“As you know, my beliefs are in the Ten Commandments and the twelve steps. I believe the Ten Commandments were written by a man or philosopher (Moses or another) who saw that these edicts could stop the murder, rape, mayhem and all that was undoubtedly practiced in his day.”

In some ways, I hope Al’s right and I’m wrong about God and the Bible. If life utterly ends upon physical death, that would be fine with me—better for a lot of people. If I’m right, we’ll all meet Jesus as either Savior or Judge.

If I’m right, the best (or the worst) is yet to come for all of us. We have a *choice* right up to the deadline of death, a choice better made while there’s to think and get your questions answered.

In Deuteronomy 30:19, God is quoted as saying, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now *choose life*, so that you and your children may life.”

All that’s involved is admitting God’s law is good and you are not. Plead guilty and obtain a full pardon. The way up is down. Humble yourself in the sight of the LORD and HE will lift you up.