

OASIS

The night-foreman's kid had caught a small, buff rabbit, and toward the end of the shift he trotted up the catwalk with it dangling from his gloved fist. Gene Stulthey shut his floor-chains down to watch, and as they slid to a stop he motioned to Red Nelson, the trimmerman, to turn around and look.

Red laughed with fast kick-back nods of his head, like a boxer slipping short jabs, as he watched this latest prank. Gene had found that there were always new pranks down here, and the greatest ones were usually pulled on the greenhorns or short-timers like himself, who had left the mines to work in the sawmill.

"Look at my spectacular swinging monkey!" Fritz shouted. The rabbit kicked out blindly and wriggled beneath the leather fingers of Fritz's glove. Red grinned and laughed.

"Where'd ya get it?" Red yelled. Fritz broke into a foolish grin and held the rabbit out at arm's length; its eyes flashed small and wet and glassy below the arc lights, cutting in every direction as it squirmed.

"Out by the fuel-pile. . .there's still more out there," Fritz laughed. Red reached out and grabbed one of the soft, whirling feet, and the animal's fur stretched taut around its scrawny neck as he pulled.

"I need a lucky foot for my kid," Red laughed. The rabbit let out a tiny shriek against the whine of the trimsaws.

"Let's tape him down and run him through," Fritz said. Gene glanced back at the resaw and noticed that the camel-back chains had filled with lumber. The rabbit squeaked now and then as Red yanked its leg.

"Hey, we're gonna get buried," Gene shouted. White Pine and cedar dimension had piled a foot deep on the incline chains behind the resaw. Red jerked the rabbit's leg a last time and yelled,

"Gadzooks! Shit — let's go!" He winked at Fritz and ran to the trimmer. As Gene flipped a sixteen-foot cant, he asked Fritz what he planned to do with the rabbit.

"Oh, I don't know," Fritz said. He looked as though all the fun had gone out of things since Red left. "I'll probably run him through the chipper."

Gene winced and studied the side of Fritz's face. His slick hair lay plastered across the top of his skull in long, oily ropes, three or four of which slipped down his short forehead as Gene watched. Fritz nodded his head and finger-combed the greasy strings back into place.

"It's a gas to watch these things run like hell against the conveyer-belt to the chipper," Fritz laughed. "They never win. . .you should hear em when they first hit the knives."

Gene flipped the freshly-sawed lumber over as it passed by on the floor chains. The chains slid beneath the lumber with a soft rasping hiss like the sound of froth melting atop a river's surface, evaporating against the roar of the saws.

Fritz snapped a splinter from the end of a White Pine cant and gripped it like a knife, steadying the point at the base of the rabbit's tail. He jabbed it upward in short stabs. The rabbit squealed and seemed to spin around inside its shiny fur.

"You stupid bastard!" Gene yelled. "What's wrong with you?" Fritz laughed and poked the animal hard, twisting the splinter inside like a screwdriver. Gene sprang at Fritz and grabbed for the rabbit, but Fritz lurched backward, throwing the bright red splinter at Gene's face, and swinging the animal away. He backed off, grinning.

"Come and get him, Gene," Fritz said. The lumber crossed-up on the sorter loader-chains, and Red started to holler at Gene.

"Keep the lumber straight, Bozo!" Red yelled. Gene threw his hand up and waved Red off.

"Go out and knock it over the head if you're gonna eat it, but don't waste the damn thing — let it go!" Gene shouted. His floor-chains had emptied and they glinted sharply under the lights. A rhythmic crashing arose from the unscrambler pit.

"You've got a plug-up, Genie," Fritz said. Gene stomped on the floor pedal and headed for the noise of the lumber, twisting and piling above the unscrambler. Fritz shook his rabbit at Gene, but the animal hung limp like it was already dead.

An eighteen-foot bull-pine cant spanned the unscrambler pit, forming a bridge upon which the mountain of lumber gathered. Gene climbed out to the top of the pile and began to leap up and down on the tangled lumber. The pile rose and fell and shuddered; the lumber on the bottom splintered as the unscrambler chains tore at it.

"God damn it all!" Gene yelled as he jumped on the twisted boards. The ends of the bull-pine cant shone thick with yellow pitch, glistening like beads of polished fiberglass. Gene grabbed ahold of the iron side-guard to keep his balance, and his tin hat flew off when he jolted down hard into the pile. The bull-pine board gave way with a soft, tearing crack underfoot, and the whole mess tumbled into the pit. As Gene climbed up the slanted plates, he caught a glimpse of Red, shaking his head and laughing in the direction of the chipper.

"Goddammed short-timers," Red yelled, and laughed, jerking his head backward in hard, quick jabs.

Gene's thermos clumped around inside his lunchbucket as he walked along the shoulder of the sawmill road. The lights of town lay far-off through the gray dawn, and as he walked they danced before his tired eyes. He ambled over the wet cinders with the feeling of lightness, or light-headedness, that came every morning after graveyard shift. Gene thought of his living room couch, and how he'd have to try to sleep on the old thing one more time.

The hills loomed close on either side of the canyon, steep and black like the jagged walls of a huge hardrock drift, slowly narrowing inward as he walked.

They made him feel cramped, swallowed up, the same way he felt when the tunnel closed in behind him when he worked at the Frisco.

One last set of headlights bounced over the ruts behind Gene, and he stepped out to the brink of the rocky shoulder. He recognized the sound of the pickup as it bore down at his back, and he stood still, watching his shadow sweep outward, then hurtle down the trunks of the trees into the gulch and the river below. As the truck passed, he saw the flash of a white forearm snaking through the passenger window. The wrist flicked out, and almost as fast, Gene ducked, but too late. The sharp metal lid of a Copenhagen can glanced off his right eyebrow.

“Got him!” Fritz’s voice trailed back to Gene. Laughter spilled out of the truck as it rattled away. Gene’s lunchbucket fell as he dropped down and groped in the cinders to find a throwing rock. He swore at Fritz and pawed through the dirt, and from the distance, from the first big corner, the sound of their horn honked back to him.

Gene stamped the cinders as he straightened up, looking wildly around at the timber-covered hills and the empty road. He kicked at his lunchbucket and missed, then booted it squarely off the shoulder. It rattled and somersaulted down the scabble to the river’s edge.

What pissed him off most was the relentless stupidity of their pranks. Night after night since he’d started they pulled something new. He was only working there because the smelter had fired him for not wearing his mask or his mitts — his gums turned blue from the lead, and he’d had to start the calcium shots again. Luanne had pressed him about getting out of the District once and for all. As soon as the baby came they’d get out. They’d move west to Hardall, she said, where it was still clean, and they’d buy a lake-lot. He’d build a house down on the shore with white pilings like stilts rising out of the dark, green water. Luanne had talked about the lake house for weeks as she waited for the baby — she described the sunlight flashing off its tin roof in the early mornings, and how it would sparkle across the water to the far shore. How tiny it would look in the rain, poking out into the mist away from the dark, wet evergreens, with water dropping everywhere — water falling from the huge pointed firs onto the roof, sliding off and landing in overlapping rings beside the piling-legs.

A month after the smelter fired him, Luanne lost the baby, and everything went to hell. She stayed in the hospital for four days, and the insurance wouldn’t cover. Gene was lucky when her father got him on at the sawmill.

He rubbed his forehead, and a thread of dried blood crackled away like dirt, leaving a greasy smudge on his skin.

When he’d brought Luanne home after the baby died, he’d set her up in the bedroom, and since then he’d rarely seen her at all. She lay in bed when he came home in the morning, and before he left at midnight he’d creep around in the kitchen, making his lunch, being careful not to wake her up. He’d tried the bedroom door one afternoon during his first week at the sawmill, but she locked him out.

Gene stooped for his lunchbucket, then swore when he remembered he’d kicked it over the side. “Hell with it,” he said, and started for town. Fifty yards down the gulch the sound of the river rose to him like wind in the cottonwood leaves. Up on the ridges, the gas lights of the mines still glittered above the trees.

Gene walked on, listening to the hush of the river below. He had settled his hand upon Luanne's thin white neck that night in the hospital; her collarbones held deep pockets at the opening of her gown, and as he spoke, she stared at the lights of the mines across the valley.

"It's not the end of the world, gal," he'd said. Luanne gazed out the window as though they were speeding through the hills again in his pickup. She stared at the pink and green and blue lights that flickered on the far hillsides. "We've still got you and me, Luanne. . .heck, things'll get better — they have to."

But the mountains seems to squeeze against the town at dusk, closing off the lighted silver mines and the ramshackle houses that clove to the shanks of the hills, swallowing the buildings of town and the lives inside, closing them away from the rest of the world.

"We still love each other," Gene had said. He set a stack of library books on her meal tray before turning to leave. Luanne had shifted closer to the window when he told her he loved her. "Come on, Luanne," he'd said. She turned to face his reflection in the glass when she finally spoke.

"I've been lying here thinking of you and me and this whole place," she'd said. "It's like a mean, mean joke."

"Don't, Luanne — we can have another kid."

"— to live here?"

"We can still get out."

"— here in this damn valley? We could just as well throw ourselves down a mine shaft and have it all over with — that's the way it'll probably end up anyway." Luanne curled up when Gene reached for her shoulder, and she'd said, "We can jump in the river for all I care anymore."

"Don't you think it'll get any better, Luanne?" Gene asked, but she wouldn't answer. As the door closed behind him, Gene could hear her voice break, and she started to cry. He slumped against the corridor wall then, and felt the smooth, cool texture rub upward into his back as he slid to a crouch outside her door. Her lake house appeared to him as he closed his eyes, shining a little ways off across the water. The lights of the rooms stood out like yellow sparks against the black trees, and he wondered how he'd ever pay their bills.

Streetlights were flickering off as Gene walked into town, and he held to the road where it emptied into a parking lot beside the river. The water crashed into its banks, roaring and full of air and falling in sheets the color of glacier ice, rushing, rushing downhill. Gene flipped the collar of his wool coat up against the spray. Across the parking lot, a shabby, two-story brick building ran the entire length of the block. From an upstairs window a woman smiled down and waved at Gene.

Inside the Oasis, Gene went to the bedroom window and looked out. Guitars played from Denise's transistor radio. The south fork of the Saint Ignatius tumbled down the narrow, boulder-strewn curve of rapids, and Gene unbuttoned his coat, trying to make out the sound of the crashing water. The river softly rose between the rutted parking lot and the mountainside before it spilled over broken columns of marbled-quartz and gray-sand-granite.

Gene pulled off his coat and draped it over the folding chair, then he sat to unlace his boots. He lifted his head and watched as water-skimmers nipped the surface of the pool below the rapids. The current sheared above submerged slabs of black basalt and gutted automobile frames, collapsing on itself like folds of skin: lips that closed, or underarms or bent elbows, or soft V's that sluiced down fluid backbones.

Denise stepped into the room and pulled the door shut behind her. She turned her radio off. "What's new?" she said, and smiled. She pulled off her bikini, snapping the bottoms so they sounded like a slingshot band between her thighs.

"Same ol' thing," Gene said. He walked back to the window. Mist boiled off the black pool in slow tendrils of steam that rose tangled and thin and strained like the voices from the next room.

"Is Luanne home from the hospital?" Denise asked. Gene nodded and listened to the soft padding of her bare feet as she climbed to the top of her sink. "Does she know that you've ever been here, Gene?"

Gene stared out the window. Luanne couldn't know. Although for a second, he wished she did. Then everything would be in the open. Something would happen, one way or the other. Maybe everything would work out between them.

The faucet chirped when Denise turned it open, and she sighed as she lowered herself over the wash basin.

"You never watch me wash, do you?" she said. Gene smiled out the window. Down on the river, broad hips bulged and stuggled against the pull. Just below the surface, the other world lay where everything worked out. The flow dimpled with shallow pockets like hollows around collarbones, or the slippery skin behind bent knees; flat stomachs fell from ribcages.

"Naa."

"Well, I think some of them like this part the best," Denise said. The water sloshed as she soaked her washcloth. Gene listened to the wet rubbing sound as Denise scrubbed herself. He bent forward and looked at the rockslides on the high slopes across the canyon.

When the oldtimers had gouged the mountains for gold and silver and zinc, the scars they left stood out on almost every hillside. At the western end of the valley they had scoured the hills bare, not even the tree-stumps remained. The racks of the smelters threw up their sulphur-colored stench against the white sky even now. The rain melted the naked hills and the soil washed down and choked the river.

"Let's go, Gene," Denise said. Gene stripped off his sweatshirt, sprinkling sawdust to the window sill. "Good ol' Mr. Wood-chips," she laughed, slipping around him and resting her back against the window pane. Denise ran her index finger down one side of Gene's chest, and stopped at his navel. He grinned and took her shoulders in his hands. Denise's breasts wiggled as she unbuttoned his pants.

"What've you got for me this morning, Gene?" She grasped Gene's pecker and pulled on it. "He's still sleeping," Denise said. Gene kicked off his pants, while Denise leaned back on her bed and smiled at him. "You know me, Wood-chips," she said, as he climbed onto the bed, "no kissing on the lips, face, or neck, right?"

“Right, Gene said. A worn-out bedspring groaned and popped loose like a knuckle cracking under their bodies. They laughed as they squirmed on her tiny single bed, wrinkling the beach towel she’d spread over the covers. Denise’s hips rubbed sharply under Gene, and she stopped him, and pushed at him to get off.

“Oww — you need some meat on those hips of yours — go easy,” she said. Gene held himself up and waited. “Okay, Denise shivered, “let’s try it this way . . . that’s better.” She tried to hold his hips away by butting her palms against them. “Oh, don’t touch my hair, honey — Please — you’ll wreck it.”

Gene let his face fall flat into her pillow, and as he sank he smelled Pinesol and stale perfume.

“Okay, honey, time’s up.” Denise pushed against Gene’s chest, and he lifted away and scrambled off the small bed. As he set his feet on the floor he felt lonely again, and guilty, when he thought of Luanne at home in bed.

He crossed to the window and saw the river. Under the skin the other world lay: the soft women swayed and circled inside the black eddies. Almost trapped, doubled-up, they thumped quietly inside the abandoned cars below the surface, and their long, bleached bodies streamed from the cracks between the ragged edges of the boulders. In midstream, they hung suspended, rocking and jack-knifed over sharp, black snags under the water-line.

“Whatcha lookin’ for, honey?” Denise said. Just above the rapids the sliding water blurred the submerged rocks, and they swayed: soft, blurred flashes of white thighs that crossed or shivered open; pale-blue knees foamed and pumped into the air as refracted lines of shin-bones and calves and cold, bare ankles sprayed skyward, bucking against the push.

Denise pulled the towel up from the foot of the bed, and snugged it between her thighs as she slid off the edge. “Somebody’s gonna see you, Gene,” she said, and laughed. “Why aren’t you ever tired-out afterwards?”

Gene stared at the mist that lifted away from the big eddies and the long, slow stretches of sliding water. He saw the women’s slender legs fluttering down the slide. How many bodies had been pulled down, he thought, pulled down and snagged on hidden obstacles in the stream?

“Have you every wondered about the water, Denise?” he said, as he leaned over to lace his boots.

“What about it?” Denise said. Gene looked up at her and smiled; his face felt red from bending over.

“I don’t know — what all’s in it, I guess.” Denise stood with one foot resting on the other, leaning against her dresser in her light-blue bikini.

“Just cold water,” Denise said. She smiled and fiddled with the knob on her radio, and all of the sudden Gene wished he had another thirty-five dollars.

Gene blinked when he stepped into the cold light that whisked down Fourth Avenue. From the northern end of the canyon he heard the horns of the Last Chance and the Herules blowing-in the new morning. Here and there on the mountain ridges, old, abandoned silver mines squatted, the tin roofs of their hoist-houses rusting above gray aprons of slag-rock that spilled from their mouths.

The windows of the Shamrock Tavern filled with steam in the cool morning, and Gene smelled coffee boiling inside as he passed. In front of Templin’s, two men crouched at the feet of the wooden cigar-Indian. They took turns hammering at the logging chains that bound the statue to a parking sign. One fellow held

the cold-chisel while the other smashed at it, sending chips of concrete from the sidewalk spraying into their faces.

“Want a bet on this one?” the chisel-man glanced up, and asked.

“When?”

“We’re throwin’ him in around five tonight, if we don’t get caught.”

“Up at Big Hank?” Gene asked.

“Yeah, you’ll hear us honking when we leave town — it’s gonna be a good one this time — lots a money.”

“I’ll take seven forty-nine,” Gene said. “For ten bucks.” The men nodded and went back to smashing the chain. Gene patted the Indian’s splintered, yellow-varnished belly. “No more beer, Two-smokes.”

At the corner of Placer Street and Fourth, Gene turned south and steered away from downtown. He thought of the wooden Indian shooting downriver from Big Hank. With the runoff, he’d travel fast, if he didn’t hang up somewhere along the way.

The small clinking sound fell behind as Gene gained the first two blocks up Placer Street. Dago Peak poked its top into the sunlight, but the buildings of the Frisco and the Tiger-Poorman remained lead-colored on the shadowed hillside.

If a body somehow made it past the deep pool behind the rapids, it would surely snag downstream in the splash-dam at Callis Creek. Gene pictured the silver, sunbleached logs of the dam rising out of the water like long fingers. From there, the river flowed wider and slackened almost to a stop at the Mission Flats. The body would be coated with fine, dark, cedar-brown silt inside the slough, hidden by stalks of wide rice and swaying cattails. Duck potatoes would sprout in the fertile soil between the arms and legs.

Gene shook his head at his thoughts, and climbing upward, he heard most of the mines in the District blowing their horns. He veered off Placer Street where Mullan Avenue came in, high above the tarred roofs of the downtown buildings. Gene started singing the oldest song he knew with Luanne, way back when she’d tried to teach him to waltz. He remembered how around that same time he’d tried to pick her up from her father’s living-room floor and carry her into the bedroom. She was too heavy back then, or he was too weak. Gene laughed — it must’ve looked something like a professional wrestling match — a grueling body-slam hold, called, “the backbreaker.”

Down the street, Luanne had the light on in their bedroom. Gene stopped singing. A ragged cur-dog shambled out from between the parked cars, jangling his tags in the quiet air. Luanne was never up this early. Since he’d installed her in the bedroom, he’d never seen the dull patch of light coming from their window in the morning. Maybe she’d known all along about the Oasis and Denise.

The dog ran up to welcome him home again. Gene felt like turning tail and running for the river. He could dive in and wash the stink away. He rubbed his forehead, and the tiny clots of blood rolled off like specks of sawdust under his fingers. His truck perched on cinder blocks in the side yard.

“Hello, dog.” He ruffed the brindled fur and said, “Are you ol’ Ted-dog? Huh? Is your name Ted?” The dog pranced off on stiff legs, dropping his nose to the dirt now and then. Across the canyon, the Tiger-Poorman’s hoist glimmered like a bicycle wheel in the sun.

“Oh hell.” Gene sighed. His face felt hot and red again, the way he’d felt when Fritz had walked off to the chipper with the rabbit. He glanced back at their bedroom window, then looked away. In the short stretches between the scattered rooftops below, he could see the river curling at the base of the mountain ridges, bending dark on the canyon floor and snaking free to the west. That was the other world — the world of warm, soft women sliding free to the west, inside the Saint Ignatius. Denise might be sleeping, or she might be hard at work again; Gene thought of her thin shoulder-blades, and the graceful curve of her spine as she crouched above the sink.

The screen door squeaked as Gene stepped into the kitchen. He listened to the faucet drip against the stillness of the morning. Someday the mines would shut down and there’d be nothing left. All the whorehouses and the taverns and stores would close, one after the other, and in the end only the interstate would be left. Only the interstate and the empty railroad tracks and maybe a truckstop. Everything would disappear.

Gene reeled on the hot-water handle and the dripping stopped. He shivered. Some day everything would be gone. He saw the land again as the Indians had: the desperate miles of timber it held, miles and miles of virgin timber and saddles breaking on ridge after ridge, like waves, to the horizon. Clean water shot through it all. Rivers full of light and cold cut through the heart of the District. Ragged slashes of dark water like wounds from broken hunting-knives ripped through the mountains, escaping to the western ocean.

“Just cool water,” Denise had said.

Luanne smiled when she heard Gene come into the bedroom, and she laid her book face down on the bedspread.

“Hello, Luanne,” Gene said. As he moved closer, the book’s cover caught his eye. *Hardrock Diary: the first ten years of silver mining in the northwest*. A photograph of the entrance to an old drift stared up at him. The narrow, black hole, fringed with blasted rock, gaped wide open with a set of narrow-gauge tracks disappearing into its throat. A candle-box stood to one side of the tunnel’s mouth.

“I was just reading about the Jesuits and the Mission,” Luanne said. “They really tried to help the poor Indians.”

“Oh?” Gene said. *The poor Indians*.

“Yeah.” Luanne yawned and stretched. Her pink nightgown peeked open as she brought her arms over her head. Gene waited for her to hold her hands out to him. She dropped them to the covers and smiled.

“Hell, Luanne — the Indians knew more than the missionaries ever could — it was their land first.” Gene felt Luanne’s eyes on him; he felt foolish as she smiled at him. He didn’t want to start anything this morning, he thought. Luanne sniffed quietly a few times. Her smile faded as she stared at him.

“If you say so, Gene,” she said. She picked up her book and held it up in front of her face.

“The missionaries were wrong to name the rivers saints,” Gene said. “Hell, they knew they weren’t.” The rivers had always been women: strong, clean women who melted from the snows of the northern Bitterroots, laughing and crashing down the saw-gulches, screaming with their raw ice and their cold beauty. Gene thought of Denise, smiling and laughing as she climbed her sink-cabinet. “You should go listen to the Indians sometime, Luanne.”

The Indians who sat in the taverns along the river drinking their government checks wouldn't speak to anyone but their buddies, and after a week of falling off their bar stools, the money would run all out and they'd crawl off somewhere. Gene laughed. "Go listen to the Indians, Luanne — instead of that crap."

Luanne's neck tightened below her book, and Gene yanked it away, revealing the face he'd seen her make at her mother so many times before.

"Great," he said. He felt like telling her about Denise. "I just got off that stinkin' graveyard shift and I don't know what all else. Some jackass threw a rabbit into the chipper this morning. Why did he do that, do you suppose?" Gene wondered what she'd do if he told her about Denise and the Oasis. "Come on, Luanne. How long are you gonna be this way?"

"What way?" Luanne said.

"The way you are now — this isn't gonna last much longer."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Luanne said. She smoothed the front of her nightgown and glared at Gene. "How much longer are you gonna be the way you are, Gene?"

"We're gonna have to start again sometime," Gene said.

"What?"

"We're going to start in again."

"Go ahead and start without me," Luanne said. "By the way, what time did you get off from the sawmill?"

"What?" Gene said. "Bullshit — I've had enough waitin' around. It's gonna stop right now."

"I know better than you do about this," Luanne snapped. She shied away feebly as Gene came after her. Climbing into bed with his muddy boots, he circled her waist and dragged her to the edge.

"You know better than anybody, don't you Luanne?" Gene laughed. Luanne snatched up her book and rammed it hard into his nose. Gene wrestled it from her hand, tearing the cover off.

"That's a library book," Luanne said gravely. Gene's nose began to bleed.

"Too bad." Gene tasted the blood that streamed down to his upper lip. "Too damn bad," he said. Just below the surface of the river, he thought, the other world lay warm and dark without care. "Did you really mean what you said about the mine-shaft, Luanne?" He wiped his face on his sweatshirt sleeve. "Remember that night in the hospital? Remember you said we could all jump in the river?"

"Let me go," Luanne said.

"You're not the only one who thinks it's a mean trick — let's go wash off in the river." The hair on the back of Gene's neck bristled as he lifted her from the bed.

"Put me down. What are you doing?" Luanne shouted. Her voice sounded flat and scared. She was light as a breeze, Gene thought, light and warm, sickly warm as he crossed the floor.

"What are you doing?" she yelled.

"We're goin' to the river, Luanne. We gotta get clean before we can start in again. . . I've got something to tell you."

Luanne shoved her hands into his face. Gene staggered, and jerked his head back as she struck at him. He snorted the blood from his nostrils and it speckled her pink nightgown. The screen slammed behind them and she glanced up wildly,

“Put me down, Gene! People’ll see us,” Luanne hissed, trying to order Gene under her breath. “Stop, dammit!”

Gene heard a car start up, somewhere down the street. Luanne began to cry as they crossed the side-yard. “You wanted the river,” he said. He jolted her up in the cradle of his arms for a better grip.

“I’ll change!” she screamed. “Let me go — please, I’ll change, Gene,” Luanne pleaded. Ted the dog gamboled out from beneath the truck. He growled and barked and pawed the dirt around the two as they passed.

“I’m through, damn it!” Luanne yelled. Ted cocked his head, and barked, rushing at Gene’s legs as they turned down Placer Street. “I’m through with it, Gene. Oh, please put me down,” Luanne begged. “DAMN YOU!” she swore, her voice sounded angry and eager to live, but mostly eager to avoid embarrassment. Ted lunged at Gene’s pant-leg above the boot, and shook his head as he ripped at it, circling away from Gene’s feet. Gene stumbled as he turned to kick the dog. Luanne slapped him in the face again and they all went down together. Gene tasted the salt from his bleeding nose, and as he tried to gather Luanne she slapped him across the cheek, making it burn. She broke free from his grip and slapped at him again, circling with the dog. Her breath came in sharp gasps as Gene crawled after her.

“Now you’re through!” Luanne shouted. Gene stumbled as the dog bit at his leg. He’d never seen Luanne move so quickly. She closed in again and slapped him hard. Tiny pin-pricks of white light swam before his eyes. Luanne’s face looked far away as she swung her fist at him. Her foolish nightgown made Gene want to laugh as she stormed up Placer Street. Ted the dog nosed in and licked his bloody face as he tried to regain his feet.

“You’re through with that rotten whore, too,” Luanne yelled. She stopped and turned to swear at him. “I’ve known about it all along, you creep!” Gene staggered. He heard a screen door slam from the house beside him.

“Dad was right,” Luanne screamed, “You never were good enough for me.”

Gene wished he could take his actions back. Luanne ran uphill to the end of the block and turned away from their house. She headed for her parent’s house. She’d want a divorce, Gene thought. Her old man would get him canned at the sawmill.

As he stumbled in the dirt, he heard more screen doors clapping behind him. If only he could start again — if he could get through all the neighbors somehow and make it down to the river, he’d throw himself in and wash the stink away.

Gene reached for the dog as he rose to his feet. He could hear voices coming up from behind. Up above, Luanne swore again, and another door slammed. Ted the dog sidled away as Gene offered his hand to him. Gene stumbled up Placer Street for almost a block, then he tripped and fell hard onto the dirt again. He lay face down, resting; the road-oil burned sour in his bloody nostrils.

“Are you all right?” someone asked.

“Is he drunk?”

Gene heard footsteps that sounded like slippers, running down the road from above. Luanne, he thought. He felt a hand softly touch his back as he struggled upward. When he gripped the small, soft arm, it tried to pull free. Gene knew the arm, and he smiled, feeling sad, as he raised up and looked into the familiar face.

“He ain’t drunk,” Fritz said. “Hell he just got off work two hours ago.” He grinned and jerked his arm away from Gene. “What’s all the yelling about? Huh? What the hell’s wrong with you, Gene?”