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Venison Summer, 1966

I worked in forest close to the mountain blue sky as spring greened toward summer in the Sierra Mountains east of the Sacramento Valley. Snow melted to clean, cold water and soaked into the ground or ran toward the ocean a valley and a mountain range away. Birds sang in sunshine in trees around me.

At sunset, I finished a day of blister-rust control work, quiet contract work for the Forest Service, digging ribes bushes out of the ground with hand tools, on the 120-acre lot in the forest canyon Muggins Creek formed. I hiked back up steep slope through forest of trees, brush, grass, bluffs and rocks. Muggins Creek ran white and wild below me in the canyon. Flowers unfolded colors and odors on the mountain, and animals moved quietly in the forest. I hiked to my camp, built a fire and cooked my supper.

Darkness settled. My fire burned low, then showed only small points of red beneath gray ashes. Stars and the waning moon lighted the mountain, the forest, and dark rock bluffs down the canyon from my camp. I folded a thick cloth over my boots and socks, wore the rest of my clothes, and crawled into my sleeping bag and slept.

At first light, I got up, broke a thin crust of ice from my water, and cooked and ate breakfast. Soft breezes blew smells to me of cold, clean water, smells of trees growing into spring, smells of life bursting from soil, smells of morning mountain in spring. as I packed my camp into my carryall.

I drove the dirt road from the flat area where I'd camped near Muggins Spring, up to logging road 26N22. My light-green rig became the only traffic rolling ahead of a cloud of dust out of mountain forest on the graveled-logging road. I turned onto paved highway and joined vehicles hurrying down into the valley, into the world of traffic, into the world of people and machines in noisy motion.

I needed to buy groceries and fuel, wash my clothes and sleeping gear, see my family, exist a few days in civilization. Sharon, my wife, and Shawn and Michele, our children, were of the valley, of civilization. I was still from the mountains, quiet, secluded.

In the mountains, birds sang in forest, wind blew between trees and brush, over late spring grass, over running water. Cool air descended from evening sky. Cold nights settled to the mountain. Smells of clean water filled the air. Mountain smells and smells of spring growth permeated existence.

Civilization smelled like oil and gasoline, exhaust from internal combustion engines, hot metal, tar of roofs in sunshine, asphalt roads in late spring. Even in spring, the Sacramento Valley smelled as hot as summer.

My third day in the valley, the house closed tighter around me. Its walls thinned. Mechanical noises, vibrations and odors filled my senses.

Phil, Alice and Don came to visit.

Phil asked, "How's blister rustin' goin'?"

"Great. Goin' great."

"Are you makin' a good wage?"

"So far."

Don said, "Put me to work. I can't find work down here. I want to go to school this fall, but I'm not gonna be able to unless I can earn a chunk of cash."

Phil said, "Hey, you jumped the gun on me. You said you'd wait til after I asked. Me first. Jon, there's zilch for jobs around here. Give me a job, and I'll bring Alice up. She'll be camp cook and pot washer. Two for the price of one. She said she'd do it."

Don said, "I don't have a helper to offer, but I'm working on it."

Sharon said, "They both play good guitar. Put 'em both to work. We can have a party in the mountains, guitars and singing around the fire, if you have a crew up there. I'll bring the kids, and we'll live in the mountains all summer and have a good time."

I said, "There's a bid opening next week. I'll look at lots and see if I can get enough so everybody can work."

I drove from the heat of the valley up into the cooler Sierras. Where Rattlesnake Creek flows down the mountain and slows across meadows that open from evergreen forest east of Lassen Peak in northern California, I made a new camp on a flat area of rock and dirt above the stream. Old-growth, widely-spaced evergreen trees grew on the flat area. A ridge rose steeply just north of where I set up camp, and another ridge rose across the creek, south, across a quarter mile of grassy meadow. The clean smell of cold water running noisily down Rattlesnake Creek blew in soft breezes up the surrounding

ridges.

I started work on a ninety-acre lot, the last of that contract. I took two days off from work and looked at more lots, bid some of them, and got more contracts, enough to support a crew for more than a month. We could work all the new lots from my camp on Rattlesnake Creek.

Don, Phil and Alice, Sharon and Shawn and Michele came up to the mountain. We worked the simple, quiet work of blister-rust control, pried out ribes bushes with rabbit-eared picks.

Blister rust kills pine trees and needs ribes bushes for part of its life cycle. The Forest Service tries to control the disease by paying contractors to pry out the ribes bushes with rabbit-eared picks and leave them roots-up to die in sunshine. We walked the sides of mountains, down and up canyons, around rock bluffs, through forest and meadow, looking for ribes bushes to pry out of the ground. We kept track of where we'd worked by stringing lanes with light cotton string that would deteriorate in winter.

It takes time to learn to see ribes bushes, gooseberries and currants, growing among all the bushes in the forest. Phil did all right, but Don got thorny. I walked steep slope on the west side of the canyon, below sudden black-rock bluffs, between tall pine and fir trees, clean blue sky above me, whitethorn and manzanita brush around me, sometimes catching my clothes, wait, wait and un snag, walk again over grass and quiet pine duff.

I caught up with Don . I said, "Don, you'll have to rework this lane. Why don't you finish it and work it going the other way? I'll walk with you for a while and see if I can tell why you're missing bushes."

"How come you're checking my work so much? Why don't you spend more of your time checking Phil's work?"

"Because you're missing a lot of bushes, and he isn't. You choose. I let you go on missing bushes, and we flunk inspections and rework ground for no pay, or you learn what I'm trying to teach you, and we pass inspections and spend our time working on new contracts and earn money for our work."

Don leaned on his pick and looked at the ground. He looked up, looked at me, took a deep breath, and said, "Okay. Show me what I'm doing wrong."

Friday morning, cold in early morning, before we left camp to go to work, Don said, "You're letting your kids run wild. Why don't you discipline them?"

I thought about sending Don down the road, but Sharon stayed in the mountains because she had more fun when there were people with us, and Don played good guitar. It was easier to stay in the mountains and work if my family was with me.

I walked over to the carryall and loaded tools, water jugs, and lunches, and we drove up the ridge to the 120-acre lot and walked through sunshine, through mountain shade of evergreen trees, shade of rock bluffs rising up the side of the mountain, day warming toward hot, looked for ribes bushes and pried out the ones we found.

Monday, we drove to the Forest Service office and picked up new bid invitations. Everybody went, just for a chance to go to town.

On the way back, Don said, "You're driving too fast."

I didn't think I was driving too fast. With my top-heavy carryall, I didn't dare, but I slowed down a little. Don said, "You're still driving too fast. It's okay if you endanger your own life, but it isn't okay if you risk the lives of the people riding with you. You're reckless even with the lives of your own children."

"Don, what in hell is with you? You're trying to take over as manager of the business and of my life, and you can't even find all the ribes bushes yet. Quit being an old woman about everything or pack your stuff and pull out and find work someplace else." He didn't say anything, looked out the window at the forest around us.

Sun hung just above western peaks after dinner. The day cooled. Shawn and Michele played near the fireplace, whose ashes gave up the day's fire. I walked uphill from camp, sat down on a log and looked down at our camp and at Rattlesnake Creek running vigorously down the mountain. Across the stream, black rock of the mountain rose vertically two feet above the water.

Farther from the stream, rock curved toward level. Soil clung to rock. Green meadow grasses grew from soil. Meadow ran toward mountain ridge. Tall trees stretched toward the sky from the ridge the far side of open meadow. Clean smells of mountain life drifted in soft breezes.

Aspen trees grew around springs flowing from the base of the ridge. Fir trees and pine trees grew from the mountainside. Behind me, a ridge rose jaggedly toward late-day sky and showed soil, bare rock, grass, brush, and green trees. Birds flew everywhere, courted and sang.

Sharon walked up from camp and sat down.

I said, "You find a lot of time to sit and talk with Don out at the edge of things, where no one else can hear you. I'm surprised you can take time away to come and sit with me."

She looked down the hill, looked west at sky turning orange as sun slipped behind mountain peaks. She said, "Try not to be too rough on Don. He's going through some hard times."

"I'm sure your sympathetic ear helps ease his way."

"He needs someone to talk to. He's up here by himself. At least you have your family with you."

"My wife on a part-time basis, when she isn't busy playing counselor for the suffering Don. What seems to be his problem, other than working for me, which isn't going to last much longer if he doesn't stop trying to manage my business and my life?"

"He has girlfriend problems. He wants things to be stable, but they aren't. He's in love, but the woman he's in love with is fucking somebody else too, and it drives him crazy."

"He needs to get down off this mountain and get close enough to do something about it."

"Everything for him depends on having enough money to keep going to school."

"Screwed-up priorities. He could get out of here and go where he could do something about stabilizing things with the girl he's supposed to be in love with."

"That's easy for you to say. You have a family. You aren't gonna be drafted. If he doesn't go to school and keep his grades up, he could be drafted. Then he'd really be away from everything, and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it at all."

One day in the next week, everyone else went to town for groceries, gas, and laundry. I was tired of being with everyone else. I said, "You don't need me. I'm gonna stay here and see if I can finish about four acres down the steep slope below the road."

I worked back and forth across steep south slope. I wound around brush, tall evergreen trees, large stones that fell from dark bluffs a thousand years ago. I found only a few ribes bushes to dig out.

I climbed steep, jagged rock bluffs that rose abruptly from the slope. I let white cotton string play out behind me, hung the string high in whitethorn bushes, ceonothus bushes, wild roses, and low-hanging tree branches, to mark the area I had worked as I crossed the slope. Sun shone hot.

Heat soaked into me, into my movement. I stopped on the

steep bluff and looked far down the canyon. I walked down to running water in the bottom of the steep canyon.

Muggins Creek ran rapidly, cold and clean. I took off my shirt, washed my face, hands and arms, and splashed water over my chest and shoulders, gasped as the coldness penetrated me. I lay down on the bank and drank.

Currant bushes eight-feet tall grew close to the stream and thrived on cold water. Their sharp, growing, green smell mingled with the smell of cold water and the smell of washed granite stone. I'd have to dig the currants out before I finished the contract, but I left them for now and worked back up the canyon slope.

Halfway through the afternoon, I worked up out of the canyon, then walked down the ridge to camp.

Sun shone down through trees on a small fire. Don sat close to the fire with his hands jammed into his jacket pockets. I said, "I thought you were going to town."

"I changed my mind."

Phil, Don, and I had a shooting contest the day before, with paper targets on the supports under the logging-road bridge downstream from camp. My pistol, out of its holster, lay on the bench in front of the supply tent. I knew I had put it away when we finished punching holes in paper targets. I never left it out.

I'd dipped a bucket of water and carried it up from the stream, so I turned and poured the water into the big container on the grate over the fire.

"Maybe you'll excuse me, Don, and scoot back a ways so I don't have to walk around you every time. You can have your spot back as soon as I get my water hot."

Don looked like he would say something. Then he leaned forward, picked up the coffee pot, got up, and started for the creek. He said, "I'll make coffee while you're doing that."

I watched Don walk to the stream. He stepped down close to the rapid current and bent to dip water into the coffee pot. A rock rolled under his foot. He flailed his arms, tried to catch his balance, and fell into the rapidly-running stream, stood up, shoulder deep in cold, rushing water that pushed him downstream. I ran to the stream.

Don grabbed at the sheer stone bank and lost his footing again. The cold current shoved him downstream and under water. He stood up, fought the rushing current, and grabbed at solid rock of the sheer bank again. "Get me out of here." His fingers slipped off the black rock, and the strong current shoved him underwater again.

I grabbed him by the shoulders and yanked him out.

He staggered to the fire and stripped off his wet clothes. "Jesus Christ, that water's cold." He grabbed a towel from the drying rack and dried off. He dug dry clothes from his duffel bag leaning against a tree upstream from the fireplace, dressed, and spread out his wet clothes to dry. He took everything out of his pockets, including his twenty-five caliber automatic from his jacket pocket. He disassembled the pistol, spread the parts out on the bench by the fire, and wiped them dry with a cloth.

A long time later, when I wrote about it and put the story of that summer together more carefully in my thoughts than I ever had before, I realized Don had planned to shoot me when I picked up my pistol. He would say I shot at him, and he killed me in self defense.

When events of that day happened, I hadn't even a hint of what it all meant, because I was missing essential information, mainly that Don and Sharon were sexually involved with each other, that came to me much later and only coalesced into a sensible story when I pulled all my memories together to write about that time.

When I eventually did pull all the information together, much later, I thought his plans changed that day, because he thought his pistol wouldn't fire after it had been dunked in water, probably a wrong assumption about how pistols and ammunition work, but one that saved my life.

A more generous interpretation would be, he couldn't kill me that soon after I saved his life, but I don't think that's the way his thoughts worked. I think he felt obligated to stick to the commitment he had made to Sharon and felt no identification with me at all.

Unaware of how everything fit together at the time, I picked up my pistol and unloaded it, sure I had already unloaded it when we finished shooting. I shrugged, and put the target pistol away. It was time to get a strongbox with a lock to keep anyone from messing with my pistol.

Don dried the parts of his disassembled pistol in mountain sunshine. Shade of tall pine trees fell around us. Smells of high, clean mountain blew to us on summer breezes that afternoon.

I dumped hot water into the five-gallon bucket with holes in the bottom, hoisted it by rope and pulley, and showered. I dried off, dressed, and stood by the fire. Don finished putting his automatic together. He hadn't said anything since his comment about cold water.

I said, "Don, you might be the strangest son of a bitch I ever

met. We're not sure you would have drowned if I hadn't grabbed you, but that looked like what was going to happen. At least, I pulled you out of cold water, and you're still nothing but totally surly."

Don slapped the clip into his pistol but left the chamber empty and put his pistol in his duffel bag. "Yeah. You did help me out. Thanks." That seemed to be all he could say. I let him struggle with whatever he was struggling with and went on with everything I wanted to get done.

Summer warmed up. We killed every rattlesnake we saw. We walked all over out there. The snake we see this time might feel cornered another time and strike.

We ate eleven rattlesnakes. Rattlesnake number twelve, I said, "Let it go, Phil. Don't kill it."

"What do you mean, let it go? Aren't you afraid it'll get you tomorrow?"

"I don't think so. Aren't you tired of eating rattlesnake?"

"Well, I would like to be really hungry before I find snake on my plate again."

"Let it go."

"We don't have to eat it if we kill it."

"Yes we do. If you kill it and don't eat it, you're down the road."

I walked away, along the steep side of the mountain, and uprooted ribes bushes. Phil left the snake and caught up with me. We left string behind us to mark what we'd already worked.

When the Forest Service inspector came up, he asked, "What's your snake count now?"

I said, "Same as last time we saw you. Eleven."

"What happened? Did you run out of snakes?"

"No. We see snakes. We just quit killing snakes. We saw seven on the forty-acre lot, but we didn't kill any. After the meat bees last summer, snakes don't seem so bad. A rattlesnake isn't aggressive like a wasp is. Give it room, and it'll crawl out of your way and leave you alone."

"Thanks a lot. I have to walk that lot."

"I know. It keeps everybody on their toes. When you're fighting your way through brush, walking on branches two feet above the ground, you get so you can see through the soles of your feet, right through your boots, a clear view of the ground, and it's snakes, snakes, rattlesnakes everywhere."

That became The Venison Summer. Nobody had any cash, because it took the Forest Service a long time to get the paperwork processed and send a check, so we were short of

groceries. We ate eight deer that summer, and I killed all of them.

Several mornings, two yearlings walked down the trail along the stream. I hadn't seen deer on our night hunts, when it was usually easy to catch one in the carryall headlights and shoot it, but I didn't want to shoot one so close to camp. I said, "You shoot one, Don. You've been eating your share, and you brought up the best deer rifle. You shoot one."

"If it depends on me, we'll go hungry. I'm not saying I won't do it. I'm saying I can't do it. If the meat's there, sure, I'll eat it if you say I can, but I can't shoot a deer."

"You're an asshole, Don. You kill ground squirrels for the fun of it and leave them to rot, but you can't kill a deer to feed yourself."

"I didn't say I was right. I just said I can't do it. Maybe someday I'll be able to, but I can't do it now."

I said, "I'm going to kill another deer. I need to feed my family. The meat won't keep, and we can't eat it all before it spoils, so I'll share. But this isn't working as a three-way partnership. I make all the decisions and take care of all the bids and check everyone's work. I provide our food, so we're going to come up with something other than a three-way split."

Before daylight, I crawled out of my sleeping bag, dressed, and took my pistol fifty yards above camp. Day brought light to the mountain. The yearlings we'd been seeing most mornings walked down, graceful as a slow dance just at dawn. I sat down, rested my arms on my knees, lined up, and shot the doe in the forehead. She fell, dead.

The buck bounced up the trail a hundred yards, stood under tall fir trees for a minute and then started back. I bled the doe, opened her up, and spilled her intestines onto the ground. I stood up and ran the buck off. I hated looking at him.

Sharon brought the kids over as I skinned and quartered the carcass.

Michele said, "I don't like that smell."

I said, "That's the blood and the intestines and partly digested grass you're smelling."

In a few days, we ate the last of the meat from that doe. Phil drove up the mountain through evergreen forest. Don and I rode in the back of Phil's pickup.

Two miles above camp, a Forest Service pickup drove down the dusty, graveled road. Don's rifle lay by our feet. I kicked the canvas tarp over the rifle.

The green pickup stopped beside us. Trees and brush and

grass grew above us on the ridge sloping up from the road and below us on the ridge sloping down. Dust from the pickup's movements hung in the mountain air. Sharp smells of hot summer forest drifted in sunlight. The driver of the Forest Service pickup asked, "What're you guys up to?"

I said, "We're blister-rust control contractors."

"You got contracts up here?"

"All the way to the bottom of the canyon and up the other side to the road again. Then most of the tree plantation at the top of the ridge."

The man in the Forest Service pickup said, "You probably see everybody who drives through here. If you see anybody poaching, let me know. I hate it. Just give me a call, and I'll get a game warden out here." He told us which Forest Service office to call and who to ask for.

He drove away. I climbed the dark-rock bluff that rose from forest above the road and watched until the Forest Service pickup crossed the meadow and disappeared into the lower forest. Dust slowly settled behind the pickup. I slid back down the steep bluff, and we drove on up the graveled logging road. Two miles up, three deer stood a hundred and fifty feet up the hillside above us, a four-point buck, a forked-horn, and a spike.

Phil stopped the pickup. I said, "Drop one, Don ."

"Can't do it."

"Give me the 30-30, then."

I aimed forehead high on the four-point. Kaboom. The 30-30 echoed across the mountain like some kind of cannon. All three deer jumped. Then they stood still and watched us.

"What the hell? Is this thing sighted high?"

"Yeah, I forgot. About six inches high."

"Great Don. Thanks for everything. Well, this must be a shooting gallery, and I get as many shots as I need. That four-point is too big anyway." I aimed a little more than six inches low and blew the top off the forked-horn's head. The other two bucks fled up the mountain. I scrambled uphill, bled the forked horn, and dropped his guts out of sight in the brush.

"Come on. Help me get him down there and load him, and let's get to where we can watch the road. I didn't like the way the shots echoed."

Three miles up the road, we stopped.

Don and I carried the buck's carcass through dense brush below the road into an open spot where we had room to work. Phil sat in his pickup and watched the road. We skinned and quartered the buck. Insects buzzed around us in summer heat.

The smell of blood rose above the smell of ceonothus, clay dust and evergreens in summer air.

We loaded the field-dressed deer into the back of the pickup and covered it with a tarp. Back in camp, I cut the carcass into smaller parts and put containers of meat down in the cold creek. I kept an upper hindquarter out and cut meat from it into thick steaks, hammered, seasoned, floured and egged the steaks and floured them again. I cooked chicken-fried steaks.

We told everyone in camp about the man from the Forest Service pulling up in his pickup and talking about how he hated poachers. Phil said, "So there's Jon, sittin' on the side of the pickup, with his foot on the 30-30, talkin' about blister-rust control and lookin' as innocent as if he never heard of killing deer out of season."

Sharon put plates on the table we'd set up from boards we brought up the mountain in Phil's pickup. She laughed and said, "You and Don should have come bustin' out of the brush, shovin' each other around, and you should have said, 'Stay away from my wife, or you won't live much longer.' That would take his mind off poaching, give him something to keep his mind occupied." She laughed again. A long time later, I realized how strange Sharon's sense of humor had become and how diabolical she had turned toward me, though she showed me no sign of her feelings, or I missed what signs there were.

Alice put the potatoes and the vegetables she and Sharon had driven twenty miles to buy that afternoon on the table. We ate. We laughed about the man from the Forest Service.

The deer after that was the last deer I killed that summer. I left camp late afternoon, carrying the 30-30. I hiked to the top of the ridge that grew trees toward the blue sky, then slow-footed, watching openings in timber down both slopes. The sun set. The air against the mountain cooled rapidly. I walked back down to the road and down the road toward camp. A three-point buck ran from the forest on its way across the road. I swept the carbine up, into his line of flight, pulled the trigger, and knocked him down. He dragged himself up the hill, using only his front legs. I ran. The buck hooked his antlers toward me, and I shot him in the forehead.

I took a minute to get my breathing steady. Then I cut the artery in the deer's neck and turned him hindquarters uphill to bleed.

They heard the shots in camp. Don and Phil brought the pickup.

The first government check came before we ate all of that

deer, and we ate store-bought groceries the rest of the summer.

Early that spring, soon after I started working in the mountains, Lela, Sharon's mother, felt sick and had to lie down on the lawn. She said later she knew immediately something serious was happening to her. Doctors diagnosed lung cancer.

Part of the time I worked and camped in the mountains, Lela's rapidly-progressing illness weighed heavily on my mind. Part of the time, I became absorbed in the mountain, the forest, the work I did, the quiet of the mountain, bright mountain sunshine. Everything far below in the valley stayed at the edge of my consciousness, almost absent from my thoughts.

Sharon stayed in the valley a few days at a time and kept Shawn and Michele with her. Toward the end of Lela's life, Sharon didn't drive up the mountain.

I drove down into the valley when it was necessary for me to be there.

Lela wasted away. At the hospital, Sharon told Lela, "I love you." She lay down on the bed beside Lela and hugged her.

When Lela was healthy, she would have given anything, even her life, for that affection, for the end of conflict and the beginning of love.

That was before anyone understood the effects of secondhand cigarette smoke. Warren said, "I smoked cigarettes all my life, and she died of lung cancer."

We talked to the mortician who took Lela from the hospital. I said, "We don't want her embalmed." I had read the laws. I was prepared to refute the claim that embalming her was required by law.

"She already is."

The moment when we could change to another mortician slipped away. It wasn't something I could argue for. I spoke to the mortician, "We want a closed-casket funeral. She was very wasted away."

"Certainly. Certainly."

During the funeral, the mortician looked at me, smiled broadly, stepped forward and threw the top of the casket open. I started to walk forward. I thought it would be good for the mortician to swallow his own gleaming, white teeth in shattered, bloody fragments.

Sharon caught my arm. I could have pulled away, but I knew she was right. I would gain brief satisfaction, followed by a lot of trouble. Had I thought clearly, I might have pulled away and refused to follow the slow-moving line past the casket. Sharon's father walked on the other side of her, awkward with

grief.

They had rouged, colored, lipsticked, and powdered Lela, but she still lay cadaverous, emaciated, dead. Awareness of anything but Lela's face faded from my consciousness. Her bones showed clearly through her skin. Anything untrue in Lela's life would have glared in the painful illumination of flesh burning away in illness until death. Her luminous skin would have cast the light of truth on everything around her.

My heart hammered. I wanted to wash away everything they had plastered on her face. Sharon kept her grip on my arm. Her tightly gripping fingers told me, "Keep a cap on it."

They buried Lela in the hard-clay ground of the northern Sacramento Valley. Heat waves rose from the meticulously trimmed, carefully-designed cemetery into hot blue sky. Farmland, orchards, and wild, huge, ancient, disorderly black-oak trees growing from wild ground surrounded the cemetery, beyond asphalt driveways, parking lots, concrete curbs, beyond carefully-controlled grass and exactly-trimmed rosebushes.

I smelled roses growing in sunshine. I smelled cut flowers with their chemicals brought to the graveside, drying in sunshine. Newly dug Sacramento Valley red clay added its scent to summer air. Bluebirds flew from rosebush to rosebush. North of the cemetery, a meadowlark sang. Its bell-like tones cut through the heavy, hot air like crystals and interrupted the oppressive heat of the day. It repeated its song three times.

Sharon and I stood close together as workers turned cranks and lowered the coffin into the ground. I put my arm around Sharon. She pulled away. I dropped my arm to my side, not quite succumbing to a need to put my hands into and then out of my pockets. Hot sunshine soaked through my black wool suit jacket and into my shoulders and back.

Thoughts I had let fade nearly out of existence because our lives settled into a peaceful course began to come back. Sharon enjoyed the idea that I was violently jealous, but I wasn't violent. I had never been in a fight. On the simplest level, I was afraid of hurting someone or of getting hurt. Beneath that simple level lay complex history and values I had only begun to explore.

I wondered if I would be what Sharon wanted me to be, if I would be what anyone defined me as, or if I would begin to be what I actually was. I wondered what I actually was. We helped Sharon's father home.

Sharon grieved.

I hated her grief. She gave Lela defiance and rebellion. She severely limited her expression of affection. When Lela was buried in the deep clay ground, Sharon invested her emotion.

“Leave me alone,” she said, when I approached her that night, but I didn’t. That became the only time, when her answer was “No,” and I carried through as if it had been yes.

I wanted her juices of life on me. I wanted my force of life, my sperm, the thrust of my life force in her. I was careful not to hurt her, but I wouldn’t let her go. She didn’t struggle to free herself. I pushed her backward, down onto our bed, mounted above her, and entered her. She didn’t cooperate with me, but she didn’t fight me. I pushed deep into her, held her tight, and waited.

She loosened, enfolded me in her arms, spread her legs wide above me, and drew me close against her, tilted her pelvis up and met me as I thrust deeply into her. I smelled her perfume, her flesh, her hot, living skin, and I lost my thoughts in passion.

A long time after that, Sharon spoke of the first moments, when I ignored her answer, “No,” forced her down onto the bed, held her down, and entered her. She said that was the beginning of the end of our time together.

The last day of August, Don left the mountain to get ready to go back to school. Phil and Alice left.

Summer stayed hot in the mountains, but I felt suggestions of autumn. Quiet on the mountain, late afternoon, in camp close to the seldom-used logging road, close to Muggins Creek, Sharon said, “I’m not going to stay up here. It’s too boring when everybody’s gone. You’ll be working all day. There’s nothing to do in camp.”

“Okay. You told me that yesterday, and I said okay.” I said, “I don’t want to work in factories again. Blister-rust control has worked out really well. So far, I haven’t fallen into the stupid mistakes some contractors make when they bid. If we hang onto the money I’ve made this summer, we can probably get through winter. I’ll work until snow runs me out of the mountains. I’ll go to school the second semester. Meanwhile, if you stay out of bars and cut spending on alcohol, the money we have and what I make before the snow comes could last us a while.”

“You can’t tell me what to do. You’re not my father.”

“I wasn’t telling you what to do. I was trying to work out a reasonable way to live, some way that might work for both of us.”

Sharon walked away and packed her car. She called

Michele and Shawn down from the side of the ridge, where they had taken the shovel and worked together. Sharon said, "Come on. We're going."

I walked down to the car with them. Sharon said, "I'm so tired of hearing you talk. Why don't you go to work and leave me alone?"

They drove down the gravel road and disappeared from view into the evergreen forest growing to the edge of the road.

Wild emotions surged through me. Uncertainty about everything in existence followed me closely through the day. Halfway across a lot, I dropped my ball of string and my pick. I felt intensely alone. My heart pounded, and tears poured from me. It took me a while to settle my emotions enough to begin work again, and then I fought wild emotions again halfway through the afternoon. The mountain, the earth stayed steady under my feet, and eventually I walked forward again and methodically worked my 55-acre lot closer and closer to finished.

Six days after Sharon left, I drove to the small town twenty miles from where the logging road connected to the paved highway. I called Sharon from a pay phone. I said, "I'm coming down. I'll be there late afternoon."

"Are you finished?"

"No. A long way from finished, but I'm really unsettled about the way things are with us. I need to see if we can come up with a better understanding of what we're doing, where we're going."

"Okay. See you later."

When I got there, Don was there, and Phil, and David, hovering. Sharon said, "You're moving out."

"This wasn't what I expected."

"I don't care what you expected. You're leaving. I'm staying. Shawn and Michele are staying."

I looked at Don, Phil, and David, waiting, and I laughed. As if a window opened and let in light, I understood the way Don looked at me. I understood the way Don looked at Sharon, the way Don looked at me when I approached Sharon and implored her to listen to me.

Awareness blossomed in my mind like a complex flower opening larger and larger.

I felt despicably stupid, that I hadn't seen what had been so obvious all summer, what was glaringly obvious now.

I knew Sharon had told David, Phil, and Don she expected violence from me. I saw the way she had gathered people

together as if my coming down from the mountain had been a scripted play, with the excitement, the tension that came from knitting together a conspiracy against an as-yet unknowing, very dangerous, possibly fatal force. Don, Phil, even David, my close friend and confidant, were there to protect her, to protect Sharon and our children against my violence.

Now that I saw the relationships starkly lined in this brief scene of the play Sharon had scripted, directed, and starred in, I understood how relationships had been formed, how they had been built upon, carefully placed, scene by scene, while I was mostly offstage, tending to the settings, and tracking down needed materials, too-little tuned to the play itself. I had let details of actions and speeches on stage, that should have alerted me to the developing theme, pass without particular notice. I felt violent internal realignment of almost everything I thought I had understood.

Profound change came to me. Though I would retain some innocence, I lost all naivete. I would never again miss clues to reality because I wanted reality to be different from what it was, but I didn't know that, yet. I didn't know powerful, completely-involving change came abruptly to me. Caught up in turmoil, I couldn't analyze what was happening to me and around me.

Underlying the turmoil of emotions and thoughts, a beginning calmness and acceptance that this moment had been decided for me surprised me. I sorted through my possessions. I said, "I can't deal with everything I own right now. I don't have anywhere to store stuff. I can't take all of it back to the mountains with me."

Don said, "Take it all now. Clear all your stuff out of this house before you leave."

I stepped closer to Don . He stepped back. I imagined how I could start from the ground with an uppercut to Don's chin, the hardest blow I had delivered to anything ever.

Sharon stepped over and stood close to Don . Her eyes burned with excitement. I looked away from her, at Don again.

Even as I imagined hitting him, the knowledge that I wouldn't turn my thoughts into action and smash my fist into Don's face underlay and threaded through my thoughts. Tenuous as it might be in its beginning, my own script, of non violence, of a peaceful existence, upstaged what Sharon had written for me.

I said, "Tell you what, Don, you think I have no power in this situation, and mostly, you're right. I don't have much

power. But this power, I do have. I owe you about twelve-hundred dollars from the lots we just finished. If you want to see the money I owe you, you respect what I own here, and you give me time to finish my work in the mountains, then time to get someplace arranged for my stuff and come and get it.

“You think you can do anything you want, and it’s okay, because Sharon convinced you and everybody else that I’m evil and stupid, violent and you’re good and smart. That belief is for this moment. It’s going to fade. Right now, you glow with victory, but don’t push too hard, and don’t believe too strongly that you’re the force of good, because what you’re doing is slimy stuff, and you know it is.”

I drove back up to the mountains after dark and into camp at two in the morning. Muggins Creek ran black and noisy toward the distant ocean in darkness. Shadows behind trees threatened dense, unknown blackness. I shut off the engine and the lights. Starlight changed blackness to grayness. Threatening shadows resolved to my familiar camp. I got ready for bed in starlight, slid down into my sleeping bag, pulled it tight around my shoulders and slept.

Sun shone warmly down into my camp when I woke late in the morning. I sat in camp, soaking in summer, mountain sunshine. Then I hiked high up the mountain, looked at trees, brush, grasses, wild flowers, animals, rock, the mountain and walked back into camp when the day was gone, in starlit and moonlit darkness.

I worked the next morning. My emotions ran wild, but, wherever I went from this moment, I was going to need money. Finishing my contracts was the best way to get it.

Sometimes, I felt nearly as crazy and moved to violence as Sharon said I was. I daydreamed I lined Don up in the crosshairs of a scope on a high-powered rifle and squeezed the trigger.

My brother, Gerrit, drove down from Oregon and worked with me four days. We sat around the fire late. Gerrit didn’t drink as much, that visit. I talked about Don and Sharon, experimenting. Without trying it out, I wasn’t sure if talking clarified my thoughts and directions or just held me where I was, slowed my progress away from this moment of regret into my future.

Gerrit said, “Why don’t we take Don down to the river and castrate him and roast his testicles? A fool and his testicles are soon parted. Mountain oysters make some good eating.”

I laughed. I saw it in vivid detail, Don tied up and bleeding in the light from the fire Gerrit and I squatted by, roasting small pieces of meat on sharpened willow skewers.

I hadn't yet pulled all my thoughts into harmony with what I began to understand; I willingly made my last exit. With violence, without violence, no matter what I did, it was over. My role in Sharon's life was finished, played to the end. I had no power in her life, in Don's life, in plans they made together. I walked away from Don and Sharon. I never had quite played the role Sharon made up for me as she diverged further and further into her own view of reality.

Sharon said the end of our being together began that night after Lela's funeral, when I overpowered her no with yes, mounted her, and thrust into her. I knew the beginning of the end came earlier, in the very beginning of our relationship, when we walked downtown together under trees that sprouted from fertile valley soil before any European touched this continent, and she said, "Let's keep this strictly physical."

I agreed to do that, but I let what she said evaporate into the heat of the day, because I wanted her, and I was willing to try to be what I wasn't to have her.

We sat by the campfire. Gerrit said, "I don't want to leave the mountains. I have reservations about teaching, especially about teaching art. I'm not sure anybody can teach art. I'm not sure I know enough about it to try." But he packed his belongings and drove north again.

On the mountain, I walked into the autumn of owls. I saw more owls in three months than I'd seen in 25 years, some of them quite close. I saw big owls, little owls, medium-sized owls. I saw owls I could identify from what I already knew or from books, and I saw some I never could identify.

Nights and mornings turned cool. Deciduous trees and brush showed the first mixed colors of autumn. The forest of evergreen trees turned darker green in preparation for winter. I worked along the face of the ridge. I looked up.

A great grey owl stood on a low limb in a pine tree. I walked closer. The owl looked huge. The owl watched me. I said, "What's up, owl? What are you doing for yourself these days?" I looked at the large, almost furry-looking owl for a long time. I spoke to it, and the owl looked down at me. Nothing I did bothered the owl.

After several minutes, I realized another owl stood on the ground at the base of the tree, its large greyness blending with its background, but its huge yellow eyes fixed on me. I said,

“Wow, owl. I’m standing here fifteen feet from you, and all this time, I didn’t see you.”

The owl spread huge wings, lifted itself through the air on soft, silent wings, and settled on the branch beside the other owl.

For a long time, I watched the owls and spoke softly to them of what I’d lived through, of what I thought I moved toward now, of anything that came to my mind. I ran out of words and stood silent, just looking at the owls, who looked at me. Then I felt the movement of time. I needed to work. I said, “Nice meeting you, owls. Have a long and rich existence. Watch out for people.”

I walked away, around the hill, looking for ribes bushes, looking into my future. Two great grey owls perched silently in a ponderosa pine tree and watched me walk away.