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MoonGate
by Kate Wilhelm
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WHEN ANYONE asked Victoria what the GoMarCorp actually did, she answered vaguely, "You know, light bulbs, electronics, stuff like that." When her father pressed her, she admitted she didn't know much about the company except for her own office in the claims department of the Mining Division. She always felt that somehow she had disappointed her father, that she had failed him. Because the thought and the attendant guilt angered her she seldom dwelled on it. She had a good apartment, nice clothes, money enough to save over and above the shares of stock the company handed out regularly. She was doing all right. At work she typed up the claims reports on standard forms, ran a computer check and pulled cards where any similarities appeared -- same mine, same claimants, same kinds of claims ... She made up a folder for each claim, clipped together all the forms, cards, correspondence, and placed the folder in her superior's in-basket. What happened to it after that she never knew.

Just a job, she thought, but when it was lunchtime she went to lunch. When it was quitting time, she walked away and gave no more thought to it until eight-thirty the next morning. Mimi, on the other hand, boasted about her great job with the travel agency, and never knew if she would make it to lunch or not. Victoria checked her watch against the wall clock in The Crepe Shop and when the waiter came she ordered. She ate lunch, had an extra coffee; Mimi still had not arrived when she left the restaurant and walked back to her office. "Rich bitch, couldn't make up her mind how to get to Rio," Mimi would say airily. "I'm sending her by dugout."

Late in the afternoon Diego called to say Mimi had had an accident that morning; she was in the hospital with a broken leg. "You can't see her until tomorrow. They've knocked her out back into last week to set it, so I'll come by later with the keys and maps and stuff. You'll have to go get Sam alone."

"I can't drive the camper alone in the mountains!"

"Gotta go. See you later, sugar."

"Diego! Wait..." He had hung up.

Victoria stared at the report in her typewriter and thought about Sam. He had worked here as a claims investigator eight years ago. She had been married then; she and Sam had developed a close nodding relationship. He was in and out for two years, then had grown a beard and either quit or been fired. She hadn't seen him again until six months ago, when they had met by chance on a corner near the office.

His beard was full, his hair long, he was dressed in jeans and sandals.

"You're still there?" he asked incredulously.

"It's a job," she said. "What are you up to?"

"You'll never believe me."

"Probably not."

"I'll show you." He took her arm and began to propel her across the street.

"Hey! I'm on lunch hour."

"Call in sick."

"I can't," she protested, but he was laughing at her, and in the end, she called in sick. When she told Sam it was the first time she had done that, he was astonished.

He drove an old VW, so cluttered with boxes, papers, magazines, other miscellaneous junk, there was hardly room for her to sit. He took her to a garage that was a jumble of rocks. Rocks on the floor, in cartons, on benches, on a picnic table, rocks everywhere.

"Aquamarine," he said, pointing. "Tourmaline, tiger-eye, jadeite from Wyoming, fire opal..."

There was blue agate and banded agate, sunstones, jasper, garnet, carnelian ... But, no matter how enthusiastic he was, no matter by what names he called them, they were rocks, Victoria thought in dismay.

When he said he made jewelry, she thought of the clunky pieces teenaged girls bought in craft shops.

"I'll show you," he said, opening a safe. He pulled out a tray and she caught her breath sharply. Rings, brooches, necklaces -- lovely fragile gold chains with single teardrop opals that flared and paled with a motion; blood-red carnelian flecked with gold, set in ornate gold rings; sea-colored aquamarines in silver...

A few weeks later he had a show in a local art store and she realized that Sam Dumarie was more than an excellent craftsman. He was an artist.

* * * *

"You get off at noon on Good Friday," Sam had said early that spring. "Don't deny it. I lived with GoMar rules for years, remember. And you have Monday off. That's enough time. You and Mimi drive the camper up to get me and I'll show you some of the most terrific desert you can imagine."

"Let's do it!" Mimi cried. "We've both asked off until Wednesday. We were going to my parents' house for the weekend, but this is more exciting! Let's do it, Vickie." With hardly a pause she asked if Diego could join them. "He's a dear friend," she said to Sam, her eyes glittering. "But he wants to be so much more than that. Who knows what might develop out on the desert?"

Watching her, Victoria knew she was using Diego, that it was Sam she was after, and it didn't matter a bit. Hadn't mattered then, didn't matter now, she thought, driving slowly looking for a restaurant, remembering Diego's words:

"Get hungry, just pull over and toss a steak on the stove. Enough food for a week for all of us. Get sleepy, pull over, crawl in one of the bunks. That simple."

But there was no place to pull over on the highway, and no place to park and broil a steak. She spotted a restaurant, had dinner, and wished the motels had not had their no-vacancy lights on all down the main street of this small town. According to the map, she was about fifty miles south of Lake Shasta, and there would be campgrounds there, places to park and sleep. She climbed back inside the camper and started driving again.

Sam had given Diego explicit directions, and the more Victoria thought about them, and about the roads -- everything from double green lines down to faint broken lines on the map -- the more she wished she had taken Mimi's suggestion and called the Oregon state police. Sam had gone up to the mountains with friends who had left him there. The police could find him, she thought, or find his friends and locate Sam that way. They could give him a ride to the nearest town, where he could rent a car to drive himself home.

Sam would understand why no one had showed up at the appointed hour. And she knew she had refused that way out because Mimi had angered her finally.

"Why?" Mimi had asked petulantly. She was very lovely, her hair black and lustrous, her brown eyes large as marbles. "After all, if you haven't snagged him in six months, why do you think this weekend will do it?"

* * * *

It was after twelve when she finally came to a stop, hit the light switch, and rested her head for several minutes on the steering wheel. She had been up since six that morning, had worked half the day, and she felt as if she had been wrestling elephants all evening. She neither knew nor cared where she was, someplace near the lake, someplace where the traffic was distant and no lights showed. She hauled herself up, staggered through the camper to the bunks, and fell onto one of them without bothering to undress. Presently she shifted so that the covers were over her instead of under her, and it seemed she had hardly closed her eyes before she was wakened by shouts.

Dazed, she pulled the shade aside. It was not yet light.

"This is a parking lot!" a man yelled at her. "Move it out of here."

It was bitter cold that morning and the sky was uniformly gray. She turned the radio on to the weather channel and nodded glumly at the report. Freezing level three thousand feet, snow in the higher passes.

All morning she crept along, sometimes in the clouds, sometimes in swirling snow, sometimes below the weather. At one o'clock she realized she had left the cold front behind her; she was east of the mountains, heading north in Oregon. The sun was brilliant, but the wind speed had increased enough to rock the camper, and she fought to hold it to forty miles an hour.

The rain forest had given way to pines on her left, and off to her right there was the desert. Later in the afternoon she turned east on U.S. 26, and after a few miles stopped at a rest area for lunch. This was the Juniper Wayside Park, a small plaque said, and went on to extol the virtues of the juniper tree. The trees were misshapen, no two alike. Some grew out sideways like shrubs, some were almost as upright as pines; none was over twenty feet tall. Beyond the small grove of junipers the ground was flat brown, dotted with sagebrush and occasional clumps of wirelike grass. The wind screamed over the empty land. Shivering, Victoria got back inside the camper. She made a sandwich and studied the instructions Sam had written.

She had less than sixty miles to go; it was four-thirty. She should be there well before dark. A truck thundered past the park, and she jumped, startled. It was the first vehicle that had passed her since she had turned east. But, she thought, it proved other traffic did use this highway; she would not be totally alone on the desert.

When she started again, no one else was in sight. The road was straight as far as she could see in both directions, and it was a good road, but she had to slow down again and again until she was driving no faster than thirty-five miles an hour. Even at that speed the wind out of the northwest was a steady pressure against the side of the camper, pushing, pushing. When it let up, she rebounded. When it gusted, she was almost swept off the road.

To her left -- she could not judge distance in this treeless country -- there were hills, or mountains, and sharply sawed-off mesas. Now and then a pale dirt road appeared, vanished in the sagebrush. Her highway was sending out feelers, tendrils that crept toward the hills and never reached them.

Milepost 49. She shook her head. Those little roads were being swallowed by the desert. It was a joke. Sam had not meant for them to drive on one of those go-nowhere roads. Milepost 50, 51 ... She slowed down even more, gripped the wheel hard enough to make her hands ache. There was no place she could stop on the highway, no place she could pull over to consider. U.S. 26 was two lanes; there was no shoulder, only the desert. When Milepost 57 came, she turned north onto a dirt road. She felt only resignation now. She had to keep driving; the road was too narrow for two cars to pass. On either side there was only rock-strewn, barren ground, sagebrush, and boulders, increasing in size now. She could see nothing behind

her except a cloud of dust. The sun had dipped behind the mountains and the wind now hurled sand against the windshield. The road curved and she hit the brakes, gasping. Before her was a chasm, a gorge cut into the land so deeply she could not see the bottom, only the far side where sharply tilted strata made her feel dizzy for a moment.

Some ancient river, she thought, had thundered out of the hills, an irresistible force that no rock could withstand. Where was it now? Gone forever, but its passageway remained. A mighty god, it had marked the land for centuries to come, its print cruelly raked into the earth. The forests it had nourished were gone; the bears and otters and beavers, all gone; the land was deserted, wailing its loneliness. She roused with a jerk. It was the wind screaming through the window vent. Soon it would be dark; she had to find a place where it would be safe to stop for the night.

She read the directions again before she started. Sixteen miles on the road, turn right, through a gate, a short distance to a second gate, twelve more miles. She glanced at the odometer frequently as she drove, willing the numbers to change. The cliffs on her left were already dark in shadows, and the gorge she cautiously skirted appeared to be bottomless. This narrow road had been blasted out of the mountains; it threaded upward in a series of blind curves.

Every step for six months, she thought, had led her to this: driving alone on the desert, miles from another person, miles from help if she should have an accident. Driving on a track that seemed designed to make any stranger end up at the bottom of a ravine.

She realized there was a wire fence on her right. She could not remember when it had first appeared. She had been climbing steadily, slowed to ten miles an hour on hairpin curves, with no attention to spare for scenery. Now the land was flattening out again. She almost cried out her relief when she saw the gate. She had to turn on the headlights to see how to open it; she drove through, got out and closed it again, and stood looking at the western sky, streaked with purple, gold, and a deep blue that almost glowed. The wind stung her eyes and chilled her. She turned around to study the track ahead. It could not be called a road here, she decided, and knew she would not try to drive another mile that day.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she murmured, climbing back into the camper. She humped and ground her way only far enough from the dirt road not to be covered with dust if someone else drove by, and then she turned off the motor. Without that noise, it seemed that the voice of the wind intensified, filled all available space. She closed the vent tight, and the high-pitched wail stopped, but the roar was all around her. Now and then the camper swayed, and she thought perhaps she should move it so that the wind would not hit it broadside. She sat gripping the steering wheel, straining to see ahead, until she realized how dark it had become; she could see nothing at all with the headlights off. Night had come like the curtain on the last act.

She pulled the shades tight, checked the locks, and thought about dinner, decided it would be more trouble than it was worth. Instead, she looked in the liquor cabinet, chose Irish, poured the last of the coffee into her cup, filled it with the whisky, and sat on a bunk sipping it as she pulled off her shoes. Her shoulders and back ached from her day-long battle with the wind. When her cup was empty, she lay down and pulled the covers over her ears. The wind roared and the camper shook and she slept.

* * * *

She awakened and sat up, straining to hear; there was nothing. The wind had stopped and there was no sound except her breathing. A faint light outlined one of the windows where she had failed to fasten the shade securely. Wearily she got up, not at all refreshed by sleep, and very hungry. She went to the bathroom, looked at the shower, shook her head, and went to the refrigerator instead. Food, then a cleanup, then drive again. As she sipped her second cup of coffee she opened the shade and looked out, and for a long time didn't even breathe.

It was not dawn; the brilliant light was from a gibbous moon that had never looked this bright or close before. She stared at the desert, forgetting her coffee, forgetting her fatigue. There was an austere beauty that would drive an artist mad, knowing the futility of trying to capture it. Not color; the landscape was revealed with a purity of light and shadow from hard platinum white through the deepest, bottomless black that seemed for the first time to be a total absence of everything -- color, light, even substance.

Slowly Victoria pulled on her coat and stepped outside. The sky was cloudless, the air a perfect calm and not very cold.

The clumps of sage were silver-surreal stage props for a fantasy ballet; grasses gleamed, black and light. Nearby a hill rose and she started to walk up it. From the top she would be able to look out over the strange world for miles, and, she thought, it was a strange world, not the same one that existed by sunlight.

She walked with no difficulty; every rock, every depression, every clump of sagebrush was clearly, vividly illuminated. Light always symbolized warmth, she thought, comfort, the hearth, safety. But not this hard cold light. She looked behind her at the camper, silver and shining, beyond it to the pale road, farther to the black velvet strip that was the gorge, the black and white cliffs, the sharp-edged mesas ... For a moment she felt regret that she would never be able to share this, or explain it in any way; then she turned and continued up the hill.

She saw boulders on the crest of the hill and went to them and sat down. To the east the brilliant sky was cut off by high, rounded hills; far off in the west the horizon was serrated by the Cascade peaks. Closer, there were mesas and jumbled hills, a dry wash that kept reversing its ground-figure relationship, now sunken, now raised. She lost it in the hills and let her gaze sweep the valley, continue to the dirt road she had driven over earlier, the kinky black ribbon of the gorge ... Platinum whites, silver whites, soft feathery whites, grays...

Something stirred in the valley and she shifted to look. What had registered before as a large shadow now had form, a hemispherical shape that looked solid. Suddenly chilled, she pulled her hood up and pressed back against the boulders. A patch of pale orange light appeared on the shape and something crossed before it, blocking the light momentarily. Then another shadow appeared, another ... The shadows moved onto the desert floor where they reflected the moonlight just as her own camper did and, like her camper, they were vehicles. Campers, trucks with canopies, trailers, motor homes, station wagons ... They lined up in a single column and moved toward the dirt road, without lights but distinct in the brilliant moonlight, too distant for any noise to reach her. More and more of them appeared, bumper to bumper, a mile of them, five miles, she could not guess how far the column stretched. Now they were reaching the dirt road. When the first one drove onto it, headlights came on; it turned south and she could see the taillight clearly. The next one followed, turning on lights when it entered the road. The third one turned north.

"Of course," she breathed. "On 26 they'll divide again." Suddenly she began to laugh and she buried her face in her hands and pressed her head down hard against her legs, needing the pain. "Don't move," she told herself sternly. "They'll see you." After a few minutes she looked up. The hemisphere was a shadow again. The line of campers and trailers was halfway across the valley. Down the road she could see many sets of rear lights. Those turning north were hidden from view almost instantly by the cliffs.

Moving very slowly she stood up, keeping close to the boulders. She began to pick her way among the tumbled rocks. She had to stop often to fight off dizziness and the laughter that kept choking her as she stifled it. She could no longer watch where she was going, but groped and felt her way like a blind person. "The birthplace of recreational vehicles!" she gasped once and nearly fell against a rough boulder, then clung to it. "Biggest damn mother

of them all!" she sobbed.

She was running and couldn't remember when she had started to run. They would train instruments on the surrounding hills, she realized, and they would come to eradicate any witnesses. They would have to. She knew she must not run over this ground, knew it and ran blindly, stumbling, seeing nothing, falling again and again. She screamed suddenly when something caught her arm and dragged her to a stop.

"Whoa now, honey. Just take it easy. You're pretty far from the nearest bus stop. You know?"

She struggled frantically and was held, and gradually she could hear the voice again. "...calm down. Steady now. Nothing's out here to hurt you. Coyotes, jackrabbits, seven head of the damndest dumbest cattle..."

Then he was saying, "That's right, just take a look. Reuben's the name. Honey, you're as cold as a trout in snow water. Come on. That's the girl. Build up this little fire. Here, wrap yourself in this."

She was holding hot coffee, drinking it, and still he droned on, his voice warm and comforting, almost familiar. He was talking about cattle.

"Spotted them yesterday, with the plane, but no way you're going to bring them in with no plane. Nope. Me and old Prairie Dog here" -- a great pale dog lifted its head, then put it down on its paws -- "we come up like we been doing forty years. Not him, a'course, he's only eight or nine, but only one way to get seven head a cattle back in the herd, and that's on a horse." He paused and leaned toward her. "You feeling a bit better now? Not shaking so hard?"

"I'm all right," she said. She glanced around. They were in a hollow with hills and boulders all around them. "How did you find me?"

"I was asleep," he said. "I heard this thing crashing all over the place and thought you was a coyote, to tell the truth. But old Prairie Dog didn't. He knew. Took me straight to you." He laughed, a deep growly snorting noise. "Thought at first I was still asleep and dreaming a pretty girl come to keep me company." He refilled her cup, felt her hand, then sat down again, satisfied. "You're okay, I reckon. Now you tell me what the hell you're doing out on the desert three o'clock in the moniing."

He had been asleep; he could not have seen it, then. Victoria opened her mouth, looked at the fire, and instead of telling him about the thing in the valley, she said, "I woke up when the wind stopped and just walked out a little from my camper."

"An' saw something in the moonlight that scared the bejeesus outa you."

She looked at him quickly, but he was turned away, facing the cliffs.

"I know," he said almost harshly. "When the moon's big and bright you see things out there. It's when you start seeing them in daylight that it's time to hang up the saddle." He stood up. "You came through the gate back by Ghost River. Right?"

"I don't know the name. By the gorge."

"Not far," he said. "Key's in the thing?" She nodded.

"I'm going to get it, bring it over here. You sit tight by the fire. Prairie Dog!" The dog jumped to its feet. "Come over here, boy, here. Stay, Prairie Dog." The dog sat down by Victoria. "He won't move till I get back. Won't be long." He took a step or two, then stopped. "Call it Ghost River 'cause nights like this some folks claim they can hear the water crashing down the rocks." Then he left and she was shivering hard again.

It wasn't like that, she wanted to cry out at his back. She had seen something! The dog put its head on her knee, as if in sympathy, and she whispered, "I did see it!"

The cowboy returned, took her firmly by the arm, and led her out of the hollow, through a second gate. "That's a mighty nice machine, Miss. Very fine. Just lock up tight and get some sleep. Going to be fine weather tomorrow, you'll have a nice driving day."

He opened the door and almost pushed her inside. "I'll be right down there, but you'll be all right now. Just lock it up and get some sleep."

She snapped the door lock, heard a distant "Good night," and shrugged off her coat and let it fall. She kicked off her shoes and fell into bed again and had no memory of pulling up the covers.

* * * *

"Why would I tell such a ridiculous lie?" Victoria cried. "That's the right question," Sam said.

She had reached the designated spot at ten, and two hours later Sam had arrived. She had coffee and sandwiches ready, and as they ate she told him about Mimi's accident. Sam, she thought, had been impressed that she had driven here alone. Then she told him about the thing in the valley, knowing even as she started, while she still had time to back out, that she was making a mistake.

Sam started to unload his backpack, jerking things out with furious energy. He hadn't really called her a liar. What he had said, snapped, was, "Story time's over."

"Why do you think I'd tell any lie at all?"

"Maybe to pay me back. I know what kind of drive that was. When that front came through I was prepared to wait three, four days. I can imagine how it was, bumping over rocks, sliding down gullies, hugging the cliffs over a thousand-foot dropoff, hating me for getting you into this. Fix old Sam. Tell him this cockamamie story, watch his eyes bug. You tried. It didn't work. No amusing little anecdote to hand over to your pals. Sorry."

"I didn't lie to you." She tried to keep her voice calm and matter of fact, but she heard the indignation in every word.

"All right! You dreamed it then. Or hallucinated. You were stoned, or drunk. I don't care what you call it, it isn't true!"

"Because I didn't get an affidavit or photographs?"

"Christ! Victoria, look, I know this country. There is no little hill back there. There are cliffs and mesas and chasms. No little hills you can stroll up in the middle of the night. That's point one. Two: do you have any idea in the world how scarce water is out here, how far apart the wells are? Too goddamn far to take the old faithful dog along, you idiot! You carry water for your horse, for yourself, if you have the room. You don't carry water for a fucking dog! Your old pal the cowboy had a nice fire blazing away, coffee on! What in Christ's name was he burning? You expect me to believe anyone would waste water making coffee in the middle of the night, have a fire burning away while he slept? And the seven head of cattle. That area's fenced off to keep cattle the hell away from there. No water, larkspurs in the spring -- that's poison, Victoria, like arsenic or ptomaine. There wasn't a gallant cowboy. No ghost river. There wasn't a thing spewing out campers!"

He hit his palm hard against the now empty pack. "Let's get started. I have two hundred pounds of rocks up there."

Angrily, in silence, Victoria pulled her pack on, adjusted the straps, and waited for Sam to lead the way up the mountains. Much later it occurred to her that Sam's fury had been all wrong. If he had believed she was lying, or mistaken, he might have laughed, might have been contemptuous or scornful. But furious? Full of hatred? Why? She could feel the shivering start again deep inside. When she looked up, Sam was watching. He turned and walked on.

The afternoon was crystalline, the air almost still, the sun was warm on her back. Every step they took upward revealed more of the alien country. Land that had appeared flat and unbroken turned into a series of mesas with sharp edges; a black pit closed, became a barren lava flow; a cliffside of mud with a sparkling waterfall became brown jasper with a thick vein of blue agate. Deceptive, lying, deceitful land, she thought.

"Fifteen minutes," Sam said suddenly, and Victoria almost bumped into him as she rounded a boulder as high as a two story building.

She sank to the ground thankfully. Her legs were throbbing, her thighs so hot she was vaguely surprised that steam was not rising from her jeans. Office work and a daily stroll to lunch had not prepared her for this.

Sam squatted beside her and handed her his canteen. "It isn't much farther," he said. He pointed down the cliff. "Look. Poison Creek. Dry now, but sometimes there's water. Alkaline. Tomorrow we'll drive by it. You can pick up thunder eggs."

"This is all very beautiful," Victoria said. "I never knew that before."

"It can be, if you accept its terms, don't try to make it be something else. It fights back and always wins."

"The eternal desert, like the eternal ocean?"

"Something like that."

But he was wrong, she knew. The desert changed; she could see the evidence everywhere. It would change again and again. She did not doubt that the desert would win in any contest, but it would win by deceit. It would lull with a beautiful lie and then strike out. "No one would really try to fight a place like this," she said. "Only a fool."

Sam laughed. "Down there in Poison Creek there's gold. You'll see it tomorrow. It's no secret. A grain here, a few there, shining, laughing. The desert's little joke. It would cost more to ship in water and equipment to get it out than it's worth even today, or tomorrow, or next year, no matter how high gold goes. God knows how many men have died or been wiped out, have gone crazy, trying to get rich off that gold. One way or another the desert kills them. The ones who last are those who can pick up a handful of the sand, look at the shiny grains, and let it all sift back down to Poison Creek where it belongs, and then smile, sharing the joke. They're the ones who accept the terms." He stood up and offered her a hand.

"Can you do that? Leave it there, laugh at the joke?" Victoria asked. She tried not to grimace as her legs straightened out painfully.

"Sure. I'm not after gold. Come on. You're getting stiff. It's best to keep moving."

She wanted to ask him what he was after, but she knew he would not answer. The reason they always got along was that neither ever asked that kind of question. They liked the same plays, music, books sometimes, and could talk endlessly about them. They argued rather often about politics, economics, conservation, religion, but it all remained abstract, a game they played. No other lover had been willing to remain so impersonal, had kept himself as uninvolved as she was determined to remain. He had asked if she was still married and she had said no, and the subject had never come up again.

Never again, she had said after the divorce, and it had been fine.

She thought of the cruel, deliberately hurtful words she and Stuart had flung at each other, as if each of them had been determined not to leave the other whole, unscarred.

"You're some kind of creeping fungus!" he had yelled. "You're all over me all the time, smothering me, sucking the life out of me!"

She had believed she was a good wife; it had come as a shock to learn that her goodness was an irritant to him. She never lied, always did what was expected of her, never was late by a second, never demanded anything not readily and easily available. She had been like that all her life, and her father distrusted her, Stuart hated her. The only two people she had tried to please wholly, absolutely, had ended by abandoning her. Never again, she had thought, would she ask anything of anyone. Never again would she be willing to give anything of herself to anyone. If no one could touch her, then no one could hurt her. If she belonged to no one but herself, no one could abandon her again.

But, she thought suddenly, never again meant keeping such a distance that everyone else, every man, would forever be a stranger. And strangers could be dangerous, unpredictable. Sam's sudden rage and this return to affability made her uneasy. She knew it would be impossible to resume the careless relationship they had had only a day before. She tried to imagine herself again in his arms, giving and finding pleasure, and the images would

not come.

She concentrated on climbing. When they got to the camp high on the mountain, Sam would not let her rest, but packed quickly and started down. "You'll freeze up, or get a charley horse," he said cheerfully. "Then I'd have to backpack you out of here. I'll get the rest of this stuff tomorrow."

It was as if he had managed to erase everything she had told him, as well as his own reaction, but she did not have enough energy to worry any more about that. Doggedly she followed him down the mountain, seeing nothing now but the ground directly ahead.

* * * *

She dreamed of a swarm of fireflies winking on and off in an intricate dance that she could not quite follow. It had to be seen from the center, she realized, and she began picking her way carefully to the middle of them. Observing the rhythms from the outside had been charming, but as she drew inward, she began to have trouble breathing; they were using up all the air, sucking the air from her lungs. Off and on, off and on, Off...

She woke up; Sam was shaking her hard.

"You were dreaming," he said. "Are you okay?"

She tried to sit up and groaned. "What time is it?"

"Midnight. Hungry?"

When they came back with the rocks he had made dinner, but she had been too tired to eat. She had stretched out on the bunk and had gone to sleep instead.

"What you need," Sam said, "is a cup of soup, which I just happen to have." He jammed a pillow behind her back and stepped over to the stove. He made the camper seem very small.

"Haven't you been to bed yet?"

"Nope. I was reading and waiting for you to wake up, starving and in agony. Soup first, then a rubdown, milk and aspirin."

"If you touch me, I'll die," Victoria said.

Sam laughed and dragged a camp stool to the side of her bed. "I'll hold, you drink." After her first few sips, he let her hold the mug of beef broth. "I've got this guaranteed snake oil liniment, made by the oldest medicine man in the West out of certified genuine magic snakes. What we do, see, is haul off the jeans, pull the cover up to your fanny, and let me work on those legs. Ten minutes, and you'll walk tomorrow. A miracle."

"Hah!"

"Word of honor. If you misuse this potion, use it for anything other than what old chief Calapooia intended it for, you will call down on your head, heart, soul, and liver the wrath of the sacred snake god, who then will do certain very nasty things to you."

He kneaded and massaged her legs and rubbed the liniment on them until they glowed, then he covered her again, tucking the blanket in snugly; he brought her milk and aspirin, kissed her chastely on the forehead, and before he could turn off the lights and get himself in bed, she was sleeping.

When she woke up in the morning she could remember that during the night Sam had shaken her again, possibly more than one time, perhaps even slapped her. She must have had a nightmare, she thought, but there was no memory of it, and perhaps she had dreamed that Sam tried to rouse her.

She got up cautiously; while she ached and was sore from her neck down, she felt better than she had expected, and very hungry. There was a note on the refrigerator door. Sam had gone up the mountain for the rest of his gear.

After she ate she went outside; there was no place to go that wasn't either up or down. It was only nine-thirty. Sam would be four hours at least; if he had left at seven, she had an hour and a half to wait. Time enough to drive back to the gate, locate the hill she had walked up, look for the thing in the valley by daylight.

The keys were not in the ignition. Victoria found her coat at the foot of the bed and searched for the single key Diego had made -- one for her, one

for Mimi, one for himself, so no one would ever be stranded outside if the others were delayed. She searched both pockets, then dumped the contents of her purse on the bed. No key. Growing angry, she stripped the bed and searched it, the space between the mattress and wall, the floor around it. Sam could not have known about the extra keys; he had been gone when Diego had them made.

She made the bed again, then found a book and tried to read, until she heard Sam returning.

"Why did you take the key?" she demanded as he entered the camper.

He looked blank, groped in his pockets, then turned and opened the glove compartment and after a moment faced her once more, holding up the key chain. "Pains me to see them in the ignition," he said. "I always toss them in there."

Silently Victoria began to secure the cabinets, lock the refrigerator, snap the folding chairs into place. She had known he would explain the keys. He would explain the single key away just as easily. She did not bother to ask. Soon they were ready to leave.

* * * *

They stopped frequently; in the dry Poison Creek bed they picked up thunder eggs and filled an envelope with sand that Sam promised would contain some grains of gold. Once they stopped and he led her up a short, steep cliff, and from there it seemed the entire desert lay at their feet -- brown, greenish-gray, tan, black. There were no wires, no roads, no sign anywhere of human life. The vastness and emptiness seemed more threatening than anything Victoria had ever experienced.

There had been no horse, Victoria thought suddenly. She could see the cowboy again -- not his features, she realized. She had not seen his features at all. She visualized the fire, but not what was burning; the moonlight gleamed on the dog's pale coat. And there was no horse anywhere. The sheltered depression had been bright; if a horse had been tethered there, she would have seen it. The cowboy would have taken it into shelter, not left it out in the brutal wind.

Sam pulled her arm and she stifled a scream. She had not heard his voice, had not felt his hand until he yanked her away from the edge of the cliff. He pulled her, stumbling and shaking, back to the camper.

Neither spoke of her near trance. Sam made dinner later; they played gin, slept, and, as before, she knew when she awakened that she had had nightmares. When Sam said he was taking her home, she nodded. She felt that the barren desolation of the landscape had entered her, that it was spreading, growing, would fill her completely, and the thought paralyzed her with dread.

II

Serena Hendricks met Sam at the back door of the ranch house.

"Stranger! Your beard is a bush! Does Farley know you're here?" She had the complexion of a Mexican, the bright blue eyes of her German mother.

Sam shook his head. "Where is he?"

"Out there. God knows. A hundred degrees! You know it's a hundred degrees? Gin and tonic. Lots of ice. Come on." She drew him into the house.

Serena's parents had worked on the Chesterman ranch, her father the foreman, her mother the housekeeper. Serena and Farley had grown up together and, Sam thought, they should have married, but had missed the chance, the time, something. She had married one of the hands instead and her three children ran around the yard whooping and playing rodeo, while Farley remained single.

Sam followed her to the kitchen. The air in the spacious ranch house was twenty degrees cooler than outside.

"We expected you and your friends back in April," Serena said as she sliced a lemon and added it to the ice cubes in a glass. She pursed her lips, closed one eye, and poured gin, nodded, added tonic, stirred, then tasted it.

"There were complications," Sam said. Sometimes he almost wished he

had asked Serena to marry him ten years ago, back when anything was still possible. Serena rolled her eyes, drew him to a chair at the table, dragged another one close to it, and sat down by him, her hand on his arm. "That means a woman. Tell me about it."

Sam laughed, gently put her hand on her own knee, and stood up. "What I'm going to do is get my stuff from the camper, go upstairs, and take a shower and a nap."

"Pig!" she yelled at his back. "You're all alike! Inconsiderate pigs! All of you."

When he brought his pack in she handed him a new drink. "Same room as usual. Supper's at six. Sleep well, dream happy."

Farley and Sam had been at U.C.L.A. together; they had climbed mountains together; they had lived through an August blizzard on Mt. Rainier together. Farley was slightly taller than Sam and leaner, and his hair was graying.

They sat on the wide porch drinking beer at midnight. "You haven't seen her since then?" Farley asked.

"I guess neither of us wanted to. She quit her job, moved. Got another job. Dropped just about everyone we both knew." He finished the beer and put the can down. From far off there came a coyote's sharp, almost human coughing, yapping cry. He waited. There was an answering call. Then another. They were very distant.

"She must have had a good scare," Farley said. "There's no Reuben in the territory, you know."

"There's nothing like she said."

"There's something, Sam boy. There is something. And I don't know any way on God's earth for her to have known it. We used to have a hand called Tamale. An old Mexican, one of Serena's uncles. He died when I was five or six. It's been that long. He'd tell us stories. Superstitious old bastard. He told me about Ghost River, scared me shitless. Haven't heard that again since then. Until now when Reuben comes along and tells your friend the same thing."

Sam felt prickles on his arms. "So there was someone. Who the hell was he?"

"Reuben," Farley said. He stood up. "Can't take these hours anymore. Must be age. You want to ride out with me in the morning? I'm making the rounds of the wells. Lundy's had bad water up the other side of Dog Mountain. I'm collecting samples to have tested."

Water, Sam thought later, sitting at his window staring out at the black desert. Water was the only real worry out here. Dog Creek irrigated Farley's wheat. Dog Creek determined if Farley would succeed or fail. Years when the snow did not come to the mountains, when the winds drove the sparse clouds over too fast to release their rain, when the summer started early, ended late, Farley watched Dog Creek, and the reservoir his father had dammed, like a woman watching a feverish child at the climax of a serious illness. The fear of drought accounted for the gray in Farley's hair. There were a dozen deep wells on the ninety thousand acres of his ranch, most of them pumped by windmills, a few of them close enough to the power lines to use electricity. The water was pumped into troughs. If one of the wells started pumping bad water, or no water, if one of the troughs was shot by a hunter, sprang a leak in any way, that meant disaster. Days, weeks went by between checks of the troughs. In this country a lot of cattle could die in that time.

And she thought he would swallow that silly story about a cowboy and his dog!

* * * *

They drove the jeep cross-country to inspect the wells, and Farley drove places where Sam would not have attempted to go. At one o'clock Farley stopped and they sat on the ground in the shade of an overhanging cliff to eat their lunch. There was a valley below them; on the other side were more cliffs. Suddenly Sam realized where they were: this was the same valley

Victoria was talking about, viewed from the other side.

"See that fence?" Farley waved his beer can toward the opposite cliffs. "Three hundred acres fenced off. Tamale brought me out with him once, when I was five. I rode all the way, still remember. I asked him why this piece was fenced off and he told me about Ghost River. Said the cattle heard the water sometimes and went off the cliffs trying to get to it. I believed him. Never gave it another thought for years. Then I was home from school one summer and Dad had me come out here to fix one of the gates. I knew by then cattle don't find water by sound, they smell it. I asked him about the three hundred acres. He said it always had been fenced because of the larkspurs that come up thick in there." He looked at the other side of the valley thoughtfully. "They do, too," he said after a moment. "Only thing is, they're on both sides of the fence and always were."

In the valley was a thick stand of bunchgrass, the sign of a well-managed range. No sage or gray rabbit grass had invaded there, no erosion scarred the land. No tracks flattened the grass, or made ruts in the earth. The valley was a cul-de-sac, a box canyon surrounded by cliffs. Where the valley narrowed, with a break in the cliffs, there was a dropoff of two hundred feet. The wire fence started at the gorge, crossed the ranch road, climbed the cliff, followed the jagged ridge around to the break. On the other side the fence resumed, still clinging to the crest, then turned, went down the cliffs again, recrossed the road, and ended at the gorge, several hundred yards from the other section. The area enclosed was an irregular ellipse. The irregularities were caused by the terrain. Where heaps of boulders, or abrupt rises or falls, made detours necessary, the fence always skirted around to the outside.

Farley got back in the jeep. "Might as well finish," he said, and drove along the fence on the crest, then started the descent down a rocky incline, bumping and lurching to the two-track ranch road and the first gate. He drove fast, but with care and skill; turned around at the second gate and made his way forward, as Victoria had done.

"Probably stopped along in here," he said. "First curve out of sight of the road." The gorge was nearby, and there should have been a hill to the right, but the hill was nothing less than another steep cliff. Farley studied it a moment, motioned to Sam, and started to walk. Unerringly he turned and twisted and took them upward. They reached the top with little trouble.

"She could have done it," Sam said, looking down at the valley again, across it to where they had been a short time before. He looked about until he saw the boulders she had mentioned, where she had sat down. They started toward them. They were on the ridge of an upthrust, picking their way over the weathered edges of crazily tilted basalt, which would remain when everything about it was turned to dust. In some places there was less than a foot of space between a sheer dropoff on one side and a slope almost that steep on the other.

"Her guardian angel sure was with her," Farley said as they drew near the boulders. One of the mammoth rocks was balanced on the edge of the crest.

"I don't believe any of this," Sam said angrily. He stopped. Ahead of them, lodged in a crevice, something gleamed in the sunlight. Farley took several cautious steps and picked it up. He handed it to Sam, a single key. Without comparing it, Sam knew it was a key to his camper.

They made their way among the boulders, through the only possible passage, and came out on top of the ridge that now widened for several hundred feet. At the edge of it Sam could look down over the gorge; he could see the ranch road, and between him and the road there was a small sunken area, the sheltered spot where "Reuben" had taken Victoria. There was no sign of a campfire ever having been there. No sign of a horse, a dog, a camp of any sort. Silently the two men walked back to the road and the jeep.

Farley did not turn on the ignition immediately. "That was in April, months ago. Why are you checking on it now?"

Sam looked at the gorge wall, imagined a river roaring below. "Mimi,

the girl who was going to drive up with Victoria, came to see me last week. She and Victoria were friends, but Victoria dropped her too. Mimi thought something happened out here between Victoria and me, that I raped her, or tortured her, or something. She told me Victoria is sick, really sick, in analysis, maybe even suicidal. Whatever is wrong with her is serious and it started here."

"You _have_ seen her?"

"Yeah. For half a minute maybe. She wanted to see me like a rabbit wants to see a bobcat. Wouldn't talk, had to run, too busy to chat." He scowled, remembering the pallor that had blanched her face when she saw him. "She looked like hell."

"So you want to get her back out here to find out what she saw."

Sam grunted. After a moment he said, "I don't know what I want to do. I have to do something. I just had to check for myself, see if there's any way it could have been like she said."

Farley put the key in the ignition. Without looking at Sam he said, "She could have gone back east, or to Texas, but she didn't. She could have taken an overdose, slashed her wrists, gone off the bridge. She could have really hidden, but she kept in touch with the friend who could get to you. She wants you to help her. And you owe it to her for losing your temper because she had the vision you've spent so many years chasing." He turned the key and started to drive before Sam could answer.

* * * *

That night Sam said he would try to get Victoria to come back, and Farley said he would visit his parents in Bend to see if there was anything his father could or would tell him about the fenced-off acres.

Sam walked. If you really wanted to find a god, he thought, this was where to look. Such absolute emptiness could be relieved only by an absolute presence. Men always had gone to a mountaintop or to the desert, in search of God. Not God, he thought angrily, peace, acceptance, a reason, he did not know what it was he sought on the desert. He would be willing to settle for so little, no more than a clue or a hint that there was more than he had been able to find. After he had quit his job with GoMar, he had tried drugs for almost two years. Drugs and a personal teacher of the way, and both had failed. He had found only other pieces of himself. He had turned to asceticism and study, had become a jeweler. He had fasted, had lived a hermit's life for a year, had read nothing, denied himself music, the radio, had worked, walked, waited. And waited still.

He was out of sight of the ranch buildings, the spacious house with old oaks and young poplars sheltering it; the big barns, the small bungalows some of the hands lived in, the bunk house, machine shops... You stepped over a rise and the desert swallowed it all, just as it swallowed all sound, and existed in a deep silence, broken only by the voices of those few animals that had accepted its terms and asked for nothing but life.

And just having life was not enough.

* * * *

He waited across the street from her apartment until she entered and, after ten minutes, followed her inside. When she opened her door and saw him, she hesitated, then with obvious reluctance released the chain to admit him.

"Hello, Sam." She walked away from him and stood at the window looking out.

He remained by the door, the width of the room between them. He was three months too late. In those months she had turned into a stranger.

When they returned to San Francisco in the spring, he had taken her bags inside for her, and then left. She had not invited him to stay, and he had not sat down as he usually did. "I'll call you," he had said.

But he had let the days slide by, pretending to himself that he was too busy sorting the material they had brought back, too busy with an order from a small elite store in Palm Beach, too busy, too busy. Every time he thought of calling, he felt an uprush of guilt and anger. Finally, filled

with a senseless indignation, as if she were forcing him to do something distasteful, he dialed her number, only to get a recording that said her number was no longer in service. Furiously he called her office; she had quit, and left no forwarding address.

Relief replaced the anger. He was free; he no longer had to think about her and whatever had happened to her out on the desert. He could get on with his own life, continue his own search. But he could not banish her from his mind, and worse, his thoughts of her were colored with a constant dull resentment that marred his memories of the good times they had had, that quieted his sexual desire for her, that distorted her honesty and humor and made her seem in retrospect scheming and even dull.

Over the months they had been separated the new image he constructed had gradually replaced the old, and this meeting was destroying that new image, leaving him nothing. He had to start over with her, falteringly, uncertainly, knowing that the real changes were not in her but in himself. There were intimate things to be said between them, but intimate things could not be said between strangers.

Everything Sam had planned to say was gone from his mind, and almost helplessly he started, "I treated you very badly. I'm sorry." His words sounded stiff and phony, even to him. She didn't move, and slowly Sam repeated his conversation with Farley, all of it, including Farley's explanation of his rage. "It's possible," Sam said, then shook his head hard. "It's true I was sore because you saw something I didn't. I can't explain that part. We both, Farley and I, want to find out what happened."

"It's true then!" Victoria said, facing him finally. She was shockingly pale.

Sam started to deny it, said instead, "I don't know."

"We have to go back there to find out, don't we?" She crossed the room to him.

"You don't have to now," Sam said quickly. "I think it would be a mistake. Wait until you're well."

"Thursday," she said. When Sam shook his head she added, "You know I won't get well until this is over."

Color had returned to her cheeks and she looked almost normal again, as she had always looked: quick, alert, handsome. And there was something else, he thought. Something unfamiliar, an intensity, or determination she had not shown before.

"Thursday," Sam said reluctantly.

* * * *

She had never been so talkative or said so little. Her new job, the people in the office, the changing landscape, a grade school teacher, sleeping in the parking lot, how easy driving the camper was ...

"Mimi says you're in analysis," Sam interrupted her.

"Not now," Victoria said easily. "She was more Freudian than the master. Treated my experience like a dream and gave sexual connotations to every bit of it. The thing in the valley became phallic, of course, so naturally I had to dread -- it. Reuben was my father firmly forbidding my incestuous advances, and so on. I took it for several weeks and gave up on her. She needs help."

Too easy, Sam realized. She was too deep inside; all this was a glib overlay she was hiding behind. After dinner, she took two pills.

"Something new?" Sam asked.

"Not really. I used them when Stuart and I were breaking up. They got me through then."

"Bad dreams?"

"Not when I take these," she said too gaily, holding up the bottle of pills. She had changed into short pajamas; now she pulled a book from her bag and sat on her bed. "My system," she said cheerfully, "is to take two, read, and in an hour if I'm still reading, take two more."

"That's dangerous."

"At home I keep them in the bathroom. If I'm too sleepy to get up and get them, I don't need them. Foolproof. Hasn't failed me yet. Have you read this?" She handed him the book.

"Stop it, Victoria. What are you doing?"

She retrieved the book and opened it. "It's pretty good. There's a secondhand book store near the office..."

"Victoria, let me make love to you."

She smiled and shook her head.

"We used to be good together."

"Another time. I'm getting drowsy, floating almost. It's like a nice not-too-high high once it starts."

"And you don't dream? How about nightmares? You were having three or four a night last time I saw you. So bad you wouldn't even wake up from them."

She had become rigid as he spoke. She closed the book and let it drop to the floor, then swung her legs off the bed.

"What are you doing?" He felt the beginnings of a headache: guilt and shame for doing that to her, he knew.

"Water. More pills. Sometimes I don't have to wait an hour to know."

Presently she slept, deeply, like a person in a coma. She looked like a sick child with her brown hair neatly arranged, the covers straight, as if her mother or a nurse had only then finished preparing her for a visitor. He no longer desired her. That rush of passion had been so sudden and unexpected, he had been as surprised as she. He had not thought of her as a sexual partner for months. Their sex had been good, but only because each had known the other would make no further demands. It had been fun with her, he thought, again with surprise because he had forgotten. It had been clean with her, no hidden nuances to decipher; no flirtatious advance and retreat; no other boyfriends to parade before him hoping for a show of jealousy. If they existed she was reticent about them, as she was about everything personal. No involvement at all, that had been the secret of their success.

He had planned to surrender the camper to Mimi and Diego, and share his tent with Victoria, out of sight and sound of the others, with only the desert and the brilliant moon growing fatter each night. Even that, showing her the world he loved so much, would have been something freely given, freely taken, with no ties afterward. They both had understood that, had wanted it that way.

He turned off the lights but was a long time in failing asleep. Toward dawn he was awakened by Victoria's moaning. He put his denim jacket over the lamp before he turned it on. She had the covers completely off and was twisting back and forth in a rocking motion, making soft, incoherent sounds. As he drew near to touch her, to interrupt her dream, she stiffened and he knew she had slipped into a nightmare like the ones she had had before. The first time he had shaken her, called her repeatedly, and after a long time she had screamed and gone limp. After that he had simply held her until it was over, held her and murmured her name over and over. She had not remembered any of the nightmares.

He slid into the narrow bed and wrapped his arms around her, whispering, "It's going to be all right, Victoria. We're going to fix it, make it all right again."

It went on and on, until abruptly she began to fight him. Then she wakened and, gasping, she clung to him as he stroked her sweaty back. He pulled the covers over her again.

"Sh, sh. It's over. Go back to sleep now. It's all right."

"No more! I want to get up!"

"You'll be chilled. No more sleep. Just rest a few minutes. It's too early to get up. Try to relax and get warm."

The drugs and the nightmares were battling for her; the nightmares waited for a sign of weakening in the pills, ready to claim her swiftly then.

What had she seen? What was she still seeing when her pink pills lost their effectiveness in the darkness before dawn?

* * * *

"How sick is she?" Serena asked. She was watching Farley and Victoria going toward the reservoir for a swim.

Sam shrugged. "I don't know. Why?"

"I like her. I don't want to see her sick, maybe die. Farley likes her. Is she, was she your girl?"

"Not the way you mean," Sam said, laughing.

"What other way is there?" Serena raised her hands and let them drop, expressing what? Sam always knew exactly what she meant, yet could never put it in words.

After Serena left him on the porch, he wondered how sick Victoria really was. After six days on the ranch, she was tanned, vivacious, pretty. Maybe she was sleeping better. Farley was keeping her busy riding, hiking, swimming, whatever they could find to do out in the sun and wind, and her appetite was good again. By ten or eleven she was ready for bed. And sleep? He wished he knew.

Farley sidestepped every question about what he planned to do "Don't rush," he said. "She's terribly tired. Let's get acquainted before we dance. Okay?" He said he had learned nothing from his father.

"Aren't we even going out there?"

"In time, Sam. In time. She quit her job. She tell you that? She's in no rush. No place she has to go."

She hadn't told him, and it annoyed him that she had told a stranger. It annoyed him that Farley and Victoria were having long talks that excluded him, that Farley had announced their swim after Sam had said he was expecting a long-distance call. Most of all it annoyed him that Serena evidently thought of Farley and Victoria as a couple. An hour later, his call completed, he walked over to the reservoir, but stopped on the hill overlooking the lake. Victoria and Farley were sitting close together under a juniper tree, talking. Sam returned to the house.

It was not jealousy, he knew. It was the delay. Victoria had something, could show him something that he needed desperately. Every delay increased his impatience and irritation until he felt he could stand no more.

After dinner he said coolly, "Tomorrow let's ride over to the gorge area and camp out."

Victoria leaned forward eagerly. "Let's. Let's camp out." Farley's face was unreadable. He watched Victoria a moment, then shrugged.

"In that case," Victoria said quickly, "I'd better wash my hair now and get plenty of sleep." There were spots of color in both cheeks and she looked too excited. She hurried to the door, said good night over her shoulder, and ran upstairs.

Farley leaned back, studying Sam.

"There's no point in putting it off any longer," Sam said. He sounded too defensive, he knew. Sullenly he added, "I'm sorry if I upset your timetable."

"Not mine. Hers. She thinks she's going to die out there. We had an unspoken agreement, a pact, you might say, to give her a vacation and rest before she had to face that valley again."

"You know that's crazy!"

"I don't know half as much as you do, Sam. I seem to know less all the time. I don't know what's in the valley, don't know what it will do to her to face it again. I don't know why you think you can use her to see it too. Nope. I don't know nearly half as much as you do."

Sam had risen as Farley spoke. "Back off, Farley. I said I'm sorry. Let's drop it."

Farley nodded and left the room.

* * * *

Gradually the ranch lights went out, until only the dim hallway light in the main house remained; outside, the desert crept closer. From the porch Sam watched the darkness claim the barn area, the yard, the bungalows, until he

could feel it there at the bottom of the porch steps. He had dug around one of the desert ghost towns once, where only a juniper mounting post remained. That was what the desert would do here if this small group of people let it. The desert would reclaim the ranch, erase all signs of the outsiders.

The moon rose, a half moon. Enough, Sam thought. It was enough.

That was what the old Indian had said. Sam had driven three hours over New Mexico desert roads, gravel roads, dirt and sand roads, to find the shack. It had a tin roof covered with sagebrush. An Indian woman had admitted him silently; inside, the temperature was over a hundred degrees, cooler than it would have been without the sagebrush insulation, but stifling. On a straight chair before one of the two windows sat the Indian man, one arm swathed in bandages where the stump was still not healed. There were a roughly sawed table, two chairs and several stools, a wood-burning stove with a cast-iron pot on it, a rope-spring bed and several rolled-up pallets. The walls were covered with newspapers, carefully cut and pasted up so that the pictures were whole, the stories complete. From outside there was the sound of children's whispers, a faint giggle. The woman scowled at the window on the opposite side of the cabin, and the sounds stopped.

Sam had seen many such cabins, many worse than this one. He pulled the second chair around to face the man, introduced himself, sat down, and drew out his report form. "I've been to the mine," he said. "What I need now is a statement from you so the company can process your claim."

The Indian did not move, continued to gaze at the desert. "Sir..." Sam looked at the woman. "He was rambling when he was found. Did he suffer head injuries? Can he hear?"

"He hears."

Sam glanced at the preliminary report. There had been an explosion at the potash mine; an avalanche apparently had carried this man down a ravine where he stayed for two days before he was found. Two days on the desert, in the sun, no water, bleeding from an arm injury, possibly head injuries. "You haven't filed a claim yet," he said. He explained the company's disability pension, the social security regulations, the medical settlement. He explained the need for the claimant's signature before processing could begin. The Indian never stirred.

Sam looked from him to the woman. "He won't sign," she said.

"I don't understand. Why won't he file a claim?"

"He says he should pay the company," she said, and although her face remained impassive, she spoke bitterly. "He says a man should be happy to give up an arm to see the face of God."

"He's crazy!" Sam looked at the Indian for the first time. He had been looking at a claimant, a statistic, one like many others he had seen before and recognized instantly. Now he studied him.

"You have a right..." he started, then fell silent.

The Indian shifted to regard him and Sam thought, he has seen the face of God. Harshly he demanded, "Who's going to take care of your family? Hunt for them, earn money? Who will go up to the mountain to get firewood? You have only one arm!"

"It is enough," the Indian man said, and turned his gaze back to the desert.

Sam filled out the claim and the Indian woman signed it. He drove away as fast as the company truck could take him. That was the last case he handled; two months later he quit his job.

For seven years, he thought, he had searched for something that would give him what that son of a bitch had. They called him an artist now, and he knew that was a lie. He was a good craftsman, not an artist. He understood the difference. He was using the rocks he found, making something, anything that would permit him to survive, that would give him an excuse to spend days, weeks, months out on the desert. It amused him when others called him an artist, because he knew he was using a skill to achieve something else; he

felt only contempt for those he fooled -- the critics, the connoisseurs, the buyers.

He would have it, he knew, if he had to risk an arm, both arms, Victoria, Farley, anything else in the world to get it. He would have it.

III

Farley watched Victoria. She rode reasonably well, held her back straight and trusted her horse to know where to put his feet, but she would have to do a hell of a lot of riding before it looked natural on her. He planned to watch her and if she started to slump, or her hand got heavy on the reins, he would call a halt, walk her up a ridge or down a valley, anything to rest her without suggesting that that was his intention.

Watching Victoria, he thought of Fran, riding like a wild thing, so in tune with her horse, it seemed the impulses from her brain sped through its muscles, in a feedback system that linked them to create a new single creature. The last time she had come back, they had ridden all day.

When they stopped to water the horses at one of the wells on her father's land, he asked. "You aren't happy in Portland, are you?"

"I get so I can't stand it. Begin to feel I'm suffocating, there's no air to breathe, and a million bodies ready to smother me. So I come back and can't stand this either. Too much wind, too much sand, too much sun and sky and cold and heat. Too much loneliness. When I start wanting to scream I know it's time to go back to the big city. Heads I lose, tails I lose."

Fran was beautiful, more so now at thirty than she had been at fourteen, or eighteen, any of the lost years. He had loved her, and had left her when he went to school. A year later she had married a doctor from Portland. She had two children, and Farley no longer tried to sort out his feelings about her. When she came home they spent days together out on the desert. When she was gone they never corresponded.

"You should have told me you'd leave here with me," Fran said that day. She tossed rocks down a hole in the ground where an earthquake had opened a fissure ten thousand years before. "We could have made it work, half the time in town, half out here."

He shook his head. "Then we'd both be miserable, not just one of us."

"Aren't you miserable? Aren't you lonely? Is this goddamn desert all you really want out of life?"

He had not answered. His life was his answer. He had tried to live in town, during, immediately after his college days, and he knew the city would kill him, just as a cage kills. His mother was dying in Bend where she had to remain for daily cancer treatments. His father was dying, too. The small town of Bend was killing him. He was like a caged animal, the luster gone, the sheen, the joy of living, the will to live, all leaving him as surely as her life was leaving her.

Fran was gone the next day. He might see her again in a month, or six months, or never. He continued to watch Victoria.

They skirted an old alfalfa field; it looked as dead as the rest of the desert this time of year. Even the deer passed it up for the greener range high on the mountains. But if the winter rain didn't come, if the summer persisted into fall, into winter, the cattle, deer, antelope, rabbits would all be here grazing, and they would bring in the coyotes and bobcats. There would be some ranchers who would start yelping about varmint control, bait stations, traps, and he would try to talk them out of it, as he had done before. Farley knew they could never control the coyotes and bobcats; only water or the lack of water could do that. In the desert everything was very simple.

They had reached the trail leading up Goat's Head Butte, and he called a brief rest to water the horses. He and Sam had inspected this pump and well only last week.

"There are trees up there," Victoria said, pointing.

"Snows up there just about every year, not much, but enough to keep them more or less green," Farley said. "We'll take it nice and easy. It gets

a little steep and narrow up there, and, you'll be happy to hear, cooler. I'll go first and lead one of the pack horses, then you, Victoria, then Sam with the other pack horse. Okay? Just give Benny a loose rein and he'll stay exactly where he knows he should."

They zigzagged for the last hour of the climb; the curves became tighter, hairpin turns joining rocky stair steps that let them look directly onto the spot where they would be in a few minutes. Then suddenly they were on the top, a mesa with welcome shade and waist-high bunchgrass for the horses. The grass was pale brown and dry, but good graze. A startled hen pheasant ran across their path into the grass, closely followed by a dozen or more half-grown chicks. A hawk leaped from a tall pine tree into the sky and vanished, gliding downward behind the trees. From up here they could see other trails, most of them easier, but Farley would not bring horses up through the sparse woods and grasses. Such life was too precious on the desert, and horses were hard on trails. He had chosen the north climb because it was barren and rocky, and would suffer little damage from their passage.

"Do we get off now?" Victoria asked. She sounded strained. Sam was already dismounting. He gave Victoria a hand. "Tired? Sore?"

"Tired and sore," she said, standing stiffly, hardly even looking around. "And scared. My God, I've never been so scared in my life! What if that horse had stumbled? We'd still be falling!"

Sam laughed and put his arm about her shoulders. "Honey, you did beautifully. You came up like a bird."

"I was afraid to move! What if I had sneezed, or coughed, or got hiccups? What if the horse had looked down?"

* * * *

Serena had packed beef chunks and chopped vegetables, and within an hour stew was ready. They ate dinner ravenously and took coffee with them to the western end of the butte where they sat on rocks and watched the sunset over the Three Sisters in their chaste white veils.

No one spoke until the display was over and the streaks of gold, scarlet, salmon, baby pink had all turned dark. The snow on the Sisters became invisible and the mountains were simple shapes, almost geometrical, against the violet sky.

"They look like a child's drawing of volcanoes," Victoria said softly. Then: "Why do they call this Goat's Head Butte? It certainly looks like no goat's head I've ever seen."

"A mistake," Farley said. "The Indians called it Ghost Head, the source of Ghost River. A U.S. Geologic Survey cartographer got it wrong."

Victoria drew in her breath sharply. "It really is called Ghost River!"

She sat between Sam and Farley. There was still enough light for them to see each other, but shadows now filled the valley below; the moon was not yet out. For what seemed a long time no one spoke. Farley waited, and finally Sam said, in a grudging tone:

"I didn't know it then, Victoria, or I wouldn't have said what I did."

"Piece by piece it's coming together, isn't it?" Before either of them could respond, she said, "We're too far away."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

Helplessly Victoria shrugged. "I don't know what I mean. I think you have to be closer to feel anything. I don't know why -- "

Sam stood up, but Farley motioned him back. He put his hand lightly on Victoria's arm. "Tonight we observe," he said matter-of-factly. "Tomorrow we'll crisscross the valley and tomorrow night we'll camp down there. Relax, Sam. Just take it easy." Without changing his tone of voice he asked, "Victoria, what did you see in that valley that night?" He felt her stiffen and tightened his clasp on her arm.

"I told you."

"No. You told both of us your interpretation of what you saw. You translated something into familiar shapes. If you ask a primitive what something is that he never experienced before, he'll translate it into

familiar terms. So will a child."

"I'm not a primitive or a child!"

"The part of you that interpreted what you saw, that has been reacting with terror, that part is primitive. I'm not talking to that part. I'm talking to the rational you, the thinking, sane you. What did you see? What was the first thing that caught your attention? Not what you thought it was, just how it looked."

"A black dome," she said slowly.

"No. Not unless you could see the edges beyond doubt."

"A black shape, domelike."

"Let's leave it at a black shape. Are you certain it had a definite shape?"

"No, of course not. It was night, there were shadows, I was on the hill over it."

He was silent a few moments, and finally Victoria said, "It was just black. I remember thinking it was a shadow at first, then it took on shape."

Farley patted her arm. "Then?"

"There was a door, when it opened, a light showed ... That's not what you want, is it?"

"Just how it looked, not what you thought it was."

"A patch of pale orange light. No. A pale glow. Orange tinted. I thought of a door, the way light comes through an open door."

They worked on it painstakingly, each detail stripped of interpretation, stripped of meaning. Victoria began to sound tired, and Farley could sense restless small movements from Sam.

"I knew they were vehicles of some kind!" Victoria cried once. "They reflected light, they moved like automobiles -- in a straight line, gleaming, and they turned on headlights at the road."

"But what you described doesn't have to be vehicles," Farley said.

"What you said was clusters of gleaming lights, like reflections on metal."

"I suppose," she said wearily. "They were spaced like cars on a road, and they moved at the same speed, in a straight line, not up and down, or sideways, or anything. Like cars."

"And when they turned on lights, could you still see the reflections?"

She sighed and said no, she didn't think so.

"You're getting tired," Farley said gently. "We should get back to camp, get some sleep. One more thing, Victoria. Look down there now, the moon's lighting the valley, probably not as brightly as that night, but much the same as it was then. If you had been up here that night, Victoria, would you have been able to see what you saw?"

Farley still had his hand on her arm. The moon behind them made her face a pale blue; it was impossible to see her features clearly, but he felt a tremor ripple through her, felt her arm grow rigid.

"No!" The trembling increased. "We're too far away. You can't see the road from here."

"Not because we're too far to see it," Farley said. "The road's lower over there than the valley is."

"You mean I couldn't have seen it from the hill either?"

"No."

Victoria rose unsteadily and stared at the valley, turned her entire body to look at the cliffs surrounding it.

"What is it?" Farley demanded. "You've remembered something, haven't you? What?"

"This isn't the right place."

"It's the place. You were over there. You can see the boulders, the pale shapes near the end of the ridge. Below that is the ranch road where you parked. It's the right place."

"It's wrong! It isn't the right place! I was on a hill. It wasn't like that!" She closed her eyes and swayed. "I was on a hill, and I could hear... I heard..."

"You heard what? You heard something and saw something and smelled something, didn't you? What was it?"

She shook her head hard. "I don't know."

Farley made her face the valley again. "Look at it, Victoria look! You're hiding among the boulders on that ridge over there. You know they might see you. You keep in the shadows, hiding. Don't move! Don't make a sound! What do you smell? What do you hear?"

She moaned and he said, more insistently, "You smell something. What is it, Victoria? You know what it is, tell me!"

"Water!" she cried. "Water, a river, a forest!"

"You're running," Farley said, holding her hard. "You're on the hill and you're running. Your eyes are open. What do you see?"

She tried to push him away. "Nothing! I can't remember that part. Nothing!"

"Look at the ridge. Look at it! You couldn't run up there! There's no place to run!"

"It's not the same place! I told you, I was on a hill, there was grass. I ran until that man, Reuben, stopped me."

"You're terrified they might hear you. You smell the river and forest. You hear the rushing water. You run. Where are you running to? Why?"

"The trees," she gasped. "Bushes under the trees. I'll hide in the bushes, in the mist." She pulled harder, her voice rising in hysteria. "There isn't any forest or river! Let me go! Let me go!" She began to sag. "I can't breathe!"

Farley and Sam half-carried, half-led her back to the campfire, which had burned to a bed of glowing ashes. Sam built up the fire and Farley held a drink to Victoria's lips, keeping one arm around her shoulder. She sipped the bourbon, then took the cup and drank it down.

"Better?" Farley asked. She nodded. "Sit down. I'll get a blanket to put around you." Wordlessly she sat down by the fire. Sam was making coffee.

No one spoke until they all had coffee. Then Farley took Victoria's hand. "We have to finish it," he said.

She nodded without looking at him. "I'm crazy," she said. "I would have killed myself that night if that cowboy hadn't been there to save my life."

"You saved yourself," Farley said. "You panicked and you ran. You knew there was no forest, no river, no mist, but they were there. You invented Reuben, you projected him, because you couldn't resist the evidence of your senses. You had to have help and no one was there to help you, so you helped yourself, through Reuben."

"I'm going to bed," Victoria said dully. She made no motion to get up.

Farley was not certain if she could accept anything he was saying. He could not tell if she heard him. "You acted out of self-preservation," he said.

"It was all just a dream or a series of hallucinations," Sam said. His voice was hard, grating. His angular face looked aged; his full beard made him look Biblical, like an old bitter prophet.

"You can't regard it all as one thing," Farley said. "That's the mistake you made before, the same mistake the psychiatrist made, that if part of it was false, it all was. Obviously the cowboy figure is right out of romantic fiction, but that doesn't make the rest of it false. I wondered if Victoria rejected the truth because she was convinced the truth was impossible, and accepted instead the illusions that could have been possible." He paused, then added, "Both in what she saw in the valley, and again in the cowboy."

Victoria stirred and shook her head. "I don't understand anything," she said, but with more animation now, as if she were awakening.

"I don't either," Farley said. "But you did see something, and you smelled and heard Ghost River. I bet not more than a dozen people today know it was ever called that, but you renamed it. That's what I keep coming back

to."

"That's crap!" Sam shouted. "She saw something and ran. Probably she stumbled and knocked herself out. You know you can't run over that country, not even in daylight. She dreamed all the rest of it." He had risen to stand over Victoria. "The only important thing is, what did you see in the valley?"

"Not what you want me to say!" Victoria cried. "It wasn't a god figure. Not a burning bush or a pillar of flame. Not good or evil. Nothing we can know."

Farley reached out to touch her and she jerked away. "You said we have to finish it. We do! I do! Sam, you wanted to know my nightmare. Let me tell you. I'm wearing tights, covered with sequins, circus makeup, my hair in a long glittering braid. Spotlights are on me. I'm climbing the ladder to the tightrope and there's a drum roll, the whole thing. I know I can do this, the way you know you can ride a bike, or swim, or just walk. I smile at the crowd and start out on the rope and suddenly there is absolute silence. I look down and realize the crowd is all on one side of the rope, to my left; no one is on the right side. The audience is waiting for me to fall. Nothing else. They know I'll fall and they are waiting. They aren't impatient, or eager; they have no feelings at all. They don't care. That's when I panic, when I realize they don't care. And I know I must not fall on their side. I try to scream for someone to open the safety net, for someone to take my hand, for anything. Then I am falling and I don't know which side I'm on. I won't know until I hit. That is what terrifies me, that I don't know which side I'll die on." Her voice had become almost a monotone as she told the dream. Abruptly she rose to her feet. "I'd like some more bourbon, please."

Farley poured it and she sat down once more and drank before she spoke again.

"I came back here to see which side of the rope I'll land on. The next time I'll finish the dream and find out."

Sam reached for the bottle and poured bourbon into his cup. "A lousy dream," he muttered.

"Indifference, that's what made it a nightmare. Their indifference," Victoria said quietly. She sipped at her drink and went on. "It's the same way we might break up an anthill and watch the ants scurry. Or how we tear a spiderweb and maybe see the spider dart away, or not. We don't care. We watch or not, it doesn't matter. Like the bank camera that photographs me when I go to the window. Me, a bank robber, someone asking for information, it doesn't matter, the camera clicks its picture." She was starting to slur her words slightly. Her voice was low, almost inaudible part of the time. "It ... they watched me like that. They didn't care if I went over the cliff or not."

Farley felt the hair rise on the back of his neck and wondered if she realized what she was saying. She wasn't talking about the dream any longer.

"They didn't care if I went over the cliff. They didn't care if I stopped, or ran, what I did." She drained her cup, then set it down on the ground with elaborate care. "That's inhuman," she said. "Not like a god, the opposite of what it would be like for a god. Beyond all idea of good and evil. No awareness of good and evil."

Sam sighed and said, "She's drunk. She never could drink."

Victoria pushed herself up from the ground. She nodded.

"I am," she said carefully. "I'll go to bed now." Both men rose. She looked at Farley. "I know why I'm here. I have to see where I land. And I know why Sam's here. He's looking for God. Why are you here? What is your noble cause?" She was taking care to pronounce each word, as if speaking a foreign language.

"You're too stinko to talk any more tonight."

"I can't talk, but my ears are not drunk. My ears are not blurring anything."

"Will you remember?"

She nodded an exaggerated yes.

"It's my land. Over the years twenty-five or thirty head of cattle

have gone over that cliff. Two people have vanished in that area. My land. I have to know what's there. I put it off and pretended it was just a superstition, wiped it from my mind, but I can't do that now. You won't let me do it ever again." He paused, examining her face. "Do you understand that?"

"No, but I don't have to." She began to walk unsteadily toward the tent. "Because it's not true," she said, then ducked under the flap of the low tent.

It was true, though. He wanted to exorcise a devil, Farley thought, sitting down again. And Sam wanted to find God. All Victoria wanted was to learn the truth. They'd both use her, and through her they might find what they looked for. Across the fire from him, Sam sat brooding, staring into the flames.

"I want to stay up tonight," Sam said abruptly. "Just in case there is something down there."

Farrelly nodded. "We'll take turns. You want to sleep first?"

Sam shrugged, then wordlessly got up and went to his sleeping bag spread on the ground a short distance from the fire.

Farley sat with his back against a pine tree and watched the shifting patterns of light and shadow as the moon moved across the sky. From time to time he added a small stick to the fire, not enough to blaze much, just to maintain a glow to keep the coffee hot. A fire during a night watch was friendly, he thought, nudging a spark into flame.

What was he doing here? What he had answered was part of it. Maybe all of it. He didn't know. For hundreds of years people around this area had known this piece of land was strange, not to be trusted. The Indians had shunned it for generations. His father had known it was not safe for cattle or men and had fenced it off. Easier to cross off three hundred acres out of ninety thousand than to pursue a riddle that probably could not be solved anyway. He would have done the same if Sam and Victoria had not forced him to examine it. He was examining many things suddenly, he admitted to himself.

"You have so many books!" Victoria had exclaimed. "Did you major in geology?"

There were four shelves of geology books. "Nope. That's why I have to keep reading. Can't find the one I'm looking for, I guess."

"And that is?"

"Life and death, desert style. Something like that. Someone who can relate the earth cycles to life cycles. I'm not sure, that's why I keep reading and searching."

"You'll have to write it yourself," Victoria had said. And Fran had asked, "Aren't you lonely?"

He was sure he was not lonely in the sense she meant, but there had to be more. A few months ago he had not known that. Every day he got up at dawn and worked as hard as any of the hands on the ranch, doing the same kind of work, doing more than any of them most days. Dinner at six, read, bed by ten. There were women in Bend, one in Prineville, all very casual, noncompelling.

He was evading again. Why was he here? He had come home because he could not live in the city. He had found strength in this harsh desert. But evil had followed him, had claimed his mother. Sometimes when the phone rang late at night, he found himself pausing, willing it to be his father telling him it was all over finally. Sometimes he found himself watching Serena playing with her children and he almost hated her for being able to find a good life so simply without any effort at all.

He could have married Serena. They had experimented with sex together; at the time they both had assumed they would marry when they were grown. Something in him had said no, and he had practically pushed her into the arms of Charlie Hendricks. And Fran. She would have gone to school with him. Their parents had expected it, and even discussed the financial arrangements. Instead he had decided he couldn't handle a bride and the university at the same time. Leave him alone, his mother had said, he'll find himself in school. But he had found nothing.

He had been drafted and at first he had believed he was finally going to do something worthwhile. He had discovered only despair and hopelessness. School again, sinking ever deeper, then the flight home to the safety of the land. Here, he had thought, was the only place he had been able to find any hope. Here nothing was unclean, nothing was evil. The coyotes, the bobcats, the summer frosts and the winter droughts all were proper here.

He had sought refuge in work on this healing land, only to learn that evil was here too. Not the land! he wanted to howl. And he knew this time there was no place he could go, no last refuge he could bury himself in.

Reluctantly, compelled by circumstances he could not understand, he accepted that finally, after years of flight, he would stand and confront the enemy.

IV

Victoria dreamed that her boss was coming, that he would rage at her for not doing her work better. "I'm doing the best I can," she cried. "Even a child could do it better," he stormed at her. And she woke up.

The light was as it had been the other night, perhaps not as bright, but almost. She didn't make any noise; she knew that either Farley or Sam would be up, and for the moment she didn't want to talk to anyone. She remembered the dream. No boss had ever raged at her in that way. A child could do it better, of that she was certain. Slowly she sat up and waited for the moment of terror to pass. It always overwhelmed her when she fast awakened; then it receded, but never completely.

Now she could see Sam, a clear profile against the pale horizon. His full beard made his head look grotesquely oversized. He had aged. It was as if he had left Shangri-la and before her eyes were passing into the mundane world where age caught up. He looked old and tired. He looked frightened. She tried to imagine Farley frightened as Sam was, and somehow it was harder to picture him so. She didn't understand Farley. Something was driving him, and she didn't know what.

Something was out there that each of them needed to learn about. They had followed Farley's plan, had searched all day by sunlight, on horseback, then on foot, and had found nothing. But the moon changed the land; it made strange things possible.

"You should be sleeping," Sam said when she joined him.

"I know. The silence and the moonlight woke me up, I think. Has it been quiet all evening?"

"Yup. Not a thing stirring."

She sighed. "The desert is very beautiful at night, isn't it. That's a surprise. I'd read that, but it's like reading that the ocean is beautiful, or that the sunset is beautiful. It's meaningless until you see it. I can almost understand why Farley wants to stay here."

Sam laughed. "Nobody understands why Farley stays here. He's a hermit."

"Sam," she said, "after tonight, then what?" He shrugged. "I mean, what if nothing happens?"

"Then I come back tomorrow night, and the next night, and the next night."

"But what if nothing ever happens?"

"Then you're crazy."

"That's possible."

"Vickie, don't talk about that right now. Let's watch the horse. Let's watch the desert. Watch the shadows on the face of the moon. They deepen as you watch. Let's not talk about anything else right now."

She sat down beside him. "May I smoke?"

Sam laughed irritably. "I wish you'd stayed asleep."

"I know. I'm just nervous. What if noth -- " Suddenly she stopped. The horse had a listening attitude; its ears were straight up, poised. They were like the ears of a racehorse before the signal. It was sniffing the air. And now, coming from nowhere, Farley was there with them.

The three of them watched the horse as he sniffed the air and pawed.

He was pulling at the tether, neighing. The other horses, hobbled on the safe side of the fence, answered sleepily. They weren't interested. Whatever it was that had wakened the one horse hadn't bothered them. Now he was acting wild, rearing.

Farley said, "You two stay here, I'm going to go get it." He ran to the gate and opened it very quickly.

Victoria closed her eyes. She didn't know what she expected, but she didn't expect him to return with the horse. Somehow that seemed too simple.

After a moment, Sam shook her and said, "Well, whatever it was we'll probably never know. That horse sure isn't going to tell us." Farley was standing before them with the horse. He led it to the others, hobbled it, and returned. He looked stunned, and bewildered, and he looked frightened.

"What was it?" Sam asked brusquely. Farley said, "We -- we'll all have to go across that fence and hear it. You can't hear it from here."

"The river!" Victoria cried.

Farley nodded. "You can hear the river over there." For a moment no one moved as they listened to the still desert. Then they went through the gate together and stopped a few feet from the fence.

Victoria strained to hear, but there was nothing. Everything looked the same, yet different, the way it always looked unchanged even while changing. She thought Sam was cursing under his breath. He strode ahead, holding himself too stiff. Angry, she thought, and disappointed. Abruptly Sam stopped, gazing upward at the ridge.

"Farley, look!" A woman had appeared on the ridge, making her way clumsily through the jumbled boulders. She glanced backward once and hurried even more. A flicker of light appeared around the rocks.

Victoria felt Farley clutching her arm too hard. "It's me," she breathed. His grip tightened.

The other Victoria ran wildly down the slope of a hill they could not see. She was dashing panic-stricken through the air, and behind her, gaining on her, came the cloud of lights. The cloud flickered all about her, like a swarm of fireflies. The light did not illuminate, it obscured the racing figure.

Now she was coming down the ridge, drawing near the edge of the cliff, stumbling, falling, rising only to stumble again. Suddenly she flung herself down and drew up her legs in a tightly curled position. The swarm of cold lights settled over her, seemed to expand and contract with her breathing. Minutes passed. The expansion was less noticeable, the lights more compactly together. Suddenly the woman stirred and rose, moving like a sleepwalker. She looked straight ahead and started to walk slowly, carefully down the side of the mesa. The swarm of lights stayed with her, but she was oblivious of them. At the bottom she turned toward the ranch road where Sam's camper was parked. Moving without haste, she passed the camper, opened the gate, returned to the vehicle, got in and drove through. Ten or fifteen feet from the gate the light swarm stopped, hovered in air for a few moments, then streamed back up the cliff, like a focused light beam that could move around curves with ease.

Victoria felt the frozen, supporting rigidity leave her. She sank to the ground.

"Me too," Farley muttered, his arm still about her. They sat huddled together.

"I'm going over there," Sam said. He started in the direction of the camper, stopped after a dozen or so paces. He came back to them and also sat down. "Gone. It's not there."

Victoria freed herself from Farley's arm and stood up. "We have to go up to the ridge," she said. She felt almost detached.

"Tomorrow," Farley said, and Sam muttered something unintelligible.

"Now." Victoria stood up.

"Okay," Farley said, "but first we go to camp and get flashlights and jackets. We may be out for hours, and it can get damned cold."

Impatiently Sam started back to camp; Victoria and Farley followed

more slowly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She really was, she realized. Since they had seen something, too, the strangeness must be in the land, in the valley, not in her; her relief made her almost giddy.

At the campsite, Sam already had his jacket on and his day pack slung over his shoulder. He handed Victoria her pack and tossed the third over to Farley, who knelt and started to rummage through it. Victoria snatched up her jacket. Farley moved to the big packs.

"Come on," Sam said. "You put flashlights in. I saw you do it." He turned and strode toward the gate again. Victoria hurried after him.

"I'm getting my camera," Farley called. "Be right with you!"

"Ass!" Sam said. "Like a goddamn tourist." The gate was still open and they left it that way for Farley. "I think the best way up is -- " Sam stopped, his hand on Victoria's arm. "Jesus!"

It was different. The crystalline light was changed: a pale mist dimmed the moonlight; the air was soft and humus-fragrant, the coolness more penetrating. To the right the Ghost River thundered and splashed and roared. Victoria looked behind them, but the gate was no longer there. The ranch road was gone. Underfoot the ground was spongy; wet grass brushed her legs. She looked to the ridge that had become a wooded hill, and over the crest of the hill streamed the light swam, winding sinuously among the trees toward her and Sam.

V

Farley hesitated at the gate, then left it standing open; the horses were safely hobbled, and a quick retreat might be necessary. He was carrying his camera, his pack over his shoulder, not strapped yet. He began to hurry. He hadn't realized the other two had gotten so far ahead of him.

"Sam! Victoria!" His echo sounded as dismal and lonesome as a coyote's call. He stopped to study the cliff up to the ridge, and he felt a chill mount his back, race down his arms. The cliff was almost vertical, the road they had been on was gone; ahead the cliff curved, and the narrow terrace ended dead against the wall. He backed up a few steps, denying what he saw. He strained to hear the river, and heard instead a low rumble, and felt the ground lift and fall, tilt, sink again; the rumble became thunder. He was thrown down, stunned. The thunder was all around him. Something hit him in the back and he pulled himself upright, only to find the ground really was heaving and the thunder was an avalanche crashing down the cliff all around him. Frantically he ran, was knocked down again, ran, fell, until he was away from the cliff. He stumbled to the horses, groped blindly to untie them, and he fell again and this time stayed where he fell.

* * * *

He dreamed he and his mother were having a picnic at Fort Rock. The fort was a natural formation, an extinct volcano, the caldera almost completely buried; what remained formed an amphitheater where he was on stage, she his audience of one. He recited for her and she applauded enthusiastically; he sang and danced, and when he made his last bow she came to him with tear-filled eyes and hugged him. She was very pretty, the wind blowing her hair across her face, her cheeks flushed under the dark tan, her eyes shining blue and happy. She opened a beach umbrella and they stayed under it out of the sun, while she read to him and he dozed.

He dreamed he was in the hospital. He had taken her place, had released her. People kept wanting to talk to him, kept wanting him to speak, but he wouldn't because then they would learn they had the wrong patient.

He woke up and felt a terrible confusion because he was in a hospital bed; his father was sleeping in an armchair at the window. For a long time Farley didn't speak, hoping that if he remained perfectly still he might wake up again in his own bed.

He studied the peaceful face of his father. The late afternoon sun gave his pale face a ruddiness that had faded months ago. His father was fifty-seven and until recently had always looked ten years younger than he

was. Relaxed now, he looked as he had when they used to go on all-day outings -- like the trip to Fort Rock ... A memory stirred, a dream surfaced, and he realized why his father was here, in his room, not hers.

He started to get up, and grunted with pain.

"Farl! You're awake?" Will Chesterman moved with such effortless speed that people often thought of him as a slow man, very deliberate. He awoke, crossed the room, and was leaning over Farley all in one motion.

"Dad. How'd I get here? Mother?"

"No talking. Supposed to call the nurse the second you open your eyes. No moving. No talking." He pushed a button on the call box and after a moment of muted static a woman answered. "My son's awake," Will said. The nurse said she would call the doctor, to please keep Farley quiet...

"Tell me about Mother."

"We buried her yesterday."

Farley shut his eyes hard. "Christ! How long have I been here? What happened?"

"Six days. Now Farl, I'm not answering anything else, so just don't bother. You got a concussion, ten broken ribs, dozens of stitches here and there, and you are a solid bruise. Nothing seriously damaged. Now just shut up until Lucas gets here and goes over you."

Then unabashedly he leaned over and kissed Farley on the forehead.

"God, I'm glad to see you back, son. Now just relax until Lucas comes."

"I've been out for six days?"

"Awake and sleeping, not really out all that time. Lucas said you might not recall much at first. Don't stew about it."

Farley started to speak and his father put his hand over his mouth.

"Any more and I'll go out in the hall."

Lucas Whaite arrived and felt Farley's skull, examined his eyes, listened to his heart, checked his blood pressure, and then sat down. "How much you remember now, Farley?"

"Being in here? Nothing. Or coming here."

"You remember what happened to you?"

"We camped out, by the gorge near the old road..." Suddenly it was all there. "Are they all right? There was an earthquake. Were they hurt bad?"

The doctor and Will exchanged glances. Will said slowly, "Listen, son. There wasn't any earthquake. You were talking about it before, and we checked. Farl, someone came damn near to beating you to death. Looks like they used four-by-fours on you, then left you for dead. Was it Sam Dumarie and the woman with him? What for, son?"

"Where are they?"

"Wish to God we knew."

Farley groaned and turned away. "They're missing? Is that what you meant"

"No one's seen them since you all rode out together last week. The horses came back around noon Sunday and some of the hands scattered to look for you. They found you at the campsite, more dead than alive. Should have died too, I guess, out there in the sun bleeding like a stuck pig. Your friends were gone, their day packs and yours gone with them, nothing else. And they haven't lighted yet. Now you tell us what the hell happened."

Farley told them. Then a nurse came with his dinner and Lucas said he should eat and rest, and no more talk. He left, taking Will with him. The next day Lucas took out forty-nine stitches, from both legs, his back, his side, and right arm. "Been run through a goddamn mangle," he grunted. "Boy, there ain't no way you're going to lay where you ain't on something that's going to hurt."

"Where's Dad? What's he doing about Victoria and Sam?"

Lucas lighted his pipe. "He's sleeping, I hope. Told him we had hospital business to attend to this A.M."

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Farley, I delivered you, took out your appendix, named your diseases

as they appeared, wrote your prescriptions for ear drops, cough syrup, stitched you up from time to time. I know you don't lie, son. But I also know there hasn't been any earthquake in this whole territory for years. It's the concussion, Farley. Funny things happen when the brain gets a shock like that."

"You believe Sam Dumarie could do all this to me and be able to walk away afterward?"

Lucas tapped out his pipe and stood up. He lifted Farley's right hand and held it so Farley could see the knuckles -- unmarked, normal. "No," he said slowly, "you'd have him in worse shape. We all know that. But he's gone, the woman's gone, and you're in here. Listen, son, I've held Tom Thorton off long as I can. Maybe there was a landslide, or maybe you fell off a cliff, but there wasn't any earthquake, and he'll know that just as sure as I do. Maybe you plain can't remember yet. I'll back you up on that. But no earthquake."

Over the next two days Tom Thorton, the sheriff, questioned him, a state trooper questioned him, the search was resumed in the desert, and no one was satisfied. Farley told Tom Thorton he had been caught in a landslide and Thorton came back with a map for him to pinpoint the exact location.

This was how it had been with Victoria, Farley thought. No one had believed her and she had come to doubt her sanity. Thorton returned again looking glum.

"Look, Farley, I was over every inch of that ground. There ain't been no slide or anything at all out there. You sure of the place?"

"You calling me a liar, Tom?"

"Hell no! But a man can make a mistake, misremember. I been reading about concussions. Down in San Francisco they been using a medical hypnotist, helping people remember things better. I been thinking -- "

"No," Farley said. "Why would I be lying, Tom?"

"I been thinking," Tom Thorton said. "We all know this Dumarie's been digging around them mountains for years. What's he looking for? He makes fancy jewelry, right? So what does he need? Gold! Silver! What if he found it on your land and took you to show you, and you gave him an argument about it, being's it's on your land and all. Gold comes between brothers, fathers and sons. So he waits till your back is turned and knocks you over the head with a rock, then he takes you over by the gorge and rolls you down the cliff, him and that girl with him. He doesn't want you found anywhere near the gold..."

"Jesus Christ! Just go out there and find them, will you, Tom? They're both dead by now, but they're out there, somewhere near the gorge, or down in it, or in the fenced-off valley."

The next day Lucas reluctantly agreed to let Farley go home. It had been ten days since they had made camp by the ranch road at the Ghost River gorge. On the way home Will drove by the small cemetery. It was wind-scoured; clumps of junipers, small groves in the barren land, were the only signs of the care given the burial ground where Farley's grandparents lay near Farley's uncle and a cousin; where his mother now was.

Standing at her grave by his father, Farley said, "I'm sorry I wasn't with you."

"I know. That last night she dreamed of you. She told me. You sang and danced for her, recited some poetry. She said she held her umbrella over you so you wouldn't get sunburned. The dream made her happy. She died without pain, smiling over her dream."

Both men became silent; the wind whispered over the tortured land.

* * * *

Farley sat on a rock, aching, hurting, unwilling to move again soon, and watched Fran ride up. She made it look so easy, he thought, remembering how Victoria had sat in the saddle climbing Goat's Head Butte.

Fran waved, but didn't urge her horse to quicken its gait; it was too hot to run a horse on the desert. She stopped near his jeep in the shade of a twisted juniper tree, tied her horse, then joined him inside the fenced area.

No one ever brought animals inside if they could help it.

"They all said you look like hell," she said cheerfully, surveying him. "They're right."

"You just happened to be passing by?"

"I came when ... I've been home awhile, thought I might as well hang around to see you. Want to talk about it?"

He didn't know if she meant his mother's death, or the landslide he had dreamed up for the sheriff. "No."

Fran nudged him over and sat by him. The sun was low; long shadows flowed down the gorge like cool silent lava. "It was here, wasn't it?" Fran asked. She lighted a cigarette and pocketed the match. "Serena said you came out here right after breakfast. Been here all day?"

He stared morosely at the gate standing open. Here in the hot still afternoon it was just another ranch gate; no way it could vanish with a twist of the head.

"We all think you were lucky. If you hadn't been separated from them you'd be gone too."

Farley turned to look at her. "Tell that to Tom Thorton. And my father."

"We aren't a bunch of superstitious Indians," she said, "afraid of a curse on the land, or land claimed and held by a god. Tom will never admit anything so irrational, but he went over this whole area with half a dozen men at least twice. The rest of it, searching the desert, the bulletins, that's all for show. Your father, my father, if they knew we were sitting here, well, they'd probably lasso us and haul us out."

"Aren't you afraid to be in here?"

"Not during daylight."

Farley laughed and pulled himself off the rock, wincing as he moved. "And I was going to invite you to come back with me tonight."

Fran caught his arm as she rose. "You're not serious! Why? What good can it do if you disappear?"

"I don't know. That girl asked for help, and I told her to trust me. Now she's gone. I can't pretend it never happened."

Fran shook her head impatiently. "When you were found, they thought you were dying, because they couldn't wake you up. Dad heard about it and called me. He doesn't approve, of course. We've had scenes. But he called me." She glanced at him, then looked out over the gorge. She was speaking almost dispassionately. "I was having a dinner party, people were just arriving, and I forgot them. Forgot my husband, my children, my guests, everything. I got in the car and left, didn't change clothes or pack. I just left. I outran a police car coming over Santiam Pass." She shuddered briefly. "Then they wouldn't let me see you. They wouldn't even let me look at you. It's a scandal, how I showed up late at night in a long dress, made a spectacle of myself." She lighted another cigarette. "Edward came down. It was all very loud and nasty. He's always known, but it was so discreet, he didn't have to admit it. I believe in your earthquake. It's shaken my world apart. I don't want you dead. I don't want you just gone, like your friends."

Her face shone -- she used oil lavishly here on the desert and she tanned very dark, her hair sun-bleached almost white. She was beautiful; it seemed every year she was more beautiful than ever before. She continued to gaze at the deepening shadows of the chasm.

"It wouldn't work," Farley said. "You wouldn't stay here with me. I can't leave."

"Won't," she said; she dropped her cigarette and rubbed it out with the toe of her boot with exaggerated care. "Won't, darling." She shook her head at him. "Forever in love with the unattainable. It's the poor lost girl now, isn't it? Now you can live the ideal romantic dream, never have to make any tough choices. Come here and mope, prowl these hills all night, and finally one day your horse will come in alone and you'll have exactly what you're after. Complete nonexistence." She strode away from him.

"What will you do?" Farley called after her.

Without turning she waved. "Probably go home and fuck the devil out of my husband and talk him into moving to San Francisco, or Hawaii." She yanked her horse's tether loose and swung herself into the saddle smoothly. "And you can follow your goddamn Pied Piper right into the side of the cliff!" She rode away at a hard gallop.

* * * *

Tom Thorton was waiting for him when he got home. He charged off the porch, stopped when he saw Farley's face, and said, "Good God! You look like old puddled candlewax."

Farley concentrated on climbing the steps to the porch. Will stood watching.

"You eat anything today?" he asked quietly.

Farley sat down without answering, and presently Serena appeared with a tray. He drank the cold beer gratefully, then ate. He wanted a shower and clean clothes, but not enough to climb the stairs to the second floor.

"You can search those rocks till Doomsday. Won't find anything," Tom said. "I've been over that piece of ground three times myself."

Farley grunted. "That's the place. I'll find something."

Will opened a bottle of beer and poured it, watching the head form. "You came to the hospital and asked me about that piece of land," he said. "I told you it was poisoned, as I recall. When my father came out here in eighteen-ninety or about then, there were stone markers down there, put there by the Braddock Indians. They were still thick then. No one ever said how the Indians read the stones, but they did. Little piles, like dry walls, here a heap, a mile away another heap, and so on. Anyway, over the years Pa got to be friends with some of the renegades, sheltered them, hid them when the army was on their tail, and they warned him about that three hundred acres. One of them took him all around that piece and told him to keep clear of it. From nineteen-two when he actually homesteaded until nineteen twenty-four when he bought the west quarter, including that piece, two Klamath Indians disappeared over there; six or eight white men vanished. Course some of them could have just wandered on, but he didn't think so. Several dozen head of cattle went in and never came out. As he got that land, he fenced it, been fenced ever since. Even so in nineteen twenty-nine two white men went in looking for oil and they vanished, left their truck, their gear, everything." He drank and wiped his mouth. "Tom's been over it three times. I've been over it a hundred times or more."

"Why didn't you get help? People with equipment? Scientists?"

Will laughed, a short bark like a coyote's. "In nineteen-fifty when the hunt was on for uranium, we had a couple of geologists here with their Geiger counters, stuff like that. They heard me out and we went over. Nothing. They moved on. Who's going to believe you, son? You tell me. What's there to believe? How does it fit in with anything else we know?"

"We found something," Farley said angrily. "I heard that river! I smelled it!"

"And you're damn lucky to be sitting here talking about it," his father said quietly. "You're not the first to go in and see or hear something and come out again. But you're the first since my father began keeping a record in nineteen-two."

"Victoria came out."

"But she's not around to tell anyone."

Tom Thorton stood up then. "Whatever you say here don't mean I buy it. I can't put that kind of stuff in a report. People don't get swallowed up by the desert. And that girl's father is coming over here tomorrow. He says he's going to make you tell him what you've done to his daughter. I think you better have something ready to tell him. And you better be here. I've had my fill of him; I tell you that."

* * * *

Farley hadn't gone back to the gorge. When he made a motion towards the

steps, his father had said very quietly that he would knock him out and tie him to his bed first, and Farley knew he could do it. He had gone upstairs and to bed. Now, waiting for Victoria's father to arrive, he was glad he had slept. He felt better and stronger, and at the same time much worse. It was as if his emotions, his mind had taken longer to wake up than his body.

He felt deep shame over his treatment of Fran; his father's grief and loneliness was a weight he wanted to share without knowing how. Most of all he kept remembering Victoria's trust in him, her faith. The past few days all he had been able to think of was getting back to the gorge, finding something, anything. Not enough, he knew now.

He needed to think, to plan. Whatever was in the valley was pure malevolence; it could kill, had tried to kill him, had tried to drive Victoria over the edge of the gorge. He no longer believed in the earthquake he had experienced. It was as false as Reuben. You couldn't believe anything you saw, felt, heard, experienced in there; and that made the problem impossible, he thought. If observers could have watched him that night, what would they have seen? He felt certain now that they would have seen him tumbling over the ground, falling repeatedly, running frantically, just as he had seen Victoria running and failing. But, he thought with a rising excitement, then she had risen, had ignored the lights and, like a sleepwalker, had simply left the area. That was the starting point. The clue to her escape that night lay in that action: she had walked away like someone in a trance, or asleep.

His thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of an automobile, or the cloud of dust from a car, at the top of the hill overlooking the ranch buildings. The car came down too fast, screamed around the curve at the bottom of the hill; the dust cloud increased.

"You want me out here?" Will asked from inside the screen door.

"No point in it. I'll talk to him." Farley watched the car careen around the last curve, screech to a stop. The driver was a thin, balding man wearing a pale blue sports coat, white shirt, tie, navy trousers. He made Farley feel hot. He went down the steps to greet Victoria's father.

"Mr. Dorsett? I'm Farley Chesterman."

The man ignored his hand and walked quickly to the shade cast by the house. "This is where she came to spend a week? In this hellhole?"

"You might as well come up and sit down," Farley said. He went up the steps and sat in one of the canvas chairs. "You want a drink? Beer, Coke, anything? That's a long hot drive."

"I don't want anything from you," Dorsett said shrilly. "I just wanted to see for myself. A pack of lies, that's all I've had from your sheriff. Nothing but a pack of lies. You don't look like someone almost dead to me. And this sure as hell doesn't look like any resort hotel where my girl would spend even five minutes, let alone a week. I want to know what happened up here, Chesterman, why my girl came here, what you've done to her."

Farley told him the official story of the campout, the landslide. "I was found and taken to the hospital. They haven't been found yet."

"I'll take that beer," Dorsett said, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief.

Farley went in for it and when he came back Dorsett was sitting on the porch.

"Why did your sheriff send people poking around in my affairs? What's any of this got to do with me?" The belligerence was gone from his voice.

"I don't know. I guess he's trying to account for the fact that Victoria and Sam weren't found."

"Ha! Because she's just like her mother -- follow anyone who whistles."

"It's hard to believe they'd leave anyone hurt, not try to help."

"Didn't her mother leave me in a jam? She ran off with one of my buyers, vanished without a word, nothing. Left me with a two-year-old baby girl. What was I supposed to do with a _girl_?"

"Did you ever find her?"

"I didn't look! She found me a couple of years later when loverboy ran out of cash and things got tough." He drank his beer and stood up. "As for Victoria, she'll show up again. If you have any pull with that sheriff of yours, just tell him to keep his goddamn nose out of my business. I haven't seen her and don't expect to. I wasn't sure if it was just him, or if you were making insinuations too. Now I know. If it's a shakedown, he's bucking the wrong man. I didn't get where I am today being intimidated by two-bit politicians. You tell him, Chesterman."

Farley didn't stand. Dorsett regarded him for a moment, turned, and went back to his car. He drove away in a cloud of dust as thick as the one he had brought with him.

Victoria had said her mother died when she was a baby. Maybe she did, Farley thought.

* * * *

Farley lay on his back, his hands under his head, on top of his sleeping bag, and listened to his father and Tom Thornton exchange stories. Tom was talking about his dude-rustling days for Leon Stacy, before he had been elected sheriff twelve years ago.

"He says to me right off, 'Mr. Thorton, I don't know a damn thing about horses, trails, desert country, nothing else I should know. All's I know is Egypt, history, pyramids, anything you want to know, I can more'n likely tell you. Now if I agree not to treat you like an ignorant slob because you don't know shit about my specialty, will you agree not to treat me like one because I don't know yours?' Thorton poured himself more coffee from the thermos. "Real fine fellow. Teaches at the university over at Eugene. Came back every year, still does, more'n likely. Nice wife, kids. Questions! Never heard so many questions. And they all listened to the answers. Fine people."

Farley counted stars, lost track and went over the steps again. In the valley there was enough dynamite to blow up ten acres. On the ridge was the detonator. He had already cut the fence up there, made a four-foot opening. They could step through, observe whatever was in the valley, get out, and set off the explosives. On the cliff and at the bottom gate there were powerful searchlights. "It will work," he told himself again.

But there was nothing to blast. Halfway through their second night the men had seen nothing, heard nothing. The horse tethered fifteen feet inside the area remained quiet.

"Three nights," Will had said. "If there's nothing for three nights will you give it up? Admit there's nothing you can do."

He had been so certain. Victoria hadn't waited. Her first night, there it was. When they came again, it was right there. He got up, walked to the gate, and watched the horse a few minutes. The starlight was so bright that if it acted up, they would be able to see it. He sat and poured coffee.

"You should get some sleep," he told Will.

"Intend to. Want to check the ridge again first?"

Farley shrugged. "No point. Not until the horse tells us."

Tom Thornton unrolled his sleeping bag. "Call me at three." He grunted several times, then began to snore softly.

"Me too," Will said. "If there's a sound, anything..."

"Sure, Dad."

The night remained quiet and Farley didn't bother to awaken either of the men. At dawn his father got up first, grumbled, and roused Tom, and when their relief came, two ranch hands who would guard the dynamite during the day, they returned to the house, where Farley went to bed.

The third night was the same.

"Farl, that was the agreement," Will said stubbornly. "You agreed."

"I didn't. I didn't say I would or wouldn't. I'm taking the camper up there and staying a few more nights. I'll hang around during the day. You won't have to send anyone up to relieve me."

"It isn't that, and you know it. If it was this easy don't you think

someone would have done it years ago? That thing comes and goes when it gets ready. It might be quiet up there for months, years. You planning to wait it out?"

"Yes!" Farley stamped from the room, up the stairs. He began to throw his clothes into a pack.

His door opened and Serena slid inside and shut it. "Farley, why are you carrying on like this, giving your father more grief? What's the matter with you?"

"I'm crazy! Haven't you learned yet? I'm crazy! Get the hell out of here, Serena."

"You're crazy all right. Driving off Fran, driving your father beyond what he can endure. Why don't you stop all this foolishness and help your father now that he needs you."

"I can't help him."

"You can! Just let yourself instead of rushing off after ghosts all the time."

"There's something out there, Serena! I know because it almost killed me! Do you understand that? It almost killed me!"

"And it will kill you the next time! You think your father can stand that?" Serena's voice rose.

"You don't understand."

"I don't understand? You're the one who doesn't understand anything, Farley Chesterman! Right through the years everyone else's had enough sense to leave it alone."

Farley indicated the door. "Beat it!"

"You pig! You don't care, do you?"

"_All right_! There's something out there! A devil. You understand devils, you Catholic bitch! There's a devil out there and I'm going to get it off this land! That's what I have to do!"

"If there's a devil, it's not out on the desert! You're carrying it around with you all the time!"

"Shut up and get the hell out of here! What gives you the right to -- "

There was a knock on the door. This time it was Will, who stuck his head into the room and said mildly, "I thought you two gave up screaming at each other ten, fifteen years ago."

Serena gave Farley one last furious look and ran from the room, down the stairs. Will regarded his son for a moment, then closed the door gently.

"Bitch," Farley muttered and sat down on the side of his bed, suddenly shaking. Bitch, bitch, bitch.

* * * *

Although the sheriff had collected Victoria's belongings to have them delivered to her father, no one had known what to do about Sam's camper, and it was still parked in the side yard. Farley loaded it, checked the water and food, added coffee to the stores, and left, driving slowly, unwilling to add to the coating of dust on everything in the valley.

At the gorge he told the two hands they could go back to the ranch. He chose a spot near the gate where the camper would have shade during the hottest part of the afternoons; then he climbed the cliff to check the detonator, and to scowl at the cul-de-sac below where something came and went as it chose.

His ribs ached abominably, and his head throbbed; fury clouded his eyes, blurring his vision. Somewhere down there, within the three hundred acres, he knew, the bodies of Victoria and Sam lay hidden. The packs they had carried, his pack and camera, it was all in there, somewhere. Unless, he thought, they had fallen over the gorge and the rushing river had carried them miles downstream. The desert shimmered with heat waves, and in the distance a cloud of dust marked the passing of a jeep or truck -- it was impossible to see what had raised the cloud. No other life stirred in the motionless, hot afternoon; no sound broke the silence, and even the colors had taken on a sameness that was disturbing, as if a patina of heat had

discolored everything, obscured the true colors, and left instead the color of the desert -- a dull, flat dun color that was actually no color at all.

But he had smelled the river, he told himself, and then as if he needed more positive affirmation he said aloud, "I smelled the goddamn river, and I saw the earth move. I felt the rocks of the earthquake!"

And for the first time he wondered if that was so, if he really had smelled the river, really had been in an earthquake. And he wondered if maybe he was crazy. In the intense heat of the desert in August, he had a chill that shook him and raised goosebumps on his arms and made his scalp feel as if a million tiny things were racing about on it.

VI

Victoria watched the swarm of lights with rising panic, until Sam tugged her arm; then they both started to run blindly down the hillside. The lights swirled about them and Victoria stumbled, was yanked forward, stumbled again, and they both stopped, and now Sam was trying to brush the darting specks away.

The lights hovered around Victoria, blinding her momentarily, then left her and settled around Sam, who fell to his knees, then all the way to the ground, and rolled several times before he became quiet. Victoria could no longer see his body under the pulsating lights; instead, it was as if the shape was all light that gave no illumination, no warmth, but swelled and subsided rhythmically.

Victoria knelt beside him, they mustn't be separated, she thought. She reached for him, hesitating when her hand came close to the mass of lights; she took a deep breath, reached through, and touched and held his arm. The lights darted up her hand, paused, flowed back down and rejoined the others. Presently Sam stirred. There was a tightening in his muscles, a tensing before he started to sit up. The lights dimmed, moved away from him a little distance, and he got up shakily, Victoria still clutching his arm.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes. I think so." His voice was hollow, distant.

He began to walk aimlessly, as if unaware of her; she held his arm tightly and kept up. Tree frogs were singing, and there was a chirping call of a night bird, and, farther away, the roar of the river. A pale moth floated before her face; a twig snapped. A large animal scuttled up a tree, as if in slow motion. A sloth! she realized. It turned its head to look at her, then humped its way upward until it was out of sight in the thick foliage.

Still the lights hovered about Sam, not pressing in on him as they had done at first, but not leaving him either, and she remembered watching herself -- the other woman -- surrounded by lights, walking as if in a trance out of the fenced-in area. She began to direct their steps, keeping parallel to the wild river, and suddenly the lights stopped, as they had done before. She and Sam had crossed the dividing line. She jerked Sam to a halt and stared in disbelief. The soft moonlit rain forest continued as far as she could see. She turned, but the lights were gone. Hesitantly she took a step, and they surged toward her from the tree-covered hill. She darted back across the invisible line, and they vanished.

"Sam, sit down a few minutes. Rest. It's all right now," she said. Sam obeyed. Victoria began to arrange stones and sticks to indicate the beginning of the three hundred acres. She made a short wall, only inches high, a marker, not a barrier. Sam was still blank-eyed.

For a long time neither of them moved. Not until she began to shiver did Victoria realize how cold the night air had become. Reluctantly she stood up to look for sticks to build a fire. Hypothermia, Farley had said, could strike any time, summer or winter. She had watched him put several thick fire-starting candles in each pack. Deliberately she thought about the candles, not about Farley, who must be dead or lost.

After a smoldering start, the fire began to blaze. Victoria was still nursing it when Sam suddenly jumped up and shouted, "Come back! Wait for us!"

Victoria hurried to him and grasped his arm. "Who, Sam? Who did you see?" She peered into the forest.

"The Indian. Where is he? Which way did he go?"

"There isn't any Indian." But perhaps there was. He might have seen her fire, might have been attracted by the smoke.

"There was an Indian, Victoria! With one arm. He was taking me somewhere. You must have seen him!" Abruptly Sam stopped and rubbed his eyes hard. "I saw something," he muttered more to himself than to her. "A path, a path of glowing light, and the Indian motioned me to follow him away from it. The path was the wrong way, that's it. It was the wrong way, and he was going to take me the right way. With one arm! You must have seen him too!"

She shook her head. "He's like Reuben. Your Indian, my Reuben."

For a moment she thought he was going to hit her. Then he slumped and his hands relaxed. "What happened?" he asked dully.

"I don't know. The lights came down the hill; you fell down, just like I did that other time. When you got up you were walking like someone in a trance, and I brought us out here." She stopped while Sam turned to stare at the forest all around them. "I thought it would be like the other time, that I would go back out, be where our camp was, but..." When she stopped there was only the sound of the river, a constant muted roar in the background. "I made a line to show where the gate was," she said, indicating it.

Sam hesitated only a moment, then took her hand and started over the stones. More afraid of their being separated than of whatever lay on the other side, she yielded and they moved into the strange area once more.

This time everything was different. The trees were skeletal, bone-white under the brilliant moon. No grass had grown here for many years; the ground was barren and hard, littered with rocks that made walking difficult. The wind was piercing and frigid; it was the only sound they could hear -- a high wail that rose and fell and never stopped entirely. Suddenly Sam yanked her arm hard and she felt herself being pulled backward, back over the wall that no longer existed. She fell heavily.

Sam knelt by her and held her. "I'm sorry," he said. "Are you okay? I didn't want to hurt you. The lights were coming down the hill. I couldn't let them swarm over me again."

"I know," Victoria said. "I had nightmares about them."

"I didn't see them the first time," Sam went on. "I saw a path, wide, easy, glowing. I knew it led to ... to ... I don't know what I thought it led to. It terrified me and I wanted to get on it, follow it home, all the time thinking it would kill me if I did. Then I saw the Indian, and I knew he knew the way. I know that Indian. He does know the way."

"We can't be separated," Victoria said. "Farley was separated from us. He must be in there somewhere, lost, maybe he fell over the gorge. Maybe they drove him over the gorge..."

"_Sh._" Sam's hand tightened on her arm. "Maybe he just came out somewhere else, like we did."

Victoria looked around. Everywhere it was the same, dead grass, no signs of life, and the bitter wind that tore through her jacket. "The fire's gone, the wall I made is gone. My pack. We can't put anything at all down and expect it to stay. We can't leave each other even a second, or one of us might vanish."

Sam nodded. "It's too damn cold," he said slowly. "Every time we've gone in and out, it's been different. Different climates, different scenery. Times." He stopped and when he spoke again, his voice was strained. "We're yo-yoing back and forth in time! That's it, isn't it! Come on, once more."

Victoria's ears were hurting from the cold and her toes were starting to go numb. "We should count our steps or something," she said. "The wall won't be there, no point in making another one. But we have to know how to get out again."

Sam nodded, and hand in hand they started forward. There was no sense of transition, nothing to indicate change, but one moment they were in the

frozen air, and then the air was balmy and sweet smelling, not from a rain forest this time, but from thick lush grasses that crowded down the hillsides, and from tangled vines, creepers, dense bushes that made nearly impenetrable thickets to their right. The river was there, not a furious roar of a cascade, but rushing waters singing over rocks.

"Here they come," Sam muttered. "Out!"

The lights were coming in an elongated cloud, head-high, straight down the hill toward them. They took several steps, and the lights were no longer there. They had crossed the boundary.

They made a fire and huddled close together. "We need shelter," Sam said finally. "The moon's going down. While there's still enough light we have to arrange something." By the time the moon vanished over the mountains in the west, Sam had made a lean-to with the Mylar space blanket from his pack, attaching it from bushes to the ground, and Victoria had gathered armloads of grass that made their mattress. They wrapped Victoria's jacket around their legs, and Sam's around their torsos, and after a long time they fell asleep in each other's arms.

* * * *

"We can't stay here!" Victoria cried late the next afternoon. They had bathed in the clear river, had portioned out their scant rations, had hunted for berries to supplement their food, and now the sun was setting and she was hungry and tired.

Sam was standing just beyond their marker stones, facing the hill. Together they had explored the hill, the valley, the entire area repeatedly. They had crossed and recrossed the barrier without effect; nothing had changed.

"It's not evil, not malevolent," Sam said softly. "This must be what happened to the others who disappeared. They weren't killed at all, just put out somewhere else, away from harm."

They would starve, Victoria thought dully. Grazing animals would find this a paradise, but not humans.

"Once more," Sam said abruptly and started up the hill again. Victoria didn't follow this time. There wasn't anything up there, nothing in the valley. It didn't show itself by daylight, she thought, and suddenly realized that the only times anything had happened, there had been brilliant moonlight. She started to call Sam to tell him, but he was nearly to the top out of hearing.

When Sam came back it was twilight. "Think of the power!" he said exultantly. "It's showing us what we can have. How many of those who vanished realized what was being offered? They probably came out and ran as far and as fast as they could and died out there on the desert, or in the cold, or of starvation. But the power's there, down in that valley, waiting for anyone who has nerve enough to accept it. It's ours, Victoria! Yours! Mine!"

He wasn't hungry, he said, wasn't tired, just impatient. "There's a secret we haven't learned yet, about how to call it, how to make it manifest itself. We'll learn how to summon it."

He began to stuff things back into his pack. "Come on. I'm going to wait for it this time down in the valley. Hurry up before it gets too dark."

"It won't be there," Victoria said. "It's never there until after the moon is up. Both times the moon was up."

They climbed the hill in the deepening, silent dusk, shadows moving among shadows.

"Unlimited power," Sam said hoarsely. "Omnipotent. It can move back and forth in time the way you cross a street ."

But it was not omnipotent, Victoria protested silently. It was stopped by the invisible barrier. It had no power to control, only to observe. An observer, she thought, that's what it was, no more than an observer. It came only when the moon cleared the cliffs that were the eastern boundary of the valley, not when it wanted to. She had been able to get out in the right time, the right place once; it could be done again, if only she could

remember how she had done it then. They were descending the hill now; it was a gentle slope, covered with waist-high grass, no rocks, nothing to impede their progress. They might have been out for an evening stroll -- if only she were not so hungry and so tired.

"You want to think of it as some kind of mechanism," Sam went on, "subject to the same laws and limitations that restrict all machines you're used to. It isn't like that. It's an intelligent being, a godlike being, testing us, for some reason we can't begin to grasp."

Each time they had talked about it, he had refused to hear anything she said. Now she shrugged and they finished their walk into the valley.

"Where was it?" Sam demanded. "Exactly where?"

"I don't know. Everything is changed again. The center I think, but I don't know. Remember, we can't believe anything we see or feel in here. Your Indian, my Reuben, the dog, none of it was real."

He was no longer listening. He considered the valley for a few moments, selected a spot, and spread his blanket on the ground.

"Here," he said. "We'll wait here. Don't speak now. Just concentrate on it, call it. Okay?"

Helplessly Victoria sat down also. The Indian and Reuben were the clues, she thought. "Sam, before we start concentrating, just tell me one thing. When your Indian was guiding you, why were you zigzagging?"

"We were making our way among the rocks and boulders," Sam snapped. "Now just shut up, will you? Go to sleep if you can."

"But..."

Sam caught her wrist in a tight grip and she became quiet. After a moment he released her and they sat side by side in silence.

But there weren't any rocks or boulders then, she had started to say. Not for her, she corrected. They had been together and still had seen different worlds.

Sam had invented the Indian, just as she had invented Reuben; if she had not interfered, would Sam's Indian have led him to the safety of his own time? It was as if within each of them there existed a core of consciousness that would not be fooled by the shifting scenery, a part of the mind that knew where they belonged and how to get back to it. Come back! she wanted to cry. Reuben, Indian, anyone. Please come back!

The night had become very dark, and it was too hazy to see the stars. Maybe it would be too cloudy for the moon to light the valley later, she thought. What if there were weeks of cloudy weather? They would die. The land would change, the forests grow, fall, be buried in rocks from earthquakes and landslides, and somewhere deep in the earth their bones would lie never to be discovered.

In a little while she put on her jacket, and still later she stretched out on the blanket and dozed. She was awakened by an exclamation from Sam. She sat up. The valley was moonlit again, brilliant, sharply defined, and Sam was walking away from her, his arms outstretched, oblivious of her, of the need to stay together.

"Sam!" she cried, but he didn't pause. From the corner of her eye she caught the flash of light coming down the hillside. She recoiled as the light dots touched her. Momentarily Sam was covered with them, a glowing crucifixion, and then he was gone.

"Sam!" She scrambled to her feet, and moved toward him, where he had been, and stumbled over rocks that had not been there only moments before. In panic she looked behind her: the blanket was gone, the pack; the valley was barren, with scattered clumps of desert grasses. In the distance there was a flare of light, and she thought of volcanoes, of earthquakes, and even as the thought formed, the earth shook beneath her, and she threw herself down, holding her breath. "No!" she said against the ground. "No!" She closed her eyes hard.

She didn't open them again until she could smell forests and leaf mold and pungent odors of mushrooms and mosses and ferns. She was wet from the

grasses under her. Very slowly, concentrating on forests, she got up. She could see only a few feet in any direction because of the trees, and she no longer knew the way out of the valley. She walked, accompanied by flickering lights that she ignored, and then she heard someone else walking through the forests.

"Sam!" she called "Farley!" There was instant silence and she held her breath, remembering the sloth she had seen before. There might be bears, or wolves, or wildcats ... She eased herself around a mammoth tree, darted from its shelter to another one, then to a hill, and was starting to skirt it when across an open area, she stood face to face with an Indian, a young man, not the one-armed Indian Sam had talked about. He looked as frightened as she, and the unquiet lights were hovering about him. Before he could move, she ran, and could hear him running behind her. Suddenly before her there rose a rock wall, the cliff, and she turned to see the Indian no more than twenty yards away. She watched, frozen, until he had taken several more steps, almost leisurely, and the lights that had been with him vanished. The barrier, she realized, they had both crossed the barrier without knowing it. She darted back toward the trees, and after only a few paces, the forest was gone, and the valley was frost-rimed, blasted by an icy wind shrieking like a witch.

She stopped, backed up until she felt the cliff behind her, then stepped forward again, into a different time, with warmer air and junipers and grass. Now she sank to the ground and sat hugging her legs hard, keeping her eyes wide open.

A flash of light caught her eye and she watched the swarm settle over something small, possibly a mouse; it moved erratically, stopped, moved again, and the lights withdrew, flowed back through the valley, up the cliff and disappeared.

She stared. Up the hill? She had assumed they came from somewhere near the center of the valley. She got up and began to walk toward the cliff. She could think only: there must have been a time before it was like this. Momentarily she was aware of a kaleidoscopic effect, of moving through layers of time, of ceaseless change. She paused, closing her eyes, then moved on.

A knoll rose like a gentle swell before her, and she began to ascend. When she stopped, it was because standing before her, filling her field of vision, was a glowing shape that was indefinable. Smaller shapes, higher than she, glided over the ground toward her, came to rest in the air a short distance away. They were oval, or nearly so, glowing as the lights glowed, without illumination; behind the glowing surfaces she could almost see other shapes, darker shadows. She blinked rapidly, but was unable to resolve the shadows within the ovals. From one of the shapes there came a swarm of the restless light dots, a cloud large enough to envelop her completely. She did not flinch when the swarm settled over her like a suffocating net.

She was aware that the large oval shape was sinking into the ground, and distantly she thought: they are placing it now, without trying to understand who they were or what they were placing. She was aware when the motion of the oval stopped, and she thought: they realize they already have me, wherever they store information -- computers made of glowing dots?, an information pool in the ground? wherever. She was aware of a heavier blanket of lights all over her, inside her, draining her, using up the air so that she could no longer breathe.

"God Almighty!"

She heard the voice, opened her eyes. "Reuben!" He stood before her with his hands on his hips.

"You again? The little lost girl again. What in hell are you wandering out here for this time?"

"I've lost a friend. I'm looking for him."

Reuben scowled. "Bearded fellow? Some kind of religious nut?"

Victoria nodded. "Is he still in the valley?"

"Come on, I'll take you to him. Can't understand why in tarnation this

part of the world is worse than a big city suddenly, people wandering about all night where they got no business being."

Victoria knew she didn't have to hold his hand, knew he would not leave her until she was ready. They started down the steep, dangerous cliff.

A motion caught her eye. Across the valley, silhouetted against the sky, she saw a man's figure, and recognized Farley. He was climbing down the opposite cliff. The lights flashed toward him and he turned and scurried back up. She took a step toward him and he was gone. In the valley she could make out boxes.

Concentrating on them, she let Reuben lead her across the valley until they stood before the boxes.

Dynamite! Farley was going to blow up the valley!

And somewhere within a few feet of where she stood, in another time, Sam sat and waited for something he could not even name. She blinked hard and saw Sam, almost hidden by the high lush grass. He was sitting cross-legged, his hands on his knees, staring ahead fixedly; he was covered with lights. He wouldn't hear her, see her, be aware of her at all, she knew; but the blast? Would the blast jolt him back into his own time? She hurried back up the cliff that became a gentle slope under her feet. The large oval had not moved, was still partially in the ground; around it there were now a dozen or more of the smaller ovals. She stopped and was aware that from all sides the lights were streaming toward her. Before they reached her, she realized that she had lost them before; she had moved from one time to another and left them behind. Now she felt almost a physical assault as they touched her, thicker and thicker clouds of them settling over her, then entering her, becoming part of her.

She visualized mushroom clouds and lasers; moon-landing vehicles and satellites; the skyline of New York and a hologram of a DNA model; computers that extended for city blocks deep underground and missiles in their silos; undersea explorer crafts and a surgeon's hand inside a chest cavity mending a faulty heart ...

A core sample, she thought, taken through time, to be collected at a later date, to be wandered through by beings she could not even see well enough to know what she had seen.

And when they came to collect their sample, a great gaping wound in the earth would remain and the earth would heave and tremble and restore equilibrium with earthquakes and volcanoes.

Her head felt hot, throbbing; it was harder and harder to hold the images she formed. If only she could rest now, sleep a few minutes, she thought yearningly, just let it all go and sleep.

Reuben's grumble roused her again. "This is going to take a hell of a long time if you lollygag like that. Come on, get it over. I got me a sleeping bag and a fire and I sure would like to get back to them sometime before morning."

She thought of men aiming polarized lights that were indistinguishable from moonlight, calling forth the lights that streamed out into nets that would contain them. She thought of men excavating the hillside, studying the energy source they found. She thought of low white buildings hugging the hills, high-voltage fences outlining the enchanted three hundred acres.

The large oval shimmered and started to rise. The small ovals clustered about it.

Victoria felt leaden, unable to move. She looked down at herself and saw that the lights no longer surrounded her, but had become part of her; she was filled with light.

"Give me your hand," Reuben said patiently. "Telling you, honey, it's time."

He led her to the boulders where she looked down at the valley and waited for the shifting landscape to become the right one, with high grass and the figure of a man, sitting, waiting.

The lights were streaking back now from the valley, the hills,

abandoning the objects they studied. Farley would see them and know it was time.

* * * *

Sam waited. As random images formed, words sounded in his inner ear, he acknowledged and banished them. He might wait all night, all the next day, forever.

He no longer knew how long he had been there; he felt no discomfort or sense of passing time. When he heard his name called from behind him, up the hillside, he denied it, but the call came again and he turned to see.

And now his heart thumped wildly in his chest and he was overwhelmed by exultation and reverence. With tears on his cheeks, he extended his arms and moved toward the figure that burned and was not consumed by the flames, that was light and gave no light, that was motionless in the air above the slope he started to climb.

"My God!" he whispered, and then cried the words. "My God! My God!"

* * * *

Victoria felt a wrench when the lights flowed out of her. She swayed and groped for the boulder; her head felt afire, and a terrible weakness paralyzed her; her vision dimmed, blurred, failed.

"Let's get the hell outta here," Reuben said, and his hand was warm and firm on her elbow as he guided her, blind now, up the slope that was rocky and steep.

The blast shook them, echoed round and round in the valley, echoed from the gorge walls, from rocks and hills and sky. It echoed in Victoria's head and bones. She found herself on the ground. The noises faded and the desert was quiet, the air cool, the sky milky blue with moonlight.

She waited for a second blast, and when none came, she pulled herself up. She was on the gorge side of the cliff, protected by the ridge from the force of the explosion. Slowly she began to pick her way up the cliff. At the top she paused.

Across the valley, on the cliff opposite her, she could see Farley in the moonlight. His gaze was upward, intent on the sky. Victoria thought: he has seen evil depart on giant batwings, recalled to hell from whence it came. She smiled slightly.

Midway down the cliff she could now see Sam getting to his hands and knees, shaking his head. He stood up slowly. And he, she thought, had come face to face with his god.

They made a triangle, three fixed points forever separated, forever bound together by what had happened here.

Farley had seen her, was waving to her. She waved back, and pointed down toward Sam. No one would believe them, she knew, there would be endless talk, and it wouldn't matter. They would reappear together and stay together, as they had to now, and the talk would subside, and people would even come to regard them as inseparable, as they were. She thought she heard a growly whisper, "No more little Miss Goody?" She laughed and held out her hand to Sam, who was drawing close; he was laughing too. Hand in hand they picked their way down the cliff to join Farley at the gate.

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