

## Barton Sutter

# Happiness

### I

The trip on which we almost drowned was Dick's idea, but he didn't have to argue very hard to get Bud and me to go along. We had four days for Thanksgiving break. "Plenty of time," Dick said. "We drive up Thursday, canoe down Whiskeyjack to that little creek we found last summer, camp right there. No need to bust our butts. Then we've got two whole days to shoot some pictures, walk the creek, and generally putz around. You with me? We break camp early Sunday, and we're back in time for a good long snooze before classes Monday morning."

"It's going to be colder than a witch's tit up there," I warned.

"I know," he said. "That means no mosquitoes. No RV's. No fat fishermen. Just us." He let out a greedy cackle. "Gentlemen, I ask you to imagine birch trees. Listen to the wind in the lonesome pine. Inhale the sweet perfume of cedar smoke. Are you with me?"

We were with him.

The plan seemed sound, but we were surprised by the difference three hundred miles made in the temperature. Dick's ten-year-old Comet let in a lot of cold air, and the heater only worked intermittently. We didn't dare push the car much faster than fifty, so the drive, including bathroom, lunch, and coffee breaks, took all of eight hours. For the last four — from Duluth to Grand Marais and up the Gunflint Trail — we rode with our coats and mitts on. Bud finished reading *The Way of Zen* during the drive but said the next time he took a trip in The Vomit he'd have to bring tweezers along to turn the pages. Every half hour I beat on the heater and cursed. Dick laughed and called us pansies.

When we got out of the car at Whiskeyjack Lake we could see our breath. Dick hurried down to the water. Bud and I were still standing beside the car, sniffing the air and stretching, when Dick sang out from the shore: "You guys. You're not going to believe this."

Bud and I eyed each other. "What?" I shouted.

"The fucker's froze."

"What!"

"The lake. Come look. She's frozen at both ends."

We ran down to the shore. Whiskeyjack was eight miles long and roughly two across. A wide stretch of grey water lay open in front of us, but the east and west ends of the lake were white with ice. "Son of a bitch," I said.

Bud crossed his arms and tucked his hands under his armpits. "Guess we should have brought skates," he grinned.

"Damn it, MacMillan," I said. "I told you it was going to be wicked up here. Now what are we going to do?"

"Don't get excited," Dick said. "I'm thinking."

"That must be a novel experience," I said.

He smiled and knocked the rind of ice off a rock with the tip of his stainless steel crutch. Dick had lost his left leg to cancer when he was fourteen. His classmates had bought him a color TV, and Dick had exchanged it for a canoe, the canoe that was lashed to the car, the canoe we had planned to paddle down Whiskeyjack.

"So," I said. "Any bright ideas?"

"We'll walk," Dick said.

"Through the bush? You're out of your gourd. It's four miles, minimum. And the first thing you've got to do is climb that cliff. Then you've got all that bog at the east end. You're nuts."

"I didn't mean over here, Peckerhead. I meant the Canadian side." He pointed a crutch at the far shore.

"Oh."

"We paddle across, leave the canoe, and walk the ridge down to the creek."

"Good," Bud said. "That'll work. There's an old railroad bed we can follow partway. Besides, if the going gets too tough, we can just park our carcass anyplace over there. It's all nice country."

"Okay," I said. "I'll go along with that. As long as you guys guarantee the lake won't lock up while we're over there."

"Naw," Bud said. "Not in three days' time." He laughed. "I don't think."

"Come on, Ray," Dick said. "What are you worried about? Say we did get stranded over there. Would that be so bad?"

I looked off across the lake. The distant shore was lavender and green. Back of that ridge, I knew, was another lake, and another ridge, and more of the same but all different, and rivers and rapids and lovely, rough country all the way to Hudson Bay. I took a deep breath of cool, spicy air. "You're right," I said. "Let's get cranking."



Coated with ice, the pebbles on the beach crackled underfoot as we loaded and launched the canoe. We took our caps and mitts but settled for jackets and left our coats in the car. "Go light, go light," Dick said. "We'll be moving around anyhow." Bud got in the bow, I sat in the center on one of the packs, Dick pushed off and hopped into the stern. Dick and Bud had run miles of whitewater together, so I naturally deferred to them. My back braced against the rear thwart, I enjoyed the ride while the two of them fought the choppy water. The crossing only took a half hour, but the light was fading fast when we reached the Canadian side.

We didn't bother to pitch the tent. Bud cut armloads of balsam boughs and built a green mattress. Dick gathered wood. I set up my cooking area, fetched water, and laid the fire. We had splurged on food for this trip. Our Thanksgiving menu included sauteed mushrooms, baked potatoes, sweet potatoes, steaks that draped over the edges of our plates, coffee, and pudding. Dick and Bud did the dishes in the dark, and then we all collapsed. I lay on my back in my mummy bag, my belly full, my body warm. The frosty air smelled like gin. When I closed my eyes I still saw stars. I grinned and drifted off.

We got an early start the next morning, but, without a real trail to follow, the hike was hard work. We stashed some of our gear beneath the canoe, but we were still overpacked for a trek through the bush. And though we all pretended otherwise, there was no getting around the fact that Dick was a lot slower in the woods than he was on the water. With the back and arms of a gymnast, he could make a canoe fly, but, determined as he was, he could only go so fast over rough ground. We worked hard, paused often, and reached the creek at noon. By the time we'd set up camp, we were all worn out and most of the day was gone, but I revived everyone with a thick chicken stew topped off with dumplings. For the second night in a row, we gorged ourselves. Then we lounged around the fire — talking, smoking, sipping tea — weary but satisfied.

Saturday dawned clear and cold. The light in the ravine where we'd made camp was eerie, soft and green, and Dick spent most of the day taking photographs. The ravine was lined with the largest cedars any of us had ever seen. The trees filtered and transformed the light, giving it such a gauzy, mysterious quality that we spoke in undertones. Dick devoted the entire morning to a pool full of clouds and sky and the soaring tops of several cedars. Even I could see it would make an amazing shot, a view in which water, trees, and sky would be beautifully confused, the world turned upside down. Bud and I talked

quietly while Dick worked, hopping around his tripod, ducking under the black hood of his big 4 x 5, popping back out, making adjustments, puffing on a cigarette, waiting for the light to change, alternately gloating and mumbling nervously. In the afternoon Bud and I walked up the creek, tracing the stream through a stand of birches to a small waterfall and then back through a tangle of willows and scarlet moose maples to the source, a spruce bog that lay less than a mile from the point where the creek emptied into Whiskeyjack Lake. The ravine drained by the creek held the same appeal as an island: It felt like a world that was small enough to comprehend. And for this one day, anyway, it was ours.

After supper we sat up late to mourn and celebrate our last night in the woods. Dick pulled out a pint of brandy he'd been hiding in his camera pack. We relived trips we'd taken in the past and dreamed up expeditions for the future. Dick wanted to run the Mackenzie River. Bud said he needed to see Hudson Bay. I confessed my reveries about Alaska. At our age, we figured, we had forty years to make these fantasies come true.

"The trouble is," Dick said, "you run out of gas."

"You get tied down," I said. "I suppose it's inevitable." I handed the brandy back to Dick.

"The trick is to keep your standard of living low," Bud said. "Avoid the middle-class traps."

"I don't think it's that simple," Dick said. He took a slug of brandy, shook his head, and buzzed his lips. "Good stuff," he laughed. "Most guys just change over the years. Look at my old man. When he was our age he spent all his spare time in the woods. Hell, he took my mom on a canoe trip for their honeymoon! But now he never goes. He's lost the urge."

"No offense," Bud said, "but I think your dad was tamed. You get married, pretty soon you want a family and a house, and there you go. It's the old domestic tug, the longing for hearth and home. We all feel it, and once you reach a certain age it must be practically impossible to fight. But if you buy the whole program you can kiss your life goodbye. Christ, you've seen it. Guys just a few years older than we are. Ornery, independent, full of weird ideas. They get married, and, bingo, suddenly Buffalo Bill is living in a split-level with a two-car garage, working some stupid nine-to-five job and looking for overtime. Instead of spending a year in Tierra del Fuego, he's talking about his pension plan and driving a carful of kids to Disneyland."

I laughed and laid another piece of wood on the fire. "Women are

the devil, then, is that what you're saying?" I looked up at Bud, who was standing back in the shadows. Red reflections of the fire glinted off his glasses.

"It's not women," he said, "and it's not men. It's the combination. The social unit. Marriage as an institution. You take a male and a female who can both think for themselves, give them wedding rings, and they go loco. Suddenly they're playing house just like the TV wants them to. Buying everything in sight. It's like they start living *down* to other people's expectations."

I tossed my cigarette in the fire, gazed into the flames, then sank back on the balsam boughs. Bud raved on, and I smiled. If there was one thing the three of us shared besides a liking for the woods, it was the conviction that the way most people lived was pathetic, criminal, and cracked. The question of how we should live our own lives fueled half our conversations.

Bud moved in from the darkness, bent over the fire, and rubbed his hands. He was tall but round-shouldered, with a smooth, boyish face and a way of going unnoticed in large groups. But he had the most intriguing mind I had ever encountered. Bud could move from music to physics to poetry and back so fast he left me feeling both delighted and scared. He didn't read books as much as he ransacked them, and once he'd adopted an author's best ideas, he gave the book away or tossed it in the trash. Bud hated the very idea of property. He lived by a rule he called The Packboard Principle. Whenever he'd accumulated more belongings than he could fit in his backpack — once every two or three months — he started throwing things. "This is what it all comes down to," he was saying now. "Warmth. That's what Thoreau says. Clothing, food, and shelter. Which are all just different ways of keeping warm. You wouldn't think a guy would have to work forty hours a week to keep warm! And you don't. I read this book about Australia once. Know what the aborigines work? Four hours a day. But we're civilized. We work eight." He laughed, a yelp that sounded as if he'd been hurt.

"Here," Dick said, offering the brandy from where he sat. "Have a little warmth."

Bud took a quick nip and passed the bottle to me. "The most valuable thing in the world is time. Isn't it? Outside of warmth? It's all we have. But we cash it in for junk — stereos, electric knives, dishwashers — and then try to cram a year into a crummy two-week vacation. I can't stand it. I won't live like that. I'll kill myself before I'll live like that."



"Don't you think sewerpipe is just a touch extreme?" Dick said.

"What's the difference? You work all year for two weeks of freedom, you must be brain-dead anyhow." He ducked his head and drank some coffee. "That's why I say, of all the lousy options available, teaching still looks like the best bet to me. At least you get your summers."

"But that's a sad-ass reason to choose a line of work," I said. "On the basis of how much time off you get. Jesus. The job itself ought to offer some satisfaction."

"You'd think so," Bud said. "But name a job that doesn't have monotony built in. Look, here's the problem. Human beings aren't meant to do the same damn thing day after day. Up until about a week ago, historically speaking, we were hunters and gatherers. Put up a hut today, go fishing tomorrow. Plenty of variety. But what do we do? Stand on assembly lines or sit in an office all day while the old bod is screaming to be out chasing deer or harvesting wild rice."

"Roots and berries, roots and berries," Dick grunted, hunching his back. "That's the life for me."

We laughed. "Well?" Bud said. "Isn't it? Why the hell else do we come up here all the time?"

"To cut the crap," Dick said, "and get down to bedrock. To leave the billboards behind. Because the further you go from the end of the road, the fewer assholes you find per square mile."

"I like the quiet," I said. "I love it when the silence gets so deep you can hear your own heart thump."

"And there's the chance to test yourself," Dick said. "To see if you can survive without sidewalks and vending machines."

A breeze burst through the trees and fanned the fire. I felt for a cigarette, held the tip to an ember till it caught, took a deep drag, and passed it on to Dick, who handed me the brandy in return. "Mostly," I said, "I keep coming back just because it feels right. I feel good out here, even when the bugs are bad or the sky is pissing rain. Right? Even when the country's trying to kill you off you feel like you belong. The first time you guys brought me up here I realized I'd been homesick all my life without knowing why. This country is what I was missing." I paused. The fire popped and sighed. "But I can't see myself living like this for any length of time. I mean, to be honest. I like books and movies and hot showers. Part of the pleasure of every trip into the boonies, for me, is sharpening my appetite for all those things."

"I hear you talking," Dick said. "I've got a sizeable hanker right



now for a piece of that banana cream pie they sell down in Schroeder."

"Well, I'd like to try it," Bud said.

"The banana cream?" Dick said.

"That, too. No, I mean living up here. For a good long stretch."

"How?" I said. I didn't like the way these conversations went. I always came off as the hesitant skeptic.

"I don't know," Bud said. He turned around to warm his back and spoke to the trees. "Save up some money. Build a cabin back in the bush, come out to work a few months a year."

"That's just a pipe dream, Walker."

"Is it?"

"Come on," I said. "What are you going to do, live like a trapper? You like to talk too much. I mean, I hate to say this, but I'm afraid these trips we take are only high-class versions of the two-week vacation. They're escapes, aren't they? This is dreamland. Reality is back out there. Face it. To think you could actually make a life out here is just a romantic fantasy."

Bud turned and smiled down at me. Light and shadow flickered over his face as if he were underwater. "Sabo, when are you going to learn? It's all dreamland, man. You think shopping malls are real? You think freeways are the truth? Passing fancies. And don't go calling me romantic. People who use that word as an accusation are just chicken-shit defenders of the status quo."

I crossed my hands on my chest as if I'd been shot. "You got me," I moaned.

"I'll tell you one thing," Dick said. "I sure as shit do not want to go back to that other reality tomorrow. I could use another week or two out here."

"Me, too," I said. "But I'm afraid we'd run a little short on food. Unless Jim Bridger here goes out and snares a deer."

"I don't know about that," Bud grinned, "but I could always hike into Grand Marais and pick up a box of Bisquick." We all laughed. Grand Marais was sixty miles away.

"Here," I said, pointing to a spot beside the fire. "Why don't you have a seat? These boughs are better than a sofa."

"Naw." Bud backed away. "You guys are sitters. I'm a stander." We laughed. It was true. Bud was always on his feet. He even ate standing up. When we gathered around the fire at night he never settled down but hovered in the background restlessly, moving in and out of the light, as if he might vanish into the woods at any moment. "Anyhow," Bud said, "I feel the sandman calling. I better sack out if

we're going to take off early."

"Good thinking," Dick said. "One last smoke and I'll be with you." He frisked himself for cigarettes. "Goddamn. I'm out. Can I bum one, Ray?"

"Sure," I said, but I only had two left, myself. "Piss poor planning," I said. I lit one cigarette and tucked the other away for morning. Dick and I sat gazing at the bed of coals, murmuring contentedly, passing the cigarette back and forth as if it were marijuana. We finished the brandy. I took a final drag on the cigarette and flipped the butt onto the coals. It smoldered, flared, and turned to ash. "This was a great idea, Dick. The best Thanksgiving I ever spent."

"Didn't work out too bad, did it?" He hauled himself up on one crutch. "Good night now, kid. Time for me to hit the hay."

I stepped out of camp to piss. My belly was warm from the coffee and brandy, but the night air felt frigid. I shivered, zipped up, and turned to look at the camp. I could see the dark shape of the tent and the coffeepot perched by the dying fire. A pale wisp of smoke wavered up into the darkness and disappeared. I put my hands in my pockets, walked over and stood looking down at the twinkling embers.

I thought how lucky I was to have found a pair of friends like Dick and Bud. They were both characters, and I felt certain they were going to do something unusual with their lives. I knew people grew apart, but I couldn't imagine a future that didn't include the two of them. I wanted to grow bald and fat with these guys. I could see us in our old age, sitting around getting soused and talking over old times. And this would be one of those times. What did it mean, I wondered, to enjoy a moment so much that even as it passed you realized you'd remember it years later? That was why the three of us kept coming back, I thought: We were creating memories, and we knew it. I looked up at the narrow river of sky visible through the treetops. It was filled with stars. I felt small but not insignificant. I must be drunk, I thought, and laughed out loud.

With the toe of my boot, I pushed the charred ends of wood onto the coals. Then I went into the tent, stripped, and slipped into my sleeping bag. The nylon was so cold against my bare skin that I gasped, but the down bag warmed up quickly. Dick and Bud were breathing heavily. A gust of wind rushed through the trees and rustled the tent flaps. Closing my eyes, I envisioned the pool Dick had photographed that morning, and, leaning out over the water, I looked up the long, spiral trunks of the cedars and beyond the green tops

tops until I fell, finally, into the blue.

## II

The next morning we ate breakfast, did the dishes, and packed up quickly. Once we were set to leave, Dick and I shared the last cigarette, and the three of us stood around the fire, sipping coffee and looking over the campsite.

"Well, it's a great spot," I said.

"Just so nobody else discovers it," Dick said.

"I think we're safe," Bud said. "You can't see the creek from the lake, and it isn't on any of the maps. Man, that cigarette smells like incense. I hate the fuckers, but they sure smell fantastic out here sometimes."

"Well, take a good whiff," Dick said, "because this is it. We get stuck out here, we'll be smoking leaves and bark."

Bud emptied the coffeepot on the fire, and we helped each other put on our packs. "Ready?" Dick said.

"Ready or not," I said.

Dick led the way out of the ravine and onto the old railroad bed. We moved along smoothly for a mile. Then we left the level railroad bed and struck off up the ridge. The climb was steep, and our enthusiasm was gone by the time we hit the top of the ridge. We had to make our way through the brush now — skirting patches of bramble and thorn, squeezing through clumps of balsam and spruce.

Laboring under the weight of the Duluth pack, I hiked along carefully, watching for roots and rocks. I was tired. I wanted a smoke. The sky was overcast and the air was cold, but I was sweating under my wool jackshirt, and my thighs burned. Every few steps I glanced up. Ten yards ahead of me, Dick was choosing our route along the ridge, pausing to study the slope or whack at a branch, then swinging off on his crutches.

I stopped and turned slowly, like someone with a stiff neck, to check on Bud, who was coming along behind me, bent forward under the other Duluth pack. His brown hair looked black on his forehead, and his ruddy face was streaked with sweat. Bud raised a hand and dropped it, smiled grimly, and kept on coming. I tugged at the straps of my pack to ease the pressure on my shoulders, turned, and moved off again. I was hungry. We hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and it was almost one o'clock. Bud had called for lunch at noon, but

Dick had insisted we push on until we reached the canoe. Sometimes Dick overdid the macho man routine, I thought. We could have stopped long enough for a little trail mix.

"Pines ahead!" Dick hollered.

I looked up. Standing on a hump of raw granite, stocky as a tree stump, Dick was pointing down the slope. "That stand of Norways," he said. "That's where we came up."

"Good going," I panted. "I was beginning to think you were taking us all the way to the Yukon."

"O ye of little faith," Dick grinned. His chest heaved, and his red union suit was damp at the neck. "You ought to know by now," he breathed, "you can always count on MacMillan's internal compass." He wiped his brow on his sleeve, braced himself to take the slope, and started down toward the pines. He slipped once, but caught himself.

Watching from above, I said, "You okay?"

"Don't fa-all," he sang sarcastically. "Fuck you."

"Sorry," I said, and angled down the slope behind him.

There was very little undergrowth beneath the big pines. Dick swung along quickly through the half-light, and I followed, still feeling the weight of the pack but otherwise going downhill as easily as if I were strolling down an avenue. The forest floor was cushioned with brown pine needles. The wind made white noise in the treetops, and the air was fragrant with elusive odors — musky, herbal, slightly sweet. What an aroma, I thought. Bottle that, and you'd be rich. Call it *Borealis. Essence of the North. Muskeg.*

Dick stood waiting below the pines. I blinked as I came out into the daylight. "Not too bad, eh?" Dick grinned.

"Fuck," I sighed. "I love it. Some of those babies must be three feet thick. Think what this county looked like before they logged it off."

"I know." Dick pointed through the scrub and balsam. "There's the canoe."

I saw the dull gleam of aluminum and, through a clearing in the trees, a patch of dark water. "And the lake stayed open, too." I could hear waves breaking.

"Yeah," Dick said, "we lucked out. The wind must have kept her open. It's blowing pretty good."

We watched the treetops pitch and sway. "Damn cold, too," I said, "once you quit moving." I raised my collar and buttoned my jackshirt.

"It ain't August," Dick said. "Where the hell is Walker, anyhow?"



"Here he comes." I raised a hand as Bud came out of the pines.

"Where you been, boy?" Dick said.

"Enjoying the scenery. Isn't that sweet in there?"

"Hey, guys," I said. "I just felt a raindrop."

"Oh, great," Bud said. "That's all we need. A good soaking."

Dick held out his hand. "That wasn't rain you felt, Ray. Look." A white flake sparkled on the arm of his red union suit and dissolved as we watched.

"Snow," I said. "Holy shit."

We stood without speaking, our arms extended, while flecks of snow gathered on our clothes and collected in our hair.

"Merry Christmas, boys," Bud said.

"We better have a look at that lake," Dick said.

We hurried down to the shore and dropped our packs. Balancing on roots and rocks, we peered out from under the branches of balsam and spruce. The clouds were heavy, low, and white. Snowflakes flickered in the wind. The waves came rolling down the lake, slapping the rocks at our feet and spitting spray, tossing and foaming far out.

I whistled.

"Whitecaps," Dick said. "What do you think, Bud?"

"That nature is bigger than we are," Bud laughed. "I don't know. Looks like three-foot swells anyhow. We've been through worse."

"When?"

"That time we rode down Long Lake in the rain, for one."

"Yeah, but we were running with them then," Dick said. "We have to cut across these bastards."

"I know. But we're at an angle from the landing. I think we can quarter into them."

"Ray?" Dick said. "What do you say?"

"It looks awful rough to me. But you guys have to judge. You know what you can handle."

"If we stay here," Bud said, "we could get good and stuck. There's no telling about that snow. It might just dump a foot." He and Dick exchanged a look. Bud shrugged.

"Okay," Dick said. "Let's hit it. Sorry about lunch, you guys."

"That's all right," I said, turning back for the canoe. "If we'd taken time to eat, we'd have been stranded here for sure."

"You can buy me a piece of pie in Schroeder," Bud said.

Bud and I carried the canoe down to the shore, eased the bow into the water, and swung the length alongside the rocks, where I crouched and held onto the gunwale with both hands. The empty

canoe jerked and bounced in the choppy water.

"You take the stern, Dick," Bud said. "You've got a stronger J-stroke."

"Finally," Dick said. "Finally you admit the truth." He pounded his chest and bellowed into the wind. We all laughed wildly.

Bud dropped into the canoe, and Dick handed in the packs. Bud slung the bulging Duluth packs between the thwarts and stacked the camera pack — a homemade, fiberglass box the size of a suitcase — on the pack nearest the bow.

"Can't you stick it under the seat?" Dick said.

"Not without spending ten minutes trying to get it to fit. Fuck it. Let's go."

I handed Bud his paddle. He grabbed hold of a tree root, and I eased into the canoe, where I sat riding high on the rear Duluth pack.

Dick stood on shore, adjusting his suspenders and buttoning his jackshirt.

"Come on," Bud said. "It's getting worse. We're going to bang a hole in this sucker before we even get started."

"Don't tell me you're nervous," Dick teased. He turned his fisherman's cap around so the bill wouldn't catch the wind.

"God damn it, MacMillan," Bud yelled. "Let's go! Let's go!"

"Coming, sweetheart," Dick said. He threw both crutches and his paddle into the boat. Then he grabbed the gunwales, vaulted lightly into the stern, settled himself, and pushed off. The canoe rocked up and down the first wave, slipped over the next, and we were away.

I was relieved to be clear of the thrashing water along the shore. The canoe slid through the glassy waves, and the motion felt fluid and free. There was nothing like it, I thought. The canoe surged ahead as Dick and Bud pulled on their paddles, then it seemed to hesitate and slip to the side as a wave rose up and rolled away under us. Bud shouted, "Wheel!" and I grinned. I was worried about the crossing, but I had confidence in my friends, and, anyway, there was nothing I could do about it now. I was a passenger. I looked up the shore at an arm of land that reached into the lake. It ended in a jumble of boulders where a small cedar tree tossed in the wind. A fountain of spray shot high in the air and showered the tree. I pointed, and Dick said, "I see it, I see it. Once we clear that point, the shit's going to hit the fan."

We were out a good hundred yards. I looked across the lake. Through the veil of snow I could just make out the landing where

there was a break in the shoreline, a clearing in the trees, and the blocky shape of a cabin. Dick kept the bow of the canoe lined up with the landing, cutting through the waves at a forty-five degree angle. Two miles, I figured.

We nosed into a heavy wave, and drops of cold spray spattered my face. Bud yelped and turned halfway around in his seat, laughing and gasping for air. He was drenched. "Jesus Christ, MacMillan."

"Sorry," Dick laughed. "We're overloaded. It's like trying to steer a damn barge. Move more to the left. Woops." The canoe swayed like a hammock. "Ray, pull that camera pack down. It's riding too high, and so are you. Hunker down if you can. That's it. Good gawd," he said, and leaned on his paddle. The wave crested and passed. "Okay, good. Everyone set? Here we go."

Slowly, steadily, we moved out into the lake. We lost the protection of the point and felt the full force of the wind. The snow thickened. Then we were out in the whitecaps, the waves were suddenly huge, and the canoe seemed to lug down. Dick let out a groan. I turned and said, "You all right?"

Dick shook his head. "It's a bitch. We're standing still!" He grunted and hauled on his paddle.

We slid down the back of a wave like a bobsled going downhill, and our momentum carried us halfway up the next wave. Then we stalled, with the top of the wave still poised above us. "Now!" Dick yelled. Bud plunged his paddle into the wave, wetting his arm to the elbow, and we inched up over the crest. The canoe rushed into the trough.

Oh shit, I thought. We could be in real trouble here.

We topped the next wave, the bow hung in the air, then smacked the back of the wave, and we hissed down the slope.

There was a lull. The next three waves were smaller. Dick shouted, "Bud? You think we can hack this?"

"No choice!" Bud yelled over his shoulder.

"Turn back?"

"Hell, no! We're almost halfway. We'll swamp if we try to turn in these bastards."

"We could run with them, ride them down to the east end."

"Ice!" Bud shouted. "You forget the ice?"

"Oh, God," Dick groaned.

"We're committed," Bud said. "Big one," he warned.

The wave came on like a car. As we climbed up the side, the crest curled, broke, and boiled around us. Bud looked as if he were sitting



in the surf. I watched, wide-eyed, as water slipped over the side and soaked the packs at my feet.

"Shipped a little that time," Dick said.

"A little!" I said.

Down and up we went, and again water entered the boat, though only half as much this time. I looked away, up the lake. The water was grey in the distance and looked like paint, but near the canoe it turned purple and black. I realized I didn't know what water was. Liquid, I thought.  $H_2O$ . It was odd not to know what water was, but I felt any minute I might find out. This much I knew: the waves came in patterns — two or three nasty swells, then one or two monsters, then three or four breathers. I tensed when a big wave approached, wished the canoe over the top, then relaxed, breathed, and prepared for the next big breaker.

The water in the bottom of the boat was over my ankles now, and I wanted to bail it out, but there was nothing I could use. I thought of the coffeepot, buried in the Duluth pack, out of reach. I made a mental note: In future, wire some sort of bailer inside the canoe. Even a cup would help, I thought.

A dark wave rose out of the others, translucent toward the crest and smooth as quartz, with froth at the top and bubbles dribbling down the side like a trickle of sand down a dune. A word went off inside my head, whispered hoarsely: *leviathan*. The canoe sailed up the side of the wave but trembled and swayed, and I thought: *Wrong! Wrong!* Our angle was way too flat, and three feet of water still hung above the bow. Bud leaned over the side, sank his paddle into the wave like a harpoon into a whale, but the canoe still came to a stop. I felt the aluminum shudder. Dick sputtered and gasped. "I can't hold it!" he cried, and the bow turned back toward the trough. Parallel to the wave, we slid back broadside, the crest curling above us. Froth and cold water poured into the boat.

I leaned to the left to avoid the icy water coming over the gunwale. Shit, I thought, this is it! But then we were lifted, the wave sank away, and we slid down sideways into the trough. The next one will swamp us for sure, I thought. All I could hear was the seething water. It sounded like seeds, like grain being funnelled into a bin. For a second or two, the canoe sat dead in the water, stock-still between waves. Then Dick shouted, "Draw! Draw left!" Bud rose, reached out, and pulled the bow to his paddle. He did it again, and then the wave lifted us up, the canoe sliced into it backwards, stern first, but at a safe angle. We rose on the wave, it rolled away, and we sat looking



back at the shore from which we'd come.

Dick yelled, "Bud! Turn around! You're the stern!"

Bud swivelled around in his seat, so that now instead of staring at Bud's brown back, I was looking him in the face. His face was white except for a red patch high on each cheek. His clothes were soaked down the front, his hair drenched, and his glasses, like mine, were blurred. Bud sat up straight, looking past me at the coming wave. He hauled his paddle through the heavy water, then leaned on it, using it like a tiller, and steered us over the swell.

I was appalled at the amount of water inside the canoe. I felt as if I were sitting in a bathtub. I hated the icy water, but I tried to sink lower to give the canoe better balance. Most of the weight was back toward the stern, but the stern had become the bow, and the canoe was riding low in front, right where we took the brunt of the waves. We only had a few inches of freeboard left, and the water inside the canoe flowed back and forth as we tilted up and down. Another two inches, I thought, and we're going down. I tried to bail with my hands, but the effort was so pathetic I quit.

Bud said, "Forget it. Hold still."

"I wish I could help," I said. "I wish we'd brought another paddle."

"I know," Bud said. "Just sit still."

My fear was gone. I felt clean, cold, wide awake. I lived from wave to wave. Looking over my shoulder, I saw we were over halfway to the landing, and I took some comfort from that. We had come that far. We had done that much. But I fully expected to die. I could swim fifty yards in a pool, but that meant nothing out here in the waves, in heavy clothes and boots. Say the canoe swamped but didn't sink, say I managed to hang on somehow. What good would that do, with the water colder than snow?

I looked up at Bud and said, "Been nice to know you."

Bud smiled tightly, nodded, and worked. When he pulled on the paddle his body shook.

Any minute, I thought. Very soon. One bad wave. Or the next. I was glad and surprised not to be too afraid. I tried to imagine how drowning would be, and I thought it must be a cold kind of burning, and I thought it was probably white and then black. It would be quick, anyhow. Better than rotting from some damn disease. I saw headlines and felt how awful my parents would feel, how wild and angry they'd be. What a waste, they would think, and how foolish. But, really, it was a good way to go. It wasn't some stupid car crash.

I gazed back at the Canadian shore — the long, low hills barely visible through the flickering screen of snow — and my chest heaved. If I could choose a death, I thought, it would be this one, here, in this place. I only wished I could go down with a little more dignity, working to save myself and my friends, instead of squatting passively in the canoe going backwards across the lake with my hands in my lap like a withered old man in a wheelchair.

The canoe rode so low in the water now that it no longer floated but wallowed through the waves. Still Bud paddled and steered. I was glad I couldn't see Dick and the spray splashing over the bow. The water was up to my waist. Water flowed back and forth inside the canoe, and water flowed by outside.

Although I was ready to die, I was troubled by regrets and odd thoughts. I remembered the plates in Dick's camera pack, the film exposed but undeveloped, and I was disturbed to think no one would see those pictures now. And how was it, I wondered, I'd lived to be twenty years old without making love? Why had I been so damn shy? I hated myself and suddenly wanted, wildly, to survive. I hadn't prayed in years, but I tried it now but got no farther than *Dear God* because it didn't make sense, I didn't believe it, and so I prayed to the water, *Water, let me live.*

At that moment, I noticed a raven overhead. It appeared to be flying in place, as if held by a string. Then the wind caught it, the raven tilted and sailed out of sight into the snow downwind.

I glanced at Bud and saw that he'd seen the bird, too. But Bud was laughing! I stared, and I thought: That son of a bitch. He's enjoying this! As if to prove it, Bud began singing: "Row, row. Row your boat. Gently down. The stream. Merrily, merrily. Merrily, merrily. Life. Is but. A dream."

"You're crazy," I shouted, "you're nuts!" But I was suddenly insanely happy myself, and I helped Bud paddle by singing along. We might have been a pair of drunks walking home after hours.

We shipped water and Dick screamed, "Will you watch it! What the fuck is going on!"

We quit singing, but Bud still wore a cockeyed smile. I watched Bud's face, feeling more for him than I'd felt for any woman yet. I watched him strain with the paddle as if by watching so closely, with so much care, I could lend him my own unused strength, and, after a time, Bud said, "We're going to make it."

I noticed then what I hadn't before, that we were out of the whitecaps, and, though the waves were still big, we were angling into

them well. The canoe sat so low I still had to hold my breath now and then to help it over the swells, but I turned cautiously and looked over my shoulder. I could see the landing and the yellow cabin, and the windows in the cabin, and not just the windows but individual panes of glass. I felt a surge of hope and killed it. I couldn't allow myself to believe we'd really make it. I looked back at the Canadian shore, which had nearly disappeared in the snow. Snow lay on Bud's shoulders like fur. A puffy flake landed in my eyelashes, and I blinked.

Then Bud yelled, "Dick! Don't quit! We're not there yet! Get up!"

I turned. We were only twenty yards out. Dick had dropped his paddle and sprawled over the bow. His back rose and fell. "I'm too tired," he groaned. "I'm whipped."

"Fuck you!" Bud snapped. "How do you think I feel? Come on, you pussy. Paddle!"

"Dick," I said. "Come on, Dick."

He lifted his head, palmed a drink from the lake, picked up his paddle, and went back to work.

I could hear the waves break as we came in close to the beach. There were rocks and trees to my right. The canoe still rose and fell, and the water inside poured back and forth. The waves looked like flint. Bud grunted, pulled back hard on the paddle, steered, and the bow scraped up on stones. The waves washed heavily against the side of the canoe, so that we tilted and swung alongside the shore. Bud swore and steadied the canoe, bracing it with his paddle.

"Out," Bud said, and I stood up stiffly. Water ran off my legs, down the inside of my pants, and I stepped out into the lake. The icy water was over my boots, but the stones beneath my feet felt good. I held the canoe while Bud got out. Then we each grabbed a side of the bow, and together we hauled the canoe halfway out of the lake. The stern, where Dick lay stretched out, his head on one arm, his other arm in the surf, still rocked in the waves.

"Come on, Dick," Bud said. "Get your ass out."

"Hell, no. I like it here."

"Come on, dumb shit. We've got to get warm."

Bud waded into the lake and helped Dick out of the stern. I hoisted the sopping packs out of the water and up the shore, then dragged the canoe a few feet higher. The three of us stood and looked at each other. Bud's lips were purple, his skin a delicate blue. Dick was dead white.

"Fire," I said. "We have to have a fire."



The landing was open and bare, but I saw a supply of wood stacked against the wall of the cabin. Glad to be of use at last, I ran up to the cabin and tried the door, but it was locked. The wood looked like pine. Good, I thought: fast and hot. The first layer was wet, so I tossed it aside. Then I carried an armful of dry, golden stove-lengths down to the beach where Dick and Bud stood waiting. I jerked the axe from the pack and split the halves into quarters, the quarters to pieces. Working fast, I warmed up enough to realize how cold I was, and it scared me. My feet, my legs, and my butt were numb. My hands felt thick and clumsy. When I had split enough pine, I went over and cracked a dead branch off the bottom of a balsam, then crunched the twigs into a tangled nest and built a teepee of pine over the kindling. Kneeling in the snow, I glanced up at Dick and Bud, who stood waiting patiently, not looking at me but at the unlit fire.

I fumbled in my jackshirt and found my matches. The safe had kept them dry, but the first one I struck flared up and went out in the falling snow. I touched a second and a third to the kindling, but the twigs were damp and refused the flame. I said, "Shit, shit." I could feel Dick and Bud watching. I looked up. Neither spoke. Bud hugged himself and shifted his weight from foot to foot. Dick stood hunched like a heron, staring at the fire that wouldn't start. He was white, he shook, and his teeth chattered. Water dripped off his nose. "God-damn it," I said. I got up off my knees and ran to a birch tree beside the cabin. I took out my jackknife. "Sorry," I said. I slit two circles around the trunk, connected them with a vertical slash, lifted the bark with my knife, worked my fingers underneath, and peeled it free. Crushing the bark in my hands, I walked back and stuffed it under the teepee. Then I stood for a second, squeezing my fingers under my armpits, trying to warm my hands. I knelt, struck a match, and touched the flame to the papery bark. It caught. Black smoke curled away from the flame, releasing a bittersweet odor, and the fire spread through the twigs and grew. The pine crackled, orange flames feathered off the wood, and I had to back away from the heat.

"Attaboy, Sabo," Dick smiled.

"Magic," Bud said. He stepped over the burning pyramid and stood directly over the fire.

"You'll burn your balls," I said.

"Who needs them?" Bud said. But the flames licked his leg, and he stepped away.

The three of us stood close to the fire without speaking and worked our fingers. We rubbed our faces and felt our ears. We turned



our backs to the fire, then turned again. We murmured and sighed, as if we were eating an excellent meal. The snow continued to fall, but it seemed harmless here, out of the wind, even beautiful. It drifted down so softly that the hiss and crackle of the fire sounded loud. Steam rose off our clothes as they began to dry. I fetched another two armloads of wood and piled on the chunks without bothering to split them.

"That's it," Dick said. "Build her up. Big motherfucking bonfire." The fire snapped and roared. Dick stood close, and his face reflected the flames, but he still shivered.

"Well," Bud said at last, "wasn't *that* an adventure?"

Dick rolled his eyes and said, "Fuck you."

"I thought we were finished," I said. "I could feel us going down."

"Me, too," Dick said. "We had way too much weight for swells that size. Christ, they must have been four feet! I've never seen such a sloppy job of loading in my life."

"My fault," Bud said. "I rushed it."

"Forget it. Doesn't matter. We made it."

"Skin of our teeth," I said. "You guys must be washed."

"More or less," Dick said. "I don't know what it is, but I just can't seem to get warm."

"Give me the keys," I said, "and I'll go get the coats."

Dick dug for the keys and handed them over. "Start her up. Maybe if we run the fucker for an hour we can get half an ounce of heat."

I walked uphill to the Comet. My clothes were still damp, but I felt warmer, anyway. The car shuddered to life on the third try. I got the coats and the army blanket out of the back seat and left the car idling.

We held our coats to the fire to take off the chill, then pulled them on. I handed the blanket to Dick, and he draped it over his head like a shawl. The three of us stood and looked at the fire as if we were watching TV. Then Dick said, "Guys. Guess what." He drew his right hand from his coat pocket and held up most of a cigarette. The end was ragged, and the paper was stained three different colors.

"What a find!" Bud grinned.

"Sacred tobacco," I giggled.

"Mr. Sabo," Dick said, "would you do the honors?"

I held a match to the dirty cigarette. Dick inhaled, coughed, laughed, inhaled again, and held the smoke in his lungs. "Not bad," he breathed. "Not *good*, but not too damn bad, either."

I took a drag. The smoke scratched my throat, but my lungs, deprived all day, welcomed the nicotine rush. I felt light-headed and happy as we stood there in the falling snow, passing the butt back and forth, blowing smoke rings and laughing. Even Bud took a toke. When the cigarette burned his fingers, Dick dropped it in the fire and said, "All right. Let's go get some more drugs. That's all I need, food and drugs." He kicked snow on the fire, and a geyser of smoky steam shot high in the air.

We hauled up the packs, heavy and dripping, and dumped them in the trunk. Bud and I emptied out the canoe, carried it up to the car, and eased it onto the roof. Dick lashed it down. Then he crawled in back, saying, "You drive, Ray. I'm too tired to hold the wheel."

I adjusted the seat and mirrors, gunned the engine, and started slowly out the sideroad, then turned down the Gunflint Trail. The snow had been falling for two hours, but there wasn't more than an inch of white on the blacktop. The flakes were heavy and wet and melted the moment they hit the windshield. The tires hissed through the slush.

I stopped at Moosehead Station for cigarettes and coffee to go. The old man behind the counter took my money without uttering a word. Outside, I stood for a minute, the coffee cups warming my hands, the bitter fragrance rising to my nostrils, and looked around at the deep green trees frosted with snow. I shivered and went to the car.

The Comet's heater only worked in fits and starts, but the coffee helped. In the back seat, Dick slurped and grunted with satisfaction. No one said much, and I knew Dick and Bud were back on the lake, as I was, reliving the crossing, even as the trees flowed past and the car climbed and dipped and swept around curves, spraying wet snow from the tires.

### III

An hour later, we topped the big hill above Grand Marais. Through the thin scrim of snow, I could see the small town spread out below, a few lights burning like early stars, the arms of the harbor reaching into the lake, and Lake Superior — as large as today, yesterday, and tomorrow — filling the whole horizon. The water was dark, and then there were layers of grey and the different whites of the sky. I took my foot off the gas and touched the brake as we started

the long descent. "Want to stop in G.M.?" I asked.

"Schroeder," Bud said. "Dick owes me a piece of banana cream."

"Yeah," Dick said, "what the hell. It's only another half hour."

So, when we reached the foot of the hill, I turned right, out of town. We climbed through the trees, and dropped again, and the lake came storming in on our left.

"Look at that," Dick said.

"Wild!" Bud said. "Beautiful."

I glanced at the lake and drove on into the flimsy snow. The highway crossed Cutface Creek, curved around the bay beneath the cliff, and then we were out on the straightaway, and the driving was easy.

When we pulled into Schroeder, it was nearly dark, and the windows of the Kom-On-Inn were blazing. The cafe was empty. We slipped onto stools at the counter, and a middle-aged woman in white came out of the kitchen. She had a nice figure and a plain, kind face, but there were circles under her eyes. "Hi, fellas. Nasty weather, isn't it? Coffee?"

We ordered cheeseburgers and American fries, and the woman went off to cook our food. We took turns washing up, then sat at the counter smoking, drinking coffee, and eyeing homemade pie. The woman brought our food and stayed to talk. The tag on her uniform said Joyce.

"You boys aren't from around here."

"No," I said between bites, "we go to Wausaukee State. But we get up here whenever we can."

"We spent Thanksgiving on Whiskeyjack lake," Bud said.

"I saw you had a canoe. You didn't get caught in this weather, I hope."

"Afraid we did," I admitted. "Just a couple hours ago. We almost bought the farm."

She shook her head. "We get these big storms in the fall all the time. You wouldn't catch me out there this time of year."

"We're experienced," Dick said. "We know what we're doing."

"When we don't forget," Bud laughed. "This was dumb. We just got in too big a hurry."

"Well, I'm glad you made it," she said. "You better be more careful next time."

We ordered pie. Dick and Bud had the banana cream. I decided on blueberry a la mode. The pie was perfect. I felt warm all the way through for the first time in hours. The room was bright and cheerful,



and the stainless steel equipment — the coffee maker, the milk machine — gleamed like brass on an altar.

The woman talked about the coming winter, isolation, loneliness. Her voice was tired, warm and low, a little sad but friendly. "Of course we'll get some skiers on the weekends now, but otherwise it'll be pretty dead until well into May. You get your truckers coming through, and local people, friends and neighbors. But it isn't much. Awful quiet up here once the snow starts coming down."

"But that's exactly why we like it," Dick said. "It's a great place to get away from all the creeps."

"You don't live here," the woman smiled. "We've got our bad ones, too. Besides, the older you get the more you need other people. A lot more than when you're young."

"You're not so old," I said.

"Thanks. But I'm older than you, and I'm telling you, you get lonesome after a while. I've spent half my life looking out that window. Sometimes I'd like to move down to the Cities."

"Why don't you, then?" Bud said.

"Oh, well. I got three kids. And my husband grew up here. He'd never dream of leaving."

"Then maybe you should run away with us," Bud said. "Right now. What do you say?"

She laughed. "Thanks for the offer. I've just been talking. I like it here well enough. The summers are gorgeous — cool and bright — and you get all kinds of people coming through then. It's just that the winters drag on so long. You guys want more coffee?"

"No thanks," Dick said. "We've got to get going."

"You don't have to worry. This snow isn't supposed to amount to anything."

"That's good to hear," Dick said, "but it's a long drive, anyhow." He stood up and dug for his wallet. "I got it, guys."

"Bye, now," the woman called as we went out the door. "Careful on those roads."

Outside the cafe it was chilly and dark, but the snow had nearly stopped. I could hear the Cross River cascading over the rocks and rushing under the bridge toward Lake Superior. The car was cold, but the heater kicked in when I started the engine, and we all cheered. I backed out and turned down the highway toward Duluth.

Bud slapped his belly. "Great meal."

"Good stuff," I agreed. "And that waitress. Joyce. I thought she was awfully attractive. I wanted to love her up right there. On the

counter.”

Bud looked at me and laughed. “You, too? Same here.”

“Are you kidding?” Dick said. “You guys would fuck a snake.” He was wrapping himself in the blanket. “I mean, she was nice enough, but that was one plain-looking lady. Not to mention the fact she’s old enough to be your mother.”

“So call me a motherfucker,” I laughed.

“She looked awfully good to me,” Bud said. “I think I know why. We damn near died back there, but we survived, and she was the first woman we saw. So we felt this rush, the life force surging up like sap. *Élan vital*, the French philosophers call it.”

“What bullshit,” Dick said. “*Élan vital*. Vidal Sassoon. You guys can wake me up when you start talking English.” He stretched out on the back seat, farted, and said, “*Sacré bleu!*” We all laughed, then settled back in silence. Before long, Dick was snoring.

I grinned and shook my head. “I guess you could say Dick doesn’t have a whole lot of patience with philosophic speculation.”

“Mr. MacMillan,” Bud said, “is an eminently practical fellow. That’s why we’re pals. He keeps me from floating away like a hot air balloon. Old Dick’s got his feet on the ground. Foot,” he corrected himself, and we both laughed lightly.

“Well, he wields one hell of a paddle,” I said.

“The best.”

It had started snowing again, but the flakes were fine and dry and blew right off the windshield. I lit a cigarette and cracked the wing vent. “Were you scared out there?” I said.

“Not really. A little nervous at first, but I got over it.”

“How? I just about shit when we went broadside.”

“A moment to remember,” Bud chuckled.

“Yeah, and the next thing I know, you’re *singing*, for God’s sake.”

“Might as well enjoy yourself. Hey, you joined in.”

“I was out of my mind.”

“So was I. That’s what saves me in a spot like that. I get outside myself. I split. It’s like I’m watching a movie, and I’m also *in* the movie. I do what I can, but part of me — the important part, I think — is way off watching, wondering how things will turn out. Know what I mean?”

“I think so, but that wasn’t how it was with me. There was one point, though, when I just got very calm. I was ready to die. I didn’t feel too bad about it, either.”

“Good for you,” Bud said. “No one should be scared to die. Pain,

okay, I can understand the fear of pain. But not the fear of death. Because death is either nothing, in which case your problems are over, or else it's something pretty interesting, and you're finally let in on the mystery."

"Yeah, but let's wait until the time comes, okay?"

"What do you mean, 'until the time comes'? Who says you're going to live to be seventy? I've never understood that. People act like they're owed threescore and ten. Like it's guaranteed."

"It's the normal life-span, isn't it?" I said. I stubbed out my cigarette.

"Normal for who? The kid who gets hit by a car? My uncle who had a heart attack at forty-two? You're talking averages. Averages are statisticians' fantasies. They work for groups but not for individuals. There's a certain uncertainty principle." Bud laughed. "You can predict how many in a given group will croak by such and such a time. But nobody can say when you, yourself, are going to die."

"You know not the day nor the hour," I said.

"Right," Bud laughed. "The Bible still beats the statisticians on that one. But it's odd how people think they've got this right to old age. They're so convinced of it they go around half-dead. 'Oh, I'll travel after I retire.' Pie in the sky, man. Better do it now. Now is all you got. But they're so sure they've got forever they sleepwalk right through life. Which is the great thing about danger, like today. It wakes you up. Did I tell you that poem I found by this guy Machado?"

"No."

"It's about Jesus. Little poem to Jesus." He laughed. "Goes like this: 'All your words were really one word: Wake up!'"

I laughed. "Great poem."

"Great poem," Bud giggled. "One of the few truly religious poems I've ever read. 'All your words were really one word: Wake up!'"

Dick sat up in the back seat. "What? What is it?"

"Nothing," Bud said. "We're just talking."

"Yakkety-yakkety-yak," Dick grumped and settled back to sleep.

I grinned, looked over at Bud, and said, "This has been a pretty amazing day."

"Not too shabby," Bud said. He leaned forward and scraped some frost from the corner of the windshield. "Anyhow, what I was saying was, I don't get scared much anymore. I get thrilled, but I don't get scared."

"Boy, I do."



"Well, I guess I'm different. Most people seem to feel their lives are important. To themselves, if no one else. I feel more like a leaf in the wind. Just along for the ride. It's fun. Nothing to be scared of."

I looked at Bud in the dim light from the dash. "You're a strange one."

"I know it. Don't let it bother you."

"It doesn't bother me. I just can't take my life that lightly."

"I'm not saying you should. I'm just saying how it is with me. Think of this. Think of yourself as a kid, eight years old or so. Are you doing it?"

"Yeah," I said, "okay."

"How do you feel?"

"You mean about that kid?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know," I smiled. "Amused. Embarrassed by how dumb he is. Proud of how hard he's trying. A little sad, I guess."

Bud nodded. "Now," he said, "do you think you'll feel any differently about yourself right now when you look back in ten or twenty years?"

I felt my mind tilt and slide. A thrill shot through my solar plexus, as if the car had flown over a dip in the road. "No," I smiled, "I suppose I'll feel about the same."

"There you are. If you can't take yourself seriously when you remember who you were, why should you feel any differently about yourself right now? All you have to do is shift your perspective. Remember who you are. Life is not the big deal we make it out to be."

"You got me," I laughed. "You asshole."

Bud grinned. "Amused melancholy," he said. "I think that's about as weighty an attitude as we deserve."

I felt a chill on my neck and closed the wing vent. We rode in silence for a time. The snow came and went in little flurries. I crouched, once, over the wheel, peered up and saw stars in a big path of clear, black sky. And then suddenly there was a deer on the road, in the other lane, angling toward the car. I looked straight ahead, tromped on the foot-feed, and clutched the wheel with both hands. For one long, floating moment the deer seemed to be running right at the fender. The car and the deer were both drifting — smoothly, slowly — and I waited for the crash. Then we were past and shooting on down the road. I glanced in the mirror and saw the deer standing on the shoulder in the swirling snow, and then it was gone. I looked

straight ahead and sagged at the wheel, feeling the blood pulse at my temples, my chest expand, my fingers tingle. I turned to Bud. "Did you see that?"

"Wonderful. Was it real?"

"I don't know! I was absolutely sure we were going to smash."

"We can't," Bud laughed. "We're golden. Nothing can touch us today."

"But that was incredible!"

"Everyday magic," Bud said. He cocked his cap to cushion his head and leaned against the window. "Okay, Sabo. My life is in your hands. Wake me when we hit Duluth."

"Sweet dreams," I said.

"You, too."

"I'm driving, you idiot."

"So? You can dream with your eyes open, can't you? I do it all the time. That's the best part about driving."

"Daydreaming, you mean."

"I guess that's what you call it," Bud yawned. "Though it's night now, of course."

I smiled. "Well, I'm not supposed to, anyhow. I'm supposed to pay attention here."

"It's up to you," Bud murmured. "I'm gone."

I drove on into the night. The snowfall glittered in the headlights, quit, came back in clouds, then cleared again. Now and then a gust whipped a white scarf across the windshield, and I was momentarily blind, but the traffic was light, the highway dry, and I felt quite safe, though I drove for several seconds on sheer faith. I focused on the road and the dark evergreens going by, and I watched for the incandescent eyes of deer. Birch trees, whiter than white, lined the road for several miles, and the headlights flickered and flashed off the trunks like a strobe light. I grew dizzy and forced myself to stare straight down the highway. I felt giddy, transparent, almost clairvoyant, and, as the snow flew by like bits of light, tiny stars speeding out of the black, I thought of the car as a capsule rushing into the future.

But of course I was not clairvoyant. Otherwise I would have known, and should have been able to guess anyway, that Dick and Bud and I would all eventually marry and drift apart, that the three of us, like other men, would be forced to take jobs we disliked, succumb to duty and dull routine, and gradually, as the years went by, admit the lives we had made were not the ones we'd imagined.

That much I might have guessed. But I didn't. Nor did I foresee that Bud would actually keep his word and, one sunny September morning a dozen years later, shoot himself in the head. Nor did I dream that, four years after Bud's suicide, the cancer that had taken Dick's leg would return to claim the rest of him. There was no way for me to know that I alone would remain to remember this trip when the three of us nearly drowned, and, with no one to verify my memories, I would feel, sometimes, as if it had never happened, that I'd made it up or dreamed it, that it was all as ethereal as that deer on the highway, though now and then a memory would blow up like a gust of snow, and I would forget where I was and be back in that green ravine, watching Dick work and hearing him chuckle wickedly over his camera, or be out on the lake and see the pure glee in Bud's eyes as we rode the waves and water broke over the bow, and I would wonder, then, how it was that I hadn't known at the time, as I drove down the shore through the snowy night, with my funny, vulgar friend asleep in the back of the car and my other, suicidally brilliant friend asleep at my side, that I was as happy then, right there, as I would ever be.