

## Hard Times in Paradise

September 16, 1970.

Someone speaks deep in my dreams. "You mustn't pull these. Leave them alone." My vision is bloody. A dark shape moves in dim light.

"What? Leave alone what?"

"The I.V. needles. You've pulled them out. Don't touch them anymore. No, don't move your legs. Lie still."

How can I lie still if I don't know I'm moving, if I don't know anything, but suddenly I'm here? I don't even know where here is. I try to think, try not to move. I try to understand what's happening.

I rode across Oregon desert in sunshine. Sage brush and sparse grass grew both sides of the highway. Wind smelled like brackish water, like sagebrush, like dry sand, curved over the faring, the windshield, and around my face and helmet.

A coyote loped beside Lake Abert, crossed the patched asphalt highway in front of me and galloped through scattered boulders that, long ago, fell from rock bluffs above the lake. I slowed the black motorcycle, stopped, dropped my left foot to pavement, watched the grey and white, russet and brown animal scramble up steep slope between large boulders, over the top of the bluff, out of sight in sunshine.

I released the clutch and accelerated. Engine rumble echoed from the ridge rising to my left. I shifted up through the gears, left Lake Abert behind, rode through southeastern Oregon, geared down and rumbled through towns, accelerated again on the open highway.

On Highway 299, down the Sierras, I slowed for traffic. Three kids looked at me through the rear window of a smoking Chevy station wagon. The tow-headed ten-year-old gave me a peace sign. I "v"ed fingers of my left hand for him, dropped my hand back to the grip, and passed the dirty grey car.

"We've put an air cast on your leg. Don't move. We'll come back in the morning and operate." My consciousness began to sort itself into sensible sequence and then abandoned me again.

Andrea came into the room with her father. I said, "What you looking

at, George?"

"This air cast they put on your leg."

"You got your camera, George?"

"Out in my rig."

"Take my picture."

"Now? You're a mess. They haven't even cleaned you up."

"Take it anyway. I want to see it when I'm back on my feet. You got color film?"

"Sure." He walked out and got his camera.

I spoke to Andrea, "Let's get married." I had planned to ride into the yard, put the motorcycle on its stand, walk to the cabin by the lake, where Andrea waited for me, radiantly beautiful in autumn sunshine. I would say, "Let's get married."

Andrea looked frightened. The doctors didn't know if I'd live.

I looked up at her, clean brown hair around her face, around her shoulders. I said, "I meant that as a joke. It's enormously funny how little our plans and intentions mean. I'm sorry. I shouldn't make jokes like that. That's like that cartoon, two guys standing on the world, atomic bombs going off all around them, so the end of everything is seconds away, and one turns to the other and says, 'This remind me of a joke I'm sure you haven't heard.'"

I slammed into the car the man turned in front of me, smashed my leg between the motorcycle and the car, flew over the car, shattered my helmet, fractured my skull, tore my insides, and skidded on my face on asphalt.

I screamed in pain and fury. I cursed the fool who drank and drove, who didn't see me until after he smashed his car into me. I cursed pain and injury. I cursed blind chance that destroyed my hopes and plans. I passed in and out of consciousness. Hot sunshine soaked into bloody, hot asphalt. I dropped into blankness.

Flashing lights reflected from mountain stone. Siren echoed from steep bluffs and assaulted the river flowing toward the valley as we navigated down the curving highway.

Deep in my greyness, the force of life found me and connected me with joy of existence and gratitude for life. I started a long journey back. Life flowed strongly. Pain surged through me, but color returned.

Doctors waited for my mother to sign so they could amputate my leg at the knee. When she got there, she said, "You're not cutting his leg off."

"His leg will get infected, and we'll have to amputate it to save his life."

"Is it infected now?" she asked.

"No. There hasn't been time for infection to set in."

"Then wait." The surgeon started to say more, and she said, "Stop standing here talking about it. Go in there and save his leg. You're wasting time and energy."

I had grown long hair and a full beard. Asphalt abraded my face. Maybe they thought I was younger. Maybe they don't take signatures from people who don't know what's going on. I would have signed whatever they asked me to, without knowing what I signed.

After I lived in the hospital for thirty-one days, Andrea took me back to the cabin by the lake in a schizophrenic landscape. Beautiful water in the lake supports myriad forms of life, but it is a man-dammed creek. The reservoir supplies water to the town of Paradise, California. The water falls low between ridges through summer. Barren clay emerges, stumps of trees, and drowned brush. Around the reservoir, second-growth timber grows, logged fifty years ago. Workers thinned new trees five years ago. Marks of logging still lie heavily on the land; logging roads, stumps. Slash from thinning jumbles ways of walking. Exposed soil smells like clay in sunshine.

Before the wreck, Andrea drove down the mountain to college classes in the Sacramento Valley. I stayed at the cabin by the reservoir. Sometimes, I hiked up a mile of dirt road to the highway, hitched a ride down the mountain, found Andrea or other friends in the valley. I hitched back up the mountain, split wood, carried water from a spring on the ridge above the lake, walked the mountain, took care of two dogs and Simon, my siamese tom cat.

Divorce, three years earlier, precipitated new perspectives. I was no longer willing to exist without deep consideration of how I affected the world, of how I affected my future. I worked out definitions. What is deep consideration? What do I know about humankind, about the earth, about me, about life that can guide me into a balanced existence?

I traded work for rent on the cabin by the reservoir. I cleaned up the effects of vandalism, put in windows and doors, installed a wood-burning

cookstove, and fixed the roof. I worked odd jobs, mowed lawns, pulled weeds, put in windows, carpentered, plumbed for people who lived along the ridge east of the reservoir. I began to understand love.

I rode Andrea's motorcycle to Oregon. I found a job and a place to live and started back, with visions of marriage dancing like sugar plums in my head.

I returned to the cabin in a cast from my hip to the toes of my left foot. Andrea carried water, cooked, and took care of me and the cabin. When she drove down the mountain for classes, she left me food and water. She arranged the cabin so I could take care of my own needs. I practiced getting around on crutches. Mountain leaves turned a hundred colors, tore loose in autumn wind, fell to the ground and began to rot to soil.

Sun rises late on the cabin west of the ridge, sheltered in pine trees, oak trees, madrone, dogwood, manzanita brush, fir trees. Smell of pine, of life, permeates the air. Fall rains soak the earth. Between rain storms, sun shines into warm days, holding winter away, this week, next week, another week after that.

I sit on the back deck, my casted leg propped on a chair. I play my guitar, sing, and whistle. Six ducks cross the lake and dabble for food thirty feet down the slope from me in close water. They discuss their food and my music. Sun shines between conifers and bathes me in light and warmth.

Late the next afternoon, Chip brought a new, single-shot .22 rifle to me in sunshine on the deck behind the cabin. Chip, 19, ex-Jersey City boy had been my sister's boyfriend. He said, "Teach me how to shoot this thing, and I'll kill a deer so we can have some meat."

"Today? Do all that today?"

"Yeah, sure. If you want to."

I decided not to give him basic instruction in reality. Let him learn from trying. "Okay. You got bullets?"

"Sure. Wouldn't do much good to have a rifle without bullets, would it?"

I pulled my crutches to me and stood. "We need some paper and stuff from in here. You can carry all this stuff."

We crossed the flat area in front of the cabin into pine trees, fir trees, low brush. "First thing, never aim the rifle at anything unless you want to

kill what you're aiming at. Not even if it's unloaded."

"We gonna kill these pieces of paper?"

"Yes. We are. Draw a black spot in the center of one and tack it to that log. The log stops the bullets. If we shoot high, the cutbank'll stop the bullets. Always shoot like that. If you miss what you're aiming at, the bullet goes somewhere. Don't leave it flying wild."

I shot three times and adjusted the sights three times. I put the fourth shot into the center of the black spot. I showed Chip how to line the sights up and how to pull the trigger smoothly. The last three shots of six, he hit the center spot.

"Okay. Now you can hit what you aim at. Don't do anything stupid. Once you pull the trigger, you can't take it back, so be sure before you pull the trigger. Now what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go kill a deer."

"Before dark?"

"Sure."

He had an hour and a half before dark. A .22 is a small, low velocity bullet. Fifty feet or less is the right range to kill a deer with a .22. Few people can get within fifty feet of a deer if they have a month to work on it. Chip had a lot to learn and a lifetime to learn it, so I crutched back to the cabin and picked up my book. Chip hiked up the ridge into the forest.

An hour later, he ran up the stairs onto the deck. "I got one. Come on. You got to show me what to do."

I grabbed my crutches and got up onto them. "Where?"

"Just this side of the paved road. Close to the road. In the brush, the manzanita."

"Did you bleed it?"

"No. I don't know what to do. That's why I came to get you. I don't know what to do."

We went through the cabin. I picked up my knife, and we went out the front door and up the road. The red-clay road curved up from the cabin by the lake, then lay level along the shoulder of the ridge through trees and dense manzanita brush. I got a rhythm going on my crutches. I didn't know I could move that fast on crutches.

Chip trotted beside me. Fifty yards short of the highway, Chip said, "Down here."

A doe lay dead under the limbs of a manzanita bush. I set my crutches aside, sat down in clumps of grass growing from red-clay soil, slipped my knife from its case, and cut her throat. "Pull her hindquarters up into the bush, so she slopes down."

Her blood steamed into the day and spread its smell into sunshine. Her udder was full. I didn't say anything about it. Her fawns would be mature enough by now, maybe they'd make it.

"Watch. Slit the hide all the way up. Then pull it aside, like this. Then cut this. Keep the knife shallow. If you cut too deep, you'll cut the intestine, and things will get messy. Cut the rest of the way up. Put your fingers under and lift up, like this, with the blade between your fingers."

I stood up, leaned on my crutches, and watched Chip work. He asked, "How far up do I cut?"

"Keep going."

"There's bone here."

"Slide the knife above the bone. Cut the hide all the way up the neck."

"Now what?"

"Tip her this way. Reach in behind the intestines and pull them out."

I sat down again, placed my casted leg awkwardly across the dusty ground, and worked with him. "Pull this out. This is the liver. Strip this stuff out, but don't pull too hard. Don't tear it. Follow this down, and get between that and the bone. The bone will cut through, here." Smells of partially-digested grass rose into the day.

"Cut around here?"

"Must be."

"Okay. That works. Do we take the liver?"

"And the heart. Cut the veins going in. Tuck the heart and liver in here. Cut here. Both hind legs. Now push the front feet through. Onto your shoulders, and hang onto the legs in front of you. You're going to have blood running down your back."

"No way to help it, is there?"

"Hang the carcass overnight and let everything drain and dry, but we're too close to the road for that. If anybody turns down this road, dive for the brush. I'll keep going and act innocent. If anybody asks me about blood all over me, I'll tell them I never did get cleaned up after the wreck."

"You could tell them you murdered somebody. 'No, no, I wouldn't

poach a deer, just murdered a friend or two. Don't try to pin anything on me.”

It never took so long to cut up a deer. By ten o'clock, I was exhausted. “You're going to have to finish it, Chip. Just cut cross-grain on the muscles. We have to get most of this into a freezer.”

“Bulldog said I could use his if I got a deer. I'll give him some of the meat.” Chip hiked out. Bulldog picked him up at the payphone and took him to town to buy freezer paper, then brought him back, helped wrap the meat. They loaded the meat and took it to Bulldog's freezer.

I have a major part of my food for a while.

I lie in bed in the dark cabin. Coyotes sing. They're cleaning up what we left of the deer. They might be thanking us. I sleep.

Andrea rented a small, modern house in the highest part of Paradise. I wouldn't have lived there in a million years, before, but I was grateful to have it, the way things were.

The guy who hit me had no insurance, no property, no job, no money. The uninsured motorist's policy Andrea had on the bike paid \$15,000. Medical bills ate \$5,000. I offered Andrea \$4,000 to stay and help me until I could take care of myself. She drove to classes down in the Valley. She wanted to go to Europe.

Rain poured from the winter sky and hammered the metal roof. I liked the drumming sound that filled the house and kept most of the world at a distance, beyond hearing. I crutched around and around the living room. I exercised all I could in the house, in the cast.

I played my guitar, sang, whistled, wrote songs, essays, poems, and short stories. Andrea stayed with me part of the time and took some of the loneliness out of winter. I got close to saying, “I love you. I need you. Stay with me.” I only said, “I love you.” I didn't know enough about love, yet. Maybe I never would. I couldn't get far enough away from myself and the situation I lived in to think it through.

I bought a tight-fitting pair of leather gloves to help me with my crutches, then a case of gloves when the first pair wore out. I wanted to be back on my feet, without crutches, without cast. I kept moving.

The doctor cut the last cast in a six-month series of casts from my leg.

I hitched a ride down Skyway to Daybreak and sat inside. Andrea spent more of her time in the valley. I started changing the focus of my

existence. I watched rain fall from the dark sky and soak into the earth. I watched traffic on the Skyway. I watched people.

Young people spent part of their days at Daybreak. Besides the official, ecological organization, Daybreak became a place for part of the local counter-culture. Some of the people smoked marijuana out behind the building. People fell in love and out of love. People tried to work out their directions by talking to each other, by talking to me. At evening meetings, I listened to all sorts of people, counter culture, business people, young people and older people talk about the environment, about attempts to get recycling going, about efforts to help our local environment.

The people meeting at Daybreak couldn't focus their discussions. The amorphous, groping lack of direction frustrated me. I interrupted. "What are we talking about? Where is our discussion leading us, or where are we leading it? Can we do something constructive with the people, the force we've gathered together here? Define what we're talking about and where we want to go, and then go there." I forced focus on the people. They recognized the power structure and focus gave us, and they accepted my guidance during meetings.

Because I assumed the position of leader and mediator of the group, the people elected me president of Daybreak. Chip voted against. I said, "Yay, Chip. The only one on my side."

Most of the people had little sense of what needed to be done. Mike wanted to drive a two-ton truck 20 miles to the dump and sort out five dollars worth of aluminum. Bob wanted to run smoking cars off the road and force the drivers to fix them or abandon them. Rick took a big tractor in and plowed our community garden area and dug a trench for compost with a backhoe.

I talked about wheel-blindedness.

"We put everything in terms of what machine should we use to do this job? We need to clear our vision and ask, is the job essential? Do we bring improvements to the human condition by doing the job? If the job is essential, then what is a sensible way to achieve it? without machinery if possible. Machinery doesn't necessarily save us work. It might cause extra work. We might work to support machinery rather than to support human needs.

"Limit use of mechanical energy. Mechanical energy uses

non-replaceable fuels and creates pollution. Make doing the job without machinery part of the job, part of the goal. Subjugate everything to that goal. Educate the culture to use that as the first frame of reference.”

Most of the people will take a long time to understand. Maybe there isn't that much time. Maybe it doesn't matter how much time there is.

Before the wreck, on my way home from Oregon to talk to Andrea, I had started back into the culture. I would say, “I have a good job lined up. Let's get married.” After the wreck, I had nothing to offer her. I read in her eyes that my being smashed up drove her away from me and closed possibilities. A long time later, I wasn't sure what I saw in her eyes, what I could know of her thoughts.

Catkins burst out on willow bushes. The earliest flowers bloomed.

Money from the insurance company dwindled. I was going to be broke long before I was able to work to make money. I hitched a ride up Skyway to Alex's place and bought two pounds of marijuana from him. I stuffed it into my backpack and hitched back to the house. I worried a little about the sharp smell of marijuana coming from my backpack when I rode with strangers, but not much. I didn't worry much.

Late that afternoon, Chip came by. I asked him. “You want to go partners, help me sell this?”

He selected a stem with dried leaves and dried flowers. He crumbled the leaves and flowers onto my open notebook, where I had written most of a poem about late winter on the mountain. He scooped marijuana into a gummed paper, rolled it, licked the glued part, lit a match and dried the wet seam of the joint, then lit it. We sat across my desk from each other and passed the joint back and forth. The penetrating smell of marijuana smoke filled the small house.

Dusk settled on the mountain. Chip became a dark outline in the darkness of the room. His voice echoed to me from deep hollowness. “Yeah, I can sell some of that.”

I remembered where we were. I said, “Don't sell to anyone you're not absolutely sure of. We don't need a lot of money out of this, just enough to live on. We do need to stay out of jail.”

He sold more than half of what we bagged up by taking it out and around. I sold the rest to people who came by.

Deputy sheriffs came to Daybreak, looking to bust dope smokers, trying

to understand who we were and what we were doing.

I went to the sheriff's office and talked to the sheriff. "Some of the teenage girls say Bernie pulls them over and feels their breasts."

The sheriff called Bernie into his office. He said, "Now you look at Bernie. Does he look like the kind of man who would do something like that?"

Dusk of the next day, I waited until Bernie got out of his four-wheel-drive rig in the gravel Daybreak parking lot. I stopped him. I said, "Anything more out of line from you around any of the girls, around any of us, and you die a violent death. If I suffer any consequences for telling you this, you die a violent death right away. You can do your job according to the law. Nothing else. No feels, no harassment. If you think you've got the only guns, think again. We have plenty, and we own them legally."

Alex, Chip, Bulldog, and two Pauls stood at the edge of the parking lot, under winter-bare trees. Bernie saw them watching. We wanted peace, but if necessary, we were ready for war. Bernie understood that. If we went to war, the sheriff's department would get endless reinforcements. The forces of law would win the war, but by the time all of us who stood together were locked up or killed, Bernie would be dead, buried deep, with the last memorial services long past. Bernie understood that.

Chip and I bought two or three or four pounds of marijuana at a time, split it into small bags, and sold it. Our volume never climbed very high. Neither did our needs. I added back to what was left of the insurance money. I wanted enough money to buy a piece of land, to have a place to support me.

Winter rain eased. The sun climbed from low in the southern sky toward spring.

I told Chip, "Dealing's gone out of balance. Too many people I don't know knock on my door, looking to buy some weed. Tuesday morning at three a.m., two guys I've never seen before hammered on the door until I got up and opened it. They wanted to buy some smoke, and they got pushed out of shape when I wouldn't sell them anything. I wouldn't live very long in prison."

Spring sunshine warmed the foothills of the Sierras. I suggested the people at Daybreak elect Ron president and leave me free to follow my

own dreams, and they did. Maybe they'd hold onto enough of what they'd learned about balance to achieve what they wanted to achieve.

Chip and I borrowed a car and drove north, looking for land. I thought the American dream, independence, self sufficiency, rugged individualism, land, and a good and creative existence for all was dying then, in 1971, strangled by greed and lack of human compassion.

Chip and I looked at forty acres of forest, meadows, steep north slope, granite bluffs, high above the John Day Valley in eastern Oregon. We woke to heavy frost on our sleeping bags. I slipped out of my sleeping bag, pulled my socks, boots, and jacket on, wrapped a scarf around my neck, and built a fire. Flame ate into wood and danced hot in cold air. Chip joined me by the fire. He held his hands close to the flames. "Cold, man. Seeped clear into my sleeping bag."

The sun rose above the mountains and sent bright light and warmth dancing through frost on the ground and through the forest around us. Chip said, "Coming north, we seen spring start twice. If we stay up in this north slope, we'll see it again."

Multiple springs. Multiple dreams. We hiked the forty acres, stood on the south-facing saddle above the rest of the forty acres. I said, "I'll build a house here. This saddle rises far enough above north slope to catch winter sun. This boulder, just like it is, becomes most of the east wall, fill in there and there with smaller stone, a window here, maybe a small window up here. We're standing in the house, main room, natural floor, this dirt and rock we're standing on, and that boulder becomes a couch. That boulder, part of the south wall right where it is. A door at the top corner, so I can walk out onto the boulder, stand in morning sun, or in winter, stand six feet above the surface of snow drifted six feet deep. I'll build a greenhouse there, north and west walls, those boulders. Planters of stone all the way up here, against the stone wall, facing the low, winter sun. Might get some greens even in deep winter."

I took Chip back to California. I shaped my material possessions toward camping on the mountain until I could build.

Andrea helped me move to the mountain and left for Europe.

Rock surrounded me, and thickets of mountain mahogany, widely-spaced juniper trees, and pine trees. Dry smell of Oregon desert's life and dust blew pleasantly into my nostrils. West, the black stone of the

Strawberry mountains rose high above the valley. North, dry-grass hills rose from the valley floor.

Cool air of dusk carried the smell of pine trees and juniper trees and granite and the damp smell of willow bush from the swale below camp. Night enveloped the world. Coyotes sang down the mountain. The waning moon rose. I walked down to camp and crawled into my sleeping bag and watched stars and the moon and the black sky. I slept.

Every day, I hiked up the mountain above camp. The first time I hiked without cane or crutches, I walked too far. Pain penetrated the bones in my leg. I held my leg and rocked back and forth in sunshine. I crawled back to camp, laughing at what a ridiculous figure I was, crying in pain and frustration.

Coyotes sang. I woke. Brilliant stars shone in the cold sky. I nearly screamed from pain when I moved my leg. I wanted medication for pain. I wanted to give up the stupid idea of learning to walk again.

But I made it through that night of pain, and I stayed on the mountain. I had to use crutches again, but I put all the weight I could bear on my left leg.

Three days later, I left the crutches leaning against a pine tree.

Two days after that, I walked up the mountain a ways without the cane.

Hard rain blew down the mountain, and I slept under the tarp I stretched over a rope tied between two trees. My dogs crowded in and curled up both sides of my legs. When I woke, my cat slept curled up close to my face. The sun rose above the mountain, into the cool, clean morning.

I crossed the fence below the saddle into Forest Service rangeland and filled burlap sacks with dry cow manure, tied the sacks onto my pack frame, packed them up to the saddle, and dug the manure into the soil.

I dug the spring out and fenced out cattle. I filled two six-gallon plastic jugs from the spring every morning and packed them on my back, one at a time, up to the garden and left them sitting in sunshine. Late afternoon, I bathed in hot water and let run off water the garden.

Radishes, lettuce, kohlrabi, spinach, and carrots sprouted. My big siamese tom carried a ground-squirrel down over the rocks into camp and ate most of it near the lower end of the tent.

Friends came to visit. In Engles Creek in the canyon west of camp, we lifted rocks from the streambed and built a dam. The water rose, and we

swam. Gerrit stood in the shade of a big pine tree, with nothing on but a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, smoking a big cigar.

Visitors left.

I sat on the bluff above camp at dusk. Night hawks flew, dove and swerved above the mountain, swooped into hollow, booming sounds of wings against air, and ate insects as they flew.

In the morning, I walked below the bluff and found a nest with eggs, just a scraped-out spot in gravel. The night hawk's speckled eggs blended so well with the ground around them, I couldn't find them again.

I dreamed Andrea walked up the trail toward me, smiling her broad, radiant smile. She drove into camp and called my name. She stepped down from the pickup and ran toward me.

I woke as sunlight touched black stone of the Strawberry Mountains. Frost covered my sleeping bag. I got up and dressed and hiked into open sun and kept moving until sun warmth soaked into me.

I wrote letters of plans and dreams and passion to Andrea. She sent detailed descriptions of her journeys and adventures and didn't respond to what I had said about love in my letters.

Jennie and Carl hitched up from California and walked up from Mount Vernon. We cruised the mountain in the '55 Cadillac I had borrowed for the summer, the only car on the mountain. High up on the shoulder of the mountain, we left the car and walked the edge of a meadow where beaver dams spread Laycock Creek and held deep green in summer grasses. Twenty different kinds of flowers bloomed and spread their odors through mountain air. Smells of green grasses, smells of cold water, smells of mud in beaver dams moved through the air. Ravens, steller's jays, iridescent hummingbirds, myriad birds of many species lived all around us. We found wild onions and garlic, ate some, and took some with us. Deer walked the mountain and grazed green grasses, elk.

When we got back to the blue and white Cadillac, Carl said, "Now where?"

I said, "We'd better go into Mount Vernon and get some gas and something to drink. You drive. I'll sit in back and look at the mountain." I played my guitar as Carl drove down through hot sunshine. Logging-road dust thickened the air behind us. A coyote galloped away from the road through tall, yellowing grass, down into the trees and brush along Laycock

Creek.

In Mount Vernon, Carl drove into a gas station. A man about 50, dark hair, red face, walked to the car, staggering a little in drunkenness. A younger man followed, watching over him. The older man leaned against the car and looked in at me. I said, "What's up?"

"I play one of them."

I handed my guitar to him. "Let's hear you play it."

He strummed a few chords, "Too drunk." He handed it back. He touched my beard. "I had me a beard. Till three days ago."

"Why'd you shave it off?"

"Didn't. Burned off. Wouldn't shave it."

"What happened?"

"Damn Jack, up there at the trailer, he tried to kill hisself. Turned on the gas. I walked up, opened the door, had a cigarette, Boom. Knocked me flat, burned my hair and my beard. Burned my beard clear off. Blew half the side out of my trailer."

"Did it kill Jack?"

"No. Hell no. Didn't even hurt him."

"Did he learn anything?"

"No. Hell no. He come up and got my twenty-two, shot hisself in the head."

"Did it kill him?"

"No. Bullet went in like this, went clear around the inside of his skull like this and came out by his jaw, right here. Didn't even really hurt him."

"Now you're kidding me."

The younger man standing behind him shook his head. "No. It's the truth."

"This's my son."

"Well, did he learn anything from it? Did he change his mind?"

"No. Hell no. He decided to drink hisself to death last night, but he threw up all over the back seat of my car and then passed out. I didn't know he was there until I found him this morning. When he wakes up and gets going, he'll try it again, try something, I don't know what next. If he's going to kill hisself, I just wish he'd do it and get it done. It's rougher on me than him, and I don't even want to die."

Carl started the motor. The man punched me lightly on the shoulder and

stepped back from the car.

Rolling up the graveled mountain road, I strummed my guitar lightly. I sang part of a song, "Amazing Grace, how sweet the song, to save a wretch like me..." I didn't know the rest of the words, but one day, I would find the song and learn all the words. Soft tones from steel strings drowned in the sound of the car rolling over the rough gravel road.

Carl and Jennie left.

Summer storms marched down the mountain. I climbed the bluff. Sun lighted mist under clouds soft orange, then pink, then pastel blue. Up the mountain, lightning struck. Lightning and thunder shook the mountain under my feet. Lightning smelled like ozone. Heavy rain poured into hard wind and soaked me. Lightning brightened everything. Thunder nearly deafened me. I danced and sang and laughed with the primitive power, with my freedom in the storm.

Lightning and thunder blew north. I walked down to camp, undressed and dried off and slept in my supply tent, cat near my shoulder, a dog on either side of my legs.

Coyotes serenaded the mountain every night.

A great horned owl soared down the mountain at dusk. Silent on its wings, it looked down at me where I sat, leaning against a rock. I said, "Hey owl, how you doing? Stop and visit." The owl flew a wide circle around camp, landed in the juniper tree at the top of the bluff, and settled its wings. It looked toward me, then down the slope falling away from camp. The full moon rose from the mountain, and the tree and the owl stood silhouetted against the moon. The owl flew from the tree and hunted down the mountain, quiet as bright moonlight.

Problems with the estate kept the title to the land from clearing, and the place wasn't for sale after all. It didn't matter. People who said they would invest in the place with me changed their minds, and I wouldn't have money to build, money for payments on the place. I had the use of the mountain for free, like the owl, like the coyotes, like the deer and elk, like the summer thunder storm.

I wanted my mail and needed groceries. The Cadillac wouldn't start, so I hiked four miles down the mountain to Mount Vernon.

I left my cane tied across my pack all the way to town. When I started back, I needed it. Even using my cane, by the time I got to Engles Creek,

my leg hurt. I lay down on the ground by the pool we built. I rested a while, then stripped and slid into the water. Kicking my legs gently in the water relaxed my muscles and eased the pain somewhat.

The sun dropped toward the mountains. I dried in sunshine and dressed and shouldered my pack. I leaned into the steep slope rising toward camp and traveled on my hands and one leg, carrying the other leg like an injured four-legged. I didn't have to bend very far. I laughed at my new way of traveling and scrambled up rough slope.

By then, I knew intense pain could shoot through my knee and lower leg, but it didn't mean anything was coming apart. The pain would ease, with rest. I could scream if I needed to.

And I did scream because of pain, but I screamed words, "I walked four miles today without my cane. Four miles. It was absolutely worth it. I can run on three legs like an injured four-legged, and there's no stopping the healing power of the life force." I laughed and rolled in the dirt. My dogs came up close and sniffed me to see if I smelled any different when I acted this strange way, and my cat came down from some hideout up in the rocks.

I sat up and looked at the animals. "Okay, you guys. End of the show for today. You'd be surprised how fast laughing like that eases the pain."

Autumn touched the nights. I wrote Chip, "Come on if you're coming. I'll be leaving here before it turns real cold."

Chip hitched a ride and hiked up from Mount Vernon in September. We ate the last of the carrots and onions, spinach and lettuce from the garden. We hiked down to the apple orchard gone wild on the abandoned homestead below the road, brought back all the apples we could carry, dried them in the sun, and packed them to take along. Chip asked, "What's with Andrea? Is that over with?"

"Looks like it."

"She isn't coming back?"

"Slice apples, Chip."

"Sure. Slice apples. That's what I'm doing, see?"

We hiked down to Engles Creek, but it was too cold to swim. Cold fall winds caressed the mountain. Chip built a fire and stood as close as he could get to it. "I ain't been warm in two days and nights. Must be about time to go."

“I guess so. It’s hard for me to get started. I don’t know what I’m going to do when I get there. I don’t have anywhere to go but temporary places, staying with friends. I don’t know any kind of a job I can do, yet. But staying here means starving and freezing to death and getting buried under ten feet of snow. I’m going for one last hike before we leave.”

We hiked down the steep slope north from camp. My black dog went along. We slid down the cutbank onto the gravel road, and I looked back up the hill.

“That black dog’s interested in something up there. Dances like he’s trying to get another dog to play with him.”

We climbed back up to the brush above the road. A mature coyote had her rear foot caught in a trap. She had dragged a limb attached to the trap with a long chain until the limb tangled in brush and stopped her. She lay on her side and looked at us. Calm, deep yellow eyes. Clean, grey fur with russet along her flank, yellow hair among the grey along her back.

I said, “I’m going to get her out.” I stepped forward and stepped down on the double-spring trap. It didn’t open far enough. “Here. Step on the other spring.” Chip didn’t move. I looked up at him and realized he wasn’t going to; remnants of city culture wouldn’t let him that close to a sharp-toothed wild animal.

I put down my cane and straddled the trap, with my face inches from the coyote’s face. I stepped down on both springs, and the trap opened. I lifted her leg clear. Half of her foot stayed with the trap, but the trap had pinched the wound closed, and she didn’t bleed.

The coyote and I looked at each other. Quiet on the north slope of Coalpit Mountain. I said, “You’d better go.”

She leaped up, spun in the air and loped up the ridge, carrying her injured foot clear of the ground. When she went out of sight over the ridge, I bent down and picked up my cane. I said, “A three-and-a-half-footed coyote might make a living. Some do.”

We couldn’t find my cat. I circled camp, called and looked. My black dog looked intently up the hill. He pointed one tall, funnel-shaped ear toward where he looked, then the other. I followed his point and found my cat up the swale, secluded behind the upthrust roots of a blown-over pine, purring and treading the soft moss around the roots.

I dropped my jacket on my cat and wrapped him tightly, with just his

nose out. "He'll fight to keep from getting in the car, but once we roll, he'll settle down. You drive. I'll get the animals settled."

We rolled, a cloud of grey dust, down the gravel road and onto the paved highway, south. We drove the curving highway through meadows, pasture, and hay ground, yellow in fall sunshine. Up out of the valley into dusty forest. The sun set. Dark of a cool evening settled. We put the windows up.

We had seen multiple springs and dreamed multiple dreams. I dreamed of land and of love.

If dreams of ownership worked out for me, maybe I would become too bound to this material life. Maybe I would stop dreaming. Dreamers are essential. Dreamers remind us of what humankind could do if everyone directed their energy toward good. Dreamers remind us that merely material goals and ambitions are brief and become ashes. Dreamers dream beyond the possibilities of this material world, beyond this material life into art, into spiritual existence.

The big V-8 engine rumbled us steadily south. Bright, twelve volt headlights lighted the curving asphalt highway and led us steadily south.