LOST

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by

James R. Kincaid

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Lost is the worst sort of nightmare, a real one. Two rather ordinary and symmetrical families without preparation, suitable equipment, or just plain common sense, set off to tent in the high country. Immediately enveloped in blinding snow, their inner blindness unravels one foolish step after the next. But no reader could be prepared for how much horror and blood can be set loose by such apparently innocent people—especially if they are not innocent. They think that nature is just waiting for them. They've read the guides: nature is waiting. But no guide could carry you though this Hell.

—Sidney Goldfarb (author of *Rushes of Tulsa and Other Plays*)

Kincaid offers up greasy grimy story guts in a game of lost and lost where the only things found—and who needs more?—are raucous wit, exuberant musing, and exemplary irreverence. But don't be fooled. Even though the story slides down easily, it sticks to the innards and leaves readers long after it ends thinking about the lure of placing ourselves in danger and oh what delights that may bring.

—Patricia Cherin (author of *Familiarities*, *Park Quest*, and other volumes of poetry)

Lost is an extraordinary book. It is not your ordinary thriller. It is not merely a tale of terror of two families of four being lost in the snow-filled, bear-infested mountains. Rather, as the horror quietly mounts, the story builds to a rich and moving examination of generational divisions—parents and children. The writing itself is what we would expect from James R. Kincaid, lucid and spare and direct. While not without dark (very dark) humor, the story holds the reader chiefly through its spellbinding descent into sadness and horror. A very special book.

—N. John Hall (author of *Correspondence: An Adventure in Letters* and *Belief: A Memoir*)

I would call this a comedy of manners, but that risks hiding the payload of terror that comes when two average American couples, with their average American children, go into the great cathedral of the woods and get lost. Nature is not kind, and men are not capable, and it soon becomes clear—in this lively, intelligent, and beautifully shaped novel—that the most dangerous thing a child will encounter in life is his own family. James Kincaid understands just how poor that hand is that kids have been dealt today, and in *Lost* he plays those cards out with winning skill and with unnerving certainty.

—Matthew Sadler (author of *Chloe*, *Jarren's La Cuccaracha, Alan Stein*, and other novels)

Imagine if the Swiss Family Robinson were dropped into the world of The Call of the Wild, then found themselves dining with the Donner Party. James Kincaid has written something that readers long for but seldom find: a smart, intense, and breath-taking page-turner. This is one of those books you stay awake to keep reading—only to discover it haunting you as you dream. A primal and universal tale of universal fear, appetite, and survival, *Lost* takes us deep into the wilderness of our unmapped emotions.

—Regina Barreca (author of *Babes in Boyland*, *Sweet Revenge*, and many other works.)

The most dangerous thing about the wilderness is not those we don't know, but those we do. *Lost* blew me away, left me staring at a white-out, freezing and happy for it. James Kincaid has crafted a story about family and responsibility, blame and discovery. Through all the horror of this novel, it still managed to teach me the possibilities, the freedom that come with being lost. This is a beautiful novel.

—Percival Everett (author of *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, *Erasure*, and many others.)

To My Dear, Never-Lost Nita

For a man needs to be turned round but once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost.

—Henry David Thoreau

"Are you lost, daddy?" I asked tenderly. "Shut up," he explained.

—Ring Lardner

All the privilege I claim for my sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.

—Jane Austen

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

They had managed to get themselves lost. Lost was as good as located to seven of the eight, but George found it unendurable to be somewhere other than where he figured he should be. All his life he had needed to know where he was, to know exactly, and to be conscious of knowing. Only twice before had it suddenly come upon him that he could not name what held him up. It was like being nowhere at all, not being. This was the third time.

To be caught in the unnamed, helpless to call up the right word, paralyzed some part of George. He kept moving and talking, but his heart was trapped. It wasn't as if some name would soon come along to help him. He hadn't forgotten or neglected to learn the name; it just wasn't. Acutely aware of his terror, he did not know how to fight it. Not being able to speak the ground could, he supposed, be exhilarating— to explorers or lunatics. Explorers, however, were equipped with the power to name for themselves, just as they liked; and lunatics supposed they were.

There were worse places to be lost: the Pacific Ocean, the Arctic wastes. Yet both held a grandeur absent from these mountains, and they were, when you thought about it, safer. How many people lost themselves forever on a life raft or on ice caps? The mountains were, comparatively, a slaughter house: people cashed in all the time in these pretty hills, wandering deeper and falling harder until they were always nowhere.

George's map did show names, of course, even safety points. He tried to satisfy himself with the knowledge that he was surely right there on one right now. Which one, he didn't of course know, but almost certainly one of them. This helped, or it should have. Perhaps he was less a pioneer in a wordless world than a booby fumbling for the obvious term.

To keep himself going, he picked up the map from the uneven rock where it lay and rolled it out again on a huge mushy-looking oak trunk, first brushing away some dead bark and activating bugs who hadn't seen the light of day ever.

Born and reared right there in that trunk, they remained loyal to their neighborhood; it might not be much to look at, but it was home sweet home to them. The death of the oak had supplied good news to many generations before them, better news to recent bugs, who found ever-softer pulp to chew. Someday, of course, a long time away, the pulp would be gone, forcing new families of wormy slimers on the road to look for new fallen death, out into the light. You can bet they'd spend as little time sunning as possible. Their instinct drove them to make themselves comfortable killing things slowly in the dark.

George slapped the map right on them, and went down on one knee, slanting his body so others could see. He didn't expect much help, but he didn't want to be alone in this either. The other seven stood around pretending to be attentive, though no one moved to grab the loose end of the map, which waggled awkwardly off the trunk.

"I guess—would someone please hold down the map?—we're just a little short of our campsite," George said, pointing vaguely to a part of the map densely covered with lines. Looking around him and then back again at the map, though, focusing on the well-memorized tiny black lines marking the agreed-on campsite and the approach to it, George found only panic.

There was nothing in the world around him to correspond with where the map indicated they had been headed or where they had recently been. He forced himself to examine again that part of the map that showed where they ought to be located. But wherever that was, it was where they were not. There was supposed to be a hill to the right, pretty-much level to the left and ahead, and

downhill behind. This was a topographical map, expensive, miserable to read, but pretty rudimentary if you took the time. You couldn't really get yourself lost using one of these.

Still, that's what they seemed to be. Forget that. The vital problem now was getting themselves oriented, defined. How had they ended up at this lost point, and what point could it be?

It was tough reading the map in the late-afternoon (real late-afternoon) light, and he wasn't sure how you read a map like this to find out where you were if you didn't already by God know. He could discover, over and over, that they weren't where he figured they should be and hadn't passed anything like it either, but where in the midst of all those squiggles was the irregular pointy hill plainly before them, what might be a deep canyon or maybe just thick sloping chaparral to the left, the confused jumble of rocks to the right? Where in Christ's name were they? What was it like to be any old place and not know? How did one act?

The only thing that matched the map was the more-or-less downhill behind, if that's what it really was. They'd managed to keep climbing, which was correct, but not to the right fucking spot. And, come to think of it, steady climbing had been interrupted by short and annoying descents. "Climbing" simply meant more up than down, not anything like all-the-time up. Had they switched mountains? That was possible. Not only hadn't their climb been straight uphill, it hadn't been straight anything.

There were times when you couldn't see fifteen feet ahead, so who knew whether there was one uphill path or a dozen? While they had gone uphill, on the whole, there was no knowing which uphill on the whole they had gone up. He had, in preparation for this crucial outing, studied the map for hours—or at least he had brought it out and stared at it when the McDormitt's were over.

He had fallen in love, not so much with the map as with its makers. Such fussy cartological precision seemed to him both exotic and grand. But he wasn't faking his fascination. He liked picturing the mapmakers, those beautifully deranged men and women, almost unimaginably devoted, charting so carefully all that remote rock and dirt and irregularity.

He'd been in the mountains enough to know how impossible any charting was: there wasn't a flat square inch anywhere, just crazy angles and juts, dips and swerves and sudden ascents. The land went everywhere and nowhere, not a continuous edge in it. It was haphazard and meaningless, and it was all on the move. Not a contour that wasn't interrupted violently before the eye could catch it. How could all this be controlled by lines?

What were mapmakers thinking? What strange isolated cells did they inhabit? He thought of them as anchorites, fueled by the preposterous hope that someone, somehow would find a way to make use of their sacrifices. But he honored them, could more easily find himself in their lives than in the lives of their mockers. There was something absurdly grand in the way they went right on, happy Bartlebys, loyal to their preferences, drawing lines as if nature approved or conformed.

Among the assembled eight, he was the only one who could read this map, by God! It had occurred to him that ten seconds of focused attention would make the cartographic principles of these ordnance survey maps clear to almost anyone. The reason so very few ended up able to read them rested not with the maps' complexities but with the general human tendency to do anything to avoid tedium, even small tedium short-lived.

Most of us are reluctant to throw ourselves into as much as ten seconds of hard work for no reward other than the uncertain satisfaction or incitement of curiosity. The truth is that curiosity loses most of its oomph after about age five, and then has no chance

against sloth or the fear of being bored. It was for this reason, George figured, that so very few understood an abacus, the Electoral College, how to play chess, or the mechanics of changing their own oil. They were happy to remain completely ignorant of the operation of an abacus, the Electoral College, the rules of chess, or the mechanics of oil-changing, since they couldn't, if they admitted it, see any point in expending the energy it would take to direct their minds into those paths. Besides, maybe it'd be too tough for them.

But George had more than enough energy for such pointless challenges and wanted to stuff all these victories, and hundreds just like them, under his belt. He took some considerable pride in this characteristic, though he also found it a little troubling, as if his reasons for going after such knowledge wouldn't bear close examination. But he kept it up, wanted to sustain it all: most especially he wanted to read maps—or maybe just wanted to put himself and others in situations only map-reading would excuse or save. He had several times offered to explain the elevation lines to his wife and daughter (his son was impossible) and to Dave, Nicole, and their son and daughter. Only the daughter-not-his was interested, and she was a mere twelve years of age, maybe thirteen or so. He turned to her now.

"What do you think, Mim?"

The pretty, large-eyed kid looked at the map so long George was beginning to suppose uneasily she'd unlock its mysteries. Fnally she said, "How do you read these if you don't know where you are? I guess you could sort of if you could see a landmark, but we can't see any of that sort of thing here, not what's on the map."

Mim tossed her head back as if she were flipping her hair. George noticed that and was caught by how mobile and telling the gesture was. She couldn't actually be doing anything to her

hair, not with the snow-cap on. Mim was simply used to clearing her eyes by this spasmodic jerk, a harsh motion altogether free of vanity.

"I agree," George said with his customary pedagogical tact, as if he were possessed of knowledge being withheld as a courtesy from the child. Only he wasn't. He thought what she thought: these maps were made for those who already knew where they were. Such lucky adventurers probably employed maps just to plot the future, not to fix the present. Though maybe they'd also serve well as ego-boosters, confirming one's know-how.

"This looks like a real good place to set up, anyhow," said Dave, already struggling to get his slightly (or maybe very) flabby body out from under his steel-railed back-breaker of a pack.

He took a minute. "Don't you think so, George? I mean, it's real pretty."

It wasn't even remotely pretty, George thought, without bothering to re-examine the surroundings; it was, in fact, scrubby and dusty, filled with grayish crumbly rock and no vegetation one would want to know the name of. He guessed he wouldn't have to be the one to point that out.

"Anything this side of Gehenna would satisfy me. We've been chuffing along over six hours on a little jaunt you said, George, would be, 'Oh, a little four-hour walk.' It's now getting dark. Let's at least get this shit off our backs."

Thus spake Jinny, his wife. Jinny was tall, lean, and demanding, demanding in that strange physical way some women have. They force you to look at them and make a judgment. George had looked and judged long ago; and he had liked that, liked it that Jinny had the balls to make him do it. He hadn't stopped in some years to ask himself whether he still liked it. He never thought of her as a shrew, but he was often throwing that word out of his

head. He did acknowledge that she was not at all feline, that her face and body were soft and that she took little pleasure in clawing.

And she was, in this case as in most, right: George had indeed said with some complacency that the hike to the campsite would take "oh, maybe four-to-five hours," figuring it would be some less, since the distance was seven miles—less than eight, certainly—he calculated; and even allowing for the uphill . . . . "Okay, I guess stopping here is a real good idea," he said, but only after everyone had already untrussed and sprawled.

"After all," Nicole said, with some of her maddening heartiness, "it's not like we were looking for a KOA or anything in the first place, is it now? We were looking for a spot up here and we found a spot up here. We were after an adventure and we got an adventure. Can you top that?"

Nicole had always struck George as an uncanny yet still uninteresting replica of a character in *Lolita*, a hilarious character to read about but less rib-splitting in person. Nabokov's creation, the Farlow woman. Humbert describes her as all teeth and leathery-skinned, the worst of those depressingly-conventional assaults to the spirit and eye, "a handsome woman."

Her nickname, which no one but her husband seemed ever to use, and he only occasionally, was "Cola." At some point, a drunken acquaintance may have found her fizzy or refreshing; when sober, maybe just common, inexpensive, and mildly toxic. Maybe she chose it for herself, in a gallant, hopeless gesture that would be compelling, if a little sad, were Nicole not so tough to be around. She was terminally perky and irritatingly alert to the needs of others, real or imaginary. She was as predictable as human beings get; but right now George couldn't tell if Cola were supporting him, one-upping his sour partner Jinny in the pioneer

woman contest, sending a signal to the kids not to be bitchy, trying to get her moony husband focused, testing herself in a new role, or burbling.

He sat on the log and wriggled himself out of his carrier with no less difficulty than Dave. Standing, he looked at the map, which, moistened by the mashed bugs and further mauled by his own ass, was smeared and ugly. It looked as if it had spent days at the bottom of a Sanolet.

One good thing was that setting up camp had been less exhausting than it might have been. Almost every bit of the their equipment was brand new and as expensive as possible. From the two huge three-room tents to the portable toilet, the snake guards, the bear packs, the camp tables, and the reading lamps, things pretty much just unfolded themselves into finished form. They had enough food, much of it smashed into lightweight, boil-able packets, to have saved the Donner party. All was efficient and clean.

From another view, the very ease of the process gave George time to consult his wilderness survival book and thus make things needlessly difficult. The campfire site had to be dug out and lined with rocks, the rocks (being everywhere) posing no difficulty and the digging proving nearly impossible. Each tent had to be rimmed with a deep trench in case of rain.

"Don't you think, Dear, we'd be better with a sturdy fire-break too? Mustn't leave ourselves open. Some earthquake preparedness? Jesus, George! It hasn't rained in months. Besides, it's way too cold. It might snow, I suppose, though the sky was blue when you could see it; but it's never going to rain."

"Yes, Jinny, but if it does, and you never know, we'll be glad we have this done. Don't you agree, Nicole?"

Nicole was ready to agree with anything, anytime; but she was also ready to faint from hunger, bone-weariness, and boredom. "Well—" she trilled.

The food was good, even though various parts of the meal emerged at different times and wildly different temperatures. They did have two three-burner stoves with them, but even they proved barely sufficient for the special needs of several in the party. Jinny was lactose intolerant, glucose something or other, and claimed to be unable to digest just about any meats—the cuts and animals varying from week to week. Dave and Nicole were loose vegetarians, going for fish but nothing with knuckles or knees. George and the kids ate anything, all except George and Jinny's troublesome Bert, whose definite tastes and rude objections were almost as variable as his mother's.

By the time dinner was over, a revived Nicole seemed ready again to devote herself to the idea that this outing was real fun. She made s'mores and actually got out her harmonica for camp songs.

"Everyone take a turn now—'Oh what did Dela-wear, boys; oh what did Delawear? Oh what did Dela-wear, boys; oh what did Dela-wear?' Okay? Now I'll play—you all sing. 'Oh what did Dela-wear, boys; oh what did Dela-wear? I'll ask you again, as a personal friend: oh what did Delawear?' You take it, Dave—'She wore a New Jersey, boys; she wore a New Jersey. . . .'"

When it came round to the kids' turns, they tried various lewd variations, brainless enough to amuse themselves and block adult censure. "Oh what did O-hi-owe, boys? He owed that Ida-ho. Oh where did Mary-land, boys? She landed on Kan's ass."

This was followed by story time.

Even Bert entered in, telling about a boy that had the power to render himself invisible any time he wanted but could not control when he might snap back into his usual form. At first, the boy

confined himself to quick petty theft; then he moved on to assault. He compiled a long list of those he disliked and those who had done him wrong and set about systematically punching them in the nose, breaking their ankles, burning out their mucous membranes, and humiliating them in remarkably ingenious ways in front of their friends. The school bully got his when the invisible boy hooked up a series of pulleys and chains, walked up unseen to the despised brute at the Senior Prom, yanked down his pants, and hoisted him high above the dance floor by his very own balls.

Moving on from simple viciousness, the invisible boy took to hanging out at the girls' school bathrooms, finally and boldly entering the bedroom of the prettiest girl in school, the one who had been attached to the bully before but who had cast him off after seeing him swinging back and forth above the gym suspended by his hairy nuts. Just as the hero was about to slip into bed with the pretty girl, however, the invisible spell wore off, the girl turned over, saw him, and exclaimed, "Oh! Josh!" That, Bert insisted, was the end of the story; and he refused to add more despite being hounded by all and then tickled and suspended upside down over the campfire by Dave.

Giggling and writhing there, his sweater falling over his head, his still babyish tummy revealed, Bert struck both Jinny and George as vulnerable and lovable again, a cute and clever little kid who was solemn and wildly excited by turns. He had, just such a short time before in his life, been a fine, uncomplaining companion on any adult venture. They had often forgotten he was a child; and, small as he was then, he had attracted the attention of strangers, what with his self-possessed, slightly detached public solemnity. He looked like neither of his parents and had been, at some stages of his rapid growth, outright beautiful.

Right now he struck others as a hunk and his parents as somewhat exotically foreign, what with his lush blond hair and very

dark complexion and eyes, eyes that no longer twinkled or revealed a damned thing. Where did he come from, this remote creature? Why wouldn't he let them move in with him?

By this time the air had taken on a rewarding chill that froze most of their resentments and made them, for a moment, glad they had come. The forest itself was a blank, George being the only one with anything like interest in it. They all, however, suddenly seemed to one another less scripted and less fully known. Who could anticipate what they might unfold up here where the sky seemed so close and the air was paralyzed?

When they finally separated for the night, kids to one tent and adults to the other, miseries were put on hold and no one remembered to care that they were lost, chilled, and mapless.

BEFORE

No one of the eight could have said with much confidence how they all had managed to become so entwined. It had happened fast. Two or three family barbecues, a swim party, the joint Halloween affair; then suddenly they had found themselves on the beach at San Simeon in November, making plans to join their fortunes for this adventure in wild living, unite against the world. How had that come about? How did they even get to the beach together?

Well, it was like this. In late September, toward the end of a joint barbecue (all too much a duplicate of their last joint barbecue) they had found themselves sitting in a lumpy circle, all eight of them, awkwardly silent. It seemed the right time for the adults to launch into planning the next event, just so they could end this one. After all, they had a good deal in common, or, if not, the capacity to get through evenings together smoothly.

Besides, they were symmetrical: Dave and Nicole were in their very late thirties, with Mim fourteen and Keegan ten. Mim seemed to fit her name comfortably, but there could be no match for "Keegan." In a burst of parental sprightliness, the boy had been given what the book said was a rich Gaelic moniker, one that forced on him a series of nicknames: Keg, Pee-again, Big-One, Vegan, Keeler, Megan, Pee-Gone, Pee-Gun, and any number of others, vaguely obscene, mostly cruel. Keegan was so used to being called by anything but his name, which only his parents used regularly, that he took in stride the latest, "Oblivia," handed him by Bert. There was nothing particularly attention-demanding about the other couple or their kids: George and Jinny were in their early forties, with Bert thirteen and Pam nine.

So, the question was, what to do together next?

Another barbecue seemed out of the question. To suggest such a thing would be too close to acknowledging that the relationships, or most of them, hadn't advanced, that the eight were no closer than when they began. Something not only bigger but relentlessly public was needed, something to announce to someone that they were, indeed, linked in some way, all of them. The joint Halloween party had been the first suggestion, probably because Halloween was the next holiday, about a month away and thus useable.

It turned out not to be quite that next-step-in-the-friendship it was meant to be. It turned out to be a whole lot more. For one thing, neither family had ever given a Halloween party, had ever decorated for Halloween, had ever given much thought to Halloween. They had no traditions, not to mention paraphernalia, to dust off and use as a foundation. The resulting challenge left everyone uneasy, in a nervous, shopping mood.

(I am speaking of the adults. None of the kids paid the slightest attention to the preparations for the party until they were forced into service during the last two days.)

Not knowing what they had in mind, but also unwilling to admit that they were so at sea—hey, we've thrown parties before, right?—the couples started buying things, lots of things. In a half-assed way, they also looked at party books for "ideas," but could hardly concentrate long enough even to make a decent pass at coherence. Dave and Nicole, whose house had been chosen for the affair, started out with bright thoughts of sound and light, remembering impressive shows they had seen at Canterbury Cathedral on their honeymoon. So they bought and rigged up speakers throughout their front yard and up on the roof. Then they bought some strobe lights, expensive, and black lights and lots of other lights, many of which they planned, vaguely, to cover with orange cellophane. A fog machine. A rope and pulley arrangement

that sent a ghost flying toward the street. A whole lot of artificial spider-web material that turned out to be hell to clean up. A big pot that would hold dry ice and steam.

George and Jinny also got a big pot that would hold dry ice, but luckily that was the only duplication and it didn't matter anyhow, as two cauldrons worked just fine, even better they said. They had decided one thing in concert: that it would be "just a small trick-or-treat sort of affair," with a few invitations for adults to come and mill about while kids were showered with candy. Very simple food and drink—spiced cider and the usual Halloween fare, very simple. The idea would be for the adults to mingle casually, you know, while the kids came to see the decorations and get their candy.

It seemed wrong, positively unfriendly, to inquire further into the details, much less to plan closely or to divvy up chores. That sort of attention to particulars would have felt unmerited, casting doubt on the closeness of their alliance and the fine webs of intuition that connected them. The process would be clear once the process itself was in motion. The process would allow all of them to make those minute and judicious adjustments friends know how to produce because of the rich background they share.

Of course there was no such rich background, so each couple piled it on, frantically showing how at ease they were. George and Jinny kept producing fancy carved pumpkins—they bought a kit and tormented their children relentlessly, so that by the 30th over forty pumpkins, some now sagging, had been artfully hacked. They also did funny tombstones, zombie costumes they figured the four kids could wear while stalking around the yard, chattering skulls that were activated by movement, dead bodies to hang from the two big trees, and an enormous toad figure they regarded as druidical, having gathered as much from an old, deeply unpleasant Ingmar Bergman film.

Neither of the couples was especially materialistic, no more than normal and a lot less than some, and certainly neither was wealthy. George was a professor of English, Jinny of Comp Lit; Dave was a social worker with consulting on the side, Nicole a free-lance grant-getter for some non-profits. They each one of them simply became caught up in the field of assumptions in which they all somehow found themselves grazing. It was as if each of them had, while sleeping, signed a four-way pact, the terms of which were known only to the other three. They were three left hands kept in the dark about the doings of the right.

By the time they were finished, they had a house so overtaken by Halloween that it would have won all the prizes, were there local prizes for such things.

Unfortunately, they also had a party that hardly got started before it was over, with a mountain of food and spiced cider left behind. The adult invitees had been told to come at about five-thirty, in deference to the trick-or-treaters, whose early start was mandated by act of City Council. A five-thirty start, making sense from one angle, however, made sense only from that angle. Ten or twelve adult couples showed up shortly before six in order to mingle happily and watch the kids get candy. It had sounded like fun when the idea had floated past the planners, but it wasn't fun. For one thing, people expected dinner and discovered only a quarter ton of cookies, raw vegetables, candy apples, sixty-four pounds of M & Ms (plain and peanut), a little cheese, a tub of chocolate covered almonds, and gallons upon gallons of over-cloved cider.

No wonder the party ended almost exactly when the wave of kids slowed to a trickle, at about eight-fifteen. By then, only Pam was still dutifully stalking the yard as a zombie and only Dave was still tousling hair and peeking under masks as he handed out

ever-larger gobs of junk, delighting late-comers, who, by the end, were doubling their evening's take at that one stop.

Stuck with one another at such an early hour, then, there seemed nothing to do but regard the evening as a success, the springboard to a whole new set of joint commitments. But what commitments? True, Thanksgiving was rushing quickly at them; but another joint holiday would hardly mark an advance, would it? It would suggest stagnation, treading water, hesitation, some doubt somewhere.

But there was no doubt. They were cemented together like flagstones on a patio, so they naturally pushed hard toward intimacy. In another era, they might have tried sexual swappings, but this was not that other era, so they were led by an invisible hand to schedule an out-of-town weekend. A weekend together would suggest something like sex, after all: an ease with bathrobes and tooth brushing, some unguarded farting, letting the kids talk dirty.

That's how they ended up at the Surfspray Inn on Moonstone Beach Drive, near San Simeon, but actually in Cambria. The irritatingly froufroued motel-calling-itself-an "Inn" was right on the beach—or just across the road from it—and they had procured two rooms, more exactly "family suites," each with a convertible couch sleeping two, in addition to the bedroom, small kitchen, and porchlet. They had divided up adults in one suite, kids in the other. That's what close buddies do, and surely they were all buddies. I mean, if they weren't that, then just what were they?

The adults took to this awkward division by pretending it was the most natural thing in the world, despite the fact that only a kleenex-thin partition separated the convertible couch from the bed. One closet, one dresser, and one bathroom, located on the other side of the bedroom. Very little privacy, you might say. That was bad, considering that, of the four adults, only Nicole

was at ease with her body and public nudity. She was forever embarrassing her children (and husband) by gliding about the house in whatever she had on or didn't.

Nicole had always been that way: never embarrassed by the public showers in seventh-grade gym class, reveling in the communal displays of youth hostels. Recognizing no difference between underwear and outerwear—"it's all just cloth"—or between one exposed part of the body and another—"we all look the same"—, Nicole (a woman whose features, taken separately and disregarding her too-often displayed woodchuck teeth, ranged from very good to better) managed to make herself formidably unerotic.

She was not repellant, to be sure, but only because there was no eros to repel. One could admire Nicole and come to rely on her, realize that she had no false pride or false modesty either, find pleasure in her company, even feel for her a deep glowing warmth, when she was not there in the flesh to cool it.

For Nicole was not really the buddy type either, buddiness suggesting a low-grade erotic hum that gave some edge and tingle to companionship. As a companion, Nicole could be a guide, a consultant, a lender-of-money, but never more than that. She confided and invited confidences; she touched and invited touching. But she was always treasurer of the club, goalie on the soccer team, mainstay of the decorating committee. She had once, while in high school, wandered out of the J. Crew dressing room in a bra and panties, looking for a different size. Nobody noticed.

But her husband noticed and hated it, did all he could to avoid seeing her at all in any form, and strove to hide his own nakedness not only from others but from himself. Dave managed to be what he probably desired, a guy who looked so much like others that nobody would ever see him.

George and Jinny didn't much think about the subject of physical attraction. Their early life together had been marked by an eager and mutual curiosity about bodies generally and the partner's body in particular. They had posed, ogled, costumed, and probed; but by the time they were married there seemed to be no more mysteries and hardly any more interest. From then on, they found it easiest not to make a big deal of nudity, which meant trying to avoid it where possible and, where not, to be blind. There had been problems in the body and sex department, but they had agreed not to remember them. One of them had agreed, at any rate.

The kids were, as expected, much more self-conscious about bodies and cloth, but they were also able to turn their embarrassment into a pretty good time. Whatever was missing from the adult room in the way of carnality had found its way to the youthful side and was bubbling out in the blushes, glances, and half-daring talk.

Mim, the prettiest and, at fourteen, the most mature, would have been willing to adopt half her mother's naturist notions, at least as regards underwear, but she must have sensed what a losing strategy that was and fought against it. All four kids recognized that their enthusiastic if indefinite voyeuristic urges could not match their modesty. So they took this energizing uneasiness and ran with it, managing to enjoy themselves with talk as they never could with actual strip poker or playing doctor.

The odd thing in this unnaturally accelerated family pairing had been the general eagerness with which the kids took to it. With a few temporary and one permanent exception, they maneuvered together with some imagination and, now and then, delight. They were at an age, though they wouldn't be for long, where gender differences mattered but were as often fun as cumbersome. Sometimes they all felt that their identity was on the line if

they found themselves playing across such basic divisions, but sometimes not.

This now-and-then concord was oiled, certainly, by the fact that the youngest were exceptional: Pam, at nine, was precocious and self-possessed; and Keegan, at ten, was generally abstracted and easy-going, a little like his dad, except that, unlike his dad, he was neither baggy nor plain. Mim was an early adult, but she was also startlingly beautiful and still resistant enough to see that the one thing she didn't want to become was what she probably would, her mother. Bert lost much of his silence and a little of his snappishness around the other kids and was, on occasion, something of a group coordinator. He was, just as often, an acidic dissolver of groups. Still, each one of the kids was energized by the other three; and together they did find a way to maintain the curiosity, not to satisfy and kill it.

But the one permanent problem: Bert was forever saying cutting things to the moony Keegan. The older boy seemed unable to be close to Keegan's body without shoving at it or punching it, and once he had grabbed the much littler boy by the shoulders and shaken him violently back and forth, so violently that Keegan's head, following his body a beat behind, seemed likely to snap off. The worst thing was the expression on Bert's face during the assault: he looked as if he were howling, though there was no sound at all. His eyes were almost invisible behind the creases and his mouth was extended to an O that made you think he would certainly, at any minute, scream. Scream or perhaps cry.

Keegan had reacted to the shaking as he had to the other attacks: he smiled afterwards and stood there with his small body relaxed, stooped, probably the equivalent of an animal submitting, a beaten wolf presenting its bare throat to the fangs of the victor. After going at Keegan, Bert would produce snorts and mean jokes. Following this especially violent shaking, though, he

had taken the little boy into what was almost a hug, as if he wanted both to shield his small sometime friend and absorb him.

Left to their own devices here in their very own family suite, the kids slept boy-boy/girl-girl, though they were mushed so tight together and so closely muffled by sleeping bags and clothes, it hardly mattered who was where. For one night, they were purposefully kind, these kids, much kinder than any genetic chart or their history would have predicted.

It was on the second night of the two-night stay that the wilderness scheme had been hatched. Dave, of all people, felt moved by the beauty of the beach and the warmth of the dinner wine, so moved he brought up something he hadn't realized he noticed in the *Review*.

"You know those cabins way up in that big canyon north of town?"

So sudden and without context was Dave's question, that nobody said anything.

"The cabins," he continued, "are a mixed bag, I gather, but they are all close to the creek and the. . . .

He paused, as if waiting for someone else would pick up the ball. What ball?

"Anyhow," he slowly went on, "these cabins are owned by the Forest Service or something like that, official and governmental, and are let out on ninety-nine-year leases, very cheap. Seven of them have come vacant, I saw in the *Review*, and you can call and reserve them for a week or so, just to try them out. The Forest Service, see, is setting aside a six-month period when people can go and try them out. Then they will issue the leases to those that want them, pretty cheap I gather, though it isn't necessary to sign up for ninety-nine years right now, as there's this trial period as I was explaining, which starts early January, and is even cheaper,

the trial rate, as they want to get lots of people interested, I suppose, since the cabins, I guess, probably are pretty ratty and, well, messed up."

"You think we might go up there for a week?" asked Jinny, with uncharacteristic tact.

"I thought it would be an adventure," said Dave, "just, you know, to go up there for a week."

George lit on it like a hawk on a rabbit. "But what you're really thinking is we could maybe lease a couple of side-by-side cabins for the long-term, real cheap, maintain them on an easy, carefree basis, and have all to ourselves a mountain home—mountain homes. Close to town too, considering—and a once-in-a-lifetime bargain, with apologies for the cliché."

Nobody said anything. This was a leap: from backyard barbecue to shacking up together for ninety-nine years.

"You trying to say we would move up into the mountains? Like dick-sucking fucking survivalists?" Bert yelled.

"Watch your mouth, young turd," said George. "Nobody's talking about living there permanently, not at all, just having a kind of retreat. It could be the opportunity of a lifetime. A lifetime! A whole lifetime! You'd have fun, Bert. Take my word for it. You could grow a beard and take up trapping."

Bert didn't grin, but he didn't look too contemptuous either, which George took as a victory. Nobody else said a word, so George broke the silence, without anything new to say. "Really—it could be the opportunity of a lifetime—I mean, well. . . ."

"It could be a don't miss opportunity for hermits, and into-the-wilds, and other loons," said Jinny, "but we don't know a damned thing about the outdoors, George. You've never shown the slightest interest before, that's certain."

This last was a jab at George for dragging his heels several years earlier after Jinny had signed the family up for Sierra Club

outings. He recognized what she was doing, but kept his mouth shut.

"We could do the one-week thing and see how we liked it, don't you think?" purred Nicole. "That way, we'd have fun for sure. It'd be an adventure, so fun and unpredictable. We could then see if we wanted to go whole hog."

George wondered why Nicole wore her hair in what might have been a pageboy bob or something equally unflattering, borrowed from some lost era where women followed one another in pursuit of uniqueness.

"Yeah, that would work, Cola," from Dave.

"I sure as shit am not going to live there!" said Bert.

Dave glanced at him uneasily. "Look, Bert, I don't think any of us will be there for ninety-nine years, honey. You'll try it for a week, won't you?"

Bert said nothing, looked at the ground, not quite willing to be rude to an adult who didn't stand over him in some institutional role. Somehow his silence seemed to seal it. They were, before they knew it, off for the week, up a canyon without a plan. To make it more of an adventure—and to pass the time (after all, what do you DO for a week in the woods apart from moving about to different parts of the woods)— they had decided to head from the high country for the even-higher country, the rough country, the home of bears and, this time of year, real cold weather. Yessir, they had done it. And now they didn't know where they were in the land of bears and snow.

WEDNESDAY NIGHT

Inside the kids' tent, there was so much time spent alternating goofy stories with giggles that nobody thought to be too embarrassed about close-quarters sleeping. It was way too cold to think of peeling off, had that been a worry. Still, they felt the unfamiliarity of the intimacy and found themselves tingling and, without recognizing it, a little tense.

Nobody quite wanted to give up and go to sleep, so they began on the two-liter soda bottles and spicy hot Cheetos. It wasn't that they weren't hungry, in the way kids always are, but hunger was not what was driving them.

"You're going to sit on the damned chips, Oblivia, you stupid asshole!"

Keegan was not all that close to the chips, but, predictably, grinned. On edge like everyone else, Mim wasn't going to let Bert's anger pass, as if it were somehow fitting.

"Stop it, Bert. Just stop picking on my brother."

"That's okay," Keegan murmured.

"No, it's not okay, Keegan. Stand up for yourself."

"Okay."

"Don't say, 'okay,' Keegan. You won't do it. If Bert cut your throat, you'd just grin—or try to."

The Keegan she had set out to defend now looked hurt, so Mim quickly switched targets, just so she wouldn't lose her thread by apologizing to her brother.

"You take advantage of Keegan's being nice, Bert—you always do. He likes you so you bully him, all the time."

"What? Hell I do! Are you running to your sister to complain, Oblivia?"

Before Keegan could answer, Pam broke her silence—"Don't fight!"—and began to cry.

"I'm sorry," Mim said immediately; just as quickly, Pam's tears stopped. Mim saw it and went on, "Hey, I have an idea: a story-telling contest. Whatdya say?"

Even Bert was glad to stop battling, and, as the best story-teller, volunteered to start.

"*Very* short stories, right? That's the rule. Okay?"

"Once there was a kid with wings. He didn't always have them, as you know, just woke up one morning and noticed these flaps, sort of pinkish-brownish flaps on his back, with pimply red bumps but not too disgusting."

" 'Hey, there's wings!' he said. He found out he could use them, too, to fly, but only at night, of course. By day, they tucked back in and disappeared into his back, like under a bra, I guess, except it was his skin, naturally. At night they came out and grew and he could fly with them.

"Know what he did? I know you do, but I'll tell you anyhow, since you insist. Well, this kid had lots of other kids he didn't like and he knew where they lived, too. I forgot to tell you that he also had this great and complete chemistry set. His uncle had bought it for him 'cause his parents didn't want him to have it, so he asked his uncle, who was cool, and he got it for him. He hid it in his room, this kid did. He right away figured out how to make bombs with this really cool chemistry set.

"So, every night, very late at night when his butthole parents were asleep, he would take some bombs with him and fly to a house where one of his enemies lived and he'd drop a bomb. 'Boom—!' Naturally, it would kill the kid he hated, along with everybody else in the house and the goldfish. After a while, everybody he hated was dead, but he still had these bombs, you see, so he started killing other people, too. I mean, why not? And he

never got caught. He's still out there, every night, flying around, dropping bombs just anywhere he feels like—anywhere, maybe even—HERE!"

This was just the story to break the ice. The audience of three laughed and cheered and poked each other, Bert joining in after a minute of basking. The stories that followed were all not-too-well-disguised copies of Bert's happy and bloody plot line, adding small variations in the nihilistic machinery.

Pam told a story of the million-kilowatt kid who could shoot electrocuting ("electro-cutting") rays out of his head. Mim's was only slightly more elaborate: a kid who transplanted a pump into his stomach and was thereby able to squirt acid out of his belly button.

Keegan, with more time to think but with less to draw on in the way of nastiness-invention, gave a name to his hero, Scott. Scott was, like the others, filled with homicidal fury, but his was directed at household pets. His murdering methods were banal, but, unlike the others, he turned murder into profit, casting the animal corpses in iron ("putting steel on them") and selling them back to their sometime owners.

By the time Keegan was done, they had found again the uneasy harmony they now and then achieved. Bert proposed Mim as the winner; Mim, Pam; Keegan, Bert; and Pam voted for herself. This caused a little elbowing and grabbing, but not enough to make anybody too uncomfortable. None of them said anything about being lost, in danger. Maybe it didn't occur to them.

The adults were certainly aware of the problems, but not too aware, allowing themselves to be annoyed, but merely in a half-assed, grumbly way. Only George, perhaps to his credit, realized that being lost in the mountains was never a joke.

He had read those exact words in a terrifying book called *How to Survive in the Wilderness*, written by a prick who seemed convinced that no one stupid enough to go in search of such a book as his would stand a chance of surviving any of the dangers so gleefully enumerated: illnesses without end; freezing; heat stroke; starvation; insect assault; poisoning from bad water; poisoning from mushrooms and lots of other attractive plants; death from insufficient fat in the diet (pounds and pounds of rabbit or trout could be consumed as you slowly starved to death); breaking bones and becoming fair game for vultures, rats, and army ants; falling into holes; getting caught in an avalanche; wandering aimlessly until finding death from exhaustion; staying put and dying a little more slowly from exhaustion; hypothermia; drowning; death from hysteria; and, worst of all, finding yourself the object of a bear attack.

Against all that, cartoon-simple sketches on how to build a sparrow-catching snare or insanely complicated instructions on making non-lethal grass soup seemed bitterly sarcastic.

In his rational moments, George figured that their only real danger was being lost and getting more lost. It seemed to him it'd be a good idea to build a fire, to get quick action and avoid running low on the fuel they were using in these expensive heaters (warranted to be safe). George figured they needed to send a clear signal to searchers, were there any, which there probably weren't. Anyhow—build a fire. It was something to do. However, the book had been downright shrill in its insistence on what a bad idea that was. None worse. Get a fire going and you'll set alight your tent, your mates, and the surrounding forest. Forget it! Be sorry you ever thought of it, idiot!

He then considered constructing a way to alert passing airplanes, attracting their attention and causing them to come roaring to their aid. In a movie he'd seen once, the survivors of some

wreck or another spelled out "HELP" in huge letters in a meadow. Maybe it was a beach. George spent some time trying to remember what they had used for the letters—rocks? piles of leaves? ruts in the snow? Piles of sand? Then he recalled that since he didn't have a meadow close by—or certainly hadn't seen any—it didn't matter a damn. Beaches were laughable. Signaling planes was a good idea still; but, as he could think of no way to do it, he carefully put the terrific idea on hold.

George knew that there were bears up here and, though not mentioned by the author of *How to Survive*, mountain lions, too. There had been several lion attacks in the past few months, resulting in a lot of fear, some scratches, and one death. The dead guy had turned out to be a mountain biker, probably mistaken for a deer by the lion, which jumped down on him from a rock overhead and chewed through the 'til-then peddling biker's neck.

George had read about the episode with grisly fascination, but he also read that lions were no danger to groups or to any people, generally. They simply had bad eyesight and might mistake a single jogger or mountain biker for fleeing prey. George didn't jog or bike, detested both species, and would not mourn their complete extinction. Still, he knew that reassurances based on what lions thought and why they did what they did were pretty slender reeds on which to lean. Who knew? Anyhow, he liked the idea of being afraid of lions, as there was something Tarzanish about it.

Not so bears.

Bears were a real menace, even if the actual number of attacks was not large. They were around everywhere, these terrible bears, as lions were not, and they messed with you, as lions almost never did.

Bears figured in George's nightmares. They would chase him to his front door and, every time, come right inside the house after him, leaving him nowhere safe to run or hide. In this dream,

home itself became a trap. He would run to his bedroom, the bedroom he had as a boy, and the bear would come right after him, cornering him and then, looking to the side, advance directly for him, as bears did. Only when he was right within dancing range, ready to embrace him, would the bear let his eyes swing round to meet George's terrified gaze. That moment lasted forever: the fuzzy, beautiful bear standing full-size and roaring, with teeth dripping pre-digestive saliva, filthy offal-packed claws extended, and eyes bulging.

George couldn't have told you or told himself what happened at this point in the dream. Maybe the bear just stood there, gnashing, until George died of a heart attack; maybe the bear got him, kept coming ever closer until he was right into him, absorbing his paralyzed victim.

Anyhow, George did not escape. There was no escape. Even if he were to throw himself out a window or manage to slither through the bear's legs and make for the door, he'd just enter another dead-end, spinning round to find the animal there before him, waiting to enfold him in its eyes and arms. Trapped there, the dream suspended, he revisited it, forced it to replay itself at odd intervals in the worst nights of his life.

The worst thing about a bear grabbing you, George knew, was not its cruel fangs or filthy claws, not even its red eyes and hot shit-smelling breath. The worst thing was the softness, the deep fluffy fur. In the second before your head was taken in those jaws or your arm ripped from the socket, what you would notice would be the cuddling. You might even swoon into pain and death, surrounded by all that tender warmth. Death by teddy bear.

George had read books on bear attacks and watched several heart-stopping nature specials on these cruel animals and their habits, especially their habits of killing. He had seen "The Night of the Grizzly" maybe twenty-five times and, even more often, a

film about a cute family with cute pets shipwrecked in Alaska or someplace and harassed by an enormous Kodiak bear.

He knew that bears could run thirty miles an hour and climb up to thirty-five feet into trees. He knew they might be afraid of humans but, again, might not be. They might charge at you and only be faking. They might only want your pack and the food inside it. They might only be dangerous if they regarded you as a threat.

None of that meant a thing to George, though he acknowledged that people talked that way. What sunk into his heart were the qualifiers, added reluctantly each time at the end of the sensible reassurances: well, yes, bears sometimes do attack and can be deadly; there are reports of bears stalking people; if they get after you at night, they are thinking of you not as a danger to them but as food.

George was fascinated by the advice experts handed out on bear attacks: what to do to insure your safety or at least load the odds in your favor. There really was a lot of such talk, all of it contradictory and in the very worst way. What might save your life might also lose it. Bear bells or constant loud singing could warn bears that you were coming, either allowing them to lumber away from your path in fright or find a way, easy enough, to ambush you, should they decide that's what they'd like to do.

If a bear charged, a good plan was to play dead, though of course that only worked if the bear believed your act and not always then—and it took away any chance you might have of dodging (bears are clumsy) or fighting back (bears had been known to abandon an attack when hit in the nose). Run and you look like prey, drop and crouch and you present an appealing treat, fight back and you enter into combat with a beast who can decapitate you with a half-hearted swing, rip your guts out with one casual claw.

Right now where they were, they were not threatened by Kodiak bears, of course, or polar bears, or even grizzlies. George said as much to himself in exactly those words. The real killers once were here in great numbers, but they had been slaughtered or driven back north. Black bears were all that stalked these hills, and most people regarded them as cute. Even the books hardly took them seriously. State parks advised campers to look fierce at these cuddly intruders, throw things at them, even charge them.

But the state parks, George felt, were perfectly willing to sacrifice a few campers as part of an experiment to see if aggressive behavior might keep the bears from foraging for marshmallows at campfires and making a nuisance of themselves upsetting garbage bins. Nobody, nobody could predict what any bear might do, at any time.

George knew that there was a fair chance they would be visited by bears during the night. Wherever the eight of them had landed, it was certainly off the beaten track and likely to catch the attention of everything shy and grumpy. They had cooked and yelled and put the food into bear bags on trees. Might as well have sent out invitations.

Bear bags, George figured, were like sweet-sounding, come-and-get-it calls. The food hung there out of reach, attracting the hungry animals but not appeasing them. Those tantalizing bags got the juices flowing and then delivered nothing, setting up ravenous and frustrated beasts to find other food. George hadn't thought of this before, really; and now everyone, at least everyone in his tent, was asleep.

What made sense was to carry the bear bags off a mile or so, but it was now too late for that. He would look like a fool doing it, and it would certainly be more dangerous to try and find your way for a mile or so on a rough and strange mountain in the dark

than to take your chances with bears that were not all that dangerous anyhow. Probably—so they said.

All the same, George would have gotten up and moved the bags had it not been for the fear of ridicule. Certainly he felt that it was better to fall down a dozen ravines, break arms and legs, plunge into the hereafter, than to take a chance on that roaring softness. This was his always-lurking fear, stronger than the fear of death, but he couldn't bring himself to push it away by moving the bags. He wondered why, both panicked and embarrassed. Perhaps he dreaded being mocked more than being ripped apart. Perhaps that fear of being ripped apart was something he really didn't want to put at a distance.

The kids, having warmed up enough temporary good feeling to wax over their tensions with stories, were not about to sleep. Unlike the adults, they were intrigued by one another and had no histories to protect. At least the little ones didn't. What they wanted to do was think new thoughts.

> What would you do if you had to live out here forever?
> If you had been raised by wolves, how would you be different?
> What if we had switched parents at birth?
> What if the girls were boys and the boys were girls?
> Why are people turned on by underwear or shoes or stuff like that?
> What if we swapped underwear, boys and girls?
> What if we all pierced one another with these pine needles?
> Do you think people live on other stars?
> Why is it that you are you and not somebody else?
> What would it be like to die?

Bert had been silent throughout all this, not sullen for once, but darkly attentive, as if waiting for a chance to spring. "What

would it be like to die?" was the prey he was watching for: "Hey, I have a question. You want to hear it?" He looked eager and untroubled for the first time, making him seem much younger, inviting and part of them.

Of course they wanted to hear. Bert wasn't asking, just telling them to stop thinking of their own fears and listen to his.

"Why do you think we're up here?"

"To have fun?" Keegan offered, looking so doll-like in his eagerness to please, he brought to mind a kitten or Shirley Temple being cunning

Bert scowled at him. Keegan was not so spacey as to miss the scowl, maybe wasn't spacey at all. But he was passive, which emphasized his good looks and made so many people respond to him oddly and intensely. Perhaps he sensed that his prettiness, not so much girlish as androgynous, was his best ally. If so, it was an instinct that also made things a little dangerous for him. Whatever it was, that something got inside Bert and chewed.

Keegan's older sister was another matter to Bert, as was his own little sister Pam, the one person he treated with something almost approaching patience. Pam was very small, with delicate features, but she looked a lot like a little old man, some strange character out of Dickens. She was passionately devoted to Bert and could be counted on to pick up any invitation he dropped. Mim was a little more skeptical about Bert, but she was also interested in what he might have in mind. So, both of the girls started talking at once, saying pretty much the same thing: what did all of them coming up here have to do with what would it be like to die?

"You think they brought us up here to have us die?" Pam asked, in a voice so matter-of-fact it seemed as if she were seeking confirmation of the most natural hunch in the world.

No one rushed to hush or to ridicule her. Somehow the idea seemed familiar, an old friend. Had the four old people brought the four young people, our very own selves, up here so they could commit murder and get away with it, easy? Of course not. They knew that not one of the four adults would be capable of imagining such a thing, not for a second. At least they would not be capable of making any real contact with such imaginings, even if they entertained them. They might think of it, but they wouldn't think of thinking of it. Their parents, they knew, were really pretty good as parents go, but that didn't change things as far as the idea of infanticide went.

"Well," Bert said, "why would they bring us along? To save on babysitters?"

"To kill us," said Pam.

"The reason they brought us up here," Mim said, "is to prove what terrific parents they are, prove it to us or themselves maybe, to the whole wide world. They are giving us new opportunities, like when they take us to museums. It's all very educational."

Keegan gaped at his sister. He caught the sarcasm but was not able to find himself within such a discussion. He tried, though. "I don't think they're so bad."

"But you wouldn't mind killing them yourself, would you, Oblivia?" Bert snarled. "Just think about it. Sure you would think about killing them. I mean you'd think about it, if the thing came up and all. So that's why they'd want to kill you."

Keegan was now far out of sight of the shore and kept still.

Pam liked all this very much. "I think we might kill them before they get on us. I agree with you. We could drop big rocks on them or set their tent on fire."

"What Bert is saying"—this was Mim—"is that there are lots of reasons they brought us up here, not all of them good."

"Jesus, Mim! Don't you sometimes get tired of being such a kiss-ass?"

Mim didn't seem the least bit ruffled by this. "What I was going to say, Bert, is that they don't know why they're up here themselves. Or anything else. That's dangerous."

Bert started to say something, but kept quiet.

"What is wrong, Bert? Why aren't you happy?" Mim was not at all interested in winning any fights with Bert. He saw all that and smiled at her.

"I noticed that too, Bert. I really did. Why aren't you happy? Can we somehow help?" This from Keegan. Bert looked at him in silence, this time forgetting to scowl.

By this time they were cold and wrung out from the discussion, so they nestled quietly into four lopping-over sleeping bags.

THURSDAY

During the night, George was up twice, thinking that he heard noises, positive he had heard noises, and knowing exactly what it was rustling around out there. He had gotten up; that is, he had pulled himself out of his sleeping bag and reared up on all fours, ready to do something. But whatever it was he was readying himself for, it didn't involve leaving the tent to investigate. If the bears had decided that these lost campers were food, then the only thing to do was to fight back. Possibly they could do that better inside the tents. And why leave whatever shelter it might offer? Maybe the bear—the bears?— would rip through only a part, leaving some of the sleepers covered and maybe safe, maybe.

George found himself hoping they would rip into, first, Nicole, then Jinny, then Dave, and never him. Maybe they'd be full by then. He got back into his bag and thought a lot about that sequence, not in the least ashamed of wishing his friends and his wife would go into the bear's maw before him, but wondering why he had arranged them in just that order. Had George been on the Titanic, he would never have entered a lifeboat. He was no coward and even had a lively sense of self-sacrifice. Bears were different.

As it happened, George was not the only one hearing things. Keegan didm too, and he left his tent to investigate and, more urgently, to unload his bladder. It was hard work unzipping his sleeping bag, the tent cover, and his fly. He decided in his sleepy haze that it would be efficient to unzip everything all at once, so he found his pecker released while still in the low crawling position he had adopted to negotiate the other three sleeping kids, randomly discarded boots and jackets, several bags of chips, and plastic soda bottles.

Emerging unzipped from the tent, Keegan was surprised both by how well he could see and by what he was seeing. Just beyond the adult tent, large black things were playing, moving about in some dance sequence, like lubberly Rockettes. When, halfway through his pee, he realized they were bears taking turns batting at the food bags dangling just out of reach, Keegan felt reassured, finished peeing, and retraced his crawl route back to sleep.

He mentioned it in the morning, privately, to Bert: "I got up to pee last night and saw some bears."

"No shit?"

A great wave of exhilarating happiness washed over Keegan. Bert not only believed him but seemed interested, best, didn't appear to be mocking him. Keegan knew enough to keep underplaying it, since that seemed to be working.

"Yeah, I got up to pee and saw them on their hind legs, you know, pawing at those food things your dad hung in the trees."

"No shit! How many?"

"Two or three, I guess."

"And you just came back in and went to sleep and all? Fuck, man!"

With enormous difficulty, Keegan kept himself from saying a word or even looking at Bert. This was the best moment ever, and he didn't intend to louse it up.

Just then they heard Bert's mother giving out, loud enough to wake the girls and anyone else within a half mile, the news that the bears hadn't been hopping in vain.

"Look at this junk all over the place. What the hell . . . Jesus Christ, George! Where are you?"

George, of course, had been first up, and he'd reacted to the scene before him by freezing, feeling as if he were still locked inside one of his nightmares. The mess truly was colossal. Paper, plastic, cardboard, cans (some leaking contents), unidentifiable

globs of liquids, powders, cereal matter, sugar and flour, freeze-dried this and that, what turned out to be bear drool were strewn, mashed, and smeared into a surprisingly large but regular circle. A circle of crap, of course, but in its way neat, like a sign, signally something.

The bears seemed to have drawn a tight boundary around their rampage, a ring that defined their territory. What a cruel way to taunt these particular victims. The bears could go anywhere; only George and the others were sharply confined.

George's second thought was how smart he'd been to get the tents outside the ring. Inside it, nothing would have had a chance to survive the claws and teeth. His first thought, however, was that the bears were still right there. His third thought was that it was so very dark for seven-thirty, very dark and much colder than when he had gone to bed. His fourth and enduring thought was his first thought all over: the bears were still there, waiting.

He was too terrified to stay where he was, run, or turn away. Better to walk straight into a bear than wait for him to come to you, better to die right now than to be slowly stalked. George stared at the small pine grove where the remains of the food bags flapped and thudded in the fresh cold wind.

He made a precise, narrow circle of his own around the trees, maybe fifty yards in circumference, took twenty steps out and made a concentric, slightly larger circle. He was in his fourth circumnavigation, still within rock-lobbing distance of the first, when Jinny's shrieks drilled into him.

When she saw him, his face, she froze, losing at once all her hardened assurance.

"Great God, George."

"Hi," he said weakly.

"What is it? What happened to you?"

"I was looking for the bears."

"Are you okay? Why were you looking—did you find them?" There was no layering, no irony. Jinny was fully present in her words. George took note of that.

"Not yet. You saw what they did. I was thinking they'd still be hanging close around."

"You think so?"

"I don't know what we'd feed them."

"You think they'd go for us? You think they'll come back?"

"I think they're here."

Jinny's chin began to quiver. "Where?"

George caught himself, dragged himself almost clear of his nightmare. "No, no. I was just checking. These are only black bears raiding campgrounds. A nuisance but commonplace. They were after food and by Jesus got it. They're long gone by now."

"But George, these aren't really campgrounds they'd know about, are they?" Jinny was so clearly now what she never was, needy and unprotected, that George felt a slap of guilt, a sense that it was up to him to lead them back to the usual.

"I'm sorry, dear. I'm so sorry."

It wasn't that easy. Jinny moved as if to hug him. George didn't flinch exactly, but she checked her advance and satisfied herself with a pat on his arm. He patted back.

By then, more or less everybody was up and saying more or less the same thing. It was Keegan who suggested that they right away see what wasn't too badly damaged and sort out what they could salvage from inside the circle. Not too much could be drip-dried from the ground, but there were two of the smaller food bags that seemed OK and another that had, though ripped apart, retained a fair-sized pocket of dehydrated stuff.

Oddly, most of the cans were goners but quite a few of the boxes (powdered milk, for instance) had been ignored. Also surviving was a little of the freeze-dried stews and whatnot the adult

campers had considered leaving behind, so unappetizing did they look, even in packet pictures meant to sell the stuff. Working together quietly, the six soon got all the remaining material together, and felt better once it was in a pile, however unappetizing. They scarcely noticed that it had begun to snow.

Not even the kids were excited by the snow, sensing that this was just the latest act in a drama none of them had meant to attend, much less star in. The snow was light, so was the wind, but the sky was very dark, and none of the flakes was melting.

They did have warm clothes, pretty warm, and they were, after all, only one day out from their ratty but cozy canyon cabins. But one day out to where?

They sure had a good deal less food now, and while nobody, George perhaps excepted, was panicked, somewhere along the line everyone had lost the sense that all this was simply a half-annoying, half-fun adventure. Whatever it was, it was something other. None of them thought they could get back to where they had been in the story, even if they could get back to their cabins.

Pam was not generally a whiner, but she started whining now, complaining about somebody kicking her in the night. Bert was scowling at her, ready to make things worse, when Mim said, "It was me. I'm a kicker." Pam shed her whinies immediately and grinned, Bert turned his frowns elsewhere, and Keegan again suggested that they take some of the big bags and see how much they could save from what remained on the ground.

What remained on the ground was, indeed, total shit, but nobody pointed that out. Keegan suddenly seemed their best survivalist, and, knowing that they should survive, they did as he said. He hadn't mentioned seeing the bears, knowing Bert wouldn't either but also sensing he'd lose the only points he'd scored in a long time if he opened his mouth.

"You guys know what old Keegey did last night?"

Maybe there was something a good deal less than sweet in that "Keegey," but Keegan didn't mind. It was the finest thing ever, this tingle running down his spine, along his arms and neck. It didn't matter how Bert told the story. The older boy had noticed and would speak it. Keegan kept his head down, picking out what looked like corn flakes and some unidentifiable but mostly dry brown stuff from among the ugly stew.

"He got up to wee-wee, saw the bears attacking the bags, and you know what?"

He waited until not only Pam and Mim, but a couple of the adults had said, "What?" He had everyone's rapt attention. A story was just what they wanted.

"Well," Bert finally said, "he by Jesus woke up in the middle of the night and really had to pee." Here he grabbed his crotch, pinching his pretend penis, contorted his face into agony, and danced around mewling, "Gotta pee, gotta pee, gotta pee!" This was so diverting and unlike Bert, they all laughed immoderately.

"He had to pee so bad he just about peed in Pam there's face. Yes. He did. That's what'd been kicking her all night. It was Oblivia in pee spasms."

Pam, half believing this, looked in distress at Keegan.

"So Keegey finally woke up before flooding the tent. Then he flopped out his really huge wang, a prized-winner at the county fair, you know, just flopped it out, right there inside his sleeping bag and was about to let go and cause a flood, when he realized where he was and made for the tent flap. By the time he got the flap open, he had dribbled a little, which is why the tent smells the way it does. But he finally made it outside, about six inches from the tent and started whizzing everywhere."

Bert paused to make everyone think he was finished. Nobody said a word. Bert paused some more.

The adults, except George, just began protesting, when Bert loudly continued:

"So—there was Keegan, just peeing away and looking all around him, enjoying the sights. When—what do you think he saw?" Another pause.

"Right next to him—only a few feet away—these horrible black shapes, huge. They were growling and roaring and ripping at things. Their eyes were all bright, sickly, oozy yellow, and they were looking right at Keegan, all roaring and slurping. They were all set to charge, Keegan could tell."

Another pause.

"And you know what he did?"

Another pause.

"Do you?"

A longer pause.

"He just stood there with his pecker out, charging straight ahead, his whang, I mean, didn't say a word, looked back at them, waved his major dick at them like a challenge, then turned around, crawled back in the tent, and went to sleep. Didn't even bother to tuck his dick back in—still hasn't. Is that cool, or what?"

While everyone was milling around, port-a-pottying, and surveying the mess, George edged up to Keegan. He probably had never spoken one-on-one to Keegan before. He couldn't remember for sure, but no conversations he could recall had gone beyond, "Hey kid!" or "Yo!" Generally, he forgot his name.

"Well, Keegan, you got some balls there."

"Huh?"

"I mean, that was good what you did with the bears, truly impressive."

"Thanks, Mr. Jackson. I only just saw 'em."

"But you didn't scream or run."

Keegan just stared at him.

"Were they big, Keegan? Could you hear them? I mean, did they make any noise?"

"I don't know. I mean, they didn't seem all that big, you know. Maybe they were."

"Were they roaring?"

"Huh?"

"Were they making those terrible loud sounds, roaring and snarling?"

"No. I don't think so. Kinda snorting maybe. Not loud, I don't think."

"Did they see you?"

"I spose."

"God. Did they chase you, come at you. Never mind. . . I guess not."

Polite kid that he was, Keegan still couldn't keep himself from giving off clear signs that he was getting uneasy.

"Why weren't you scared?"

"Huh? I had to pee."

"Didn't you want to run?"

"I guess I was sleepy."

And that, George saw, was that.

The celebratory tone warmed them as they picked through the debris, feeling as if they were at a party. Even George became hilarious, offering up Groucho Marx quotes as if they fit the occasion:

"You know, I've had a perfectly wonderful evening, but this wasn't it."

"Those are my principles, and if you don't like them . . . well, I have others."

"You know, while we're all in such a good mood, I have an idea for us." This from Nicole. Everyone stopped, but before Nicole could announce her idea, Pam interrupted.

"Oh, sorry, Mrs. McDormitt."

"That's OK, honey."

"Thanks. Just as you were saying you had an idea, I was about to say I had an idea. Funny we both—sorry."

"Don't be sorry. That's really nice. You go first. What is your idea?"

"Well, OK. Thanks a lot. I was thinking we should have this drawing—"

Pam paused so long, Bert finally prodded her, not unkindly, "What for?"

"Oh, yeah, that was my idea, a drawing, you know. See, we'd put all our names in a hat and draw out names, so we all ended up in twos, everybody'd have one person as a partner. Then these two, you and your partner and me and my partner and everybody else and their partner, well, we'd go off together, twos, and see if we could figure out how to get back to where—get back."

Nobody said anything.

"What I mean is, each of the two would try and figure out how to get back, you know, to home, the cabins. I mean, they'd just talk about it and see what their idea was. Or maybe they could search a little, walk out and see what they could see. The footprints they made in the snow could get them back here, so they wouldn't get lost, just like Hansel and Gretel."

Several people started to say something just as Pam decided to keep going, silencing them by her own low-pitched earnestness.

"Also, the two people could talk and try to get to know them—the other person. They could talk about questions like why we're here and killing and stuff."

Jinny looked at her daughter as if she'd just dropped in from the moon. She had no idea Pam was capable of this much consecutive and coherent talk, much less a plan that seemed so very sensible, or at least a plan. But killing? Best to ignore that.

"Dear, I'm so proud of you. That's a beautiful idea."

Nobody seemed to think it wasn't a beautiful idea, and nobody asked Nicole what her idea had been. Nicole did pipe in, though, "Should we have some ground rules? Like nobody gets paired with her or his spouse? No kids from the same family?"

Everyone looked at Pam, the captain of the idea. "No," she said, after mulling it over, "It don't matter how the drawing comes out. You gotta take whoever it is you draw and try and figure out what to do and talk about things."

There was no quarreling with this, so they set about cutting the strips of paper—Dave had brought along a yellow legal pad—signing them and shuffling them in a hat. The results were certainly bizarre enough:

Dave—Nicole
Jinny—Keegan
George—Pam
Bert—Mim

"Well," said Nicole, "how about either Dave or me switches with somebody so we have all diversity pairs? That wouldn't be too much of a change in your idea, would it, Pammy?"

"Well okay, Mrs. McDormitt. That would be fine." Pam paused, considering. "I think we should keep things like they came out, if that's okay with you and everybody. We could always have another drawing later if this one don't work."

"Fine with me," Dave said. "Me and Cola can scout these here woods like veteran trappers."

"Well," George said, so pleased with his daughter and so happy for the diversion, "do we just pair off now and go off together?"

"Everybody pairs off, like Dad says, but nobody leaves yet. Just go away and huddle so nobody else can hear, and decide what you want to do to figure out how we get back. And then you do it. When we get back to here we'll talk about what we found out and the things we talked about."

"Is there a set time limit, honey?" George asked her , a little anxiously.

"Yes there is. Ten hours. Everybody gets to look and discuss for ten hours. Be back here in ten hours."

Everyone stared at Pam, not knowing quite how to object. Finally, Bert laughed and then poked her. "Good one, Pam. You got everybody good!"

Pam grinned and waited for Bert to carry her along.

"Hell," Bert said, "she meant two or three hours."

"Two," Pam said decisively, and two it was.

"Well, let's get bundled up, then," George said, too loudly.

"Come here, Jinny," George said, as she was about to enter the tent.

"You issuing orders now?" she said, but she did walk with him several yards away.

He had long practice in ignoring her small resistances. "I think, dear, we're in a bad spot here. We'll make it out easy, but—" George stopped abruptly.

"But what?"

"I think you and I need to be really careful to take charge, figure it out, protect the kids. The kids are so very innocent. You see little Pam there? I could just cut off a leg for being so stupid as to get them into this."

"Okay. You mean that Cola and Davey aren't going to be much help, so we'd better keep ourselves focused on the kids. The kids are the thing."

"Yeah. We have to keep C&D and the kids busy doing other stuff, distract them. It's the kids that worry me."

"You don't want them scared."

"Right—or cold, hungry, or sad either."

Jinny suddenly looked at George with something like respect, possibly even warmth. George didn't register it, though, so the moment passed.

They got ready, assembled, and went off like Noah's poor animals.

The Keegan/Jinny Story

Of the pairs drawn, this was the least likely to produce anything useful: good plans, good talk, or good company. Jinny seemed to be a remote and perpetually miffed adult; Keegan a self-conscious, uneasy little boy. However, she had, in her way, noticed Keegan and thought about him. For his part, Mrs. Jackson was so frightening she seemed almost, kind of, interesting. He thought she was mean and pretty, and he was sure she'd make him do uncool stuff and then refuse to talk with him.

"Well, Keeg," she said, smiling, once they had secreted themselves behind a rock, "how are we going to get out of here?"

He smiled back at her. "We ought to go downhill, I think. It'd get us out of the snow, wouldn't it? It gets better, I think."

"Sounds like a plan to me. I have heard about that, probably from George in one of his monologues about life in the woods. It's not that I listen, but things do filter in and lodge, you know."

This was beyond Keegan.

"Do you like George?" she suddenly asked.

"Well, I don't know. He seems real nice."

"Look, Crowbar, if we're going to talk, we have to drop that sort of shit. I'll tell you what, just so you won't think I'm pumping you and getting you to tell me secrets so I can embarrass you, I'll tell you some secrets of my own. Okay?"

"Okay. If you want." Keegan didn't have near enough time to react to this, had no idea what he thought or what it would mean for it to be "okay." As near as he could tell, it didn't seem to be okay, but he was used to adults offering him choices that weren't choices.

"I want. Well, for one thing, just to get us started: I really do like you and your sister. I really do. I know it often doesn't seem like it, but I do."

"Oh."

"And I like your dad okay but I don't think I like your mom. I mean I LIKE her well enough, but she seems to me to be satisfied with having people like her, you know what I mean? So does your dad, in a way. George, my husband you know, has a lot of things wrong with him—maybe I'll tell you some—but he wants more than to have people like him. He cares about that, too much, but he cares about other things, too, you know what I mean? I can't tell if your mom and dad care about much of anything but that. I don't generally take to people who want so bad to be liked."

Keegan wasn't in the least offended. This was all new to him, but he saw what Mrs. Jackson meant and enjoyed the talk. They seemed like new topics—not that he could pick up on them real well.

"You think they're sort of assy? Excuse me. What I mean is you like them. That's what they want. What do you do more than liking someone?"

"Well, for one thing, you get curious about them, find them interesting."

"You don't find Mom and Dad interesting." He was just echoing, neither defensive nor surprised.

"I may be wrong, you know. I am not easy to be around, and some people defend themselves by being nice."

"How come? Do you think I do that?"

She understood what he meant. "I can see why you'd worry about that, when you thought about it, but don't. It depends a lot on your age. Your parents ought to be long past all that. I mean it's not like they're angling for prom dates. But at your age, everyone wants to be liked, and with the parents you have it's natural that you do. But I think there may be more to you than that already.

Besides, you've got some lucky natural assets. That'll make it easy for you to roll along and not have to worry about making people like you. You can be a mean son of a bitch—it'd be a good idea if you were—and you'd still have people wanting your notice and your time, thinking about you, having you on their mind. That's what life's all about, you know. For instance—do you think we should start trying to walk downhill a little or just fake it? I'm all for hiding behind this rock if you want. Anyhow, where the hell's downhill anyhow?"

"They'd be able to tell if we sat here. We maybe should make some tracks out there. Maybe it'll go downhill. What did you mean, for instance?"

"Okay—let's saunter kind of crossways over there, where it doesn't look so steep." They walked toward over there and then started picking their way through scrub that seemed, hallelujah, to be going downhill— possibly.

After several minutes of more or less maybe downhill, Jinny picked up the conversation. "What I meant by for instance had to do with Bert, but it's also right here in what you just did."

"What did I just do?"

"You waited ten minutes or so and didn't ask what I meant when I was talking about you. How many kids would do that? Most kids would be hopping out of their pants to hear something, anything about them. You know? You want to get a kid's attention, just say, 'You know what it is about you?' Come to think of it, you get adults' attention that way, too."

"Yeah." Keegan had a pretty good idea what she meant.

"You weren't so fucking eager to hear all about yourself that you asked me about it. That says two things, one really important. The first is that you aren't completely consumed with self-doubt so that anyone's opinion is a matter of life or death to you. The second is that you're naturally cool."

"Thanks."

Jinny went on, unprompted, "No need. By cool, I think I mean that you already know you're hot stuff, down deep you know, and don't have to expend any effort demonstrating that. It's that attitude that counts. And being pretty and cool—wow! Cool is realizing you're cool and not acting it—that's all it is. But you—oh hell, you know what I mean—or you don't."

"You're really smart, do you know that?" Keegan wasn't sucking up.

"Yeah, I am. But I'm not cool the way you are. That's not being modest. It's no secret I'm smart. If I were you, it'd be a secret."

"So, I'm smart but I keep it a secret?"

"Jesus, no. That just shows you that cool and smart have no necessary relation. I don't know if you're smart or not. Probably not, since not many people are. And look, I'm not here to flatter you. You're cool. Be satisfied with that."

They paused at the same time, having come up against some kind of ravine, a steep snow-covered bank that went down several hundred feet, maybe a thousand. The cliff, which is what it surely

was, came on them all of a sudden, as they clawed their way through some neck-high scrub. Just before the cliff, the vegetation stopped abruptly; and on the hill there were no trees at all, no vegetation of any kind, none visible anyhow, and probably none at all, as the snow there was only one or two inches deep.

"Whoa!" said Jinny; "back up there, Keegan."

Keegan had already retreated from the edge.

"What do you think?" Jinny looked at the boy, as if testing him to see whether he were really smart and hiding it.

"I think this is real dangerous. Underneath there's probably that gravel stuff we came through a little on the way up."

"But this isn't the way we came up."

"No way. This is too steep and way too long. And if you started to slide down this, there'd be no way to stop, looks like. It's a sheer drop."

Keegan peered over the edge. "It's not really a cliff, is it? But that's worse. A cliff, like, you could know was bad. Look what's at the bottom. Maybe it is a cliff. Is it? Looks pretty much like it. God, it's a long way down. That's a cliff. Yeah. But what really is at the bottom? What would it be like to hit down there?"

The burble of questions left Jinny thinking maybe Keegan wasn't so exceptional, maybe not even moderately bright, just pretty—and cool. "I don't think there're pillows down there."

"Rocks is more like it. Sharp, jagged rocks. What should we do now?"

"Well, we've found a way NOT to go. Maybe if we cut over there we could see if there's a way down over that rise. Trouble with these fucking mountains is you never know if you're going down or up, really, since to go one way you always got to be going the other. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah. I know when we came up here, on the way up, we sometimes went up and we sometimes went down. Like that drop we slid down?"

"You slid. I fell flat on my ass."

"Yeah. Look at our tracks."

The snow was much thicker now, taking away shades and contours, making sharp footprints into gracefully curved shallows, turning the mountain more and more into a featureless beach.

Jinny looked back and felt a stab of fear. "Jesus, yes." They had descended, oddly, to much more open ground; but spreading out before them in both directions were woods and thick scrub and rocks. No end to it. No towns, certainly, no roads—no people, no hope. Not this way, anyhow, which didn't mean. . . .

Looking down, they couldn't see any snow-line. True, they couldn't see too far down in the thickish snow, but there was sure no break. They didn't know their altitude, but it didn't look like they were going to walk out of the snow very easily. Looking for an escape in this direction much longer could be deadly.

"Well," Keegan said, "let's go back, don't you think? We can get back real easy right now and tell everybody we shouldn't be going this way."

"Right, Sunflower. That way leads deeper into the woods and," thinking of the drop-off above them, "into a deathtrap."

They started back.

"Maybe we found something good, though. Maybe we should just go the opposite way."

Jinny's initial estimate of the boy's intelligence quivered a little more drastically. "That's a happy spin to put on it, Keegan, but hell, we really didn't see anything like a full arc of even one part of the compass."

"What?"

"I mean we didn't see all of what was to the south or whichever way we were facing down there. We just got a narrow slice of the landscape. Maybe just out of our range on the side there's a way back down or a view of something other than a cliff or a goddamned tree with snow all over it."

"Oh."

"So the truth is we don't know that if we go in the opposite direction, we'd be doing anything at all except finding a way to starve. For one thing, 'opposite' doesn't mean much: there are four points on the compass and only one of them even vaguely useful to us. And only a part of that."

"Yeah—"

"If we want to mess our pants over this, imagine that we're on the ocean in a raft. It's not a question of floating or rowing North or South. We have to have the precise direction or we miss the only island for a thousand miles. A tiny error means we miss it, don't even see it, and just keep rowing and rowing and never find anything. Plus, we may have been looking at the way out and not known it."

Keegan was silent but not moved. He had some experience with adults pulling rank by means of horror-movie scenarios, and he wasn't really surprised. She hadn't scared him, either, though she had certainly managed to scare herself.

"What did you mean about Bert back there?"

"Pardon?"

"You said, 'What I mean by 'for instance' had to do with Bert. You were talking about how I didn't always want to be liked and you said you thought maybe I didn't always and said for instance it had to do with Bert."

"Well, near as I can figure out anything about Bert, he's very anxious not to rank being liked very high. And he pays a lot of attention to you. He wouldn't do that if you were an insecure needy suck-up like your mom and dad."

"Oh." Keegan was trying to distribute among his ways of understanding the various ideas this gave him. He was wise enough not to say anything right away, but he was confused. Inside all the confusion, though, was an eagerness to know, to figure out Bert, that he had to run after.

"You understand Bert?" Jinny really thought he might.

Keegan ignored that, wanting more to get at how Bert's bullying signaled anything good. There was the story Bert had told about him. That was different.

"No. He's very cool, you know. Sure you know that. But I don't think he likes me, really. That's OK." He wasn't going to specify. Maybe she knew about what Bert did, but he didn't want her to think it bothered him. She might make Bert stop.

"Fucking shit!" Jinny snorted, falling in the snow and then falling again trying to climb up a bank. She hadn't lost the shape of the conversation, though. "It's because he socks you and makes fun of you, right? That's what I mean."

"What do you mean?" Keegan asked.

"He doesn't let you alone because he's drawn to you."

"What?"

Jinny looked at Keegan, suddenly realizing this all had certainly gone too far. There was something about the boy that allowed you to forget he was so young and could even tempt you to overestimate his intelligence, almost certainly by a wide margin. He looked even younger than ten, and littler, and he seemed about as manly as Bambi. Still, Jinny was not the first adult to find herself somehow treating him, kind of automatically, as an equal.

"Well, Salamander, I'm not going to say more. I know that's rotten, but that's how it just has to be. Sorry. Bert's what he is—and so are you."

Keegan just looked at her pleasantly, making Jinny more than a little nonplussed.

"Oh what the fuck! Bert is confused, Hun, about lots of things, you among them, and blames you for it."

She stopped and tried to see if Keegan knew what she meant. Probably not, but she couldn't tell. Anyhow, why on earth was she saying all this?

She paused. Keegan looked mildly interested, but not shocked, interested as he might be in an adult lecturing on igneous rocks or the role of the judiciary.

"Anyhow, Bert is intrigued by you in ways he doesn't comprehend, and he will probably either, you know—well, who can guess? But whatever it is, you'll be the first to know. Friendships are always based on hidden things, right Sherlock?"

Keegan didn't react to this for a minute, as he was thinking too hard, trying to figure out how all this fit together and what "all this" was. He did recognize Jinny's plea to be let out of this conversation by turning it into a joke. He smiled, kind-hearted kid that he was.

The Dave/Nicole Story

Dave and Nicole couldn't have been happier with the outcome of the pairings. Not only would they spend some time together, just the two of them, but the ease of their mutual trust—they were each other's best friend, after all—might well be what was needed to find a solution to a problem both of them half-recognized as critical. It was not a time to panic, but it was a time to put heads together, and it was impossible to imagine heads joining more perfectly than theirs.

They had no secrets from one another. There was nothing they couldn't talk about. They had no hidden agendum, no buried aggressions to be unleashed, no sores to scratch, no passive aggressive instincts. They didn't much like one another, felt perfect trust because each one had very little interest in the partner, actually no interest at all that could be identified. They had reached an unacknowledged agreement, whereby their mutual distaste could pass for congenial ease and their indifference could seem like trust. Dave and Nicole's empty truce served to get them through times that would have thrown and trampled closeness. It was a perfect marriage.

Their oneness, however, left them nowhere at all to maneuver in a physical emergency. Paired, they were like two tugboats with no liner to tug, two cans of three-in-one oil with no machine to lubricate, two utility infielders without starters to replace, two Abbots without a Costello. They were chocked full of agreeableness and support. No carping. No ideas.

"I see Keegan and Jin went over there. Should we go the opposite? Then we'd cover—they go that way and we go this and we come back and compare notes?"

"Good, Nicole. Also, this way looks sort of level, which is OK by me."

"The kids are having fun, don't you think?"

"They really are, Nicole. Are you? Do you suppose they're warm enough?"

"That's one thing we were careful about, warm clothes. I didn't imagine it'd be this cold, though. Watch out for that lump there. Is it a root?"

"I don't know. The snow's covering it. Maybe a root. I'm not a root expert. Are you worried at all?"

"Oh no. I mean, we can't be more than—what?—seven or so miles from where we came up?"

They walked along in the snow, picking their way through trees that seemed to be getting much thicker as they went. Neither spoke for some time.

"Dave, do you think Bert is sometimes mean to our little Keegan? Jesus, these trees are everywhere. Seems to me we're just flailing around."

"Maybe we should call it quits. This sure isn't the way we came up. I can tell that much. We aren't going much up or down, are we? We just seem to be going in."

"Yes, we are. And in where? This way doesn't seem right in any case. Let's turn around while we can still see the tracks, Okay? It's snowing even in here among the trees, though how it hits the ground, I don't know."

They scratched their way back for a while, carefully holding branches so neither got face-whipped.

"So, Dave, what do you think about Bert?"

"Well, he's a confused boy. I like him, though. I think he needs somebody to talk to."

"You don't think George is the right person?"

"Well, George is a wonderful guy. He really is. It's just that he is his father and therefore not—you know, any boy and his father . . . . That's been going on since there were fathers, I imagine. I'll bet there was tension between old Adam and that Cain and Abel. It's just male testosterone causing battles."

"Except for you and Keegan. You have a wonderful relationship—no battles."

"Ah, but Keegan's so different from Bert—and, Cola, maybe by the time he hits puberty we'll have a Bert on our hands."

"Never. Has Bert hit puberty?"

"I'd say so."

"Why? How'd you know?"

"It's not that I looked, Nicole. It's just his manner."

"Do you think he's interested in Mim? You know they're off together. Do you think that's safe?

"I am sure it's safe. He's scared of Mim. Besides, she knows a whole lot more about the woods than anybody here, including George. And I would bet she knows more about boys—about sex. More than Bert, I mean—more than most of us, maybe. I'm sort of scared of Mim myself. She's lucky she has you to talk to. You're absolutely great with her."

"But you were asking about how Bert treats Keegan. I think that's also just testosterone—perfectly normal. You know, king of the hill, mine's bigger than yours. They get along just fine, really. See the way Bert told that story?"

"Didn't you think little Keegan was embarrassed, all that about his penis?"

"I suppose so. I know I would have been—certainly at his age. You think I should talk with him?"

"With Bert?"

"Well yes, but not about that. Not Bert; I meant with Keegan—Oh, fuck!"

Dave here tripped on what turned out unmistakably to be a root, grabbed onto Nicole, saved himself from falling but managed to knock her headfirst into the snow—into a section of the snow that covered a pointy rock. She came up bleeding.

"Oh Jesus, honey."

"I'm just fine. Hit on my hard head, that's all. It didn't hit my temple. I'll just dab it—you got a hanky? It'll be fine. I think we'll all be fine."

The Bert/Mim Story

While both kids were a little flummoxed to find themselves teamed, Bert was so angry at this turn of events that he could hardly recognize the elation that warmed him. Maybe he wasn't

really angry, just thought he should be. He was the last person who would have known.

Mim saw right away pretty much how it was with Bert and found her own discomfort slipping from her as easily as cheese on a sideways pizza.

Knowing she'd make it too easy for him if she spoke first, she stood looking at him, waiting. She couldn't resist the deep pleasure in allowing a conversation to start unexpectedly, and also in embarrassing Bert a little. She knew she could begin talking, and knew what she would say, but neither she nor Bert had any idea how (or when) he might get things going.

"Now they got us headed off in pairs like some fucking kids' party. What is this, spin the fucking bottle?" Bert finally blurted out. He immediately reddened when he realized what he'd said, and added, "What the fuck anyhow!"

Mim, not knowing she could be so bloodthirsty, said nothing, simply stared at him.

"What're we supposed to do, anyhow? Jesus Christ!" he finally managed.

She recognized the appeal in his embarrassment and, feeling a little guilty, rushed to the rescue.

"Who knows, Bert? I don't think they do. I mean, I like Pam's idea, but it's kinda weird our parents do. They seem eager to waste time in about any way."

"What I say is, why're we playing games? Can you tell me that?" When he was angry, Bert got shrill, which made him sound almost babyish. "We are up here," he continued, a little lower in the soprano range, "no fucking food, snow coming down like shit from a bucket . . . ."

"The situation don't look so good, do it, Captain! Maybe if we say 'Fuck' enough, things will improve."

Bert looked at her and grinned. “It’s the same situation we faced with the Zorbas on Planet Lucifer. So fuck ’em all! What worked then will work now!”

“Unless it don’t.”

“Right. Unless it don’t. But it’s a plan. That’s what we need, a plan, mate Riley.”

“And the plan you have, Captain, is a whole lot better than the one we’re getting from Headquarters, which seems to have its head right up its—”

“Yes, right up there.”

Both were silent for a minute, having gotten pretty easily past the rough part.

“You think the old fucks actually do have a plan?” Bert asked.

“I doubt it. They never do. My parents are too busy thinking they’re having fun. I don’t know about your parents. I guess your dad is in charge, but who knows?”

“Yeah,” Bert said.

Neither said anything more for a bit. They kept walking.

Bert wasn’t quite ready to let it all go. “You suppose they have plans they’re not letting us in on for some reason? They have had a lot of time together.”

“Maybe,” Mim said doubtfully, “but we both know they really don’t. It’s true, they may like the idea of keeping stuff from us to protect us, but they don’t know what it is they’re keeping from us.”

“Huh?”

“I mean they’re keeping stuff away from us, I imagine, but it’s enough for them to be all secret-guarding. That way they don’t have to think about what the secret might be. That way it can be nothing at all, just fucking nothing. You see? They’re hiding it,

but they don't know what it is. Like they're hiding it from themselves, too. They got the protecting-the-kids stuff down and that's enough for them, keeps them from doing a damned thing."

"Oh," said Bert, impressed, but also a little abstracted and more than a little scared.

"Even if they don't have a plan, which they don't, they could still tell us that much. You and I know that much." Mim meant to be reassuring, in a way, but didn't manage it. She was angrier than she realized.

Bert tried to talk down his panic. "I see, they'd pretend to have a plan. T hey'd think it was all adult of them to have a plan and protect us from it, like you say. That's enough for them. I see now. For them, protecting us keeps them from the bother of coming up with a plan."

"Oh shit, Bert," Mim said, and fell silent.

"You know," Mim picked up after a bit, "say they have a plan and don't tell us, or they don't have a plan at all. What's the difference?"

Bert didn't quite understand, but it sounded smart and a little like what he had said, so he nodded.

"I mean," Mim said, looking very closely into Bert's eyes, "it sort of leaves it up to us."

"What?"

"Well," Mim said, still thinking as she spoke, "I don't know if we'd be very smart to just wait for them to tell us their plan or set it in motion."

"Maybe they'll spring their plan on us without us knowing it," Bert said.

"Yeah, but how do you feel about just sitting around waiting for that to happen—if it does?"

"Yeah."

Mim again looked close into his eyes. Something passed between them.

Bert nodded and looked away.

"Were you kidding?" he asked, suddenly embarrassed.

Mim looked at him in a way that made it clear she wasn't kidding, also making it very clear, without at all meaning to, that she was beyond pretty.

They stopped by mutual consent to take stock, re-focus on the task at hand.

"Which way should we go?" Bert asked.

"The problem is it's real hard to tell how the land is shaped from here. We need to see more, but I don't know which way to go to do that, to see better."

"Yeah. What we want to do is go up, for sure. Don't you think, Mim?"

"Above the trees. If we go down, we're not going to see anything. Bet the others try to go down."

"Bet they do, too. They've heard shit about following a stream and it'll take you to a lake or town, where people are bound to be."

After slogging along for some time, Bert continued, as if there had been no break, "Mim, do you know Mr. Beatle, teaches science? Sure you do."

"Beatle? Oh, Mr. Beeder. Yeah. I haven't had him or anything."

"He's pretty nice. He said the problem with following water downhill is that it doesn't mean the land will keep going downhill. Creeks often go underground, and the land can rise again. So you just get more lost."

"Yeah. That was nice, what you said back there about Keegan. Meant a lot to him."

"Oh. I wasn't nice. I just thought he was being cooler than shit. I wasn't saying anything to make him feel good."

"Why?" Mim asked, really curious.

"Fuck, I don't know."

"I like Keegan a lot, you know, Bert. He's a really good little brother."

Bert grunted.

"You know we used to take baths together? Kept it up until—oh, let's see."

Bert was flushing, anxious not to betray how interested he was in this innocent little story and the pictures it evoked. "Until last week?" he said, adding a lousy imitation of a laugh.

Mim really did laugh. "Too bad we didn't know you then. You and Pammy could have joined in."

Bert could find no words, and couldn't have gotten them out had they been delivered to him.

The kids had come to a sort of clearing, not that it gave them a useful vantage point; it was surrounded by thick forest. But at least it was something different, maybe useful.

They stopped and looked about, unable to guess what might be behind the first wave of trees. Other trees? A rocky uphill to beyond the tree-line? A downhill to below the snow line?

"How about we make a circle as wide as we can and see if we spot land going uphill? I mean, we can walk around this clearing and see. It's almost a circle like you the ones you draw; isn't that funny? Boy, those trees are thick." Bert looked around him and then closely at Mim, waiting for her to decide.

"Yeah, we should do that for sure. Just what you say. You're right. You can see that the trees go back pretty deep, though, up or down. At least it looks like they do. Maybe we should be happy with what we've found for now."

She stopped and looked at Bert, then continued.

"We have two hours, one out and one back. We're not going to get anywhere very new in that time. We've used up pretty near an hour now."

"Yeah. Maybe we should just mosey on back and not even try to make the circle. That snow's coming down and we could lose our tracks."

"Yeah," Mim said, for some reason smiling brightly at him.

Bert felt something like elation, his mind returning to bathtub scenes. "Let's go back and hang around, wait till the other losers return. Then we can make real plans."

"Does it hit you, Bert, that we are here and out there are a million mistakes and not many right turns? Also, this snow is going to make it all look the same."

"Yeah."

"And not only that."

"What?"

"There's not much we can do. I mean, I can't think of anything."

"Well—do you think?"

"It's like those scary movies—"

"Yeah," Bert said, "wherever you go—"

"There's the killer."

Bert was silent.

"That's interesting, isn't it?" Mim said, after an unusually long pause.

"Well, yeah, I guess it is."

"But it also scares me."

"Yeah—and maybe we're —just saying it to scare ourselves? I mean, I sometimes do that."

Bert shrugged and then went on— "I mean, fuck that. We're on this not very big mountain in a not very big snow storm and

sure as shit not very far from the cabins. We're not in the middle of some horror movie or anything."

"You know, Bert," Mim said slowly, "it ain't so bad, as you say, but it also ain't so good either. There's those bears."

Bert picked up quickly. "Forget the bears."

"Yeah," Mim said, "they've done what they're going to do. The problem's food, not bears."

"And there's no food problem if we can get out pretty soon," Bert said. "It's the snow."

Right," Mim said. "There's the snow making it worse all the time and we know that."

"Yes, the snow," Bert nodded, waiting for Mim to go on.

"What scares me is that it covers things that might kill us. I suppose it covers a way out, if there is one, but it also makes everything look so gentle and it isn't. There's holes there and rocks and ways to fall."

"We have to keep our mind on the snow as our major problem," Bert said.

"That's what will get us, if anything does," Mim went on. "The snow. There's also the cold and the limited food and being so confused. We can handle that, the confusion, even if our parents can't. We'd better."

Bert saw what just she meant. "The bears aren't the problem," he said.

Mim managed a half smile, worse than none at all. "The bears are probably going to sleep, hibernating, if they do that around here. I suppos they do. Do all bears do that everywhere? Anyhow, who gives a shit. Besides, the problem isn't going to jump out at us, like in a horror movie, like you say."

"Right. It's not something out there," Bert nodded, perfectly satisfied.

The George/Pam Story

George found himself both annoyed and touched, looking at the small face studying him from about twenty inches away. Why on earth had he agreed to this party-game scheme for saving their lives? Now, instead of doing anything sensible and making progress on getting back to the cabins below, here he was having to entertain his own kid, and the very last of the kids he would have found useful as a planner—or companion.

She was little and probably weak and she made him very uncomfortable. Always had. What the hell could he say to her? He didn't know how he could occupy her for two hours, much less use that time to find a way down, even look for one. What would they talk about? As soon as he recognized that he was worrying about such a thing—silly—he felt a flush of guilt invading his face. Here he was responsible for the lives of all these people and he was concerned with small talk.

This wasn't a fucking high-school date, an unwelcome idea anyhow, given that this was his daughter he was talking about, a fact he often more or less forgot. Anyhow, this was real life, and by Jesus, a vital time if they were going to have any lives at all.

"So, Pam, what do you think?"

Pam stared at him.

George stared at Pam, no idea what to say. "Well, Pam, where do you—"

"I think we should try the way we came up."

"What?"

"I think we should see if we can go back the same way we came up. I mean, we know we came from that direction"—pointing straight behind George—"so why don't we go and see if we can just go back that way?"

"Well, yes. I wonder that nobody thought of that. Of course you're right—that's what we should do. I mean, we weren't on a

trail and we made some odd decisions the last mile or so trying to keep going uphill, but . . . ."

"But it's better to go that way, probably, where we came up, instead of other places where we didn't come up. Everybody else is going other places, so we wouldn't be going where they're going," Pam said.

"That makes some sense." George looked harder at Pam. "Why do you suppose everybody else is going off in different directions?"

"I don't know. Maybe because they didn't know the way we came up."

"What? Oh, you mean they were confused about which way we came up. But, as you say, dear, that is the way we came up, confusing or not, and it only makes sense that that's the way we should go back down."

"Yeah, only—"

"Only what, Pam?"

"Only it is confusing, like you say. We can get lost that way like we did coming up."

"Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. You've heard that expression, honey?"

Pam stared her big owl eyes at him again. George turned around and started a march to the rear, Pam catching up immediately and, in truth, leading him backwards.

But they soon found themselves twisted around and, somehow, unable to go down. Everywhere they turned they seemed to be within fifty yards of uphill. Which of the uphills, if any, turned shortly into a goddamn downhill? How could they not simply descend just as they had ascended and in the same place? I mean, didn't they come uphill the last twenty or twenty-five minutes, steady uphill? Maybe not, but that's what it seemed like.

On the other hand, what it seemed like was nowhere to be found, no matter how hard they tried. And, just as Pam had predicted, going off in more or less the right direction seemed no better than hiking more or less at random.

It couldn't be, but it was.

THEY REGATHER

"So," Nicole choked chirpingly, blood flowing down her face and into her mouth, "what do we think?"

Nobody said anything. George realized he should be the one taking over here, after politely inquiring into Nicole's messy lacerations. But he did neither.

The silence didn't last long. Bert hadn't expected to have such a chance, but he didn't muff it.

"Mim and I think we need to have a clear plan that we all agree with to find a way to go up, so we can see what we can see. You know, a landmark to orient ourselves. Then use the map. We have to be able to use the map or we're lost. I mean, we are lost; but if we don't find some way to use the map, we have nothing going for us but luck." Bert paused, but nobody said anything.

"I know none of us knows which way is up," he went on, "like in the saying. But we gotta hope we can find a way that gets above the trees and shows us something.

These mountains do go above trees, don't they?"

George roused himself. "Yes, they certainly do. They go up to about 13,000 feet, many of them, or even a little higher. I guess the solution is, just as Bert says, to give ourselves real exploring time so we can find a way up."

George didn't add, but thought, "And hope to hell we're on one of the mountains that really does have a tree line and some clear land above it." They could find a way up, go up quite a ways, go up to the top of wherever they were, and still have nothing but trees. And how do you know what the top is, when you're surrounded by trees? And how do you know how to get going in an upward direction, one that keeps going the way you want it to? He and Pam could find no way to go down, after all.

Reading his mind, Bert said, "Yeah, it's time to look. That's the thing. You know, even if we don't find the top of the mountain, we can find a clearing or some place where we can see out and use the map. That's all that really matters. It's not like we're climbing Mt. Fucking Everest."

"Well," George said, "Pam and I tried retracing our steps, start back down the way we came up, and found that it really is impossible—hard to do, I mean. If we were going to try and go down, our opinion is we can't, anyhow not down the right way and maybe not even down at all. I suppose eventually—but—well, who knows?"

"That makes Bert and Mim's plan all the better. We have to try and get up and see where we are. Then the squashy map, which is now useless as tits on—will be our salvation. It's a sensible plan. You can still read it just fine. And it's the only plan we have."

George could have knifed himself for letting that last comment slip. He seemed to be adept at hanging on for one last fatal sentence. He saw panic sweep over the faces of both Dave and Jinny. The kids didn't seem to notice, at least not in a way he could read. But hell with the kids. They needed now to be quiet, attentively obedient, and out of the way—playing games among themselves, whatever it was normal kids did.

What they absolutely had to have in this group was competence, adult thinking. They'd need all the adults working together at something like full capacity. Clever as the kids seemed, and maybe even brave, it was getting serious now, with the raging snow and the cold and less food than they needed. They were only kids, and the group had to shuffle them back to where they belonged, back to the bottom of the deck. They desperately needed something beyond kid-smart now—or would soon—namely, guts, mature thought, physical bulk, and the ability to

slog on through thick brush and uncertain footing, mushing in snow that was covering God knows what.

"So let's plan," said Jinny. "Why not one of us stay with the kids, and the other three adults and Bert go out looking. Two teams, you see. All we need is a clearing, some place where we can sight something—or two somethings, right George? We match up two things on the map and we can triangulate, I think."

George remembered he had read about that, and figured it might well be so. After all, they had not moved their base, which was only six or so hours max from safety, even allowing for a few wrong turns. They could draw a reasonably accurate circle around where they were and then locate it exactly with two sightings.

It wasn't yet clear to him just how that would work, but it did seem like it would. That's what the experts all said. Maybe Jinny understood it. More likely, it'd be something that would become clear in the doing. Anyhow, getting to a clearing, seeing something, using the map: all that sounded much more like a scheme that would end in a merry time back at the cabins. Going off blindly played out in his mind like something from a tragedy. All they needed was an unexpected menace or two to complete that particular dread plot. Maybe there were some *Deliverance* hillbillies up here.

With a plan, they were in a nice family film; without that plan, they were outside all comforting plots.

THE EXPEDITION—THURSDAY AFTERNOON

So they did just as Jinny said. She stayed with the kids, while George and Bert went off in one direction, Dave and Nicole in the opposite.

It was a terrible arrangement. For one thing, Jinny ranked dead last among the adults in her tolerance for kids. More important, she was smart and steady and should have been on the trail. Maybe she really did know what "triangulation" meant. It was a cinch none of the others did, not really, not in the way that would help.

It's funny that, when it came down to it, general and approximate ideas, which are what most people have of things, are quite useless. Maybe they are worse than useless, as they dangle their solutions and their hope just out of reach. Probably the salvation of all eight, if it were to come, lay in that triangle or in a warp. Certainly not in a linear path or in linear thinking, either.

But Jinny, along with the bright kids, stayed locked inside the tent, where no sightings could be made, even if the snow would allow it.

The kids each had a way of coming up with things on the spot, of finding visions springing into their minds, a capacity unknown to any of the adults. But now these kids, maybe their best resource, were treated as incompetents in need of a nanny. When they were in the last ditch, adults might sit down and die. Kids wouldn't, simply because they were far too inexperienced to realize which ditch it was. Of course they hadn't reached that last ditch: Jinny knew that, hated herself for being morbid, disguising from herself how happy she was with her grisly metaphors.

She disliked the current arrangements but did not let herself recognize the pattern they were settling into, a pattern that could become fixed and then dangerous. Just because they could think of nothing else to do, these mildly unconventional people had executed a stiff bow to convention at just the wrong time.

The pairings were every bit as misgauged as the general plan. There were only two stable and sharp beings among the four, and they were disabled by mutual antagonism and by the other members of the team.

Those others, Dave and Nicole, suddenly presented themselves as what they had always been: people whose minds and bodies, if they shone at all or ever, did not shine in mountain emergencies. On the weekend jaunt at San Simeon they had appeared agreeable, adaptable, and competent enough; here they seemed ditzy, physically inept, and cowardly. There was something about the murky mutual tolerance they had perfected that kept them from challenging one another: they took all their irons out of the fire before they were even warm. Their chances of finding a clearing with a view, much less a view of the cabins, were about equal to the chance of returning to miles of beach and finding where you'd buried your sunglasses.

Bert and George represented the best hope of the group, at least the best hope in this particular arrangement. Each might, in a different world or time, even have found ways to magnify the abilities of his partner. Bert was alert and could think on the spot; George was best informed of the group. But they were uneasy around one another, unsure of themselves. Each siphoned off so much energy from the other that there wasn't much left for considering such things as how exactly they might escape death.

The party left behind didn't have much idea what to do with themselves. Jinny, trying very hard to throw herself into some role that made sense, locked onto the notion that it was her job to

take the kids' minds off things, "things" being the sense of imminent peril and the panic it was sure to cause. But how on earth was she to do this? Games! But what games could she remember or devise? What were the kids interested in? Silly things, smutty things. But what silly, smutty games did she know?

"OK," she said, "it's just us sluts here along with our one stud, so what do you say we play a dirty game? Huh? I mean, who's going to report us?"

She had expected eagerness, alarm, or something; but Mim, Pam, and Keegan, not one of them, reacted at all. They just looked at her steadily, threatening to unnerve even Jinny, who was not easily unnerved. But now—. Left with no other option, she barged straight forward.

"Well, whatdyasay? Let's first off get inside the big tent there and take the table in with us. Kids manage that? Okay—looks like you could do it. It's got a heater on it that's doing no good out here—Jesus that snow is coming down! And we can at least talk or draw or something." Draw? Coloring books?

The kids then did react and, with their quick instinct for doing anything at all to keep someone else from feeling awkward, not only pitched in with the moving and hauling but declared themselves wholly up for any "dirty games" Jinny had in mind.

"Well, you're all dearies, you really are—and you deserve much better than the parents it's been your lot to draw. I meant only word games, you know, games designed to embarrass, not actually set us groping one another. Hey, don't worry."

They didn't look worried.

LATE THURSDAY—THE SNOW

They devised dirty games.

"OK! We'll go round the circle and go through the alphabet, saying, 'I'd like to _____ you!' See what I mean? No? Well, then I'll start—'I'd like to ass-kiss you.' See? Your turn, Keegan. Use a verb that starts with 'b'."

Meanwhile, George and Bert were carefully working their way upwards through a dense chaparral thicket, trying hard to mark their trail as they went. It was a promising stretch, what with such low, if solid, bushes. Were the snow less thick, they'd be able to see ahead and at least guess at which way the land was going. George figured they were near the end of any vegetation, would soon come upon rocks and more rocks. Getting that high, they'd surely be able to see, were seeing now possible.

"Dad, I think the snow is getting worse. We keep going, we won't be able to see anything anyhow."

"Yeah." George knew Bert was right but hated to abandon the first hopeful possibility they had come across. "Maybe we should go on for fifteen more minutes—see if this brush stuff runs out."

"Even if it does, so what?"

"Well Christ, Bert, then we'd know we had a view."

"Sure, but a view of what? Maybe a wall right in front of us or something equally useless."

"Yeah and maybe not. You ever think of that?"

"Why are you pissed? You're always pissed. You get so damned snarky. I was just saying that whatever's up there, we won't be able to see it anyhow because of this fucking snow. You ever think of that? Huh?"

George did what he had never managed in such situations with Bert: he kept his mouth shut for a full minute and regained some

composure. Usually he would have continued in the same vein, "But if we turn back, smart ass, we won't know, will we? You get my point, huh? Probably not, but take my word for it. You'd better!"

But now he settled down and tried to think of survival rather than Bert and his own authority. When he did think about what counted, Bert watching him with a truly obnoxious smirk on his face, he came gradually to see that survival and Bert, or Bert's idea, were connected. Even more urgently than Bert thought. George saw that the real problem with going on was that he and his annoyance might not get back, might lose their way in this thick snowfall, might have their tracks erased, might wander out here until they were dead.

"I'm sorry, Bert. You're right. Let's go back right now. You think there's some way we can mark our position so we can retrace it when the snow stops?"

If Bert were gratified, he didn't show it. "We can use our poles, these ski pole things, to mark where the thicket starts. Once we find that, we'll be OK. There isn't any path in it or anything like that, so if we can find the thicket, all we have to do is head uphill. We'll just use the poles to mark the bushes here and hope we can find our way back to the poles."

One problem plowing right into them was that it wasn't at all easy to tell where the thicket started: looking what may have been down the mountain, it seemed to start and stop again, over and over. Still, they marked what they thought would be a regainable spot in an area that was pretty clear, though even "pretty clear" was hard to determine in a snowfall that was coming to look like a whiteout.

In fact, they lost their tracks altogether shortly after marking the proper spot, or a spot. In the two hours they'd been out, the snow had smoothed over everything, making even declivities that

their boots may have made, uncertain falling glides in a graceful landscape. Luckily, both had been checking back over their shoulders as they climbed, memorizing tree clusters and small ridges.

All the same, George knew that what he was feeling was panic. It wasn't the all-consuming panic brought on by imminent bear attack, but a more settled and low-grade obsession with time and fear. The longer they were out there, the deeper the snow would get, the less chance they would have of recognizing anything in this eerie white camouflage, the more worn they would become, the more prone to injury, the more likely to do something desperate.

He wondered but was not going to ask if Bert felt anything like this. Bert did. They might have calmed one another down, had they spoken of their dangerous state of mind, shared and examined. But they were not the sorts to do that, certainly not with one another. So they cast their lot with chance, and chance brought them back to the tents. The most frightening thing was that they didn't have any idea where they were until they happened to see one of the tents, maybe fifty feet away. They could have walked right on through their own campground without knowing it.

There was nothing for it now but to hunker down, join in the games, and wait for the snow to let up. It was cozy in the tent, and Bert and George were now all good spirits and comradely fun—well, George was. They were safe, deeply relieved, living inside the narcotic that swims in as tension drains out. What's more, they could convince themselves that they had done something productive. In telling of their adventure and their find, they could make it sound more useful than it probably was. And they did.

It was Bert's idea to add to the game now being played—a version of Truth or Dare—the requirement that any Dare be enacted at once and to the full. Since most of the Dares were mildly risqué and fully primitive—there were no phones for prank calls—lots of gougings and ticklings, some of them intergenerational, were soon transpiring. They did not travel even an inch beyond giggly kid stuff; the thrill came from imagining they might.

It wasn't that any of them had been able to expel from their mind the specter of Dave and Nicole, worrying about them, wondering where they could be, devising reasons for their lateness. It's just that nobody allowed these musings center stage, not even Keegan and Mim, who might be expected to have some kind of familial feeling. Indeed they did, but perhaps not of the customary sort. It was actually late afternoon, not long before it would be obvious that it was truly "starting to get dark," when Jinny raised the issue.

"I wonder if we shouldn't go out and call for our valiant explorers? They could be close by, waiting for a signal. I'll bet they are."

Nobody looked convinced, and for the first time, the kids, all the kids, were scared. Mim started to cry, softly but in a throaty sob certain in its tone and beat. Because of her unusual maturity, and the dubious advantages it brought, she was forced to see what the others were childish enough to evade. Nothing but horror, mild or unbearable, could explain her parents being two hours overdue in the midst of a mountain snowstorm so unrelenting it blotted out sight and, in its way, sound. Yelling into that snow was like howling straight on, face mashed to cloth, into a thick mattress.

But they did just that, over and over, until the "starting to get dark" period arrived without mistake.

"Dad, you go straight that way. Keegan, you go straight that way. Pam, you go straight that way. Mom, you go straight that way. Mim, you go straight that way."

Bert issued orders like a kid playing George Patton, but he seemed to be making sense.

"Okay," George said, feeling proud of himself for being so tactful with Bert, "but don't go more than—let's see—a thousand steps total. Count them, watch your feet very carefully, and yell all the way. Don't veer off. Be careful not to wind in circles. Just go in a straight line, best you can, and when you've gone five-hundred steps, come straight back. Your steps will still be visible. If you come to a drop-off or a wall or something, don't try to change course. Just turn around and come right back. Okay?"

They all took their one-thousand-divided-by-two steps, yelling and listening. And they all came back, Mim giving them a terrible scare by returning several minutes after the others. When she saw the faces around her, lighted up as they were by relief and pleasure at seeing her, she broke into racking sobs. She did not find in any of those faces what she was looking for: any notion that her mother and father were anywhere around, anywhere that might be safe.

Nicole and Dave had gone off blithely enough, filled with goofy confidence and happy to have some alone time together, sharing, as always, the one valuable truth in their lives, that they had chosen well. They would always spend time together in preference to being with anyone else. They did errands together, went to work together, waited patiently for each another outside meetings.

They both recognized that this was an emergency, and it seemed to give them a heightened sense of connectedness, how

much each prized the other, how deeply at ease they were together, when they forgot to acknowledge to themselves about how small their lives were and how little the other offered. They could still surprise one another and still give comfort. Both seemed to recognize how rare that was among people they knew; both were determined not to get used to it, even if they knew all too clearly they were fooling themselves at every turn.

They went off together, into this thick snow and rough terrain, made all the rougher by the white disguise, thinking almost entirely of one another and very little of the task at hand. The task at hand was two-fold: try to find a clearing that would promise a way out; don't kill yourself doing so.

Walking heedlessly through the snow, paying little attention to their surroundings, they suddenly, and together, spotted, straight ahead, what seemed to be an opening. In a sense, it was just that. They rushed toward it, kicking up snow and once falling to the ground, Dave again pulling Nicole down in a tumble so raucous it was way more than awkward.

"Oh Jesus, Dave, you are as clumsy as an ox."

"Sorry, Hun. You okay?"

"I think so. I can hardly even see my ankle what with this snow, but it seems fine—as near as I can tell."

"Want to go back?"

"Go back? What if Lewis and Clark had gone back? If Stanley had never gone on so valiantly to meet Livingston? Why, we wouldn't have—what wouldn't we have? Tell me, Dave. Why did old Stanley meet Livingston anyhow?"

"To fuck, I think. That must have been it. Otherwise, why would it be so fondly remembered, taught so earnestly in all the schools? Anyhow, as regards us and our kinship with Stan and Living, by way of fucking. Let's keep that in our sites, not get distracted. We're much better at that than this exploring stuff."

"We're the explorers of fuck, charting new lands of fuck, opening new horizons of fuck. Let's look over there."

"Over there" was a 1500-foot drop-off. Through the scrubby trees, it had looked like a promising clearing in the snow, but it only cleared the way for Dave and Nicole to come crashing through the branches, holding their arms before their faces for protection, blinding themselves to what was ahead, about two yards in front of their stumbling, slipping feet.

They held to each other as they glided over the edge. At the beginning, their slide was slow motion, almost fun, and it seemed as if they could stop at any point, that they were kids at the top of the hill, sleds clamped below them. But then the land gave way altogether, they lost hold of one another, and they fell, screaming, toward a world of rocks below the snow. Neither lost consciousness, and both had time to wonder why they weren't spared the vivid awareness of the rocks, more and more jagged as they came into focus, speeding to meet them.

They felt their faces breaking open when they hit.

"I think we should stop walking about for a while. Dad and Mom will find us a lot easier than we can find them. They know where we are, you know." Mim left unfinished what all were thinking: "and we have no idea where they might be."

So they did. They hunkered down, all of them, in the adult tent and made plans, seriously and without panic. Anyone would have thought they were seasoned mountain people, perhaps members of a Search and Rescue Squad, considering the calm and easy way they went about their business.

FRIDAY

Things went so well for the tent comrades that they all fell asleep of one accord right where they were, warmed by their comradeship and easy reliance on one another. They joined in a circle of determined, if over-energized, mutual trust, a circle they happily welcomed, though it was enclosing a vacuum. What really united them was a willingness, for the time, to avoid thinking.

They woke up in the morning no better focused.

"This tent is so cool. It's big and it's warm as anything. You did a great job, Dad. I mean, getting this tent. It's even got those little vents and all but it's not really cold, and . . . ." Pam trailed off.

They all agreed that the tent was a dandy and would do just fine until they were rescued, an idea they had somehow reached simultaneously, this rescue, fitting because, as plans went, it was no plan at all.

They were never going to get out on their own. That sounded harsh but it might be so. They had tried scouting about. The absence of Dave and Nicole, whatever it meant, was a clear enough signal to them of the inconvenience that would come from more of this aimless shuffling. Here those two klutzes were, thrashing around in the snow, no doubt within a couple hundred yards of the camp, slowly circling in on it. They'd show up in another half hour, tops, but the fact that they got a little bit lost showed the rest of them they could get in trouble if they kept up with that sort of thing.

They would just sit tight and get themselves rescued. Haul out the games, keep warm and dry, resign themselves to the fact that

they sucked as explorers and chalk it all up to an adventure they could laugh over later.

Only Mim seemed to stand outside the general satisfaction that such non-reasoning evoked. But she was silent, and the rest protected themselves from fully registering her alarm, though everyone noticed it in the way we have of sensing the one person in the group not laughing at our joke.

The first thing to do was to make an accurate reckoning of the food remaining, less now than it had first seemed when Keegan directed the salvage operation after the bear attack. But how much less? The kids were sent to their tent to get it, bring it back, and sort it out, George and Jinny staying behind to tend to things there, though there were no things they could find that were convincingly in need of tending.

As soon as the kids were out of the tent, Jinny said, "Jesus, George, do you suppose those two are lost for good? I mean wandering around somewhere out there, stumbling on each other and getting farther and farther away? They would have no idea on earth how to find us or how to survive. That's for sure. Anyhow, could anyone survive in this sort of snow and cold?"

"It's not really all that cold," George said.

Jinny understood. George agreed with all she said and didn't want to amplify it.

"I think, Jinny, our worry has to be the kids. The kids only."

Jinny nodded.

The kids re-entered with what food there was—an alarmingly small quantity, and not very appetizing or even very useful (a good bit in the rice and cereal department, along with some freeze-dried fruit and vegetables, a little bread, doubtless stale, and some soup, dehydrated and otherwise). They also brought along the news that it really was snowing harder.

"Not very hard," Bert said, though George, looking out the tent flap, figured that the afterthought to the weather report was simply the product of Bert's newfound tact.

Actually, Bert was thinking only of survival and not at all of delicacy. He was thinking further that his own survival, and that of all the other kids, not only did not depend on the adults but probably ran on a different track altogether, probably going the opposite direction. He hadn't worked it out yet, but he was going to talk with his close allies more about how it seemed to him. And how it seemed to him was that whatever was good for the adults was not automatically good for the kids and that they had better recognize that— speak it and then keep it to themselves. Form a coordinated union.

He also accepted it as fact that the adults had reduced their numbers by half, that Mim and Keegan's parents were dead. He wondered how he felt about that. Not elated. But it made the array of problems they were facing less complex.

George and Jinny set about carefully dividing the food, sending the kids to gather wood. They had plenty of butane for the heating and cooking but wanted the kids out of the way. Besides, wood fires would be cozy, normalizing, and, most of all. reassuring. George used that very word in explaining all this, the fire-building, to his suddenly-agreeable spouse. She may have smiled, though it didn't look like it, quite. No matter

George, his mind occupied by fire, returned to the first idea he had rejected.

"Jinny, what about a signal fire?"

"Jesus, yes, George. Let's get the kids to doing it. That's a fine idea."

"Yeah, well wait a bit."

"What?"

"I thought about it the first morning, a fire, you know, a fair-sized one that others could see from some distance."

"And?"

"The best guide on survival, you know that *How to Survive in the Wilderness* book?"

"Yeah—well?"

"It really hit extremely hard on not doing that very thing, lighting a signal fire. He said, the author, that smart as it sounds to light a fire, there's far more chance of igniting us, or the woods—and if we were to catch the woods on fire, that'd take us, too. So, he said the odds were loaded against fires."

"Oh, I see. So you think we shouldn't? Sounds like we shouldn't."

"Yeah, I think we shouldn't, on balance, you know, but still; clear enough."

"Okay. That clarifies things some."

Both felt a new and strong sense of focus. Despite the danger they were in, they felt very alive and responsible, a little proud (a lot proud) that they were rising to the occasion.

"We may have a little more food than I thought."

"Enough to get us through?"

"Well, depends on what we're getting through, how long—but look at this— it's probably hardly enough for, hell I don't know. There's not really all that much."

"You're not thinking we should just take right off in the snow, are you?"

"No," George said quickly.

"You're thinking, honey, that we should hunker down here and wait to be found? Be careful with the food."

She hadn't called him "honey" in so long he had forgotten how much he disliked it.

"Yes. I'm pretty sure we are better off waiting here in safety than wallowing around in the snow. You know the old amusement park principle: better to stay where you are and let others find you."

"Which works just fine if only one person adopts it."

"True, but that hardly applies here. We'll be missed and they'll send out the experts."

For the first time, they thought hard about who might miss them and when.

But they didn't say anything. They looked at one another, vaguely imagining they were hard at work thinking useful thoughts. Only they weren't. The tent was very hot and the humidity was high enough to grow orchids. They felt itchy and tired and suddenly closed in, sick of the netting, the fancy dividers, and handy pockets ingeniously stuck everywhere. What was the point of all the deluxe gortexy stuff they had paid lots for when so hilariously shopping for tents and any other allied (or not) equipment that caught their eyes. What in hell were they thinking?

Jinny had so much dirt under her fingernails she was about ready to chew at them with wild abandon, using her teeth as nail files. Her ass hurt worse every fucking minute and she could find no comfortable position. She had been eating such crap and so little of it that her stomach felt hollow and gurgly at the same time, sending out waves of hot weakness through whatever was inside her arms and legs. She had had too much sleep or too little, and she felt both helpless and enraged. Aware of both feelings, she wondered why she was being so careful not to explode at George. He was, after all, the one solely responsible for this murderous venture. He deserved yelling, or, more fitting for the situation, a knife in the gut or a shove off a cliff.

George, lapsing into vacuity, felt almost nothing at all except very good. He had that sense he often had right before he began a

writing project: clean yellow pad, sharp pencils, iced coffee, early-morning sun coming through the window. It was a sense of anticipation unchecked by any experience or memory.

Though he had had such beginnings before, each one seemed freshly virginal. It didn't matter that the gardens finally sprouting from such Edens had been routine and undistinguished. Even if he recalled dimly the sloughs into which such fresh starts always fell, he had something of the infinite monkeys at infinite typewriters feeling. He was, after all, writing prose; and who really knew what might come of it? Maybe it would turn out to be the work of genius, even if he were no genius. It didn't take a genius to do inspired work; it didn't take inspiration. It took prose that worked, and it could work, so to speak, on its own. All that was required was starting to put it down on the pad. And he could do that.

And he could also get them out of here—or at least adopt exactly the right attitude toward doing so. And that was much the same thing. They connected like cogs in those big wheels they used in Victorian factories, the ones that chewed up child laborers, which was interesting but not really germane now. Worth a chuckle, but he must now turn to matters close to hand.

He looked at Jinny sitting comfortably across from him, knowing that she felt, at that moment, a great and passionate pleasure in releasing her own being to him. George could see into her mind and heart, read there her relief at letting go, as well as her expanding love for him, love both renewed and constant, annuals and perennials, so to speak. At the core of calamity, his wife had found a serenity that gave George more strength. Not that he needed it.

Jinny was looking at George and wondering if she felt anything at all, ever. She knew she felt nothing right now, and that it wasn't a case of feeling something and not being able to identify

it. What she felt was, absolutely and certainly, not anything. She wondered if she always didn't feel that way.

"Well, Hun, the term starts in a couple of days, right? They'll wonder why we aren't in class, especially for you over there in comp lit."

"Really? What day is this? I think it's only the fourth or something like that, and the term doesn't start until the eleventh. I'm not sure, but isn't that right, George?"

"Something like that, but I'll bet people will start wondering before then."

"Why would they? They knew—those we told—we were going up to a canyon cabin, and that was that. A canyon cabin. I don't think we even said where it was, did we? Did we tell anybody, really? Why didn't we, if we didn't? I don't think we did. Let's think about it. Did you tell anyone, anything specific, I mean?"

George was pretty sure he hadn't, in fact, told anybody about their plans, was absolutely sure he hadn't. Feeling some kind of proprietary claim not only on the cabin but on all the cabins, he had regarded them and the mountains towering above and protecting them as a secret—like a good new restaurant you want to keep all to yourself, quiet and struggling.

"I am sure Nicole and Dave did."

"You didn't?"

"I don't think so. No, I didn't."

"I didn't either."

"But how hard will it be for them to find all this out at school, that we weren't there, I mean, when we sure as shit don't show up? But that's several days—anyhow; and besides, Dave and Nicole will be sure to have told a dozen people. They're like that."

Jinny said nothing, again not wanting to rage at George. She didn't know what restrained her. Maybe it was simple: she didn't

want to open up her heart to all those oceans of feeling and find they were but shallow rills. She didn't want to discover that she didn't care, couldn't locate a fountain, even of commonplace rage, to turn on full blast or any blast. Maybe she now was experiencing such hot terror that she was far beyond talking. But even when the terror receded a little, she kept quiet, changed the subject.

"What do you think happened to Dave and Nicole?"

As soon as she said it, she experienced a strong recoil, shocked at having allowed what should be uppermost in her mind to leak in as an afterthought.

For some reason, she was ready to hear George's opinion on the fate of their friends.

"Got lost. They'll be back shortly."

"They're OK, you think?"

"Oh sure," George said, and meant it, insofar as he meant anything at all.

Bert set in at once to quiz the other kids and discover how close they were to thinking with him, realizing together that they needed to survive, that their survival was in their own hands, and that the adults (whether four or two) didn't figure in those plans, and to imagine that they did. . . .

As he entered the tent, he saw at once that whatever he was thinking they were ready to think, too, maybe already were playing in the same ballpark. Pam, Mim, and Keegan looked up at him in unison, their heads like newly-released magnet-needles wheeling around and then clicking on North.

If they had been talking, they stopped at once, not because he was interrupting but because he focused both their anxiety and their need for a formulated cohesion. But he saw it at once: they were far too glad to see him, too hope-filled. For better or worse,

they were tied to him and he to them. Mim held, subtly but surely, to her place in a a small, diminishing distance, looked at him differently. But she clearly would not hold out against a unity they needed so badly.

The three kids Bert found himself with were all smart and, he guessed, reliable; they would think pretty well and, in an emergency, keep thinking. They could shoot their imaginations beyond their own situation, with some regard to how the group as a whole was responding. Such versatility was something none of the adults seemed able to manage or even know about. These kids, the smaller ones, were not helplessly dependent on him, but they located their energy squarely inside his own motor. That way they all formed a group or hoped to. That way, as a group, they might not die. All four seemed to see that they needed an immediate and steady center, a place to gather. They were all willing to throw everything into that center, seeing no other choice.

Except for Mim. It's not that she was resisting this centripetal force, just that she was locking her mind mostly onto her parents. Any minute now, she knew, they would open the tent flap and pile in with loud shouts, snorts of laughter. They would tell, in detail, all about how they got lost, what Mother had said and how Father had listened and agreed, but then Mother had seen . . . . Mim knew that her happiness and relief at seeing them would very soon collapse into a familiar boredom, a familiar wish that they would transform themselves into something cool or at least shut up.

She knew that she was embarrassed by and for her parents, wished she had others, and wondered why her friends, with far cooler sets, felt the same way, or said they did. But right now she couldn't keep from thinking of them. She wasn't worried, really, not now. She had been worried earlier, but that was then. Now, she just felt nagged at by anticipation.

Bert was about to call the kid group to order, but they were already fully in that state. At a loss for a moment, Bert was saved by Mim.

"Let's all guess what they're doing over there, those two, your parents. Don't speak, Bert. We'll see who comes closest."

"They're doing nothing at all, just staring at the insides of the tent and thinking," said Keegan.

"They're making escape plans," said Pam.

"Well, what I bet is that they're really planning, that's for sure, but I'll bet they're planning something like counting the tissues, dividing up the food, making lists of all the clothes, and wondering if all the dirty laundry can be cleaned in the snow."

"That's close, Mim," Bert said. "They're very busy with the food supplies, sorting the stuff out into little piles. I'm sure they'll start making lists and planning fucking menus. Then they'll make little charts for daily games and fun activities."

They all laughed a little, not much, but together. For the moment, there was no hint of the competitive tension, the self-consciousness that had earlier afflicted them, the boys anyhow.

"Look, they're my parents over there, and Pam's. Pam's with me on this, so nobody's going to feel bad if I say that they don't know what the hell they're doing."

Nobody argued.

"The only thing we can count on them doing is something. They'll always be doing something—like this making charts, sorting things, planning little pointless excursions."

"But we have to make the excursions to find my parents and Keegan's."

"Sure we do, Mim. Only maybe we don't. I mean, your parents are more likely to find us than we are to find them."

Mim looked shocked.

"What I mean is that they are sure to know pretty much where they are and where we are. They'll find us for sure—and maybe we'll find them, too. I mean we'll find them for sure, or them us. It's really only a question of . . . ." Bert trailed off, and Mim did nothing to help him.

"I don't think we should worry about them." Keegan said this in his usual high-pitched, oddly melodic voice, but it still sounded like it came from underground.

The other three all started a sentence of protest, but each one stopped short of finishing it, and not out of politeness. Everyone knew what Keegan meant, even Mim.

Bert fumbled, "Keegan's right. They'll do fine on their own and there's not anything we can do right now about that. What we can do is think about how to get ourselves out of here."

Nobody asked him to specify the parties making up "ourselves."

George burst into the kids' tent with good cheer that ought to have been fabricated but wasn't. "OK, kids. Come over to our place for a general council meeting."

Once they were all settled, George started in by announcing cheerily what they all knew not to be true: "The snow is really letting up."

Getting no response, he hurried on. "What Jinny, your mom, and I figured was that we should check very carefully the food supply and see how best to ration it. We've done that, and I'm pleased to say that there is much more food than we thought. It won't be the Ritz; it won't even be Burger King. But it'll get us through for"—only a slight pause—"a long time."

"That's good," Mim said, with what George was willing to regard as enthusiasm.

"The reason we are so concerned about the food and so relieved to find out that it presents no problem, none at all, is that we think the best thing we can do, for ourselves and certainly for Dave and Nicole, your parents, is just to sit tight, keep up our strength, and be in good shape for the rescuers, who are probably—certainly on their way now or will be real soon."

Jinny saw from Mim's face just how cruel such a focus on coziness was. She added quickly, "Now of course we'll be also finding your parents. That's the most important thing. That comes first. Absolutely. George is thinking that they'll certainly find us faster, since they know where we are. But all the same, there's a chance of a twisted ankle or something like that and we'll organize serious search parties so as to find them. I agree that they'll find us first, but we'll just double the odds—I mean make it even faster."

These assurances acted to cement an agreement that reassurance was certainly the right tone to strike. It thus spoke even more loudly the truth that only Mim did not allow herself to hear or be contained within. No one else expected anything to happen: they would not locate Dave and Nicole, and Dave and Nicole would not locate them. But Mim knew better. Any minute now. . . .

"Well, but don't you think we should get some search parties out right now?" she said. "It must be about noon or something, don't you think?"

"Sure," George said. "I think we should try and see what some loud yelling will do. How about if we divide up in pairs and go off—not too far—for thirty minutes and yell real loud, yell in all directions. Time yourself."

"Then we can meet back here and go off again," said Bert, realizing as he said it how ridiculous it sounded.

"Bert's right," Keegan said. " I agree with him. We can keep that up, changing the way we go and how long we're out there yelling. It will be . . . ."

Once again a sentence hung in the air. So they organized themselves into pairs, agreed to the rules, and went off to halloo into the empty trees and rocks and snow. They did it again and again throughout the day, ate, counseled some more, sat around, until night really did fall and the last hollering troop came back, wondering how they would face the results.

THE WEEKEND

They spent the weekend, two entire days, doing very little except talking. The snow kept them hemmed in, it is true, but outside conditions seemed to echo, not to cause whatever it was made them hunker back. Of course, what made one group hunker back was altogether different from what was driving the other. The kids were steadily cementing their separation.

Following a big breakfast Saturday morning, all packed together in the same tent after a night spent apart, George got ready to give the little buck-up speech he and Jinny had discussed in bed. Jinny was going to deliver it herself, but she had been awake most of the night, feeling the onset of that most banal of calamities, the flu. Her throat was scratchy and she was hot in the wrong places; she felt weak and her head hurt; she was terrified. What would ordinarily be an annoyance could here be fatal, and so aware was she of her fear that it was some time before she could make herself aware of anything else.

Before George started talking, Jinny made a show of messing busily with the paper plates and hot cereal cups. They had prepared far too much food, with pancakes and oatmeal and multitudes of biscuits all over the place, along with dried fruit they had mistakenly tried to re-hydrate. The kids had eaten in silence, eaten a lot and even greedily, but without any sign of enjoyment or vitalization.

It made Jinny nervous to watch them, both because they were consuming all that food so menacingly and because they seemed so distant. They sat apart, looking, individually, just as they always did, but without any of those signals for adult help, adult correction, that always were there. Jinny had generally been inattentive to such signs, but she could tell when they were missing.

And the food. They were eating her and, she almost forgot, George straight to death. That was a melodramatic way to put it, maybe, but it was the way she and George had put it the last evening. It seemed to both of them no more than right, thus, to provide this morning's lavish spread.

Neither of them had eaten much (really none) of the boiled bag stuff they had for dinner. Jinny hadn't been hungry, the impending flu already starting its invasion; but, beyond that, she had reached, along with George, a momentous decision, each grabbing the same script at the same time. As soon as the kids had retreated to their private tent, George and Jinny began sharing the heroic narrative they had concocted independently but by the same formula.

"You didn't seem to eat much, Jinny. Did you eat at all? You feeling OK?"

"No, I think I'm getting the fucking flu. That's good timing, isn't it?"

He was about to say something predictable, but she continued over him. "I felt as if it were wrong to eat anyhow. You did too, right? I don't think you ate anything at all."

"I figured I'd skip a meal, yeah."

"We'd better talk about this, old shoe," she said.

"We're thinking the same thing, I know. Maybe no need to talk about it."

"OK. How long do they have?"

"If the kids keep eating like this, only maybe three/four days of food, bad food and getting worse, unless Dave and Nicole come back . . . ."

"Which isn't happening."

"Ummm. . . ." George didn't disagree.

"But we have to stay here in case it does?" Jinny really was asking a question.

George said nothing so Jinny stared at him and continued, "You say the kids have three-to-four days; maybe we should tell them. Shouldn't they spread that out to a week? Maybe we could stop stuffing them, as if they were geese for the table?"

"I just hope the snow stops, so we can get them out of here. Hell with staying for no reason. If it stops today, we'll all eat and make a run for it. Or after a decent interval, you know, pretending—"

"When?" Again, Jinny really wanted an answer—and George knew it.

"Well"—he looked worried— "we are now waiting for the snow to stop. That's real. We're also waiting for our dearest friends in the whole world to return. That's less real."

"And?" Jinny asked.

"If the snow stops, we right away tell the kids we're all going back— and we'll find a rescue party or something—or find the cabins. We'll leave food and a note for Dave and Nicole. That ought to cover it—be a cover story, I mean."

"So we'll do that?" Jinny said.

"If the snow stops."

"If not?" Jinny asked, knowing the answer.

He smiled at her. "Well, we'll stick to the plan."

That settled that. All bases covered. It was worth dying for this feeling, almost worth having the flu.

The kids were also making plans.

"You notice what got done this morning, how much we accomplished?" Mim said. "We slept in; then we went over and ate all that stuff; then we came back here."

"Well?" Pam said. "What should we be doing?" It was a real question.

"No, what I meant was what your parents didn't say about a plan. What are they doing? If there is a plan, what is it—and what part are we playing? My parents are out there lost or something; we're up here in the middle of an off-and-on blizzard. There are things to talk about, don't you think? I mean, Pam . . ."

"I know what you mean," Pam said. "Remember when we said they were trying to kill us?"

"You think they are, Pam?" Keegan asked.

"Yes," Pam said, narrowing her eyes.

"You might be right, you two, but it's not that they're going to put poison into the dried fruit and simplify their lives by snuffing us. Isn't that stuff awful?"

They were all kids for a minute, trying to outdo one another in describing the horrors of dried apricots, made much worse by the attempt to undry them.

Bert stood up and took off his sweater. He then pulled up his shirt and held it by both tails high above his shoulders. On his still-little-boy belly, they saw an uneven but unmistakable X.

After perhaps five seconds of silent display, Bert lowered his shirt, looking expectantly and with a bravado that didn't quite cover his red embarrassment.

They were all shocked a little, even by this pretty routine semi-nudity, Bert being the last person to expose anything.

"What's the X for?"

"It marks the spot—like they say?"

"Nice tummy there!"

"What you doing?"

"Should we all do it?"

"Yes," Bert finally said, "you all do it."

They seemed to understand. Everybody dutifully opened clothing, passed the blue indelible marker around, and marked. Then they all looked at Bert:

"You got it? That's our signal."

"We raise our shirts up?"

"No, Keegan," Bert said, for once without exasperation. "It's our signal. You can do it in front of our parents: cross your knife and fork, your fingers, two sticks, anything that makes an X. You can also just say, 'X'."

They all looked at him, saying nothing, smiling.

"Bert, how about if we make the voice signal, 'Exactly,' so it'll seem less odd, won't draw attention."

Bert nodded at Mim, they all exchanged looks, and that was that.

Then Bert explained, "OK, I think what you're all saying is right. I don't think my parents have in mind killing us. They have in mind being real cozy and doing nothing at all. I men, nothing that counts—nothing that goes beyond playing house. You notice all this getting breakfast shit? What do you think that is?"

They were silent, ready to hear more.

"They ever done that before? Does it seem like them? Here we are in the middle of whatever and they settle in to pretending all's just dandy and we can be happy with, 'mom and dad make breakfast on a Saturday morning.'"

"Oh God," Mim said.

"I get it," Pam said, standing up and jumping wildly. She was the only one who really could stand up and jump inside their narrow confines.

"What?" Keegan said. "They make breakfast and they should have been thinking about all this other stuff? And they don't even say anything about all that?"

"Yes," Bert said. "What do you think that means?"

"That they're trying to kill us," Pam yelled.

"Shhh. That they're not trying to save us or themselves. They've given up."

Mim paused a minute and then went on, "But that's not it. They've done worse than not trying to save us. They're trying to keep us from saving ourselves."

"Why?" Keegan asked.

"They don't even know they're doing it," Bert said.

"Right," Mim continued for him. "They are doing the easy thing, being parents."

"Yeah?" Keegan was still adrift.

"They figure they're being responsible," Bert said, "which means fucking hiding everything, from us and even from themselves. You see, right?"

Bert was getting visibly annoyed but also more and more excited.

Mim said quietly, patting Keegan's leg, "They're making us into little babies they can take care of. We can feel good and they can feel even better—and they keep us from doing anything."

"By making us into little kids again," Keegan said, quietly. "We get big breakfasts and games. Like there was nothing wrong."

"And all we have to do is be good," Pam said in a sarcastic singsong voice. "That's all. All we have to do is be good and die like nice little children."

"That's it," said Bert. "They've not only given up the game, they're trying to drag us down with them. That's it. If they make us feel small and helpless, then we'll think they can help us, like when we were four-years-old. And we'll give up, too, you see—just play our parts. That's what we all thought then, that they'd help us and we didn't have to do anything, and maybe they did help us then. Did they? Think about it."

"My parents helped kinda," Keegan said. "I mean, they bought me a bike and stuff. They gave me books and my dad read to me. We went on trips. I went to school—and they bought me clothes

and braces. They didn't hit me. I broke my arm that time and they took me to the hospital—I got shots sometimes. My dad said he'd teach me to fish, but there wasn't. . . . He took me once. Little League. . . ."

"Were those things for you?" Mim asked. "They did all that stuff for me, too. Good parents. That's what they knew how to be, good parents. But how come they were?"

Keegan looked at her with some alarm, not because of the question but because she was using the past tense. He didn't mention it, but it filled his mind.

"Well," Bert said, "what if they didn't do those things? I mean, how come your parents and my parents didn't just say, 'Fuck the measles shots' or 'I ain't gonna sign my little shits up for school!' or 'You can take those piano lessons and shove 'em right up your fat ass!'? You know why they couldn't say those things? Do you? Sure you do. They are just dying to be good parents and have all the other good parents see that they are good parents. It doesn't matter who they are good parents to. If we died, they'd keep being good parents for a week or two before they noticed."

They all looked at Bert, who was looking just as intently at Mim.

"Oh, yeah! That's what it is about the mark, the X, right?" Keegan said.

Bert made a move toward him, Keegan flinching a little but then leaning into Bert, who hugged him. That sealed it.

The rest of the day on Saturday was spent talking a lot and getting started on the important job (so George said) of digging snow paths out, so that immediate travel was easier and the route to the toilet was "smooth as a swimming pool slide." He thought

about making that image available to the others, said it out loud, found it disquieting, and bottled it.

The collective also managed to clear the campfire circle pretty nicely and got snow out of the trees immediately overhead, then scraped some areas down close to dirt and discovered that, in a surprisingly short time, they melted clear. It finally had stopped snowing, maybe was warming up.

"You think the snow is over, Bert?"

"You know, Mim, it's funny that it isn't deeper. I think it didn't snow during the night, or something, and not very much today. Anytime we look outside the tent it seems to be like *Call of the Wild*, but this isn't all that bad, what's here on the ground and all—could be worse. Maybe it's just been blowing old snow around. I suppose it's drifted, though, and that could be bad."

"Yeah—but it's not as bad as I thought either," Mim said. "So what is all this tidying up? More of the setting up house, isn't it? Why don't we. . . . "

"Yeah. They're keeping everybody put. My mom does have the flu; that's not faked. It does seem handy for them. Not like they seem to mind it, even Mom."

"Yeah."

"What could they be thinking, Mim? They seem to have gone into neutral and are finding ways to stay there."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I feel like we don't matter—like we weren't here."

"How about your mom's illness? Do you think. . . ?"

"I don't know, Mim. I almost feel mad about it, like she did it for the same reason they're occupying the kiddies. But she couldn't make herself get the flu, I guess."

"I guess," said Mim.

There was no noise anywhere, inside or out, but dead in the middle of the night, in all that silence, George was suddenly awakened by a rush of fear such as he had never felt before. He stared straight into the middle of the darkness for some time, seeing and thinking nothing. Finally, he mustered courage enough to raise his arm, click the light button on his watch, and note four minutes after three. That made him feel located but no less afraid.

It was the silence, unnatural and ominous. Must be something scaring the night creatures. Badly needing company, he hissed, "Jinny," then, a little louder, "Hey, Jinny." She didn't stir, and George, embarrassed, gave it up.

He knew what the silence was: the bears back for food, quietly stalking the grounds, sniffing it out.

George had carefully moved the remaining food into the tent to save it from the bears. That is, he had redirected them straight into his room, his bedroom—his only safe spot, now no longer. . . George could feel the sweat pouring down his sides, his armpits running faucets. His eyes burned and his ears seemed frozen. If there were a sound, no matter how loud, he wondered if he'd hear it. He could not move. Raising his arms that once, the watch check, had drained all the courage he had.

There was nothing to do now but settle back and wait for the attack, the casual, indifferent opening of the tent, then flesh. First they would be carefully exposed, then, in an almost delicate, measured way, defaced.

George could find no way to relax the fear, much less refocus. Now, there was nothing to do but try and hold his breath, outdo the silence. He knew it was futile. Still, he wondered that Jinny could make so much noise, not snoring, sure, but breathing as if those beasts were not a few feet away. What in hell was wrong with her?

George was determined to take his mind off the moment they were in, he was in. At first, he tried thinking of being starting right-fielder for the Dodgers—what an arm!—and winning the pennant by. . . . That petered out fast, so he tried another: he inhabited a world in which he could have sex with anybody he liked but had only one minute, no more, to compile his complete list. That idyllic tickler had worked well before, but now he found himself, right after Connie Bradlaugh (a high-school knockout), returning back to the bears.

He tried sweet reason. Hell, there wasn't that much food; the bears had already taken pretty much all they wanted; they would surely just sniff around and leave; they would take what remained of the food and then leave; they would eat Jinny and not him. They were, after all, only black bears. He repeated this, and set himself off into a whole new world of panic.

Black bears had attacked and killed rangers, campers, and, in a story that menaced George's sanity, a little girl living with her forest-ranger, fire-spotting parents. The child was playing in the yard of the emergency fire and rescue station, when her watchful mother noticed a medium-sized black bear approaching slowly. Shouting for the child to head for the house, the mother ran into the yard and straight for the charging bear. The bear brushed her aside with a casual paw and kept after the child, who made it to the kitchen door and inside ahead of the bear.

Just as in George's dream, though, the bear tore easily right through the screen door, trapped the child against the family refrigerator, and carried her back through where the door had once been, into the yard, past the dazed mother, into the bush, where he proceeded, unhurriedly, to make a lunch of his prey. He ate her not fifty yards from the house.

And then there was the case of the Compton kids, taken up into the mountains for a weekend of fresh air and frolic, away

from the hovering copters and the gang shootings. One of these black bears came into the camp at night looking for food and found it. She ripped a third-grader out of his sleeping bag, chewed first on his arm and shoulder and then on his skull. Unable to break through the skull, the bear moved lower and, with her thick teeth, clumsily dislodged first one, then the other foot. It is believed that the little boy was alive through all this, that he was able to die only when the bear, several minutes later, found his neck and bit through it.

George didn't fall asleep or relax from his half-sitting posture. He did slide into a state of terror that left him stupefied, but he was spared no moment of consciousness. The silence never did leave him, even when the sun came up.

The next morning, the kids, knowing another gala brunch was on the way, got down to serious planning. They guessed that the adults would hold off eating as long as possible, just to prolong the inactivity and snug everyone through the day, so they were in no hurry to rush over to the big tent.

For the first time since coming to this place, really for the first time ever on this trip, they did what the parents supposed they had been doing all along: they played. Keegan and Bert were talking about zombie and alien books, movies, and video-games. The talk graduated to exaggerated hand and body motions that illustrated the zoom-and-destroy action of the games, to full-body attacks, blasts, and up-endings. The girls, as it happens, were talking about music and video-games, apparently the same video-games, as they too started the aggressive banging of flying hands into chests the boys were, somewhat less savagely, also performing.

It was a large tent, but not large enough to allow these wrestling duets to proceed without considerable overlap. The result was an intermingling of bodies so miscellaneous that it produced

neither the embarrassment nor the idyll all of them had begun wondering about and half longing for. They rolled over and into one another, neither seeking out nor repelled by any form of contact. In fact, it was so hard to know who was touching whom, where, that they gave themselves up to a kind of indiscriminate skin and nerve tumble: tickle, touch, brush, bang, excite, hurt. Everybody's flesh was alike soft, elbows and knees alike spiky.

No one, none of the group, in any event, would have thought of it as an orgy, but maybe this is what orgies were meant to be: raucous and polite, uninhibited and considerate, the bacchanals of Caligula redone decorously and inside ripe winter clothing. They stopped as easily as they started, shared some squirreled-away chocolate to tide them over until the almost-noon meal Homer and Marge were busy rustling up in the next tent, and turned to talk.

"One thing we have to do, since they aren't, is go and find Mim's and Keegan's parents," Pam announced.

Everyone looked at her, expecting more. So—

"They're probably close, and I think we should be the ones to go get them, since my mom and dad are just, like you say, cooking and that."

"Right," Bert said. "Here's what we'll do. It's not snowing now, so we can all go out. I'll tell my parents we're going together on a little excursion to find your parents. I'll say we'll be staying close to camp, to do more yelling."

Bert paused long enough that they became restless.

"That's what we did yesterday," Keegan said. "Maybe that's enough yelling. I mean—"

Bert scowled hard at Keegan out of habit, and, out of habit, Keegan gave all the signals of backing down. But they both recovered quickly.

"Yeah," Bert said. "I was just thinking about how we could make them think we were just yelling when we were really doing some serious exploring. I can only think of one way. Keegan, you and Pam have to promise not to bitch about this."

"You can ask me to my face," Pam said, giggling. "I'm not part of Keegan."

"Okay," Mim laughed, reaching to her left to nudge her little friend. "You're right, Pam; don't be touchy, though. Bert's doing the best he can."

She leaned over and stage-whispered to Pam, "Remember, he's only a boy."

Bert waited 'til all this was done, showing no reaction, and then continued, slowly and amiably, "I want me and Mim to go up where my dad and me planted some ski poles and where we might be able to see something. It's some low scrubby stuff and no big trees around it, or there didn't seem to be. It was up a ways, but we marked how to get there, sort of, or I think I can anyhow."

Bert paused, expecting protests from Keegan and Pam, but they were just looking at him expectantly.

"See, Keg and Pam, I'm just worried that if we all go up there, my ass dad will notice the silence and wonder where we are, and figure it out, slowly but surely, and come up. That'd be fucked, since he'd try to take over, tell one person to go this way, another person to go that way, everybody report back in fifteen minutes and . . . ."

Bert was getting into the feel of this angry parody, waving his arms and lapsing into a good imitation of his dad's baritone.

"Then he'd send everybody back out again for twelve minutes and nothing would get done and we'd all head home because it was getting time for afternoon tea and games."

Keegan and Pam were both wildly amused, Pam jumping up and shouting, loud enough so the other tent would certainly hear, "Tea and fucking games!"

Before he considered what he was saying, Keegan blurted out, "It's funny to hear you say 'Fuck,' Pam. It's not bad or anything, nothing like that, just funny."

Pam stared at him.

Both the little kids saw Bert's point and were immediately ready to do their part, which was to circle around home base, never too far and never too close, giving out with pointless (they both saw that) hollers now and then.

"OK," Mim said. "Thanks, Bert—and thanks to you two, too." Her eyes were starting to water, but she held back the real crying. "I want to find my mom and dad."

Pam moved closer to her. "Me, too. You and Bert will find them or maybe me and Keegan will, by yelling."

Bert thought one was just about as likely as the other but said, "I think we should get all dressed for the cold and then head over to the other tent for the goddamned breakfast. Eat hearty like good little victims!"

The other tent was, indeed, gearing up for breakfast, not so very smoothly, but with lots of creaks and groans in the machinery. Jinny was now truly rocked with the flu, feeling scorched, weak, and hollowed out. So was George, though he didn't think he had the flu, not really any fever. He had checked twice and was surprised to see how normal that part of him was.

Both thought their problems sprang from their fasting vow, that form of heroism they had expected might bring on hunger pangs and a little weakness but not the migraines, sour stomach, irritability, tingling hands and feet, and disorienting drowsiness that had taken up lodging in them. Both had slept a good ten hours, but it was a sleep that brought them only a sodden, pent-up

feeling, rather like the intermediate stages of a bad hangover, past the agonies but still far from the shores of peppiness.

Still, they managed to boil water for oatmeal, toast some of the bread (somehow both stale and limp, but not yet changing color too much), and give the gala a try by way of raisins and more dried fruit (this time left in its desiccated form). The big treat was pancakes, yes pancakes!, though the syrup George concocted out of sugar and water was a bit primitive. There was also cocoa, made with the packaged glop and the dried milk the bears seemed purposely to have left behind. The kids had mentioned that yesterday's cocoa was "great but weak," so they doubled the dose of the cocoa packets, which turned out to be a massive overcorrection.

As George and Jinny fiddled with this mock catering, they tried hard not to speak and not to touch one another. They were both hoping to notice nothing, to exist in a state not quite lifeless but not fully conscious either. This made their stomach-just-inexpertly-pumped feeling easier to tolerate. And then they didn't have to summarize anything, issue general pronouncements, take the long view. They wanted to look no farther than the deluxe three-burner stove, one of the two such they had, the one now being plenty for the four remaining eaters.

"I wish I could get tired, so that I wanted to sleep or something," Jinny said, without whining.

"You know, when you're actually not sick, it always seems like being sick is a little like a luxury, just wallowing around under the covers with a book, sniffling and drinking hot tea. Sleeping a lot. But when you're genuinely sick, the miserable thing is you don't want to do anything at all, yet you sure don't want to do whatever it is you're doing now."

George just said, "Yeah, I know."

"You know? You know, George? Just how is it you know? Are you sick too?"

"I took my temperature and don't have a fever."

"So you don't know."

"If you say so."

"Oh fuck you, George. You resent me being sick? I just now did about ninety percent of the work getting the fucking breakfast ready and you snivel about feeling bad."

"Jesus, Jinny! I just said that I knew what you meant. You were the one sniveling—sniveling and sniveling and sniveling. Fuck. Fuck you! Maybe if you were even half as artful in figuring out ways to get out of here as you are at finding and acting out variations on self-pity, we'd be back home by now."

Jinny just stared at him, her booming headache taking her attention away from the dozens of stinging retorts she could have called up so easily.

Then the kids stormed in, not noisily but without any hesitancy or announcement. Usually, kids anywhere have a little trouble entering a room, even at home. They let you know they're coming, as if ten thousand previous welcomes did not guarantee that the next time they wouldn't be turned out.

"Well," Mim said, with a heartiness worthy of happier times, "that was some breakfast yesterday. We all know we can't expect that sort of thing every day, but this is Sunday, so we want brunch—just like at the Catburglar Inn."

"Right," Pam said. "I really want some of those little sandwiches, if you got 'em, and what are those things they put the hot berry sauce stuff on?"

"Blintzes," said George, "which you'll be amazed to know we have, yes we do."

"We do?" Pam tried to look interested.

"Yepppppp," George crooned. "What we have are even better than the Catburglar Inn blintzes, which they get frozen. Frozen! Can you believe it? Half-assed chefs as they have there! Frozen! But ours are fresh made—and what's more—" Here he paused, happy that he had caught their attention. The kids looked odd, though, in a way George couldn't gauge: it was something other than rapt attention—but close enough for now. The kids weren't the ones in charge.

He pushed the pause a little too long, quickly tried to regain his emcee role: "What we have, you see, is not only fresh-made but what are known as Snow Mountain blintzes, which, as you probably know, are very hard to come by."

The kids' faces didn't change much—he had expected eagerness, wide-eyed excitement.

"And the reason they are so sought-after is not only because the Prince of Denmark, one Sam Hamlet, made them famous by refusing to eat anything else during the entirety of his very long life, which is still going on, though he was born, as you very well know, in 1464. No, that's not the only reason. And who can tell me why that year of 1464 was so important? And I am not referring to sports here."

George saw that he had outrun his ground, if he had ever held it, but knew no other act, so he kept on, trying not to sound like a nightclub comic grousing about an unresponsive crowd. "Anyhow, you superior students—you just go look that up and you'll remember it better than if I told you—young gourmands, these blintzes will present themselves to vulgar palates—palates means what you taste with, young morons—to vulgar eyes and vulgar palates, I was recently saying, they might appear as what only the discriminating and the refined can tell are not—pancakes."

"I like pancakes," Keegan said eagerly.

Bert almost sneered at Keegan, caught himself, and spoke in a tone he hoped would end things without setting off his prickly dad. "But we're talking here about blintzes. Exactly. Excellent blintzes, even if they would seem to morons and doofuses as only those damned dry, awful lumpballs—exactly."

"Enough! They are Snow Mountain blintzes, fresh off the blintz machine and complemented by Elixir Syrup, otherwise known as George's Juice."

Here George paused, winking at an audience he had long ago lost, had never held.

He decided to ignore all that, declare the match a triumph and bustle about a tent that seemed much more commodious than before. He caught himself just short of saying so, realizing that the two missing adults helped make for all this roominess.

Pancakes were served, with the syrup that was hot and very sweet, thus meeting with unfeigned approval.

The kids didn't need Bert's signal, didn't forget, even for a minute, that they were leagued against the adults; but they put all that aside for the time. They ate greedily, warmed inside and out and not just by the food.

The problem was making an exit. They all seemed to realize at about the same time that they hadn't thought through how to slip their plan, and its disguises, past the adults. It was one thing to have the hollering decoys covering for the exploring Bert and Mim, but it was another to get the hell out of the tent with some good reason for being gone a long time. It had to be a reason, too, that would keep either of the dangerous adults, even the ailing Jinny, from coming along. Anything like that would—they had to be sure there was nothing like that.

Mim sensed all this and saw the two younger kids looking at Bert. But Bert was not the one to save them here. On the trail or

among themselves, he was rock-solid, even (mostly) with Keegan.

With adults, however, he seemed to be able to draw on only a limited repertoire of roles. He could be, and generally was, silent, not, of course, respectfully silent but silent in a way so obviously driven by contempt and loathing that it broadcast, through all stations, a deep and desperate longing not too well covered by a defensiveness, thin but drawn tight. Adults, with almost no exceptions, read no deeper than the shell and mistook all these pleas as belligerence, all-too typical teenage belligerence, as if all children, even their own children, were designed and manufactured in the same plant and turned out as indistinguishable, uniformly defective products.

Bert did have other modes he could pull out for adults, but they were just as useless now. His red-faced mumbler role or his I-don't-have-to-listen-to-you-asshole-and-here's-why role: neither would be the right thing for getting them out of the tent, unsuspected and soon out of mind.

So Mim stepped in. "That was the best breakfast ever and thanks. Do you want us to help clean up?"

The other kids looked at Mim with alarm, but she knew what she was up to.

She looked around, worried about what the others might say, and tried to block anything bad with an "Exactly."

They seemed to see, recognizing that the adults needed to fuss as much as possible in order to fill up time and convince themselves they were doing good things, and that Mim had sprung on the bustlers the perfect decoy.

It was.

"Oh no, honey. You kids go back to the tent and let us do that," Jinny said and very quickly.

"It's the least we can do," George said.

Jinny looked at him as if he were an idiot, using a line that might have fit somewhere but certainly not here.

George saw her look, agreed silently, and tried to rescue things."

"What I mean is, you kids go off and give each other wedgies or play hide the Cheetos. We'll clean up here and then get together for a meeting later to plan strategy—and all."

"Exactly," Mim said, adding it for extra security. "If you think we should."

She gave eye signals to the others to get the hell out, though they were expressing by every means possible their sense that she should say more, get to the point, get them out into the woods. Any humans less terrified and less overwhelmed by circumstance than George and Jinny would have noticed.

But they were trying to deal with so much death, and they had nothing in their experience on which to draw. They had known death only from the next county—grandparents and uncles, George's unlikable father. Now there was Nicole and Dave, dead for sure. Had they been caught in the snow, they would have been back by now; there had been no snow for over a day.

How was it possible that they could be here one minute, friendly and oafish as always, and then gone? George and Jinny weren't reflecting on life's brevity or uncertainty; they were reflecting on nothing at all. They only knew that they now had no plans, that it was just one minute after another. Now ya see em; now ya. . . .

Like a hike—one step and then another and time passes.

Whatever had happened to Nicole and Dave was out there, stopped and waiting. George did not give himself permission to think of bears; Jinny was trying not to think of freezing or whatever happened when exhaustion wins. They both were working hard, but they were working hard at stalling, remaining empty. It

is one of the most absorbing tasks known to humans and one we must not train ourselves for. There are no classes for shutting down our heads, though it is, in the end, the one resource we'll all need.

George and Jinny were struggling against certainty, against knowing what the future held. Cuddled up against death, George was heading back to his nightmare and now sort of knew why he had never run or ducked from the bear.

Jinny had no such concreteness to hold onto and was even more lost. She had greater funds of courage than George and she knew how to get to them, but she had no equipment that would allow her to ward off thinking outward, toward something. Unlike George, she couldn't just go blank, even fool herself very well or for very long.

It wasn't, for either of them, that the future held death. Nothing so banal or easily stated. It was more that they couldn't recognize themselves without some kind of projection, some anticipation of change, some way to move from here to there and imagine they had planned and completed it—and could, next day, plan and complete again.

All they had now was one another, and they were closer than they had ever been, much closer than when they were in love. But that closeness was also based on a mutual terror that could so easily coil back on them, making them see in their partner the very danger that had briefly held them together.

They cared about the children deeply, worried about their fate much more than their own, were struck with lightning-like stabs of remorse when they thought of their own responsibility in bringing them up here. If it would help, they would gladly die for their kids and for the other kids, too. Those grand and tragic scripts were never very far from their thinking. The kids were

now all sort of one thing to them, and that conglomerate brought the remaining two adults together into the fold of their fear.

The only selfishness, and it was fatal, involved claiming the terror as their own, holding it aloof from the dear smaller ones around them. It would do no good to die for the children, but they would do it anyhow. Death by starvation would help no one, but it was a winning strategy for outfoxing mortality. It seemed the only way to challenge that brutal guy waiting for them was to beat him to the punch. He took away what was ahead, or so he thought, but if you brought your own death into the scheme of things, didn't it mean that you still could live by planning and doing? Didn't you still own the future after all?

Thus, these two generous and tender people taught themselves to believe that they must sacrifice themselves for the good of the children, not seeing too clearly how far their sacrifice might reach.

After the quartet of schemers was outside, Mim gave them all shushing signs before turning back to the tent and poking her head inside the flap.

"Oh," she said, "I forgot to say. I hope this is okay: we thought we would spend some time while you were cleaning up getting some exercise."

"Don't go far, dear," said Jinny, clichés fighting their way through the fever.

"Oh no, we won't," said Mim. "But we thought maybe we'd just go out a bit, you know, out to do some more calling—for my mom and dad. They could be getting closer."

"Well—" George said, trying to think how best to initiate a negative.

"The snow has stopped and maybe they holed up during the storm and are now out and wandering around. You know how

they are." Mim forced herself to say this in a we-all-are-in-on-the-secret-of-what-amaible-klutzes-those-two-are tone, but for one of the few times since her initial grief had hit, she felt the sobs coming.

George could think of no way to veto the harmless exercise scheme or take control of the idea that Dave and Nicole had holed up. He could think only of how reasonable such a supposition was. Maybe they had indeed holed up somehow and were now out and a little lost, close by. He only wondered why such an obvious possibility had not occurred to him.

Mim wondered that too, as she turned to the others and moved away from the adult tent in order to hide from them her crying. She had invented all that on the spot, invented what ought to have come to her much earlier when she was thinking about her parents and not being involved in some kid trick. She hadn't really thought of her parents for so long—had not exactly written them off, maybe. Surely not, but that's almost what it looked like.

She wondered if she felt worse about her neglect than about their supposed death. Presumed dead. Was that the phrase the papers used? Mim asked herself if she really had supposed her parents to be dead and had just shrugged it off. Why had she entered into all this planning, laughed at breakfast, thought so much about Bert? Unlike the adults, Mim had no evasions at hand, nothing to protect her.

The other kids had been all set to congratulate Mim on her triumphant conniving. Hearing every word from the safety of the outside, they had been ready to run off to an out-of-range distance and celebrate. Mim's sobbing froze them.

Pam began crying and threw herself onto Mim, trusting that the older girl would catch her. The two heart-broken children held one another and shook with an energy they could neither control nor understand.

It is as if they were broken by the hope let loose by Mim's story, the sweet idea that the other adults had been sensible, had simply protected themselves. Nicole and Dave were fine and happy. At least they were alive and looking for them. They were on their way to the kids, a vision that made their certain loss jump into the hearts of the two girls with a terrible ferocity.

The boys could only offer as much sympathy as their confusion and embarrassment would allow. And that wasn't much. They knew they couldn't ask what was wrong. Somehow they found themselves, and not for the first time, inside a platitude that was part of the lived experience of all men, those who could stand to feel and acknowledge it. Their brains couldn't get them to where the girls were, and they didn't know how to activate their spirits for such a trip.

Still sobbing but without releasing Pam from the embrace, Mim pulled the little girl farther away from the adult tent. The boys trailed after.

Inside the tent was sickness and heavy responsibility, which was being met with the cheery habit of domesticity, long perfected and now brought into play eagerly. George had never been so meticulous in his scraping, saving, and scouring. Jinny was hot and a little dizzy, but not too baked or woozy to do more tidying than she ever would have done at home.

On the other side of the tent flap, four desolate children were trying to formulate themselves anew, exiled from the world of rules and comforts and reassurances. They were starting to bring home what they had been saying, that there was now no one to tell them who they were or what they might do to protect and realize that being. They needed now not only to hatch schemes but to hatch themselves by themselves, new chicks cast out into a barren world.

Keegan and Pam, as planned, went off to yell into the empty air, while Bert and Mim made their way toward the ski-pole-marked thicket that might, now that the skies were clear, give them a vista and even a way out.

Retreating a good quarter of a mile, Pam and Keegan finally stopped of one accord and locked stares. Neither had said a word and neither had planned to go this far. Its just that Keegan and Pam were equally unaccustomed to taking command, so that both assumed the other would decide and say.

They were surprised to find themselves together, pleased, too. Pam was experiencing the odd elation that comes from the release of grief, and Keegan was feeling curious about Pam. He liked girls a lot generally, found them much easier to be around than boys, though he had never really talked to Pam at all, not really. He found her unusual but not scary. What on earth had made her cry? Not that he would ask about that, but she was, in almost every way, a mystery to him and he was willing to try and find things out.

As for Pam, she thought Keegan was really pretty and liked looking at him. In her experience, boys were seldom as companionable as he, but she had no settled views on that subject. Much less self-conscious than Keegan, she was just as curious and far more observant. She really missed nothing that went on around her, though she had not developed the customary conceptual or linguistic frame that would allow her to say a lot and have a reasonable chance of being understood. She didn't seem eager to acquire such an ability, preferring her own theories on vital matters—sex, love, death, and music—and her own way of speaking these theories or, more commonly, keeping them to herself. The loyalties she developed were unshakable, and she loved with an intensity that made most adult love look like half-hearted flirtation. Sensing a part of this, adults treated Pam as an unclassifiable

oddity and beat a disguised retreat from this self-possessed child as quickly as they could.

"Pam, how are we going to do this, I mean all this yelling and—you know?"

"Any way you want. Maybe we should stay together and then go apart and then come back together."

Keegan knew just what she meant, as he was thinking pretty much the same thing. He didn't want to be by himself for very long, and, quite apart from that, he wanted to be with her.

"How about we both of us go about . . . a ways off, you know, not too far, so we can still hear, and start yelling, Keegan? You want to do that?"

"Yeah. I'll go this way over here, you go that way, then when we're out of sight, we'll yell. Who'll yell first?"

"You do—or me. Let's see if we can yell at the same time. That okay?"

So they did.

But they were soon back together.

"Hey, Pam," Keegan said after about the fifth rendezvous, this being the first one marked by anything more than grunts, grins, and up-close waves.

"Yeah, what?" She said, looking closely at him in her barn owl way. It was not a particularly inviting look, but Keegan proceeded anyhow, recognizing her countenance as the one Pam wore for almost all occasions, telling him nothing in particular, nothing scary.

"You know when your mom and I were off together, when we teamed up that time and you went with—ah—"

"My dad."

"Oh yeah, your dad. Anyhow, I was with your mom, like I say, and you know what she said?"

Pam looked at him.

Keegan giggled, "You know what? I got this habit of saying everything like a question. That's what my mom says and tells me to stop it. 'Hell's fire, Keegan, just stop it, you can at least control it,' she says. Anyhow, you know what I mean? I mean, I can't say, 'I'm going to school now,' without it comes out as a question, and it sounds almost like I'm asking if I'm going.' Here he imitated, not exaggerating at all his usual upward glide at the end of declarative sentences: "I'm going to school?"

Pam kept staring.

Keegan, baffled, continued with an explanation he found himself enjoying mightily, as if he were a third member of the party, listening to himself, this talking kid, and finding him pretty amusing, take it all and all.

"She said she thought my parents were kind of dorks, your mom did. I mean, what she said was that they didn't want anything except to be liked, my mom, you know, and my dad, too. I've been thinking about that a lot, now that they got lost."

Keegan was careful not to ask questions with his endings now, but he paused a second, considering why they're being lost should bring into focus how much they needed so much to be liked. Pam let the pause go on.

"Anyhow," Keegan took up in a minute, "I was thinking—you think we should go off and yell some more?"

"Nah," Pam said, "go on with what you were saying. You know—what you were talking about. I like that. Wait a minute. We can yell right here where we are. First you, then me. They'll never notice where we are—that we're together, I mean."

Keegan nodded, resumed. "So, I was just thinking what your mom was saying was real interesting. I never thought of stuff like that before, like, you know, that wanting to be liked was so dorky, I mean wanting so real bad to be liked. You think?"

"Do you want to be liked?" Pam asked.

"Well, yeah. I guess what's what I was really thinking about—just then and now, too. I hadn't thought that but now I think that's what it was—what I was thinking about. I asked your mom if she thought I was just like my parents in all this—I mean, wanting to be liked and not much else more. She said no, but I wasn't sure why she said that.

Pam stared.

"What do you think, Pam?"

"You don't care how Bert is mean to you, do you? I was wondering. I mean you don't seem to."

"I don't know. I wish he liked me. I know that. I mean, I like him a lot, but I guess it really doesn't bother me—too much."

He paused. "That's funny, isn't it? I mean, I don't really think too much about that."

"Your parents, if they wanted Bert to like them, would probably go out and buy him stuff or something."

Keegan looked at her and thought.

Pam went on after a few seconds, "I think your parents are very nice. They are. I don't think it's bad wanting people to like you. Do you? I mean, they're real nice."

Keegan thought about it. "Yeah. I see. Maybe your mom meant that, you know, you couldn't count on them for too much, since they were so busy being liked and all."

"Maybe. I think Bert likes you a lot. I really do. I don't know why he's sometimes so mean. But I know he likes you. I don't know about him being mean."

"Me, either. Hey, Pam, you said before all our parents were bringing us up here to kill us. Remember you said that?"

Pam nodded.

"Do you still think that?"

"Yep."

"Oh. I see. So you think my parents could be real nice, you know, and still want to kill us?"

"They're not here now."

"I know, Pam, but I was thinking—how could they be real nice and still want to kill us?"

Pam didn't miss a beat. "One part of them's real nice and one part of them wants to kill us."

She thought for a while. "I don't know if they waaaannnnt to kill us. I think they just would, you know. It maybe would just happen and they'd not mind, but that's not really it. You know?"

Keegan didn't know, but thought he should. Maybe if he kept talking to Pam, he'd figure it out.

They had been sitting on some rock piles, gargantuan stacks of house-sized smooth boulders, and now got up and started wandering around, in, and through them, bouncing from one huge stone to the other, in the unconsciously graceful way kids have, down to the ground and then up again atop another field of Brobdingnagian rocks. All this time, though, they were not noticing that these rock communities were clean of snow and that, in the bigger ones, there was no way of knowing where you were, no way, that is, by the tracking methods they had been counting on.

After a while, they stood and looked at one another and then re-sat, neither knowing which one had initiated the moves.

"Hey, Pam," Keegan yelled, though she was right there next to him on the rock.

"You don't need to yell. But that's okay. What?"

"Sorry. I was just excited because I see what you mean, I think. You mean my parents could just bring us up here and get lost and all and get us killed, and they wouldn't exactly mean to but they wouldn't not mean to."

Pam stared.

"No, that's not it—I mean, they wouldn't be thinking about us exactly"—Keegan was looking off into space, thinking hard as he talked—"and they would be thinking about themselves. They're nice people and they'd be thinking about being nice people. If we died, we died, right?"

"You think so?"

"No, you're the one who thinks so, right? I mean, I was trying to figure out what it was you meant."

"Yeah."

"Is that what you meant?"

"I guess," Pam said agreeably.

Keegan smiled. "I do, too. I think it is just that they think they are good parents. And they are good parents. I mean, they're not wrong about that. But they think they're good parents and they think about that—and that's it, right?"

Pam nodded, just to keep Keegan going. This all was pretty interesting.

"They want to be good parents, and in a way that doesn't have anything to do with me and Mim and all. I mean, they'd fry our butts in the frying pan if somebody told them that's what good parents do."

Pam was quiet for a minute, than said, decisively, "I wouldn't fry somebody's butt in a frying pan, no matter what they told me I should do."

Keegan started to laugh and then saw she hadn't missed the point. "Do you think your parents are like that, too?

Pam thought fo so long, Keegan wondered if she had forgotten what he asked. Then she announced, "Yes."

Keegan guessed there was more.

"Really—more than yours, a lot more, maybe. They don't even see me and Bert, my dad doesn't. My mom, too, but in a different way. I don't know for sure about your parents. They seem a lot different from mine."

It was quiet for a minute.

Then: "I hope your parents are okay." Pam was looking at Keegan with eyes that had no owl in them.

Keegan was curious why he didn't cry, as it came to him very quickly, that he was now an orphan.

"Thanks, Pam. I think they're not okay, probably. I'm pretty sure. I know Mim doesn't think they're okay. I can tell. Your parents, too. They don't say anything, but they hardly ever mention stuff about looking for them."

Pam gazed at him some more. It wasn't that she was trying to understand—at least not only that. She just wanted somehow to be inside him, his head and something more, and she knew that would happen.

"I guess I don't know how I feel. That's awful, I know. I think maybe I don't feel anything, to tell you the truth. I think this is fun, being up here, and with you guys. It's scary, but it's the best thing that has happened to me." He kept himself from qualifying anything he had said.

"Me, too. I know," Pam said.

The two kids sat there on the pile for several minutes, silent.

It was Pam who first noticed the change in the landscape.

"Let's yell together and then find out how to get back past all these rocks to where we were."

They yelled in unison, loudly but not much caring if they were convincing or not. Mostly, they were wondering if they'd be heard—anywhere.

"The snow's all melted on these rocks, isn't it?" Keegan said, looking closely at Pam, not for guidance but to make sure they were together.

"Yeah, I guess. But that's okay. We can sort of see where we walked between the piles, kind of. Anyhow, I have an excellent sense of direction."

Keegan smiled at her, but not in derision. "I know that about you. I do, too—sort of good."

So, back they went. They moved slowly, picking their way among the rocks and through the scrappy patches of snow separating the boulder clusters. They chatted and even sang a little, but they did not hurry and they did not miss a sign—tree, sun, possible footprint—that would keep them going right.

They were aware that they were not so much going someplace in particular as getting themselves unlost. If someone, some adult along for the ride, had asked them whether they knew one false shift in direction would kill them, one misreading, one blurring of the few, mostly indistinct footprints, they would have nodded. There is a chance adults could have questioned them into panic. There was no chance they would do that to themselves.

After twenty minutes, they found themselves back in the deeper snow, able to see pretty well. Neither said a word; both understood. Following their old steps along with a little more speed now, they suddenly came upon what looked like several extra sets of prints, big prints.

"Whose are those?" Pam asked.

"Well, let me look: I don't know for sure, though I'm an old hand at mountain tracking. Maybe those tracks are people who live here or maybe us, you know, us fooling around or something—before, you know," Keegan said. "I don't think anybody else is up here—any mountain people or anything. Maybe, though. Maybe they'll rescue us."

"Or kill us."

"Yeah, Keegan grinned: "They'd first fry our butts, like they enjoy, and then—whamo. But we got killers up here as it is. We don't need no more."

"Maybe we should have a big killer party," Pam said, and invite anybody up here, those especially who want to eat and then kill some kids."

"We could send out invitations—drinking at five o'clock, hotdogs at six o'clock, spin the bottle at seven o'clock, kill the kids at eight o'clock."

Pam laughed and then squatted down in the effortless way only slim children have at their disposal. "These don't look like people tracks, Keegan, People are littler than this by a lot. I think they're animal."

Keegan looked. Now *this* was fun! "You're right. They're pretty big, but they're all mushed around. I think it was a bunch of dogs, really big dogs."

"Big wolves," Pam said, seriously.

"I hope so," said Keegan. "I saw this show about how nice wolves were. Maybe the wolves'd lead us out. Could be bears. Like were at our camp."

"Maybe."

"You think these prints are important, Pam?"

She thought for a moment, looked at her friend, and then, matter-of-factly, "No."

That settled it, and they trudged on, thorough what were now unmistakably their own prints, back to their original secret spot.

George and Jinny had not heard any of the yells. They had been napping, Jinny because she was ill and George because he couldn't think of anything else to do and was thus able to convince himself that a short nap would set him up. It didn't.

When he woke, he felt much worse than before. More than that, he felt guilty at not doing anything, at sleeping while the kids were out going on with that useless, heart-breaking yelling.

Just then he heard what might have been that very yelling and felt a cold shiver go along his arms and legs.

He crawled over and opened the tent flap, glad to see it was still light outside, though long past mid-day. He quickly stopped feeling glad, though, realizing he had dozed for almost two hours, leaving the kids without any possibility of help. They were little kids, after all, and knew not a damned thing. How could he have slept, letting them continue calling out for dead people?

He tried to assess his weakness, crawled slowly from the tent and walked around it three times, then four. He figured the brisk jaunt, even if not so brisk, would refresh him. Nope.

He was further depressed to find that the snow, though still abundant, really seemed to be no more than, say, six inches deep, if that, at the deepest point. He went around sticking his mittened hand in several places and had to admit it seemed more like four inches. Jesus! He then tried comforting himself by recalling drifts: hell, what with the wind, the snow is doubtless up to the neck just around the bend.

George was very quick to catch himself doing absurd or mean things, and he couldn't avoid seeing that he was hoping for more disastrous conditions to justify the disaster mode he and Jinny had adopted—or he had forced on Jinny.

And the kids.

Of course, the disaster was real enough in one way. The death of Dave and Nicole was real. I mean, what do you call a disaster, if two corpses aren't enough?

But another of George's virtues then rose up to bite him on the ass: he could spot his own cover-ups quickly. It wasn't the deaths of his friends that had caused any of the crisis stories that had run

so smoothly through his head and directed the plan he had adopted: heroic suicide to save the kids. The two adult deaths were incidental to all that, trivial and absurd. If ever people had died for nothing, it was old Dave and Nicole.

And now he and Jinny were dying for nothing, too, or trying to. They were staying here pretending to wait for corpses to rise and come walking in or for rescue parties nobody was convening. They were staying here finding ways to die for excellent reasons. No matter if those reasons had to be re-invented daily.

What on earth good would it do the kids to have both of the adults weak, puking, feverish, and delusional? How was that going to get them out of there, the kids? How was it going to do anything more than assure the deaths of every one of them?

Of course the goal was to get them out. At least the kids. Probably only the kids, but maybe all. Of course.

George's ability to correct himself didn't stay at that depth for long, and he quickly surfaced. The thing now was to rethink everything, to find a way to revitalize the adults and lead the kids out. The snow, he had to admit, was no real barrier. The air was warmer, clearer, much easier to maneuver in. Why not get up and go? Just use the rescue-party story to cover that difficulty, cheer up the kids, and start right off—going somewhere, maybe even down.

As he thought this, he stumbled a little against a tent peg, right there before him but partly hidden in the snow. The stumbling part was easy to understand—could happen to anybody—sure. What was harder to pull into George's new let's-get-em-up-and-outa-here story was his falling—stumbling for a minute, then managing to regain his balance, but still by damn toppling over backwards. He simply lacked the strength to hold himself upright, could not correct the movement downwards from the stumble, and landed, after a flailing wobble, square on his ass.

He crawled back into the tent to think some more, and saw, not at all to his relief, the angry eyes of his wife, looking at him with merciless concentration.

George had seen that look once before, when he had excused Jinny for fucking Gino Capettini—

Jinny's affair had actually been going on for several months, it turned out. Dino Capettini was a new Professor of Italian in the department, Jinny's department, that is, Comparative Literature. Dino had joined the department in September, and by the end of the term, he and Jinny had started meeting at various locations, mostly off campus, to have sex.

George knew him a little, serving together as they did on the College Curriculum and Development Committee. In January of the new year, a few weeks into the affair George had no idea was going on, he had arrived early for a meeting of the committee and found Dino plopped there at the end of the table.

"George Jackson—English."

"Dino Capettini—Comp Lit."

"Gladameeya. You in French?"

"Italian."

"Oh—I'm sorry. I would have sworn. I mean, your accent seems French."

"So I've been told."

"Well," George went on amiably, "what do I know? It's very charming—your accent."

Silence.

"So—Comp Lit. I see. You know my wife, then."

"No!" Dino Capettini said, with some energy.

"Jinny Jackson."

"No."

"No? How could you not? What do you have in Comp Lit, about seven of you?"

"Oh, yes—I guess I do."

"Know her?"

"No—I mean, I do—know her, just as you were saying—but not closely."

"She speaks well of you."

"Oh?"

"Yes, she says they're very lucky you're here in the department, that you're terrific."

In truth, George couldn't remember if Jinny had ever breathed a syllable about this new guy. Probably not. Jinny didn't really talk much about her department and this oafish twerp certainly wasn't the sort to interest her. George looked more closely at him and noticed he was wall-eyed. No, surely not—couldn't be. Yep, there it was—wall-eyed as anything. That was a bit interesting in a disconcerting way. Anyhow, he sure as hell was a lousy conversationalist. Probably stupid. Maybe just shy.

"Do you like this committee?" George thought he'd try a new avenue.

"I like you."

"Thank you," George said, blinking.

He was very happy to see other members of the committee, however surly and self-absorbed, arriving.

That night, George remembered to mention this strange being to Jinny.

"Oh, Jinny. I wanted to ask you. You know that new guy in your department? Well—"

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why?' I was about to tell you a story and ask you what you thought of him."

"Why?"

"Why what? What's wrong with you? I talked to the guy at Curriculum Committee—you know the one I'm on, the college committee—today. Dino Capellini, I think. Is that his name?"

"Yes."

George was silent for a minute. "Wait—I don't think that's right. Gino Capellini played football—for the old Baltimore Colts team, I think—defensive end, Gino Capellini. I think that's right—but neither here nor there. This guy is Dino something—that's it, Dino. But not Capellini. This guy's—yeah, Caprioti."

"It's Capettini, George."

"I don't think so."

"Yes, it is, George."

"Oh, yeah—well, you'd know."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're in the same department."

"Oh, yeah. What about him?"

"He and I were talking at the meeting, you know. We both happened to get there a little bit early and were talking. Just talking—you could hardly call it a conversation, unless it was part of an absurdist play. I just wondered what you thought of him."

"I have no opinion."

"Really? That's not like you. You usually make quick judgments—not that you're judgmental, not in a bad way. Anyhow, I was wondering if he's completely sane. Maybe you guys hired him as part of a program to employ the worthy-otherwise- unemployable, the profoundly handicapped."

"Why do you say that?"

"He's either round the bend, on marvelous drugs, or dead stupid—or maybe he doesn't understanda the Engleesh very well. He seems to have picked up conversational skills on Jupiter. I don't know—very strange all the way round. Probably confused about

what the hell he is, passing himself off as Italiano and speaking French, or something like it. I think he's a fake."

"No, he isn't."

"Well, okay—you'd know. I still wonder why he speaks with a French accent? His name's probably Jacques Le Pew or something, passing himself off as an Italian. He's a fraud. You there in Comp Lit have been had."

"Fuck you, George. What do you know?"

"I know he's a wall-eyed, single-eyebrowed fraud who can't recall what country he's from or what language he's into." George was enjoying himself, laughing.

Jinny wasn't. *"Jesus, George! He's not fucking wall-eyed. He's learned."*

"Oh, I suppose learned can't be wall-eyed? And add to that single-browed. Think of that combo. Genetically impossible. What a fraud!" George by now was howling.

"You know what I mean, you asshole!"

Jinny had begun the affair readily enough, in the sense that one day after a department meeting they had gone for drinks, she and Dino, and then to his apartment to screw. That's why they had gone there, but Jinny still wasn't sure why she'd been wanting that outcome or even if she had.

She hadn't been able to hide from herself clear-eyed views of Dino that were distressingly similar to George's. Dino wasn't exactly a fraud, maybe, but he was absurdly pretentious—all the time, maybe by nature (were that possible). The French accent was just one mark of his search for some way to be impressive.

Still, she kept it up, increasingly annoyed that the affair seemed so drearily routine and so tediously safe. At first, being with Dino was like masturbating in bed beside George without George noticing. With Dino, George was there, sort of, and that

made things almost interesting. But George's fantastical, half-dangerous presence faded and she was left with Dino and his safe sex.

For a long time, Ginny told herself that it was the academic schedule, with its spray of meetings, appointments, classes, and counseling that made her affair so easy to pull off. That was nice, worked, for about a week or two, and then the very ease made it seem like an exercise routine or a trip to the cleaners.

Jinny liked sex, she supposed, and Dino was young, if undeniably uni-browed and truly wall-eyed. He was a little slimmer than George. Still, though slim, he was in dreadful shape, which made what there was of him unthrillingly soft. He might as well have been truly mushy-pudgy. He had a very large dick, that was for sure, a thick dick that sometimes seemed to Jinny a good deal wider than it was long. That probably wasn't strictly true, but. . . . Also, he made love with some eagerness—not to be denied. Still, his eagerness took forms that varied as little as the circumference of his now-uninviting member, one Jinny came to regard but tried not to think of as an outsized pepperoni.

Dino couldn't seem to grasp intuitively or through Jinny's hints how much nicer it would be if he climbed into bed in his underwear, engaged in a little foreplay (Jinny didn't expect much), and then, discreetly, removed his briefs with his toes, dragging them down and thus enabling his mottled red-brown pleasure-giver to work its way unseen.

That was another thing: there was not that much pleasure. Maybe swollen cocks weren't all they were cracked up to be. Maybe it was his underwear, which wasn't always what you would call clean, or his thick black hair, or his habit of talking during the act. Sometimes he spoke of her loveliness, though often in crudely specific terms—"what lilting—how you say?—teets you have there! They remind me of Dante. Your cleetoris or is it

cleyetoris gets so big it's like my small brother's penis—and the very same color, too."

But more often he talked about his car and repairs thereto, his mother, other members of the department, French wine, his sinusitis. And parking on campus.

Jinny was reluctant to admit it, but she did admit it: she was desperate to give some signal to George to change his obtuse ways and end this torment of an affair. She couldn't bring herself to make things so obvious that she would get, most certainly, caught. But what in God's name was she to do—leave (invented) notes of passion around the kitchen, magnetized to the refrigerator?

Turns out, George did catch them. Though Jinny and Dino often used her house, simply because it was closer to campus, George didn't catch them there. It was at Dino's apartment. George had come from a College Curriculum meeting Dino had missed—in order to plow George's wife, as it happened. George, amiable lout that he was, had volunteered to drop off some committee papers for Dino, got the address from Maxine-with-no-last-name, the Committee's staff assistant for well over thirty years, maybe more than a century, and had popped right on over.

Jinny answered the door.

"You're here," George said, neutrally.

"Oh God!" Jinny cried, genuinely upset. She burst into tears, wracking sobs.

"What's wrong?" George said, so surprised he didn't move to comfort Jinny, though he immediately felt a wave of great pity for her. He wasn't, somehow, surprised that she was there, but he was very surprised that she was weeping.

Just then, Dino appeared. "Oh, it's you," he said, with such phony cinematic guilt that George at once knew.

"I brought you the committee papers, and now I'll leave," George said, abruptly turning, closing the door softly, and heading straight for his car.

Jinny opened the car door as soon as it was closed. "I'll come, George," she sobbed, but George either didn't hear her or couldn't stop his legs from pushing him outward at that point. They drove back in separate cars.

He wept all the way home, not entirely for himself, not much for himself, since he was thinking almost solely of his embarrassed, disgraced wife.

By the time she got home, he was all compassion meeting her, had prepared his apology, and delivered it. From that point on, things were changed. Perhaps all was lost.

After he apologized, Jinny looked at him through eyes red with tears, flashing at him a hurt so concentrated in its refusal to accept or grant mercy that George wondered if he could ever get back behind that apology he had thrown at her. Certainly, he had expected different results, though he kept himself from admiring too openly his magnanimity.

He did have time later to wonder why that charity had come to him so easily, had cost him nothing at the time. Later was different,. Later the charge amounted to much more than he could ever come up with.

It was the same look now, and it brought to him the same fear, the thought that he could never find a stance or a role that would make the slightest difference to his wife. It was futile to search, but what else could he do?

"Where have you been? I thought something was trying to get into the tent. There was this big crash and banging—right up against the tent. Then I saw you weren't here. Jesus Christ!"

"That was me. I stumbled is all. I was just checking things out—around the camp, you know. What'd you expect me to do—leave you a note?"

"And, guard and protector, what were the results of your little check-a-da-camp?"

"Let's not fight. I think we need to change our plan. There's not a whole lot of snow, really, and we can move much more easily now. Get the kids the hell out of here. Tell them we're going to find help. You know."

"Nice time to think of that, Sidney Carton. A far, far finer thing would have been to decide all that in the first place, before we started to add our names to the glorious list of parents giving their all for their valued offspring."

"Do you feel a little better?"

Jinny glared a bit, then smiled. "You mean because I go on the attack with my old vim, rip into you with some of the old ball-bashing spirit?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"Well, that's probably—certainly—what we ought to deal with first. Getting both of us stronger, I mean, and fast. That isn't selfishness speaking, only reality—what simply is. Screw, I fell into the tent because couldn't summon the strength to keep myself from falling. I was like a toddler, only worse, out there, swaying and weaving, no balance at all."

"What time is it?"

"It's ten after four. I know, the kids have been out there a very long time. But I heard them hollering just a bit ago. Listen, I think what they're doing, yelling and so forth, should tell us and no mistake that we're wasting everyone's time, need a new plan—or some plan. Here we have four healthy and good kids just wandering around and yelling after what are probably dead people."

"Probably?"

"Okay. Why don't we have the kids leaving this place? Leaving is what makes sense. But we both know they can't—at least they won't—leave without us."

"I see what you mean, George; but why didn't you think of this a little earlier, when it stood a chance of doing some good? If your plan is to pack everybody up and just bull our way down the goddamned mountain one way or another—if that is your plan, why didn't you fucking formulate it before we got so far along with our starving? And don't blame the snow. It's been not snowing for two days at least. God damn you, George!"

She looked at him as if, through all that hatred, she was puzzled, wanted to ask him a real question and get an answer, too.

George saw that, found it easier to respond to the hatred.

"I don't blame you for being angry, Jinny. I'd feel that way, too, if I were you."

"That's sweet, George."

For just a sliver of a second, George thought the conversation was over. But Jinny was up on one elbow, her flushed face expanding toward him. There was no way to avoid this. Avoid what?

"Yeah, I see what you mean. I do. I thought and *you* thought, too," he added, hoping not so much to implicate her in the wrong as to shift to her the burden of explanation. He stopped.

"Thought what? That we should trap the kids here while we starved, not even making an attempt, not even a fake attempt, to find Dave and Nicole, or their bodies or whatever?"

George was swept with a great wave of weariness and also, before he saw it coming, a second wave of admiration, something like love, for his wife. They were in it now, in for it now. But having spelled it out like that, it was clear she was in it, too. He couldn't pretend any longer, and that was frightening, but not so

frightening as being alone. However heinous his confession was going to be, he had an audience and even a confederate of sorts.

George settled back to rest and then thought better of it, shuffled around to find the matches, lit the butane stove, and got the tea bags and two large cups from the neat little set-up they had arranged in what used to be Dave and Nicole's half of the sleeping section. He then found the smaller of the two water jugs, now well-packed with melted snow, carefully filled the fold-up (now unfurled) kettle, put it on the stove, waited for it to boil, whistling to himself meanwhile, got the bubbling water finally into the cups with the dangling tea bags, dug out some not-too-stale shortbreads, arranged them all before Jinny, and then sat cross-legged, which he found he could now, for the first time since childhood, do.

Jinny watched him in silence, feeling her rage subside a little and wondering if she wanted to just let it go. She recognized that the state of flu misery where death doesn't seem so bad had come and gone. Death seemed unwelcome again, and she couldn't understand how George was playing with it so recklessly, stupidly.

Maybe she had agreed with something or other, but she couldn't recall now doing so or what exactly it might have been. And anyhow, George had been gleefully stage-managing this whole production pretty much on his own. To what end? She waited for him to finish laying out his goddamned tea-party, trying to compose her face into a blankness. She was not about to cooperate with his cowardice, not if she could help it.

George smiled at her and read in her face a reflection of the same renewed tenderness he was feeling for her. There was no rage now, just a readiness to work together, a deep trust, certainly, and a brand-new affection. George grinned at Jinny an awfully long time, allowing himself to revel in this love that had just grown up between them in the last fifteen minutes and recognize

that it was, unlike earlier false sproutings on this trip, a new flame entirely, not just an old sputter. It was like two altogether new people finding one another, not at all like two old bozos clearing up a misunderstanding, not doing it well, resigning themselves to one more loss.

"You know, dear, I think it all, you know, started when we let Nicole and the kids set the tone for things, all that game-playing, drawing lots to see who paired with whom. But we learned from that—and it's done now."

George grinned again, as if he had put things straight and cleaned up a mess nobody imagined recoverable.

Jinny stared at him, her mouth ajar, wondering. She really could not believe her ears. She always thought that was just a platitude—but there it was.

She stared at George for a second and then screamed, "You asshole! It all started when you dragged us up here without knowing what in hell you were doing. It all started with you being so reckless, so fucking heedless of the lives of all of us, of your own damned kids even. No contacts, no phones, for God sake. Why no phones? It's one thing for you to be idiotically suicidal, but it's not your business to order up suicides for the rest of us.

"Well, you know the reception is not so. . . ."

"Fuck the reception. You know not one thing about it—about anything. So why did you throw us all into this hell?"

George, grinning no longer, tried to interrupt, but Jinny stalked right through him.

"It started when you got us lost—probably a deliberate maneuver—and couldn't come up with a better plan than 'let's not move.' Let's stay here and play house and have parties and pretend that everything's just fine and be Ward and June Cleaver doing Sunday brunch, over and over, and over."

George tried to ignore her tone and thereby shift it. "Plenty of blame to go around, if we want to play that dumb game. But let's not. There are, and always have been, three plans, really: move, stay and wait to get rescued, stay and build a fire and send smoke signals. I couldn't see the way clear to doing any moving, especially when we got confused about which way to go. Then with Dave and Nicole. . . . I suppose you're right that we could have done that, moved I mean, after the snow, sort of."

"Or could do it now, sort of," Jinny added.

"Yeah. It's the fire that really bothers me. I mean it makes so much sense, in a way. You build a fire and put green pine branches on it so it smokes a lot. If people were looking for us close by or in a plane or something, they'd see it."

"If."

"Yeah. But why would they be looking? Besides, it's better never to build a big, long-term fire. I read that. I guess we talked about that earlier. Yeah. Anyhow, here it is Sunday, I think, the something, and whenever school does start, it starts later than the something, and there's no reason anybody would look for us."

"Why, really, didn't we tell anybody, George? I mean, why didn't you tell anybody? And don't say you overlooked it."

George looked at her but couldn't speak.

"Was this some Chris McCandless idiocy? Something drawn from your adolescent fantasies of solo climbs? Just you and the mountain, you and your throbbing cock against death?"

Still, he couldn't make a sound.

"I mean, when we go off on vacation or even away for the weekend, we spread the word, cover our tracks. Even when we took the kids to the fucking Grand Canyon, we told parents and neighbors and friends and chance acquaintances, strewing contact numbers all over the place. A dozen people could have tracked us from motel to motel, up and down the canyon. Why didn't we

leave any trail when we were sailing off into this remote cock-sucking hell?"

George looked at her with new pain, as if she were advancing on some point he hadn't the energy to defend.

"Actually, I know I told some people at school when I picked up my mail, but I guess really only Shirley and Fred, probably, and Fred's work-study, and anyhow neither one would give a shit. I mean, why should they? I guess Shirley would, but I probably only told her we were going camping or, now I remember: I told her we were going out to enliven our sex lives by rolling down mountains. You know how she is."

Jinny squinted at him. "Oh, she's a real card, that Shirley. Who cannot love her?"

"Yeah."

Jinny then looked sad, probably sad; it was, in any case, a new look: "I didn't say anything more than that, I'm pretty sure. Maybe told nobody at all. I didn't even stop the paper or anything. Who's picking up the mail?"

"I don't know."

"Well, that'll pile up, like the newspapers. Maybe one of the neighbors will notice and call the police."

George kept himself from releasing any of the sarcasms that bled to his lips.

"But they won't. They'll probably just tidy it all up and stack it neatly on the table out there by the door. They have a key, you know, both Tom and the Rajahs have keys. I expect they'll just figure we forgot, if they think about it at all, neglected to tend to those things. I mean, they'll just brush it off and put it out of their heads.

Jinny looked puzzled for a minute, took a sip of tea and wiped her forehead. It was cool in the tent, but she still had the fever, high as ever. Felt generally like shit, too—all over her body.

"But it was you, George."

"Huh?"

"It was you. We didn't vanish this way by accident, did we? It was you."

George mulled it over. "I didn't think of it that way, but yes it was me, now that I think of it. It surely was, I—yes, I did it."

Before she could respond, he added, mildly, "I don't know if I'm imagining it, but I don't think the accusatory tone, if that's what it is, is very helpful."

"Accusatory? Oh, George, how could you think such a thing? Your loving wife accusing YOU?"

George wished he could just collapse, close off the discussion, but he was annoyed.

"It wasn't," Jinny went on, "that you forgot to spread the word—just slipped your mind."

"No, I guess I didn't forget."

"What did you want to do, make it more dangerous, get your balls swollen by girding your flabby loins and just by God conquering the wilderness, the wilder the better? Come up here where them bears you so love could git ya? Put your head into the mouth of death to satisfy your need to feel life more intensely?"

"Not exactly, I don't think."

Jinny ignored him. "Well, you horrible asshole, does all this seem more real to you? Does it, George? Are you sublimely focussed, just like those pile-of-shit Everest climbers? Does this make all the rest of life recede into a faint background? Are you living the vital life now, you prick, feeling rush after rush of that real man juice coursing through all your vitals?"

George looked at the ground, not really ashamed but not wanting to feel the force of Jinny's eyes.

"It wasn't planned out that way, Jinny, not as some sophomoric macho drama. But, to be honest, I can't call it, the way it unrolled, an accident. No—let me go on."

Jinny wasn't finished herself, had tried to begin anew, but she was willing to what was inside George's odd new quiet tone.

"I never thought, 'Hey, let's all go up to the mountains and put ourselves in as much danger as possible so I can be the man I always wanted to be and that dear old Dad never let me become.' I really think I came here because of you."

"Me?" Jinny could barely get out the monosyllable.

"Us, then. What I mean is that our life sucked so bad. I didn't let myself fully see that it did, but it did. When Dave mentioned that notice in the paper about the cabin, I went off like a powder keg. I wondered even then why I was so eager to get the mountain plans all set and rolling. Remember. I just forced everybody to commit to it—whatever 'it' was—within twenty seconds. I would have started a fight with anybody who hesitated. It meant everything. I could see that. I mean, I really could see that. I thought, 'If we don't jump on this, the chance might never come again.' "

"The chance for what?"

"The chance to cure everything."

Jinny just looked at him. She didn't even wonder what it was he figured needed curing. She didn't care.

"You're wondering what I wanted to cure. Put it this way: not a cure but a fresh start."

"Let me get this straight: you thought if we all came up here, we'd have a fresh start?"

"Not we all—just you and me."

"Why did you think that?"

"I can't really remember exactly. I just know I did. And it wasn't that I merely thought so. I was sure of it."

"Are you still so sure?"

"I don't know."

"So, you decided we needed some kind of marriage counseling, the pure kind that you get from the birds and rocks and trees? I mean, what exactly was your scheme? I'm all ears."

"Let me see. I thought that if we came up here, we could get a fresh start."

"Jesus, George! You said that. I'm trying to figure out why you thought that. Why, for instance, didn't you mention it to me, maybe talk it over? You think you were the only one who was finding our life together rancid? There are other ways of improving things, George, though you probably never heard of them. Conversation is one, fucking is another, talking together, real marriage counseling, therapy, a nice romantic cruise. None of that appealed to you—occurred to you—right? You dug deep into that bag of tested cures and came up with a suicidal journey to the high mountains where you could play Edmund Fucking Hilary."

"That's right. I know I should have talked with you about it, Jinny. But I didn't talk with me about it. Somehow, it just seemed so necessary. I didn't think it out, but I did know what it was all for. It seemed necessary."

"So you said. Necessary, too, I guess, to bring our friends along for a little homicide and maybe slaughter our kids, so we could mend things by way of an ultimate togetherness. Very Shakespearean. No, George, I don't understand anything you're saying, and I think you're just lying, you pathetic miserable coward. It had nothing to do with me—any of the rest of us. It was all you. Just that. You were willing to kill us because you're a damned gutless swine and wanted to prove you weren't."

George didn't seem to be listening.

"You know why I said it was a fresh start, Jinny, and why I didn't tell anybody?"

"Gee whiz! Enlighten me."

"Fresh starts are all we have. All that count—all that mean anything. They're everything. But I see what In did was simply clear the decks. Here's what I mean. I've been thinking I spend my life doing things so I can get to a point where I don't have to do things. I mean, I work for the weekend or term breaks; I arrange all my work in a pile so I can whittle it down to nothing, feeling more and more excited as home comes into view. I make to-do lists so I can wipe them clean. I even eat so I can get done, check the time while I'm at the movies so I can get out of them."

"I know you have sex with me so you won't have to have sex with me."

"That, too," George agreed blithely. "Here's what I've been thinking. I teach so I cannot teach; also, I write stuff so I cannot write stuff—well, you see what I mean. But when I actually get to the end—which sometimes I do—I can't stand it. It makes me almost sick to be on vacation or to come out of a movie or to be done with sex or something, finishing anything."

Jinny looked at him, interested despite all the insults and the fuzzy relevance. At least he was trying to say something original, even if wasn;'t honest. And, as for that, it was likely as honest as George could get.

"So, I guess I thought coming up here would be like getting the list done but not then having that horrible empty space to look at. Instead of the end of something, it'd be the start. I am so tired of living in endings, though I can imagine what you're thinking. I come full circle, making my new beginnings into final exits.

"No, George," Jinny replied, her hot anger replaced with a loathing that could find no settling point, largely because she again had trouble fitting even George to such narcissistic blather.

"Somehow I wasn't thinking of the neat little irony you got yourself into and so perfectly formulated—let's see, how did it go: making your new start your final ending. Instead, George, I

was thinking of how brutally, massively selfish you have been, you—-never mind."

George sprung up, shocked out of the comfortable cloud he had been riding on, floating along on his magnanimous resolve to accept all blame. He bumped his head on the top Gortex cover, whipped round as if hit, and then took a mini-step toward Jinny, hoping he was now looming and impressive.

"Selfish!"

"Even as you were spinning all this out, doubtless imagining that this empty blab was revelatory, opening your soul to me, you spoke of not one thing other than yourself. You have a grammar with but one pronoun in it, George. The fact that all this came on you instinctively, this desire to 'cure,' as you put it, excuses nothing—shows only that you're a bastard at heart. You filthy selfish fuck!"

"Jinny, you're not well—just need to. . . ."

"Just look closely at yourself, George—though that's like asking Donald Trump not to be so empathetic—and tell me, right now. What you see."

George made no move to answer.

"Okay, then. I now see it all very clearly. You wanted a better life, and a finer marriage, and a new start. You wanted that feeling you get at the start of term, the start of a new project, the start of a meal or movie, the start of blowing your nose or taking a shit. It's all that fucking banal, and only a monster of egoism would go ahead and act on it and then, you trivial moron, try to justify it."

"I didn't say that—what you said. Please do me the courtesy of not ventriloquizing me."

"You didn't say what? You said you thought, you wanted, you needed, you felt, you deserved. And you are so reckless in your self-regard you give not even a glancing thought to what you've

set out to do: murdering your friends, and me, and all these kids—our own among them."

Just then a loud yell—"Mom, Dad!"—forced them both to turn around, toward the tent flap. The recognized it as the kids calling, but it seemed to be Pam's voice. Why would she call "Mom!" And "Dad!" And why so close to the tent?

And, more to the point, why were these the first calls they had heard in the longest time.

Bert and Mim had by this point settled awkwardly, mashed into a little cranny to talk and rest. They had charged uphill fast and had been climbing the rocks and clambering through the bushes for nearly two hours. They needed the break. Even without the fatigue, they would have invented a reason to stop examining the landscape and start examining one another. They also wanted to release themselves for a while from the impossible job they had taken on.

Here they were, straining to focus on a strange mountain (or mountains), trying so hard to find clues that they just couldn't see, even if they were there. They refused to give brain room to the skepticism that would have told them that maybe there were no clues for them, that such clues as there were didn't lie in the direction they were headed, or that they lacked the training to pick up such clues as may be. Both Bert and Mim were sure that if they looked hard enough, stopped fooling around and really looked, they would see everything that was needed in order to save themselves and the two other friends depending entirely on them.

In this, they were like little kids trying to spot from a whizzing car the rabbit in the field the adults had so insistently pointed out. "Look! See right over there? Over there! No, the other way—to your left! Look! Look!" This time, though, they had discarded the

adults and their smug pointing fingers, knowing they pointed only to what kids could not see, called out signals for their own exclusive pleasure. Such adult pointers never transmitted knowledge; they served only to secure their own authority, their superiority as spotters of the true and the significant.

Bert and Mim were alone in this landscape, substituting their own ignorance and eagerness for the lethal knowingness of adults. They both seemed to recognize that it would take time to go it alone, but that going it alone was all they could do. They knew, too, that they had almost no time.

They were not, then, either one really all that discouraged when they finally stumbled on the clearing and saw that it cleared the way only to a blank and very high, steep wall, an irregular cliff that kept the trees from growing but that provided no way to see around or through. Everywhere else there was, or seemed to be, nothing but unbroken forest, and the cliff was, for sure, too high to climb. Bert would have tried, but even he saw that, though the cliff, for all he knew, probably offered lots of crevices and hand-holds, it also seemed to angle outwards, not inwards.

He thought he was seeing things at first, but then it became clearer the closer they approached. The damn thing tilted the wrong way, which meant that any climber on the way up would have to dangle out over open space pretty near all the way up. Bert had seen such things in IMAX movies, but there it always seemed as if those guys were hooked securely into the rocks by pulleys and chains and stuff. He'd never seen anybody, even in the movies, do it with their hands and nothing else. He wasn't really all that tough, not even what you would might call "physical." He had no trouble acknowledging that. Still, he'd try it if it made any sense.

It didn't make any sense, and, as he settled in, he decided not even to mention it to Mim.

That he made no move toward pointless heroism (or self-centered blab about heroism) did not mark and advance in Bert's maturation. It wasn't that he was becoming a man, outgrowing childish braggadocio. Bert was holding onto the child's single-mindedness, still connecting what he thought of as his own self to the way he regarded other selves.

The boy decided not to go through the motions of displaying his eagerness to climb the cliff in order to have Mim talk him out of it simply because he knew it would be a waste of time. He also knew, though the knowledge came to him more as an instinct, that it would be both dishonest and dishonorable to do so.

He didn't want to impress Mim but to save her, if he could. He wanted to save her just as he wanted to save himself, and he knew that, for this to happen, she would have to do an equal amount of the saving. Neither could afford to diminish the other—and neither wanted to do anything of the kind.

Bert hadn't arrived at this way of thinking or doing by observing adults. The adults he had seen would never evade false drama, would chase after it even if such a chase would prove fatal.

"Well, Mim! Whatdya say! Here we are. You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Probably. You weren't thinking of trying to climb that, were you?"

"Nope."

"Yeah, well what I was thinking was that this cliff is really a whole lot of cliffs. You see how it seems to go off on both sides, goes out like a big wall on both sides. Maybe more on the left, but I can't tell. The trees make it hard to see."

"I think you're right, though, Mim. This cliff isn't just a thing that juts out and then quits. It seems to be a whatdyacallit—really it seems to be a wall, or lots of walls, just like you say. And I

don't know why we'd want to go walking beneath it, either, since there's those thick trees both ways."

"Those trees might peter out and give us a beautiful open view," Mim said, smiling.

"Oh yes, aren't you just sure that they would! I mean, why wouldn't they, if we wanted them to do so. I'd like to see em refuse!" Bert said, enjoying himself.

"So, what can we conclude from this little, though vital, exercise, class?" said Mim.

"Well," Bert said, "I think we can conclude that we should abandon the idea of going up any more. Sorry—up and up and up. But you know what I mean, which, put much better is that I think our plan of going up should just be peed into the urinal."

"What did you say? You can just right now get your young—and very pretty—ass up to the principal's office. That's what you can do—and with no delays! I just hope he gives a full report of this and what you said about asses to your parents."

"But, Missy Teach-Teach, I said not a word about asses."

"That makes it worse. You should've."

A part of Bert was still a little stuck on the word "parents," hoped to come unglued by rushing but went a little too quickly: "Oh, please, Ms. Top-Heavy, please—not my parents. They'll give me good advice and they'll reason with me."

Mim registered that Bert had winced at "parents," and she knew why. But she went on. "I'm afraid you've brought it on yourself, young Bertram. That is your name, isn't it? You aren't just calling yourself that unlikely name to try and shirk responsibility, are you? The school district has special punishment places set up for students who attempt to shirk responsibilities, especially those with fake names."

"Oh no! Oh please! Not that!"

"I have a responsibility to my uppers and betters. Maybe next time you'll be more alert to what's expected of you."

Neither felt the need to restart the game, which had exhausted itself anyhow. They sat there, rested and happy, not a bit disappointed in their failure, knowing that their excursion had accomplished a great deal, though they wouldn't have been able to put that accomplishment into words.

Mim looked a Bert a minute, closely, actually wondering if she shouldn't maybe just go ahead and kiss him. She knew how much she wanted to but wasn't too sure if he wouldn't be made so uncomfortable by it that he'd lose the easy confidence he'd found. Maybe it's be cruel to do it. She didn't know for sure, so she leaned over and kissed him.

Bert returned the kiss and put one hand lightly on Mim's shoulder, as he would a buddy.

"Thanks," he said.

"Sure," she said.

"I was thinking, Bert," Mim went on, as if the kiss had been an unexceptional part of the conversational flow, "that this was a good idea, coming upwards to get a good view and use the map, that we gave it a go, and that we know—and that we should now switch to another plan—no regrets."

"I was thinking that, too," said Bert. "It sort of simplifies things like you say, that we tried it. By going up any farther, even if we could find a way, we take a chance on getting even more lost."

Bert paused briefly—"And we also are counting on being able to figure out the map, even if we do see something."

"And that's not the worst," said Mim.

"No, it's not," Bert said.

"You remember when your dad and Pam tried to go back down the same way we came up and got all screwed around?"

"I was thinking of that, too."

"Well, Bert, the big problem with coming up this way is that we're almost for sure moving right straight away from where we'll have to go down to get back. You see what I mean?"

"Yeah," Bert said. "It's dangerous to think we should go the opposite way from home just in order to find the way home. It makes some sense, maybe—but—I don't know. It's interesting, sort of, but dangerous—get us more tangled up, maybe."

"It'd for sure lead us into strange stuff. There's no way we'll recognize anything going up this way, nothing that we saw coming. Going this way, we won't accidentally start going the right way. At least, going down we might get lucky."

"You're right, Mim. We might get lucky. At least that."

"Time to rescue the little yellers, don't you think?"

"Oh, shit!" Bert said. "I sort of forgot about them. Hope they haven't got caught by my dad."

"We'd probably know about it if they had."

They picked their way down the hill quickly, equipped with lots of energy and the ability to find their tracks in snow that had melted and then frozen softly, making the indentations positive and sharp. As they came up on the campground, they heard George clomping around and shouting.

"Who in hell's he yelling at?" Bert asked nobody in particular.

"Sounds mad," Mim said, stating the obvious.

They came up behind the trumpeting George and weren't eager to announce their presence. As a result, they scared hell out of him, which made him even madder.

"You two! What—? Holy hell, Bert! You sure as hell should know better. Where you been? Where are the other two? Never mind. I think I know where they are. God damn you, anyhow! What were you thinking? You weren't. That's the trouble with

you. I mean Bert, Mim, not you. Sorry—to you. It's not your fault. He should have known better."

George paused, but neither kid spoke. They weren't in the last flummoxed. They simply glared at the adult as if he were maddening but not rational enough to answer.

"Well, goddamit, Bert. I couldn't go get the little kids because your mother is—very sick, and I . . . . Well, you two stay here and I'll go get the other two kids. See if your mother needs anything. I'll deal with you—Bert, I mean—when I get back."

Tossing that limp conclusion over his retreating shoulder, George went off to locate Keegan and Pam, heading toward what he guessed was their latest yelling spot.

Bert and Mim went into the adult tent, now occupied by the red-faced, bleary-eyed, snot-nosed, hacking Jinny.

She tried to look what she felt—happy to see the two kids. She sensed that they were getting along very well, maybe better than very well, and that made her happy. If she were right—and she all but knew she was—Bert was very lucky. Maybe they were both very lucky, since she didn't know but what Bert was something of a prize, too. Mim was for certain. Anybody could see that—and not just from her appearance. Her own Bert maybe was OK. Who the hell knew? But they cheered her no end, these two, just by coming in the tent, joined so close together, showing no sign of wanting to be anything other than tightly connected.

"George is feeling all out of sorts because he's afraid he's not in charge of something. You kids go off looking, you know, it's like you might possibly find something, and he'd not be there to decide what to do about it and start issuing directives. I think he'd be so deeply disappointed if you were the ones to find the way out—probably try to disguise it. You didn't, did you?"

"Not exactly," Mim said, laughing.

Bert wasn't laughing, though he was surprised to hear his mom making sense in an interesting way, telling him something he didn't exactly already know—not really—for the first time he could remember, ever.

"You kids getting along okay? No need to tell me, I can see you are. Well, I'm happy for it, makes me feel this fiasco wasn't a complete—well, fiasco, not in every single way."

Jinny beamed at them, or did what she could to force out some light from her sodden face. What actually emerged was a kind of flashlight-burning-out sickly glow, but they understood.

"There's nothing ever so fine as being a happy kid with a friend," she added, not thinking it was a lame thing to say. Maybe it really wasn't.

The kids ignored whatever sentiment she meant to convey there, whatever misplaced nostalgia she was loading onto them. They both started tidying up a little, picking up old messy Kleenex and odd bits of clothes. Bert smelled the strong Vicks VapoRub odor and almost felt reassured. Nothing could be too wrong when Vicks was in the air, he thought—for a second.

"How are you, Mom, really?"

"Thanks for asking, Bert. You're a dearie. I'm really okay. Just got this slimy sniffles. Whooie. You know, messy but nothing to worry about."

"But you look all warm, kinda hot, and sweaty," Mim said, "and I'll bet you have a fever or something. And you can't be very comfortable in here."

"I'll say—it's hotter than hell," Bert said—but then, thinking maybe his mom wanted it that way, "but that's good when you have a cold."

"Your mom doesn't have a cold," Mim said decisively; "she has something like the flu or some infection. Do you have any medicine, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Thanks, kids. George gave me some antibiotics—or so he said. I really think it's the medicine that's the trouble. You know how that stuff is—makes you feel very weak. And except for feeling weak, kids, I really don't feel bad. A bit dizzy, but that's nothing. And I do think it's the antibiotics doing that, you know, making me feel weak. I guess I'm repeating myself. They'll kill the infection, I'll get strong, and I'll be back bossing everybody around, getting on their nerves—just like usual."

Just as they figured she was finally finished—the pause was so extended and she seemed to be thinking of other things, maybe preparing to fall asleep—she started up again.

"This is the voice of wisdom speaking here, the voice of a sickbed visionary. Listen to that voice, not me. Don't trust anybody over thirty. Especially don't trust George or me."

And then, without much of a pause, "or Dave or Nicole. Now, if you're going to ask me whether I said that once I'm back on my feet, of course I'll deny it. So tuck it away and don't mention it to anyone. Just act on it. Remember now—unless they're advising you not to take advice, don't take advice from old fucks."

They both smiled.

Jinny smiled, too. She looked closely at the two—"I love you," she said, being careful to leave neither out.

They were both embarrassed but tried not to show it. Still, there was no way they could answer.

"Have you been eating good stuff, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Yeah, Mom. We noticed you didn't have much breakfast."

Jinny was pleased to be asked. She was so inordinately pleased, she was also surprised she didn't feel a little guilty. Nothing so fine as to have others guess your martyrdom, even celebrate it, while it was in progress.

"Well, kids, you think your father—George—would miss the chance to boss me around about diet? He's been stuffing me like a goose."

"A goose?" Bert asked, sidetracked.

"Yeah, you know about that—how they pour food, grain I guess, down a poor goose's neck in France to make pate—I mean make them have great giant livers so they can cut em out and make goose-liver pate?"

Neither kid did.

"Those lousy French—they probably get pleasure out of this goose-torturing. And also—you know, they're so smug and self-satisfied and so Jesus Christ ugly. The men are the ugliest on earth, except maybe the English. That Prince Charles! But it's the French who are the walking damned sneers. And they hate Americans. Imagine they are the center of the known world, with their tormented geese and ugly peasants. I don't know why I said peasants, as if they had a corner on French ugly, which they don't. I hate the French!"

The kids stared at her, thinking, for the first time, that maybe she was loony, deranged by the fever, suffering from mountain madness, whatever that was.

She saw how they were looking at her. "Sorry. I was just feeling so relaxed. You know how it is."

Relaxed? No, they didn't know how it was, though they weren't about to say so.

Jinny was still all hot about the French, but decided to waive the well-deserved hostile generalities in favor of another vivid illustration, even if its application was oblique.

"You remember the suffragettes? The British suffragettes? Now the British aren't much better than the French, as I say, but they're better. There's something endearing about their lousy food and their cat-ass ugly queen. Anyhow, they, these British,

stuck tubes down the throats of these suffragettes, once they had them in prison for no reason at all, and made them eat, the authorities did."

She paused, examining two alarmed faces.

"They were on a hunger strike, these suffragettes who wanted the vote, you know, and the Brits weren't about to have them succeed in that hunger strike, so they grabbed them around the chest or something, held them like a vice, shoved funnels down their throats and poured soup and Yorkshire pudding and mushy peas and steak and kidney pie and trifle in. I should have said they did this after first imprisoning them, as if that weren't enough. That's all true, I swear. Just like the French with geese, you see, children."

Both kids nodded, wondering if they were ever going to escape from this tent.

"Well then, anyhow—."

Jenny was going on—headed somewhere, maybe—when George reappeared, the two little kids in tow, shoving them before him like an exhausted herder into the tent.

He elbowed in after them and tried to look imposing. He felt truly imposing, knew he was in a situation where imposing was the proper attitude. True, he was hampered some by the close quarters, and was forced to choose between a stooping or a squatting position. Two of the kids had been squashed over to the other side, staring straight at the tent flap and not at him. George felt as if he were one of the underlings in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea.* He deserved a podium and a spotlight, and instead found himself in this crawl-space of a super-heated sewer.

Making the best of it, he decided to address Jinny, speaking of the kids as if they were of another species, not equipped with the linguistic competence of humans. It is an old adult trick, a trick as hoary as it is cruel and, thank God, feeble.

"Do you know what these four were doing, dear? Do you know what they were doing, Ginny? Can you guess what they had cooked up and were doing?"

Jinny knew she wasn't supposed to answer, but couldn't resist. "Golly, George, I shudder to think. They weren't. Oh, I do so want to know what they were doing, George, though I shudder, I really do shudder to imagine. Maybe you should spare me, delicate female that I am."

"Ha ha," George snorted; "but this isn't the least bit funny. Far from it. It could've gotten them all killed. All of them. It. . . ."

"Did it?" Jinny asked, trying to appear wide-eyed.

"It COULD have," George shouted, as if Jinny's mockery were a serious protest. George opened his eyes wide and tried to make a full circle of glares, but succeeded in making eye contact only with Keegan and Pam, whom he didn't especially want to terrorize.

"Well, Jinny, what these kids were doing was indeed something that could have easily gotten then all—destroyed. Us, too. It was stupid, and dangerous, and. . . ."

"Could have gotten us all—er—ah—destroyed, what they were just up and doing, these kids." Bert said, in a tone that combined boredom and mockery in such an acidic compound that George would certainly have hit him if he could find a way to clear a path that would get him within striking range.

"Oh, that's very funny, Bert. That's very funny. What we need right now is for you to be a comedian and act like a spoiled brat and just go merrily off, like you do—did, and put everyone's life in danger—especially your mother's."

"My mother's?"

"Absolutely your mother's. She's sick, you know. And you're doing all you can to make it worse."

The kids were stunned, hit hard by George's stupefying and reckless irrationality, struck right in the part of them that was most vulnerable to adult bullying.

George saw his chance to increase his control margin, spelling it all out. "Look, kids. I'm not mad or anything—"

Even Mim snorted at this, and Jinny said, in a stage whisper, "Note that, please: he's not mad or anything."

George ignored her, pointedly. He was not going to be sidetracked. "I'm not mad, but I need you to act more maturely, to think of others and not just go off playing and putting us all—you as well—in very great danger. But the people, as I say, who are in the most danger when you act so irresponsibly and immaturely are—" It was obvious what was coming, but George paused anyhow, for the dramatic effect not really forthcoming. "—your very selves. That's right. When you act secretly and immaturely you put yourself in danger. And us, too, but we aren't thinking of ourselves. We're thinking of you."

"No, you're not." Bert's voice was firm, not mocking.

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'no, you're not.' You're not thinking of us. You're thinking of yourself. I mean, what have you been doing? We've all been up here, what, six-seven days—more than that, even, and what have you been doing?"

"That's enough, young man!" George was actually quivering.

"I mean," Bert continued, looking straight into George's eyes, without blinking and without ever raising his voice, "who got us lost? Who brought us up here and didn't know what he was doing? Who is happy just sitting on his ass and organizing little sweet games for the kiddies and not even trying to find Mr. and Mrs. McDormitt or get us out of here?"

"You get outside this instant!" George screamed, pointing at the tent flap (once he located it), much like the father in the melodrama showing his errant daughter the door. His neck was a ridged field of popping veins, his eyes were bulging, his hands opening and shutting manically.

"No, really, Dad," Bert said, even more quietly. "Answer the questions. Or tell us what your plan is and how we're going to get out of here."

George responded with even more pointing, wobbling his arm for emphasis, and with some very impressive gargles and wet sputters.

Jinny tried to intervene with, "I think we're all understandably just a little bit—" but Bert cut her off.

"No, Mom, we're not just a little bit anything. Dad's trying to play the boss and I'm saying it's time we stopped listening to what he says, listening to *him*. Unless you can tell us some plan or some good reason—I'm not finished!—some good reason why you want us to just sit and obey you and all. . . ."

Bert looked directly at his apoplectic, crimsoned father and said, very slowly, "You don't have any idea what to do, Dad, and you don't care if you kill us all."

George finally got himself a little unstuck from his paralyzing rage, reached over and grabbed Bert by the collar of his jacket, dragged him right over the top of, first, Pam and, then, Jinny, and shoved him outside the tent.

Once escaped from the tent, Bert wrenched free and ran a little ways off. He wasn't afraid of his father's authority, but he was aware of his size and lack of physical restraint.

"Come here, you little yellow bastard."

Bert kept his distance and stared.

"How dare you say such things to me—your father? What has got into you?"

Bert felt himself becoming cooler and cooler, more relaxed and fully assured. George sensed some of that and felt wave after wave of humiliation sweep over him. He was dizzied, almost blinded by the sensation, but he held his ground.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I really am. I know you want to hit me, but I'm not going to let you."

George had no way to relax his anger, but he did feel a strong twinge at the idea of hitting his son. Bert was right. He wanted nothing more than to hit him, hurt him a lot. He even considered running after him or luring him to within grasping and striking range. Maybe if he talked sweetly to him, using strategies effective with dogs, drawing him closer, closer. . . .

Bert stood there quietly, hands at his sides, watching his father. At that moment, alert as he was, what Bert experienced was a mild exhilaration and a sense of relief: he knew he wouldn't go back on anything he had said, go back to being an instrument of his father's fantasies.

George had been feeling some of the thirst for physical violence drain from him, and he mistook that slight release for a happy return to reasonableness. Surely Bert would see that and submit. For all his cantankerousness, Bert had usually been a kid you could talk to, he recalled, forgetting that, in the past year or two, Bert had seldom or never been a kid he could talk to and get the results he counted on, the results he had every right to count on.

"Look, Bert. Okay, I won't hit you. I won't. Now, just listen to me. You don't have any choice, you know. You have to listen to me if you want to survive this. I'll get you out of here; I think you know that. I think you know that—surely you know that I've never let you down and that you need to listen to me in this. Especially now. When we're back home you can pretend you're a grown-up, but it's serious now and you just gotta listen to me. As

it is, you're just putting your mother in danger—and all the other kids, too. Think about it and stop being so selfish—that's all I'm asking."

"Give me one reason, one real reason, why I should listen to you," Bert said, calmly.

George immediately shot back to his homicidal mode. "Because I am your fucking father!" he screamed.

"Oh! How is it I knew that's what you'd say?" Bert said, allowing himself a safe taunt.

"I am your father and you don't have a choice. I certainly don't have to explain to you why you should listen to me. Imagine such a thing! You just have to. I am your father. You listen and obey. You hear me? Answer me!"

"I'll answer you. I don't think what you say makes any sense. Why should I listen to you if you don't have anything reasonable to say? Why should any of us listen to you?"

"Why should you?" George had now reached a level beyond screaming.

Bert, with true instincts of a combatant who knows he can safely taunt his now-defeated opponent, said, in a very low, sweetsie voice, "Yeah. Why should we? These are our lives. We are not you. You don't own us. We are not your lives."

"Yes, you are. That's precisely what you are. You are our responsibility, our charge. You are children, for God's sake: our children, our responsibility, not yours."

"We are too our own responsibility. I mean, if you're going to get us killed, why should we let you do it?"

"What in hell do you mean, Bert? Are you crazy? Get you killed? You been filling those other kids with this craziness?"

"You aren't getting us out of here. We can see that. You don't even care. You sit in the tent and make breakfast and force us to do games. You are killing us."

"You don't know the first thing—you don't know what you're talking about. Come here!"

"I'm staying where I am."

"Get over here, goddamn it! I'm telling you."

"No."

"I'm ordering you."

"No."

They stood looking at one another like kids (or adults) playing (or waging) war. George was beside himself and actually took two quick steps toward Bert. Bert saw it coming, took one step back, quickly enough to let George know, even through his frenzy, that he couldn't catch the kid and would be better off abandoning the idea of a dignity-ditching chase.

Finally, George collapsed. "Why do you hate me, son? You've always hated me. And I've tried to be good to you."

This was a lousy appeal and the lowest, but Bert had his limits and wasn't proof against it. As long as his father was direct and challenging, Bert could see clearly what lay before him. But this blubbering self-pity, this play on the child's ever-ready guilt, struck home, drew the boy to his side—for now, just metaphorically.

"I don't hate you, Dad. I don't. Not hate. I'm just trying to do what's right."

"I know, Bert," said George, actually breaking into tears and doing his best to cling (still from a distance) to the dry-eyed boy. "I respect that, and I'm proud of you. Let's just try together to do what's right—help one another."

Bert was silent, sensing danger but unable to recognize its features as it changed, or to jump out of its way.

"Okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

At that very moment, the kids, through Bert, were tussling with risks from which they had imagined themselves free. At one time almost out of reach, they were now being dragged back into a world of trust and comfort. They had tried that world and found it wanting. Recently, they had uncovered some of its threats, its lethal weapons.

But it was the world they knew, and abandoning it at one leap was like staying securely atop the wobbling two-wheeled bike first try. Here, Dad came running up behind to pick up the bike, straighten it, brush and pat, reassert his smiling right to be the balancer, the one holding the handlebars.

They'd have to start over. Watching Bert re-enter the tent with a grinning George's paw slung over his shoulder, the other kids clearly recognized the iconography of defeat. But they also saw in Bert's eyes that the defeat was tactical only. At least he was going to try and make it that way, a set-back on the way to victory. Maybe they couldn't charge straight at or through the enemy, but that didn't mean they couldn't go around, initiate a flanking maneuver.

George wasn't going to let the kids escape without both savoring and solidifying his victory. "Well then, everybody, we're all back on track, right?"

Bert winced and then winked very slightly, surreptitiously at Mim and Pam. Keegan, unhappily, was out of wink range and didn't understand at all when the other kids, led by Bert, said, "Right!" with a good deal of enthusiasm. "Exactly!" Bert added, but without extra emphasis.

Keegan could decipher Bert's signal, but he found it confusing. He didn't say, "Right!" and didn't think it was right at all.

"I don't think so, Mr. Jackson. What about my mom and dad, for instance? And what about just sitting around here having breakfast and stuff? I don't think that's being on track."

Keegan, though angry, couldn't sustain such rudeness all the way through a full pronouncement and added, "Sorry."

George immediately felt angry, almost as angry as he had with Bert, and would have launched into the same unanswerable diatribe, had not Bert cut him off.

"That's okay, Keegan. We all agree with you. Trust me." Bert looked at a deeply confused Keegan, knew he couldn't risk another wink, so added, "Please, buddy?"

Of course that did it. Even without the "please" it would have sealed it. For a "buddy," Keegan would have thrown himself in front of a bus.

"Okay," he said. looking, however, only at Bert and then at Mim and Pam, never at George.

George glanced left and right, like a talentless teen in a beginning acting class told to look left and then right, very quickly, registering and projecting alarm and confusion.

"No, it's not okay at all," he said to no one in particular, eager to assert his authority over—or place in—whatever it was that was happening.

Jinny had a very dim sense of what was going on, which was worse than having no sense at all. She thought she understood that George had bullied the kids into some sort of reluctant acquiescence. She supposed it was for their own good. Maybe. They had run off or some such thing. She wasn't sure exactly what had happened. She was mostly aware of feeling hot and weak, though she was now inside one of those rare moments of deep sickness when the pain had gone on vacation and left behind an aura of peaceful lassitude.

Looking at Bert with a vague sort of tenderness, she was struck by how very young he looked, not so little any more but very delicate. He had always been blessed (cursed?) with features that belied his self-reliance and, later, his rudeness: large eyes,

long eyelashes, tiny nose and ears. Even his teeth were small. He was much more than pretty. Was it really necessary to take so much away from him, so much pride and confidence, in order to keep him safe? That's what George had done, she just knew it.

Jinny had planned to remain silent throughout whatever was about to happen, as she certainly wasn't clear on what it was that might be happening or why—and lacked the energy, or interest, to figure it out. Still, she found it hard to see the little ones being cowed. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have minded much—not at all—but something quite odd was going on, both inside her and without. Suddenly it came to her that she was feeling all the tenderness for the little lambs simply because they were acting like little lambs. They so seldom did that. What was going on?

"Hey, kids," Jinny croaked. "Now that we're apparently all on the same track, maybe you could explain to me what track we're on and why you want to be on it?"

George looked at Jinny with some alarm, not because of what she had said, which made no sense to him, but because her voice was so very much in keeping with how she looked, such an accurate index of her physical state: drained and weakened beyond any easy or even predictable rejuvenation. George had, of course, seen her ill before, twice hospitalized for surgery. Even in recovery rooms, she had never been like this.

The kids seemed to have something of the same response, looked at her as if for the first time and saw something awful, exactly what George was seeing.

"Well, who goes first? Someone going to answer me or do we have to invent another goddamned game to get to that point?" Jinny spoke with what she imagined was remarkable sprightliness. For just a moment, she felt full of energy and thought she must surely be looking bright-eyed, pretty.

"Well, we just figured—" Bert began.

"That's okay, honey," George interrupted, leaving it uncertain whether Bert or Jinny was the honey in question.

"We just agreed, all of us," George maundered on, "to work together and get everything—"

George paused, not because he couldn't pluck a nostrum from his store and finish the sentence, but because he felt simultaneously the futility of it all and the terrible thing he had done to his wife. Forgetting that he had not directly inoculated Jinny with the flu virus, he laid that to his charge as well. He didn't care about the kids right then, nor did he see how well they functioned for him in the clichés-will-do-just-fine department. George felt sure that Jinny was dying, and he thought of himself as her killer.

He stood staring until Jinny started laughing. "Bear got your tongue, George?"

Bert finally rescued him. "We agreed to do things together, to get the hell out of here together, to find Mr. and Mrs. McDormitt together, too."

"Right," George said, wearily. "We'll get together and agree on everything. But now, kids, I am absolutely sure you are very tired after your long day."

George had never once asked what they had found, where they had gone, or why. None of that popped into his head. George's indifference to escape would have given the kids ample evidence of how worse than useless adult energies were going to be for them, had they needed such evidence. But they didn't.

They took the clue and went back to their tent. But not to sleep.

"I'm sorry, Bert," said Keegan, as soon as they all got into the tent. "I didn't understand what was going on right away, and so I said all that about—"

"Not your fault, Livya," Bert said, not smiling but looking at Keegan as if he mattered. "I was trying to wink at everybody, but I couldn't get your eye, you know. Where you were standing and all. Besides, it all went fine."

"Yeah, exactly," Pam said, loud enough so that the older kids looked worried.

"Exactly, Pam," Mim said. "Don't let the old folks know what we're up to."

Pam understood.

"Okay, we need a plan." Bert said this while looking expectantly at all the kids, ringed in a tight circle, all leaning in and scrunched up, butt-n-legs foldings. They looked back, just as expectantly at Bert. Nobody was impatient. They knew a plan would come.

"I've got s plan," popped up Keegan, risking a lot by being perky.

There were no prompts, so he launched into it.

"Let's go right back over there and say we've all talked about it, know that Mrs. Jackson is sick, but we aren't going to take any shit." He paused. "No, I mean, we'll say that we're tired of waiting around and need to go off to find my parents. Really go off, not just some walk around the campground yelling."

The other kids were delighted by the last phrase and for some reason got hysterical giggles over it. When they were over it, they politely turned to Keegan for more.

"We're going to look for my parents, see, and we will, only we'll also be looking for a way out, too. If we act mad and say we know your dad can't go because he has to take care of your mom, wouldn't that work?"

Yes, it would, they decided, so they went right over and found out that, no, it wouldn't.

What happened was that their expressions of combined outrage and concern convinced George that they were right, or at least needed to be pacified. Sick or not, Jinny could tend to herself. The rest of them would go out for eight hours, taking along a lunch. That would allow them to extend their survey far beyond what they had taken in so far. It would be extremely tricky, too, but George could hardly bring that argument up, knowing the kids would point out that sitting on their asses was far more risky—not risky at all, really, since all risk was erased by the certainty of death through inaction.

Thus, the kids found themselves saddled with George. The two little kids did anyhow. The plan was to release Bert and Mim to explore as they would, while George accompanied the tykes. He wouldn't spare them a long, weary hike, he promised, and told them all to get a good night's sleep.

"Tomorrow's the day," he announced cheerfully, as if something had been accomplished. "You little kids hit the sack and get lots of sleep. You big ones, too."

The kids were careful not to display their irritation, so careful that George mistook their silence for trust.

"Goodnight, my dearies," he called.

Nobody answered, though all heard and were touched. A little. Not enough to sway them from what they knew they must do, what they knew would happen.

As George, famished and fully exhausted, collapsed into his sleeping bag without undressing, the kids reconvened their squatting council.

"I'm sorry," Keegan said as soon as they got back to the tent, and he really was,

"No, Keegan, don't be sorry. It was a good plan. The thing about all plans is that you never really know, especially if they're

good plans. Anyhow, it's not like it didn't work. We wanted to let my parents know that we demanded action, needed it, and we wanted to get rid of them so we could explore on our own. Right?"

"Right!" Both Mim and Pam enthusiastically supported what Bert was saying, whatever it was, since it was so clearly designed to make Keegan feel better.

"No, I mean it," Bert said. "We got them off their asses, and we'll now have a real chance to get more than a piss-whiz distance from the camp. That's exactly what we needed, really wanted. The only thing I'm sorry about is that you and Pam will get stuck with my dad. Of course," he added after a short pause, "you all might find something vital—but it's still my dad. Anyhow, Keegan, I'm the one who should be sorry."

Keegan sensed that any direct acknowledgement of Bert's generosity would be bad, worse than bad, so he kept his mouth shut and shrugged, shooting only a one-eighth grin at Bert. Jinny had been right about the kid's instinct for cool.

"Do you think we're going to get out of here?" Pam asked anybody who would answer her.

Bert waited for Mim, knowing that she'd do better with Pam and also suspecting that she had a better line on the real answer.

Mim leaned over and put her hand on Pam's shoulder but didn't hug her. "I won't lie to you, dearie. I doubt it. We've been looking for days now, trying to find a way out without getting ourselves even more tangled, more lost."

Pam nodded.

Mim went on. "I think your dad and mom were right to try their plan and keep us close to camp, but it just didn't work. There aren't any searchers around these parts about to come upon us or anything like that, And we've looked and looked and we're still stuck here, getting colder and with the food running out, must

be. And we didn't find my parents, they didn't find us, and we're worse off than we were. Your mom and dad are pretty weak now. Your mom's sick and I think your dad is, too, though he tries to hide it. Anyhow, something's wrong with him, we can all see that."

Mim stopped abruptly, and nobody else wanted to continue for a minute. It should have been Bert that took up the story, but instead it was Keegan, willing to try and take some of the pressure of truth-telling off Bert.

"So what I think, Pam, is that we have to find a way tomorrow or Tuesday. Tomorrow's Monday, I think—that's what my sister said, I mean, that's about as long as we have, 'cause your parents are getting weaker and other stuff. We are going to have to get them down the mountain, you see. And we don't know how to get down the mountain ourselves. Right, Mim?"

Mim nodded. "Right. You see, Pam—we really need to find my parents. That's first of all. But even if we do, they probably will be weak and beat up, so they will just make matters worse. When we finally get down we can send those search and rescue people up to help them."

The other kids all registered, sharp and plain, that Mim regarded her parents' death as certain. The adult McDormitts would not be adding to their problems.

"But what Keegan was saying," Pam continued, "that's the main thing, for sure. What with the food running out and the cold and your parents getting a lot weaker, we have only about two days, you're right, before we'll just have to make a run for it, set off and hope we end up getting somewhere safe instead of just more lost. Almost for sure, that won't work, just hoping to walk out; so unless we find a way today or tomorrow, I think we won't make it."

Pam looked satisfied. "Do you think we'll find a way out today or tomorrow?"

"Well, Bert said, hoping to ease things a little without doing the cheery lying things adults always do, "we haven't found anything yet, Pam. That's true, but we're going farther out today, so who knows? Maybe we will."

"They brought us up here to kill us and now they're going to do it," Pam said.

Nobody disagreed, but nobody seemed particularly alarmed either. It was very hard to think they were dying when they felt so very much alive. Never had any of them been so attached, close-tied to friends who really were friends, who had stopped working to estrange all those who approached them. Life had never contained so much for them, held out so many promises. Tough-minded as they were, it didn't make much sense to think of all the lights going out. Somebody had just flipped them on.

"You know," Pam finally said, "if we aren't going to get out of here, we ought to do everything now we would have done later on. I mean, who not?"

Keegan giggled. "Like what, Pam?"

"Drugs, you know, and cigarettes. Marijuana cigarettes and crack. Liquor and beer. And sex."

"Sex?" Mim said, shocked. "You want to have sex, Pam?"

"I mean, why not?" Pam said. "What makes the difference? I mean, I won't get a baby in me or anything."

Bert looked at his little sister as if he'd never seen her before. He had barely registered the fact that she was female, having always regarded his flat-chested and strange little sibling as a rough companion, spooky but game for anything. Game for anything, but not sex, for God's sake!

Keegan was so embarrassed he turned a kind of turkey-wattle red. He hardly ever blushed, but now he bloomed.

Only Mim took Pam seriously now, once the startle had passed, and appeared to consider her statement as a proposal, on the table and up for a vote, possible action. The others could see that she was pondering, which ruled out mocking Pam or turning the whole thing off with a joke. Besides, what jokes could be made to fit? And who wanted to mock Pam?

Pam seized the opening. "I mean, maybe not sex exactly, but whatever we want to do—anything. What makes the difference anyhow? I mean—what makes the difference?"

Mim finally spoke out. "But for me, Pam, it'd have to be more than 'what makes the difference.' We can do something because we don't see any reason why we shouldn't. Or we can do something because we want to."

"Or both," Bert said.

"Both, yeah," Mim said at once. "That's what I mean, both. We don't have to do things just because other people, like parents, are ordering us to stop or not do something But we can do something, we can do it and we can want to. That's what I meant by 'both.' Exactly." She smiled.

"Or neither," Keegan said. Then he looked round the circle and added, "I don't mean we can't and don't want to. Maybe. I just meant maybe neither, too."

It was quiet for a minute. Everybody was waiting for Mim to speak. The boys had uttered the syllables they had at their command on this subject, and Pam had made her uncomplicated enthusiasm crystal clear. It was up to Mim.

Mim saw clearly what was going on. She and Pam were way ahead of the boys, not in eagerness especially, but in the ability to talk easily and directly about sex. It wasn't that they knew more; it was just that they hadn't been subjected to that particular and strict male coding of sex, the one which made sex the obligatory topic but only within a framework of blunt irony and coarseness.

The male sexual discourse, thrusting itself on both Bert and Keegan, didn't fit them comfortably, was far more conventional and protective than were either of the boys. It allowed otherwise straightforward kids nothing but the languages of giggle, peak, and sneak, along with, on occasion, the attendant activities. To respond to a pretty girl (or boy) by saying, "Hey, there's nothing to keep us from having sex and, since I want to and figure you feel the same, let's do it—so long as you're sure," was beyond the range of their language, though certainly not of their feelings.

Mim sensed that both boys needed time to locate some words that would tell them how they stood. She also knew that they needed to find some level of comfort with the very notion of "having sex," more exactly of admitting to themselves that they had little idea what "having sex" might mean.

True, the girls didn't really know exactly what "having sex" might mean, but they found the uncertainty provocative and fun. The boys didn't know what "having sex" might mean, and they weren't sure that uncertainty wasn't alarming, threatening.

To give them that time, Mim said, winking at Pam, "Well, why don't we just sleep on it."

"Or with it, Pam said, for once acting like the little kid she was. "Get it? Get it? Sleep with it? You know like having sex with it? People say they're sleeping with somebody—so, instead of sleeping *on.* it, we're sleeping *with* it."

"Now, that's real funny, Pam," said Bert, for once glaring at somebody other than Keegan, "and makes no sense at all."

"Well, Pam said, babbling through her own uproarious laughter, "it would if you did it!"

Keegan started laughing, too, and Mim as well, so Bert gave up, guessing he was cast among lunatics. Without more talk, they all curled up in their sleeping bags, and went asleep—either with it or on it.

George, meanwhile, was urging Jinny to eat, with new sincerity. He argued that she needed strength to fight off the bug she was hosting. For some reason, the anger of the kids, unreasonable and annoying as it was, had injected him with something like hope. Maybe the next day would, indeed, bring with it new bearings and new directions—new possibilities. He entertained no idea that it would bring them Nicole and Dave. He wouldn't have especially minded if it did, but he wasn't concerned about them—they weren't part of the pictures in his head. He just wanted out of that campsite and away from the guilt that was drenching him.

Jinny shared none of his resurrected feeling, was, in fact, more repulsed by her husband and his selfish delusions than by the image of death. There were times, in her fever, when she so hated George that she really did think death would be preferable. Death—hers or his. Either? Both? Now that he was carrying on about getting out of here, she was absolutely certain it didn't matter.

"Look, George, what we decided was that we'd get our kicks by being martyrs, grandly starving ourselves and leaving behind affecting notes. You forget that?"

"Well, okay. I know we were talking sort of like that. I just think, honey, that there's new—"

"There's new nothing—not a goddamned thing. There's not even new shit. You can't even come up with new ways to be an idiot, a fucking self-absorbed, self-satisfied, ingrown idiot. I'm surprised at you, George, deeply disappointed. You used to have such a fertile store of idiot roles. Now, you just sashay back to the same old lines and attitudes Johnny-One-Note. Here you go again."

"Well, conditions change, my dear."

"No, they don't. Not ours. Conditions are the same as they were last week, the week before. Snowed in, we're not, lost, we are—and we're still sitting here, starving ourselves so we won't think of how we've slaughtered our kids—pointlessly."

"Don't say that. You're just feeling sick, feverish. So eat something and you'll see things differently."

Jinny stared at him. She hoped he knew she was staring at him with pure disgust—but George didn't. He thought he had said something that had made a difference, a vital difference, and that his magic words had brought her to her senses.

"Here, sweetheart. I'll start you with some tea and toast—a little dried beef and apricots."

"George, how can I say this so you'll understand? I don't want to be fattened up so the starving will take longer. I'm sure such a program fits perfectly into your imbecilic scenario, but it wouldn't make sense to any decent person."

"What I'm saying, Ginny," said George, at last a little nettled, "is that there probably is no need to starve."

Jinny was getting tired, felt very weak and even hotter than usual. She just wanted George to shut up. It wasn't that she thought she could sleep, and it wasn't that arguing with George didn't take her mind off her misery for a little bit. But she much preferred that misery to talking with George.

George again mistook her silence for wavering. "Jinny, if you'll just give me a chance."

Jinny roused herself for the last time that evening. "George, try real hard to get this. It really shouldn't be that much of a challenge, even for you. No, I won't. I don't want to give you a chance. If you were in a hovering helicopter right now, ready to fly me to safety, I'd jump off a cliff. I want to be alone, and I want you right now to go fuck yourself."

And with that the two called it a night.

MONDAY

"Mr. Jackson," Mim said, "I know how much you like to keep things organized and timed. I can see that, and we've all gone by that sort of plan every time we went out to find Mom and Dad or find a way home."

George was deeply hurt, for some reason, much more than he had been by his wife's expressions of loathing.

"I just think," he said, making no effort to disguise his wounded tone, "we should know what we're doing before we start, that's all. If you think it's better to be ignorant about—"

"I just want to find my parents," Mim cut in.

George was stopped dead, had no answer for that, just stood there looking piteous.

Mim paid no attention to what he looked like. "I want to find my parents, and I don't care about the time. Let's just set out and look all day—or as long as it takes."

Jinny roused herself and croaked, "Jesus yes, George. What do you suppose you're protecting us from, anyhow? What have your plans accomplished?"

George felt even more like crying: he was being so unfairly hounded. "My only concern is—I am only trying to keep us all safe. Is that so wrong? That's all I ever wanted."

"Dad," Bert said, not unkindly, "we know that. But we don't think we can go on doing the same little things every day. We think we need to take some risks, if we have to, and find Mr. and Mrs. McDormitt and then find a way down the hill."

George looked even more wretched when Pam, his own daughter and hardly more than a baby, chimed in, "Besides, you haven't exactly kept us safe, really."

There was no need for Pam to enumerate the points and degrees of danger into which George had led them—led them straight into danger and then walled them inside.

At that point George gave up, surrendered a great deal he would never regain. But he didn't give up owning the last word or the right to announce what they were to do, even when what they were to do was not of his imagining.

"Okay, so we'll all go out and see what we can find. We'll report back here—when we get back."

Bert tried one last time: "Why don't you stay here with Mom and take care of her, get her better. Then, when we find something, we can get out a lot easier."

But it was hopeless, and George even managed to divide them up into hunting parties of just the sort he liked. Almost. He suggested that he and Mim form one team, Bert and the two little ones another. That was a rearrangement of last night's groups and it showed he was thinking—alert and moving forward.

The groupings he announced made a certain sense from one point of view, though it was exactly what the kids didn't want. Bert didn't see how to argue the point, though, and was about to resign himself to yet another wasted day, when Mim broke in.

"No, absolutely not. Those are strange groups, and what we have to have now are the best groups we can manage. Bert and I have worked together real well, and so have Pam and Keegan. There's no reason to break any of that up at this point. That's what we had set up last night, and we should stick with it—those groups like I said. I agree with Bert that you should stay here and get Mrs. Jackson strong, George. We all ate a big breakfast except her and you. Both of you just stay here and eat, get your strength back up."

Mim had hoped her cheeky use of "George," added to her perfectly reasonable appeal, would clinch the deal—but as soon as it

was out of her mouth, she saw that the last bit about eating had given this wretch no choice. What with his idiotic fake martyrdom, how was he going to agree to just stay here and eat?

And he didn't fall for it.

He simply set off toward what should have been the downhill, the area that had been investigated twice before, the general direction from which—maybe—they had come so long ago. With him were Keegan and Pam.

Bert and Mim went straight toward what they figured was the second promising flat area, separated from the other party by an angle less than forty-five degrees. They knew that within a mile they would be a long way from George and the little kids and might hit a different route to the downhill they had used to get here. They were prepared to mark trees with chops and separate for short periods to investigate. To go a long way: that was the main plan. See what new vistas they could find, what paths downhill. Neither party said anything about finding any living beings. They were more focussed than that, wanted for now only a path.

When they had gone just a little more than fifty yards, Pam reached up and tugged violently on George's coat sleeve.

"Why don't I stay here with Mom?"

George looked closely at her, surprised that she wanted out of the expedition.

"If you want to, honey."

"No, I don't want to. I want to go. I just think somebody should be here, you know, in case she gets real sick; somebody should take care of her. Besides, something might come and attack her."

This put a different light on things. If Jinny really did need protecting, why on earth would anyone leave little Pam to do it?

There was no choice but to assume Jinny was just fine and that Pam should keep with her present group.

George did wonder if Jinny really were fine and wondered, too, for the first time, about how vulnerable she was, there all by herself, as they put miles and miles of distance between the healthy ones and the hurt, stuck back in the campsite on this long-searching day. All at once, the nightmare bears returned to haunt him and he realized how much he'd hate to be left behind, to be all alone, like a hot dish in an untended cafeteria. But it was Jinny, not he. He now had company, even if it was the company of tots, and that made him feel something close to safe.

Let Jinny fend for herself, sleep all day or something, anything that would put her in a better frame of mind. Right then, George really didn't care if Jinny were comforted or not, if she got well or not, even if she were in danger from claws and fangs.

So he told Pam that her mom wanted to get a whole day's sleep, which was what she needed to get all better. So she should be left alone. He couldn't tell if Pam believed him—she didn't seem to—but he was relieved when she fell into step as they left the clearing and went into the forest. Maybe this was the forest that led to another clearing, that led to a nice downhill path, one marked, "This Way Out. It'll Be Very Easy. Watch Your Step."

"Don't go so fast, kids. We have all day."

They did have all day, or not quite, in which to venture out into new territory, to put themselves far from the camp and the life they knew.

Bert and Mim made their way across a fair amount of ground pretty quickly. The snow covering was now, even at its very thickest, no more than routine, postcard-quality scenic, so spotty overall it was not always reliable for what they needed, which was tracking. Bert was being careful to hack away at passing

trees, soon getting the hang of it, making a nice visible slicing mark that was clean, shallow, and easy to spot, that probably didn't hurt the tree (though what would he know about that?) and that he could manage to lop off with a single wrist-flick, hardly breaking stride. He also realized quickly it'd be good to share this altogether fun chore with Mim, who caught on at least as fast as had Bert.

So they went onwards, quietly, passing the small camp axe back and forth.

"Mim?"

"Yeah, Bert? I wondered when we were going to start planning, when you were going to loosen your tongue."

"You coulda started."

"Oh, sure, and have you get all whining and sobbing 'cause I took over the male's job."

They both laughed.

"Anyhow, Mim you bossy manly bitch, I think we should plan what we're going to say to the kids, if we don't find anything today and they don't either."

"Yeah. It's funny, isn't it. I mean, I agree with you that we should plan what we'd have to say, but it's really not like we have to hide anything from them. They're really something. Not like they're pissing and whining and all."

Bert laughed.

Mim continued, "But we should figure out about how long we're going to keep doing this, sending out these scouting parties from that camp."

"I'm sick of that camp," Bert said.

Mim, who was leading, turned around and looked at him. Bert stopped at once, startled by the expression on Mim's face.

"Say that again."

"What—say what again? Oh, I said I was sick of the camp. And you're goin' to say, 'Will you listen to yourself. Nobody gives a shit whether you're sick of it or not. You think that matters? This is not about you, handsome and—handsome as you are, just try and keep your mind on what's important.'"

Mim stared at him. He wondered if that "handsome" stuff has been a big mistake. He wasn't sure. He'd meant it as a stupid joke; maybe it was just stupid, embarrassing. Anyhow, he couldn't tell if her expression had changed.

"You were going to say that, right, Mim?"

"Yes," she said.

Bert wondered if he should be hurt.

He was still wondering when Mim side-stepped and pushed him into the lead. He hadn't taken five steps when he felt something on his butt—a hand, rubbing his butt. He didn't say anything, figuring it couldn't be that but knowing it was.

"Hold on a minute," Mim said. Then she softly hiked up Bert's coat, shirt, long undershirt, took hold of the waistband of his pants, pulled it hard toward her, and then wedged her hand down inside his underpants and cupped one cheek of his bare bum. They kept walking, kind of, for several steps, while she fondled one cheek and then the other, then she found a soft bit of flesh twiddled with it a minute and then pinched it—hard.

"That makes us even," she said.

"Even?" Bert said. "I've never played with your ass."

"Maybe not, but you've dreamed about it, so that really does make us even. You gotta grant that. In fact, you're still ahead, so turn around. Now suck in your fat gut."

Mim waited several beats, figuring Bert might wonder what on earth she was going to do, though it seemed to her obvious. I mean, what else was he expecting?

So she stuck both hands over his belt loops on either side and yanked downward, being mildly careful not to take down anything but pants.

Bert at once made to pull them up.

"Don't you even think about it, handsome. This is what I wanted to see, you in your super-clean white briefs. How do you keep them so clean?"

"God, Mim."

"You are so pretty, Bert—not just your underpants, though I cannot tell you how often I've pictured just this scene."

"Oh."

"Oh? Aren't you at least a little bit embarrassed, being so close to being bare-assed? Get it? Get it?"

"You want me bare assed?"

"No, Bert. Then you'd just want to play doctor. But my God are you sexy there, just as you are."

Bert wasn't sure what he was to do now. He hadn't even considered reciprocity, knew Mim was counting on him to keep it all safe, just a game—a joke. Was she?

Mim had no idea what she was expecting, what she'd planned. She didn't even know she was acting out a long-suppressed fantasy connected to Bert and his jockey shorts. But she didn't feel ashamed, didn't want to retract anything.

She was ready to drop her own pants, should Bert even hint at it. But she knew he wouldn't. So, she kept him facing away from her, playing more with his butt, kneading it and, after a minute, lowering his garments so she could get to his naked flesh.

But only at the rear—and only for another minute or two. Somehow she knew she had been right, just as it was right at this moment to let him re-clothe himself, hike things up, rezipper, and get on their way.

Once Bert was all set, he turned and grinned at Mim. A good many things had changed between them, all of them good. Still, they both knew enough to keep things just at that point, not to extend too far, too soon.

After a few minutes of walking, Mim said, "Hold on."

Bert turned at once, grinning.

"No, not for ass play, Bert. I was thinking about what you were saying the other day. What we were both saying. Any time we let your parents in on the plans, they take them over, your dad does, and holds on. He manages to keep things somehow the same, always the same. They look different, but nothing changes.

"Yeah." Bert signaled that he was listening and agreeing.

"Well, we've got to separate from them. I mean any plan we have has to be without them. Secret."

"Right," Bert said. "Or we could let Pam loose on them. She'd knife them in their sleep."

"Little sweet-hearted killer, isn't she?" Mim said, and then added, "or I sometimes think Pam just understands way more than the rest of us do."

"She may," Bert said. "She's always been a little geeky. No, not geeky so much as kind of tough. I can't remember her ever being scared, you know, like a little kid, or running away from something. She wouldn't hide her eyes even in the real scary parts of those horror movies I'd take her to. I would, but she wouldn't.

"Keegan used to, but not anymore," Mim said.

"Yeah, we're lucky."

"Lucky?" Mim said.

"Well, they could be could for sure be two ass pains for us, but they're not," Bert said.

"I like them," Mim said.

"Yeah."

"So, if we do this without your parents, Bert, then I think that means—"

"We sneak out."

"Leave them behind."

"Yeah."

"I also think we should plan on leaving Wednesday," Mim said, "give ourselves today and tomorrow to look about us and then just the four of us get out of here the best way we can. Just leave your parents here and go. We have to."

"Wednesday." Bert thought about going a little more slowly, but he wasn't resisting. "Okay. Wednesday. Yeah, two days for us to look and then we get the kids together and we all get out of here. By ourselves. Exactly!"

Mim nodded.

What with all the talking, they hadn't advanced all that far from camp. The ground where they happened to be seemed pretty level, but the clearing had ended and they were in a pine forest, friendly enough for walking right where they were, as the trees were not all that close together and the spaces were easy to negotiate. But they could see almost nothing of the land ahead and felt a little impatient with terrain that gave no sign of up or down.

"I have an idea," Bert said.

Mim walked a couple of steps up to him and stopped.

"Nobody's really tried to track the direction your parents went last week. I mean nobody's gone very far that way. I think my mom and Keegan sort of did, but that was one of those forty-five minute game hikes."

Mim's eyes widened and brightened.

"Anyhow, I don't think this line we're hiking on, following, isn't going much of anyplace. Why don't we two go back to camp, close to it, and try that way—the way your parents went. I think I know just where it was."

Mim appreciated it that Bert said nothing about finding her mother and father, the missing, the lost. They were going that way only because it had, oddly, been neglected in all the rescue missions. Maybe nobody wanted to see what might still be there.

But Mim and Bert were now much beyond such routine squeamishness and didn't mind seizing a new possibility, even if they didn't bother saying or asking what made this newness attractive to them.

In no time at all, they were close enough to camp to start feeling the effects of some worry about being discovered. Without thinking much why they were creeping, they crept slowly and whispered until they had satisfied themselves that they were now safe, far enough away and tracing the route Nicole and Dave had thundered down the week before.

Before long they reached the thicket of menacing limbs that had blinded the inept adults. Working their way slowly through the dense, clogged brambles, they instinctively slowed even more, to a crawl, careful to protect one another from backlashing branches and from roots set to trip.

They were, as it happens, less than twenty yards from where Dave and Nicole had so hilariously bulled through, and they were approaching the same cliff.

"No wonder your parents got lost, Mim. There'd be no way to find anything in here."

"That's true, isn't it?" Mim said, trying not to feel hopeful. After all, finding a good reason for them being lost was not exactly the same as finding them.

When these two, like their predecessors, emerged suddenly from the thicket and saw ahead of them nothing but open air and a disappearing floor, they were startled but in no danger of going over. They had been advancing so cautiously, it almost seemed as if they had anticipated this trap.

"Careful!" they both shouted.

"Jesus, look at that!" said Mim, advancing close enough to the edge to see that it was an edge.

"This is a cliff. Watch out, Bert!" She moved to hold him with a hug.

"Yeah," Bert said, content to stay back from the edge—"watch out for the snow up here, might be slippery."

They started kicking away the snow, moving forward by inches and examining carefully the ground as they moved. They were both thinking the same thing and both keeping silent about it—for the same reason.

As they got to the edge, they saw how quickly the ground gave way: a short and very steep slope, followed by no slope at all.

It was a bright sky by then, but not blinding. They looked toward the bottom, searching for what they figured they couldn't see, hoping they couldn't see.

"There's something down there," Bert said. "See that? Something's moving."

"I think so—yes, I do," Mim said, excited by the movement.

At about the same time, they both recognized and announced, "Birds."

That was all they could see, the birds. It is a peculiarity of human eyesight, well-aimed and well-intentioned eyesight even, that it can identify insignificant movement and miss larger and more prominent stasis. The two children made out the birds of prey pretty quickly and failed to register the final remains of the much larger corpses on which they were feeding.

George found himself gaining energy as he walked. The kids were moving along slowly, held back by George's careful trail-labeling. They were also resting quite often, George being careful

(and vocal) about respecting the kids' limited resources. The pace, when there was one, was not a lot better than snail.

Their crawl-along reflected George's obsessive concern about marking the trail and marshaling energy; he had no real interest in getting anywhere. I mean, where was there to get?

There was only one axe in the camp, now with Bert and Mim, so George had brought along a bunch of toilet paper, small bits of which he tore off and poked onto tree twigs as they passed, careless of the littering (though he did actually think about it). It occurred to him that the weather allowed this absurd bit of woodsmanship. It was so warm and still that even this method, nicely suited for posting "Kitty Lost" signs in the suburbs, worked just fine.

The only problem was that in areas between the trees there was now so little snow, and that so patchy, George worried about how they would be able to retrace. He spent so much time stopping the kids and discussing this difficulty that even these two polite twerps became impatient and started giving him orders. He tried to find it all amusing—didn't.

"Look, Mr. Jackson," Keegan said, a little shrilly, "these open place things aren't all that big anyhow, so seems to me all we have to do is look for your paper signs when we cross. Exactly. I mean, how hard can that be?"

"Yeah, Dad. Let's keep going. You put those toilet-paper things all over anyhow. We'll find them. I have an excellent sense of direction, you know."

The last part Pam had said with a grin that was not calculated to be winning but still had that effect.

George decided they were right. Well, he didn't think they were right, but he couldn't just then devise any way to solve the problem of the open spaces, so he took the best available option

and pretended to give in, good-natured old sweet lummox that he was. The kids didn't seem fooled.

They'd been out a good two hours, moving through (and sitting on) remarkably uniform landscape. Sometimes up, sometimes down, clearing briefly for a while and then back into the pine trees. What with some doubling back and side-trip checks of false leads, they had managed to put surprisingly little distance between themselves and camp. Probably for that reason, they seemed to be on a treadmill, looking at the same grass and rocks and dark woods. The world around them was neither promising nor discouraging, and somehow the feeling that they were moving onward, however slowly, without running into any obstruction or positive indication that they were going nowhere seemed cause for something like cheer.

"What do you say we stop for a little mid-morning snack, kids? You've been going flat-out and deserve a treat."

When the kids looked anything but celebratory, George added, "You know what flat-out means?"

Pam, driven by sheer kindness, said, "No, Dad, what does flat-out mean?" Keegan shifted from one foot to the other but didn't otherwise register his impatience.

"Well, you see students, it's a term from car racing, yes it is, meaning that you are blasting ahead, going as fast as you can, putting the pedal to the metal, and not letting up, even for the sharpest and most dangerous curves."

Both kids imitated sounds of gratitude, so happy for the enlightenment.

"But Mr. Jackson," Keegan finally said, "we're really not at all tired or anything—hungry, I mean. Can we save the treats for later on, when we'll be hungry and all?"

"Well, okay," George said, peering ahead and seeing what seemed to be a fairly steep rise, an upward slant that maybe went

into deeper, more tangled brush and trees. "I just figured you might need some fuel for the climb, but that's fine."

"Do you need to rest, Dad?"

"Thanks, Pam. I'm fine. But—" Here another time-waster appropriate to the role he was playing struck George. "But, to pass the time, why don't we play this game as we hike. It's called 'I Got a Secret,' and what you do is give some clues about a real, true secret you have. The other two get twenty questions that you can answer yes or no, you see, and try to figure out what your secret is."

"What?" Pam said.

"Well, for instance, maybe my secret could be—just for instance, you know—that I smoke cigars when I'm by myself and no one's looking. I could say, 'My secret concerns a bad habit I'm sneaking around about and not telling anybody, not a soul.' " George stopped talking a minute to catch his breath. The kids were leading him uphill awfully fast, mercilessly.

"So then," he finally said, just before the kids interrupted his sweet explanation with questions, "you two would ask me things, like, 'Have you been doing this for more than a year?' Or 'Does it cost a lot of money?' You'd see if you could narrow it down and then, finally, guess what it was. The person whose secret it is"—here more puffing—"keeps count of the number of questions, since the max is twenty. Can we pause just a minute here. I'm a little out of breath."

George couldn't tell if the kids were interested in the game. He couldn't really tell anything at all about them, which was one reason he had thought up this game—or recalled it. The game was no more than a device for prying into them, their secrets, all along pretending it was harmless fun. What a lousy thing to do! George considered that point but decided it was not even close to the other lousy things he had done recently.

George went first in the game and managed to stump them. He had also slowed down the pace a little, which was unplanned but fine by him.

George's secret was that he often snuck downstairs at night and ate ice cream, sneaking back to the freezer to replace it the next day or two so nobody would notice. Once he had replaced cookie dough ice cream with chocolate chip by mistake and had almost been caught, when Bert loudly complained about the switcheroo.

The closest Pam and Keegan had come to guessing the secret was, "Messing things up" and "Taking drugs."

Pam went next and gave as her clue, "something I did at K-Mart a long long time ago, when I got my first Justin Bieber hair clip, the one with his picture on it that Mom said I couldn't have."

Keegan's first guess was, "You stole it!" Which turned out to hit the nail on the head.

"Some sleuth!" George yelled, still panting, as they marched pretty steadily uphill. "Your turn now, young Sherlock."

Keegan stopped climbing, so the other two did also, Pam reluctantly, George gratefully.

"Okay, I got it," Keegan finally said, his face locked in an unfamiliar pained and serious expression. "The secret has something to do with what I've been thinking."

"Does it have to do with sex? I'll bet that's it, exactly—?" Pam asked, not giggling.

"No," said Keegan, giggling.

"Something you've been thinking," George said, prompting himself and having not then first idea what to ask. "Does it have to do with school?"

"No, Keegan said, giggling again.

"Are you thinking about getting a tattoo?" Pam asked.

Keegan, thinking of X, looked at her with some alarm, realized quickly that Pam was not about to blow their secret, and said, half-giggling again, "No!"

"With sports," George asked, feebly.

"No."

"How about giving us another clue, Keegan, cause we're never gonna just guess what's in your head."

"Really, Pam? You know what's in my head—but okay, what I'm thinking about is what we're doing—right now, I mean."

"With this game?" Pam asked.

"No. I mean what we're doing, looking."

"Is your secret, Keegan, that we'll manage to find a way out?" asked George.

"No," said Keegan quietly.

"Is it that we're going to get killed?"

"Pam!" George said, truly shocked.

"Not that, Pam," Keegan said.

Neither George nor Pam could come up with other guesses that were not stupid. Actually, they would not have minded stupid; they couldn't think of anything period.

"Tell us," they both finally said. "We give up."

"I think we're not going to find my mom and dad. I think they're dead," Keegan said.

"Oh, no they're not," George said quickly. "Oh Keegan—we'll locate them or maybe they'll locate us first. They're not dead at all, not even close to it."

Pam looked at Keegan, moved a little closer to him, and said, "Yes, they are. You're right."

"Come now," George said, "we have every reason to believe they're perfectly safe and sound, just holing up. Keep your hope alive, kids!"

Keegan looked blankly at him, put his arm around Pam, and then just stood there. The two kids then turned to one another.

George felt suddenly so distant from the children and all they thought and knew. It was as if he were caught in a tableau, a frozen grouping that spoke clearly to others, were there others to observe it, of what was going on and what had been transpiring, of why they were all here, and of what hope they might have of being released.

Finally, it was Pam who broke the silence. "I think Keegan had the best secret, and I don't want to play that game anymore."

George was so eager to break ranks, get out of the picture, that he started to move ahead at what was, for him, a quick pace, grabbing the lead from the kids for the first time since leaving camp, some two miles or so back. He stopped only to fix some scraps to trees and then very nearly jogged in order to stay in front of the steadily advancing children.

He soon lost his overpowering panic and the corresponding need to cover a lot of ground. The mountain they had been climbing turned out to be only a moderately steep hill, soon leveling off but without displaying any clear views. More and more forest, one group of trees looking just like the last group of trees.

It seemed increasingly strange that they had gone even this far and encountered nothing significantly different from the landscape from which they had started. George had really never expected to find anything useful, such as the missing friends or an identifiable escape route, but he did think new and interesting landscape features were in the offing.

He settled into a steady, bored pace, paying no attention to the kids walking behind beyond hazily registering that they were there. He could tell that by the steady murmur of their talk. What on earth did they find to talk about? He pondered for a moment whether these two might be friends, and if so, what common

ground they might conceivably find. What shared ground was available to ten-year-olds, or whatever they were? (He could have dug deep into his memory for their ages, but didn't have interest enough to shovel.) He was thinking about dinner, figuring there was food enough for another feast before they had to institute a camouflaged but severe rationing program and foist it on the children.

The kids behind were entertaining their usual topics: movies, music, pseudo-sex, other kids, ways out of here, and death. They both knew, without saying it, that any expedition with an adult was not going to accomplish much, unless they could figure a way to spring free and explore on their own.

"We could pretend to be hungry, Keegan, and tell him to stop so we could go look for firewood and just leave him there, go off on our own and hell with him—you know, exactly."

Keegan wasn't surprised any more by much that Pam said, but this scheme surprised him. "He might not be very good at finding his way back and when he did, what would we say?"

"Well, Keegan, let me think. These trees are getting a lot thicker. We could just say this, that we got ourselves lost and had to come back another way."

"Yeah," said Keegan, seriously considering. "Maybe we'd better say we're tired and getting cold and that's why we want a fire. I bet he didn't bring anything for lunch that needs cooking, so that wouldn't work so good, telling him we need to get firewood cause we're hungry, I mean."

"You're right," Pam said. "Was that a noise?"

"What noise?" Keegan asked.

They both stopped walking and listened.

"Nothing, I guess," Pam said.

"So, should we?"

"Yeah, we tell him we're cold and hungry and then we'll ditch him," said Pam.

"Okay—exactly," said Keegan, overcome suddenly with the giggles.

"He's got pretty far ahead," Pam said, than she started to yell, pretty loud, "Daaaya—" but also broke down in. A body-rocking, all-consuming laugh attack.

"Mr. Jackson!" Keegan finally got out a pretty good trumpeting yell, Pam now doubled over and holding her sides, tears running down her cold-red cheeks.

George heard, turned around just in time to see it come out of the thick woods, moving steadily, not running, toward the kids.

Pam saw it last, became aware of something behind her only when Keegan pushed her firmly aside, running past her, the wrong way and shouting something that sounded like." Nooooo! Yaaaiiiee! Goooo!"

Pam finally located it more distinctly, the pretty face of the bear, walking on all fours toward her, as if it wanted to be petted.

She caught herself wondering why Keegan was yelling at the bear, running at it and waving his arms wildly. After all, the bear was so close anyhow. What good would yelling do, if it wanted to do something bad to them?

And it did.

But not in any special way to Keegan. When the boy got close enough, whooping and wind-milling his arms, the bear finally turned toward him deliberately, rose again briefly but now to a half-stand and growled out the first noise to issue from it. Then it made a slow, playful swipe at her friend, hitting him right on the side of his snow cap. The bear looked like he was just shooing a fly he really couldn't find it in his heart to do more than wave away.

Keegan suddenly began to fly, moving upwards from the ground like a Fourth of July rocket and then landing several feet away, right at the bottom of a tree. Pam was looking at Keegan, not the bear, feeling very anxious and then relieved to see that he had not banged into the trunk, really, only the ground, still covered with enough snow to offer a little protection.

Then it was on her. Before she knew it her face was crammed roughly right against its belly and she was being hugged, but very tightly. The fur was not soft but kind of wiry. It smelled mostly like dirt but a little like her Uncle Wallace, who had hugged her once after being outside running. She felt herself then being swung around real fast, like when she was a little kid and some adult would play merry-go-round with her, whirling her in a circle. Only now something was happening to her loose arm. And she could feel something very hard on her head, right through her hat and her hair.

Then she knew the bear was hurting her, very bad. Somehow her other arm seemed more free now and the bear was still there. She pulled back as hard as she could and punched the bear in the belly. But it didn't go away. It was like her hair was coming off and she couldn't feel anything in her one arm. Then it was all dark.

George saw it happening, saw Keegan try to draw the bear to himself, only to be swatted aside like an insect, saw Pam attacked almost before she could turn around. George didn't feel at all as if he were inside his nightmare, but still he just stood there for several seconds without moving. It wasn't that he was doing no more than watching, he told himself, but that's what he did—watched the bear as it started to maul, tear at Pam.

He saw the child flung upwards, as the bear obscenely stripped her with its claws, tearing off her pants, bringing blood out fast from her thigh and leg and then slashing at her shoulder. The

shoulder seemed to loosen, somehow, and the arm to extend itself—but that couldn't be. The child should have been helpless, but just as George broke through his paralysis and started to run to help her, he saw her pull back the other arm and aim a really good, completely futile, right hook to the bear's stomach.

By this time, the bear was holding the little girl's head in its jaws, shaking her from side to side and trying, George realized, to break through the skull. He was eating her on the spot.

Just as George got close enough for the bear to notice, he partly stumbled, giving the bear time to drop the child and set off on a half-hearted run. Though he didn't think so right then, that stumble doubtless saved George.

As the bear lumbered along, so did George run after it, right past Pam's body and into the woods. Twice the bear paused and looked back at the pursuing human chasing, but it knew it was in no danger, didn't especially want this one to eat, and knew its fresh catch would be back where he left it, once it lost this unthreatening, clumsy pursuer.

George knew very well why he was chasing the bear. He did not think that he could kill it with his bare hands, that pursuing the bear was the manly thing to do, or that he was helping the kids by leaving them both bleeding in the snow.

He was chasing the bear so it would turn and kill him, kill him just any way that suited it, slowly and painfully, inch by inch, tissue by tissue, nerve by nerve. George knew that death was the right thing, the right way to complete the story, that only death-by-bear would make sense, make things right. He had lured them all up here because of his need for bears. He could not think of anything but that roaring mouth and embracing arms. He had not been thinking of this particular mouth that had chewed on Pam, or the arms that had suffocated her. He had in mind those of his own special monster.

There was no way his heroic and suicidal mission would turn craven and murderous, not if he could help it. But the bear refused to stop and turn. It kept slowly advancing into the more and more dense woods, playing with him, George imagined. But the murderous beast-turned-coward was putting more and more distance between them, and George actually lost sight of him for a moment before catching a good view again in a clearing.

"Now, I've got you," George thought. He may even have said it out loud, yelled it. He charged into the open clearing, screaming at the bear, challenging it.

He actually stopped and gave out a roar, the best he could manage, intending to issue a challenge. "C'mon you lousy fucker chicken son of a bitch!"

The bear disappeared into the bush on the other side, and not all of George's posing, cussing, howling, and then crying could make it attack, even re-appear.

George waited for some time, thinking only of some way to get at the bear. When the beast seemed gone for good, when George couldn't even imagine that acting careless, closing his eyes, would lure the damned bear out from the trees, up behind him for a sneak attack, he was lost.

What he needed now was some other way to end all this. He wasn't thinking of dignified suicide, exactly, though that would have been dramatically apt. It was simply a conclusion that he wanted, some ending that would vindicate not just him but the whole story. The story line he was unable to entertain was the one where he walked back to the camp with the situation and the story still open, going nowhere but still going.

George stood there still, staring at the trees and the ugly, patchy-snow ground. Then he unzipped his fly and scratched around through the layers of cloth to find his penis. He pulled it out and then quickly reinserted it, as if suddenly overcome with

modesty, by the awareness that he was all this time on stage at Carnegie Hall. What had he been thinking? Had he been about to mark his territory or something equally idiotic? Whatever it was, he couldn't face it.

Now in tears, occasioned mostly because he could find no part at all for himself, he turned and re-entered the clearing, checked again for the bear, and doggedly began to retrace his steps. Were it possible for him to mistake the way and lose himself, he would have done it. But the trail was like a highway, the bear knowing the woods too well to take any but the plainest, easiest route.

Keegan was awake and had been trying hard to move for some time before he could make his limbs work. During this strange, twilight time, he discovered that he was for sure bleeding and that part of his cheek was missing. It almost seemed as if he could reach right straight through his mouth and touch his teeth from the wrong side, but he wasn't too sure that was what was happening or even could happen. Anyhow, his mouth and all didn't hurt nearly as much as his ear and especially his head. Even his eye on that side hurt, was throbbing and hard to focus.

Keegan shut his bad eye and tried to find Pam with the other. He knew she was there, but it took a minute to fix his sites on her. When he did, he started what he thought was a determined calling, then shouting to her, telling her to keep up her spirits. His clear voice was hardly audible and he only imagined his words were forming into recognizable shape.

"Hey Pam! Pammy! You hear me?"

Keegan paused.

"I got tied up here. Your dad went to shoot the bear. Are you okay? Me, too. Exactly. Be there in just a minute. I'm tied down here. Only be a second. Knot's coming loose."

Keegan was all this time slapping himself on the leg, the thigh, even pulled himself around with great effort and slapped his ass,

thinking it might harbor the nerves he needed to awaken. He wanted to get over and help Pam so badly. He could see her there, her and lots of blood and ripped clothes. She didn't seem to be moving, but he knew she was probably just in shock or maybe resting up.

As soon as the feeling started to slide into his legs, Keegan began crawling toward the broken bundle that was his friend. He was using any part of himself that was working, however defectively, even digging hard into the ground with his chin once to get some leverage and move a little closer to the body.

"Here I come, Pam. Bout time, huh? Damned bear."

By the time he got within better viewing range, Keegan was up on his feet and staggering. He at once saw that Pam's head was a mass of blood, that her hair wasn't in the right place, that the one arm turned crooked, kind of dangling.

"The bear got you bad, Pam. You'll be fine. Go ahead and sleep. I'll do mouth-to-mouth."

Keegan took off his coat and put it on her chest, then started a clumsily paced, but calm, resuscitation effort. He smoothed back Pam's hair and saw that it kept moving with his hand. She had lost her scalp. He rearranged the top of her head as best he could without looking too closely at what was revealed, all the time trying to put his own breath into then little body of his friend. Somehow his mouth wasn't quite there, not on the one side, so he used the other.

As he breathed into her as best he could, Keegan kept stroking her cheek and the shoulder that still held what seemed to be a well arm, now and then reaching his hand up automatically to wipe away his snot. He was not aware that he was crying, steadily and desperately.

In a minute, he suddenly remembered that he should have been checking Pam's pulse. He did. There really was one. Just at

that moment, Pam opened her eyes and seemed to smile at him. He wasn't sure. But then she opened her eyes again and really smiled. This time he was sure.

About then, George came through the trees, saw the kids, who didn't seem to be moving. He was right away certain they were a pair of corpses. Then Keegan called hoarsely, softly to him and said Pam was okay. At least that's what he meant to say, anyhow.

"She pree hurt, buh she okay."

George somehow understood, felt his heart jump and then took a closer look at the boy. He seemed as pretty as always, though the left side of his face was missing, actually the flesh that went from his jaw up to below his eye. George couldn't tell if the eye were there or not, but all he could see below it was a little, not enough, stringy white stuff, blood, and what might have been teeth.

"She's okay, is she, Keegan?"

"No," Keegan snapped, furious all of a sudden. "Heh arm tawn an heh hayah off." Suddenly, thinking of Pam, and the need to bolster her, he added, "No ree, Pahhee. Ya juh gaw hurr theyh." But, using what was left of his face, he glowered at George with contempt so hot George knew he had to move before it.

George looked more closely at Pam, crouched beside her, and allowed himself to register the truth—or at least the concrete indices of truth. He also checked her pulse and found it. For the first time since the bear came on the scene, George started thinking about what should be done.

"Okay, Keegan, here's what we're going to do. You just wait a minute and then we'll have everything set. I'm going to tie this up, so it's supported. Meanwhile, you gather up what's around."

As there was nothing around but grass, rocks, and blood, Keegan just stared at him.

George had in mind making a kind of tourniquet/carrier for his daughter's bad arm, but he didn't see where he might tie it. The arm seemed to have been loosened right at the shoulder. All the same, he moved what cloth remained up there and gathered what flesh and sinews he could together in a sort of bundle, tying it roughly with a strip of his shirt.

"Can you walk, son?" He asked, using the familiar term because he had forgotten Keegan's name.

"I'll help you. We don't need to hurry, but let's get back to camp. That bear will be returning."

Thus they set off back the way they came, a wobbling trio that would have looked comic from a distance: a big figure loaded down with a package in his arms, unsteady and bumbling, along with a small, frail companion, spinning and sometimes, as in a pinball game, bouncing between the lined-up trees.

George's woodsmanship, arriving too late, gave him all he needed to walk straight back to the camp without a misstep or a pause to check directions. Keegan walked as best he could behind him, resolutely, and with growing fear. The boy also began to be conscious of the terrible pain, of his diminished vision, and of the general weakness that was overtaking him. All the same, he did not reach a hand toward his mauled face or allow himself to become dizzy. He told himself two things as he walked: "I am not dizzy. Pam is alive." The only words he let escape into the air were recurrent messages of cheer to Pam, phrases that became more disjointed as they proceeded. But they lost none of their last-gasp enthusiasm, sounding, even if faintly, the high-range, madly pitched hope of the young.

No one really could have understood Keegan's words, not that it mattered. He desired to communicate only to his friend. Perhaps he did. He thought he was saying things pretty clearly, simply because he knew he had to do that and was trying so hard.

As they broke through the last of the trees before the camp, George suddenly dropped to his knees. He held Pam carefully before him, not allowing any part of her to touch the ground. He looked as if he were offering the child to some deity, maybe as a sacrifice or as part of a bargain.

"Here she is, you see."

Keegan waited only a few seconds before trying to yell at George. "What you doee? Okay?"

"I'm okay," George said softly.

Keegan was afraid he would not be able to start again if he stopped much longer. He was even more afraid for Pam, knowing that warmth and what he vaguely imagined as medical attention awaited her back at the camp—everything she really needed. He probably didn't actually believe that, but he was calling hard on his ability not to be reasonable, not to fail the girl now lost to her terrible father.

"Gaaup!" The boy hissed.

George didn't move. He wasn't swaying or teetering; there was no collapse imminent. It was as if he were in a gentle snooze, mildly and self-indulgently dazed.

Keegan moved up beside George. The boy was now bleeding freely from where the left side of his face had been. George saw all that and felt guilty. He might have hooked up some kind of bandage, realizing the long and fast walk would get the blood flowing, flowing out and down.

"Damn you," the boy said, clearly enough, though he was crying and angry. "I'll tay er my bahh en go horsy."

"No," George said gently. "I've got her, honey. You stay right here beside me and we'll all go right in. It's right there straight ahead. One minute and we'll be warm and you kids will be fine, bandaged up and rescued."

Keegan said nothing but indicated his concern by pushing and by breaking into loud angry sobs.

In just about a minute they were, pretty much as George had said, in camp. He took Pam straight into the adult tent and placed her on an air mattress that was free of blankets and bags, right before Jinny's half-risen body, inches from her face.

"What's this?" she asked, fighting off the sleep that had held her until George had kicked and banged in the tent flap. But she could see too much immediately through her haze and was fighting not to become aware of what was right in front of her.

Keegan had fallen to his knees, mostly to be near Pam, though it is unlikely that he could have supported himself in any case. "She's hurt bad, Mrs. Jackson. Please fix her. Help her," Keegan said in his garbly mushed speech, halting his crying abruptly.

Jinny understood enough of what he was saying, even if he had no longer the means of making words.

"She needs her arm fixed and her hair. But she's okay. She's doing okay. Ain't you, Pam! She isn't talking now. She's saving her strength. She opened her eyes—smiled at me. She's okay. Sew her up."

George had sat paralyzed through this, staring at the tent side and thinking nothing at all.

Jinny took it all in with lightning speed. Her daughter was horribly mangled and the boy there was, too. At first she thought that Keegan was the pressing calamity. She reached toward him to check out his face; and, as she did so, had to disturb, ever so slightly, the bundle at her knees. Looking down so as not to hurt her daughter as she reached toward the boy, she saw Pam's pretty face all covered with hair, not hair that swept over her eyes but hair that shouldn't be where it was. Jinny moved her hand gently to brush it away from both mouth and eyes, only to have hair and

scalp slide in one piece back over the top of the child's eyes, her forehead, and her naked skull.

She stopped at once and did not scream. She hovered over Pam, forgetting Keegan altogether and pressed her mouth to her child, kissed lips she hoped would not be cold, blowing at the same time as a kind of prelude to resuscitation, should she need to do it, should she remember how to do it.

She was vaguely aware that George was doing nothing, that he was in the way, that Pam badly needed real help. She tried to take away some of the coats George had wrapped around the child and saw that Pam was, on one side, nothing but raw and bleeding flesh. The other side was naked. Jinny saw the odd X as she rolled Pam slightly toward the light. She had no curiosity about the sign. She noted things sharply, in order, as if her mind had turned into a memo pad, an invisible hand recording "Things To Do."

Straightening the child out under the light, reblanketing her, and thinking of how to treat that ravished had and side, Jinny noticed that Pam's arm had not rolled but just flopped, displaced and limp. Simultaneously, she thought of Keegan, bleeding and missing part of his face.

She glanced briefly at George and then, without hesitating, yelled as loudly as she could for Bert and Mim. She didn't care if she sounded hysterical and scary in her bellowing. She was not hysterical and she was not panicked, but the time for all this idiotic role-playing, this adult-protecting-kid shit was over. In that yell for help, she acknowledged what she had known all along, that the kids were far more competent than George. And she. They probably didn't know as much, but mostly that was for the good. They were honest in a way that Jinny could only smell at a distance, so remote to her was the union of desire and thought

present in these little people. She could see it but still could hardly imagine it.

So she yelled. And then, at that very point, she became extremely dizzy and nearly fell over onto Pam. Jinny was feverish and she was starving. She didn't crush her daughter and she didn't pass out. But she almost did both.

George noticed his wife's sickness and turned to her, trying to resettle her and speak comforting things. Jinny saw what he was doing and detested him for it. George felt concern of some sort, but, for reasons she wouldn't yet judge, wasn't able to focus in on the kids. He had taken them out looking and something had happened and he had brought them back. That ended it.

As it happened and without Jinny knowing it, Bert and Mim had returned not five minutes earlier, having decided reluctantly to abandon what might have been a promising lead. It might not have been promising, might not have been a lead; but it was a wooded area that seemed to go downhill and might have looked familiar. Lots of areas seemed to go downhill and most of the woods were equally familiar and strange by now, but this could have been different. However, it was way past noon by then, so they marked the path pretty well, all six or seven miles of it, and headed back to camp so they could try a direction about 30 degrees west. It looked just as good, so they figured they might give it a go. To get there, they needed a circle-back.

Luckily, they decided first to rest, only for a few minutes. They had just got their heavy coats off and were about to settle in to talking, when they heard their names being called too loudly.

They were at once inside the other tent, crashing in with some exaggerated show of obedience, imagining the adults were exercising their authority over them and determined to parody their allegiance to the big guys. They stopped abruptly when they were

there, took it all in pretty quickly, and divided themselves between the kids. Bert went to Keegan, Mim to Pam. Family allegiance meant nothing. These were the closest ties and the two who could walk and function, to whom life was still a given, turned to what they could do best. They both chose the hurt child they loved most, guided by some clear instinct to gain everything they could in the way of shared confidence, knowledge, hope. It wasn't much, but it was a place to begin.

Neither Bert nor Mim, as they crouched over their friends, simultaneously trying to get out soothing words and decide what to do, thought they were going to be a nurse or healer. They both thought of themselves as tending the dying, searching to find in themselves an alliance with death they otherwise would have shunned.

It was an alliance the adults simply could not pledge themselves to, and both were therefore useless. Even Jinny, who chugged downward after that first rush of steam. Both were empty: Jinny was very ill, and George had extended more energy than he had available reacting to the sight of the bear, chasing it, and carrying back his daughter.

Still, that was not it. It was not a matter of the body or of the mind. Both adults could have found energy, even if it were the false juice called up by the cry of self-preservation or the suicidal energy some might find to throw themselves before a speeding train in order to dislodge a trapped animal from the rails.

It would have taken an extreme situation to call up the last of the adrenaline. To these two, the death of children didn't qualify as that sort of extremity. Even if the deaths were murders.

Of course they cared and of course they were horrified, moved, shocked, and shaken to the core. But they had had time to register all this. George especially had found space inside himself to run after bears, worry about time, worry about the route, worry

about his penis, worry about Keegan keeping up, worry about Keegan blaming him, worry about Keegan knowing too much, worry that Pam might die, worry that Pam might not die. It wasn't that he had found a comfortable role to fit himself into. He hadn't, and he now figured that he probably never would. It's just that he had some decisions to make, pressing decisions, and none of them really involved the bleeding bodies before him.

Jinny had touched her child, her favorite, and seen that the body was torn and mangled. Her first and strongest impulse had been to put it back together, make it one and undamaged. She was a kind person, in many ways, and she didn't want to see anybody suffer. Also, she felt responsible for being part of the decision, even a passive part of the decision, that had brought these kids into such terrible danger. Still, it had, after all, been an accident and nothing more. It was awful, and it was awful to see a kid so shredded. But when things like this happen, you have to do the best you can.

When Jinny recognized that her thoughts had moved so far away from her little girl, when she realized that she was thinking of Pam as just some child, a calamity, when she realized that she wan't thinking of Pam at all, she collapsed. It wasn't the darkness of her sickness that overcame her but an inner darkness she found she could not face.

George and Jinny were, so far as the two older kids were concerned, in the way. That was it. Mim was ready to order them out, but Bert got there first. "Dad, get Mom over to the other tent and take care of her."

"Boil some water, a lot of water," Mim added, realizing that she was using a clichéd movie line but realizing also why the movie line was there.

The adults out of the way, the older kids could talk to one another through the bodies they were tending. Keegan was still conscious, on an off-and-on basis, but Pam had drifted away and gave no signs of life beyond the pulse and light breath Mim could feel.

"Keegan," Bert said, kissing his good cheek, "when you get awake can you tell me what happened? Did you fall down a cliff?"

"Pam, you're going to be fine since we've set up kiddie hospital right here and me and Bert are playing doctor."

The two older kids looked at one another, neither one panicky and both resolved to do what good they could. Almost certainly not much, nothing.

"How is Pam, Mim?"

"Oh, Bert. . . . Her scalp is off and her arm is so ripped. Looks like somebody, your dad, tried to wrap I with a piece of shirt or something, but it's bad. It wasn't a fall. I don't think she'll be able to tell us."

She paused, then, "Hey, Pam!"

Keegan stirred a little, Pam not at all.

The two older kids kept checking the bodies as carefully as they could, efficiently and deliberately. The both crooned to the small kids they were cradling.

"Hey, Keegan," Bert stage-whispered, trying to sound casual and routinely friendly—"Hey, Oblivia!"

Mim then: "I'm going to try and re-set Pam's arm and shoulder, sew her head back on—I mean her scalp. Where is your dad with the water? Fucking asshole!"

"Dad!" Bert screamed, "get the hot water here."

No George.

"Keegan, you awake?"

"Yeah, shu," mumbled the little boy. "Wha Pah?"

"Right here. We're helping her," said Bert, again kissing him, this time on the ear, the one on the undamaged side. "What happened, Oblivia?"

Keegan gave what looked like a faint grin—"A beah."

Neither of the physicians said a word.

"I got something right here for the pain," Bert said, giving Keegan a smashed up valium he had found in his mother's toilet bag and two dissolved Tylenol capsules. He thought his dad had said something about stronger pain stuff, but where in the hell was his dad?

His dad was sitting on his ass, staring at the tent flap, patting on unconscious Jinny on the head. What he was thinking involved pondering exactly how the two tents differed. The one he was inside now was not altogether different from the other one. This one was brown, though, and the other one was greenish, a kind of military green, he supposed. This one was more attractive, a warm khaki color, like new jeans. It had more fancy stuff than the other: flaps and netting and little pockets on the side in which one might put things that otherwise would get strewn underfoot.

He thought about it. Still, this one was not as high and didn't have the same square footage. In fact, it had only about two-thirds the square footage, exactly that. George knew that because the original plan to buy two identical tents hadn't worked. It hadn't worked because the local REI had the other tent, the one he was not now in, on sale, a clearance sale. But they had only one, the floor model. So the second tent had been bought separately, not even from REI. They had found it at Sport Chalet and convinced themselves that it was better for the kids anyhow. Actually, it was smaller and cheaper, compensating for the mediocre quality with lots of do-dads. It also was on sale, though the mark-down was less.

To be fair to Sports Chalet, the salesman had told them it wasn't exactly a heavy-duty tent. He said it would do fine for light, occasional camping, but that if they planned to do more than that they should invest in something better. Listening to all that as they were convincing themselves that it would do just fine, the adults, all four of them, had caved in. Though it sounds as if economy were the motivating factor, time was at least as important. They had bought everything except the tents earlier, having, for some reason, procrastinated on this most important bit of equipment. It was also late in the evening, everybody was tired, and the tent seemed okay. Okay was good enough. This way, they'd have it done and could turn to more interesting subjects: the maps, what food to take, general babble about the adventures that lay ahead.

That's how they came to have this tent, which wasn't as familiar to George as the other one but still seemed homey and warm, just fine. It had worked out very well indeed. In fact, the tent had worked out better than expected. Plenty of room. Warm. It would serve for many an excursion. They had done right to get it. It was also easier to put up than the other, just one of the benefits of its lighter weight. Plus, it had been better—

Had George been able to think more loudly, he would have, but Bert's calls finally found their way into his head and rang so insistently that he had to answer.

There was no water boiling. He hadn't gotten around to it just yet.

"Coming," George said.

"Bring the water. We need the water!" The older kids yelled.

Silence. George did, however, quickly turn on the main burners on the two stoves the kids had commandeered for their own tent, filled two pots from the large jug filled with melted snow,

and put them on the stove. How had the kids managed to burgle the cooking equipment? When had that happened? Why?

Bert had made Keegan as comfortable as he could, had examined the wounds carefully. At least Keegan's face was his only problem. The rest of his body had not been punctured or torn. It's not that Bert had looked: he knew from the condition of the boy's clothes, the bloodstains, and the fact that Keegan had walked back from wherever his dad had led them.

"Led them right to their deaths," Bert said to himself, immediately rebuking himself for being so melodramatic. He didn't think his sister and his friend would die. It seemed to him right then that he and Mim could accomplish anything, including keeping life in these bodies, putting it back in if they had to.

He hadn't looked over once at Mim, accepting the certainty that she was doing exactly as he: devising ways to transfer breaths from her own storehouse to the patient. Maybe twenty, forty, and hundred breaths—whatever they could steal. The older kids both assumed that they could, by caring enough, extend that number into the future, some kind of future, even one measured in minutes. There was no separation between Bert and Mim, though neither allowed their thoughts to travel in that direction. Neither gave brain space to anything so puerile as prayer, but both directed more love than they knew they possessed at the necessary, impossible task at hand,

Keegan would pull through because Bert's life had doubled his and no injuries was a match for that two-in-one. Mim and Pam—well, they had exactly the same thing going, maybe more, since they were girls. And girls—.

Mim was working as best she could to tend to Pam's side, carefully using the clean cloths at hand—she hoped they were clean—to move some of the smeared earth and blood away and look at the side to see where the actual wounds were. Pam's arm

or shoulder and her scalp she had bracketed off, waiting for the water. Unlike Bert, she had glanced away several time to look at the other pair, see her brother. His bad side was toward her, and she thought he had never looked so pretty, that face so rudely opened up for all who would to see inside—count the tendons, count the teeth.

George entered with the hot water, gave one pot to Mim and one to Bert, and stood there.

"Leave," Bert said, without anger and without hesitation.

George left. He stood outside for a while, looking at the mockingly sparkling sky and wondering why he had never learned the constellations. The Big Dipper was there, or maybe it was hidden. He thought he had seen it. Anyhow the Big Dipper was as far as he could go in displaying his astronomical knowledge. This weakness amused him and he chuckled to himself, glad to see he hadn't lost his capacity for self-mockery.

Bert took his hot water, carefully folded a red rag thing that looked like an auto mechanic's cloth, and began to work upwards from Keegan's shoulder then neck. Keegan opened his eyes and let out a little puff of tuneless air that Bert recognized as pain. He saw that it was not a moan at all, rather a signal that Keegan was in the world and beginning to register what his position meant.

"Hi, Keegan."

"Hi, Berr."

"Hurts like hell, don't it?"

"Yeah. Whah happah?"

"A bear, you said."

"Oh, yeah. Pah. Wheh Pah?" He blinked hard and long to accompany a sudden shot of pain.

"I'll get you some more Tylenol. No, I'll call Dad for stronger stuff."

He yelled.

"Pah?" Keegan asked with a whisper he thought was a shout.

"She's right there. Mim's fixing her up."

Mim was fixing her up. Within a few minutes after the hot water came, Mim had done wonders with Pam's torso, cleaning the arm and the good shoulder, so she could see better what to do. She had tried to fix the scalp, but it was too confusing: what was hair and what was skin and what fitted into what?

Mim had the sewing kit right there. She had only the roughest idea how to sew, but she knew that rough idea was all they had. She took what looked like the thickest looking thread, put it through the needle's eye at first poke, and turned back to Pam. For the first time, she felt like crying. The hot water she had used to clean the wound had started the blood flowing again, flowing so fast it was almost spurting. It came to Mim in a flash that the cold outside had helped it clot, that the warmth of the tent and the hot water had reopened just one other way for this life to escape.

Mim picked up the scalp anyhow, wondering why it wasn't bleeding, too, and held it against the head, trying to match it up so it would all come out even. There was blood everywhere, sloshing over her hands and causing them to be as slippery as the body parts. Once she almost dropped the scalp just as she had it lined up, and had to start over, guessing at what was scalp flesh and what was other matter. It was hard even to separate skin from bone.

But Mim was determined to close all this off if she could, in order to make that blood stop spilling and start flowing back inside and around Pam's head. Into the body, saving it and using it, not having it escape onto the little girl's chest and onto the floor. The blood was the life, and she had to get moving inside, where it should be.

She carefully pushed the needle through something and back through something else, then again. She transferred it for a moment to her left hand, wiping her right hand on her hair so she could re-grip the needle.

Working steadily, Mim was way beyond fooling herself, but it did seem that the messy, external blood flow was lessening. Wiping the area with a dampened towel, she could make out better what she was doing. And what she was doing amazingly like good work. Somehow she had been hooking scalp to head skin, not consistently so but generally. She continued working, now more clearly set toward a real goal, and took time to notice that there was very little blood eeking out from the useless, displaced arm. She would do that next.

Just then, just as she was looking at Pam's forehead to see what she would do next, to finish that part of the job, Pam opened her eyes, looking clearly and entirely at Mim.

The muscles around Pam's mouth and eyes contracted, perhaps in pain and perhaps in a smile. She heaved her little body up toward Mim a few inches and said something that sounded like, "Bahy." It could have been anything: the sound came from so far down in her throat, thrust out with all the energy she could collect, in a deep airy sound. It hung in the air, maybe as "Bear," "Bad," or a misshapen "Hi" or nonsense, or what they came to accept at true, "Bye."

In any case, whatever it was she said, whatever the results of this tiny explosion of sound from the wrecked body, there was no more energy left. Pam didn't close her eyes, but relaxed her face muscles into a look, not so much peaceful as rueful, humorous, and ironic. It was a mature look, still a little owl-like, but something new for the child, as if leaving the world, she was determined to see what else it had to offer.

Mim saw what had happened. She sat back on her heels for a minute and stared at her small dead friend. Then she put a blanket under Pam's head and arranged the body as best she could. The arm was still bleeding somehow. Mim noted that she had finished sewing about two-thirds of the scalp back on. She moved it slowly, being careful not to mess up her sewing and put it down softly.

She then started toward Bert, just as George entered the tent.

"Codeine," he said.

"Great," said Bert. "Thanks."

George handed him the bottle, looked around for a minute, and went back through the flap.

He hadn't asked and neither kid had told him. Bert glanced over, saw quickly how it was with his sister, exchanged a look with Mim, and then turned back to Keegan. Mim sat beside him, looking over his shoulder at the bottle of pills: one tablet every 6 hours for pain, not to exceed three tablets in a 24-hour period; do not use for more than 3 successive days without consulting physician; not for children under 16. There were lots of pills, dozens, though the bottle wasn't full by any means.

"Okay, Keegan. What I'm going to do is, I'm going to crush some of these up on this clean sheet thing here and get it hot and put it right on you there where your cheek is scratched."

Keegan, who somehow didn't seem to be in pain but must have been, looked at Bert without speaking.

Bert wondered if he were unconscious with his eyes open, in a coma, in shock. "Can you hear me, Keegan? Is that okay, what I said?"

"How Pah?" Keegan whispered. He could have made more noise, but he didn't. It seemed the right thing to be quiet in a sick tent.

"She died, Keegan," Bert said without thinking. But he felt no impulse to take it back or correct himself.

"She die?" Keegan said, puddling up. "Your sissah . . . ?"

Bert tried to hold the crying boy without disturbing his wounds. The result was that he reclined beside them, on Keegan's good side, and clutched the child to him.

Mim, who had turned around to arrange Pam's body, flicking away bits of blood from around her mouth, heard and broke into tears as well. Bert was the last.

They all let fall the grief and pain onto their cheeks and shirts, releasing tears and snot and spit. It was too much for kids to bear, but they were better facing it and losing on their own than with adults. They had that knowledge, and it helped them some.

Concern for Keegan drew Bert back first. "Okay, Livya. We have things to do. We're leaving this place, the three of us, before they find a way to kill us, too. That's what we're doing, right Mim?"

"Oh, yes!" Mim stuttered out, trying to end her crying.

"First, we have to get you in shape and then we can talk, the three of us and see. It's all simple now. We just have to get you in shape. We won't leave 'til you're ready. We won't let them get you, either. If any of us dies, all three of us die. And . . . ."

Bert stopped, thinking he was sounding too much like somebody in a movie. Mim didn't think so and neither did Keegan, who was not in shock or in a coma. He was just being quiet, thinking of Pam and trying not to think of his pain. The pain was, truly, beyond anything he had ever felt, beyond what most of us will ever feel. His jaw had not been dislocated, which allowed him now to form words more and more clearly, as he got used to having fewer muscles and smaller lips to work with. His torn eye seemed to be intact, though he could not see much out of it.

But there was no more good news. The casual swipe of the paw had caught him in the cheek bone and torn into the bone itself, raking flesh down from around the eye and removing everything below that would move, tearing so deep that almost nothing remained between his lip, what was left of it, and the inner muscles of the jaw bone. Those inner muscles had been torn and all the flesh, exposing the teeth and gums, removing even some of the gum tissue above his top molars, molars that had not yet all presented themselves.

Keegan was aware of the pain, which came at him in irregular waves, hitting his eyes and behind his nose, his throat and neck, his shoulder, and so many things inside he didn't know how to name. The pain was not general and all-over; it was a set of sharp specifics. It was not heavy pain, nothing like an ache. The pain was like electricity or fire. All the same, Keegan acted as if it were not there, so awake was he to the world around him. He saw his sister and the boy looking at him with hungry concern, and he wanted to reassure them. Bert—that was the boy. He took to his heart what Bert was saying about the three of them and wanted to say that they all could start their escape right now. He didn't need more fixing. But right then he couldn't talk.

Bert scooched over to his left, making room for Mim, who saw and joined. The three of them were then huddled together. That's what it seemed to be, a formal arrangement, a trio set up by an artist with advanced tastes. In some ways of seeing it, it would have been a grouping of two bent over a third. But none of the three felt it that way or would have understood such seeing. There are ways of looking that are blind, and accurate sight can be a way of leaving the scene of the crime.

"Keegan, if you can understand me, blink twice. Okay?"

Mim, for some reason, laughed. Then Bert did, struck with what a stagy line it was, something out of a soap opera.

They'd both fell silent then, when they noticed that Keegan, too, was laughing. Then they joined in, and all three laughed so hard that the next tent could have heard, had they been tuned in.

"I guess you don't have to use eye blinks, Keegan," Mim said, her laugh now a gentle giggle.

"How about this, Oblivia?," Bert added. "You don't like what I'm saying I'm going to do, just grab me by the balls here and squeeze. That'll get the message across."

Keegan looked like he might be smiling. For sure, he nodded.

So Bert mashed several codeine tablets and put them on the white smooth cotton fabric. He started to get some water to put with it and then realized how much this would hurt, so he stopped. He looked around, puzzled.

"You see a glass, Mim?"

"Wait. Here."

Mim gave him a glass and a nod. No need to explain. She saw what he was thinking of doing, why he had suspended it, what he was about to do now.

Bert took two, then three more codeine pills, mashed them up, put them in the glass and passed it to Mim, who filled it with the cold water. Bert then looked hard at Keegan, who nodded a little and again may have smiled.

Holding the boy's head up as gently as he could, Bert tried his best to ease the liquid into the good side of Keegan's mouth. Slowly, he dribbled the magic water in, twice stopping when Keegan flinched. Some of the water had gotten into then other side, hit the torn gum, the loosened teeth, the exposed nerves. But Keegan held as steady as he could, and Bert finished the job.

"I think that's the right amount of pills," Bert said.

"I'm sure it is," said Mim.

Keegan said, very clearly, "Yeah."

Waiting for a little bit, not long, until Keegan's eyes started to flutter and then droop, Bert then gently touched the codeine mixture to the wounds.

Keegan was either asleep now or kept himself somehow from objecting to the swabbing. Anyhow, Bert kept it up, grinding up three more pills and trying to get them onto the teeth and gums. He had no idea if the surface application would do anything, but he thought it might. In any case, the liquid had allowed them to see more clearly the damage to Keegan's face, to see that, ghastly as it was, it was completely confined and sharply etched, as if the people who draw figures for coloring books, those figures outlined with such thick and absolute clarity, had drawn such a diagram on the boy's face. The bear had been a good crayoner, staying right within the lines.

Then they covered Keegan, together put a sleeping bag over Pam, just up to her neck, hugged one another, and turned out the lantern.

The inhabitants of the other tent were not resting. After finding the codeine tablets right there in his pack and delivering them to Bert, George had resumed his careful study of the tent, concentrating so completely that his wife's movements, loud enough as they were, went undetected. It was only when she started talking that he remembered she was there at all.

"It's time we did something *now* and put an end to all this mock planning, George. Things have clearly reached a crisis. I mean, things reached a crisis several days ago, but we put off recognizing that. Funny how it isn't a crisis at all until you say it's a crisis. That sounds like some of that theory you teach, George. Is it?"

"What? Oh yes, it is. Discourse and what we take to be reality live inside a tight circle, an ecology. Neither exists independent of

the other, nor is there any causal connection that runs only in one direction."

"Proud of yourself for that, George?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I've heard you say that sort of thing a million times, but it only now struck home. Interesting, isn't it."

"Yes, it is. Something of a grinding labor, though, to have to explain it at the beginning of every class, encountering the same resistance, the same opposition, the same obvious objections from students wedded to ignorant common sense, kids who imagine they're the first to have thought of them—the objections. It's the sort of idea that takes some time to sink in. I sometimes feel I should lay it, all out for them, tell them to think on it every day, and cancel class for a month, at which time they'll have it."

"Would they, though?"

"No. For one thing, they wouldn't think about it. They'd forget all about it. But it's more than that. They need to work through it, process it, proceed irregularly, and at a different tempo for each student, through a forest of mistakes, false starts, and thinking they have it when they don't at all."

They were both silent for a minute, wondering what it was they were talking about, what they were doing.

"Jinny, don't you want something to eat? It's been a very long time, and you haven't been drinking either. I mean, look, what's the point now of starving ourselves?"

Jinny just stared at him, with an expression George was unable to read.

"I know how exhausted I am after today. I really think I've used about the last energy I have. I know that sounds melodramatic, but I do think it's true. And you've been very sick on top of all that." He paused. "You're worse off than I am."

Jinny again didn't speak.

"Dear, it's time we thought about ourselves."

George thought that sounded odd after it had left his mouth, but he didn't know why. True, he was weak and more than a little light-headed. But he snapped to attention when Jinny hissed at him.

"What else have we been doing?"

"What?"

"Are you saying that now we've managed to murder one or two of the kids and our best friends, it's time to turn our attention to Number One?"

"Murdered?"

"You really think we ought to glom down all the rest of this food and get our strength back? I see. Well, that's a plan. Maybe we can tether the kids out of reach, the ones that are left. Make sure you stake them up far away, though, so their screams don't annoy us. It's a lot to ask of you to have to walk that far, but it'd make our happy times so much more pleasant."

"Dear, I think you need some rest. That's what you need. You also could use some food, too, as I've been saying, and now I'm going to get you some."

"Our daughter's dead."

"No, she'd not. She's hurt, I grant you that. But we'll get her to a hospital and she'll be right as. . . ."

"She'll be right and dead. We'll get her to an undertaker," said Jinny, and started to cry.

"You're just upset, Jinny," said George, starting to become both nervous and annoyed. "Pam is not dead. Neither is—you know—Keegan. These sorts of things always look worse than they really are."

"What sorts of things?"

"Injuries—fresh wounds."

"Did you look at the kids? Did you look at Pam?"

"Did I look at her?" said George, now feeling warmly defensive and on happier ground he could fight from. "Hell, Jinny, you forget I carried her back all the way, carried her in my arms?"

"I asked if you looked at her."

"And I said of course I did," George countered, feeling much less assured.

"The fuck you did. Her arm was flopping, out of the socket, and she had been scalped. She had lost so much blood by the time you got back there's no way she could have survived. You didn't give her a few pints of blood, did you, then pause to sew her scalp back on?" Jinny whispered her bitterness, looking firmly away from George.

"I wanted to get back as soon as I could," George said, peering closely at Jinny but really speaking to nobody in particular.

Jinny was silent.

"She was alive when we got back," George said.

"Yes," Ginny said.

Then George turned out the light and slept. They both did.

TUESDAY

George broke from his shallow sleep several times during the night, wondering each time why he hadn't been granted what movies always spoke of, even portrayed: a few hours of fog. Forgetfulness. Didn't people always wake wondering where they were, what had happened? Wasn't it only gradually that it all came back to them, that the horror of their situation broke over them. So why was he waking right into the center of ther story, right there sharp and clear, much more vivid than when he had gone to sleep?

Each time he woke, George considered going over to the other tent, and each time he decided that there was no need, that there was nothing he could do over there anyhow, not right now, not in his present condition. There was no noise coming from the other tent, and if he went over right now, he'd just wake up the kids, who needed the rest more than anything . So, for right now, he'd wisely stay where he was. For right now. As soon as it was the useful thing to do, he'd do it—go over. But not right now.

Jinny didn't seem to sleep at all. Maybe she did sleep, off and on, but she didn't care one way or the other. It didn't matter the least bit, so why even notice. She guessed she thought at some point it was odd, though, the general state of things, but she was beyond thinking of how she felt or thinking about how she was thinking. It wasn't that she was unconscious or even beyond desire. She seemed to be possessed by an unforgiving lucidity. She wanted, violently, to die.

When the light outside was strong enough to leak into the imperfectly sealed tent, George lifted his head and looked right into his wife's eyes, maybe two feet away. He tried to lift the rest of his body, any part, and found he couldn't. He wasn't in pain, not

especially—not even sore. He wished he were. It was as if he couldn't find a way to leverage his body upwards. He tried rolling, then propped elbows, then heaving violently up by way of the stomach. His body didn't respond at all.

"I can't move."

Jinny stared at him but said nothing.

George wondered if his central nervous system had gone out. He pinched his hand, the fleshy part, and felt it, then remembered that he had been able to lean forward, just a bit ago, to get his head up. He had then moved a part. It's just that some other parts of him wouldn't move. Maybe it was an hysterical paralysis. He'd heard of that. He found that diagnosis interesting, not in the least bit frightening. He was keenly aware of his indifference, his cool.

"Should I call the kids?"

Again, Jinny said nothing, though she may have smiled.

"George let his head go back down and then immediately lifted it again. Funny that he should be able to manage that motion and nothing more. Also, he could twist his neck, talk, and wiggle his shoulders. His toes, too.

"Jinny, can you help me?"

"No."

George decided to let that flat "No" mean that Jinny was too weak to come to his aid, much as she wanted to.

He waited maybe five minutes, staring at the inside of the tent roof and wondering if it'd be best to go back to sleep. Going back to sleep suddenly struck him as evading the problem, and he was through evading problems, by God. Right then, he felt a rush of excitement: it wasn't too late to pull things together, get his sick wife and sick daughter and sick Keegan snd the two healthy kids off this mountain and to safety. Right now. Hell with the bears!"

"Bert!" He called hoarsely but with some force.

In an impossibly short time, none at all, the tent flaps parted and Mim came in.

Even George could not but notice how different she looked: filthy and bedraggled in ways she never was, but also worn and impersonally attentive, like an experienced file clerk, homicide detective, prostitute. George found her repellant, didn't want her there.

"No, Bert. Bert should come."

"Bert's working on Keegan. What do you want?" Mim spoke without looking at him, though her eyes were right on his.

"I need Bert. I need help in moving. Something's real wrong with me."

Mim reached down and yanked off George's outer blanket, then rolled him roughly to the side and unzipped the sleeping bag. She tried to lift his legs up, found them too heavy.

"Help me," she said. "Move your legs up."

George did. The legs did.

Mim lightly slapped the now moving legs—getting them tingling in the calves and thighs. "Roll over," she said.

George did without trouble. Mim took his shoulders and wedged them back until they hurt, though George did not protest, then grabbed his elbows and did a kind of wrestling hold on him, twisting his arms where they didn't want to go. Then she kicked his ass on both sides, none too lightly.

"You know what you're doing?" George cried out, though he realized he was starting to get mobile.

He looked over at Jinny, wondering if she found all this funny, perhaps pitiable. Maybe she would share in his feeling, if he adapted it to suit her. But she stared at him as if she didn't give a fuck, recording as if she were watching bugs crawl.

"Just try to move around now," Mim said. "I think you just got real stiff."

"More than that," George started to say, but then realized that he was now moving, not as usual but with a painful hesitancy of the sort he had expected when he first woke up. No damage to the central nervous system, just plain old out-of-shape hikers' creaks.

The instant Mim saw him moving, she was out the door.

George found it intolerable to crouch over in the tent, so he stepped outside and decided the best thing to do with his protesting limbs and muscles was to ignore their complaints and command them to move. So he took several short tours about the campground, each a little easier than the last, until they became very easy indeed. He began to rotate his arms in big circles, do semi-squat jumps, roll his neck around, stretch his legs as he'd seen runners do. But he didn't venture into the bigger tent, where the kids were, where the officious damn Mim was, and his troublesome son, and his hurt daughter, and the mangled other did.

He decided his immediate duty was to induce Jinny to eat, so he went back to that. As he slid under the flap, he realized he was considering what sort of attitude he ought to adopt as natural. A grin, a frown, a rough laugh, a whoosh of breath signifying nothing, a mildly concerned pleasant look, a weary collapsing stagger, a firm business-like smile.

Jinny heard him coming in before she saw him and started talking before there was a body there in front of her. "I think you should see what you can do for Keegan, George. You've left those two little kids over there all night to nurse Keegan and to watch Pam die."

"When?" George said, not knowing what he was asking.

"Plain as day, George. You're fine, I'm dying, though not near as fast as I'd like. Pam's dead, Keegan may be, or may be on his way. Bert and Mim have been living inside pain that you and I cannot imagine. Did you see Keegan? The three of them wonder-

ing if the next second would come. And Pam. How do you suppose the other three have managed that? Her body is right there. I bet they tried to make it look pretty, and then. . . ."

Jinny started crying with the loud, unrestrained howl of a little girl, her mouth forming a square, her sobs coming regularly but without interrupting the keening, angry wail.

George stared and tried to cry along with her.

Bert had been working with Keegan, certainly, but not nursing him. He had been telling stories, singing softly to him, and cuddling him on the good side. The codeine pills, applied inside and out, had managed to keep Keegan's pain under good enough control so that Bert and Mim could wash out the wound with water so hot they thought it might make things worse. Somehow it hadn't, and the cleaned wound looked some better.

"You know what, Keeg? There's no bones missing that I can figure out—no important ones, you know—and I'm a real good bone man, you know! Bones Are Bert!"

Bert paused so that he and Keegan could laugh. Keegan had no trouble laughing, though all his reactions seemed to float through a double screen.

Mim had put a blanket over the body, but it wasn't the body that mattered. They missed Pam so badly they all felt as if flesh had been taken from them. The corpse meant nothing. They knew it was garbage and had no wish to look.

"So, all they'll have to do is redo some skin and fat there, you know, and work in the muscles that got pulled out. You got some loose teeth, but they'll reset, I think. Or they can make new ones."

Keegan stared at him tentatively. Bert thought maybe he was going into too much detail, getting a little graphic. Still, he went right on. "Now, as for the flesh. Here's what they'll do." Bert

paused to see if he had Keegan's attention, though he knew he did.

"They'll just take some of the spare flesh from your butt, an equal among from each cheek and sew it on up there. Now, that will make your butt a little smaller, which will be very good. And it's improve your face."

Keegan's eyes brighten and he said something that sounded like a long sentence: "Neryay caw me bahfay fah so." Bert put his ear right next to the good side of Keegan's mouth and finally decoded it.

"You're right! Butt face! That's you." Bert was struck with an idea. Unless you want to use my butt."

Keegan made a "Heahr" sound, apparently delighted. He was half leaning on Bert, bad side out, and at this, nestled his head closer.

"You know, we could do the operation, while you're zonked." Bert moved his right hand up a little, gently lifted Keegan's shirt, and pretended to plunge his hand downward into his friend's pants, grinning and chuckling all the time so he wouldn't cry.

Keegan gave another of his grotesque half-faced smiles and muttered something.

Just then, Mim, who had been cleaning up and getting more hot water, "Now there's therapy for you. Butt therapy."

Bert smiled, thinking of how much he loved Mim, but no more than he loved little Keegan. He would indeed have sliced into his own butt for him.

George came busting in, filled with the high enthusiasm of panic, determined to form them all into a new unit, connected by way of his escape plan. He had never felt more confidence in — well, everything: his timing, his yet-to-be-formulated plan, his leadership, his competence, his basic goodness, this adulthood.

"Sorry to keep you kids waiting. I have been tending to your mom, Bert. She's weak but okay. She's a tough old bird you know—not all that old, really, not as old as you kids think. You always think anybody over thirty might as well be seventy-five."

George stopped and looked at Bert, who was sitting facing the tent flap, doing something to the other boy, Keegan, who was also sitting, slumped against Bert. Bert was cuddling the younger boy, leaning close to him, nuzzling him, then kissing his head.

George turned his eyes upward, like an enlightened parent showing his caught-with-a-boner-kid how tolerant he was, how normal it all was, how completely within the natural course of things, a course of things directed, really, by the parent.

A few seconds later, plenty of time, George returned his eyes to find Bert's face just where it had been and Keegan's face, bad side forward, confronting him. George tried to carry on, just as if his boy were not making some kind of homosexual love to another kid right there before his eyes.

"Look, kids, I know it seems as if I let you down. I'll level with you. I have. I really have. Now is the time to work together and get right out of here. The hell with the tents and equipment and food. To tell you the truth, we're pretty much out of food anyhow and we can't wait any longer for Dave and Nicole. We're doing them no favors by denying them professional searchers."

George paused to let the full force of his remarkable candor fill the tent and all in it.

All three kids stared at him with expressions that George could not read.

"But it doesn't matter how much food we have, since in a few hours we'll be back at the very heart of fast food heaven. My idea is just to—Bert, are you listening?"

Bert looked at him without changing expression. Keegan seemed to say something, god knows what. It sounded something like, "Srakah."

"C'mon, Bert. I'll get your mom over here to nurse Keegan and you two can get some rest."

"You know where the shovel is?" Bert said in a voice so drained of expression George would never have recognized his kid in it.

"What?"

"The shovel. The one you used to dig the trenches for the rain."

George looked closely to see if Bert were being sarcastic. It didn't seem so.

"Yes, the shovel's here in this tent. Back in that utility bag. It's a neat fold-up job, you remember."

"That blue bag?"

"Yes, there's actually a pocket on the side where it fits in neatly. One of the advantages of these things."

Bert glanced at Mim who crawled back to the bag.

"Look," George tried again, "I know how you're feeling. Give me a chance, though. Freezing me out like this isn't going to help anybody. Let me get us back home and then you can go back to being teenagers hating their parents."

George paused, expecting a relaxed sigh from each kid, a signal of assent. None came. "I only want to help now. Just help. We have to work together."

For the first time since he entered, Mim now with shovel in collapsed form in hand, spoke, "You don't know anything about who we are or what we feel."

"That's right," Bert said in a low oddly peaceful voice. "Just listen to me," he added as George started to hum toward speech.

"Take this shovel, go off a ways through the trees behind us"—here Bert pointed—"and dig a grave."

George reached out automatically for the proffered shovel. "Dig where?"

"Wherever you want. Out back there." Again, Bert pointed.

"Why?" George asked, now stunned and afraid. "Oh God, poor little kid." Then he did cry, sinking to his knees, with his face in his hands, hiding from the small ones still alive his tears and his terrible shame.

Only Keegan made any move toward him, maybe in sympathy. But Keegan could not get very far. Bert turned his move into an adjustment in position and allowed the boy to snuggle more deeply into the blankets and into Bert.

George finally dragged himself to his feet, the tent filled with an accusing silence and the loud breathing of the kids. He could not help but feel now that they were breathing in spite of him, that he could not help them, that they would not be breathing much longer.

Bur he took the shovel and left the tent. Stripped of defenses, he plodded the few steps separating the tents and looked in at his wife. Jinny was now both flushed and white, his face withdrawing inward as he watched.

"Pam's dead, dear. I killed her by not getting to that bear. I guess really by bringing her up here in the first place. I'm going to go dig her grave."

He waited to see if she wanted to say something: accuse him, accompany him, give him instructions on proper grave-making.

"Why bother?" she said. "Just stick her out there and the animals will take care of the body. It's all the same thing."

George didn't know she had such rage in her, and he wasn't, even now, past caring. Some part of him was still struggling forward, still devoted to saving all the others. Even now. Especially now. He didn't care about self-sacrifice. He wanted out and wanted the kids out. A part of him had stopped living, while some other distant part of him had never been so alive.

He let the tent flap drop and went off to find a spot where there was some kind of soil. Within two hours, he was back, having been lucky in his choice of ground. He entered the large tent without a word, and gathered the small corpse into his arms. He now remembered all the detached things, the dangling arm and the torn scalp. Somehow, no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't remember the bear, so he was very careful to keep the blanket where it was, surrounding the impossibly light lump within. He waited with his daughter, stooped over at the highest point of the tent.

"Do you want to come? Say something about your sister, your friend?"

"No," Bert said softly.

"We've already done that," Mim added, looking at George with the first kindness he'd seen for days.

George then went to the grave, which he had made a little deeper than his own height, remembering all the songs and jokes about six feet under. He set the body down and went into the grave himself. He stood there for some time, looking at the blanketed little girl and the trees beyond, at the obscenely sunny sky and the pile of rich black dirt he had made into a very neat mound.

He had been living the last three hours on the stage, spotlighted. There were his accusers out there, demanding that he give a performance that would absolve him, somehow sing and dance his guilt and their troubles away. He had bravely confronted their

boos, offering no excuses, letting them know he deserved whatever bad notices they would publish about him. But now, the full force of what he had done hit him like an electrocuting shock.

He stood and absorbed it. He did not fall.

Keegan was asleep now, and some of the exhaustion that had been building in the two older kids began to take over. But first they must allow themselves to release their hold on their grief and let disbelief and fantasy replace the hard acceptance and stoic command forced on them by the emergency. Bert had slipped away from Keegan after making him as comfortable as he knew how. Now he and Mim leaned into one another and returned to where they might and should have been hours before, when Pam was holding on to life too hard and too long, and when Keegan was driving his pain away.

It couldn't be happening and it had happened. Kids that had clutched so long for the future tense, caring and driving forward, now slipped into the past. In that past, Pam was alive, dear, and also about to die. And Keegan was still unknowing, on the verge, and pretty.

They held each other and sobbed out their farewell to their friend. To their happiness, and to the possibility that there was anything much just around the corner. From now on, for whatever was left of them, they would live within the presence of death, and the realization that death settled nothing, bringing with it neither clarity nor closure. All the love and determination they could gather to stave off the unthinkable wasn't worth a damn. Living through such a night is supposed to make us strong, or so say people who have never lived through such a night. Bert and Mim already knew better. They were not strong; they were afraid.

When they had recovered enough to feel tired, they both realized that they should give themselves some reason to sleep, a form of resolution.

"You know if there is a gun in this tent?"

"No, Mim, I'm pretty sure not. I think all that metal stuff is just aerosol cans and tent equipment. Some of it looks kinda weapony, but our parents would never have brought guns up."

"True."

"But do you think we should?"

"I don't know. It would simplify things. We wouldn't have to sneak out."

"Yeah, that's true. It will be harder with Keegan the way he is, too. I mean, maybe we should."

"It'd be pretty easy. Your mom is apparently dying now, and your dad probably used up his last gasp digging."

"We could just use knives or something," Bert said, suddenly very weary.

Mim thought, "Or if they're all that tired, we could just say fuck 'em."

"Yeah, fuck 'em."

"Besides, we aren't that far from town. They'd investigate and all."

"They aren't worth it?"

"You're worth it, Bert. But no, they aren't."

"Pam was worth it," Bert said.

"Yes."

Then they both went to sleep, snuggling in with Keegan, and gathering strength for what they must do.

THE LAST DAY

George awoke, wondering if he had slept. At least he didn't wonder very long, nor did he hesitate in waking Jinny, whose breathing was loud and strangled at the same time. It was as if she were snorting in and out through different channels. The one allowing breath in was doing so only reluctantly, signaling it might, at any moment and without warning, shut down.

"Jinny, wake up. There's only one thing to do now and that is to do it, not talk about it. Wherever we are now, in terms of all the dead and who's to blame, well—that's where we are. No need to waste energy analyzing what can't be changed. Let's just see if we can get out. Can you walk?"

Jinny just stared at him, giving no clear signal that she was aware of him, heard him.

George suddenly felt very weak himself, as if his energetic outburst on waking had exhausted his quota for the day, maybe for many days.

He tried to rise and slipped back down.

"Are you sick?" Jinny whispered.

"I can't tell," George moaned.

How could he have sunk so low so fast? Not sixty seconds ago he was filled with resolve and what seemed like strength. He could not fade now, not because he wasn't due to fade but because he had no means of understanding or dealing with his own collapse. Just as he had turned all his attention and energy to the lives of the kids, he seemed to have no energy to give. And what good would his thinking of them do—for them or for him.

It didn't matter if Jinny died. He thought she looked like she would, and he certainly didn't care. He also didn't care if he did, but he wanted to use the life he had left to give his kids some

help, some story of hope. For himself, he didn't even worry that his story might well be very ignominious, so long as he had one. Fading out here, now, would be no story at all. He couldn't find himself in that movie he was running in his head, a movie which featured all of them stuck there, starving and dying a few hours from town, simply because they hadn't found a way to start in moving.

Now he wanted so very badly to move. He turned all his mind to arranging just that. Jinny's talk didn't distract him. He wasn't even listening.

"I know what you're thinking, George." There were long pauses between each word.

If he rested a bit, he'd use the energy that came to him to start moving and get the kids moving with him. Once started, he could motor along on momentum.

"Why don't we eat the food that's left and make a run for it. That's a good one—a run!"

Jinny may have laughed. No one listening could have told.

Anyhow, the thing to do was to have a plan, and he had one. Rest, store up drive, only enough to get things moving. Once moving, it'd be downhill after all and they'd keep moving. At least he would. And the kids.

Bert woke first, with one arm around a pillow and the other arm around Mim, his hand directly on the top of her head. He stroked her hair gently, thinking that would be the best way imaginable to wake her.

It was.

"Bert, I wish we had time to cuddle."

Bert gave a half-grin, all he could manage.

"I think," Mim said, "we should do anything we want to now, anything we won't have a chance to do if we don't do it now."

Before Bert could respond, Keegan looked up, smiled on the good side, and said, "Doone mine me." Then he laughed. It wasn't a muffled or a choked laugh either, but a quiet, pleased-with-himself laugh.

"God, Keegan! Here, take some of this." Bert quickly made a new mixture of the codeine he had already measured in the cup. He did this all with his right hand, added water, and stirred, never moving his left hand from fondling Mim's hair.

"Sex?" Bert finally said, not surprised, just clearing his head.

Mim laughed. "Good timing. Keegan doesn't mind."

"Aye be Rayo nouncer, an nounce," Keegan giggled.

"Nobody's doing sex unless you do it, too, Keegan. How do you like that?"

Keegan, without missing a beat, "Lot."

"We could be porn stars, the three of us, make our own movies!" Mim said, but in a whisper.

"When we get back," Bert said, after a pause.

"Promise?" Mim said.

"Pros?" Keegan said.

Bert didn't smile.

Without saying anything more, they swapped kisses, being careful to make them real good, as good as they knew how. Even Keegan, with half a mouth, did what he could. They were gentle with him, hardly touching—but meaning it.

They knew they should be quiet. There wasn't much to gather up, and they knew that if they found themselves in a place that required a lot of gear, they were beyond hope and help. They were going to make it out quickly or not make it out.

Keegan nodded seriously when Bert asked him in a whisper if he could hack it. Mim propped the little boy up on one side, Bert on the other. Wrapped up warmly and spinning a little as they wobbled on with their unbalanced center, the three tiptoed quietly

around the adult tent and toward a spot they hadn't yet got in their sights but hoped to locate before long.

There was almost no snow now and they couldn't remember what to recognize as a promising sign. So they crept out of camp in a direction none of them chose.

After maybe five minutes, Keegan gained so much assurance they let him walk on his own, walk without too much wobble. The first thing he did was to locate a large pine cone, green, chocked with seeds, and still on the tree, reach up shakily, twist it off, and hold it proudly for the others to see.

He then dropped it on the ground, kicked it clumsily, and watched as it scurried half way across the clearing. Mim then took her turn, Bert watching closely to see what the lie was for his kick.

"Damn it all!" He said. "Up against a tree, but I can fucking out-kick any pine-cone-kicker around. Watch this!"

And he kicked and she kicked and he kicked and they kicked, the game taking the cone, its hopeful seeds, and the children where games take us all.