

James Jackson Riley

One

Branches twist in the storm and scrape the roof. Wind tears wet leaves from trees and slaps them against the house past midnight. Rain increases. In the freight yard across the street, someone pulls a diesel engine up to a fast idle, an even-pitched tone in changing tones of the storm.

Again James thought he heard someone at the front door. He walked through the living room, opened the front door, and looked out into the dark storm. Cold rain chilled him through the screen, but no one was there. The diesel engine revved. The truck pulled out of the yard, roared down to the highway, and up the highway out of hearing into the storm.

Early in the morning, James's landlady pushed her wheelbarrow across the street, bent over, and raked leaves in blue sunlight shining through the bottom of grey clouds. She picked up broken limbs and dropped them clattering into the metal wheelbarrow. She asked, "Who you got working in your garage?"

Then James heard the sounds and walked over to the garage, where a skinny kid with big hands, blonde hair ragged to his eyes, laid boards across a sawhorse and marked them.

James said, "This is my garage." The kid pulled a two-by-four out of a stack, marked it, and sawed it off. "My landlady wanted to know who was working in here. You didn't ask me about it."

"I come to your door and knocked a couple of times, but I couldn't get nobody to answer. Hand me that board there, will you?"

James reached into the shadow and pushed the end of the board over to him. He asked, "What're you building?"

The kid put the board down, pushed his hair back from his face, and sat on the edge of the frame. "You a cop?"

"No."

The blonde-haired kid picked up the board and nailed it into place. "Cops, they ask a lot of questions, so I wondered if you was a cop."

"I'm not. But I am curious about what you're building."

Questions bother you if I'm not a cop?"

"What I'm building here is a sailboat."

"Out of that?"

"It's what I got."

"But that thing couldn't float."

"It ain't a boat to float. See the wheels on it? And this part goes up through here so I can sit on top and steer it."

"Where are you going with it?"

"Home. Gonna sit up on top and steer this thing to Missouri. Once I get away from these California freeways, I can stop and get me some rabbits or shoot me a deer, get some meat to take along."

"They won't let you on the highway with that thing. They'll make you take it off the road."

"They'll have to catch me first. I'll flat outrun em. Hand me that plank by your feet."

James picked up the plank, handed it over the frame and watched the kid nail it into place. "What if the wind isn't blowing right?"

"I'll catch me one that is. I didn't plan on going this way. I come to California to make me a stake, but all I ever got was farm work, and you don't make much stake on that. I made what I could, and I went to buy me a car. Salesman told me it was in good shape, all the problems worked out of it."

"It did sound good when I heard it run, but I got this far, and that smooth running V-8 motor busted a piston. Metal pieces scored the cylinder wall and the crankshaft, and I ain't got the money to fix it. But I used to sail boats some. I can build this thing up to get me home, sell the parts I don't need for scrap metal."

July

James woke early to the sound of garbage cans clattering in the alley behind the house. He heard someone say, "Damn dirty garbage cans and damn dirty people. I'd like to take this truck and drive it right through a bunch of these houses." Lids and cans clattered and rattled as if they were thrown.

James walked to the window, but all he saw was the back of the big truck as it roared away from him up the alley. Burned diesel fuel smoked black from the exhaust pipe. James went back to bed, but he couldn't sleep. He got up and dressed.

Downtown, James started to open the door to go into the waiting room. He heard a familiar voice peak in an intense diatribe, "Damn dirty people and their rotting chicken guts and

sticky paint cans and rotting garbage and filthy shit of all kinds. Who do they think they are, and who the hell do they think I am?"

James reached to open the door, but the doorknob jerked out of his hand, and a man in a grey uniform, sleeves rolled up, shirt stained with sweat, walked rapidly out of the waiting room, through the hallway, and out into sunlight.

James stood in the open doorway.

The woman behind the desk said, "Mr. Riley?" He turned and looked at the thin woman with red-blond hair pillowed around her pale face. She said, "We're ready for you if you'd like to come in now, Mr. Riley."

The balding, square-faced psychiatrist, remaining grey hair cut close, pointed to a chair, and James sat down across the desk from him.

"I'm James Riley."

"Yes." They shook hands across the desk.

"Is that garbageman a patient of yours?"

"I don't discuss patients. Even as far as identifying them."

"I wasn't trying to pry. A garbageman just passed me outside the waiting room. He's the garbageman who woke me up this morning, and I asked if he was a patient of yours to bring up the subject."

"The garbageman interests you."

"Well sure, or I wouldn't have brought it up. And I don't know if it's so much the garbageman who interests me. It startled me when I heard him here, because that's what woke me up. The noise he made at five-thirty this morning behind my house."

The psychiatrist placed his pencil on the blotter on top of his desk and adjusted it until it lay as close to the edge as it would go without rolling off. He rolled his chair back, opened the top drawer of his desk and looked in, shut it, pulled his chair forward, and picked up the pencil.

James said, "What were you looking for?"

"What? In the desk? Oh. I don't know. I looked in there without really thinking about it." He placed his pencil on the edge of the blotter and adjusted it. He looked up at James, scooted his chair back, opened the drawer, took out some tissue, and cleaned his glasses.

"You know, you just finished cleaning your glasses as I came in."

The psychiatrist dropped the tissue into the drawer and slammed the drawer shut. The slam of the drawer caused the

pencil to roll from the edge of the blotter onto the desktop with enough momentum that it rolled to the edge and fell on the floor.

He pushed his chair back and leaned forward to pick up the pencil. His shift of weight shot the chair backward out from under him, and he fell forward and hit his head hard on the edge of the desk. James saw only his back, with the desk between them, and he started around the desk.

The psychiatrist felt for his glasses, looked up at James, watery-eyed, still on his hands and knees, and said, "No, no. Sit down please. Stay in your chair. I'll manage here."

James sat back down.

The psychiatrist stood up, straightened his suit coat, pulled his chair forward, sat down, and put his glasses on. The right lens had shattered without coming out of the frame. He stared blankly. His right eye behind the crazed lens seemed to be a dozen jagged particles of eye. Each part looked at James from a slightly different angle.

James said, "Your glasses are broken."

"Oh yes. Yes, I can see they are broken. I can see that. Well, I have another pair here." He put the broken glasses in a drawer, brought out a pair with lighter colored rims, and settled them on his face.

"You all right? You took a pretty heavy knock on the head there."

"Mr. Riley, please sit down. I'm quite all right, and even if I weren't, I would be able to handle it."

"What if you were knocked out cold, though? You know, maybe you should check with a doctor."

"I am a doctor, Mr. Riley. Jesus. Let me see. Jesus me. Where are we?"

He looked through his different glasses at James. They made him look like a slightly different man. For a moment, James feared they might not have cohesion to where they had been before he fell and hit his head.

"Was that why you came in to see me? The garbageman woke you up this morning?"

"No. I've had the appointment for two months. I came in because I promised my wife I'd see a psychiatrist, and I have felt, what? disoriented? lately, since I came down from the mountains, particularly this morning, so that influenced my decision to come in."

"Were you thinking of not keeping the promise?"

"It doesn't mean anything now. She left on the back of a

friend's Harley seventy-four, won't be back anymore."

"Do you have children?"

"She took them with her."

"When?"

"Saturday night or Sunday morning. I came in Sunday morning, and they were gone. If I'd had a bigger motorcycle, maybe she would have stayed. I can't decide whether she hates me, or loves him, or loves that Harley seventy-four. That is a lot of power between her legs."

"I would like to know which it was if you find out."

"Sure, me too."

"I mean Saturday night or Sunday morning, which it was they left. If you ever find out, it's something I'd like to know."

"Oh. Okay."

A knot as big as half a pigeon's egg had risen from the doctor's forehead. Neither of them said anything. James wondered if the psychiatrist's silence might be a symptom of cerebral concussion. He leaned forward and looked to see if the psychiatrist's pupils were dilated.

The psychiatrist drew back from James as if startled and turned his face partly away.

"So you think she left because of the motorcycle?"

"I think she left because I just could not be what she wanted me to be. I tried. I became compliant beyond recognition, but what woman could respect a man who would try to change as casually as changing shirts? She told me to get out. I stayed with a friend until I found a small house to rent out the other side of town.

"The hardest thing to understand was the permanence of the changes. Even now I wake up sometimes, thinking she's knocked on the door, or I wait around in the afternoon and evening, restless, but I don't go any place in case someone comes by and I'm not there. But I haven't realized that was why I wasn't going anywhere until it was too late to go."

"What can you do about it?"

"Nothing. I'm so enraged by the way things have turned out, I feel moved to violence, but the fact that I tended toward violence, or that she thought I tended toward violence helped bring about the deterioration of our relationship, so violence isn't a possibility for me. Sometimes I'm so unsure what violence is, I hesitate to take any action, for fear that action of any kind is violent."

They sat quietly for several minutes. Again, James looked closely at the man across the desk. The pupils of the man's eyes

dilated. James waved his hand in front of the man's face and saw a diminished reaction.

James opened the door and called the receptionist and shut the door after she came in. "He's had a nasty knock on the head. I think he's going into shock or suffering concussion. You'd better get medical help."

The woman spoke to the psychiatrist, and he turned toward her, but he gave her no answer. Fear lined his face. Apparently, he couldn't focus his eyes.

The receptionist dithered about in confusion.

James worked for her attention. "Get the phone book, call the hospital, and arrange to get him there."

She fumbled through the phone book, but she couldn't find what she looked for. James took the book from her, found the number, and called, and they came in an ambulance. The police came with them.

James started to get into the ambulance with the psychiatrist, but two policemen stopped him. The ambulance left, siren howling and lights flashing. The tallest policeman asked James what had happened. He told him, and the policeman asked, "Did you argue with him?"

"No. We didn't argue. We were having a psychiatric session, a treatment, an analysis, you know, doing the work he does."

"And you were the patient. He was treating you. What was he treating you for?"

"That doesn't have anything to do with what happened here."

"Maybe it doesn't. But what I read on his note pad here says, 'tending toward violence.' Is that you, Mr. Riley, tending toward violence? Is that what he was treating you for, violence?"

"I see what you're thinking, but don't carry it any further. Just give him some time, and he'll be fine. Then you can ask him what happened."

Two days later, the psychiatrist regained coherence and remembered what had happened. The police questioned James twice in the meantime. When the psychiatrist told them what had happened, they came back and questioned James twice more, reluctant to disengage their interest.

The psychiatrist's receptionist called James Tuesday and asked him to come in Thursday. When James sat down, the psychiatrist said, "I don't intend to charge you for your last visit."

"Okay."

The psychiatrist made a steeple of all his fingers and said,

“Mr. Riley, marriage has a three-cornered foundation. One corner is love, another is finances, and the third is...”

James interrupted him and said, “I only came in because the woman out there asked me to. I didn’t know what you might need from me, but I came to find out. I’m not seeking treatment.”

“The third cornerstone of that foundation...”

“I don’t think we’d get anywhere if we did continue, do you? Talking about marriage and trying to adjust me to it is pointless, since my marriage is finished, and that’s the reason I came in in the first place. Maybe you could analyze some of what I’ve been having trouble with, but I’ve also analyzed that, with no good results from analysis alone.”

The psychiatrist leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his stomach. “That decision is your decision, of course.”

James stood up and walked to the door and opened it. The psychiatrist said, “I see one major problem.”

James leaned against the edge of the half-opened door and looked back at him. “There’s a large difference between what you want to be and what you are. You want to be successful, but you’re struggling with everything, even basic survival. You think about that some.”

“Okay. Sure.”

James started through the door, and the psychiatrist said, “Most people who need psychiatric help don’t get around to getting it until they’re in deep enough trouble, we just hope to keep them going, and it takes a long while to make any actual progress. For a while, I thought you had a head start on that.”

Anxiety etched his face. He sat forward, on the edge of his chair.

James looked at him for a minute, but he didn’t say anything more. James left and shut the door behind him.

Three

Icy dawn outside of Hungry Wolf, Oregon. James pushed his carryall to sixty miles an hour. Engine noise filled the cab.

James looked in his rear-view mirror and saw the kid, sitting high above the traffic on top of his machine. A plastic shield slanted up in front of him and deflected the wind. The tiller came up under the shield. Goggles reflected the morning light, and James couldn’t see the kid’s face.

James honked his horn as the kid passed and looked up at him where he sat wrapped in a sleeping bag, arms out through

the top of the zipper, rifle laid across his knees. The kid didn't look around.

The triangle of grey sail blew out of sight behind frosted trees above the curving embankment blasted out of the mountain's grey rock.

August

Early morning summer heat. Powdery dust rose in clouds from the road. Dust settled and clung dirty-white to the trees beside the road. The carryall fishtailed. James let it slide through loose dust in the long curve and then straightened it out for the bridge.

He looked downstream as he crossed the bridge. A tanker-truck sat beside the water, hose down the bank into the pool a massive machine had bladed into the stream.

Oil clings blue and red to plants dying at the edge of the water. The driver of the tanker leans against the rear tire in the shade of the rig and waves. James waves back and then looks up the road into sunlight. The image of the dusty driver, smoke curling from a cigarette, blue smoke hanging above the pump motor, arm raised in a half-salute, drifts for a moment in the sunlight ahead of James.

Dust boiled up through holes in the floorboards and settled on the pack, rifle wrapped in a blanket; axes, picks and shovels rattling in the back. Dust churned in the hot, thick air. James looked in the rear view mirror, back at the thick cloud of dust behind the rear window and at the reflection of his own face.

Sweat streaked like wrinkles in dust, dust white in his hair and beard. He looked a lifetime older, a glance through fifty years.

He held his carryall at forty. The steering wheel felt sticky with muddied sweat. Hot metal rattled around him. He hit the brakes and dumped two wheels into the shallow ditch when a dust-green ten-wide with a full load of nearly mature pine thundered around the next curve toward him. Jacob-brake pulled the log truck's diesel engine into flat compression sounds that hammered sunlight to dust. James waited until the thickest of the log truck's dust settled and drove back onto the road. Pools of dust pulled at the wheels, splattered against the underside of the carryall, and boiled into the afternoon sun. Sun burned James's eyes.

He drove through the Forest Service tree plantation on the saddle of the ridge. He had strung lanes and uprooted ribes bushes through this plantation earlier in the summer.

Up there, by the big stump, uprooted by a powerful machine clearing away detritus years ago, he had heard dry rattling, turned, and saw a snake coiled in the shade. He watched the green, yellow, tan, and black creature. The snake stopped shaking its tail and watched him.

James said, "Well, snake, you are beautiful and fascinating to look at, but I do have this job of work I said I'd do."

He walked away in intense mountain sunshine. Dust puffed from beneath his boots as he crossed the tree plantation on the high mountain ridge.

Later in the summer, dust boiled from the carryall into sunshine. Burned over brush and stumps piled in curving windrows silhouetted charcoal limbs against the blue haze above the ridge. Cover vegetation burned yellow and brown in summer's heat. He parked the carryall away from the road, hidden behind brush.

At the spring, James washed in ice-cold water that drove sensation out of touch. He drank and rested where, more than a hundred years before, American aboriginals drank and rested in the heat of the summer day when silence settles on the mountain.

Aboriginals journeyed to the peak of the mountain and stayed there alone without food and water four days, seeking visions. A young man found spiritual knowledge in his vision and power through his connection with Spirit and through his knowledge of himself as a spiritual being created and defined by Spirit. The mountain gave James some sense of the power the visionary experience kindled in the young men.

When the sun stood directly above the mountain peak, he started toward it afoot. Somewhere over the next ridge, a logger started his cut on another tree. The high-pitched chainsaw sound drifted down to James like blue gasoline smoke.

He hiked up the ridge, beyond most human sound. Sometimes something follows him, out of sight, at the edge of his hearing.

September

James heard sound beyond the firelight, lay down on the log, rolled into darkness behind it, grabbed his carbine, and crawled out of the light of the fire while his eyes adjusted to darkness beyond the circle of orange light. Then he saw him leaning on his rifle, like a shadow where the light flickered against trees.

The kid spoke as soft as moonlight. "Go easy. I ain't meaning you no harm."

“I’m jumpy about people walking up on me.”

“I see you are.” He walked into firelight, leaned his rifle against a tree, and warmed his hands over the fire.

James asked him, “You had anything to eat?”

“Yesterday. I hitched a ride with a trucker. He wasn’t feeling good. His wife run him off and wouldn’t let him see his little girl. Told the judge he was a violent man and would bring them harm, but he said that wasn’t the truth about him. He give me his lunch, and I ate it after he dropped me off.”

James put more wood on the fire and boiled water, added dried meat and vegetables. “I saw you going north outside of Hungry Wolf, Oregon. I thought you were headed home.”

“I was. I run out of wind in northeastern Oregon, broke ice for my water and only a tiny fire because it’s hard to find dry wood in the snow. I broke dead branches off trees for my fire. I got frostbite this cheek a little, watched winter stars behind thin, ice-crystal clouds before dawn.

“Four days, I couldn’t get enough wind in the sails to even start, so I ditched the rig in willows along a frozen stream. Hitched back down to highway 395 because it sounded like a bargain price for something. Up 395 to Pendleton. I worked in a service station in Pendleton until spring broke, and I started out again, mostly on foot.”

September

Jet fighters flew low above the mountain and shattered the morning quiet with ear-splitting, ground-shaking, thundering roar. James saw them against the opposite ridge, almost level with him, slammed the rifle butt against his shoulder, led the first fighter like leading a duck, levered two cartridges through the carbine, rifle explosions nearly lost in sudden thunder of jet-sound, and James’s thought caught up with his actions.

Sunlight reflected from the canopy, and he saw the pilot, a dark form coiled into machinery. He grounded the butt of the rifle and faced up the canyon as the jets roared out of sight over the mountain.

James left the ejected brass shells on the dusty ground where they fell. He walked over the ridge into brush growing between ragged thickets of second-growth timber. A steller’s jay flew from tree to tree up the ridge, hysterical in reaction to two jets and then James’s intrusion into his own wild territory, and spread the raucous word.

Manzanita tangled in James’s clothes; dry limbs broke, and

broken pieces whizzed past his face. The sharp, dusty smell of ceonothus flowers and the smell of bruised manzanita hung in hot, still air. Manzanita limbs grew so close together, he walked on them above the ground. He found no level place to stand. He propped his pack in brush and strapped his rifle to it to free his hands. He started again.

The sun dropped behind the mountain before he fought his way clear of dense brush and stood on bare rock at the rim of the gorge. White water roared three hundred feet below him. The sound of wildly-running water filled the gorge and shook the solid stone where he stood at the edge of the rim, with solid rock beneath his feet, and dense brush behind him.

He watched colors climb the western sky as the sun sank deep behind the earth. He found a dirt-filled depression in rock and unrolled his sleeping bag.

September

The kid lay by the log, his head nearly covered in his sleeping bag. Tiredness dragged at James. He fed small pieces of wood into the fire and kept a watch on the night. Sometimes James thought everything changed, and he lay there sleeping, hair sticking out of the top of the sleeping bag, while an older, tired man sat by the fire, his consciousness just touching James's sleeping consciousness.

The kid woke at daylight and built up the fire. James lay down on his sleeping bag and slept soundly until the kid brought water from the stream and put it down near the fire.

After they ate, the kid said, "My brother come out here seven years ago. He wrote me and said come on out but finish school first, because everybody in California wants you to have a high school diploma before they'd hire you.

"He made more in a day than he'd made back home in a week. He sat on a machine, running big sections of pipe by in front of him and grinding down rough spots in the welded seams. He bought him a new car and got married. He said he was doing real good.

"Missouri, it seemed like a hell of a place to be. I could go out after school and weekends and make a few bucks, but I could see I wouldn't never get a chance to buy me a good car or have anything but hard work and hard times, so I thought a lot about California, read a lot about it and talked a lot about it. I figured I'd go.

"Three weeks before graduation, Lucille passed me a note in

class, askin' me if she should have them put her maiden name on her diploma or go ahead and have them put my name. She was pregnant and didn't want to wait any longer than it took to get things arranged. I was scared, but I wanted to get married.

"Lucille, she's a tall girl, taller than me and long blonde hair, pretty and built real fine. One eye don't look quite where the other one does, so it was hard to tell if she was looking at me or maybe just a little past me. Sometimes I thought she might be laughing at me when she was looking somewhere behind me, but I never knew what she would be laughing at if she was.

"We got married two weeks before school was out, and we went up side by side for graduation.

"I could see things was going different from what I'd figured. I'd have to get some money put by before we took off for California. I'd have to find a good place to rent and have money for doctor bills for the baby. I got a job in town, but my dad, he had a heart attack before he got the seed down. Somebody had to run things, so I quit that job I had, and I went to farming.

"Lucille and me, we fixed up the old house down by the river. Nobody'd lived there for over ten years. We fixed the plumbing, and we painted and cleaned and bought used furniture. I'd come in off the tractor after sunset and Lucille, she'd come out the back door, her blouse tied up around her belly that was starting to get big.

"She'd have green paint on her from the living room and yellow from the kitchen, and I'd wish I wasn't covered with grease and field dirt, cause I wanted to hold her right then, touch her belly to feel the baby growing there and pull her down into the grass with me.

"We'd work halfway into the night, and I'd head out and farm the fields again before sunrise while she slept in. Seemed like there at first, she was sleepy all the time."

Wind blew grey ash across the rocks. He walked around the fire and stacked more rocks behind it.

"Two trains a day went by that place, the other side of the river. One went down early afternoon, while I ate my lunch. The other went up the river at three in the morning. I'd wake up before I heard it, lie awake until I felt it rumblin' and shakin', blowin' the whistle at the crossing. Then I couldn't hear the engine anymore, but I'd hear it blowin' at the last crossing up at the top of the valley, a long ways up there, and I'd lie against Lucille. She'd curl up to me in her sleep, and I'd go back to sleep.

"As long as the old man was sick enough all he thought about

was he going to live or die, everything went okay. My mom brought him home from the hospital and took care of him at home, at the new place they built when I was a kid.

“We’d go up there once a week, eat dinner with them, visit a little. I usually told the old man what work I was doin’, how things was comin’ along, but he never said much, just sat there grey in his face. For a long time, I thought he was going to die, but he started gettin’ better.

“He walked around by the house some, and he sat out every morning in the sun. Then he walked with a cane and come out where I worked. When I started cuttin’ alfalfa, he come out and walked around. He still didn’t work, and he still didn’t say much. Before, when I worked, everything was real relaxed, but when he started comin’ out, I’d get nervous.

“I brought in the first cutting, and he stood there and watched me all morning long. I cut all the way down the field, and he watched me come down. I turned up the field and I felt him watchin’ me all the way up.

“Lunchtime, I said, ‘Ain’t you got nothin’ to do but watch me run tractor?’ He just said, ‘Not much,’ and he headed up to the house.

“I said, ‘Hey. You could sit down with me here and eat lunch,’ but he just kept going without sayin nothin’. That was still the most talking we’d done for a while.

“The doctor told him to still take it easy, but I guess takin’ it easy got worse than workin’, so he come out and started workin’. That was okay, because there was plenty to do. He’d do one thing, and I’d do somethin’ else.

“But then one evenin’ after dinner, him and my mom, they come down to our place, first time they’d been there since we moved in. Lucille brought em coffee and some cake she’d made and she chatted with my mother like they do. After a while, the old man pops up and says, ‘Gonna put you on a wage here on out.’ I looked at him and said, ‘What?’ and he just said the same thing again, like he’d been practicing it. ‘Gonna put you on a wage here on out.’

“I said, ‘I don’t work on no wage for you. I come down here when you was sick and got the crops planted. I fixed broken machinery, got that Willys engine pumps out of the river runnin’ and brought in the first hay and brought out more chickens and got the chicken house straightened up.

“I been livin’ here for food off the place, and I been workin’ all the daylight and half the dark most days. I never asked you for nothin’, and then you come along and don’t ask me nothin’

about what I want; you just say you're gonna put me on a wage. If I keep on workin' here, it's for a share of the profit, if there is any from this farmed-out, run-down place.'

"He's sittin there looking at me all the time I'm talking. He's not sayin' anything, but his face gets redder and redder.

"Was a time when his face'd get red like that, and he'd be up out of his chair and I'd be knocked down on the floor, but he's an old man now, and when he's sittin' there turnin' red in the face, he knows that. My mother flutters around, goin all pale and she says, 'George, you got to keep your blood pressure down,' and they got up to leave.

"Last thing he said as they left was, 'Gonna put you on a wage here on out.'

"I shouted at his back, 'Look for yourself a new farm hand. I'll be goin' down the road.'

"He lit up the night with a three cell flashlight and kept walkin', said nothin'.

"He wasn't in shape to carry the whole thing hisself yet, so I stayed a while."

Sun shone down through the tops of pine trees. The fire died down, and they didn't put on any more wood.

The kid walked to the stream, lay down on the bank, washed his face, then briefly submerged his head. He rose to his knees, brushed his hair back with his hands, dried his face on his shirt tail, stood, and walked back up and sat on the log.

"Lucille and me, we started havin' the first argument we ever had, and it went on ever day. The day after my folks come down and the old man made his announcement, I come in late and greasy, and she asked me, 'What's the matter with workin' for wages? Your mother told me he's going to give you a good wage.'

I said, 'There's nothin' the matter with working for wages, but it would mean working for him, takin' orders from him, and I finished with that when I was sixteen.'

She wouldn't let it go and kept at me about it. First I tried to explain, but then I just stayed out in the shop most nights, workin' on things 'til she was in bed and the bedroom lights was off.

"Things come apart in a hurry. I could see havin' enough money to go on and get out, go to California, but when I'd talk about it, Lucille would say, 'Why go to California? I never been there, and I don't want to go. I like it here. I don't understand why you can't stay and work for your dad here. We'd do okay. And we got this house all fixed up.'"

He sat for a long time on the log. James rolled and tied his sleeping bag and put his pack together. He put food aside for the kid to take with him.

The kid said, "I got a daughter almost a year and a half old, and I never seen her." He moved from the log to the soft white dust the other side of the fireplace and sat in the dust.

"When I got ready to come to California, Lucille wouldn't come, so I give her most of the money I had and the car, and I set out hitch-hikin'. I rode one day and one night with a skinny old man in a black Buick Roadmaster with the radio tuned to a man who screamed and shouted and hollered and moaned in a gravelly, singing voice about God and Christ and sin and damnation and salvation, a lot more about sin and damnation than about Christ and salvation. Hear him tell it, God got all his fun casting poor sinning souls into everlasting fire.

"Sometimes I drove. I'd look over at that old man, and I'd think he was sleepin', so I'd start to reach over and shut the radio off. Before I touched the knob, he'd open one eye and say, 'Leave it on.'

"That soaked into my head until I had to get out and try for another ride even if he was going all the way to California. I went into a place for coffee to try to back off that preaching still twistin' up in my head. All the people in that cafe looked strange to me, like they hid mysteries I couldn't begin to understand, like they believed mysteries about me I'd never even heard of.

"For a while, I felt like somebody was watchin' me all the time. It took me a couple days before I felt like I was by myself any time I was alone.

"When I got to California, it wasn't like it was when my brother got there. More people than jobs. I got little jobs here and there. Enough to get by on a while, send a little to Lucille, tell her I'm going to hit it right, soon, and then she will come out.

"My brother lost his job. They laid off half the crew. Bought a million dollar machine to do my brother's job.

"Took me a while to figure out I'd done better in Missouri. I'm headed back, but the world can't be only Missouri and California and one highway runnin' between."

September

James woke. The yellow moon hung huge above the deep black gorge. He lay still and tried to see how far he was from

the edge until he knew he still curled into dirt in the hollow in stone.

He sat up in moonlight and wondered what sound had come over or through sounds of water roaring wild down the deep gorge. He heard again or remembered the sound of breathing. Or the sound of water running in the gorge echoed from the walls and built an overtone he mistook for the sound of something breathing.

He untied the rifle from the pack, levered a shell into the chamber, let the hammer down to safety, and wrapped the rifle in his jacket. He watched dense shadows below him in the gorge move as the moon moved across the sky. He got back into his sleeping bag and slept again.

Nine

The highway runs straight out of Oregon into Idaho. Then it curves and twists through a series of ridges. Wind blew dust across the highway.

James rode the deserted highway past curving, dry embankments. He kept his motorcycle in third gear and rode smoothly. The engine rumbled almost beneath his hearing, through curves at forty miles an hour.

At the top of the ridge, a rough track branched east from the highway. James turned onto it. The track ran across broken stone, across stone eroded to gravel, stone eroded to dirt. The track smoothed out at the top and ended at a monument of stacked rocks, six feet tall.

James drove into the narrow shade, lifted his bike onto its center stand, took off his helmet and jacket, walked around to loosen up, then ran a wide circle along the flat top of the ridge. He looked north into the haze fifty miles, and into the desert south. He saw several miles east and west along the top of the ridge. South, rounded ridges stood up from the earth, a series of young mountain ranges, all of them lower than the high point where he stood. The haze thinned to the south, a grey-blue shroud along the horizon, and blended to the blue sky high above the horizon.

James untied his load, spread out the tarp, and unrolled his sleeping bag on it, untied the canteen, drank water, and looked toward the horizons.

The sun set diffused red. Red light spread a thousand miles across the west. The moon rose orange until it cleared the smog, turned yellow and smaller and then white, like a pearl.

The sun rose in blue and red light. James woke, dressed, and ate. Sunlight warmed stone and earth. Hard wind scoured the ridges, blew dust into his food, and hammered at him. He gathered everything together, packed and then sat on the rocks and watched the day, in no hurry to be anywhere.

Sound blew in the wind, and he couldn't identify it, a far-off, nearly faded, sudden sound, repeated, and again. Before he knew what it was, it oppressed the day around him. He scanned north, south, east, and west, and started over again, until far south, two ridges away, where the highway cut the top of the ridge and then dropped out of sight into the next sloping valley, he saw something moving fast, up over the top, and down out of sight again, followed quickly by other fast-moving vehicles. He heard the sound again and knew it was gunfire.

He worked frantically, tied everything in place and then felt caught in impotence. He couldn't think of anything to do. He waited and watched.

Sound muffled in the low hollows. Sound blew away in the wind. It seemed a long time. James thought they must have all stopped.

They rolled suddenly into sight over the next closer ridge, grey triangle of sail augmented now by a square, wide sail stretched tight with wind. The kid crouched on top of the rig. He had tied down both booms. Cars topped the ridge behind him.

James heard gunfire again, but the kid sailed downslope and pulled far ahead of his pursuers. Engines screamed at their highest speeds. Red lights flashed on car tops. The kid sailed out of sight again, and three cars followed him down. James placed them by sound as they approached, sporadic gunfire, gear whine, and roar of engines. He started his motorcycle, rode closer to the road, and stopped. He straddled the machine, shaking and agitated. His leg bounced with tension when he put his foot on the peg.

He shut off the engine, leaned the bike on the side stand, and walked closer to the road, to the top of a rise of dirt and rock where he could see farther down the road.

Sails snapped into view. The kid's vehicle rolled fast up through the long curve, close to the white metal railing that separated the curve of pavement from the sharp, rock-jumbled drop down the side of the mountain. Rapid gunfire echoed in the deep swales. The kid turned, lay down, and fired down the hill behind him, gathered himself into a tight crouch again, and corrected sails as the vehicle started to veer across the road, but

the brief change in course slowed him. Three police cars shortened his lead.

The kid leaned forward, yanked the ropes free, and pulled the boom toward him. Gunfire. He jerked upright and let go of the boom, which snapped out away from him, reversed direction in the wind, slammed him with brutal force, and knocked him clear of the rig, out through empty air above the railing and down onto jumbled rocks far below the highway, while the sails snapped tight, twisted, and broke the mast free.

The vehicle hit the railing, bounced away, and slammed back into it harder. Pieces of broken wood flew from it. It tipped, smashed down on its side, spun, tumbled, and shattered, scattered itself over hundreds of yards of asphalt roadway.

If the bullets had not killed him, there was still no doubt he was dead. His body broke on the rocks. James saw his blue shirt and dark blood. The wind eased and then died.

Despair and pain flooded through temporary numbness. Still James couldn't think of anything he could do. When he could move again, he pushed his bike off the stand, let it roll down the hill, and held it slow with the front brake until he was well down in the sharp-sided swale, out of sight of the road. He parked the machine and walked back up to the top.

Uniformed men walked about the roadway and climbed down the hillside. Red lights flashed on car tops, flick, flick, flick.

It took them a long time. Before they finished, James couldn't stay longer, started the bike, spun the rear wheel going up, and wondered if they heard him, if they would know he had seen what happened. He rode up through the ditch onto the pavement and down through two long curves, until shattered pieces of wood and automobile parts scattered over the pavement. He slowed, dropped his left foot to the pavement, and looked down the sharp slope to where three men carried the kid up the ridge on a covered stretcher.

James heard the shouting voice, looked up at the officer, whose face mottled red from the fast pace toward James. Sunlight reflected from badge, buckle, pointed to his pistol in its holster. The policeman motioned and shouted, "Move on. Come on. Drive on through. We don't need spectators at highway accidents."

James dropped the motorcycle into first gear, released the clutch, and rode by the uniformed man making sweeping motions with his arm. Out of the mountains, he opened it to ninety and held it there, miles falling away, until he ran out of

gas in northern Nevada on a flat, desolate stretch of highway.

He switched the gas tank onto reserve, rode off the highway on a road of sand, and rode two miles away from the highway. He parked the machine and knelt in the sand, vomited, and vomited again and again, until he heaved mechanical, dry heaves. Deep bitterness rooted in his tongue and throat.

Darkness spread across the desert and engulfed the sand road, the asphalt highway. James rode to the highway and down the highway to a wide place where he would be in good view. He stopped and waited. The first three cars, which took two hours to come by, would not stop. There wasn't another until nearly midnight.

When headlights appeared way down the highway in moonlight, James walked out to the center of the road and stood and waited. The headlights came closer and closer. James thought the pickup was not going to stop, but it stopped just short of him.

The driver climbed down from the cab in anger and said, "What the hell are you standing in the middle of the road for? Trying to get killed?"

"I'm out of gas."

"What's that to me?"

"God damn. God damn." James walked toward the man standing behind the open door of the pickup. "God damn. Would it hurt you to help somebody? I've been here since before dark, and you're the first person I could stop. What the hell is the matter with you or anybody else?"

The man said, "Stop there." His words drove sharply through cool midnight air. James realized he held a pistol leveled through the open window of the door he stood behind. James stepped again and again and then stopped. And listened to the pickup engine running against the night. Something changed. He had wanted to walk into greeting bullets, but he turned away and walked back to the bike.

The man drove off the road and parked in front of the motorcycle, shut off the engine and lights, got out of the truck, and shut the door. James saw nothing in the black shadow of the pick-up and camper. He leaned against his bike and looked at the moon. From the dark shadow, the man said, "I have a five-gallon can of gas." James walked toward him. He said, "You'll have to pay me for it." He walked around the back of the truck, into the moonlight. The pistol was not in his hand now.

"How much?"

“Twenty dollars.”

“It only holds three and a half gallons.”

“Okay, fifteen dollars. You’re using up my time as well as my gas. I’ll have to unlock it and open it up to fill it up again.”

“Okay. It’s worth that not to be stuck out here. Okay.”

The driver of the pickup held a flashlight while James poured the gasoline. James gave him fifteen dollars, and he fastened the can onto the back of the truck and drove away.

In Reno, James saw a thin woman with short dark hair, a dark skirt, and blue sweater when he came out of Harold’s club. He thought she looked at him. He noticed her again when he came out of Harrah’s. The third time he saw her, he waited until she walked over and looked up at him.

He would remember her high-cheekbones, pronounced forehead, tanned, weathered face and her dark brown eyes. She was much older than he was. Then she turned her face so the light fell from a different angle, and he thought she was very young. She said, “Do you live here?”

James said, “No. I’m on my way through. I’m staying at a motel for the night and looking at the town.”

“Could I go to your motel with you?”

“Sure.” They walked under the archway over the railroad tracks and out where the night slowed down.

James sat on the bed, and the woman sat in a chair near the foot of the bed. He felt like reaching out to touch her, like bringing her to the bed, but he was constrained by exhaustion and by unwillingness to assume her intentions were sexual. He took off his boots and shirt. He lay down on the bed and fell immediately asleep, but he snapped awake with awareness of the woman. She said, “Sleep. It’s okay.”

During the night, she lay down beside him. Their combined warmth, the mixture of their odors, their light contact, became the tone of his sleep.

When he woke, her presence was heavy in the air and in his mind, though she had left while he slept.

September

Blue light above the horizon spread to purple and then shaded slowly to dark red. Objects on the earth separated to his vision in blacks and greys. His breath clouded in front of him as he watched, as he had watched since moonset. Objects began to reflect their colors as light increased. James Jackson Riley curled, hip in the scooped out place he had dug for it. He felt

physically abraded and grainy through his conscious level of existence, that sleep might clear, but he directed his attention to his environment.

Sunshine lighted the treetops on the ridge west of him.

He got out of his sleeping bag, walked naked to the edge, and looked down into the still dark gorge. He felt cold. He walked back, uncovered his clothes, and dressed. He picked up his rifle, sat down, rested the rifle across his legs, and watched darkness at the bottom of the gorge until morning's light penetrated the depth. White water ran wild through dark stones and early morning shadows far below him.

He ejected the cartridge from the chamber, kept the next one from coming up, closed the lever, and eased the hammer into the safe position. He lay the rifle aside and picked up the canteen. He was as out of water as he had been all the day before.

He studied the steep cliff falling into the gorge, but he saw no way down. A hundred feet of sheer bluff blocked his progress along the rim of the gorge. If he didn't climb the bluff, he would have to go back through dense brush.

Sun shines intensely at seven thousand feet. James rested in the shade under the edge of the brush. When he felt ready, he hid the pack, rifle, and canteen in the brush. He took his boots off, put his knife and matches in them, and tied them to his belt, one hanging each side of him. He climbed.

Sunshine heats stone. He put his hand into a crevice and made a fist to keep his hand from coming back out. He pulled himself up. He felt the rock with his toes and found a narrow purchase. His foot slipped, and he cut it painfully across the instep. He couldn't turn to see how much it bled.

His eyes stung with sweat running into them. He gained a foot and then a few inches. He retreated part way and started up a more possible route. Rock dust fell away from him down the steep stone face. Small stones fell and rattled on solid rock far below him. He jammed his foot into a crack and started to push up. Rock broke under his weight. He ripped skin from his hand, wrenched his shoulder, and banged his knee against the rock as his foot followed the broken rock partway down, and he caught all his weight on his right hand. Tears flooded down his face, a mechanical reaction to the intense pain it cost him to hang on.

He felt the rock face with his toes until he found another place to push up from. He should have been a spider. So much of existence would be easier, including climbing rock cliffs, including decisions about what next step to take. He tried to

think like a spider, to cling to the sheer rock face like a spider, to climb like a spider.

Dusk. He jammed fists and feet into a crack that ran clear to the top and pulled himself up a few inches at a time. He pulled himself over the top, rolled away from the edge, lay on warm rock, and tried to ease the pain out of his existence. He dozed and woke nearly unable to move his right arm. He gathered his senses. He tried to put his boots on, but they wouldn't go onto his swollen feet. He said, "Spiders don't wear boots."

He limped to the edge of the brush, gathered dead branches, and started a fire. He slept for a while but woke cold, added wood to the burned-down coals, and huddled close to the flames that burned dry limbs. He slept, woke again, and built the fire up again.

The sun rose. He limped out onto the dark rock and waited while the sun's heat soaked into him. He felt hunger and thirst. His right shoulder ached. He tried to get his boots on again. He walked barefoot along the rim of the gorge.

A small stream flowed down through brush and timber, crossed barren rock, and fell far into the gorge. He walked down the smooth rock and knelt by the clear water, rinsed his mouth, spat the water out, and washed his face, but he didn't drink. He had gone two days without water. He would go two more, seeking vision as Native Americans had, going four days without food or water.

The stream narrowed and cut a deep, full channel in rock. James lowered himself into cold, rushing current, squatted on the smooth rock bottom, and submerged himself. Shock of the intense cold drove to his bones. Up, out. He slapped water off and walked on the rock in sunshine.

He washed his clothes in the stream and spread them on dark rocks to dry. He sat naked most of the day in sunshine. He bathed again at dusk and dressed for the night, then walked up the rock to where it narrowed above the gorge.

Before the sun came up, he felt extremely weak, as if he would float away in fever. He watched the sun rise, stared directly into it. "I should not look directly into the sun. It will blind me. No. This is not true. People have told me the sun will blind me, and the belief could blind me, but the sun could not.

"Sometimes, natives of this continent stared into the sun when they sought vision. They were not blinded. They put aside their material needs, for food and water, and their material senses, and focused on the sun, reflection of the light of Spirit. Spirit spoke to them and gave them vision."

James moved enough to watch the moving sun. His existence became agony. His eyes filled his head with pain; his neck hurt; his back and buttocks could not accept the immobility and the pain. No, this is not true. I believe it, and so it manifests, but discard the belief.

Gradually he felt no pain in his muscles, and then he had no muscles. He felt no pain in his eyes, and then he had no eyes.

Time passed, agonizingly slowly, but then time did not exist, only now, only eternity. All existence became the brilliant sun, representation of Spirit. Not Spirit, but reflection of the light of Spirit. Spirit.

The sun set. An intense light still burned in James's vision. For a long time, he didn't know any change had taken place. Slowly, sensation and individual thought returned. He felt clear and light. Still, he had had no vision. This knowledge of why he had come to the mountain, his direction in seeking a vision clear of the morass he had cast about in before, this clearness in his existence, his acceptance of Spirit, of the Life Force that kindles the sun and kindles him, could that be his vision? delivered not as pictorial vision but as already interpreted knowledge?

A Native American received his vision and returned to the wise men of the tribe for help with interpretation. Plenty Coups saw in his vision the coming of white men and cattle, the end of the buffalo, but the vision was beyond his understanding. Wise men of the tribe interpreted the vision when Plenty Coups told it to them. The Crow nation, with some success to the survival of their lands and culture, planned their cooperative relationship with the intruding culture to work with the knowledge given them.

Had James been give an essence of knowledge? this change that was upon him, that needed no interpretation, because there are no interpreters anymore? Thank you Spirit. I am cleansed. Now shut down the circling thoughts, shut up the words. Continue to listen. This is not finished. Put away distraction. A presence is here.

The moon rose behind him and covered him with soft, silver light. For the first time, he looked down from the horizon. Close in front of him, a large coyote sat looking at him.

They faced each other in silence. Then the man moved a little. "Have you followed me?"

The coyote panted; his tongue hung out, and the man thought the coyote was laughing.

"Are you Coyote God?"

Then the coyote did laugh. "Coyote is not God."

"Indians spoke of Coyote God."

"White men spoke of Coyote God because they didn't understand what the people told them. White men's religion was too primitive to encompass what the people told them of the order of existence. The people spoke of Coyote, a guide to God, an interpreter of Spirit, a particular reflection of Spirit, as are all forms of life. There is only one Spirit, one God, and He is not visible to your material senses."

"Is this my vision then? Are you my vision, my dream?"

"All you've known until now is your vision. Now is what is real, the beginning of waking."

"I'm ready."

The coyote turned and trotted up the ridge. The man rose and followed him. As the moon moved through a quarter of its journey across the sky, they ran, up and across the ridge, across the next ridge, and down the east side of the third ridge into a high valley, where a path led them to a small fire burning in a clearing in the forest.

Four men sat around the fire. They made room for the coyote and the man to join their circle. They sat in silence as the moon moved through a quarter of the sky.

A very old man looked up at James and said, "We have come here to help you know the meaning of your vision." He made ceremony. When he passed the pipe to Coyote, Coyote was gone and the kid sat in his place. The kid took the pipe, puffed, offered the pipe to the wind, and passed it to the next old man, a dark, ancient face under a broad-brimmed hat.

James spoke to them, and the old men answered him.

"You have thought the world must come to balance and then you can achieve balance in your life, so you have not reached inward and upward to Spirit for balance. The way you have lived is not your path in the world."

"What is? What about Black Elk? He had an impossible vision to fulfill, to keep the Sioux nation united on the true path of peace and fulfillment of the people's physical and spiritual needs when the invading ex-European culture destroyed their culture, their sustenance, their lives."

The man wearing the hat looked up, ancient, vigorous face in the firelight. "Black Elk's sorrow came because he thought he was responsible for the entire nation. He could only offer his people the substance of his vision and his own wisdom. He could not force them to see it and accept it. His vision was not primarily of his people, but a personal vision, guidance through

a long life of spiritual fulfillment in the midst of apparent chaos. He healed illness and injury and influenced many paths. He found direct communication with Spirit.

“His brothers and cousins stepped deep into the violent ways of the world and left behind the guidance of Spirit. Black Elk’s vision was of his communication with Spirit. His life became an exaltation of Spirit. His vision is fulfilled.

“It is easy to follow the true path of peace and exaltation of Spirit when there is only peace. When everything around you gives the appearance of disorder and violence, the path still lies straight and clear. Stay on that straight, clear path, and you walk above the appearance of material existence.

“If you see only chaos, it is because you choose chaos to be the meaning of your existence. Your vision has been of violence and chaos, disorder, no center that will hold. You are invited now to step above that existence and exalt Spirit. When you are clear and walk in Spirit, there is peace within you and around you.”

“Wow. Do you think I can just step from where I am into what you’re telling me? Alone, no support system, no tribe to accept this knowledge you’re giving me? How can I do this by myself?”

“You asked for vision.” Ashes in the center of their circle stirred in a breeze and scattered, grey dust into mountain wind.

“Yes. I did. Thank you.”

Morning light began. Ashes from the fire had gone cold. Wind rose. Birds began to sing.

The old men stood up and made ceremony. One whose hair was thin and white said, “James Jackson Riley. Something for you. These birds who sing in the mountains, these animals who live in the mountains, their brothers and sisters and cousins can sing these same songs in the cities, can live in cities if they are made welcome.”

The oldest man, thin nearly out of existence but standing straight, with clear, deep eyes, said, “As we go now, making our way, so you go. This is your spiritual ally, the individual power your vision experience brings you to carry with you as you walk the earth.”

The old men put back the rocks that had partially circled the fire and walked soft-footed into the forest. The wind blew grey ash until only a dark spot remained on the bare earth, that the first rain would wash clean, no other sign they had been there.

James Jackson Riley hiked first to where the river burst from the gorge and spread out in a wider, calmer channel. He bathed

in very cold water and drank, dried in sunshine, dressed, and walked downriver to highway 36.

He climbed from the river up over steep rocks and through dense brush to the concrete abutment of the bridge, onto the concrete, and then onto the asphalt highway. He crossed the steel, concrete, and asphalt bridge. Hot asphalt felt strange, flat and hard under his feet. He walked down the winding highway. Light-footed, uprooted, floaty from hunger.

He couldn't make sense of his thoughts. Away from the experience and looking back at it, he thought it must have been hallucination. That couldn't have really happened, could it?

A battered '47 chevy sedan went by him and pulled off the asphalt highway into the next turn-out. He walked to the tan and rust-colored car and opened the door on the passenger's side. "Did you stop to give me a ride?"

Battered, broad-brimmed hat, ancient, dark face. The old man nods, points down the road, shifts into gear when James is seated, resumes the highway, smooth riding, slow driving. The old man asked, "Hungry?" He gave James a pouch of mixed dried fruit and meat and a canteen full of cold water. He said, "Eat slowly at first, or you will be sick."

James ate. Then he asked, "Where are you driving from?" The dark-faced man pointed over his shoulder with his thumb.

James nodded.

When James got out of the car, the old man motioned to the pouch and the canteen James left on the seat. He said, "These are yours. Take them with you."

James reached into the car and picked them up, stepped back, and shut the door. The old man drove across the highway, up a dirt road, and into the hills.

James stood on the shoulder of the highway in warm sunshine. Across the road, a bird he couldn't see but knew to be small and fluffy grey sang three ascending notes, stopped, then repeated his simple song, and again.

James ate again. He sat in sunshine on a large rock near the road. He began to settle out of the dizziness hunger had brought. He felt physical strength returning. He ate again, a larger amount, and sipped water. After a while, he got up, walked to the shoulder of the road and put his thumb in the air.