Ice Rings

A Novella by

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1Ice Rings

1.

Big Joe Lungren began tinkering with engines the summer he was nine: he lapped the valves of the five horse Briggs & Stratton mounted in the Tote-Goat he drove in circles around the fir that would be blown down by the Columbus Day storm, the one his dad blocked and burned later that winter of 1962. His dad gave him a worn out Homelite to get him to help buck the log--Joe remembers his dad's complaints about him not doing anything around the farm if an engine weren't attached to it. Possibly true. But after putting a new jug and piston in that Homelite Super Wiz, he helped make wood, then traded the gear-driven saw for a McCullough 125 with a broken crank. He rebuilt the Mac and used it to power a gocart with which his mom won the Powder Puff derby at Oceanlake the next summer (he was forbidden from driving the cart as his mom thought it went too fast).

He bought a 1950, 4-door Dodge when he turned twelve. Although he was forbidden from taking the car onto the highway, after pouring new babbit for its bearings, he drove it up and down Slick Rock Creek Road until it lost a tooth on its ringgear. So he sold the Dodge for $25., and used the money as the downpayment on a Ford flathead V-8 engine, which he mounted in the Fiat his older brother Jim had left when shipping out for Vietnam. But by the time Joe could drive legally, Jim had returned to claim the Fiat with its bumper sticker, *YOU'VE JUST BEEN PASSED BY A FLATHEAD.*

When sixteen, Joe went to work after school and on weekends at the Lighthouse Texaco, there on Devil's Lake. Already he had a reputation for being able to repair engines. Maybe because of his size (he was nearly two hundred sixty pounds and his not turning out for sports was a great disappointment to Taft High's football coach) or maybe because he could feel in his already large fingers what was wrong with an engine, his work was trusted by even the retirees who had moved to the coast to watch storms and feed seagulls all winter. His work was trusted by teachers who knew him as a bright but mediocre student, who ignored assignments and habitually forgot homework. His work was trusted by his peers, who wanted him to tune their cars for the nightly races along Highway 101. And it was that year while rebuilding Calkin's Desoto that the idea of a ceramic piston ring first occurred to him.

The idea seemed silly when he tried to explain it to his shop teacher: rings are really springs that seal an undersize piston in a cylinder so that during combustion, gases will drive the piston down and not push past it, thereby pressurizing the crankcase. Ceramics have no spring. How, he was asked, could he put a glass-hard ring on a piston. How could he get it over the top of a piston and into a groove. He didn't know. But he knew somehow that

problem could be solved. He was certain the wear resistance of ceramics would make the effort worthwhile.

Everyone he talked to about ceramic piston rings thought him either ignorant or odd, so much so that his mentioning of his idea began to effect his reputation as a mechanic, his most prized possession; so he quit promoting his idea to anyone other than his highschool art teacher, who helped him fire a few rings and who taught him enough about ceramic fundamentals that, now, thirty years later, he has an engine that will burn any fuel with its hundred-to-one compression ratio. On most engines he has converted, though, he has kept the compression ratio around forty-to-one, making the engines capable of burning vegetable salad oil without needing a blower and specialized manifolds. His 1966 Dodge pickup which, before he converted it, would only run on 100-octane Av gas will now run on the used motor oil he gets free from Haliburton Exploration.

But his conversions, instead of bringing him the financial rewards he had expected, seem oddities destined for this era's industrial dungheap. Gasoline remains plentiful and cheap. Favored engine innovations are for higher rpms and less weight. And no one seems to believe a ceramic ring will work.

He applied for a patent more than five years ago, at first doing it all himself as he didn't trust sharing his idea even with an attorney. Recently, however, he has brought onboard Pierre Lamont, a lawyer of a different sort, a fellow who seems equally unwilling to trust courts, legislators, or the Federal government. He converted Pierre's Ford pickup, and Lamont offered his services gratis, an offer he couldn't refuse. Nevertheless, his application has been held up because his design can't work, according to every expert who has looked over his drawings. And until his patent is finalized, he isn't about to let auto engineers from either Washington, Detroit or Japan look inside his conversions.

So now, with gnarled knuckles and an overhanging gut he hasn't acquired accidently--his fingers are the size of bananas and about as straight--Big Joe repairs mostly starters and alternators when not reading the books and manuals stacked in every corner. He rebuilds an older engine once in a while, but he probably does as much transmission work as engine work. He, he hates to admit it, has sort of given up ever seeing his design marketed. Yet, each morning, as if riding a piston's upstroke, he rises with great expectations. However, by the time he puts his tools away each evening, he feels jerked downwards as if the day's compression caused another cylinder to fire. So he certainly doesn't expect the call he's about to receive:

"Joe's Auto Electric. How may I help you?"

"Mr. Lungren, please." The woman's voice is pleasant and disguises her age.

"Speaking." He is always a little taken back by women. He married when eighteen, but wasn't married for long. Since then, he has lived, eaten and slept

in a shop, either his own, or for a few years when President Carter screwed up the economy, in the back of his brother's. He turned wrenches and his brother sold cars, both of them working as if they were machines. Now, *Cowboy Timber Jim* owns a Ford dealership in Montana, while he has here at Corea Creek this little rathole, barely larger than a double car garage, with mosquitoes as large as Cessna 170s.

"I don't think you can help me as much as I can help you. May I come over?"

"I'm open till six."

"And where will you be after that?"

"Would you like an appointment for in the morning?"

"No, I want to see you this evening about your engine design. Now, may I come over?"

Surprised, even a little taken back, he stammers, "Try to make it before six." He can't comprehend a woman wanting to talk about nuts and bolts; so he figures she is either another lawyer wanting business or sent by an engine manufacturer to sweettalk him into giving away his design--that happened to Marty Porter of Seldovia, who traded his Ottercat idea for a case of Black Velvet and a feel, signed papers and everything. So either way, he figures it won't take long to convince her that he's not worth her time . . . he can sound as ignorant or as intelligent as a situation warrants, one of his gifts he developed to survive as a small repair shop in a world of corporate dealerships.

He glances at the grimy faced clock above his greasy workbench, its planking black from years of accumulated grunge. One-thirty. He should've stopped to eat. Perhaps he'll just grab a bite--he sets aside the rotor he just took from the growler, and without washing, takes from the refrigerator wedged between the end of the bench and the back wall a loaf of white bread and a package of coldcuts. On one piece of bread he lays six slices of meat; on another piece of bread, he spoons mayonnaise. A third of the sandwich disappears with his first bite, another third with his second. But before Big Joe finishes chewing his second bite, a fisherman from Ninilchik, one of the Clucas clan, pulls in and wants him to wire his truck's alternator so he can weld with it.

"You won't be able to burn quarter inch rod."

"Don't need to. I'm just gonna be sticking cod pots back together with chicken-shit. It'll do that, won't it?"

"Oh, yeah. But maybe you ought to have your dad to show you how to run a bead. Your welding does look pretty shitty."

"It holds most of the time. . . . I gotta get back on the beach. My kid's fishing my permit. So just make it work."

Knowing the permit holder is legally required to be with his or her gear, Big Joe jams the remainder of his sandwich in his mouth as he pops open the fisherman's hood. If he hurries, he can get the fisherman back onto his beach site before the twelve hour opening ends at six.

Late model alternators put out three times as many amps as the alternators he first converted into welders, but the tradeoff is a maze of wires to the many solenoids intended to prevent a vehicle from running if it pollutes. But, he tells himself, if his ring and piston design were adopted universally, then pollution wouldn't be a problem, which is only partially true. So instead of the hour it used to take him to wire around diodes and add welding leads, it now takes all afternoon, which is why he now doesn't get many calls to do the conversions.

The fisherman no sooner leaves than an older Jag, one, he suspects, that originally came with Lucas Electronics, pulls into his graveled drive; his driveway seems terribly shabby. The Jag is dark green and has black leather upholstery. The woman driving has dark hair and a green dress. He wouldn't want to have to guess her age. She is, he believes, obviously a lawyer.

"Mr. Lungren, I presume." She extends her hand as if she were a man. "Virginia Hill--and you, sir, are a very difficult man to find."

He has been wearing the same pair of blue coveralls for a week; he's greasy, dirty, and, he knows, shabby.

"If you're here about the patent, you need to talk to my attorney in Anchorage. I'm sure you already know who he is."

"That can wait. I wanted to meet you first, sort of size you up, see what kind of a person you are."

He points to his Dodge truck and to a 1967 Scout, both parked alongside his shop. "Those tell you all there is to know about me," he says, wishing that were true.

She looks them over as well as visually taking inventory of his shop, its tools, and the weeds growing along the side of his shop, weeds that have no fear of ever being pulled.

"They might tell me a little about the exterior, but appearances can be deceiving. . . . Is that the truck that runs eighty to one?" She starts towards the Dodge, then hesitates to see, seemingly, if he objects.

"It actually runs at a hundred to one when the blower works right, but how do you know about it?"

"My mechanics told me they had heard rumors about your engines." She steps to his Dodge, and being careful of what her dress sleeve brushes, she opens its hood. "Of course you're not going to tell me how you keep your ring from cracking, but will you let me hear this engine run?"

"Keys are in it. Start it up. Just be careful of the rpms until the oil heats up."

"Injectors. A rack. Your blower, very nice. Oh, I see where you preheat the oil."

That isn't the oil he meant--surprised and pleased that she recognizes components of his fuel injection system, Big Joe nevertheless gruffly asks, "What do you expect to get from me?"

"Civility." She gets into the Dodge, and locating its preheat button, presses it, waits a minutes, then tries the starter. The truck purrs. And she listens with her head mostly out of the cab.

After a few minutes, she shuts down its engine: "Your ring is a defector design, and I think it floats."

He says nothing. He should never have let her listen to the engine.

"I am right. It does float, doesn't it?"

Reluctantly, he says, "You have a very good ear."

"Well, I didn't come here to steal your design. I came to do business with you." Leaving his truck, she stands close to him. "I don't believe you have more than twenty-five thousand invested in everything you have. Why don't you sell out and come to work for me. I'll give you a hundred fifty thousand up front for half interest in your design, with a promise to aggressively market it. Plus, I'll hire you as a mechanic at forty thousand a year, with full benefits."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"I don't know you."

"My apologies. . . . I'm sort of used to everyone knowing who I am. I own Hill Racing, best known as a CART engine builder but our tentacles reach into many other endeavors."

"And why should I accept your offer?"

"Because you don't have a better one."

"Today."

She smiles. "Should I negotiate through your attorney? Mr. Lamont, correct?"

"You're likely to take him to lunch and he'd charge me for it." Her mannerisms put him at ease, something which causes him concern.

"I don't have any dinner plans. Would you like to join me?"

"Naa. You'd eat somewhere I'd have to use silverware."

She laughs. "Yes, I would. . . . Tell you what, I'll meet you for breakfast where I will be staying, Our Point of View Inn. Do you know that place? Near Cooper Landing. I passed it on my way here. . . . It was highly recommended."

"Indeed, I know it--and I'd recommend it." And indeed he knows the inn: one night a couple of years ago, a tank truck rolled and blocked the Kenai River bridge. Traffic was stopped while eleven thousand gallons of gasoline were pumped from the ditch. The inn opened special and served, gratis, coffee and soft drinks until the road was certified safe. He was one of those stranded travelers.

"Six o'clock?"

That is a little early for him, but he agrees, "Okay."

"See you then, and think about my offer. I'm sure you will have others, but I think you'll be happiest at Hill."

"How exactly did you hear about me?"

"I have recently brought in a new manager, a real gogetter, and he had heard jokes about ice pistons when in France--about it being so cold in Alaska that one fellow was making engines with pistons of ice as hard as glass. Of course everyone was having a good laugh. But when my manager returned from the Continent, he heard more rumors about your engines, rumors he thought credible enough that he insisted I personally come and inspect them--I've grown up in the business." She touches the top of his forearm with her right fingertips. "We can work out the details, at all times keeping in mind your protection. We will need to take an engine apart. But the details of taking an engine back to Orlando, and of getting you down there to consult can be worked out with your attorney--and you should have your attorney present before you sign anything."

2.

Like an engine of his own construction, Big Joe returns to work--an International Harvester transfercase needing its brass synchromesh gears replaced. He drags the case from under the pickup, parked in front on his drive; and almost involuntarily pausing to look over the front of his shop, he suspects that not counting his lathe, mill, firing kilns, and precision tools, none of which are visible, all of which are worth a lot, he would be hard pressed to get even twenty-five thousand for a lifetime of work. The most he can say is he owes nobody anything, not that anybody is likely to loan him money after two near-bankrupcies. He ought to, he knows, jump at a chance to get out of this Edsel of a situation. He should be flattered that she wants him to go to work for her.

But what would life be like having to punch a timeclock: he's never done that and is probably too cranky to start. In addition, if he took a regular job he would be expected to buy a house and everything that goes in one; he couldn't live in the shop. A job carries certain expectations. They restrict a fellow's freedom, usually bringing with them credit cards and one-page financial statements. But then, he isn't free, not welded as he is to this shop.

Jobs also carry health insurance and retirement plans, neither of which he has ever had. Now that he needs to oil stiff joints every morning, he might want to think about what he will do when he gets old . . . he'll replace parts until the tolerences become too great for him to run--he has his .357 if he gets cancer from his years of breathing gas fumes.

How come, he asks himself, he didn't meet someone like her when he was young enough that it would've made a difference. A woman who hears how an engine works. Not just one who likes cars, especially those that go fast. Not one who merely understands that pistons go up and cams open valves. But one whose ears are well enough trained to hear, at 700 rpms, the swirl pattern inside cylinders. He would've been happy with one who didn't belittle him because of grease under his fingernails.

He closes his left eye to hold back the moisture forming in its corner--the fellow who puts on greasy coveralls every day has to accept the condescension that comes from both men and women with briefcases and college degrees. About a decade ago, he thought about going to college. Maybe if he had a degree his ceramic ring would be taken seriously. He even went so far as to talk to a counselor, who thought if he took some basic machining and metallurgy courses, he probably could get in their VoTech program. And he realized while looking at the list of courses he would need that he could probably teach every one of them. No, college wasn't for him then. It isn't for him now although he would like to know more about engine computers. He didn't have any problem figuring out how CD modules work--even figured out how to melt out the plastic, resolder whatever wire broke, and reseal the unit. But what that service rep up from Atlanta found hardest to accept was that he, Big Joe, could repair the sealed fuel pumps designed by the rep's firm to make repair impossible.

She, he tells himself, is the first woman who ever asked him to dinner or breakfast or anything else. Of course, her interest is in his ring. Still, being asked out stirs feelings entombed in fat and greasy coveralls. He'll have to take a shower and see what he has to wear that's clean.

*

Morning brings gray skies over Cook Inlet. A high breeze pushes clouds towards Anchorage--the breeze isn't low enough nor strong enough to blow away the small black mosquitoes that hug warm shop walls. It isn't low enough to push the fog bank clinging to the middle rip ashore. Nor is it strong enough to keep Deep Creek fishermen on the beach. Despite the hidden sun, a flotilla of little silver boats shine like wet pebbles on the inshore side of the first rip.

As Big Joe scans the first rip, looking for beluga, he wonders if he shouldn't have gone fishing. The first run of kings are out there--some of the boats are taking big fish, eighty, eighty-five pounds. He heard that one of the Eastside setnetters, one of the Jakinskis, sold a king weighing a hundred six pounds, taken during last Friday's opening. Record size fish are out there. But he isn't much of a fisherman. When he goes, everybody else catches them. He just doesn't have the touch. Fishing is like making money: a person has to be able to feel it in their fingers. His fingers, when it comes to the natural world, are as insensitive as iron. What he can feel is the pulse of an engine, its timing, its breathing, its pressures.

His Dodge starts, warms, smoothes out. It's running on crankcase drainings, dirty 15-40 from Haliburton's trucks. He ought to strain the drainings, but he doesn't. All he does is put a submerged heater in their tank--otherwise, they don't flow very well on cool mornings.

A cow moose and her calf crosses in front of him just before he reaches the Johnson Lake turnoff. The calf's top left flank is bloody from mosquito bites.

He's through Soldotna, and Sterling, and across the Moose River and onto the flats before he sees another moose, a fair bull hurrying across the road nearly a mile ahead of him.

Except for the lodge across from the mouth of the Russian River, Cooper Landing seems deserted. The Kenai River, where it leaves the lake, is swollen and gray-blue from glacial melt; Kenai Lake is also high, but more blue than gray.

He turns, half apprehensive, up the drive to Our Point Of View inn, sees the green Jag she drove yesterday, and feels a sense of inadequacy, which doesn't hide in anger like a child behind his mother's skirts, but rather, nearly turns him around. However, he was born to put his pants on one leg at a time like everyone else. His break in life just hasn't come yet. What he fears is that it won't ever come, not that he needs the things, the trappings of success. All he really wants is respect for his idea, one that would revolutionize reciprocating engines if given a chance. All he has received is a tightening of screws that hold him in his place.

The inn is open. A few fisherman, in waders and vests and with sockeye flies hooked in the wool patches over their hearts, sit at three tables. They talk among themselves as if they know each other. Big Joe nods to one to acknowledge the fellow's glance of greeting, but he doesn't see the Hill woman. Other eyes raise to meet his. He again nods to faces he doubts he can remember, doubts he'll ever see again.

The Hill woman isn't seated at a table nor in the passageway to the kitchen. She doesn't seem to be here even though it's quarter after six. Maybe he ought to take a table and wait--but her Jag is in the lot; so poking his head into the kitchen, catching the attention of a young woman in a white apron, he asks, "Has Mrs. Hill come to breakfast yet?"

"Who?"

"You know," again guessing at her appropriate marital status, Joe says, "Mrs. Virginia Hill." Pointing over his shoulder with his thumb, he adds, "The owner of the Jag."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but that's my car."

"It's what she was driving when she came by yesterday."

"Impossible. I was here and my car was here all day."

"Naa, not unless there are two of them in the state."

"Sir, I'm sorry. I can't help you."

"I was to meet her here this morning for breakfast."

"I wouldn't know who you're talking about."

"She isn't staying here?"

"I'm again sorry, Sir, but no one stayed here last night."

Flustered, puzzled, his face reddening rapidly, Big Joe mumbles, "My mistake," although he can't imagine how he's made one. This is when and where she said to meet him. That's her car, and he knows she drove it

yesterday. Nonetheless, he repeats, "My mistake, my mistake," as his fingers fumble his keys and his left foot steps on the toe of his right. He backs out the door, and hurries to his pickup. If he could fly, he couldn't get off this hill fast enough.

He doesn't notice the eagle on the gravel bar that tears hunks of red flesh from the flanks of a still flopping sockeye. He doesn't notice the fox in the fireweed at the edge of the road that waits until no cars are in sight before darting across the highway. He doesn't notice anything as he hears an inner voice saying, *You're a fool. She made a fool of you, a damn fool of you, a stupid damn fool of you.*

But by the time he reaches the Skilak Lake turnoff, his internal mechanisms have thrashed him sufficiently, and he begins questioning what could be happening. There isn't, he is certain, another Jag like that one in Alaska. He knows his vehicles--that skirt-waitress lied to him. She just flat out lied to him. He knows she did: he listened to that Jag run yesterday.

Why, he wonders, would she lie to him? What did she have to gain? . . . He doesn't know if the Hill woman was traveling alone--he sort of doubts that she would be. She seemed to be, though. Maybe he's just stuck in the era of big block V-8s, a time when he didn't hear of a woman traveling alone. He suspects times have changed. At least that's what he sees on TV, what he reads in magazines, in books.

All this doesn't answer why that skirt lied to him, why she claimed the Jag was hers, that it had been parked up there at the inn all yesterday. *That was what she said, wasn't it. I think that's what I heard. . . . Change be damned, dumb ideas are still dumb ideas, and traveling alone is a dumb idea.*

The Jag was one reason why the waitress might have lied to him, an ugly thought made even uglier by the fact that he was thinking of accepting the Hill woman's offer. Unfortunately, things happen, especially to people traveling alone. Even he wouldn't mind having the car so what might have that skirt-waitress done for the Jag besides lie?

She would, he'd think, have to know that she couldn't get away with telling him the Jag had been there all yesterday. What does she think he is, dumb as an engine block?

He knows how she could think that: the size, the weight, the coveralls, the truck, the whole package. If he had any intelligence, he wouldn't look like it does, wouldn't talk like he does, wouldn't tell the stories he does. He's kind of like a Rabbit on a basketball court, a car that never sold well in the American market but one that runs and runs and runs.

As he drops down onto the flats, Big Joe suspects he should get hold of the state trooper, John Bierman, who patrols Corea Creek and Clam Gulch. He isn't quite sure what he will tell John. The Jag has out-of-state plates. A white background with black numbers. No letters. No state name nor logo

that he can remember. Might have been a foreign plate--he ought to go back and check.

He pulls wide onto the shoulder, and checks behind him. There's no traffic in sight, either direction. The Dodge's rear tires spin gravel as he makes the U-turn.

The Jag is gone.

Again feeling foolish, he doesn't go inside. Instead, he turns around in the inn's parking lot, pauses to doublecheck the lot, then not satisfied and certainly more confused than before, he resumes his trip home. Only now his trip seems much longer, seems a burden, seems like a bad hangover, one that needs morning oil. Each mile passes in drudgery, passes like an ordeal. Every quarter mile bounces the well-directed utterance of *fool* from between his lips. Every utterance cuts where it falls.

Home and again in greasy coveralls, he opens the hood of a 1975 Ford pickup. Its wiring harness conceals a short that knocks out CD modules; its wiring harness is the one he can't get. The truck's owner wants him to return its ignition system to points rather than spring for the money to rewire it. He got a point distributor for the pickup yesterday. All he needs now is a resistor. UPS should be bringing one; so he might as well get started making the switchover.

As he lifts the one distributor out, he again marvels at the accuracy of the Hill woman's ear. He wonders if she put the waitress, whatever the skirt is, up to telling him she wasn't there. Maybe she thinks she knows, from hearing his engine run, enough about his ring design to go home and build one herself. Maybe he ought to protect himself by calling Bierman to report his meeting with her yesterday and that she is now missing.

He wonders exactly what she heard. How sensitive are her ears? And why, really, wasn't she at breakfast? . . . Bierman needs to know--

"I'll write up a report, but I don't know what to tell you, Joe. You haven't given me very much."

"That might be all I need, just to have the report on file, a just-in-case insurance policy. She's got the best ear I have ever seen. Listened for not more than five minutes and mostly figured out how my design works. Quite a woman."

"You sound smitten."

"I'm not in her league. I'm down here turning wrenches for you peons."

"I'll see what I can do."

Each then saying they have to get back to work, they hang up. But instead of dropping in the other distributor, Big Joe, leaning on the Ford's front fender with the portable phone in hand, feels something nagging him, feels like he should call Hill Racing in Florida. He wonders what they will tell him, wonders if he shouldn't have his attorney get hold of them. His design will certainly run at seven grand, but will it run at twice or three times that, the rpms needed for

a racing engine? He suspects it will, but he has never tried. He has been more interested in engines that run at twelve hundred or fifteen hundred rpms, super high torque engines with steel pistons and heavy flywheels and broad power curves. At high rpms, aluminum pistons distort; so modeling will have to be done to see if the elliptical piston bodies will slip back inside his rings if they separate completely. He doesn't have the computers to do that modeling. He would have to build a few engines that are balanced well enough to reach twenty grand and just see what happens. It's easier doing it that way than learning the math to do the calculations if they could be done without the horsepower of a coprocessor.

Several years ago, he tried to do some high rpm testing. He modified the piston of a 028 Stihl chainsaw. But his test didn't work very well: his ceramic ring pulled the chrome from the cylinder bore before the piston really got hot. He couldn't afford enough jugs, not at ninety dollars apiece wholesale, for his testing to be conclusive. On one of his tries, though, the Stihl did reach and hold twenty-eight grand for about two minutes before it failed. But then, he probably could have gotten as many rpms for as long from the regular piston and ring. The only difference was the saw ran on #2 diesel instead of mixed gas.

He doesn't know why he stalls, why he doesn't immediately dial information and get Hill's number. Maybe he doesn't want to know for sure that she stole his idea, even if he remains certain she won't be able to make it work.

"What the hell." He dials.

"Hill Racing. Jason speaking."

"Is Virginia Hill there? Tell her this is Big Joe."

"Lungren? In Alaska? The fellow with glass pistons?"

"Is she there?"

"No. She left here a week ago to find you. She checked in yesterday, said she'd talked to you, said your design is for real. I told Leroy, our manager, that she planned to make a deal with you. But why do you think she's here?"

"Huh." He smells a wolverine's den. "She was a no-show this morning. Thought she might've caught a flight home during the night."

"No. She was gonna drive back. Ship an engine if she made the deal, but she likes driving." Jason pauses, but when Joe says nothing, he continues, "She was looking forward to meeting with you again. Your design impressed her, and that doesn't happen often."

Big Joe tells Jason about seeing her Jag at the inn.

"That's strange. She really loves to drive that car. Would rather drive than fly places. Takes it with her to Europe. It's been in South Africa, to Hawaii. We flew it up to Fairbanks last Wednesday. That's where she picked it up."

"Why Fairbanks?"

"Almost a thousand less than into Anchorage."

Joe looks out the open shop bay at his old Dodge, and he wonders about someone who drives a Jag, flies it around the world, then looks to save a relative pittance, not that a grand is a pittance to him. Maybe that's why she can afford to travel and he can't; maybe saving those pittances is part of having the feel for money. He can only guess.

"Well, I called the troopers here, but I didn't have much to tell them other than she's missing. Maybe I'll call them back."

"You shouldn't have called them . . . but I'm glad you did." After prolonged silence, Jason adds, "Our head of security will be up there by this evening. Big fellow. South African accent. Peter Vandeneikhof. He'll want to talk to you."

"Send him by. He'll see my sign. I'm right on the Sterling Highway, just before Clam Gulch."

Nothing more to be learned, nothing more to be said, Big Joe says goodbye. Apparently she didn't intend to stand him up. That makes him feel a little better. That also starts him worrying about her. And without wanting to, he finds himself feeling possessive of her--but both feelings quickly get lost in the maze of timing gears that regulate his inner workings.

He checks the clock: it's only eight-thirty and he feels like he has already put in a full day. After showering, he shouldn't have read last night; can't remember the story, something on the edge of between being literary and pulp-crap. But then, he felt edgy, still does.

3.

The clouds clear when the tide changes. The breeze strengthens, and the Inlet becomes choppy as the wind works against the waves. Most of the tiny boats are south of Ninilchik: they troll for kings close to the shore as a line of feeding beluga prevent returning reds from crossing the first rip; kings run deeper than where the white whales look to feed.

Big Joe has hardly accomplished anything so far today. Oh, the Ford pickup he started this morning runs and is parked out front. But work on the transfercase of the International, now pushed into his single bay, proceeds painfully slow.

He feels like charging back up to the inn and demanding explanations. He has plenty of patience with pig iron and grease, but the slickness of some people makes him want to tap them, then screw them into lock nuts welded to truth. A lie is an affront; lying, while characteristic of vocations like politics or prostitution or being a private dick, is anti-mechanical. It makes him want to pinch out the truth as if he were popping a zit, a little blackhead attached to a maggot-white string of oily shit . . . if he were to charge up to the inn, they would probably call the troopers on him. But he would like to know the name of the skirt he talked to this morning. And who were those fishermen there?

They might still be on the river. He wonders if he'd recognize any of them if he sees them again.

He feels dysfunctional, whatever that word means. Nothing is functioning right. Everything is wrong, and he's on a meaningless job. Just something to do to make enough money to make another month's payments. An exercise bike. Pedal as hard as he can to go nowhere. He'd get just as far if he does nothing; he'd get just as far if he went looking for her.

Her Jag had been driven away between when he first saw it this morning and when he returned not twenty minutes later. That isn't much time, and it's a pretty conspicuous car. Somebody will have seen it unless it's hidden at the inn. Even then, those fishermen are likely to remember it; they would've still been eating when it was moved.

Reaching into a can of orange cleaner, Big Joe stoops to pickup a paper towel when--splinters! bounced tools!--the bullet strikes directly in back of where he had been standing. He's under the International and out and through the doorway to his quarters as if he were a greased pig. He surprises himself by how fast he moves. And grabbing a 6.5mm Swede he keeps loaded for the occasional moose that trots by close, he peeks around the corner and twists just enough that he can see out the open bay.

Nothing. No movement. Except for a raven that circles, looking for, Joe imagines, blood from the kill.

He has no idea where the shot came from. The bullet got there a long time before he heard the boom, loud enough to be from a magnum. And the raven swoops low over the pavement as if understanding the meaning of the shot. It flaps twice, then sets its wings, banks and sails over the seis road that leads away from the Sterling Highway. Three moose that he knows off were killed on this end of the seis road last hunting season.

He looks up at the hole in the wall, and wonders when the season opened on fat mechanics. That was no warning shot. That would've been a lung shot--somebody was unlucky, or rather, he was lucky he bent over when he did.

His cordless phone is on the floor, not six feet in front of him. For right now, it might as well be on the moon--he isn't about to expose more of himself any time soon.

He lies on his stomach on the cold concrete for long enough his back feels like he's lying over a boat anchor. His knees hurt. His elbows hurt. He can't hardly get his finger in the Mauser's triggerguard, let alone keep it in there for all this time. So he's damn thankful to see the younger Bloom turn in his drive, stop, and take from the bed of his pickup a Jimmie starter still dripping water . . . it looks like they again swamped that scow they use as a tender.

He waits tills Jon hollers for him before he crawls forward to retrieve the phone. To Jon, he hollers, "I see what you got there . . . but I have a little problem I have to take care of first. You'll have to wait a minute."

Seeing the rifle in Big Joe's paw, Jon asks, "What are you doing, practicing for when the I.R.S. pays you a visit?"

"No," pointing to the bullet hole above where he now sits on the concrete, Joe says, "I'm calling Bierman. Somebody's target practice came a little too close."

Examining the hole, pulling loose some of the splintered wood, Jon says, "I'd say thirty caliber. That's a pretty serious wound. Is this wall gonna recover?"

"It might if I patch it up with ten inches of reinforced concrete." Just then, Big Joe gets the trooper on the line: "John, get down here as fast as you can. Somebody just took a shot at me. Damn near didn't miss."

Within twenty minutes, three state troopers descend upon Corea Creek. They block traffic until they determine the angle of the shot. Then with a German Shepherd named Kya, they tramp through willows and cranberries until, four hundred yards from his shop, they find a single cartridge case, freshly fired from a .300 Winchester Mag. The ground is soft, but impressions--the troopers work late into the dusk that passes for night--are blurred due to the amount of vegetation. They finally conclude the shooter is of small stature, possibly a woman or younger teenage male.

The bullet fragmented when it struck a nail in the wall; so the officers are unable to salvage it. Yet they take its fragments and call for additional help, who arrive within minutes and who follow the trail of the shooter to a drilling pad approximately two miles from the highway. There, a vehicle of standard wheel width had parked for long enough to leave oil drippings on the gravel. But the road into the pad is well graveled. No casts of tire tracks are possible. Nevertheless, the officers, as if this is their only case, scour the willows in hopes of finding that one clue necessary to identify the shooter.

Big Joe is happy to see his tax dollars hard at work, not that he pays any taxes--the state budget still comes primarily from oil revenues--but he wishes they would put at least a little effort into finding the Hill woman, for whose safety he now fears. He sits on an overturned grease bucket next to the International's front fender, and feels very well protected with so many pairs of blue trousers with yellow stripes running around, popping in and out of his shop, talking on radios, hindering business; but he worries that all of this effort takes away from any potential search for Virginia . . . his use of her name catches him by surprise, actually shocks him as much as getting bit by 110 volt current. He feels as if he has crossed a line he shouldn't have gotten near, an electric fence marked No Trespassing. Well, he's across that fence, and like that bull of Bloom's that chased the state milk inspector through the barn and into the creek, he'll be hard to put back into his pasture. All of those good people of refined society can shoo all they want. Then he winces as he remembers that the troopers shot Bloom's bull.

Unfortunately, he knows the fence he crossed is imaginary while the pasture that holds him is enclosed by fiscal barbwire.

"Bierman, close up here when you get done. Snap the lock on the chain. You know how I do it. You've checked it when I've been away. . . . And I gotta get away for awhile. Don't even want to stand up around here so I'm gonna get something to eat."

"You don't need that rifle, do you?"

"I just feel a lot better carrying it."

The trooper doesn't argue. They won't be too long unless they find more of a lead. Still, Bierman plans to return in the morning, as much to make sure he's seen by potential snipers as to make sure Joe's rifle is again leaning beside the inner door.

4.

A little nervous about sitting up straight behind his pickup's steeringwheel, Big Joe slouches enough that the wheel rubs against his shirt even with the seat all the way back. The Swede rides beside him, its muzzle on the floorboards, its bolt open.

The sport fishermen he saw in the inn this morning probably limited out and returned to Anchorage--the way they were dressed, he imagines that's where they were from. But they might have been tourists from Montana or California, in which case they are likely staying in one of the campgrounds along the Kenai. The campgrounds, then, are where he will start.

He sees no moose in the flats this time. Instead, a white wolf with a kit fox in her mouth trots diagonally across the Sterling Highway about Milemarker 78. She doesn't hurry when his Dodge bears down on her. She seems unconcerned by where she is and by who will see her. And he wonders if she has read New York and San Francisco circuit court decisions that protect even her fleas and mites.

The most likely spot to find Outside fishermen is in the Russian River campground, where, bumping along slow over potholes and washboard, he passes a parked Ford F-250 weighted down by an over-the-cab, extended pickup camper. The truck has Washington plates, and three fellows stand around a smoky fire, their waders hanging upside-down from the back of the camper. He thinks he recognizes one of the fellows so he stops, and leaves the Dodge idling in the middle of the dusty road.

"You fellas have any luck?" He wants to get a better look at the one he might have recognized.

"What did you tell our waitress this morning? After you left, she took off like she was shot. Thought we never would get served."

All three fishermen had been in the inn.

"She leave in the Jag?"

"Left roostertails. . . . Say, what do you have in that truck of yours? Sounds like the sweetest running diesel I've ever heard."

"No. It's the old hemi. I've done a little work on it, changed it around some."

Leaving the twirling woodsmoke that temporarily confuses swarms of mosquitoes, the fishermen ring the front of his pickup, waiting for him to open its hood. When he does, he learns that all three work at the same Ford dealership and that they have never seen nor heard of anything like his conversion. He tells them only enough to intrigue them, tells them it runs with glass pistons.

"You're kidding."

"Nuh. When it gets cold here along about the middle of December, I take icicles from old Quonset huts--best ones come from huts with really rusty roofs--and turn them on a lathe, then give them a thin coating of ceramic shell, like pouring chocolate over ice cream."

Interrupting, the tallest of the three fellows says, "That's pretty good, telling that with a straight face."

"Just wait," says the youngest, "till the tech rep hears about this. Think he'll be up on the next flight?"

The three laugh as if they have something original to pull on their rep--their laughter, subdued now, cements a bond between Big Joe and the fishermen that has the three repeatedly retelling how their waitress fled after Joe left.

With nothing more he can learn from these fishermen, Joe continues through the campground, now truly worried about Virginia. So once back on the highway, he debates with himself about which way he should go, about whether he should swing by the inn or turn what little he knows over to Bierman, who has already put in a long day and probably is home with his kids, meaning nothing will get done until tomorrow. If the waitress truly split, then the inn's owners might be of some assistance. Of course, they might also blame him.

They don't: "We've talked about it, and we don't know what came over Donna. She's always been responsible. She's well liked. So you probably know more than we do."

"Does she live around here?"

"No. In Anchorage. She stays in a guest cabin when we're open, goes back Mondays and Tuesdays. . . . We can't understand why Donna left so suddenly. She didn't even stay long enough for me to get Jill," Steve nods towards his wife, "to come down and take over, so for awhile, I was both cooking and serving."

"What about the Jag? When did Donna whateverhernameis get it? It doesn't belong to her."

"Her name is Donna Green, and this morning was the first I saw it. She said it was her boyfriend's, so he must have been down last night. He's a real scumbag. Spenard trash."

"Do you know his name?"

"No," Steve says, "but it is the type of car he usually drives so I didn't think anything about it."

"Well, the woman who owns that Jag is missing. The troopers are looking for her. Would you mind talking to them?'

Steve agrees, and Big Joe feels like he, at least, has accomplished a little bit, running as ragged as he is. But he's worried, an emotion that has been as alien to him as water is to fuel. As if he's driving a clutch with a broken pressure plate, he has lost his grip on the world surrounding him. All because of that damn shot. Not true. All because of a woman no work is getting done. His efforts sputter. Even this attempt to find Virginia, the first female who, in twenty-five years, has seemed like real people, appears doomed.

Then there is this matter of being shot at--a serious attempt on someone's part to kill him. The realization, he knows, of how close his life came to ending hasn't yet fully set in; he's still in denial, only now thinking that he ought to worry a little bit about himself. Spenard is one of Anchorage's armpits. The other is 4th Avenue. About every evil a person can think of occurs in those two holes. It wouldn't be any big deal for one of Spenard's lowlife to hit a single woman in the head and dump her body in the Kenai. End of story. Her Jag is now problematic, but it could be cut up for parts and sent overseas. Double end of story. Little tremors start in his fingers and spread upwards like out-of-balance vibrations in an engine until all of him shakes. His feet feel as if they are bolted to motor mounts: no matter how much he shakes, he remains upright, still running mentally, but with clutch disengaged. His thoughts don't seem to reach his fingers that would if they could pinch the lowlife's head off. He can't seem to move, just tremble.

"Are you okay?" asks Steve. "Sit down. I'll get you a cup of coffee."

Realizing he hasn't eaten today and that he can't afford to eat here, Joe says, "Coffee isn't what I need. I have to be going."

That Spenard lowlife has two loose threads, Donna and himself, which still need tied off. He doesn't know about her, but there's nothing thread-like about him. Under the grease and the lard are muscles forged by a lifetime of hard work and a mechanical simplicity of knowing he has to keep going. He might be the only person who saw Virginia in Alaska. He suspects there are others. Gas station attendents, etc. But Donna looks enough like Virginia that from a distance she could be mistaken for her, which might be why Donna had the Jag.

"I don't like this, don't like it at all."

"What don't you like?" Steve asks. "Look, it's late enough in the evening that we have extra soup. Let me get you a bowl. It's still pretty good, and I don't want to dump it out."

The same hospitality as when the tanker spilled gasoline--how is he to say no? After all, what might be wrong with him is that he hasn't eaten, and despite his best efforts, he hasn't been able to ween an engine yet although he has leaned some carburetors so much he has been accused of trying. He's no different even though he carries an extra hundred pounds, reserve for when the next oil shortage comes, not that he expects to see OPEC agree on anything soon.

Knowing in his coveralls that he looks as rich as he is, Joe says, "I never have thanked you for opening up that night they closed the highway. Guess I'm gonna owe you a second time."

"I knew I'd seen you before. That's the evening. . . . We had a pretty good time, all things considering."

"I won't forget it."

After declining more soup, more bread, coffee, Big Joe feels a stupor spread through him. He's really too tired to head for Anchorage right now, too out of shape to stay up all night and still be good for anything. So with night nearly as dark as it will get, a sort of soft twilight, he thanks Steve and Jill, promises he will return, and leaves.

He turns right when he reaches the Sterling Highway, and drives without needing his headlights, without a destination in mind, his thoughts, instead, about the many feet of corduroy that went into building the roadway across the flats. He wonders if bodies are buried under the logs, in places twenty-five feet deep. He wonders if Alaska circa 1953 was any less hazardous than Alaska now, which often seems like Los Angeles North with salmon fishermen and roadwise moose. He wonders if Virginia is in the Kenai River or in one of the muskegs alongside the highway. For all he knows, she might be in the mud of Turnagain.

If she is in the river, he hasn't much chance of finding her. She will join the bodies of spawned salmon in helping raise smolts that will return to the Kenai after four or five years at sea, a rather calloused view of life. But if she's in a muskeg, well, there's a sliver of hope she might be found, a case made against whomever, and justice executed even in Spenard.

Searching muskegs is tough business, risky, usually futile. What he needs is the Ottercat he built for Leonard Fitz, who once started a beach log on fire trying to cut it and a lot of sand with a dull chainsaw; the Ottercat he built before Marty swapped his patent for a feel. He framed the decease order he was served preventing him from building additional machines, framed it and Marty's handprint so neither of them would ever forget.

He doesn't know what sort of shape Leonard's Ottercat is in; he suspects it needs work. If it does, he should be able to trade work for its use--it might

take a month to cover all of the muskegs in just the Skilak Loop area, which reminds him he ought to take the Loop road home to sort of scout it out.

The left turn onto the Loop road can be made without slowing. Well, it can be made in a car without slowing--Joe's Dodge pickup doesn't handle like a car, and it takes shedding some speed and a little fishtailing after he makes the turn for him to keep control, perhaps because his reflexes have slowed, just as oil thickens, with the cooling temperatures.

He remembers when the Loop Road was all washboarded gravel, and remembers a moose he once killed in the middle of the road--he ate dust all that winter.

He feels drawn forward as if a magnet pulls him.

His attorney knows the Moose Range as well as he, Joe, knows his shop--he was with Lamont when Pierre killed a black bear intent upon calf moose for lunch. One shot. Across a lake and up a seis trail. Six hundred yards if two hundred. That was shooting. The cow sniffed her calf, checking it all over, then snorted at the downed bear as if saying, *Take that*. When the bear didn't move, she wheeled around as if suddenly thinking herself in danger, and lit out, highstepping it through a stand of white spruce, her calf beside her. Pierre said she smelled death, but he never quite believed his attorney. What does death smell like, especially when recent? Does it smell like a hot engine turned off? Maybe it's just something he can't smell.

Just before the Hidden Lake turnoff, he sees a bull with a still-growing rack of nearly sixty inches. The bull, standing in a mosquito pond, one of those bodies of water too shallow to support fish through the winter and too deep to dry up during the summer, munches pond lilies and weeds. The bull is a good one; so Joe pulls over to watch him in the dim twilight. The sun, now below the horizon due north, casts a yellow band across Barrow and Prudoe Bay, which if he stands on his tiptoes he can almost see or so it seems as the darkness of night stretches overhead, east to west. Of course he can't see even Anchorage, let alone villages hundreds of miles farther north. But the effect of the circling sun draws his attention northward just as a moth is drawn to a porchlight, not an effect he feels in his shop where engines idle under the cool green of long florescence light bulbs, flickering sixty times a second.

In the false darkness, whitesoxs join mosquitoes. With his side window down, both insects feast on his neck and forehead as he wonders whether the bull will be around when season opens in September. He imagines the bull will be in the vicinity; for why should he leave. There's enough cows around for him to gather a harem if there isn't also a larger bull in the area.

On a rock below his driver's window, he notices a green stone, darker green than the local jadite. It's about the size and thickness of his thumbnail.

He could watch the moose till the sun swung around to the east and the bull bedded down. As it is, he needs to get home, get some sleep himself. He just isn't sure he can sleep knowing someone out there is determined to kill

him. Doesn't know for sure if he wants to return to his shop. And he feels as orphaned as an engine on a junkyard rack.

He starts to pull away when he realizes the stone is the same color as Virginia's Jag. He stops, thinking it might be his only souvenir of his best chance to sell his design. Maybe he can mount it, call it the one that got away, his version of a fish story. So he backs up, gets out, then can't find the stone for several minutes.

When he finally does find it, he sees that it's really a paint chip a sixteeth of an inch thick. A chip from, probably, considering the many layers of paint, the rock panel of a Jag. Maybe a Rolls. But he knows, as if he can feel the soul of her car in his calloused fingers, the chip, thicker than the metal in most new U.S. made cars (twenty coats, maybe more), is from her Jag, and it is fresh.

Some time recently, the Jag pulled over to the side of this rock road here, where he is now parked. Why? To look at a moose. This bull, perhaps. Or to dispose of a body, something he can accept but what he really doesn't want to think about.

Why would you, Virginia, stop here? I'm willing to bet you would've been more careful, wouldn't have hit a rock that's obviously visible. Someone else was driving your car, weren't they. Who? That Spenard scuzbucket. Probably.

Beyond the pond are lowlands--bogs and tussocks, dwarf blueberries and pond lilies, easy places to hide a body. Another moose a half mile away sort of shuffles her hooves as she crosses the sink. White and black spruce line the swale on the north. To the south, beyond the birch and willows, lies the Kenai River: the sound of its roily boiling carries across the still wetlands. He hears the river and a loon's lonely call, coming from, probably, Skilak Lake, its errie cry piercing the veneer of civilization developed by engines of all kinds.

If he were a different person, he would seek a spirit helper; he couldn't help but seek one. But he has always solved his own problems, always managed to puzzle things through, always relied on his curiosity and a bit of luck, always looked for mechanical options. And right now, his curiosity causes him to look over the bank. Trampled grass and bogberries--a trail circles the pond and enters a scrub patch of black birch. With his eyes, he tries to follow the trail beyond the birches, but the sink is as dark as a dream.

Big Joe hasn't looked into many dreams, can't remember having them--he sleeps at night like an engine turned off. Usually. But the twilight and the absence of anything manmade other than the road causes him to remember his grandpa's stories of Vikings and of Loki. Plunder and magic, both of which he rejected. Plundering is antiproductive, and magic is antimechanical, which is why Jim remembers more of their grandpa's stories than he does. His brother could find trolls where he only saw stumps. Jim would, if here now, warn him not to wake the frost giants; he would, if here, point out in which bogholes those giants sleep; but Jim isn't here to stop him. He won't be stopped.

Taking the little Swede with him, he starts over the bank and immediately wishes he had a headnet. He knows why the bull is in the water. Whitesoxs attack his eyes and ear canals, taking chunks of meat out with each bite. They climb into tear ducts, and die crushed in his sweat. They crawl deep into his ears and get stuck in wax, where their wings beat and their many feet stomp. They bite all of him that isn't grease covered.

His fingers are too big to do more than shove bugs deeper into his ears, but with the back of his hand, he wipes his eyes and forehead. He'd be hard pressed to see the Swede's sights to aim even if he had to, even if there were more light.

A hundred yards from the road he finds a piece of green fabric snagged on a blowdown, a dead spruce toppled by winter. The fabric feels like silk and might be the lining of her dress--he should stop right here and call Bierman. She's been here. She's somewhere ahead of him, and he really doesn't want to find her body. He wants to remember her the way he does.

He stands still beside the blowdown, its limbs dark and broken reaching upward like arms. His pickup continues to idle quietly behind him. The bull dredges up mouthfuls of moss and water weeds--water trickles back into the pond from his head and neck. The loon calls again. Another answers. Bugs buzz about his head. And the wet shred of green silk cries what feels like real tears.

He has been living in grease for so long the night truly seems alien. No radio here. No smell of soldering paste nor of old transmission fluid. No tires to trip over. Only water and grass and berrybushes. And dark sets of wings dipping, darting.

The green silk feels feminine, stirs a longing for companionship he welded shut years ago. Its torn edge feels weak, but it seems to drive his curiosity forwards. He'll go just a little farther before he turns back. He'll look in the birches where he fears what he'll find.

He finds nothing--he actually loses the trail in the birches. Moose trails are everywhere and go in every direction. Each looks the same, none more promising than another.

The sky begins to lighten. It won't be long before fishermen come tooling along the road. He doesn't like that prospect: after being shot at yesterday, he won't trust any of them so if there is anything here to find, he needs to be finding it. He needs that piece of silk to tell him where she is. But the shred of green silk is as silent as the green grass and green berries surrounding him.

Towards the river fifty yards from the birches, in a soft spot between blueberry bushes, he finds the impression of a knee where someone fell. Then nothing. No body. No shallow grave. No tracks. No breadcrumbs. He feels like part of a fairy tale, only there is no cottage ahead. No magic. Just more tussocks and marsh and blueberries.

Finally, he has to turn back. He's more than a mile from his truck, still sitting alongside the road idling. The sun is above the horizon. Bugbites have caused his eyes to swell. He can hardly hear.

He takes no more than ten steps when, to the side of the trail he's been following, he sees what appears to be her crumpled dress. Only she is in it.

"If you've come to finish me off, just do it." Her voice, weak, raspy, barely carries the few feet between them.

Swollen arms and feet, distorted. Dried blood on her face. One side purple. She's hurt, and as he visually checks her over, he feels too weak to move. The machine in him won't start.

"I didn't expect to find you alive."

"Just do it. I can't take anymore."

"Can you hang onto my shoulders? I'll get you to the road."

She twists forward unnaturally, and he sees the dark circle on the side of her forehead. Among the bites is a small and difficult to see hole. It looks like a puncture wound, like stepping on a nail, and on her forehead, he knows it's a bullet hole--she's been shot.

She might have broken bones, but right now his greatest concern is getting her away from the bugs. He lifts her, and with the Swede in one arm, her over his shoulder, he hurries.

His wind is not what it should be so he stops after fifty yards to catch his breath--and when he does, she tries to fight free. "Hold on. I'll get you help. You're hurt real bad."

She stops resisting, but remains tense when he starts off again, and remains tense all the way to his truck, where he lays her on the seat. He has tools in the Dodge, but no first aid kit. No water. Not even a clean rag.

His T-shirt is the cleanest thing he has: he put it on yesterday to go to breakfast with her.

Wiping her face with the sweaty shirt, he asks, "What happened?"

"I don't remember. He took my car . . . after that I don't remember. . . . Something was licking my face. Maybe a fox. It wasn't very big." Her voice falters.

The bullethole is small, probably a .22. Its entrance is on her forehead. There is a small exit hole behind her left temple.

As he examines the wounds, he says, "I can't believe your luck. Even finding you was pure luck."

"I don't believe in luck." She reaches to see if the gold cross she wears is still there. It is. "He must've been in a hurry not to take this."

"Your people in Florida will be happy. They're worried about you."

"I didn't know where I was. Tried to find my way somewhere. Next thing I knew I saw you." She shifts positions as if checking to make sure what parts of her still work. "Thought you were with him. Thought maybe you figured I stole your design."

"No." He tells her about seeing her Jag, and about the waitress taking off. "It looks like they saw an opportunity and tried to take advantage of it. The troopers can take care of them, and your security man, who I was supposed to meet at the shop hours ago, will have made his trip in vain."

"Security man? I have no security staff."

"Sure you do. Jason said--I don't remember the name, a Dutch name, a fellow from South Africa was your security chief."

"What were you doing talking to Jason? He's a floor mechanic."

"He answered the phone."

"That isn't right. And I really have no security staff. I have no security chief."

"Humh." He wants to believe her. She seems lucid. "That might explain about the shot." He tells her about the bullet that caused the afternoon's excitement. "But," pointing to her cross, he adds, "I was just plain lucky."

"Who would've found me if something happened to you? That was more than luck."

He is now too worried to argue, and he wonders if a college degree would help him figure out the connections. He can almost make sense of what has happened, but nothing seems quite clear.

"That Spenard slimeball thinks you're dead, right?"

"The man who shot me, I would think so."

She needs immediate medical attention--he hasn't time to figure out what rattles darkly in his mind, like an exhaust valve sticking shut, not letting an idea out that gets repeatedly compressed until the action it should generate dissipates in heat, in anger.

"I'll get you to the hospital."

"No, no. Let me think. I'll be all right, now."

"Hell, woman, you've been shot. You have to--"

"I'll be . . . my head hurts too much to think about this."

"Can you sit up so I can drive?"

"Wait. You want to say something. . . . It's important."

As if suddenly clearing, smoothing out, gaining rpms, his tongue, without him realizing it, says, "Your fellows in Florida are sorta behaving like they think you might be dead. They might have something to do with you being shot, might have arranged it. Might have . . . " Again his thought sticks as if it were a fuel charge that can't exhaust.

"That's crazy . . . but if there's any connection, any at all . . . if I'm supposed to be dead, let them think . . . that I am." She tries to sit, and almost makes it: "I'll be all right, I think, so take me somewhere else . . . not to the hospital where all . . . this will make news . . . anywhere . . . away from these bugs."

"I'm taking you to the hospital."

"No, please."

Although only four a.m., the sun steadily climbs higher in now the eastern sky. Big Joe turns west off the Sterling Highway at Milepost 131. Down the hill and onto the beach he goes, bouncing Virginia over ruts and rocks and around alders leaning over the double set of tire tracks. He stops only long enough to lock the Dodge's hubs before heading north along the gray sand and black gravel beach, passing the camps and cabins of Eastside setnetters, some he knows, some he doesn't, all with dogs that bark. He's heading for the Bloom's, a family of fishermen who began harvesting reds and pinks in Cook Inlet with traps when the fishery was still managed by the Federal government. There are, he knows, three generations of Bloom women in camp, with Grandma Bloom remaining in the house on the bluff above, where she tends their gardens and chickens.

Transmission and transfercase gears groan as worn tires churn furrows through the soft sand of the Clucas site. Then around a point and past rocks that hang inshore gillnets every tide change, he shifts into fourth and hurries--he worries he's making a mistake, an emotion that troubles him as much or more than the fear itself. He's not used to thinking about someone other than himself, but with her bouncing against him as the pickup lurches through shallow creeks and over coarse gravel, he can't help but think about her, worry about her.

A mile. Then a second one. Finally he's there, in time to wake up even the dogs . . . in a gray wool halibut shirt, gray wool longjohns and red rubber boots, Clyde, the senior Bloom on the site--Edna's husband of forty years--sort of stumbles from a wanigan attached to an eighteen foot camp trailer, hiding between tents and skiffs, piles of pink buoys and diapered gillnets. Looking behind him to see what he tripped over, Clyde motions for Joe to come on in as he picks up a halibut gear anchor, and tosses it where his grandsons are sure to also trip over it.

"I got a situation here, Clyde. A woman was left for dead and she thinks she ought to remain dead--"

"You with a woman, Joe?"

"She needs some doctoring. Been shot."

Clyde starts to tell a funny about some woman he thought was dead, but stops when he sees Virginia. "I'll get Edna up."

Within two minutes, actual minutes, Joe finds himself seated on a lawn chair in the wanigan and three generations of Bloom women administering first aid to Virginia. Clyde gets sons, son-in-law, and grandsons up--all but one great grandson was up with the dogs--for they have to get ready for the sockeye opening at six. The women would usually be up within a few minutes anyway, would usually be cooking breakfast and making sandwiches. Today,

though, teenage sons take over their tasks inside, while outside, boom trucks lift diapered nets and skiffs.

Edna has been in charge of family medical emergencies since her stint as Army nurse before marrying Clyde (they met the winter she was stationed in Anchorage); so her orders are followed unquestioningly. Cheri boils water. Sandra sterilizes tweezers. Joe keeps his mouth shut. And Clyde, after getting his pants, stays outside.

Schooling sockeyes will, today, rub their bellies on the gravel beaches, making the inshore nets of Eastside setnetters productive. Their offshore nets will gill more reds as well as a few chums, bright as the silver tins in which they will be canned. And down the beach to the south, the Clucas clan will again harvest a king or two.

Joe can't see what all is being done. But after being told for the third time that he should've taken her to the hospital, he eats the plateful of pancakes and eggs he's served without asking how she is.

"She's lost a lot of blood, but the bullet channel is clean. Considering its how many days old, two, that's a wonder. . . . It looks like the bullet knocked her out. She probably looked dead to whoever shot her."

"I'll be all right," Virginia says, now sitting to the table, sipping warm salt water. "I just feel real weak . . . and cold. Just thankful to be here."

"That bullet," Edna says, "wouldn't have deflected twice in a thousand shots. It wasn't her time. That's all. Her time wasn't up. But no thanks to you, Joe Lungren. She's lucky, but it isn't human not to take her to the emergency room."

Joe sits without answering. Earlier, while the sun was still in the northern sky, with Virginia leaning against him, he passed his Corea Creek shop without stopping. He doesn't know what it's like being shot--a near miss was enough to arc sintered thoughts of mortality into a divining rod that pointed to calling the troopers. He suspects he should've left her at the hospital. She isn't, now, really his concern. He has work to do, a business to attend . . .

It's crazy, he knows, to think she's not his concern. He's been in that shop alone with machines too long. He has to see this through.

But even presidents are vulnerable to snipers. He doesn't have the Secret Service to clear the willows of potential threats, and doesn't feel inclined to give that shooter another chance. He, Big Joe Lungren, is way too large a target to miss a second time.

If that Spenard slimeball learns Virginia is still alive, will he again try to kill her, or will he run to the Lower Forty-Eight--the two dollar question, which? If he runs, then he, Big Joe, can quit worrying about wolves with Winchesters.

However, that chemical computer monitoring Joe's air-fuel ratio has been damaged by worrying, damaged perhaps beyond repair. It has run repeated self-diagnoses, but each time, before the diagnostic program can be completed, questions of a Florida connection have shorted its selfcenteredness. At some

primordial level, he knows whatever has happened in Florida with her firm has something to do with her being shot. He can explain swirl patterns and spark advances, but he can't vocalize what he intuitively knows. He almost did earlier, but has since struggled getting past a methane-rich quagmire of mental soup.

If his mind would work as hard as his brain, he might understand why he realizes that some chances have to be taken.

"Edna, can you raise Bierman on your CB?"

"That's more like it. She needs help, and so do you. . . . I'll have to call Grandma, have her telephone Soldotna."

"Ask him to meet us here. It still isn't a good idea to let anyone know she's alive."

Grandma Bloom is outside feeding chicks when Edna first tries to reach her. She tries again after ten minutes, and the message is delivered . . . Grandma calls back and says the trooper is on his way, that he wants to talk to Big Joe, that he has some information on the shooter.

Word spreads quickly through the site that Bierman is coming. Eight-year-old Jess, his BB gun in hand, hastily gathers and disposes of the magpies he has killed this week: he crippled one a week ago, tied a string around its leg and has been using it to decoy others in. Meanwhile, Cheri sweeps the wanigan's floor. Sandra (Sandy to most everyone) now heats water for dishes, and Edna straightens sleepingbags and comforters--along the beach, nights are chilly even in July.

Big Joe watches young Jess hurry; he watches but he doesn't really see. His mind seems to have lost its operating system. He has no way to boot up thoughts other than some faint image of him being a decoy, of a string tied to his leg. So when, awhile after the men leave to set their shackles of gear, two of the kids run into the wanigan, yelling, "He's coming," Joe stirs and without thinking, tells Edna, "Don't think we ought to let even Bierman know she's here."

She scowls. But after forty years of fishing the beach, she understands: "Then talk to him outside."

To reach the Bloom's wanigan without fourwheeldrive, a person has to hike the sand and gravel beach north from Milepost 131. No exceptions are made for state troopers.

"I wanted to see you, but I shouldn't be talking to you this morning." Bierman checks his boots. Their shine is ruined.

"Grandma told you, I found where the Hill woman's body was dumped? I know a lot more about what happened now."

"Found where because you put it there?" Bierman's expression are blank, his tone professional.

"You know that's nonsense."

Relaxing a little, the trooper says, "I do, which is the only reason why I'm here." He uses the splayed end of a length of poly rope to brush embedded sand from between the soles and uppers of his boots. "But you're the prime suspect in her disappearance, and her firm's security chief wants you arrested. He thinks you killed her because you believe she stole your engine design. That seems reason enough to bring you in."

Feeling a frame being bolted around him, Joe realizes he hadn't anticipated this turn, which does turn on a booting process: "Sounds to me like somebody wants her found before too long. Probably why he didn't bury her."

"Don't say what you don't want me to remember." Stepping over to Joe's pickup, again getting sand all over his boots, Bierman asks, "Whose blood?"

The only blood Big Joe sees in his truck is on his T-shirt lying on the seat: "Mine. Bloody nose."

"All right." The trooper seems to believe him. "You found her body. Have you moved it? Touched anything?"

Just then, Joe hears the door to the wanigan, always sticky, push open. "I don't have a security chief."

Surprised but not as much as Joe would've expected, the trooper pulls a small notebook from his shirt pocket. "Peter Vandeneikhof says you do, I presume, Ms. Hill."

"You don't look all that surprised to see her alive."

"With you, Joe, I've learned to never take you exactly at your word. You'd tell me, if you thought I'd believe it, that those engines you build have pistons made of blue glacial ice."

Edna leans through the doorway and says, "She's been shot and needs to lay down. Why don't all of you get in here."

Bierman, beside Virginia before Joe gets around the front of the Dodge, assists her inside and insists she go with him to the hospital. But by now Edna Bloom, certain there is no immediate medical danger, will hear none of it: "She's safest right here, where she's at. Between the kids and the dogs, nobody can get within a mile of here without us knowing it."

Bierman lifts the corner of the gauze patch on Virginia's forehead. "Is that where--"

Edna says, "The bullet ricocheted off her skull, went just under her skin and came out. She's very lucky, and I don't know whether she can thank the mosquitoes or not. Their bites kept her blood from clotting--she lost enough blood to wash the wound channel clean but also lost enough blood she wouldn't have lasted much longer if Joe hadn't stumbled across her when he did."

"I know better than to argue with you, Edna." Bierman jots notes in the notebooks he keeps in his shirt pocket. "You are certain she doesn't need to immediately see a doctor. I'd feel better if a professional sees her, not that I don't respect your doctoring. But this will be an attempted murder case. A

connection will be hard to prove, and then there is the problem of split jurisdiction."

"What if we can get them all up here?"

Instead of answering Joe, the trooper looks over at the Dodge and asks, "How do you make those rings of yours? I know they work."

"That I don't tell anyone."

"If you sell your design, whoever buys it will have to keep you around, then."

"Just a second," Big Joe steps inside and asks Virginia, "That offer of yours still good?"

"It's probably not enough. I was listening to your engine at least some of the time on my way here."

"What's your company worth? Everything. Total assets."

"We have two hundred fifty million in contracts, another fifty million in assets. Selling price for the company would be about a hundred million. Why?'

"Who does it go to if something happens to you?"

"I have two minority partners. They would have first chance to buy my stock. . . . I guess everything would go to my sister, who I haven't seen in almost twenty years. We're not close."

Bierman, standing in the wanigan's doorway, asks, "No other family? No one else who stands to inherit?"

"No. Dad died last year. He provided for Mom . . . she's in a retirement home in Tampa." She straightens her back, and despite the discoloration of her face, reddens as she says, "You want me to sell who, Joe here, my company in exchange for what. That is what you're suggesting, isn't it?"

The edge in her voice makes it apparent to everyone that she values Hill Racing as much as she does her life. Whatever Joe or Bierman had in mind is of no consequence unless she suggests it.

The surge sounds loud through the wanigan's thin walls. Gulls can be heard as can be the rootings of the skidder Blooms use to move rocks and load totes of salmon onto the only six-by they have that is highway legal. Cheri's baby wakes crying.

Finally, Virginia says, "Both of you think I've problems in my company. So do I. But how . . . how do those problems get up here, get me carjacked?"

Again, they hear the skidder engine rev with each push--the rock is either very large or in an awkward spot.

"If the carjacking," Virginia says, "is in any way connected to problems in my company, then--what?" She pauses. "I've needed to change my will for years, but it's one of those things that don't seem very important when you're busy."

"Where," Joe asks, "is your sister?"

"I don't know. Last I heard, she was in a halfway house in Los Angeles. Alcohol problems mostly. A little more. She was running with some biker-types."

"What about," again Joe asks, "that new manager you were telling me about. Suppose he hired a security chief."

"He would've had to. No one else but me hires anyone."

Bierman, hat in hand, says, "I would've bet Peter Vandeneikhof had been with your firm for years. He had those mannerisms about him."

Joe, on an impulse, something he hasn't felt nor acted upon for a decade, asks, "Does your sister look like you?"

"A little bit. She's quite a lot younger." She seems embarrassed to mention age. "Why do you ask?'

"That waitress, Donna Green, looks a little like you."

"I think the most important thing right now," Bierman says, "is to block any sale or transfer of your assets. We'll pick Ms. Green and her boyfriend up."

"I never liked guns . . . but I'm not quite so afraid of them now."

"You," Bierman reaffirms, "are lucky--and maybe you should, for now, avoid a miraculous resurrection."

"I think so, at least until problems in my company are solved, if they exist. . . . Perhaps I should marry Joe here, steal his design, then appear on *Unsolved Mysteries*, playing the part of myself." The suggestion seems more in jest than serious.

But the trooper says, "That's not exactly what I had in mind, but a sham wedding for long enough that whoever stands to gain from your death has to come forward, come up here--"

"That's as dumb an idea," Joe says, "as your colored salt idea."

Bierman's glare warns Joe not to tell the story.

Virginia looks at Joe, makes direct eye contact, and has the tact to not say *no way*. Instead, she asks, "What were you thinking when you asked about appearances?"

"I had one of those antilogical kinda quarter-thoughts that maybe the Green woman was your sister. Just something in her voice, the way she seemed to believe that Jag was really hers."

"And a quarter thought is? Like a quarter note?"

Bierman answers: "No, it's Joe's reply when somebody says I'll give you a quarter for your thoughts."

"I could have a private detective run my sister down."

Pointing to her forehead, Bierman says, "We'll want to do that so you don't have to. We'll investigate everyone who stands to benefit by your death. But carjackings are usually random."

"Would you come to work for me, Joe? Serious."

"I dunno. You build race car engines and I'm kinda the opposite, kinda like an old stationary engine on a rock crusher. Bolted in one spot, beating my head against rock."

"But you used to build street rods--and I found an old newspaper article about you building a funny car for a Portland businessman that was really quick for its era."

"That car was why I went broke the first time. Long story." It's also not a story he wants to tell.

"If it will help," she pauses to consider her proposal, "I'll do or sign whatever is necessary to prove there's no connection between my company and the carjacking."

"What about," Bierman asks, "you buying Joe's design for some outrageous amount, say a hundred million. Not for real, of course. But a sting sale, operation."

"That would require my partners' approval. They would never go for that, which is why I offered Joe what I did. What I offered was my money."

Her words swell Big Joe's chest a little.

Cheri says, "Uncle Doug's boat is over fifty feet. That makes him a ship's captain. He could sign a marriage license, and he's leaving for Area M after this opening. It'll be a month before he's back, before anybody can find out if he really married them or not."

Big Joe shakes his head: "I dunno. I don't think that's a very good idea."

"Why?" Virginia asks. "Do you have a wife somewhere I didn't find out about? I checked you out--"

"You had to have to find out about that funny car."

"I wanted to make sure your ring wasn't a con."

"Joe, I think that settles it." Turning to Virginia, the trooper adds, "With your power of attorney, Joe can make the decisions you would have him make."

"Will this be dangerous for him?"

"Of course there will be some danger." The trooper pauses, considers and seems to reject a possibility, then says, "If there's a problem in your company and apparently there is, this might be the best way to expose it, but establishing or eliminating a connection between there and here will still be difficult."

Joe adds, "Look at it this way, if something happens to me you'll inherit my design, will save yourself a hundred thousand. Even in Anchorage, that's more than pocket change."

"No, Joe. For you to say that shows you don't understand me or my company. . . . I'm still cold and it's not cold in here. I did lose a lot of blood."

"On a naked body, mosquitoes can bite at the rate of nine thousand per hour, draining a person in three to four hours."

"Now that, Joe," says Cheri, "is a cheery bit of information."

"Where, Joe," asks Bierman, "did you come up with those figures?"

"Russian numbers. I was reading about hydraulic rams and found a little more than pump capacities and flow rates."

"Why were you," asks Virginia, "reading about their hydraulics? My understanding is they struggle in that area."

"Yeah, but I see their problems, and the ways they've worked around what they don't know offer interesting possibilities."

Virginia, despite her weakness, looks at Joe with interest. She believes she will heal; so her thoughts are about her business, which for fifteen years has consumed all of her energies and most of her inheritance. She doesn't want to think about--and avoids doing so by sheer will--a connection between the carjacking and unauthorized changes in Florida. Rather, her thoughts are about how to use Joe's design; she will make whatever deal is necessary to acquire it legally. It works.

"Is everything settled then?" asks Bierman. "Everybody stays here until I return tomorrow."

"We have," Virginia says, "quite a bit to discuss . . . a deal to make." She smiles at Joe. "And I want to hear that long story. I've built several fuelers, and have a story of my own to tell about how much money I made on them."

"You know more than I'm going to tell."

She smiles somewhat more knowingly.

"Then, Joe, get that pickup of yours out of sight. I'll get hold of Doug. Thirty days married is long enough for anybody."

Edna says, "I'll have Doug meet you in Homer. Seward Fisheries' dock."

6.

Fifteen hundred reds at about five dollars apiece from eighteen shackles of gear: yesterday was a fair day for the Blooms who won't fish now till Friday. So while racked nets, leadlines on the left, corks to the right, have seaweed and jellyfish picked from their webbing, with only their largest holes mended--Clyde claims if a net has a few holes it fishes better, says that a school will see a hole and all try to get through, with one of two making it, whereas a school will go around a net otherwise (of course, not many setnetters believe him)--Big Joe sits on an upside-down, blue plastic bucket. He spent the night in the ten-man G.I. tent with the boys, and now has sand in his socks and shorts and has three admirers. He adjusted the governor of a Honda generator, the first one he has encountered that's been out of whack. Cheri said she thought young Jess had something to do with the Honda's malfunction, said they never should've given him his own tool box. So he had Jess help him, and now sort of wishes he had someone to teach what he knows.

Yesterday was troubling, but today is worse. Old Doc Fitz came by late last night; said without X-rays he couldn't be sure, but he thought Virginia has a skull fracture serious enough any bump of her head could kill her. That

certainly wasn't what he wanted to hear, not after she kept him talking long after everyone had gone to bed. A farce marriage wouldn't matter under other circumstances, but it doesn't seem right today, especially not when there is a very real chance of her dying before it can be undone. So all morning--which comes early when in a tent with boys eight, nine, ten, and twelve years old--concerns he would never think about in normal situations have challenged the stoic exterior he's acquired living with engines. He has never argued questions of morality, never heard in any garage or sawshop anybody discuss right or wrong. Just isn't done. Port timing is talked about. Maybe carburetion. Or the condition of injector tips. Or pre-ignition shock. But whether he ought to take advantage of the situation in which he finds himself, no, that isn't a fit subject for fellows who live in sweat and grease; that's the subject of stuffy novels and inspirational literature. So he has no basis for determining the validity of feelings that push against this edge or against that one. He's like that Honda missing its governor spring. His mind races without a load, then nearly dies under felt-strain.

Before breakfast, before being asked to fix the generator, he started to take apart the powertakeoff of a WWII six-by still being used as a boom truck even though most of its frame has rusted away. The bolts he needed to remove were too rusty to come out easily and too weak to take the torque needed to back them out. So while their still-tight threads soak in penetrating oil, he sits on the bucket, unsure of what to do or where to go. Bierman told him to stay put for the time being, but that was yesterday. His need to do work makes idling difficult.

Cheri pokes her head out of the wanigan, and hollers, "Joe, you need to come hear this."

He rises, and as he starts for the wanigan, from which comes the aroma of link sausages sizzling in a grillpan, he hears the radio that has been turned up loud:

"The former Ms. Virginia Hill of Hill Racing, Orlando, Florida, has been reported missing. Ms. Hill, 47, was driving a green, 1978 Jaguar. She was in Alaska on business and had just married Mr. Joe Lungren of Corea Creek, whose whereabouts are presently unknown. More details will be released by Department of Public Safety officials in a rare, noon press briefing. However, foul play is suspected."

Joe, smiling as he steps inside, says, "You robbed the cradle."

"Not so that anyone will notice."

"Did they say anything else? Like a reward for information was being offered."

"No. But if the mention of foulplay hadn't been included, people would think we eloped."

"Too many people know me--"

"What?" asks Cheri. "Nobody knows you, Joe. You drink alone, live alone, never socialize, never go anywhere. You fix things. That's all I know about you. You fix whatever is broken. That's not knowing you."

Sandy adds, "We like you, Joe. But she's right. You've lived how long up there in that garage, and I've seen you only once anywhere else, and that was at Chief's funeral, and you looked pretty uncomfortable."

"I was. That giving a fellow a passport to heaven seems a little spooky."

"That's 'cause you're not Russian Orthodox," Edna observes. "What are you? Everybody is something."

"They don't make suits my size--"

"I know you're smarter than that, Joe." Edna kneads a bread dough sponge. "You're like the rest of us. You went and did things instead of continuing on in school until you can't believe. So what were you as a kid?"

"Mom was Adventist. Dad was nothing. We grew up nothing." The hairs of his forearms bristle as he thinks about his mom quelling whatever fun they wanted to have Saturdays. "If you can't agree on what words mean, then all of that heaven and hell and Sabbath day stuff is just stories."

"And people are just machines?" asks Edna. "You know better than that, Joe. I know you're smarter than that."

"Maybe I'm not." He looks over at the radio. "I was starting to say, word will get around that I'm here so I can't stay. . . . Me here puts her," he nods towards Virginia, "at risk. I have to go."

Virginia watches Joe, but doesn't say anything. The swelling around where she was shot has gone down a little. Her thoughts seem sharper.

"Where will you go?" asks Cheri.

"Maybe everybody ought to be talking about glass rings."

"What if they want to arrest you?" Cheri asks. "You know what John said."

Joe holds out his hands and forearms: "They also don't make handcuffs big enough to go around these wrists."

"They'll use," Edna sourly interjects, "leg irons."

"Naa, I'm serious." He steps towards the stove, his mood truly serious. "I know what I'll be doing." He picks up two sausage links and starts out the door. When outside, he turns back, and on a lighter note, says, "What do they say, everybody gets fifteen minutes of fame. Now's my chance."

The tide is in. Squeezing around the point above Jakinski's forces him to drive through surf two feet deep. He will have to drain the differentials now--he ought to build a better way to vent them. Something as simple as a one-way valve would work.

He was in D&D Marine a few years ago; talked to a Mercury outboard rep there. *I do get out, go places. See.* At any rate, when he asked why Mercury went away from their Thunderbolt distributor ignition system, the rep said, cost. Seems the company saved three dollars an outboard by switching when they

did from their very good Thunderbolt system to CD modules; the decision was entirely based on cost per unit. So for his ceramic ring or any of his other ideas to be successful, his idea has to lower unit pricing.

Right now, the pistons needed to accept his ring design have to be turned on a lathe. That makes them expensive in relation to cast pistons. But they could be as easily though perhaps not as cheaply cast as conventional domed pistons. In runs of ten thousand, his attorney's analysis of cost indicates they will compete with other specialty pistons.

The price for his rings, one required per cylinder, is harder to compute. It took him a long time to eliminate flaws in the firing procedure that caused the rings to fracture. His firing procedure is what really prevents someone from stealing his design; it is what can't be backengineered. He doesn't know on how large of a scale his procedure will work. Some bright guy somewhere, he's sure, will be able to duplicate in thousands what he does six at a time. The cost per ring, then, will drop to nearly nothing.

Really, the problem with his rings is their simplicity. To replace them, all that is required is to pull the head, mike the bore to check taper, then drop a new ring in the cylinder. Unless the wrist pin bearing is bad, something that doesn't happen often, the piston doesn't have to pulled, meaning that for engine assembly his design is the simplest yet. Once the necessary valve work is done on the head, work within the ability of any competent machineshop, then rebuilding the engine returns to being a backyard project, the complaint he's received from mechanics for Sims Allen Ford.

It is the blowers that will remain expensive, but blowers aren't really needed for compression ratios of less than forty to one.

Big Joe almost misses his turn--he is still thinking about cost per unit when he pulls into the radio station's gravel parking lot there on Kalafonski Beach Road. He believes he knows how to smoke out across-continent connections.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Lungren, and yes, I want to talk to you on air." The station's news director beams. The room seems to glow from his eagerness to interview Joe.

"I don't need the hassle of having troopers interrupt what I want to say, so why don't you tape our little talk and play it after I go. I know you can do that."

"Yes, we can. However, the station cannot be party to any even questionable conduct. You do understand."

"Sure. But this ain't questionable. It's just the troopers will like what I have to say--like it so much they'll be right over, wanting to make a statement, take an active part. That's okay. But I don't need to be here for that."

"Well, then, let's go down to Studio B and get started."

The studio is the size of a narrow bathroom, all white inside, and soundproof. Joe again notices little tremors in his hands and arms, again little vibrations like those of an engine with a bad crankshaft. His throat feels like

he's just swallowed a mouthful of gas. But at the director's prompting, he introduces himself, saying, "Quite a few of you people know me as Big Joe. . . . You know I've been working on a glass piston ring for some time, and some of you people have even heard engines run that I've converted to use my glass rings. Some of you tell some pretty good stories about my pistons being made of ice. Think I've even told that a time or two myself. Well, I want you all to know that Hill Racing bought my design, and I'm not too modest to say for a lot more money than I have ever seen before.

"Now getting to why I'm here, I want to offer a million dollars to anyone who knows more than I do about what has happened to my wife, Virginia Hill. We got to know each other while putting this deal together, and I guess she sorta wanted to keep the money in the family. At any rate, she was last seen near Hidden Lake on the Skilak Loop Road. Troopers have more details. They'd welcome any information you might have. . . . We need a witness to come forward. I'll make it worth your while."

The director asks him a few more questions, mostly routine stuff about how to collect the reward.

The light above the door goes off. The door opens, and a woman with a stiff spine enters and hands the directer several sheets of papers, which the director scans as he says, "I'm really sorry, Joe, that your good fortune should take this sour turn. The station will be happy to participate any way possible."

Big Joe thanks the director, then, once outside in the parking lot where a fresh breeze pushes inland the smell of canning salmon and gurry coming from the mouth of the Kenai River (the smell of canneries keeps Joe from eating either commercially canned or home canned fish), he wonders where he'll get a million if someone actually comes forward. His intention is to put pressure on Donna Green and her lowlife boyfriend; maybe get them to make a mistake. He also hopes one of the wire services will pick up the story so if there is a Florida connection--

All he has done is make of himself a bigger target.

No. He's certain he's done more than that: he will have pissed off Bierman, not that the trooper will ever say so.

Telling himself he might as well find someplace to wait till his interview is played, he parks by the bridge where, two months ago, snow geese splashed in the mud as they rested on their migration north. Now, sedges are beaten down by the trails of fishermen, mostly the two-legged kind this close to town.

The interview is played at 11:45. Immediately afterwards, the Department of Public Safety's noon press briefing is canceled by an unnamed spokesperson.

Joe waits until he hears the interview, in which he thinks he sounds a little stupid, before leaving the K-Beach area. He passes through Kasilof shortly after noon. And by the time he reaches Johnson Lake, he begins feeling

homeless: he really has no other place to go but back to his shop, where he expects visitors. Or to be shot at again from long distance.

But he has the little Swede, a model 1896 Mauser, variation 1906, built by Husqvarna, a rifle his grandpa could've carried while Sweden sat out World War One. It's nearly as obsolete as lead bullets. But it's still lethal.

An Avis rental sits crosswise in his drive, blocking him from pulling in.

Stopping before running over the top of the rental--he wants to push the new Chevy over the berm--he wonders why anyone would park like that. Someone wants to block others from pulling in, wants to hinder his business, not that he has been open since the shot . . . he looks over the top of the rental and sees the lock is off his shop door. Either Bierman didn't lockup, unlikely, or the driver of this Chevy is inside.

He wants to explode, but his years of dealing with customers, like the balls of a steam governor, limit his responses to provocations, real or imagined. Any number of fishermen would let themselves in if Bierman didn't lockup. But none of them would park across his drive.

He blocks the Chevy from moving.

Pushing the bay's door all the way open, its bottom edge rattling over gravel, he steps alongside the Cornbinder from which he took the transfercase, and he sees the door to his quarters open. His guest is, from appearances, still in his quarters and probably searching them, an act that triggers hot anger flowing from a sense of betrayal, of personal violation. Like a cylinder firing from compression, energy drives downward through his neck and shoulders, arms and hands, and into the emptiness of his barrel chest where it turns around, recharged now by the sight of scattered tools that he always puts away.

Joe confronts the object of his anger just as he emerges from that inner door. Trying to maintain the constancy of a flywheel, he, Joe, grinds out, "You're away out of bounds here--you and me need to have a talk with the troopers."

"Out of my way." The fellow has an inch-high flattop, and the burliness of a schoolyard bully caught taking lunch money from that four-eyed first grader bundled in sweaters on even nice days by an overly protective mother.

"You ain't going nowhere."

Peter Vandeneikhof stands six-four, a little taller than Joe, but he's not as heavy, and what he can't know right now is Joe regularly lifts engine blocks and transmissions because his chain hoist reaches only down the center of his shop. Unlike Joe, Vandeneikhof can't apply seventeen pounds of torque to spark plugs with his fingers. He can't snap a three-quarter inch drive breaker bar like Joe did last week. So when he tries to push past Joe, instead of the jelly softness he expects, he's bounced off the bench, hard, bounced again, even harder.

His kick catches Joe's inside thigh, but before he regains balance, Joe's left hand locks on his shoulder while the fingers of Joe's right hand, rigid as C-clamps, crush his face.

Joe hears cheek bones crack, feels his fingertips push into soft bones behind an eye and at the jaw hinge; he feels he could pull the man's face completely off with one jerk. And he jerks.

"Hold it, Joe! Hold it! Let him go." Bierman grabs Joe's forearm. "Let him go."

Vandeneikhof collapses unconscious onto the concrete floor.

The trooper checks for a pulse and finds a weak one as blood trickles into lungs. "Damn lucky for you, Joe, that I swung by. Call the ambulance."

"He attacked me."

"I don't know if I would call it that. I saw what happened."

"Who is he?"

"He didn't introduce himself? . . . That," Bierman says, indicating Vandeneikhof with his right thumb, "is Hill Racing's security chief. Met him last night, and I know how you could take a dislike to him."

"Maybe it is a good thing you stopped by."

The security man begins gasping, choking with a rattle coming from deep in his chest. Bierman checks that his airway is open, then says, "Hell, it's all crushed. You can tell that ambulance crew they better hurry or they'll have a d.o.a. Joe, you don't know your own strength."

"How's this gonna come down."

"I don't know. . . . If you look in the back seat of his car, you'll see the rifle that fired the shot at you. But he isn't our shooter."

"You're certain about the rifle?"

"Until the lab says so, I can't be absolutely certain. But, yeah, I'm ninety-five percent."

"Wonder how long it'll take them to buy another one."

"That's not exactly your average hunting rifle." Bierman doesn't elaborate, nor is Joe interested.

"Do you need me to stick around?"

"After your stunt at the station, you better. There's brass who want to talk to you. Some want to do more than talk."

7.

Big Joe doesn't fit into the back seats of even fullsize cars: there's too much of him. But the troopers don't want him to drive himself to Soldotna. As a compromise, he rides, unbelted (the shoulder belt lacks four or more inches of reaching around him), in the passenger seat of Detective Bill Johnson's car.

He imagines he is neither free to decline the ride to Soldotna nor free to leave once the car pulls around behind the Department of Public Safety's building where he is hurried inside. If he were religious, he might say of

himself that he feels like Paul arriving in Rome. But his thoughts are of how to connect that Spenard slimeball with whatever happened at Hill Racing since Virginia left for Alaska. Something must've been in the works for a while. Although revolutionary ideas are sometimes spontaneous, revolutions aren't. Her new manager convinced Virginia to come north and look at his design, and as soon as she was out of the way, a security chief materializes and mechanics answer phones. And she gets carjacked.

Peter Whoever not only went through his private quarters, but had two of his rings in a front pants pocket--he was dead by the time the ambulance reached Soldotna; the trauma nurse with the crew refused to preform a tracheotomy, perhaps the only thing that might have saved him.

Invited to be seated in a room that looks too much like ones he's seen on television, Joe asks, pointing to the panel of oneway glass, "Do they have to stand or are there chairs?"

Ignoring Joe's question, Detective Johnson, now seated across the table from Joe, asks, "Where's Virginia Hill?"

"Your department wouldn't believe me Thursday that she was missing. Do you now?"

"Where is Ms. Hill?"

"When did you start looking for her?"

"Where is she?"

"Have you found her Jag? You might start by looking in Spenard body shops."

"Do you have some insight as to where we might find it?"

"The boy friend," Joe pauses as he twists trying to get comfortable in the chair intended to be uncomfortable, "of Donna Green, the former waitress--"

"You have already told us about her." Taking a sip of Coke, the detective stares at Joe as he tries to make eye contact. But Joe has spent long enough repairing engines for villagers both on and off the Kenai that by habit he looks over the top of the detective so as not to embarrass him. Continuing, the detective says, "You won't mind if what we say here is recorded."

"Would've been surprised if it wasn't. . . . Have you gotten hold of Hill Racing to find out if Peter Whoever was for real? I don't think he was."

"Oh, he was." Johnson takes another sip of his Coke. "Officials of Hill Racing tell us they are not interested in glass pistons, yours or anybody else's."

"There's a difference between a piston and its ring."

"A misunderstanding."

"Yours or theirs? . . . Why don't you get them up here. Let them tell me my contract is no good, that I don't own their company. That's what this is all about. Who controls their company. Virginia, or some wannabes there in Florida."

"Tell us where Ms. Hill is. She could straighten out any misunderstandings."

"Find her Jag. Can't be another one like it in Alaska."

"Actually, there are two."

"Same color?"

"Where is Ms. Hill?"

"If you're playing twenty questions, it's time to ask the next one."

The detective stands, and without speaking, leaves the room.

Alone but knowing he's being watched, Big Joe looks around to see how he might entertain himself. What needs fixed? or, the way he feels right now, broken? He checks the table at which he sits. It's bolted to the floor. Three-eighths inch bolts. Moly-screws actually. He grasps the tableleg to his right side, gives it a little jerk, and pulls the lead inserts loose from the concrete. Then pointing to the window, he says, "They didn't build this very good."

The detective returns immediately: "How do you know Ms. Hill was last seen on the Skilak Loop Road?"

"Question isn't how I know, but are you gonna look for her?"

Johnson leans over the table, both hands on its edge, his face close to Joe's. To another person, his presence might be threatening, but to Joe, the detective might as well be a snarling weasel, vicious, dangerous, but too small to be taken seriously.

Finally, the detective straightens, says, "I will be gone for some period of time, and if you can't keep from tearing this room apart, I'll find a cell for you."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Not at the moment."

"Then I'm gonna walk out of here, walk across the bridge and up the road to the restaurant. I'm feeling my blood sugar level dropping a little bit and that's the last thing you want."

"No, I want you to stay here. We'll send out for a sandwich. You are, if nothing else, a material witness."

"What about that fellow down there in my shop?"

"If you try to leave, we will hold you for that . . . but John Bierman said he saw what happened." The detective demeanor becomes subdued. "That's the type of injury a person sees in a bear attack."

"He was stealing from me. Ideas mainly."

"What do you do, keep ideas on hangers in your closet?" The detective suddenly acts perturbed: "He didn't have anything. An old shirt of yours and two white napkin rings. We looked to see if he had taken notes or recorded a message. He had no camera. So what the hell was he stealing? He was trespassing, that's all."

"That's enough."

His demeanor again changing, the detective, now like a sympathetic pastor, asks, "Did you and Ms. Hill have an argument? Maybe the situation got a little out of hand? Something happened that you didn't mean to happen?"

Until the past couple of days, Joe has been passionless for a long time, maybe even depressed, but the suggestion that he might have hurt Virginia is like shaking the grates under a banked fire. Coals glow, and again that boiler of anger builds pressure within him.

Johnson sees red creep in Joe's face, deepen and darken and become ugly. He quickly adds, "Just a possibility--and about that sandwich, what would you like?"

His jaw still tight, Joe feels energy drain away, feels little tremors in muscles as unused adrenaline oxidizes. He wants to remember what it was like to be eighteen and alive, but until recently, he had forgotten even remembering. Too much grease. Too much poverty. Appreciation but no respect. So he says, "Anything but piggy. They're too close of kin."

"I'll send someone in with it. Two of them?"

Now without anger, he thinks about a second sandwich, knows he'd normally eat three or four, so says, "Yeah."

The chair is as uncomfortable as its designer intended it to be--Big Joe wishes he could see who was on the other side of that glass panel. He doesn't like being watched. Hates it when customers watch. Usually charges more. Sometimes twice as much. There are some things he won't do when a customer is there. Won't bang a bearing home. Won't torque by feel. Won't wash parts in gas even though gasoline cleans a helleva lot better than solvent. He always feels a little guilty, about what he doesn't know, when someone watches. Maybe that's why the glass is there. Guilt. Being watched breeds it, nurtures it, causes it to ripen on even stony soil. Getting through each day is a lot easiler when no one is looking, or at least you don't know that they are.

An hour passes. The chair is more uncomfortable than ever. A second hour passes. A brazed joint where the chair's arm meets its back cracked some time ago and now fails. Joe's not surprised. He hasn't found many chairs that didn't break when he sat, hasn't found any that would hold up under him for long.

Finally, the sandwiches arrive with the return of the detective: "Sorry about not getting these to you sooner. A misunderstanding with the Sargent."

Joe isn't suspicious by nature, but sitting for two hours now causes him to wonder if the sandwiches have been doctored. He expects that some trust is required; so he lifts a half.

"We have a problem," the detective says as he sits in the room's second chair. "Hill Racing knows nothing of Ms. Hill marrying, nor of any deal with you. We have been in nearly continuous contact with them for the past hour. I have spoken with Ms. Hill's partners, with her operations manager, with the firm's attorneys. To a person, they believe you are perpetrating a fraud."

"Sounds like the company is functioning pretty well without her, like they don't even miss her."

The detective doesn't say whatever he had intended. Rather, he leans back and stares at Joe.

"You haven't been out looking for her, have you?"

"Don't need to. When she heard we were looking for her, she came in."

That surprises Joe. Edna, he would've thought, would've kept her on their beach site, but since he's ready to get out of this chair, he won't quibble too much. "Well, that's it, then. You know everything and I'm outta here."

"I don't think we know everything."

"Well, where did she say she was?"

"She's been in an accident. She doesn't remember the last couple of days." The detective leans forward. "As a matter of fact, there's quite a bit she doesn't remember. . . . We're now talking about capital fraud."

"Can I talk to her?"

Lowering his voice, the detective says, "John is with her right now. She wants us to release you, but we think we should hold you at least until morning."

"For what reason?"

"We're trying to determine the location of her accident." The detective glances at the oneway glass.

"I told you--"

"Her Jaguar doesn't appear to be seriously hurt although from the bruising of her face it is evident she's been in a very serious incident." Again the detective glances at the glass panel as if his words are for an unseen listener.

Big Joe's hearing has suffered from years of working around engines without ear protection, but he has no problem hearing what the detective just said. He picks up the second sandwich and virtually inhales it. If he chewed any of it, the detective across from him missed seeing the motion.

"I think, Joe, you won't be able to buckle the lapbelt in her Jag." Said just in case Joe missed the reference.

He hadn't missed it--so is this woman Donna Green? She had the Jag, and they look a little bit alike, enough to be sisters, his quarter-thought. So is this a ploy to get him somewhere that Spenard slimeball can put a bullet in his head. Seems like that. What other reason makes sense?

When is discretion better? Now might be a good time, but not good enough: "Since I'm still not under arrest, if my wife is waiting--"

"Now you are under arrest."

"For what?"

"Manslaughter."

"You know that was self-defense."

"Tell that to a jury."

Somewhere on the Kenai, a sow brownie fishes a shallow stream--her two cubs, a couple of hundred pounds apiece, splash for the pleasure of splashing. Three ravens tumble in the updrafts off East Forelands. An eagle returns to her aerie with a Dolly Varden; her tiercel sits her eggs. An ermine gnaws a sculpin left by fishermen from Denmark. Gulls regurgitate cannery wastes, chopped and pumped into the surge. And setnetters listen to the radio, hoping for word of who wins the million dollar reward, hoping it's a neighbor if not themselves.

The reward dominates discussions of whether Fish & Game's sonar counters in the Kasilof accurately records sockeyes entering the system. It dominates discussions of whether the slick off Kaligan Island is really from dumped drilling mud. It dominates complaints about IRS audits, about a return to state income taxes, about the Brady Bill and Federal Beau'rats, about El Nino. It will dominate the praise of praise services Wednesday evening. It is the subject of prayers.

But it isn't prayers that are being asked in the Department of Public Safety's Soldotna office, where in a war room of sorts, now that most children are in bed in the Ballard subdivision across the river--some boys are vigorously protesting that it's too early, that it's still light outside--Detective Bill Johnson, trooper John Bierman and Barbara Roth of the District Attorney's office sit in a semi-circle in front of Big Joe Lungren, whose wrists still smart from the nylon electric ties with which they were bound earlier in the evening.

"You would've thought she was your wife as mad as she was when we wouldn't release you." The detective checks his notes, then adds, "I've now been down to Bloom's beach site. I've seen the real Virginia Hill, and I think, Joe, not getting her better medical attention was criminal."

Ms. Roth says, "We have enough to charge both Donna Green and Antonio Roberts with attempted murder. However, we believe Roberts met with Peter Vandeneikhof at the Anchorage airport."

"You know, Joe," the detective says, "until today, I always thought pinching a person's head off was a figure of speech. We would've liked to have talked to Vandeneikhof."

"You really don't have much choice about me going with the Green woman tomorrow. She knows where the connections are hinged, and she is either stupid or desperate."

"She's not stupid," John says. "I think she's our shooter, which puts you," nodding towards Joe, "at too much risk."

"Doesn't she realize," asks Ms. Roth, "that Joe will recognize her before they leave the building. Is she suicidal?"

The implication of her question lingers long after the walls have absorbed the sound of her words.

The silence lasts far too long.

Finally, Johnson says, "A couple of housekeeping details. Joe, you're really married. You will have to divorce Virginia Hill when this is over."

"How can that be? I wasn't even there."

"You were under arrest, so Jon Bloom said the vows for you, your substitute. Doesn't happen often." Again referring to his notes, the detective adds, "I put her on a charter flight to the Native regional hospital in Sitka. She was admitted under the name Pamela Amason, a member of Region 13. And she'll receive excellent care there, not Bag Balm and iodine."

"You," Joe asks, "haven't told anyone at Hill Racing she's alive, have you?"

"That's the next matter," the detective pauses, takes from his shirt pocket a gold chain, and handing it to Joe, says, "she wanted you to have this. Said it was better than luck. Said you will understand."

The chain is wrapped around her gold cross.

Too short to go around his neck--Joe isn't one to wear jewelry anyway--the chain dangles from his hand until, not knowing what else to do with it, he drops it in his coverall's shirt pocket, and lets it settle a little to the outside of his heart.

"Jason Stoddard and Leroy Smaly and two of Hill's attorneys will be flying into Anchorage tomorrow to examine the contract you, Joe, and Ms. Hill signed."

"Is this the same Jason I talked to?"

"He is." Johnson again consults his notes: "You have looked at the contract, Ms. Roth?"

"Yes, I have. It won't be easily broken." She looks directly at Joe. "You, Sir, better have a glass ring that works. They will be taking your engines apart. They're bringing their tools and healthy skepticism."

"I'm pretty certain," Joe says, "there's a mutiny in Florida. Think someone down there knows Roberts well enough to get him to make sure Virginia didn't return. Now--"

"Joe, we need you to wear a wire."

Joe agrees, and everything seems settled except for whether he should go with Donna in the morning.

"That's it, then. We'll meet again before you, Joe, are released. We might want to bring the Green woman in."

The red coveralls given Joe would probably fit the man for whom the offered bunk was designed--both might be fine for a little fellow, say someone weighing a hundred seventy pounds. But sleeping on the thin rug covering the concrete floor would've been more comfortable for Joe. So he spends the remainder of the night in an equally uncomfortable chair, with the red coveralls draped over him like a saddle blanket. His coveralls aren't returned until a female night-janitor finds him in his underwear when she enters the room to clean it after the sun rises.

When traffic resumes on K-Beach Road, Joe figures it must finally be morning--the room lacks a clock--and still unsure about meeting the Green woman, he nevertheless seeks a mirror. Except for a dispatcher in the far corner of the building, no one is around; the janitor has gone home. He finds a stale maplebar remaining from a dozen doughnuts purchased yesterday; he helps himself. Coffee in the pot is cold and acidic, almost as undrinkable as the gall of the Green woman. He catches a glimpse of his profile in the window of a darkened room: except for his gut, he's shapeless. A blob. Balding on top. Greasy. White stumble. Contemptible. In blue coveralls. Maybe he doesn't want to remember when he was alive.

What has happened to him? He never was into appearances, even as a kid. But he used to look like other squarehead fellows, never a pretty boy but normal. Big, with big muscles. Actually, quite impressive. Now he's nothing. Heart attacks' poster boy. Maybe there's a reason he seldom leaves his shop. Maybe a little exercise, a little fresh air wouldn't hurt him.

The back door to the building isn't locked--he steps outside, and feels the dew, heavy so close to the river, cold on the mossberries and lowbush cranberries. He hears the whine of an outboard jet, hears dogs barking and the yip of a coyote, driven close to town by Kenai's swelling wolf packs. He sees the blaze down the face of Ski Hill, sees a pickup towing a trailered skiff stop at the light, sees life going on oblivious to whether his piston rings work or whether the Green woman kills him or whether he dies of a heart attack in the next few minutes.

A raven sits silently on the dumpster.

Life for him, he realizes, just doesn't have that much meaning. No purpose. No plan. Not much of a legacy. He breathes like an engine, needs fuel like an engine, can be as temperamental as an engine but is usually as forgiving as a Ford. He doesn't really feel a need to be around people, doesn't feel a need to have little kids point at him then tell their mothers, *He's fat*. Too many times that's happened. In grocery store checkout lines. In bank lines. In the laundromat. It happens. Fact of life.

Across the road, the Kenai flows swiftly over the spawning beds where Humpies, in a couple of weeks, will bite Pixies cast by Outside fishermen, who see a salmon as a salmon, not knowing the differernce between a dog and a red, a silver or a pink. Names and appearances--both lie like engines will never do.

He will, at least, meet with Donna; he has to even though she lied to him and he doesn't trust her now.

Remembering the raven, he turns to see if it's still perched on the dumpster. It is. He looks it directly in the eye and sees an intelligence no engine possesses. The bird seems to mock him, though, as if no hierarchy of intelligence separates them.

Maybe none does.

Seems like all he will be doing today is meeting with people. Maybe he can really sell his design. He'll try. Damn he'll try, like that *Little Engine That Could*.

Detective Johnson arrives: "Enjoining summer? If it lasts another day, we'll have a picnic."

"You aren't gonna be able to make a case against those fellows from Florida, are you?"

"Probably not. What are you thinking?"

"I'm not thinking. . . . More feeling. . . . Maybe I ought to take up fishing, get outta the shop a little more."

"Probably wouldn't hurt." Shifting a stack of papers from one arm to the other, Johnson adds, "I'll be about five minutes, then we'll go over to the courthouse."

"You know, I have to go with her."

"With who? Donna Green? I still think that's too risky."

"Has to be done."

"That'll be Ms. Roth's call, not mine, not yours."

Joe remains outside until Johnson returns, then he gets in the detective's car for the fifteen minute drive to the courthouse at Kenai, where he will appear before the judge who once fined himself a dollar for illegal fishing (seems the judge was observed snagging salmon in a closed area). Joe is scheduled to be arraigned at ten, or so Donna was told yesterday. And not one minute after ten, the green Jag parks in a handicap space near the courthouse's sidedoor.

Bierman sees Donna arrive, tells Johnson, and the detective enters where Joe waits. He whispers the news to Joe, then approaches the Bench, where he confers with a clerk for the judge. The clerk disappears into chambers, then after a few moments, reappears and nods to Johnson, who motions for Joe to follow him out into the hallway.

In the hall, the detective says, "We're going to let her meet you, but only after we pass her through a metal detector."

Joe enters another all white room, but one without glass or mirror. And he has barely computed the room's size--104 inches by 180 inches--when the waitress enters.

"Hello, Darling," she says, as if she believes they are being monitored. She steps close to him to embrace him. Only when she has her hands on him does she softly say, "Don't be surprised. A million buys a lot of loyalty, and I can be a very loyal person."

Despite heavy makeup, the yellowed bruising of her face is still very evident. She is, Joe notices, about a half an inch shorter than Virginia, but otherwise (he isn't about to guess ages) they could be twins, certainly sisters.

"What do you think you're pulling?"

"I stand to inherit, and you're now in my way." Her voice is very low, but not soft at all. "You're late coming to the party."

"It's now my party. . . . You're not Virginia. Who are you and where is she?"

Loud enough to be heard in the hall, she says, "I came as soon as I heard you thought I was missing. I tried to take you home last night, but they said there was some trouble with my security chief, that Peter had been hurt . . . by you."

"Self defense. Guess I crushed his windpipe." Joe can't tell if she's acting, but she seems genuinely surprised that he isn't the one unable to breathe. "Again, you're not Virginia."

"And you are not married to her."

"Got a license that says I am."

"Your license is as real as I am."

This room has a clock, a white one. Joe feels its ticking in his chest, almost as if the clock were pumping fluids to his hands, his arms, through his head. Finally, he asks, "Your boyfriend rough you up?"

"You weren't supposed to come asking about her."

"What did you expect? She invited me to breakfast."

"We never expected that, not with you--"

"You know, I'm just a big ol' fat guy. Not too bright. Not a threat to nobody. . . . There wasn't any good reason to take a shot at me."

She shakes her head and her earings shimmer as if alive. "I don't know anything about . . . somebody shot at you?"

"You did."

"No, absolutely not." She closes her eyes as she leans against him as if her legs are too weak to support her.

"Did your boyfriend knock Virginia in the head?"

"I can't say. I wasn't there."

"He bring you her Jag afterwards then?"

"You're smarter than you look." Very softly now, less than a whisper, she says, "He slapped me around pretty good for you asking about it."

"And he's out there," Joe nods in the general direction of Anchorage, "waiting to knock me in the head."

"You have this all figured out, don't you."

"A fella doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure this one out. . . . Would've figured the Jag for going straight into a chop shop, not you driving it around, taking the risk."

"It's my car, should've been mine a long time ago." Then again very softly, she says, "I don't know where Rob is. When I heard you were supposed to have married Sis, I grabbed the car and came. I know a scam . . . and know you will need my help."

"Was it Rob who hit Virginia on the head?"

"Why do you keep saying he hit her on the head? He shot her." She pauses. Then with her hands all over his chest as if in love or feeling for a hidden microphone, she asks, "Cops haven't found her yet, have they?"

"No." The lie falls from his mouth before he tastes it.

"Then how do you know where she is?"

"I don't know. . . . Why, did I guess right? She's in Hidden Lake?" His mouth puckers from the falsity of his question as much as if he had swallowed alum. "You know where he killed her?"

"What if I do? . . . You need me--more than you know."

"Why? I have her signature on a contract, her signature on a marriage license. I stand to inherit the company." He is pretty sure he heard her call Virginia Sis, but maybe he shouldn't know about a sister so he doesn't call attention to it.

"Those signatures are as phoney as can be. Any good attorney will show they're both forgeries. . . . Besides, Leroy won't let you near her company. He knows too many people."

"Is that Leroy Smaly, the fellow I'm to meet this afternoon in Anchorage?"

"Yeah--if Rob doesn't run into you first." She seems a little more at ease; her whispers are easier to hear.

"How is Rob involved with Leroy? And why is it important that I be framed."

"You are a lot smarter than you look . . . you look like you fell off a turnip truck."

"Yeah, well, even good ol' boys make lucky guesses once in a while." He bends over to tighten a shoelace, and Virginia's gold cross falls from his coverall's shirt pocket. Before he can scoop it up, Donna sees it, and slaps her hand over his.

"Lucky guesses, my ass."

He stands, and without showing her the cross, pockets it.

"Where did you get that?"

"What? The chain?"

"That's Sis's . . . and she would never, never give that to you. . . . You found her, didn't you?"

"Was that paint chip a plant or for real?"

"You fucking sonnabitch! You are stupid! You could've had everything. . . . Cops have been listening to every word, haven't they? Every fucking word." Donna's whole body has become as rigid as pewter. "Where is she?"

"Still out there."

"What do you mean--"

"Couldn't get the troopers to go look for her. Then when you showed up, they were satisfied."

She tilts her face to look him directly in the eye--he feels as if he is again meeting the stare of that raven.

"You have explaining to do." Her body softens a little as if she were a tin soldier, a cast camp follower with painted face and skirt, now being remelted in an open lead pot.

"If you didn't shoot at me, who did?"

"Did you bury her?"

"Yes." Telling lies is like being in a henhouse with a skunk: after the initial spray, the stink's so bad a fellow might as well stay until he kills it.

"That bothered me, Rob just leaving her to the wolves."

"You're gonna have to tell me why I should trust you, why I shouldn't tell the troopers that you're not Virginia Hill. . . . You've taken a helleva chance coming in here."

"It's the only chance I have." As if her legs are melting up around themselves, she clings to his arms to steady herself in what seems a desperate attempt to hold on. "If I don't want to join her . . . I can't do jail time."

"You might have to. You're driving her Jag."

"I can't. I mean it, I can't."

"And what's in this for me?"

As if recasting herself, Donna stiffens though she remains outwardly soft where she touches him . . . Joe feels her hands gently tighten on his arm, feels her push herself closer, smells her hair--and he realizes his years of living in the shop have made him a bell without a clapper.

She, very businesslike, answers, "Everything."

"I already got that."

"Not everything." Her voice and body professionally soft, she says, "I can make a deal with Leroy. We'll get a check every month, enough. I'll work it all out."

"Well, I'm not free to go just yet." He is certain Johnson has been listening though he has no idea where the microphone might be hidden; he doesn't know that it was sewn into his coveralls last night. "But maybe we can make a deal. You and me. You and Leroy. But where does that leave your boyfriend?"

"Leroy will take care of him--probably have the other one who came up with Peter do it."

About then, as if he has been listening, Detective Johnson knocks once on the door, then opens it and says, "It's time, Joe. You're next."

Donna releases his arms, and says, "I'll be waiting for you, Dear." She looks questioningly at the detective as she adds, "Here?"

Johnson says, "I'll have a chair sent in. Joe shouldn't be too long"

"Will you release him? It was self-defense. You can't hold him on that."

Joe is surprised. She sounds very wife-like.

"That," Johnson says, "is not up to me, but up to the district attorney and the judge."

Once in the hall, the detective hustles him into another side room where Ms. Roth waits, with a yelllow notepad on the table in front of her. And before Joe even finds a chair, Ms. Roth says, "She is dangerous--I don't want her leaving this building."

"Who," Joe asks as he sits, "do you suppose that *other one* is that flew up with Peter Whoever?"

"Interesting that you'd pick up on that," Johnson says. "We already have people checking into who else left Florida. But we haven't determined how Vandeneikhof arrived. We think he came by corporate Jet. If that's the case--"

Ms. Roth interrupts, "We weren't able to pickup everything said in the clinches, so what did we miss?"

"Boyfriend killed Virginia. She knew about it, knew where it happened, claims not to have been along."

Barbara asks, "Is she for real? She crawled all over you."

"She's not a guy, if that's what you're asking." He sees Ms. Roth advert her eyes and shake her head. "But I don't think she knows the truth when she tells it. . . . She believes what she says, says whatever is convenient."

"Won't make much of a witness then," says Johnson.

"She's like a car that's all chrome and leather upholstery, but only running on one cylinder. . . . I wouldn't buy her unless I was figuring on rebuilding her, and it's hard to know ahead of time what that will take. . . . She says she can't go to jail."

"We heard that." Johnson looks over at Ms. Roth, then back at Joe. "You, Joe, heard what she said. I think we should pick up this whole bunch, Florida contingent included."

"How much say do I have in this?" asks Joe. "Enough that I can make a suggestion?"

"We should get you out of this right now," says Ms. Roth.

"What? And not meet this Leroy character this afternoon? I think it's already too late for any of us to back out."

"Your idea?"

"She told me I look like I fell off a turnip truck." He raises his hand to silence forming objections. "Well, I do. I know that. Wouldn't have said that about myself, but I use that turnip truck look every once in awhile to sort of sneak up on whomever I'm doing business with. . . . I'm just a mechanic, a pretty good one, but I haven't been to college. I don't use a lot of big words, don't have need for anything but coveralls. And I'll guarantee you that those Florida fellows will size me up, then will try to take advantage of me, figuring I'm as stupid as I look. They'll tell me the things they'd tell their dog, say things to me they wouldn't to anyone else alive, really will." He wishes one of them would object, if only out of politeness. "I have to meet with them, and I will make a good witness for the same reason. Appearance. Because of this lard I pack around."

"You might be right, Joe, but this will be high risk." Ms. Roth scribbles on her yellow legal pad.

"And packing all of this lard around isn't?"

Barbara usually deals with relatively simple cases (traffic tickets including DWIs, fish and game violations), virtually all that the Kenai court hears, but she appreciates the complexity of making a case for attempted murder stick, especially where the connection might rely on Donna Green's testimony provided the state can roll her. She intends to offer Donna a deal; she would rather have the bird in hand than risk two getting away. And as far as the Florida connection is concerned, she says, "I suspect Leroy Smaly is far too smart to make our case for us so, Joe, I understand your wanting to continue, wanting to take a more active part, but the risk--it's more than what we talked about last night. It's too much for what we're likely to gain."

"It's not more than I'm willing to accept." Joe again holds up his open hand to stop possible objections before beginning an explanation: "There's a Tlingit story about Raven bringing the sun, then marrying the headman's daughter. Most of the real smart people I've met think the story is a cute tale about where the sun came from. But the story usually continues with Raven's brother-in-laws going out hunting every day and bringing back game while Raven brings his wife home seaweed until the village drives Raven out. How I hear the story is that it doesn't make any difference what great deed a fellow does--and it's hard to imagine a greater deed than bringing sunlight--a fellow still has to go out and work every day, as if he is some kind of a machine." Joe looks around to see if he's being understood. "My job is to meet with those fellows. I don't want to, lots of reasons, but I have to because none of you can."

"I'll see if I can find you a vest," Johnson pauses, then adds, "but I know we don't have any your size. And even if we did, it would be terribly conspicuous."

"Don't worry about it. I have Virginia's lucky charm." He reaches into his coverall's shirt pocket, finds nothing, and experiences a moment of panic before remembering he put it in his pants pocket after it fell when he bent over.

Johnson says, "I'm going to see if they've determined how Vandeneikhof arrived." He leaves, leaving Big Joe with Ms. Roth.

"Did you find her attractive?"

Joe shrugs, rolls his hand palm side up as if saying he doesn't know, then asks, "Why do you ask?"

"I know the story about Raven bringing the sun . . . I didn't get that from it."

"Maybe it wasn't in the story you heard."

"Must not have been. . . . Why don't you go with her?"

"Who?"

Barbara knows what she suggested is irresponsible, but she wants the big case, not the one already given her. It's her job to make that case.

"Donna."

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now. . . . We'll try to follow, but you'll really be on your own so be very careful."

"Where am I going?"

"The Captain Cook. Room 525. Tower One. . . . Your meeting is in three and a half hours. This could all be over in time for me to buy you dinner."

"Ahh, shame on you. Inviting out a married man."

"Right." She smiles as she shakes her head. "You'd better get out of here before Bill returns . . . and before I come to my senses."

"You're on for dinner. I generally eat a whole heifer at a sitting, especially after a big day."

She raises her eyebrows. "When was the last time you used that line?"

"Don't think I have before."

9.

Never one to do much besides work on things mechanical, never one to flirt or exchange banter with the opposite sex, Big Joe, having surprised himself, now wishes he didn't have to go with Donna Green, who seems a little too much like a Gila monster--and he doesn't know which he hears darkly, a song about or stories about taking a pretty snake to his bosom. So with legs feeling a little weak, his throat a little dry, feeling as if he's running on stale gas, Joe, knowing he did this to himself, lets himself into the white room where Donna waits: "This ain't over yet, but let's go, before that detective returns."

Appearing surprised, she nonetheless grabs her purse and starts for the door. "An escape? I thought maybe you were working with them."

"I considered it. But they aren't offering enough." He checks the hall before squiring her past the metal detector and its metal watchperson, who glances at him before lowering her eyes. "Besides, most any decent attorney can get me off. It really was self defense, and seeing how I haven't yet been arraigned, I think they know they can't make their case."

"Will they call ahead, block the road before we get around Turnagain?"

A problem. This escape attempt has to look to her like an escape attempt, and not like they let him go. Her criminal mind is definitely better than his. He hadn't considered that in Alaska, one road goes here, one road there, if a person can even get there from here.,

"Yeah, they probably will which means we'll have to fly." He needs to get one of his engines north to Anchorage. He was planning to drive his Dodge, but now that's out. "Maybe," he knows how he can get to Anchorage undetected, but he'll lose any possibility of backup, "my attorney can help."

"Does your attorney have a plane?"

"Next best thing. Head out Funny River. . . . I need to make a call on a land line so stop at Soldotna's almost airport."

"Soldotna's?"

"You want to get stopped at Kenai's, where they have a tower and security and a helleva lot of people around?"

"No, I just never knew Soldotna had an airport."

"It's just a strip."

Joe realizes his borough sales taxes haven't been at work repairing potholes--even the Jag's suspension is taxed by the road's roughness the last mile to the improved field, from where he calls Pierre Lamont in Anchorage.

"My Friend, of course I will have Billy or someone there ferry you to Merrill Field, where I'll pick you up myself--and yes, the Ford runs fine. We certainly can use it to close the sale of your ring design."

"This, I'm afraid, is a little more complicated than just a sale." Donna listens, so he can't say much other than, "Troopers are involved."

"I see. Anything I shouldn't know."

"Yeah, so don't ask. . . . You know your chainsaws, you remember how a BP-1 is designed. Well, there's that situation also at work here."

"A balance piston--"

"Yeah, but this one fires real bullets."

"My Friend, enough said. . . . Go to the third hanger from where you are right now, and park whatever you're driving inside. Someone will open its door by the time you get there."

If Lamont were charging him for his, Lamont's, patent work or any of his other legal services, Joe would suspect his attorney of being a little less than forthright--it's almost like Lamont has big secrets of his own. At one time, he thought Pierre might be working both sides of the Law, but not anymore. His secrets, Joe suspects, have something to do with his ability to shoot . . . maybe Lamont was a sniper in Vietnam or in another theater where he notched too many kills, enough too many he now has a look in his eyes that sort of pierces bravado and impales courage. In a courtroom, even judges seem to fear him, which both helps and hurts his clients.

Donna pulls in front of the hangar door a moment before it opens from inside.

A fellow of about thirty steps aside and points to an Arctic Tern tethered outside the hangar. "It's fueled and ready to go. I'm supposed to haul you, Joe, to Anchorage."

Pointing to Donna, Joe says, "She's also going."

"Then get parked, get in and get belted. I'll be about a minute."

Joe sees the fellow return to the phone receiver lying across a tool box. The fellow speaks a short sentence into it, then hangs it up, and sheds his dirty coveralls.

"Are we ready?" The fellow asks once all three of them are in the Tern. "I'm Billy, your pilot today, and there won't be any infight service. You have to bring your own peanuts."

"What did you tell Pierre?"

"That we are on our way. . . . We'll be about thirty minutes getting there."

Once the Tern's engine starts, Joe can no longer hear anything Billy says, so he looks out his window and remembers that he dislikes flying. No good reason. He doesn't need a good reason to feel like he's away too heavy to get off the ground.

In the air, the Tern climbs over the Kenai River, a meandering bluegray strip between dark green stands of spruce and light green stands of mixed birch and spruce, both colors of green flowing like glaciers around lakes and over ridges, both colors cut by intersecting seis trails, straight as only things manmade can be. With Pierre, Joe has hunted the area off to their east, the Swanson River gas fields; has even been in on the kill of a big bull south of Canoe Lake. But the country down there looks so much smoother, so much easier to hike from a thousand feet up than it is. Gone are the pushed-down trees. Gone are the bugs and the muskegs and the tussocks. Instead, he looks down on the wings of a pair of swans, white as his knuckles.

The Tern sails over Turnagain, where wind slips the plane sideways. Turnagin Arm is ugly brown, water and mud. But Anchorage lies just beyond its far shoreline (he can't really tell where the tide stops and the mud starts), so Joe relaxes a bit as he feels the Tern begin to descend.

Commuter flights, national and international flights land at Anchorage International, but private planes land across town at Merrill Field. And even if Detective Johnson guessed from where he and Donna left, Anchorage traffic is snarly enough that they are here before a tail can be sent from across town. So Joe doesn't expect any outside help or interference until the meeting in the Cook, three hours from now.

Donna hugs his arm. Joe wonders if she has a gun, maybe the .22 that shot Virginia. He wonders where Roberts, Rob, lurks; wonders who the other person with Peter Whoever is. He has more questions than answers. So as he watches Billy taxi the Tern into the wind for the return flight to Soldotna, he reaches around Donna and draws her close, hoping to feel any concealed lump that might be a gun. But what he feels is his face becoming flushed when she doesn't pull away. Here he is, a sort of shapeless blob in blue coveralls with his arm around a fairly attractive woman who by rights shouldn't have anything to do with him. He knows her willingness to participate in this charade stems from fear or greed greater than her natural repulsion of lard in coveralls. A million dollars probably isn't reason enough. Either she expects a lot more money, or she's very scared--and if she's scared, he should be, too.

Pierre arrives in five minutes, his green pickup mud flicked and dusty.

Joe asks, when he hears the pickup's engine, "What are you running it on?"

"Right now, JP5 that might have some algae in it so the flight service, there," Pierre points down the Field, "couldn't sell it except as stove oil. I got it for sixty cents a gallon."

"It sounds a little hot. You might back your compression down a little, say to thirty-to-one."

"Remember BP-1, Joe. Keep your priorities straight."

"Yeah, you're right." He opens the passenger sidedoor for Donna, noticing when he does that Pierre's well-worn singleshot hangs on the gunrack behind the seatback. "I see you've come prepared."

"Where to?"

To Donna, Joe says, "We have time enough to do a little business with your boyfriend. Where can we find him?"

He feels her shudder as if the mention of Rob is enough to overcome repulsion and greed.

"He'll be looking for you. He'll know about your meeting with Leroy. . . . Leroy will tell him."

Pierre asks, "Who are we looking for?"

"Antonio Roberts."

Both Donna and Pierre look with surprise at Joe, Donna surprised that he knows her boyfriend's name, Pierre surprised that they haven't heard the news: "There can't be many Antonio Roberts in town, and a jogger by that name was found trampled out at Russian Jack park this morning. It looked like he tangled with a moose, according to last hour's news. . . . Here, let me find a station." Pierre turns on his truck's radio. "You can hear the latest, along with more than you ever wanted to know about the Kennedy family."

"Rob doesn't jog. His idea of exercise is rolling pimps."

"Maybe one of them took him out running."

"No. There must be some mistake."

"You were gonna tell me about the second fellow who flew up from Florida, remember earlier this morning." Joe has his arm around Donna mainly because there isn't room for it elsewhere. Without moving, he tightens his bicep and about crashes her.

"The other one is not a man. That's all I know."

Traffic lights seem to take forever to change. When a light finally changes to green, cars sit and wait while six, seven, eight cars run the now red light for the cross street. Then just before the green light turns yellow, vehicles ahead of them start forward and continue forward through the red light for six, seven, eight cars.

A newscaster interrupts Rush Limbaugh to again warn joggers in the Russian Jack area to steer clear of moose, particularly cows with calves. Then again the trampling of Antonio Roberts is reported before *The Great One* again announces that he hasn't time to be fair to another caller. And Joe finds himself wondering if everything that occurs in the city hasn't already occurred

before--and if there isn't anything new, then why is he trying to build a better engine. Maybe this is why his design has never been accepted; it hasn't been done before. Maybe the world has a quota for "firsts," a fact nobody ever told him. He has to get in line, has to wait, and he hasn't even known what the rules are, let alone where to find the line. No wonder Pierre hasn't been able to help him. Neither one of them think much of standing in lines, whether to piss or to collect paychecks.

"What should we do?" asks Donna, who appears to have dismissed the report of an Antonio Roberts death.

An awareness begins somewhere in his brainstem and quickly spreads to those regions where thoughts occur in words--if the troopers picked up Roberts, how better to notify him than to use Alaska state news, considering they have at least temporarily lost contact with him. He becomes certain what is being reported is the removal of a player, giving him one less person to worry about and one more worry: he and Pierre really are on their own.

"Let's get over to the Cook before anybody expects you there, Joe." Lamont is over six feet, with the arms and build of a logger which he, during a Kenai blizzard that kept him overnight at Corea Creek, admitted he once was. He usually denies having a past although Joe knows Pierre spent time in the Aleutians and at Kodiak before the crab money ran out. He, Joe, suspects Lamont prefers being on his own, prefers being a lone wolf able to howl at distant stars on cold nights, expecting to be heard in far galaxies where the smell of death bubbles in a evolutionary soup, white and pure.

Joe also suspects they shouldn't arrive at the Cook early, especially if news of the Russian Jack trampling is an attempt to communicate with him--the troopers need time to setup whatever support he might get. Besides, the Cook is not where mechanics hang out; it's where those still possessing money in Alaska stay when in town. It is where airline pilots and stewardess, oil company executives and Republican politicans stay. It is where developers of all stripes and ecology sages stay. It became Wally Junior's World even before Hickel borrowed Vogler's Independence party and served another stint in Juneau, but it retains the flavor of the self-made millionaire developer who came to Alaska with ambition and a couple of dollars.

"I wish," Joe says as if thinking aloud, "we were meeting them somewhere else, somewhere . . . ." He doesn't finish his thought.

"Nobody will recognize you, Joe," Lamont says before, as if changing thoughts in midstream, he adds, "and you, Joe, are going to buy some clothes. A suit. At least a sports jacket and a pair of pants. Anything other than coveralls."

"Where? I'm a size sixty, tall. When was the last time you found one of those hanging on a rack."

As if she finally understands a problem she thought unique to women, Donna twists nearly completely around to visually measure him. "Are you that big?"

"I'm more likely to find something at Alaska Tent & Tarp than at Penny's." Yes, his size embarrasses him some. Didn't a week ago. Well, maybe it did. "Damn fat man pants don't fit. The crouch is always wrong. And finding a jacket--forget it."

Lamont says, "I appreciate the problem. I'm a fifty-two. That didn't used to be a rack size though it is now. So things are getting better."

"They won't in the next five minutes."

Pierre pulls over about 5th and C, opens his cellphone and places a call to the director of a Mountain View funeral home:

"John, you remember telling me you keep a stock of big mens suits. Do you have some really big ones? Size sixty and up." Pierre listens, then says, "Good. We'll be over in twenty minutes."

"What the hell, Lamont? You're gonna--"

"Relax. John used to be a tailor in Hungary before the Soviets gave him refugee status in exchange for a volda bottle full of gasoline. He didn't speak English so when he arrived in Toronto and began working his way west, he took the only jobs he found where language wasn't a problem. He washed bodies in morgues. Along the way, he'd changed vocations. By the time he arrived here, he was an undertaker. So now if somebody dies without a suit--and how many Alaskans do you know who own one--he rents one to the family. He keeps a big stock that hasn't seen much wear." As if recalling a private joke, Pierre laughs as he adds, "They're not the latest Italian styles, though."

"What, I'm gonna look like Khrushchev?"

"No, you're taller." Pierre starts chuckling hard enough the pickup shakes as he pulls back into traffic.

Joe's choice of suits is between a dark brown one with wide lapels and baggy trousers that stay under the overhang of his belly, or of a black one that's tight across his back and really too narrow in the shoulders.

"What do you think, John, the brown one?" asks Lamont.

"It's the wrong color for your friend. Makes him look sick, like he will be staying with me tomorrow."

"No way," Joe shakes his head to emphasis his words. Yet his thoughts this morning were of his mortality, of a possible heart attack.

The brown suit, despite its wide lapels and 1950s East European styling--it doesn't look as Russian as Joe feared; it doesn't look good, but then, he expected worse--is chosen because of its fit. So he reluctantly surrenders his stained but almost clean blue coveralls for wide lapels and a five inch wide tie. He isn't sure he doesn't look more like a hick than before, but at least he won't

have to change clothes if things go wrong in an hour; he's already dressed for his funeral.

But he feels like a damn fool.

All of his life, he worst fear has been looking like a fool and acting foolish. He avoided being in those awkward girl-boy situations as a teenager, didn't socialize outside of shops where his knowledge of engines commanded respect, didn't try out for sports where a missed tackle or booted grounder might bring boos. He did wrestle intramural, and he routinely pinned the A-2 heavyweight state runnerup. But he never tried out for the wrestling team. Yet, here, now, he's a fool on a fool's errand, while looking every bit the part.

Donna tells him that he looks nice, but he knows she is a professional liar. The undertaker, tape over his shoulder, pinches the jacket here, and there, seeing what quick alterations might help its fit. And he, Joe, sees, when Pierre's jacket opens, the butt of a Ruger Red Hawk--he imagines the revolver is Lamont's .44 Mag, but his glimpse of the gun is for less than a second.

All of a sudden, the absurdity of the past half week, like the smoky exhaust from a wornout Pinto, bends him double, starts him coughing, tears flowing. He can't decide whether he's gagging or laughing. Either way, hacking, choking, he can't continue. Not dressed like some sort of a comic Russian, an Ivan from God-knows-where come to Moscow on his turnip wagon. His sides hurt, and he has to piss, and he can't even take himself seriously--and attempted murder is very serious business.

"Lamont, I can't--"

"No time, my Friend. We have to go right now."

"No--"

"Yes."

Now he is laughing, laughing too hard to resist as Pierre pushes him towards his Ford pickup, still idling where hearses load caskets.

All the way in on the Glenn Highway, then down 5th, Joe continually shakes his head as he imagines the figure he'll cut in the Cook's lobby. He wishes he knew enough Russian he could speak the language--idiocy is forgivable proportional to perceived cultural sophistication, something he read in, probably, a John Haines essay excerpted in the Sunday *News Miner*. But he struggles with simple English, if any act of speaking English can be called simple. He knows *nyet* and *da*, and he feels so damn ridiculous he could be an Aleut living upriver on the Copper. He doubts he can pass himself off as Eastern European without knowing more language, and an inner question asks, can he pass himself off as a deaf mute? He would stand a better chance if he hadn't already talked to Jason. And for once he wishes he wasn't so damn big; wishes he was one of those little gray men, faceless accountants all, regardless of whether they teach school or aim missles at whoever designed his damn suit.

Actually, thinking about walking through the Cook's lobby, he wishes Pierre was him and he the semi-literate body guard of comic movies, a role for

which he's better dressed, and he says so: "Well, what do you think, Lamont? You want to be me? You aren't as big as I am, but you're pretty good size and a lot better talker. And Donna, here, will be the one making the introductions."

"I don't know, my Friend. I've answered questions from the Patent Office about your design--but you will have to help me when it comes to tearing the engine apart. I haven't taken an engine down in twenty years."

"You're going along with this, Donna, aren't you?" Joe doesn't trust her. If Rob has been trampled, fear for her loses some of its bite, which leaves him trusting her even less.

"Of course. . . . I'm in this for the money. Let's make no mistake about that."

"Well, Lamont here ain't, so you don't have to worry about him, hear. He's got enough money he can even afford you."

"Don't be silly. I only want what's rightfully mine. That was my inheritance also that built Hill Racing into what it is today. I want it back."

"Then you really are Virginia's sister?"

"Of course I am. Who did you think I was?"

"Not much sibling loyalty--"

"I told you, loyalty costs money."

"So this is gonna be a bidding war between Leroy Whoever--"

"No, not on his part. He'll want to kill you if he can't expose you as a fraud."

"Joe," Lamont interjects, "I am you, and you will wait for me in that cafe on the ground floor."

"Can't let you do that, Lamont. I have to do this regardless of how stupid it seems." He hopes the troopers will have again caught up with him before the meeting.

Turning into Cook's parking garage, waiting that moment for the time-dated ticket to pop out, Pierre says, "We'll go together, but I'm going to be you. Agreed."

"I suppose. But you ought to wait here in the truck, keep the engine idling in case we have to get outta here quick."

Donna, her hands over her face, says, "Can't you two agree. I can't believe I'm going in there . . . with you two. . . . It was scary enough when Rob dealt with them, and he makes you two look like . . . like . . . Mutt and Jeff."

"Do you remember Mutt and Jeff, Joe?"

Shrugging, Joe says, "The name."

"That's what I thought." Then to Donna, Pierre says, "Money might be all that motivates you, but that's only because you don't have it. . . . You haven't earned it yet."

"Oh yes I have--"

"Then where is it?"

Her face becomes hard as she sits very straight, her hands now on her lap--and a horn honks behind them as Pierre makes a wide turn to get square in a parking place labeled for compacts. The bed of his pickup sticks far out into the corner, forcing cars to come nearly to a stop before jockeying around his truck.

"Remember BP-1," Joe says as he slides off the seat, the wool fabric of the trousers slicker than his denim coveralls. He isn't certain that's the proper model number for the ancient McCullough chainsaw that used a shadowing balance piston--a two cylinder saw design in which only one piston was charged and fired, the second piston, down when the first piston was up, doing no work, was just for balance. But it's the number he has always called the saw, the number he used when lamenting its stupidity to Lamont the night his attorney was stuck at Corea Creek last winter. And it doesn't need to be the correct model number if they both understand what he's trying to say in a code meaningless to Donna, who if she wrestles with the number will probably think BP stands for British Petroleum.

Up one floor on the elevator in the parking garage and they are at street level, and with Donna now hanging on Pierre's arm like a matador's cape, Joe, more self-conscious than ever, falls a step, then two, then three behind as they cross the side street and enter the Cook, whose towers at one time were half of Anchorage's skyline.

The elevator to Tower One is right there so Joe enters seen only by porters pushing luggage racks and two elderly Native women seated on the bench just inside the inner set of doors--both women have permed hair and rather shapeless dresses, one of white polkadots on a dark blue background, the other of yellow and orange sea shells in rows on a green background, and he feels a little less like a turnip.

A young woman with a flat chest hurries to get in with them; she wears sweat pants and a tank top. Joe would usually not notice how she's built except she bumps into him, jostles him, then gets off at the second floor as he realizes he left his wallet in his coveralls--he checked to make sure he still had it after being bumped, such is his suspicion of everyone he is likely to meet in the Cook.

Pierre and Donna start along the hallway of the fifth floor, looking for where the meeting is scheduled; they are ten minutes early. Meanwhile, Joe loiters beside the elevator. He is too big not to be noticed, but the hall is mostly deserted. A housekeeping cart sits in front of an open door halfway down the hall, and two kids, outfitted by L.L. Bean, whisper as they try doorknobs, then try to open locked doors with a plastic phonecard, practicing, he suspects, to become the next generation of detectives for a Straley mystery. And he imagines he should tag along behind his attorney. He thinks he knows what Ms. Roth needs from him. He just wishes he didn't look so much like a KGB buffoon, left over from an Iron Curtain that rusted away.

Pierre and Donna are being let into Room 525 when he's still four doors away. He considers stopping right here, staying where he is, but in a way Virginia is counting on him. He has to make his presence known, not something usually this hard for him to do. So he hurries and catches the door just before it latches.

He recognizes Jason as being a mechanic before he hears the introductions. The other fellow must be Leroy: tall, six-three or so, and thin, very thin, Leroy looks more like a driver than a manager--he is hawk-nosed, with a protruding Adam's apple, a receding hairline, and the long muscles that come with age; his eyes are intensely hard.

To Pierre, Leroy says, "So, Mr. Lungren, Ms. Hill signed a contract with you before she disappeared. . . . Thank you for promptly forwarding us a copy. Our attorneys are," nodding to the wall in front of him, "next door looking it over. I hope you won't mind if we are skeptical."

"You'll find it quite in order even though it was difficult to get it drawn up on such short notice."

"On how short of notice?"

"She arrived at my shop a little before closing, understood the design principles, seemed satisfied, and dictated the terms over the phone to Burt Cool of Soldotna, whose bill I have with me. I believe you are to take care of that bill. It is unpaid."

"Not so fast there Buddy Boy. . . . We don't believe she signed anything, let alone your contract."

Pierre steps forward quickly, jams a finger hard into Leroy's chest and lowers his voice: "One more *Buddy Boy* and you're out of Hill Racing before you can catch your next breath."

This is the side of Pierre Joe has always known about even if he has never seen it before. This is the side he didn't expect to see, and certainly is not what the troopers want--and he wonders why he was never given that wire to wear. Now he's glad this isn't being recorded.

Backing up a step, Leroy's eyes rage as he quietly asks, "Is that how you got her to sign? Bullied her around."

"You're terminated, as of this minute. I'll see to it that you're paid through the end of the month."

"What the hell! Who the hell do you think you are? You don't have any fucking say about what goes on in my company."

This time he's ready for Pierre--he blocks Pierre's hand away, but doesn't see the left that sends his sprawling across the bed, covered with papers and the remains of lunch.

Jason wants to intervene: he starts to move, then stops and just quivers as if he knows what happened to Peter Vandeneikhof and has no desire to have his face pinched off.

Joe also wants to intervene, but he's too slow getting started. And Leroy doesn't rise from the bed--rather, he lies there, with his right eye already beginning to close.

Donna seems horrified. She stands in the corner by the door, her hands, as if praying, joined over her mouth.

"Hill Racing is now my company, and will be mine until there's a resurrection of saints. . . . You miscalculated. Roberts made a deal with me."

"Now I know you're lying--"

"He was afraid of you. I'm not. Guess he wanted to back the winner . . . just as she does." With his right thumb, Pierre points over his shoulder in the general direction of Donna.

Leroy's eyes dart from Pierre to Donna, then back.

"Doesn't matter what your attorneys, now my attorneys find. You're out. So's this punk kid, here." Pierre nods towards Jason.

"Like hell I am." Leroy bounces up and to the side, leaving him standing alongside the bed, leaving him looking directly into the dark hole of the Red Hawk, cocked, with the lead noses of four bullets showing. The .44 caliber barrel appears as steady as if held in a vise. "What the hell!"

"Rob really didn't want to tell me about his arrangement with you. Let's see in the few minutes you have left if you can do better."

"I'm not saying nothing."

"Fine. Perhaps Jason, there, would like to come clean before he jumps out that window."

"None of this was my idea. Please, I didn't know anything would happen to Miss Hill."

The doorknob clunks a tiny bit as it turns--Joe, who can't hear higher frequencies but can hear if one lifter runs drier than another, hears the knob being turned and steps to the side just as the door opens. One attorney pushes ahead of the other, but freezes like a jacklighted doe a half step inside the room.

The muzzle of the Red Hawk waves both attorneys and their assistant, the flat-chested girl from the second floor, into the room . . . the attorneys eyes seem fixated on the big revolver, but the girl looks Joe directly in the eyes--and he senses that she recognizes him, that she knows who he is.

At first Joe imagines the recognition is from the jostling in the elevator, but the coldness of her eyes, a coldness like that he saw in the eyes of a wolf Pierre had trapped in the Moose Range, presses against easy answers, reason and logic, and pushes from his lips, "BP-1."

Pierre twists to cover her as she drops and spins, drawing from her sweat pants a PPK. Joe leaps, as if catapulted, atop her, all four hundred pounds of him landing on her before she extends her arm to shoot. He lands hard, like diving for a basketball and landing on it. Her shoulders catch his sternum--they support his weight long enough to knock breath from his lungs, before

they collapse. He feels her go limp, becoming like a pile of laundry; and gasping for air, gasping hard, feeling he can't fill his lungs, he rolls over, onto his back. When he does, he knows the troopers will never question her.

His landing on her shakes the whole floor of this earthquake proof tower. Doors open up and down the hall.

Joe is certain he can't get up; he can't pull air into his lungs far enough, can't get oxygen to the bottom of his lungs; so he lies there, on her, on the floor, his feet apart, his shirt untucked and far up his back, the button that had held his jacket closed popped off.

"Still feel brave?" Pierre asks Leroy.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"What about you, kid? The troopers will be here in a minute. Someone is sure to have called them."

Jason's knees seem to buckle: he sits down hard, leans forward and buries his head in his arms.

"That leaves you, Girlie."

"Let me go. I didn't have anything to do with any of this. I just wanted what was mine."

Lowering its hammer, returning the Red Hawk to his shoulder holster, Pierre takes the copies of the contract from Hill's attorneys' hands. "Business concluded."

As if waiting for a cue, the door opens and uniformed officers pour, like dumping marbles into a box, into the room, taking everyone into custody. Yet Pierre, as if by a tug on his beard he has become invisible, slips away from the officer detaining him and sort of melts under the door and is gone.

Joe is helped up by three officers, the grunting and groaning of the four of them perhaps providing the commotion necessary to cover Pierre's exit. Regardless, when Detective Johnson is finally able to push his way into the room and push past the medical team attending the woman who has at least four ribs puncturing one lung and one rib the other, he demands of Joe, "Where the hell did you go?"

"What do you mean? I came up here."

"And where the hell did you get that suit?"

"I'm getting where I kinda like it." Which is a lie. But the farther he gets away from his shop, the easier lying becomes.

"You know we can't use a damn word that's been said in here."

About then, Ms. Roth pushes her way into the room: "We won't have to. Antonio Roberts has become very cooperative."

Joe turns aching muscles towards the assistant District Attorney as he steadies himself by holding onto the shoulder of an officer.

"Yes, he became cooperative when, after showing him Vandeneikhof's hospital report, I promised him that he and Joe would share a cell for a night. . . . I'm certain he'll be even more cooperative when he learns about what

happened to her," Barbara points to the woman on the floor, and is corrected by one of the medical team.

"To *him*. This is a guy, or at least he still has a penis." The EMT stands, and adds, "You can't trust appearances."

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