

# ***Rendezvous***

a tale of romantic adventure in the heart of the wilderness

by Nowick Gray



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The cabin appeared in the distance, nestled beside a half-frozen pond. It was a scene from an old-fashioned Christmas card--except the cabin's chimney pipe showed no smoke.

"Looks like we're the first ones here," I said to Matt. I checked my watch again.

My companion bent forward with the weight of his pack. He rested his hands on his knees, catching his breath. "Yeah--what time is it?"

"Twenty past three."

"Well, we're behind schedule from losing our trail. They could have had the same trouble on the other side."

"Yeah; or maybe they got a late start."

Matt turned his eyes from me toward the cabin. Sweat generated from our last steep climb up the scree slope dripped from his limp, wet mustache.

I tried some other explanation: "Maybe they're already in the cabin and there's no wood; or they've just got there and haven't lit a fire yet." I started to shiver. It was the end of June, but at six thousand feet a sweating body cools quickly.

We trudged on through wet, foot-deep snow to the cabin. A couple of wooden steps at the entrance are falling apart, but otherwise the rustic structure appeared stoutly built, with walls of rough planks supported by a stone foundation.

I pushed open the creaking door; wind whipped into the single room. There was a neat pile of split firewood stacked beside a little stove, with cobwebs stretched between.

The cabin was well-equipped, for all its remoteness. There were stacks of blankets and sleeping bags and spare shoes, all on a drying rack overhead; four built-in bunks complete with foam mattresses, a kitchen with various supplies in the cupboards: matches, toilet paper, tea, cocoa, canned soup, a little rice, along with a portable campstove and fuel, cookware and dishes.

Matt started unlacing his wet boots and suggested we get a fire going to dry our clothes and heat water for tea. I was too anxious for the arrival of the other party to sit tight just yet; I told him to go ahead, and I'd scout around to see if I could see or hear a sign of their approach. He tried to reassure me that they were probably just running late. But I left him to the stove and took off with map in hand to the end of the ridge, calling out and peering down into the dim vastness of the Glacier Creek drainage.

There was no response to my shouts in the empty wind. Far down the mountainside, the creek streamed out from its source icefields and wound away beyond sight. Somewhere down there, a trail had to run along the heavily wooded slope; and at some point it had to veer up on a final ascent to the pass. Somewhere down there were Farah, our daughter Suze, and their hiking companion, now over half an hour late--not a big deal, if you're meeting someone at a restaurant; but this was wilderness. The higher

stakes made all the difference.

It was cold sitting out there on the exposed rock, and so I got up and walked, with a growing uneasiness, back to the cabin. A gray plume of smoke now curled out of its chimney. Looking beyond, I hesitated in my steps, struck by the awesome beauty of the mountain peaks that loomed all around. A beauty so desolate, and incomplete . . .

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Morning light drew our eyelids slowly open. I pulled Farah closer for one last kiss while we still had the chance.

"Nine weeks," she said in a forlorn whisper. "Nine weeks too long."

As soon as our lips touched, Suze awoke from her bed beside us, right on cue. There was no turning back.

Never had I been away from Farah for longer than a week, in our four years together. Now we would have to last at least four or five weeks at a stretch, until I could arrange a quick trip back home on a couple of days between shifts. The treeplanting camp would be a full day's drive away, in the next valley.

But when John Harris had called me, a job offer out of the blue, I'd told him I'd do it; because with a half-finished house and a three-year-old, we needed the money. The house was a full forty feet long but only fourteen feet wide: like an overgrown trailer, it

was, or a glorified railway shed--with the exposed hallway, serving as a temporary outer wall, showing not one but a row of doors to the back rooms.

We got up and dressed; then Farah made breakfast while I finished packing. It was all happening so fast. Over breakfast and a road map we tried to figure how many round-trips our budget could bear, with me putting the big, gas-guzzling Ford back on the road.

I wasn't too concerned about using some of the big bucks I'd be making for the odd trip home. At a hundred and fifty a day . . .

Farah was more prudent: "But Will, remember all the other things we need that money for; those planting days have to cover us for the whole year."

"Yeah, you're right. Still--" Then it hit me.

"Hey, Farah--you know, we're going to be up near Invermere in a couple of weeks. Look at it on the map: I'll be directly across the mountains from here."

"That Will be nice."

"More than nice. Look. There's Jumbo Pass, right up there. If there's a trail on the east side, I could hike over the pass on my days off and meet you on the Glacier Creek side."

"That's true . . . I could drive up to the trail on this side--if the road's open--and pick you up. It would take a whole day each way, though, wouldn't it?"

"Uh . . . yeah, I guess it would. Hmm. Still, look at the map. It's so close . . ."

"Or--wait a minute. You're not going to feel like going anywhere on your days off, are you? After packing trees up and down the slopes all week, you're going to go off climbing mountains?"

"Yeah, but Farah--" I didn't understand her hesitation. If I was volunteering such an ordeal, in order to get together with her--didn't she want to see me after weeks apart?

Of course she did--but she wanted an equal part in the challenge.

"How about this," she proposed. "You hike up your side, and I'll come up the trail from the west, and we'll meet at the pass. I've heard there's a cabin there, where we can stay the night. We'll have more time together that way."

It was sounding pretty good. I pictured our bed, not in the cabin but out under the millions of stars wheeling around amid the frosted peaks . . .

Suze had stopped stuffing pancake in her mouth long enough to attempt speech. The result was something of a strangled whimper, muted but nonetheless effective.

It brought me back to earth. I spoke for her before she choked: "Farah, what do we do about Suze?"

Farah looked at our daughter with loving eyes. "Oh, I'm sure she'd love to come, too."

Now suddenly it was sounding like too much. "I'm sure she would," I said, looking at our bright-eyed, nodding youngster, with her cheeks still bulging. "But how's she going to get there? It's what--a three-hour hike for an adult, in shape?"

"She could walk up part of the way . . ."

"And have you carry her the rest? Wouldn't it be easier to find someone she could stay with?"

"Oh, she'd rather come--wouldn't you, Suze?"

When Suze hesitated, perhaps trying to swallow first, Farah added, "We'll bring lots of food along; and your bluey quilt . . ."

"Yessee, yessee, I wanna come."

That settled that. And so our plan was hatched--at least in principle.

Saying good-bye was difficult--though less so for me than for Farah. I had the excitement of a trip and new experiences to look forward to. Farah would be at home with Suze and the big garden to look after; and as if that weren't enough, she'd also taken on the job of babysitting two other kids.

"Are you sure you can manage all that?" I'd wondered.

"Oh, no problem." And for Farah, it probably didn't seem like much.

Backpacking around Europe at seventeen, running a printing press at nineteen, roaming the mountains for a week in her twentieth year, and having our child at twenty-one: these are all manageable-enough undertakings. With Farah it was a matter of style, pace, the set in her jaw and the gleam in her eye, the determined clomp of her heavy boots that she wouldn't have had time to remove before starting a whirlwind in the kitchen that

produced in a morning's time a batch of bread, a couple of dozen quarts of canned fruit, and several steaming pies--with a cord of firewood split and stacked, between infrequent peeks in the oven. One or two burned pies, no big deal. It's the cost of accomplishment.

But now as we held each other one last time by the brown truck door, Farah cried for her coming loneliness. I smoothed the wet strands of hair to the sides of her cheeks, encircled her arching back to pull her closer, and took her mouth to mine.

Then I got into the truck, tried to smile for her, and rumbled down the driveway.

From my first day of work I began to dream of the coming rendezvous. Packing fifty-pound treebags up and down the razed slopes and gnarly ravines, through logging slash and rockslides, fighting duff and sod and rock and flies, the body takes a beating and the mind seeks solace elsewhere. I filled the mindless dimension of the work with clear visions of Farah: her sparkling almond eyes, her sensuous full lips, her arousing body.

But the quality of my work suffered. Daydreams of the distant peaks turned to nightmares under my nose as I had to spend two days replanting whole sections of ground: digging up each of hundreds of seedlings and packing them back in the earth, firmer, straighter, deeper.

Somehow two weeks passed, and the hellish Cranbrook contract was finished. No one had made much money. A dozen planters had quit or been lamed. After days of

blistering heat, it snowed the day we broke camp. I worried about my truck with no chains getting down the winding dirt roads, but made it with no trouble. A ragtag caravan of assorted vehicles carrying forty surviving planters and all our camp gear--kitchen and shower trailers, collapsible tent-shacks for drying clothes and for dining, all our treebags, tapered shovels, spiked boots, rainwear and so on--proceeded up the Columbia River valley to set up again for the more promising five-week Jumbo Creek contract.

I took the occasion of a supper stop in Invermere to phone Farah. Beyond the essential I-miss-you's and I-love-you's, she had some news to report. She'd taken an exploratory trip up the western route to the pass, accompanied by Karianne, a woman whose husband, David, was part of my crew. The idea was to make the hike a double-date. They took Karianne's small horse along in the back of the truck, as a means of carrying Suze and Karianne's two kids up the trail.

The Glacier Creek road was in such bad shape, Farah told me, that they had to stop and move rocks in several places along the way, from slides that half-covered the road. On the other side were steep dropoffs.

"I was terrified," Farah told me.

I asked her why they didn't turn around and go back home.

"Turn around! Are you kidding? That would have been worse, to try to back up far enough to find a wide spot for turning around. You know how it is for me to try to drive in reverse."

"Yeah, you're right. So what did you do?"

"Well, Karianne got out, with all the kids of course, and tried to guide me through. She seemed to think I had lots of room. But I couldn't see anything--except air on one side, and rock on the other. My hands were shaking so hard I could barely hang onto the steering wheel."

"I'm shaking," I told Farah, "just hearing about it."

"Me too," she confessed, taking an audible, deep breath. "Anyway, when we got to the trail we put the kids on the horse and started up. But that didn't work out very well. There were too many logs that the horse couldn't get over; we had to take the kids off while Karianne led the horse around the logs. We ended up just leaving the kids off and all walking up, hoping the trail would get better. But it didn't."

"What did you do then?"

"We kept going till we hit old snow, then decided we should turn around and go back. Maybe in another month the trail will be clear to the top."

Farah's sturdy five-foot-two frame would have to be fit for the task of carrying Suze at least part of the way up, with the power supplied by her ambitious spirit. I promised to keep in touch as I found out more about the road and trail at my end.

The caravan turned west from Invermere into the mountains. The new campsite was located an hour's drive along Toby Creek, at the point where Jumbo Creek roared in. Halfway along this last road we passed the plush Panorama Alpine Resort, and the pavement turned to dirt and gravel. This would be the closest outpost of civilization--if civilization is tennis courts, hot tubs, a telephone and a bar.

My home and family were situated directly to the west, on the far edge of forty kilometers of mountains. The mountains surrounding the new camp rose with spectacular grandeur into ice- and wind-carved peaks. Beyond camp, the dirt road narrowed and stretched up the Jumbo Creek valley for twelve more kilometers. The planting blocks rose up the east slopes from the road. Jumbo Pass beckoned invisibly, tantalizingly from around the last mountain in sight.

As we traveled each day in the crew trucks that took us to work, I began to plan in earnest for the day I would drive my own truck to the end of the road, where the trail to the pass began. When I broached the idea to Harris, my towering, intimidating boss, he told me that the road was reportedly washed out somewhere past the last planting blocks. There was a possibility, he said, that it had been patched since.

"But if not," I was happy to hear him say, "you could take one of the boony bikes. I'll check out the situation one day when I'm up that way." He enjoyed bouncing around

on the balloon-tired, all-terrain, motorized "trikes" and I was glad to have the big man's support for my little adventure.

Weeks went by. On the better ground here I became preoccupied with trees, time, and money. Never mind the dazzling vistas of glaciated peaks from the higher slopes. I could take in glimpses during lunch. On and on I pushed myself. Faster, faster, stride, stride--tree; stride, stride--tree: my shovel and I made a hybrid machine. Up and down the mountainsides, all day long in a race against time, I pounded in the seedlings, up to a thousand a day. At twenty cents a crack, I couldn't afford to think about Farah.

Back in camp at the end of a day, when my stomach was filled and the conversation became sparse and stale, my thoughts would return to her. As time wore on, past the third week, into the fourth week, and fifth, I ached with a visceral emptiness, that all the good camp food couldn't touch. I'd plod over to my plywood box, brush my teeth reflectively, and crawl into my bed of foam pads and sleeping bags, diverting my mind until dark with a good mystery or Stephen King horror. But it was the dimly-formed vision of Farah's face, the disembodied love behind her ever cheerful smile, that would haunt me into sleep.

Farah and I still had a plan, of sorts. We just had to wait until the end of the contract, it seemed, before Harris would give the crew more than one day off at a time.

With constant pressure from the contracting company to keep production up, Harris wasn't about to let planters take extra days for fanciful honeymoons.

As that magical last day approached, I finally got some useful information from Harris. The road was indeed washed out beyond repair, he'd found, not far past the last blocks. The boony bike "might" make it, Harris told me, if the right place to cross were found. There were other complications, however.

In fact, the details, as the time approached, were maddening. I was too close, had waited too long, for our golden opportunity to fold because of some small hitch. To begin with, the actual days off at the end of contract were unknown until the last minute, due to an indeterminate number of remaining trees. There was some pressure on Harris to move right on to the next contract; so the days off might be needed for breaking camp, traveling, and setting up again. Meanwhile I knew from periodic phone calls to Farah that she might have trouble arranging days off from babysitting when I was free; though she remained confident that it would work out somehow.

Related to the problem of timing was the problem of access. The farther down the road I could get before starting to walk, the more time I'd have for the hike to the cabin. But even if I could wrangle a couple of days free, with the camp gone I'd no longer have the option of using a boony bike. That left me with my truck. But there were numerous minor washouts on the way, that we crossed daily in the crew trucks only with a good deal of scraping, bouncing, churning, and plain dumb luck. And these freshets were

increasing in volume every day, I'd noticed, in the sweltering June sun. As each day passed, I grew increasingly frustrated that for the sake of Harris's almighty production, Farah and I might well have missed our chance and would have to call the whole thing off.

But at last my opportunity came. The last day of work, a Sunday, was to be a short day with a partial crew. I chose not to work, but to rest and prepare for the hike; as Monday the camp would come down and be moved on toward Cranbrook, and Tuesday would be another full day off before the next contract began.

I hopped in the crew truck with the radiophone and drove it down the road to the one point where radio waves could find a hole in the wall of mountains. I reached Farah to finalize our plans. Our voices and breathful silences pulsed wondrously in the crackling airwaves.

Farah had acted on my tentative information from a previous phone call and fortuitously arranged Monday and Tuesday off. The so-called "double-date" idea had fallen through; David had decided he'd had enough of Harris's whip cracking, and had left this morning to drive home. Farah had guessed as much from talking to Karianne, and was trying to find someone else to come along on the hike. The basic idea was to have help carrying Suze. The best bet at this point was a mutual friend, Ron; but he hadn't

made a final commitment as yet. I told Farah that a fellow planter named Matt had expressed interest in accompanying me.

She said, "It won't be quite the same as just us, up there together."

"It wouldn't be just us, anyway, with Suze there."

"That's true . . ."

"Anyway, it still makes sense for both of us to go with someone."

"I know. Ron was telling me that it's the grizzly capital of the world up there."

"Oh, great. Well, I hope he decides to come along. Bears or no bears, anything could happen."

"We'll be all right."

"Yeah, I think so." I was impressed as always with her level of confidence; in the case of this upcoming trip, I was infected by it.

Matt was a tall, thoughtful theology student, whose black hair and beard framed a strong-featured face of gentle intensity. On the slopes where he spent his summers working, he was an aggressive planter who could flail all day through logging slash or duff, like any six-foot-five bear. He was also an experienced mountaineer.

When the time came to break camp and head for the pass, I trusted Matt's assessment that my big truck would probably do fine over the washouts. As for timing, we agreed to aim for a return before four-thirty on Tuesday, so we could phone the forest

company office for directions to the new camp location. Then it would be touch and go to make it to Invermere, because my truck only had a quarter-tank of gas.

When we set out Monday morning, the washouts were definitely deeper. It felt as if we were fording a river, crossing that first one in the lumbering, three-quarter ton Ford. Halfway through, the back wheels began to spin in the loose gravel and then the truck stalled. I figured maybe this is it--we could call it quits now, before we got too far down this former road, and just move on with the rest of the camp. There was still time to drive home the long way around . . . But then, with Matt beside me waiting for me to try harder, to start the thing up again and rock it back and forth out of this hole in the creek, I thought of Farah--with her determination to push on with her end of the journey from the west--and I was inspired to barrel our way through, if not hell, then at least a little high water.

We managed to drive on through several minor washouts to the eight kilometer mark. There, sure enough, we were stopped by a raging river cutting completely through the road. On the other side was an old shed lying on its side, a victim of some previous spring flood.

Now we were close enough to get out and walk. Or swim, more likely. I hesitated, weighing what to do with the truck key. Leave it in so someone else could drive, in case something happened to us? Or so someone could steal it? Who? As a compromise I left the doors unlocked and pocketed the key. My hypothetical thief might

hotwire the starter, I reasoned, but without the key the steering wheel would still be locked. Then I turned back to the roaring torrent before us.

A slender poplar had been good enough to fall neatly across the creek. So Matt and I stripped off our boots and pants, heaved them across the creek, put our backpacks on, and waded across, using the poplar as a handy bannister to brace ourselves against the frigid current. Then we dressed and walked on in high spirits down the last stretch of road, vast mountains towering up on both sides of the narrow valley.

Where the trail was supposed to start, there was an old cutblock, partially logged, with a few old skid roads crisscrossing it and disappearing into the remaining growth of trees at the edges. I pulled out the dogeared map that I'd drawn with directions from the Forestry office in Invermere, to get our proper bearings. The map proved not to match exactly with the actual layout of skid roads on the site. In fact, after three-quarters of an hour of fruitless trial and error, we gave up and decided to follow our noses uphill in the general direction of the pass, which we could see from the clearing.

The dense alder was wet from an overnight rain, but offered plenty of handholds. Matt and I put on our raingear and managed the ascent without much difficulty, in a couple of hours of climbing, jumping creeks, crossing boulder fields and snowslides. Then we had to pick our way along a precipitous rockface, and at last we stood beneath the final, broad, steep approach to the pass itself.

Our destination hovered before us like some distant dream coming true, which it was. In its summer color, its profusion of alpine flowers and moss and sparkling rivulets, its mantle of shifting cloud and patches of ice and snow, it was stunningly, grandly beautiful. Beautiful, but still desolate and incomplete--until, in a few moments, Farah would appear to complete the picture.

We headed up. Near the top was the toughest going of the trip so far, with a slick bank of compact mud and shale above the flowers. We crawled like snails along that final bank, our boots balanced at the tips of the toes on the slimmest of notches kicked into the hard surface, our fingers grasping at ephemeral stone chips that went skittering away at our touch.

Then we were there, in the snowy pass, with the cabin nestled some two hundred meters away beside a half-frozen pond, as in some old-fashioned Christmas card . . .

Had I really expected to see Farah, Suze and Ron all cozy in the cabin, drinking tea and smiling for us when we arrived? I walked back into the cabin, stamping the snow off my boots, ready at least to warm up for a bit while waiting.

Matt had his feet up roasting by the stove, teacup in hand. He seemed unconcerned, urging me not to tie too much expectation to a strict timetable in mountainous terrain like this. I was Willing to listen but it didn't help the unreasonable fear gnawing at my gut.

"Come on," he said when we'd finished our tea, "let's get up on some of this higher ground and have a real look around."

"Okay, sure," I agreed. It was part of why we were here.

We had only to climb a short distance up from the cabin to find excellent vantage points from which to scan the awesome mountain peaks that ranged everywhere around us. To the west loomed the blue-black, glacier-filled masses of the western Purcells and Selkirks: Banquo, Covenant, MacBeth and Lady MacBeth, Cauldron. To the east rose the red-rock giants of the dryer, eastern flank of the Purcells: Karnak, The Cleaver, Jumbo Mountain, Glacier Dome. Down the Jumbo Creek valley lay the lesser slopes we'd spent the last month planting. We studied our topographical maps, then sat still for a while to meditate on the desolate beauty of it all.

Finally we slid down the icy snowslides and retired to the cabin for more tea and warming of hands by the woodstove. I hung up my wet clothes to dry and, clad in long johns and a sweater, sat down to wait. I was in a silent and reflective mood by now, brooding over the dubious wisdom of this so-called adventure. An hour had passed, still with no sign of Farah, Suze and Ron. Then, at long last there was a voice in the distance, calling. Instantly I slipped on a pair of the cabin's battered old running shoes and ran out the door, down the rickety steps and across the snow in the direction of the shouts. The voice grew louder, closer.

A series of little parallel ridges, spines of alpine rock and scrub trees, angled down from the cabin toward the headwaters of Glacier Creek. I crossed one or two as I headed down to meet the approaching hikers. Finally Farah came into view a hundred meters down along one of the ridges. She was alone with Suze, carrying a large backpack as well as the child on her shoulders.

As we approached like two powerful magnets, the force of our unfamiliar closeness was staggering. Within reach now, Farah's face beamed vibrantly under her bedraggled hair and skewed wool cap. We embraced with all the muscular energy we could muster, for long, long moments, silent but for our breathing.

Finally words came, breathless and trembling.

I said to Farah, "You made it."

"Yes. I can't believe we're finally here, together."

"You came alone? What about Ron?"

"When I came by to pick him up, he said he couldn't come."

"Oh, Farah. You look exhausted."

Suze still sat above me on Farah's shoulders, bundled in her purple snowsuit. I picked her up into the air and then cuddled her joyfully, while still holding Farah.

"I walked some-a-way myself," she chirped.

"She sure did," Farah said. "For a long way, too. And she would have walked more, except she was so slow, I didn't want to take the time. We were late getting started, at Ron's. He took a long time deciding not to come."

"I was getting worried. We've been here over an hour."

"What time is it?"

"Four-fifteen."

"Oh--we're practically right on time, then. It's only three-fifteen, our time."

For all my figuring of logistics, I'd forgotten we would be meeting on the time-zone boundary; and so I'd worried for nothing.

Except that now Farah had more to say about the difficulty of the way up. The trail she'd been following petered out in the alpine, and she'd come by instinct the last half-hour or so in the rough direction of the pass. Coming up among the ridges on the west side, she lacked the clear line of sight that had guided us to the cabin from the east. So though she had actually reached the lower bowl of the pass, she lost her bearings and had to depend on voice contact to reach us at the cabin. Nevertheless, they had made it; that was all that seemed to matter now.

When we arrived at the cabin Farah exchanged brief greetings with Matt, unstrapped her pack, and immediately collapsed on one of the bunks. I helped Suze out

of her snowsuit and boots. As I did so she said in a thin, shy voice, "Will, I'mt someping a-eat."

"Okay, Suze, what would you like?"

"Someping from backpack."

I opened Farah's pack and found it crammed with extra warm clothes for two, bedding for three, food for a group, toys and books and art supplies for Suze, mail for me. Even my junk mail. I was astonished at the size of the load.

"Farah, you didn't have to bring all this stuff, did you?"

"I thought you'd want to see those new books you ordered."

"Yeah, but I could have waited! I mean, I appreciate it, but all the way up here . . . and the junk mail--"

"It doesn't weigh that much."

I held my tongue and sat beside her, putting my arm around her. She leaned her head against my shoulder. I could feel the weight of her exhaustion and relief. It was so good to see each other, to hold her again like this. Suze reminded me to gether some food. I found a muffin for her and sat back down beside Farah.

There would still be supper to attend to, news to exchange, Suze to entertain, and further acquaintance to be made with Matt. But now Farah and I wanted nothing more than to cuddle together under our bulky down comforter she'd brought along.

We did enjoy a taste of this long-awaited, close sweetness, when Matt graciously took his flute outside to serenade the mountains and left us to ourselves inside. Farah was so chilled from her trek that she kept her down coat on as we lay on the bunk together in tender embrace. But that didn't matter. We could at last lie still together, with commingled feelings of excitement, fatigue, accomplishment and good fortune. By the time Matt returned, Farah had almost drifted away into the mists of sleep.

After a supper of lentils and vegetables, rice cakes, fruit and mixed nuts, we gathered around the cabin's logbook, while a light rain fell outside. We learned that the shelter had withstood thirteen years of the clashing of weather systems at the top of this mountain range, where moist air traveling from the coast drops its last load of rain and snow before reaching the Rockies. Entries made in every month of the year recounted blizzards. We felt snug enough so far, though we had some reason to be apprehensive as we closed the logbook and prepared for bed.

Matt chose one of the top bunks. I made Suze's bed under his, while Farah piled our comforter on the other bottom bunk. Outside, the wind was picking up. We put more wood in the fire for the night and dove shivering into our beds.

Love was never so lovely as this, so patiently earned, and now so wonderfully extended within our short time together, so as to blanket the weeks apart, and those yet to come, with its soothing balm. Our hands played over the rediscovered terrain of our skin,

finding here the mountains and rivers and forests that lay all around us in the unseen night. The roar of our passion was muted by respect for Matt's close-by solitude, yet in the process it was transmuted into deeper frequencies, richer harmonies, more resounding exclamations of the heart.

The cabin walls shook with the buffeting of wind and rain from all directions, while thunder and lightning made a mounting attack on the darkness. Our bodies clung tightly together into the night, courting sleep. Somewhere in the realm between love and the void, we heard a crashing of wood outside. Farah's eyes popped open--I could feel the lashes against my cheek. Instantly I was alert to the arrival of a grizzly, come to claim some of the new food in its domain.

Or, I considered, maybe it was just the wind blowing some boards about. As the sounds subsided amid the general cracking of the elements, somehow we found our way into sleep, a long and dreamful sleep.

I was in a hallway, a long, cockeyed room like one in a carnival crazy house: with sloping floor, walls out of plumb, shadows painted at random along its indeterminate length. I walked slowly down (or was it up?) this narrow passage, noting the seven doors

I passed, all closed. At the end I came to a warped mirror. I didn't like what I saw there: seven more doors, and a wobbly me, stretching backward and forward forever. At the end of the hall where I thought I started, I found another mirror, like the first. There was no exit now, I decided, but through one of the doors.

But which one? They all looked the same. Did they lead to different rooms, a common "outside" . . . or to another hall, or halls, just like this one? I paced the length of that hall several times, deliberating. Nothing was changing: it was I who would have to choose. Yes, I wanted to get out. I had to get out. That much I knew. Why, I didn't know. But I would not stay in this oblong box.

So I chose the first door--that is, the closest to an end of the hall. By now I couldn't remember which end it was, but it hardly mattered, as far as I could tell.

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The morning light found Farah and me wrapped tightly in one another's arms. Suze still slept, as did Matt, in the bunks farther down on the cabin wall. As our thoughts awakened in the soft light and softening wind, our limbs came alive once again to the exquisite touch of each other's skin, so tender, so transparent with feeling. We breathed together, our blood coursing as one, our loins throbbing to a rapid, then a slowing tempo. We lay for a long time looking into each other's luminous eyes.

Suze finally stirred and came awake. Her little cooing noises rose up into the chill air and brought further stirring from Matt's bunk. Farah and I still lay in reverent silence together. Suze peeked her head around the partition between our bunks and then came crawling into bed with us. Our arms wrapped around each other in complete delight.

All too soon we plunged out of the covers and into cold clothes, amid cheery good mornings delivered with frosty breath. Matt and I briskly bustled about, making breakfast, while Farah dressed Suze and then started packing.

Breakfast was dried fruit, porridge, nuts, and leftover soup. We savored it as a feast. I knew from Farah's glowing silence that she still bathed with me in the wonder of our renewed connection. Matt and even Suze seemed also to be chewing in a reflective spirit, honoring the occasion.

Then there was time only to write our regards to the cabin and the mountains in the logbook, stuff our packs full once again and head off to our separate destinations. I accompanied Farah, with Suze on my shoulders, to the end of the top ridge where their descent would begin.

We stood there holding one another for many long, blissful moments in a gray, icy drizzle, saying good-bye, our wet cheeks pressed warmly together. With visibility no more than three feet, turning my family loose was like sending them off into the void. The final bliss of our parting now became painful. They vanished into the mists; and I trudged back to the cabin to begin my own descent on the other side of the mountain.

\*

As I entered the cabin door, I discovered with some horror that I was back in my oblong, misshapen hallway. Quickly I groped behind me to get back through the door; but it was shut now, and when I whirled to try it with all my strength, I found it locked.

Very well, then, I can accept what fate throws my way; I'll choose another--if one may be found still unlocked. I strode to the far end of the hallway--gave myself a crooked smile of assumed confidence--and tried the door there. It opened; and I can say that it was with some considerable misgiving that I entered, thinking that if this were indeed a different experience I was letting myself in for, it could hardly be an improvement on the one I'd found behind the first door. Except, of course, for the weather . . .

\*

I was naked under the elements, and it was not pleasant. My aching bladder told me I'd come out to pee, and my drenched shoulders shook to tell me I'd better hurry up with it. I did my part in soaking the earth and quickly bounded back up the steps, back inside the cabin door . . .

\*

Of course. Back home again, jiggedy-jig. Whoever was responsible for this cruel joke, I was not amused. The combination of lentils and fruit? I tossed and turned. Boards banged; the little room rocked from side to side--walls shifting, floorboards groaning. Invisible windows threw blackness back into itself. I considered getting up and going outside again, this time to investigate that infernal banging. But I couldn't even see the door in the dark, and besides . . .

Lightning flashed. The room reeled eerily. There was a door, visible for an instant. I almost awoke enough to make the effort. Then, there was a row of doors--at least three I could see to choose from.

I choose the middle door, and as I walked through it it shut behind me like a trap.

\*

Matt and I stood not five minutes down the mud-and-shale bank just below the pass, looking at the ground. The bearshit steamed in the cold morning mist, just at the point where the flowers began.

Our progress had come to a chilly halt at the fresh sign. Our eyes swept the landscape, near and far. No bears. (No door.) I wondered what this grizz had eaten, and how recently. It likely owned this mountain ridge, sniffing and browsing every inch of it, in time.

Which would be worse? was my paranoid query as I followed Matt's lead, creeping down the slope. For a bear to kill Farah and Suze, leaving me without them? Or for the bear to snap me in half like so much dry spaghetti--leaving them to grieve? Maybe, I dared to hope, our love so fresh and strong would keep the bear away . . .

But no. The sound was just below us. In the boulder slide, large rocks knocking together--with upwards of a thousand pounds of grizzly tipping the balance. We saw the animal at the same time as it turned its head up to us; it snorted with a loud HWMFF.

Sweat broke out on my neck. Matt gaped up at me with an instantaneous look of fright. It was the first time I'd seen anything but experienced confidence in him. He was experienced, all right; and something about that bear's behavior . . . but then Matt's eyes softened with what I perceived as the gentle acceptance of the saint.

The bear charged. It leaped up the hill, practically flying with its enormous bulk over the boulders and onto the adjoining mud-and-shale slide. Matt was closest. He knew, I say, about bears. He instantly fell to the ground, clutching his head in his curled arms and squeezing his knees up against his vulnerable belly.

Ursus horribilis pounced on him in an instant, growling and whoofing, cuffing him back and forth with its huge paws. The stiletto-like claws tore Matt's vest to ribbons. The escaping down floated around them both like a cloud of angels(I thought as I stood watching,paralyzed, transfixed)--or fairies, or mosquitoes . . .

This flurry seemed to amuse, then to infuriate the bear. It first sat back on its haunches, waiting for the feather storm to subside (and while doing so, stealing a quick look at me, frozen up the bank twenty human paces away). Then with the quickness of a cat, or a rattlesnake, the bear's muzzle clamped shut on Matt's neck. The severed jugular spouted all over the cursed place; Matt's poor waste of a body was left to flop about like a beached fish.

The bear stepped back until the death throes were complete; then it nosed forward to lap up a taste of the blood. Faint from the shock of what I had just witnessed, and what I feared was in store for me, I lay on the ground still immobilized, knowing there was nothing I could do. No more choices, no more plans. Nothing more to worry about going wrong, on this so-called adventure. No more rendezvous with Farah and Suze, nor Harris and the gang, nor anyone but Dr. D.

Then the beast, already bored with its lifeless prey, turned its glittering eyes and red mouth my way.

I awoke with a start, my throat constricted with a strangled cry from deep within the darkness. It was just getting light in the room.

All right, I thought to myself. It's all right; I didn't even come back here through any goddamned door--at least, not that I remember.

Farah may have been still asleep, but I hugged her so tightly she woke up, turned to face me and smiled. Then I leaned out of bed to peek at Suze. She lay neatly tucked in her bed, peaceful as an angel . . . her rosebud mouth relaxed, her eyelashes so delicate as they lightly lay on her downy, cream-colored cheeks. Then quite suddenly her eyes opened, and blinked several times.

"I have a bad dream."

"Oh," I said. I'm sorry to hear that. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No-ey. Was too scary. Will, we are gonna go home, today?"

"Yes. Except, Suze, you know what?"

"What?"

"You and Farah are going down one side of the mountain, and Matt and I are going down the other."

"Oh, but . . .then I want to go treepranting wif you."

"That would be nice, Suze, but you can't. I need to make lots of money so we can buy things we need, like food for you, and gas for the truck."

"Oh . . ."

"Besides, you'll be with Farah."

"Yeah," she said, with a strange little darkness crossing her brow. "But Will, Farah might miss you, too."

"Yes, I said. "And I'll miss Farah, and you too."

Then we had breakfast to fix, and backpacks to stuff; jobs to return to. Before I knew it our little vacation had come to an end, and I was following Farah and poor little Suze out the cabin door . . .

\*

The night was long and wild. The wind carried me along in the clouds. There were deer dancing in the stars, that I couldn't see. They peeked their heads down through the clouds to say hello, then went back to their dancing.

Bears were everywhere, looking for food, but also hiding behind corners, rocks, low clumps of trees. I thought this was where, in the wintertime, Santa Claus lived.

When it got light in the morning the deer rode away on the stars and the bears all disappeared and I woke up. Farah and Will woke up, too. And Matt. They got me dressed and we ate porridge and soup and nuts. Soup for breakfast! Leftovers, goo-guk. They let me have figs to eat when we started to walk down the mountain. I was cold.

There was snow on the ground. I was wearing my purple snowsuit but it was raining in the sky and my snowsuit got all wet. My face was wet like tears all over it--but I didn't cry.

Farah carried me a long, long way. She said we were walking in the clouds. Just like an airplane, or geese. But an airplane doesn't walk, silly. That's what I told her. Just people. And geese do, too. But in the clouds, they fly, she said.

I flapped my arms. We flew down the mountain. I was cold and wanted to go to sleep in the black truck. Farah was tired and wanted me to walk. I was too tired. I cried when she put me down. We rested and ate some nuts, that I held in my hand. But I dropped some, my fingers were so cold.

The bears could eat them, I thought.

Do bears eat people?

Farah said not usually. I wanted to go back up on her shoulders.

We finally got to the black truck. I woke up when Farah strapped me in my kid-seat. I looked out the window and the bears and the deer were saying good-bye. But I didn't wave. I didn't want them to see my eyes.

Then we drove away, down the bumpy road. Va, va; ya, ya, ya. I was hungry again, but Farah said I would have to wait. I started to complain, and Farah said stop complaining, she had to drive; but I was so hungry, and still cold, and I started to cry. Then we were going so slow, I thought we would stop and she would feed me.

Farah said she was just trying to be careful; I had to wait. I stopped crying and said blow my nose, Farah.

Just wait, she said, mad at me. I don't know why she got so mad at me. Then--

Then the truck fell over. And over, and over and over, down the hill we fell off the road, down the hill and the truck was flying, like an airplane but upside down, and it was quiet like in the clouds.

Then we bumped down so hard! And the roof was all crunched in, and I could crying see that Farah's head was broken and I screamed--

\*

I lost it--thanks to those strings pulled by the watchful mind. The good strings, and the not so good. I'm glad that the curtains are on auto-drop when the scene goes to absolute hell.

Or was it I who got the drop, through some infernal trap door that left me, far from salvation, lost in the center of a maze? What I saw was simple enough: an oblong box, irregular of construction--or misshapen from weathering, or warped by some trick played by the conspiracy of eye and mind, mirror and eye, mirror and mirror . . .

Still the row of doors, on either side. I couldn't remember which I'd tried. So I tried them all, turning the knobs to see which I might yet open. Just to get my options

clear. So I could put all my rational faculties to best use.

Through each cracked-open door, I heard a distant sound of hollow laughter, and the skin crawled briefly up my back. Four doors locked. Could I assume these represented my choices thus far? I could assume nothing. But that was my hypothesis, for better or worse. And so I had but three remaining doors to try. I was beginning to wonder if there was any point to guesswork, or if this was a setup to run me through the mill before the final door. And then--what?

I blindly grabbed the nearest knob and it came off in my hand. In a rage I flung it at the mirror at the far end of the hall, where it created a shattering explosion of shards. One small but deeply-seated sliver I had to remove from my own wrist. And then, with blood on my hands, I boldly marched through the swaying door without so much as a peek through the doorknob's empty hole.

\*

Morning dawned through misty, drizzling sleet. Visibility, if you chose to call it that, was practically nil as we got up and peered out the cabin windows.

We dressed for wet weather, packed up the rest of our things, and sat down to a hearty breakfast, mulling over the prospects before us. It did not look good. If Farah had been disoriented in clearer weather on the way up, what would it be like now?

Matt had a suggestion. "Maybe, Willie, you could go partway down with them, until Farah got started on the trail. Or I could come too if you want, and help with the load . . ."

Good basic idea, I thought; but there were other factors to consider. I looked at my watch. "Gee, I don't know. Would we have enough time left to get to Panorama for our four-thirty phone call? If we miss the guy in the company office, we won't know where the new camp is, and we miss work tomorrow. Also, isn't Harris going to send help looking for us if we don't show up tonight?"

"They might start worrying. But really, it shouldn't take us more than two hours to get to the road, then another hour's walk to the truck."

"Okay," I said. "Let's say five hours to Panorama, to be safe. It's after nine now. If we left right away that would give us no more than an hour to go down with them on their side, another hour to come back here. And we still have to get on coats, and boots, and Suze's things . . ."

Farah spoke up now. "I think I'll be fine. I made it okay carrying everything uphill. Maybe, Will, you could walk down with us just to where we met you on our way up."

Somehow I knew that Farah's self-reliance would assert itself here. I readily agreed to this plan. Now I could be helpful to her (and we could say our little family

farewell alone together out in the wild and whirling elements) without jeopardizing my schedule.

"I'll stay and finish cleaning up," said Matt, deferring to our decision. "Then we'll be ready to go when you get back."

Ten minutes out of the cabin, we were all three soaking wet. Farah's down coat and Suze's polyester were slick with the freezing rain; Farah's hair streamed out from under the edges of her soggy wool hat; and both their faces gleamed with the shiny glow of the exercise and the glaze of sleet. We couldn't see very much at all: traces of footprints here and there in the patchy snow along the ridged rock; white air.

We followed our noses some ten minutes further, and then I turned the backpack over to Farah. She looked around uncertainly, trying vainly to recognize some landmark or sign of her passage the day before. We were now past any leftover footprints, and visibility remained negligible. I tried to offer some final guidance before turning them loose.

"We know Bastille's over that way. So down there a little farther to the right, that deep draw goes down toward Glacier Creek, and then your trail must be somewhere farther right, pretty much downhill from here."

"Yeah, I guess so. But it comes straight up the hill a long way from where it follows the contour. If I don't find where it starts up high, I'm not likely to find it until way down below."

"Well," I persisted, conscious of time ticking away, "we lost the trail on our side and just bushwhacked uphill. And I guess we'll do the same on the way down. If you just head straight down you're bound to end up on the trail eventually--or if not, you'll come out on the road, or down to Glacier Creek itself. Either way you'll know where you are."

"That's true . . ." Farah still seemed uncertain. "And I did tell Ron that if I wasn't back by seven he was to come out looking for me." She looked intently into the white haze. "This ridge here looks kind of familiar," she ventured, putting on a bright face.

"Are you sure you'll be okay, now? I could still come down with you part way, a little more, if I would be any help--"

But by now I already knew that her mind was made up.

"No, that's okay. We'll be all right, thanks."

We stood and held each other close, our cool cheeks firmly pressed together against the sleet, for a long moment meant to last until another reunion--another time and place, home.

I left them and turned back up the ridge to the cabin. When I looked back, Farah and Suze were gone into the clouds below.

I had a strange feeling of uneasy hesitation as I opened the cabin door--was it a premonition of some disaster, a bad decision, a wrong turn on the forked road of this fragile labyrinth we call life? I turned and gazed off into the vague and formless western sky. Was it too late to go back and help them find the trail? My hand still clutched the latch of the cabin door. Yes, too late. I would go on ahead, and trust that it would be all right in the end.

The packs stood ready by the bunks, and Matt was putting plates and bowls away. I thanked him for doing the dishes.

"Oh, no problem," he said. "How'd it go? Did you manage to find the trail?"

"Oh, no problem," I wished I could say. Maybe, I thought, Matt should have come along with us after all. I told him the truth. "Not exactly. But I think we got to the right general area. Farah said it looked familiar."

Matt looked somewhat dubious, and concerned. He didn't know what to say. I told him what I'd told Farah, that if necessary she could head straight downhill.

"Yeah, that makes sense," he said, nodding slightly. "I guess so, anyway. If you thought they were going to be okay . . ." His voice trailed off, and his eyes fell to the floor. He turned to the packs. "Okay, I guess we'd better get going ourselves then, eh?"

Within minutes down the east side from the pass, the air was clearer and drier. Evidently the foul weather was expending itself against the western bulwark of the pass

and the adjoining ridges that formed the height of land along the spine of the Purcell cordillera.

Matt commented about Farah's strength and courage; I bathed in the glow of appreciation and respect for her. And I hoped that the trip had been worth the effort for Matt, who hadn't enjoyed quite the rewards I had.

The ground was still slick and slippery. But once we'd picked our way down the mud-and-shale slope just below the pass, we could walk in fairly full stride.

We reached the truck with time to spare, and drove on past Panorama into Invermere. It was still only four o'clock when we phoned the company office for directions to the new camp location. Then I phoned Farah.

There was no answer. Still perhaps too early. Her descent was about the same distance as ours, with a similar drive to get home from the foot of the trail. But she was no doubt slower with her doubly-heavy load.

Matt and I decided to stay for an early but much-needed supper in Invermere. I was worried. We talked about what we could have done but didn't--because I was so concerned about earning an extra day's wages. Wagering two lives, my life, for a hundred dollars . . . We agreed that Farah had likely had trouble finding the trail, and Matt reminded me of the obvious--that she would have taken extra time to find it.

Still, I hardly tasted my lasagne. Matt ate fish and chips with similar disinterest. He was concerned about hypothermia if they strayed across the mountainside too long,

especially under the threat of coming darkness. I phoned again right after supper. Still no answer.

Next stop was Kimberley, two and a half hours away on the highway toward Cranbrook. The rest of the crew had ended up "camping" at a ski-lodge called the Purcell Condo. Plans had changed slightly. No more propane showers that ran fire-and-ice; now we could relax after work with whirlpool hot-tubs, color TV . . . There was a pay phone in the lobby.

Matt went to find Harris to check in with him. I phoned home again and once more got no answer. It was after eight o'clock; it would be dark in another hour. Surely, I thought, Farah should have been back home by six or seven. Maybe she stopped at Ron's on the way home and got invited for supper.

I phoned Ron's place. No answer there, either. So I tried Farah's sister and close neighbor, Janet. She told me Farah hadn't been heard from, and that Ron had phoned a half-hour ago to say he was organizing a search party. They would go up right away. By now they had probably left.

I said I'd drive on to meet them and join the search. Sandra started to tell me not to worry. My voice started to choke as I thanked her and quickly hung up.

Matt had vanished down the faceless corridors, the neat rows of nameless doors standing innocently at attention (one of them reserved for me). I knew Matt would be

concerned and would likely want to come with me, but I wasn't about to start knocking on doors to look for him now. I was out the big glass doors of the lobby and on the road. Let them figure out where I'd gone.

As I stopped in town first for gas and a thermos of coffee, I considered the futility of an after-dark search. Yet something had to be done; Farah and Suze couldn't be left out there in weather like that. If they were conscious and lost, the search party might locate them by voice. Yes, it was definitely worth trying, in nighttime hours that might otherwise see them go over into irreversible darkness.

I barreled down the highway, trying to imagine what could have happened. I blamed myself, of course, because it would have been so easy to go down with them to the trail. And now? Maybe Farah had turned an ankle and just needed to sit tight and stay warm until help arrived. Or maybe a bear--I put that thought out of my mind. No, she must have simply lost her bearings and wandered . . . through the sleet and fog, both their coats soaking through to the skin, Suze stoic with the cold rain streaming down her cheeks as the tears would if she hadn't been holding them back, in her blind trust in Farah to lead them back to the truck and home.

I pictured Farah trying, with increasing desperation, to guess which way to go, whether to veer left or right. If she headed too far left, she stood the chance of bypassing the rise of the trail altogether and ending up in the untracked vastness beneath the

glaciers. So probably she would angle to the right. But that way she might also miss the upper trail and would end up instead high above its lower contour, separated from it by hundreds of feet of steep, slippery brush. So she'd have to backtrack, and by then she'd be exhausted from trying to keep her footing on the alder stems that covered the ground like millions of greased rails--not to mention the sixty pounds of load taking its toll on her shoulders, leg, back, spirit . . . Suze's patience meanwhile would have surely worn thin and given way to moans and whimpers, at the least. If she had considered making the child walk, now Farah would realize that under such conditions, that would be even worse than carrying her.

So she would perhaps consider an attempt to return to the cabin. Her pride and determination to forge ahead would be a force against such an option--as would the prospect of hiking back uphill still lost, ever more fatigued, with darkness fast approaching.

In fact the night was fully upon us by now, and for a while on the road my mind was as blank and black as sky and coffee coursing toward dawn. It was three-thirty when I hit the turnoff to home, and with impulsive hope I decided to drive in as far as Ron's house to see if they were back. But his car was gone, and the house, as I peeked and called inside the front door, empty.

Back on the road up to Glacier Creek, my heart sank to a new and frightening depth. I could envision it all now: the trucks parked at the bottom of the trail; heading up in the early light, suddenly alert and energetic, shouting as I go. The blinding glare of fresh snow on the ground. An answering shout, muffled by snow and distance, way off to the left, off the trail that continues up and to the right. Scrambling across the contour, through the upper reaches of alder, the patches of juniper shrub and walls of slick shale. The repeated calls coming at me from a slightly higher elevation as I cross.

"We found her," I finally hear--and the way I hear it, it doesn't sound encouraging.

Then, I see Ron bent over Farah's still form, blowing air into her mouth. Useless, mouth.

Suze, somewhere else, downhill. Cold, useless.

How? (Why is too painful, full of me.) How?

Sometime later, entering my empty house at home, my living tomb, I see in the darkness: Farah, trembling with exhaustion, hefting Suze off her shoulders and down onto the ground. The child waiting while the backpack is discarded. A startled cry and Farah turning to see our daughter rolling down the hill like a tumbleweed.

A scream from Farah--Suze is strangely silent now, still rolling away out of sight through the wet alder. Farah jumps up, slips back to the ground and scrambles on her stomach, knees and elbows, grappling holds with numb hands on numbing roots . . .

Her foot catches on a root and she, too, tumbles head over heels, but her head comes down on the first roll against a large, round rock.

When she wakes up the rain has stopped. Suze is gone. Farah can't move, but realizes, gradually, that that's okay. Then she feels a breath on her neck and turns to find Suze, warm and dry as a newly bathed and powdered babe, snuggling in her original nakedness up to her own naked body: and the two of them lie in the spring flowers, the sunshine relaxing their pale, supple flesh into one, with the milk and breath and blood flowing between them again as mother and child.

\*

Now I see; this is my house. I've tried all the doors but two. All right, I've seen it all. What can be worse? I walk like a condemned man through the next to last doorway, noticing at the last moment that the door beside it is cracked and weathered, and wears a handle instead of a knob; but that's all right, one circle of hell's as much damned fun as the next.

\*

It was a fearful night. As morning dawned through thick fog, sporadic gusts of

wind still blew scattered rain against the roof and walls. When I finally got up and went outside to pee, I shivered in the icy drizzle on my hair and bare arms and shuddered back inside as quickly as I could.

Farah was sitting up looking out the window. "I don't know how I'm going to find the trail like this."

"What, naked? You'd better dress warmly, then." I hurried back onto the bunk and draped my arms around her.

"No, silly . . ." She turned her head and smiled briefly, brushing a kiss against my shoulder. ". . . I'm serious. I mean, it was hard enough to follow the trail on the way up when I could see. This is ridiculous."

I had to agree. Meanwhile Matthad awakened too, and poked his head down from his bunk. "Good morning--such as it is."

"What do you think?" I asked him.

"Well, it looks like a mess out there all right. But it's likely to be clearer as we get farther down."

"What about Farah's trail, at the beginning?"

"I don't know. Maybe we should go with her till we spot the trail."

"Yeah," I readily agreed. I gave Farah a little squeeze with my long, bare arms; she still held the bedclothes in front of her. "And if Matt and I left our packs back at the cabin, we could help you carry Suze and your backpack at least part of the way down."

Farah was still dubious. "What if you guys got lost on the way back? You wouldn't even have your packs."

We considered the problem of timing, to make it down the east side for our four-thirty phone call. It seemed as if it could work, if all went well.

Farah turned to the window again. "It's snowing."

It was: large, soft flakes streaming down suddenly in a spontaneous blizzard.

I quickened the pace: "We should eat and run, then, if we're going ahead with our plan, before it gets too bad out there."

"Yeah," Suze chimed in. "Eat and run!"

By the time Matt returned from washing dishes at the pond, he could report that the fresh snow was an inch deep. He couldn't see the cabin from the pond and could barely follow his own tracks back.

When Farah heard that she stopped packing. "Goodness. I don't know about this. With all that snow on the trail, now, maybe we should wait. It's bound to melt . . ." She looked unhelpfully out the window again.

"Or get deeper," I added. "We should decide pretty quick if we're going at all."

Again we tossed around our options, the jobs to return to, the people waiting for us below on both sides of the pass. The idea of a search party (or two), mobilized into action on our behalf while we sat up there deliberating, made me wince. Not to mention

a day's wages lost. But outside, the snow fell faster and faster. It was almost a relief to watch it happening, making the decision clearer.

"We've got to think about first things first," I said to Farah finally. "Let's wait. It might just blow over."

Matt nodded. "I think that's a good idea."

Farah let out a loud sigh. "All right." It wasn't her usual style to let caution hold her back, but in this case her motherly intuition seemed to have gained the upper hand. She looked at Suze, who had been silently soaking it all in like a sponge. "Suze, we can unpack all your toys and books and crayons and coloring books after all. We're going to stay here for a while until the snow stops and we can see where we're going."

The snow continued to fall. We read books, drank tea and cocoa, told our life histories, philosophized about the ecumenical movement. Suze colored and played quietly, listening. Before the day was done we'd read all her books to her half a dozen times; outside the snow was a foot deep. There was no sign of clearing as darkness fell.

Our food supplies were running thin. Suze had eaten the last rice cake in mid-afternoon. The soup and porridge were gone. We still had a handful of nuts and dried fruit left, that we'd been hoping to save for the hike down. The cupboard shelves had a little rice, maybe a cup. There was powdered milk, some more of the crusty old cocoa, a can of ox-tail soup. We decided on soup and rice for supper, with our trail food and

cocoa scheduled for the next morning.

We ate in moody reflection of our fate that evening. The snowfall was a bit lighter, I thought, as I trudged out to the pond to wash dishes. But I couldn't say for sure.

Farah and I colored with Suze while Matt occupied himself with the logbook. When darkness fell we all crawled into our bunks once again. Matt was still absorbed in reading the logbook and took it to bed with a candle. Farah and I did not make love this night--we simply held each other close and still, until our bodies softened as one into sleep. Outside, the snow fell down and down, thicker and faster in the chill of the night.

\*

Back in the box. I sat tight, crosslegged on the slanting hallway floor. It was a sit-down strike. I refused to go through any doors. Maybe, I thought (with the taste of sour grapes in my mouth) they'll all be locked now anyway. But I won't give them the satisfaction. Not that they, the stupid doors care. They are only the middlemen, the arch observers as I pass through them, or pass them by. Let them wait, now, and see what happens.

\*

When the next day came, the weather had not let up. I awoke with the queasy feeling that we'd made a mistake in staying here, cooped up in this little box.

The cabin was still shrouded in thick fog; but there was one positive sign--the snow was coming down wetter. If we could just get down from the higher elevation, we'd be home free. If not, there would certainly be a search party, at least from the Argenta side, arriving soon. We figured it was safe to eat up the last of our nuts and dried fruit, along with the last of the cocoa and powdered milk, for breakfast.

There wasn't much. We sat on our bunks eating silently. When that was gone, we found that our certainty too was eaten away. The popular subject of our fate was up for discussion again.

Farah was still cautious; now I was all for trying to get her and Suze started down on that trail. "What do you think?" I asked Matt.

"I think we should just stoke up this stove," he said, getting up to do just that, "and sit tight until this weather clears a bit. It's bound to change before too long, I bet by this afternoon. Then if no one's arrived from below yet, we could head down to find the trail, like you say."

"That would leave us too short of time for going down our side today, wouldn't it?"

"Depends. We might still have time. If it was before four or five, say, we'd be okay."

The stove roared now. We all edged a bit closer. Farah finally stood up and stationed herself next to the stove, warming her back.

"That sounds like a good plan to me," she said after some deliberation.

"Yeah, okay," I agreed.

"Oh, but I'm hungry," said Suze. "Farah I want someping a-eat."

Farah twisted uncomfortably, looking as if she wished she hadn't heard that.

"You'll have to wait, Suze. We'll go home later today, and you can have whatever you want to eat when we get home."

"And Suze, you just had breakfast," I added. "Besides, that was the last of our food."

"Oh, but how long Will it be? I can't wait that long. I need someping a-wait. I need someping nowww." And she began to cry.

I offered to read her a favorite book, *The Three Little Pigs*. She forgot her hunger momentarily. Three books later, I needed a break, something to relieve my own boredom, to take my mind off my own hunger.

"Where's that logbook?" I asked Matt.

"It's still up by my bunk, on the windowsill," he told me. "Do you want me to get it down for you?"

"No, that's okay, I'll get it."

The little windowsill on the end wall of the cabin was beyond my reach, so I hefted myself up to the bunk, resting my knees there while I found the logbook. Then I jumped down onto the floor.

My right leg crunched through the thin plywood flooring, in a place I should have remembered was less than solid. I yelled in agony, and in distress at my stupidity. The left leg had held, over a joist; the right foot had twisted, half-catching the joist on its way through. It now felt quite broken, dangling in cold air.

Matt and Farah helped me out of the hole and examined the leg as I lay groaning on the floor with the stabbing pain. The foot was skewed at an unnatural angle, already purple and swollen.

Suze was more upset than anyone; I soothed us both by holding her against my chest as I lay there on the floor. When her panicked cries had quieted down to a soft, plaintive whimpering, Matt said he thought I should have a splint.

I didn't relish the prospect of forcing the bone straight again. But without really considering the alternative, I asked Matt, "Is it really necessary?"

"You'd be better off with it. With your leg loose it would be too easy for the broken bone to tear through the skin. A splint will keep it stable. It may even start it healing properly."

"What will we need?" Farah asked him. "A board, some strips of cloth?"

"Yeah," said Matt, "actually a couple of boards, and some padding; I'll see what I can find outside."

Suze was now fascinated with the preparations. I could only think of the pain, and the pain to come. When the plank ends, strips of a T-shirt, and handfuls of melting moss were gathered at my feet, Matt bent to do his duty. Farah, holding Suze, knelt close beside me.

"This is probably going to hurt," Matt didn't need to say. I squeezed Farah's hand. He pulled gently, pushed slightly. Nothing happened; I lived. He tried again, harder, and this time I thought I was going to die. One attempt more, and bone cleared bone, sending a bolt of lightning pain straight through my head. But my ankle was almost straight. "I think that's going to have to do for now," my doctor decreed, and with Farah's help, he proceeded to wrap up half my leg, cushioned with moss pads, between the boards.

I managed to say, in a hoarse whisper, "Thanks, Matt."

"Oh," he shrugged. "You're welcome. You know, I've never done that before, except on a dummy in a first-aid course years ago. It's not the same."

"No."

Farah bent closer and brushed her cheek against my suffering face. Her tears started flowing freely. I put my arms around her and let my own tears come. Then Suze, of course, also started crying, and Farah had to laugh and turn her attention to comforting the child.

"Are you ready to get off that hard floor, yet?" Matt asked. "You don't need a body splint, you know."

They helped me onto the lower bunk where Suze had slept. And then it was time to decide in earnest what to do. It did seem that the snowstorm might be on its way out. The sky was somewhat brighter than before . . .

Farah and Suze headed down together to get help; it seemed a good bet that they'd meet up with a rescue party on their way. Matt and I spent the rest of the day waiting, helplessly waiting. The pain in my leg was unbearable, but I had to bear it anyway. We hadn't even any tea left for Matt to nurse me with, never mind brandy, aspirin, morphine--anything to muffle the ringing, throbbing pain.

He tried to comfort me with thoughts of home, the approaching rescue, my deliverance from the hells of treeplanting. He tried to divert us from our boredom and nagging, ever-present hunger with talk about baseball, politics and the downsliding economy. Farah hadn't returned, so she must have found the trail. Unless she'd got lost. Or had got down to the bottom and then had driven off the road. Or some other nameless possibility. The question remained: Where was that goddamned search party?

Supper came and went, providing no supper. I tried to read myself to sleep, without success.

The night was a dark and hostile place whose walls leaned in and threatened to crush me, then fell back away so my body could lay open to cold, penetrating points of starlight.

In the morning we saw patches of blue sky beyond the billowing clouds of mist that still swept over the mountains. We felt certain it would be our last day here. But the clouds hung on, and by noon, when no help had arrived, Matt's patience had run out.

He'd just brought in a fresh load of firewood and dumped it in the box beside the stove, and now he stood between me and the door, with the door still left open. His dark eyes sagged and his mouth was drawn down into his shaggy, black beard.

"Will, I hate to suggest this, but what would you think about the idea of me going down on the east side to try to get help?"

I'd be up here alone . . . with only the bears for company . . . But I, too, was tired of waiting.

"You mean take my truck and go to phone somewhere?"

"Yeah. I'll get you a ride on a helicopter. That would be fun, eh?"

A wall of fog moved across the door, sucking Matt's words out with it. The cold air swept in.

"Sure. Anything. Yeah, go ahead, Matt. Hey, close that door, Will you? Yeah, it's a good idea. We've got to do something. We can't just rot away here waiting forever. I don't know what's happened at Farah's end."

I stared at the ceiling, trying grimly not to think about it.

"Will," Matt said. "I'm sure they're okay. The fog must be still too thick . . ." he faltered, "down there, for the others to follow the trail up. It would've been easier for her on the way down."

I wasn't convinced. But it didn't much matter what either of us thought.

"Yeah, you're right. Go ahead then. I'll manage."

Matt stood silently debating for a moment--still framed by the door, now closed.

"Really," I told him. "I think you should go."

"No, I was just wondering," he said, "whether to take my pack or not. It's got my climbing gear, and extra clothes in it--"

"Don't worry about it. Go ahead and take it, just in case. I know you're not going to desert me up here. You don't need to leave a deposit."

Matt snorted a laugh of appreciation. "Yup. Right. I'll take it, then."

He packed up in short order. A brief hug around my shoulders, and he straightened up to leave. Then he thought of something. He carried the half-full bucket of water from the counter, got a cup to go with it and set them on the floor next to my

bunk. Then he took the roasting pan I'd been using as a chamberpot out the door, brought it back in, empty, and set it down on the floor beside the bucket.

"There," he said. And there's plenty of firewood. The stove's full, so you may not even have to drag yourself out of bed. Do you think you can manage okay, now? I'll be back in a jiffy. Anchovies and double cheese?"

"Uh, hold the anchovies, thanks. Yeah, I'll manage."

"Bye, Will."

"Take care."

My pain had become rather dull, but we kept each other company just the same. I counted the hours till salvation. Matt left at close to one o'clock. By three he should have been striding with his long, strong legs down the road. I ticked away the minutes approaching four o'clock, the time I safely estimated as the hour of Matt's arrival at the truck.

My heart beat faster as I looked at my watch, riding with the imperceptible sweep of the long hand to the top of the hour. Two o'clock. Matt would be opening the door of the truck, throwing his pack into the passenger's seat, climbing in, reaching for the key--  
--the key that was still in my pocket.

\*

No doors left unopened. I tried them all again, and all were locked--and just as well, but for that first one. I counted in the dim light, three on each side. But no: there had been seven. And now . . . I checked again: up one side of the hall (two locked knobs and a frozen latch), down the other (three locked knobs). Odd, but who was I to try to figure it out. The thing was now, to get myself out. Or was this my final trial, the acceptance of fate closed forever from further possibility--my final home in an oblong box, with no exit.

I was tired. I lay down, looking up at the ceiling, the too-close ceiling, imagining all the billions upon billions of stars out there somewhere, somewhere. I had seen them once; and once (one life), I guessed, was enough.

iii

Morning light grew slowly from the drizzling fog outside, through cabin windows misty white as a cocoon. Farah and I were still wrapped tightly in each other's arms,

under our cozy quilt. Suze still slept snug in her bed, and Matt stirred slightly from his upper bunk.

It remained to be seen how we would fare going back, today. Especially difficult would be Farah's descent in search of an unmarked trail. But we managed to let such worries sleep as we lingered long in bed, watching our breath hover in the air, enjoying the peace of the special time and place. I was unconscious of the dreams I'd had; I was only aware of Farah warmly breathing beside me, and I savored to the last that exquisite touch of our bodies together. Suze moved in soon enough to make it a threesome--a crowd, actually, but idyllic in its own way. Then Matt bent his tousled head down from his bunk to greet us with a hoarse but cheery "Good morning."

"Morning," said Farah.

"Hi--hi--hi," was Suze's high-pitched, staccato salutation.

"Did you sleep well?" I asked.

"Not too bad," Matt responded, "after that crashing of wood outside. I thought it might be a bear. Did you hear it?"

"Yes," I said, "and I thought of going out to see what it was, but decided I'd be better off behind that cabin door." It was only as I said this that I remembered my dreams.

Not that my intimations of disaster were enough to deter me from my selfish desire to stick to the prearranged itinerary. For Farah's part, though she confessed to some uncertainty about finding her way in the icy gloom, she was Willing enough to make a go of it.

"If you guys made it up okay on your side without any trail at all, then I should be all right finding my way down." She said this with an air of justification, so that I wasn't sure if she believed it. I wondered how much her Willingness to go ahead was a sacrifice on her part for the sake of my schedule.

Whatever the wisdom of our parting there among the trackless ridges at the base of the pass, Farah and Suze set off on their way down the west slope, and I trudged back up to the cabin. Matt and I were shortly hotfooting it down the east slope, leaving most of the foul weather behind. I felt, with some smug comfort, the truck keys in my pocket as we headed down. With each step onto rock, mud, ice or heather, I was careful to aim for a stable footing, aware that one false step and a twisted ankle could leave me stranded. Yet my leaps and bounds all managed to fall into place; and it took only an hour for us to reach the bottom.

Once on the road, we had another hour's walk to the truck, during which I continued to nurse, in the back of my mind, second thoughts about my headstrong decision to let Farah and Suze go unguided down the western slope. I told Matt about my soul-wrenching dreams. He was reminded of a nightmare of his own, in which we had

capsized the truck in the middle of a gigantic washout, and nearly drowned before we could crawl out to safety.

We marveled at the psychic potency of the night's electrical storm, and then our conversation turned to lofty theories about the world ecumenical movement. We paused to greet a Stellar's jay who perched beside us atop a precipitous drop to the gorge below. Matt said it was a good omen.

The truck, we knew, was parked just around the next bend in the road, across the last washout. But the runoff had swollen to a considerably greater depth and force after the overnight rain. So we chose to cross this time with the aid of a rope sling which we set up to ferry our packs across.

With dry clothes waiting in the truck, we decided to keep our boots and pants on as we waded into the waist-deep, icy current. Luckily our poplar bannister was still there for us to hang onto as we fought the turbulence on the way across.

We came to the truck with final sighs of relief, briskly changed and jumped in the cab. But around the next bend in the road, we were forced to wonder where we'd taken a wrong turn. There was another major washout where the previous day, harmless inches of water had trickled over the road. It was nearly as wide and deep as the one we'd just waded through. Could we have somehow bypassed the real road? No, the truth remained: this was a brand-new washout, created overnight by the combined deluge of the

storm and the melting snows. Logs that had formed a foundation for the roadbed were strewn about in the water, among the large rocks downstream, like so many pick-up sticks.

We got out of the truck, gaping in disbelief. The creek that roared in front of us was a good ten feet across and two feet deep, and full of boulders in such irregular array that, except for the old logs, and the road which plunged abruptly into the torrent on either side, one would never know that a road had ever crossed there.

There was little chance of making it across now. We paced back and forth along the rocky bank. Our minds raced from one unreasonable solution to another.

We could go for the crossing, hoping for freakish luck to bounce us from boulder to boulder and over to the other side. If we didn't make it, well . . . the truck could sit there in the creek until we got a tow truck up here.

But it would be a thirty-kilometer walk to Panorama, and it was already mid-afternoon. If we phoned from there for a tow truck, it might not make it past the other swollen washouts farther along the road; it would, however, coming all the way from Invermere, be sure to cost plenty--maybe close to the value of my stranded truck.

So maybe I could just ditch the ill-fated Ford--at least temporarily. Then I'd have to somehow make it through the rest of the planting season without a truck (and all my gear for camping and planting, the variety of clothes for weather ranging from snow to

burning heat, the spare boots, shovels, sleeping bags, tent . . .); and I could plan to return later in the summer with the Dodge to pull it out--what was left of it by then.

We desperately plumbed our reserves of luck and surveyed the possible angles of an alternative crossing. Twenty feet upstream the creek was wider and somewhat shallower, though still it swelled with a wild force that made the prospects of success seem madly slim. The only hope might be to build up the deepest holes in the creekbed there with fresh layers of rock. The current was strong enough to make loose boulders roll, however; so a log dam, supported by a row of well-placed rocks, would have to be installed first. It just might work, we began to think. I observed that we would also have to mine the approaches on both sides for the large rocks and log-ends that otherwise prevented access to and from the existing road. That operation would provide plenty of fill right at hand by the stream.

It was still a gamble, and it would take hours. If we invested our afternoon in such work and then stranded the truck in midstream, we'd be left without enough daylight, energy or food for the walk to Panorama. Either way, botching it like that, or forgetting the whole thing and walking now, we'd be faced with a six-hour walk. Unless the gamble worked.

"So, what do you think?" I asked Matt.

"It's your truck."

"Oh, hell," I said, with a shrug of my shoulders. "Let's go for it."

We spent the next three hours hardly talking, just working doggedly to throw and drop and nudge rock after rock into place, building up the stream bed, wading and digging, smoothing and widening the approaches.

At last the job was done well enough--we hoped. The water still rushed over the rocks about a foot deep, but without its former turbulence, as the boulders now fit together in a relatively even pattern under the current. The large tires and high-riding frame of the truck would be put to the test, but with a good head of steam, we just might make it.

I hopped in behind the wheel, with my adrenalin starting to flow. Matt posted himself on the upstream side to watch where the wheels were headed. It was going to be hard to see where I was going, and I'd only have one chance.

The engine revved smoothly; I gunned it. I spun the steering wheel just right, apparently, because I was over and down onto the road in a moment. Matt's eyes were large, however, as he trotted down to the truck and pointed back to the creek.

"Man, you just made it," he said. "Your right rear wheel took out that log dam just as it passed over. Good thing you had some momentum or you'd still be back in the creek."

We arrived at Panorama just in time for our four-thirty phone call to the company office. I also tried my home number to see if Farah had arrived yet. There was no answer, and once more I began to worry.

"It's still a little early yet," Matt reassured me. "It must have been slow going with that load she was carrying."

"Yeah, I guess you're right.

But back on the road, I had to wonder, would we really be able to enjoy a celebratory supper tonight? In fact, would we even get as far as Invermere? My eyes followed the needle of the fuel gauge down to E, and below.

"Maybe I should have tried Ron's while we were at the phone, to see if she stopped in there on her way home. Or maybe her sister's place . . ."

"Hey, we'll be in town in a few minutes. It's all downhill from here."

As soon as we gassed up and parked, I headed for the pay phone. Matt went on to a restaurant across the street, called The Meeting Place.

Farah answered, her voice vibrantly alive. She and Suze were all right. But on the way down, she'd been lost.

"Oh, Farah," I told her, sick at heart. "I should have gone with you farther to find that trail."

"I don't know how much that would have helped, really. I just couldn't see a thing. And I was completely soaked, and shivering, and my pants were torn, and Suze was crying--" And Farah started to cry on the phone while she told me the rest.

For hours she'd wandered through the untracked brush, until, at the limit of her endurance, she decided to bushwhack straight downhill, leaving the backpack behind so as to save what little strength she had left for carrying Suze.

My grief at being partly responsible for her nightmarish ordeal was balanced by a final elation that they'd survived. The backpack could stay there forever, even with our down quilts inside, as a monument to what might have been.

"But I know where I left it," Farah said. "Under a certain tree . . ."

"Oh, great. Under a tree . . ."

"No really," she laughed. "I don't think it would be that hard to find. I made a little stone cairn, to mark the trail where I came onto it, straight downhill from the pack. I bet we could find it--"

We. Now that sounded more promising. Maybe it would be fun to go back there together. We could take along some flagging tape and mark the hillside as we traversed it, looking for the pack. Suze would enjoy a little picnic out there--if the bugs weren't too bad in July . . .

We told each other good-bye, and I left the phone booth with a spring in my step, to cross the street to The Meeting Place.

\*

Morning dawned through the nearby window, and my eyelids pulled slowly open. Farah still slept beside me curled up under the covers; I'd tossed them off during the night and now felt cold in the chill morning air. I could see that Suze still slept peacefully in her bed. I pulled the bedclothes back over me and snuggled closer to Farah.

It was clear out, likely to be another scorching July day once the sun came out in force. This was to be the day we would go back to Jumbo Pass together, to see if the bears and squirrels had left us anything of the backpack. If we could find it. If the Glacier Creek road was still negotiable. If I didn't get called back to work while we sat down to breakfast. If the good weather held.