



The  
*National  
Tree*

a novel

*David Kranes*

# *The National Tree*

by  
**David Kranes**

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# 1

Regret is a wounded animal—one part tucked under another. Regret masks, pretends, knows all the raw sockets but feigns nonchalance. Regret would rather not be seen. And Corey Burdock had had enough of regret.

Corey's father had been mauled by a bear and had turned to drink. His mother? First one, then another Montana carnival drew her—lights, long midway, vanishing point—till she disappeared. Corey's Butte house was a house abandoned and scarred.

Raw stuff, this place: Butte, Montana. Corey just couldn't concentrate. School, first a refuge, became a landfill—broken legs of equations, scraps of grammar, burnt-out histories, junked experiments in science. Was he able? Stupid? Lonely? Hard to tell. Bafflement stumbled into confusion; confusion led to withdrawal; withdrawal to the hauling of copper in Butte's open pit—the pit, itself, another hole: endless steps down until you lost all count.

When he was nineteen, a mine blast scorched Corey's back. And although the company paid, its settlement barely covered skin grafts and a Dodge pickup. Still, he set off—as survivors of burns will do—for another place, saying goodbye to Butte, but dragging memories.

What Corey remembered about his mother were fingers and cigarettes, moving toward and away from her mouth. Dreams, sometimes, changed her fingers to cigarettes and cigarettes to fingers. Should they

ever meet again, Corey thought he would ask: “Was it the man juggling the silver milk bottles, or the tattooed geek who ran the Tilt-a-Whirl, you ran away with?”

And his father: the memory a hairy growling man sweating alcohol in a church choir. And the question was, “Is a bear worse than a back on fire?”

Scored and alone, then, Corey drove and slept and drove again. He was alive; that counted. And there were chance possessions—tools, a radio, scar tissue. And a certain pride. With these, he headed West.

He zigzagged toward the Pacific—a route, haphazard but okay; it was movement. And movement was enterprise. Pluck. Then, when his truck snapped an axle in Happy Camp, California, Corey stayed. Soft: the land there. Quiet. Nothing burned with a green flame all night. No gaping depressions. And there were trees! The Camp Café served delicious biscuits and gravy 24 hours a day. Responding to an urge that felt at once familiar and ancient, Corey entered the topsoil and landfill business. In two years, he had financed a home and three acres, married a woman. Delores! Beautiful Delores. And it was as if the wounds of himself became, then, the wounds of another person, someone Chinese or Italian—a stranger, a sudden friend Corey wanted oh-so-badly to help.

Delores. Delores. In some lights she looked timid; in others bold. She rolled both eyes and shoulders with a sauciness. She rippled an abalone comb through her red hair. She made Corey laugh. And when she sang, her voice touched and sweetened Corey. It moved him to be near her. Until one deep socket of a night—moonless entirely—she drew the whole of him so within her that she released a hunger he would never—try as hard as he might—be without.

Most times, though, Delores’ rule was away, not near. She was revulsed by Corey’s back, the fire-curdling of it. It made her hands go slack, her flesh crawl—all its scarred furrows and ridges, its grafting. She would flinch, make an involuntary sound, withdraw. Lower her eyes. Bite her lips. And at those times, Corey most often would get up, go outside. Breathe. Clear himself. Clear the house. He might plant a seedling—a lodgepole, a clump aspen.

He thought about planting a tree the morning his singing Delores

entered labor at Klamath Regional Hospital. From the pre-dawn of her hospital bed, she'd squinted and dismissed him. "Skedaddle! You're just the germ!" She could tease; she could make jokes. "Go off! Earn some money! Entertain yourself. I don't want your mopey face up there like a sad balloon over my bed all day long. It's gonna be hours. When the kid's out—we'll call you."

So with Delores at Klamath Regional delivering the child—gift of their scant mutual time—Corey set out on a job he'd contracted but postponed. The Newland Group had asked him to inspect some shore acreage with the notion that, though the land was marshy and near the mouth of the Klamath River, it might be graded and landfilled for a high-end destination spa—lodge, cottages, pools, tennis courts, decks, hot tubs—constructed there. Would the land, properly modified, bear such use? Can't a marsh be fixed? A wetlands stabilized?

So Corey drove out to the shore, walked the property, made notes. He checked the land against the scrolled schematics and renderings. Curious. If Corey read the blueprints accurately, there appeared to be a beach where, now, a long shoulder of rocks cropped over the breakers. Surely, he was misreading. Still, he didn't want to be in there with his Cat, expected to take out rockery. The cliffs were home to a hundred poor-will and bats. Fragile huckleberry. Lichen. Besides—without cliffs, stroked daily by the tides—the present land, no matter how it might be filled, would dissolve like Tums in water in a matter of mere years.

Well, all he could do, he supposed, was say as much to the Newland Group. Write it down; make it certain and clear in his report. He took some pictures, gathered soil samples. It made him feel good to be out there as an expert: Corey, you're an expert in these matters. Would you be willing to drive out to the coast some afternoon next week and take a look? Expert! He liked that. For Delores, he wasn't an expert, he suspected, in anything. Not true ... not true. Almost every day, she said to him, "Corey, don't mind me; you're a good man." So he was an expert and a good man. And both felt a lot better than all the regrets of Butte, Montana.

Feeling good, then, and finished with his surveying and notes, he began to explore, north, along the water. The doctor in Delores' room

had said, "It'll be a while, Mr. Burdock. My guess—not until sometime tonight. We'll watch closely." So, there was no rush, and where he walked, a kind of path at the edge of the sea rocks, was alluring. There would be a point. Then a cove. Then another point. He saw a piliated woodpecker. He saw a heron. Enormous muscular elk. It was a walk and diminishing afternoon in which Corey loved his life. Heaven on Earth: at least today—an expert! And—hours away only—a father! Wasn't that a miracle? Good Lord!

Then, from the tip of the third point and looking into a cove that held the mouth of a small tributary, Corey saw a band of perhaps thirty people who, when they moved, moved together, taking shapes—now a triangle, now a circle. Smoke rose. A lone figure in their crowd held focus, the others seeming to take him as their point of reference. It was intriguing, strange.

So Corey simply stood a while. And watched. He tried to assign meaning—even though the close details were dissolved by distance. He tried to ascribe a word. Meeting? Meeting seemed close, but not right. Dance? Dance seemed further off, but not wrong. So in ways a meeting; in ways a dance. He moved ahead, tracing the cove's inner lip. He approached his vision.

Within range, he identified North American Indians bound in ritual. Most wore traditional clothing, though a few were shirtless, shoeless—men in Levis. The lone focal man was also shirtless—his chest streaked, struck with salmon red that had been ribbed with mineral black, flecked with white. He wore a cloak woven of feathers and a mask—sleek, curved, carved—the face of a fish.

The smoke Corey had seen rose from a tall chimney of stones. Across the top was a tree-branch grate—perhaps aspen, perhaps cedarwood, its sapling shafts about three-quarters of an inch thick. Something crucial, it seemed, had been recently cooked there.

And then Corey saw what that something was. A large fish—white bones, pink clinging flesh—carried by the dancing man in the feathered cape and fish mask. Others, as the man passed and extended himself, pinched off meat and placed it in their mouths. When any hand would reach, the whole group leaned in, like the interior walls of a membrane,

contracting. Then, even closer, Corey heard a low undermusic—moan or tune—dancer first, then the assembled. Humming. Chanting.

Corey stood back. Some of the natives noticed, glanced his way, found him to be of neither interest nor threat, glanced away. The fishman moved ... offered ... moved. The circle reached, fed, drew back. But was that it? Reach, feed, drawback only? Each reaching seemed to take such a long time.

Then Corey saw! The occasion wasn't only reaching, eating. Another gesture gave its shape to the air. Each taker-tribesperson, placing the meat into his or into her mouth, returned some object—a bead perhaps, an opal, a ring. The plucked carcass began to look like a bazaar, a jewelry store.

And so it went, around and around. Until there was no meat, merely bones, glittering bones that—seen alone and laid bare, the jewels disengaged—looked like lines, like a child's drawing of a fish or the shape of fish on a fossil or chipped in petroglyph.

Then the dancer-fishman held the bones high, laden as they were and winking in the low light, and sang something. To which the others replied. Then, again, sang. And, again, the assembled answered. A third time—the small community responded, at which point the fishman moved to the shore, the group closing in. Now, the figure they made was more line or spine than shape. Perhaps echoing the fish. At the shore, in a deft gesture like a magician, the fishman raised something that looked like a Japanese paper lantern.

When he guided the considerable skeleton into the Japanese paper lantern, the group tipped in to watch and Corey tipped just outside and beyond them. Bones now in the lantern, the fishman somehow made the lantern into a kite, which suddenly rose at the end of a long string—the fishman feeding the string-so-thin-it-must-have-been-fishline out and out. Minutes later, it was way up and out, over the cove's entrance, then beyond that, out and over the sea.

At which point the paper lantern, which had become a kite, became a bird or some sort of charmed origami. From its boxy fish-casket shape, it grew wings. How was that done? What sort of strange engineering, puppeteering, string-pulling enabled two of the side flaps to rise and

release the fish skeleton?

The skeleton dropped, struck water, submerged. The lantern/kite/bird rose up, freed into its own element. So, as the bones sank, the red and silver paper rose—smaller and smaller until it was almost memory. The fishman and the whole group froze. All bowed their heads. Corey bowed his head. Then, after perhaps a thirty-second silence, everyone dispersed and mingled. Lit cigarettes. Passed a cask of whiskey. Put clothes back on. Men hugged men. Women hugged women. Women hugged men.

Before Corey sensed palpable presence, an older gentleman stood beside him. “Salmon,” he announced.

“The fish?” Corey wasn’t sure.

“Salmon,” he repeated. “Year’s first salmon.”

Corey pointed out and beyond the bay.

The man nodded. He explained the ritual.

There were, he said, friendly people, a tribe who lived under the sea. And though their tribe lived in the ocean, each year for several months they sent large numbers into the river. But before they came, they changed themselves—bones, flesh—into fish. Wonderful fish. Salmon. They sent themselves into the river to feed their good friends, the older gentleman’s tribe, natives too. They offered themselves up as gifts. To show gratitude, to return the gift and keep the gift ever moving, the land people always gave back the first salmon taken from the river to their water brothers. With it—having fed from it—they included, always, items of their own of value.

“We do this,” the older gentleman concluded.

Corey nodded. “Yes.”

“Always,” he said. “The gift travels.”

“Always. Travels,” Corey repeated—feeling in part privileged, in part stupid. “You do this.”

“Have a good day,” the older gentleman said and walked away.

Corey drifted back the way he had come, on the path. Now here, now there, though, he found himself pausing on the Pacific’s rim and considering. So much had been taken from him in this life—it was true—but so much had been given too: a beautiful woman, and later today, a child. Abruptly, he cried. Violently. Dreadfully. Almost like

vomiting. A grief flung itself at the frail cage of himself so powerful that it bent him in half. It was a crying—so long, so intense—that it drilled his teeth. And when it was done, it took him ten minutes to repossess his breath. He kept standing, pressing his chest, waiting for his breath to ignite, to reinspire.

Always the gift travels, the native man had said. And all that is sacred loves circles.

When Corey finally moved on, he passed a planted sign: You Are Now Leaving Tribal Land. He didn't understand how he had missed its reverse earlier: You Are Now Entering Tribal Land. It made sense. The words. The ceremony. On today, the day of the birth of his child, he had crossed over. He had been in another place, a place that would never, he knew, stop being in his head. The smoke of fire. A mask shaped from the sea. Bones dropping through the air. We do this and the gift always travels ... from an old man's lips.

Corey imagined his and Delores' house filled up with fish—salmon, holding themselves in the dark current just above their bed, shapes opaque and gelatin nudging heroically forward along the phantom and rippling shadows of their hall space. Especially, he imagined how they would swim in and out of his trees—holy forest, holy fish, miracles!

An idea flashed like a fish. Like a coho or silver salmon. He would bring trees, bring home some Sitka tonight and plant them for his child. Corey thought of his own mother and her cigarettes. He thought of his father and the bear. He thought of Delores and her sad, bluesy, testy voice and of those tender nights when she'd drawn him close.

He would go home, write his report first, advise the Newland Group not to develop. The marsh will eat pilings like a bear—something like that. Two years—anything you develop will be swamped. This is sacred land, Corey mused, a place for fish—not hot tubs. Corey thought, I came. I chose. This is mine. I can give a gift. I can put my bones back into whatever sea. I can plant trees: Dedicate them, dedicate myself, be grateful. The Sitka will grow, my child will grow, I will grow. Life is abundance, a gift. Like the tribe, Corey had been given and, at the proper time, would give.

He imagined writing a letter and sending it off to cities—perhaps

New York, possibly Washington—addressed to people of consequence and in high position. Even—why not?—the President, a man who, seen on television, often seemed unhappy and filled with regret, a man a majestic tree might, very well, hearten and inspire. And the letter would propose an offering. It would say: Would you like my tree? It could be there for Christmas. I would personally deliver it. Yours, Corey Burdock. He would plant Sitka; the Sitka would grow; at the right moment—Would you like my tree? I could deliver it. Yours—Cory liked his plan.

Excited, he ran to his car, drove to the nursery-supply outlet he sometimes patronized in Yreka, and bought a dozen burred infant Sitkas. They looked like thistle, like hair brushes. He also picked up local, state, and national forestry pamphlets and read them over lunch in town. Then he went home and prepared soil. Fired up the backhoe to move an enormous boulder out of the way. Laid pipe for irrigation. Set the trees fifteen feet apart. They'd grow, the literature said. They'd reach out: three, four, five feet in diameter. They'd need room. Light, as well. Air. So Corey followed instructions, dug and planted, then went indoors.

Stepping out of the shower, he heard the phone. It was Klamath Regional. Delores. "Guess what?" she began. "Guess what I've got here in my arms."

Corey's breath fled. "Did it happen?"

"This little guy's a hoot!" Delores said.

Guy! Corey's heart thudded. "Are you—? Is there—? You okay?"

"This little guy's a big one!"

"How much does he weigh?" Corey asked.

"A hundred and four!" Delores said and laughed. But then her voice trailed. "Hey, don't worry," she said. "He weighed enough. He's a keeper."

Keeper. All that is sacred loves circles. "Well, now it's my turn," Corey said.

"Absolutely!" And again, Delores' change-of-pace laughter. "I had him. You have the next one. Your turn!" And she laughed again, though the laugh sounded ragged. And Corey saw it had been hard. The birth. These months. "He may not live," Delores said, her voice sounding like it had to work at being a voice.

“What?”

“A full life, a whole life. He has this ... He’s going to get very big, Core. That’s what the doctors said. Too big. Bigger than his heart might be able to—”

Had Delores stopped? Speaking to him? Or were her lips moving, but her voice pulled back to some place where Corey couldn’t hear it? Was she crying?

“He’s all yours now, Corey,” she said.

Corey was speechless. Might not live? He’s all mine? He couldn’t fathom any of it, but managed to stutter out the next question. “So, what will we name him? We thought maybe Luke, right? Or Daniel?”

“I can’t—”

“What?”

“—name anything right now.” Her voice was going away again.

Corey tried to send her and himself energy. “I planted trees!” he enthused. “In our back yard. You’ll love it. Moved a huge rock.”

“Me too,” Delores managed. “Me too. Call him Rock.” And she hung up.

A month later—joy abounding for Corey, Rock straining the ribs of his crib with his remarkable feet, the Sitka inching up—Delores left. She paced the room at first. Cried. Blamed herself. It was her fault, her inability, her failure. She traced a raw and throaty ballad. Then cried again. She said Corey had the dry rippled back of a salamander. It was cruel to say such a thing; yes, of course. She was sorry. Still, fact was fact, and touching him was extremely hard. She knew she ought to be stronger, but she wasn’t. And Rock was just going to grow and grow and then die, and she couldn’t get beyond.

“Beyond what?”

“Just beyond.”

“But ...!” Corey said and kept saying. “But ...!” And then a dozen other sentences that began with But ...!

But I love you.

But we have something.

But I’ll try harder.

But we don’t have to make love.

But I'll have more skin grafts.

But I need your singing.

But there'll just be me ... and the baby.

Still, truth said, apologies out, arguments voiced: Delores left. Deep, deep one night, and into the raging moonlight that made a fleet of rags out of the clouds, she set out. Pillowcase in one hand, scuffed-up suitcase stained the color of a treefrog's throat in the other. Left foot, right foot; out the door, down the walk, sharp right at the eucalyptus. She tried to make music at the curb—something bright, smartass—a cover-song while she waited for the taxi. Still, the song, under its cover, steeped with Delores' own version of regret. Throat making husky dusky notes. Dense as a hundred-year-old black walnut. And the taxi came. And she got in. And wherever it went—however far and for however many miles—it took her.

Had Corey missed something? On the shore, with the tribe? Had the Indian gentleman not said everything?

So, it wasn't the upswing it had seemed—Rock's first month—the bounty. Still ... heck! Corey kept saying. Heck, you can't just ...! And, heck, you can't allow these things to ...! There was, after all, life! Right? Corey had his trees. And Rock. For however long—and that would carry him into tomorrow. And then tomorrow.

## 2

**T**ime passed. Corey's Sitka grew. Rock grew. Unnaturally. Was all growth. "The more he grows, the shorter time he'll survive," the doctors warned. So Corey would look in—Rock swathed in rough flannel, face scrunched until Corey fed him a bottle, eye him, measure—twelve inches, twenty, thirty-four by the time he was six months. Corey'd feed him a bottle, then another. Hold Rock. Heavy as he was. Then wander out and into the back and check his seedlings.

Which, once a week, he'd measure too. Sitka, he'd read, could be used for the hulls of boats. There was a thought! If whoever in Washington or New York didn't want one as a Christmas tree. . . . Corey pictured one, then another, of his trees, scooped out, flat and varnished, streaking through lathered ocean: Keel below, sail fat with wind, hull tilted. It was the kind of dream-vision someone like Corey would have—the free imagining of *He Who Had Always Been On The Shore*.

He read, too, that Sitka were prized for piano sounding boards. They grew straight as arrows and held sound, pure as memory. Sometimes Corey would set his fingers on bark or an extending branch and play it like a keyboard. He imagined that he was playing Chopin; he knew Chopin was what you did with a piano, though he wasn't entirely sure he had ever heard it. And then he might play one of Delores' songs, maybe the song she was humming when she walked through the door, down the walk, and to the street.

Dust and air, soil and light, flesh and water: The Sitka grew; Rock grew. Larger and larger and then larger again. He seemed to be coming more to life, not dying. His fingers reached out toward anything bright shining beyond—the cribside lamp, the window, the moon.

This can only be good, Corey thought. He's still here—bigger and bigger. There's a gift traveling. So Corey sat down and began writing a letter that would be repeated year after year: "Dear Mr. President. Dear People At Rockefeller Center. If, some Christmas, you need a tree ..."

Alone, biding, patient—Corey tended his trees, raised Rock, trusted his life always to the possible and good. One particular Sitka rose gloriously. Rock rose, filled out. By the age of nine, he had the frame of a linebacker—six-foot-two, two hundred and ten. Any of his coaches-to-be drooled. But with his doctors intoning the dirge of mortality, Rock slowed, sank, decided power and size to be useless at best, final too soon. He became inert of spirit and reluctant. "So ...?" he'd say. And "Why? What good is it?"

Corey would attempt answers. "Every day of your life is a rafter," he'd say. "Raise the rafters. Every day of your life stacks on the day before. See?" he'd say, pointing to the huge filling-out Sitka, "we're all rising."

Sullenly, Rock would reply, "Yeah. Like the fish in the Klamath. Rising to get hooked."

Rock's second-grade teacher, Mrs. Katsan, didn't help. "Rock, try not to be your name," she said once when he didn't respond. Soon, other children, in playground time, picked it up: Rock the rock! they chanted. Rock the rock! One day, a sixth-grader, Timmy Carlson—when Rock was running after a ball—called out, "Rock! Hey, Rock! Careful. Don't fall on yourself. You might crush yourself to death." And the playground erupted.

The notion—Rock inert, a lump—spread year-to-year, grade-to-grade. And, often, we become our own news. Corey tried to coax his son otherwise. He brought a dog home from the pound, but the dog ran off. He bought a terrarium, but somehow Rock smashed it. Walter Roberts, Happy Camp's high-school football coach, pleading with Rock to join the team didn't help. "Our secret weapon," he said—arm around Rock—to the assembled players. "This guy's the rock. You guys are the

catapult.” Then he laughed.

When Rock was eighteen and graduated from high school, he stood six-six and weighed just over two hundred and fifty pounds—big certainly, but not enormous. Gainy, in fact, if you studied him. And proportioned. Hardly the medical freak who’d been predicted. A few tall girls, big girls, sometimes smiled, but mostly Rock saw them sneaking wary looks, then averting their eyes. With girls, he felt something like the hulk of a car, mud-imbedded, along a sluggish riverbed. So in that secret place, deep in his heart, he felt huge and useless. Because nothing had notified him to the contrary. Other than his father. And who are fathers, other than their sons’ most encouraging fans?

The year Rock turned eighteen and began work at Dan’s Auto Body, the tallest spruce in their backyard stand reached taller than seventy feet and Corey revised his letters to both the President and Rockefeller Plaza. He tried to make them both more generous and urgent. “How’s this sound?” he’d ask, reading Rock the letters, and Rock would say things like: “It sounds like English class,” or, “It sounds like moose matings, half a mile down the river.”

“I’m serious,” Corey would say, and Rock would tell his father that if he was serious, he should keep it to himself.

Nevertheless, Corey picked up his pen and moved it, draft after meek draft. Hopeful always; always offering. He learned style: the pushy, which he always crumpled. The humble: I’m not a person who you’ve ever heard of, but ... The understated: I was just sitting around one day wondering. Given Rock’s withdrawal as a listener, Corey would pin the various drafts up on the wall, scan them as he came and went. Finally, he decided on what became his standard: “Dear Sir(s): Please find a photo of my Sitka, which I offer for next year’s Christmas Tree. If you’d like it, please say so. I’d be happy to deliver it myself. Sincerely, Corey Burdock.”

The replies, invariably, were polite but negative. They extolled the tree’s majesty and beauty, praised Corey’s generosity and good will. The President wrote, “Although a National Tree already existed (a blue spruce planted by President Jimmy Carter),” Corey nevertheless “exemplified the American Spirit.” A man named Nobu Panasko from the Center At Rockefeller Plaza sent his own tree-picture, saying, “Though we’ve

made commitments, your generosity lights a light. Keep us in mind.”

Corey showed the letters to Rock, who barely sniffed them. His new job pounding out dents had given him a windfall of spare cash, which he used to buy what now passed for his first enthusiasm, a video camera. He was taping the inside of the refrigerator, mumbling into a tiny microphone. “Here’s the milk I had this morning on my Wheat Chex. Here’s some leftover spaghetti.”

Corey, nevertheless, strove on. He made small editorial changes, altered penmanship. On a store clerk’s suggestion, he chose more linen in his paper. Then he started posting his offers in July rather than September. Little changed—replies that were personal but declined. They praised Corey, praised his tree, wished him well. A letter with the President’s signature advised, “Stick to your guns—whatever those admirable guns may be.”

Rock said his father’s letters were dumb. “They’re all sitting around, eating Turf ’n Surf,” Rock said, “drinking imported beer and wine, and laughing—some guy out in the boonies tells ’em he’ll bring ’em a tree. ... This is the inside of my father’s ear,” Rock said into the video-microphone; “you can see clear to the other side.”

Rock’s unshaven words hurt Corey. But not as much as what had begun to happen within his back-acreage stand of Sitka. There were paths tracing his property. The local youth often used them—shortcuts to the regional school, paths ushering lovers into the deeper woods. So a certain element of the town came and went—in and among Corey’s trees.

And that was fine. Corey didn’t mind having his land be a part of the town’s here and there, its local movement and friendly traffic. Corey even thought sweetly of the comers-and-goers as his tribe. It was a good thing—being the tender of a Commons. But then the movement and traffic became heedless and, within a single week, Corey discovered messages—carved into the trunks of two trees.

Sean

+

Amy

carved into the first, and the unmistakable head of a penis gauged into the second. He led Rock to the vandalism.

“It’s called ‘desecration,’” Rock said.

“How do you know that?”

“It’s a vocabulary word.”

“This is hurting the tree,” Corey said.

“Oh? The tree say that?” Rock said. “‘Ouch! ... I’m hurting?’”

Corey pulled an army knife from his pocket. He pried open a blade, handed the knife to his son, held his arm out, pulled up his sleeve. “Carve something,” he said.

“Don’t be weird,” Rock said.

“I mean it. Carve something. See if I cry out, ‘Ouch! I’m hurting!’”

“Carve yourself,” Rock said and handed the knife back.

Corey set the blade to his skin.

“Don’t be a jerk! Stop it!” Rock knocked it away.

Corey pulled the knife back, broke the skin. Rock dislodged the knife, wrenched his father’s hand and twisted it. The knife dropped.

“You can be fucking weird,” Rock said.

“Another vocabulary word?” Corey said. Blood seeped where he’d broken the skin. He held the wound out to his son.

“Okay, I get your point,” Rock said. “I’m sorry.”

“I can’t let this keep happening,” Corey said.

“Fine. Put a sign up.”

“Saying what?”

“Saying: ‘Don’t Write On The Trees.’”

“Please Don’t Write On The Trees.”

“Okay: ‘Please Don’t Write On The Trees.’”

“Would you paint it for me?”

Rock agreed. Corey posted the sign. Two days later, yet another Sitka bore the engraving:

This

is

Printing

“Shoot the turkey!” Rock prompted. “Or give me your forty-ought-seven and I will.”

Instead they struck on another plan. Corey’s principal fear had to do with his prize tree, the pride of his forest, the tree of his letters. If some

year, someone finally said, “Yes. Thank you. Please bring your tree,” and it stood disfigured with scar tissue, who would want it? What kind of offering to the world was that?

So Corey devised a scheme to build a protective eight-foot hexagonal cedar-and-pine pole fence around the trunk. “Let whoever-they-are use their knives on that,” he reasoned. He showed Rock his plans. Done to scale—side and top views. Rock agreed to help.

Clyde’s Builders Supply delivered the lumber on Thursday. Friday morning—before dawn even—Corey’s maverick friend, R.D. Patterson, rolled up in one of his trucks, from which the three unloaded a huge table saw, a gasoline-powered post-hole digger, and about five hundred pieced-together feet of extension cord. Corey cooked slabs of ham, scrambled eggs, biscuits and gravy. The dawning sun was making the whole property look like it had been dipped in butterscotch. And the three set to work.

R.D. was a genius about equipment. He knew jobs. He could size a project and figure the shortest line between where it should start and end. “I’ll manage the post holes,” he recommended. “I can core those holes like I was drilling through balsa wood with a quarter-inch bit. You two work the table saw—feed and cut, feed and cut. Get too hot, there’s this iced tea. We’ll have everything sized, ready to assemble—two hours outside.”

So that was what each did. All around the prized Sitka trunk, in the sputter and stink and blue-plumed smoke of his gas engine, R.D. performed like an absolute master dentist. It didn’t matter, it seemed, that there were thick and flinty rocks everywhere in the soil. He somehow turned them into pumice or picked them out like beets or carrots and rolled them to the side. Rock had a radio on, playing a music that only he’d ever heard and making his neck and head dance to it. Corey was measuring, marking, then—with the saw and Rock’s guidance—feeding the boards and logs into their cut of specification.

Until a sudden thing happened!

R.D. was on his last six or seven holes. Corey and Rock were halving a sixteen-foot pine post. Rock’s radio was turned up the full distance—R.D.’s gasoline post-holer screaming against some granite obstruction.

They'd all worked nearly two hours nonstop. There was a kind of pocket or luff in everybody's concentration. The particular pine post Corey and Rock were feeding had a considerable burl five feet down its length, one of those knotted sap-hardened tangles in its skein.

And when the saw hit that burl, it jerked the whole pine post forward. Like a monster trout, some perverse salmon, hitting your line when you're not fully attentive. Some things can take your body away from you. This did that. The table saw blade locked, unlocked, then snatched the whole log forward—Corey guiding the log from one side, Rock guiding it from the other. Each with his right hand.

Then suddenly, both hands were food for the blade. Clean and fast. Disconnected, dismembered. Grabbed and hurled. Up. Strangely up, at that elevation that can't be called to the side but up. So that against the white and paperish light of the early morning, the father's and son's hands, just before they fell, looked like some sort of posed composition, like sketches in a notebook of Leonardo DaVinci.

R.D. immediately noticed. He dropped his posthole digger and became nothing but reflex. He uncinched and stripped his belt, jammed bulky woodscraps at pressure points, cinched the father's and son's arms together. He pulled Corey's belt, grabbed a sheet they'd brought for cleaning the equipment. With belt and sheet he stanced, best he could, the severed arms. Neither Corey nor Rock spoke. They couldn't. What would have been the language? R.D., sensing a need, though, spoke for them: "Fine. We're doing fine. Don't worry; I've got this. It's going to be fine," and, as he spoke, bent, picked the fallen hands from the ground, set them in the jug of iced tea—gathered, urged, coaxed, guided: "Let's get ourselves just to the truck," he said. And within fourteen minutes the two were under deep anaesthetic at Klamath Regional Hospital.

Within the critical span in which such things stay a possibility, both hands were reattached. R.D. hadn't missed a beat, so the elapsed time went in their favor. Nerves were wired to nerves; muscles spliced to muscles. A Dr. Welch and his attendant sped the procedure forward—all incredibly focused. Sensation, strength, movement—everything would be restored. It was a kind of miracle. The two were wheeled to a room. A special nurse was assigned. They slept seventeen hours. When each

awoke, it was to some freakishly numb and circular sense of second chance, life exchange. What had happened?

It was Doctor Welch who, when both were conscious and clear enough, explained. “In all the ways that count,” he began, “the operation was a success. How’re you feeling?”

Neither Corey nor Rock seemed to have yet rediscovered speech. Both nodded.

“Good. Excellent,” the doctor said. “You both survived. You’ll both ultimately have fully restored manipulability—thumb and forefinger opposition.” He laughed. Nervously. “All the ways that count,” Dr. Welch repeated, “a success. Still, there’s something I need to explain.”

Corey saw all the team-members, the other doctors, behind Dr. Welch—attending, listening, measuring, weighing something that was about to occur, but hadn’t.

“You both look none the worse for wear,” Dr. Welch chirped.

Why was he trying to be so chipper?

“And that’s always the point, you could say, of surgery: Once the O.R.’s behind—to look none the worse for wear.”

There was a silence. Dr. Welch took a deep breath. He went on. “There was—I’m sorry—an oversight,” he said.

What?

“We were so, I’m afraid, focused on a successful result, it seems we didn’t ask—all things considered—an essential question. I mean, a working hand is a working hand in the final analysis, but—” Dr. Welch paused. He smiled. The team, in a semi-circle behind him, waited. Now Dr. Welch looked stern. Professional. Like a surgeon. “Each of you,” he recommenced, “has the other’s hand.”

Neither Corey nor Rock seemed to have a ready reply. Both looked to where their right arms dangled—hovered in slings, wrapped in bandages, fed by tubes rising to a half-dozen clear-fluid bags.

“But heck, father and son! I don’t know what else to say. I don’t. I feel badly. Still—”

Reading eyes—father, son—it seemed each was trying to absorb, trying to imagine what it would be like to, say, shave in the morning or sign for a package with the other’s hand.

“We don’t ... I mean, this is not a common practice,” Dr. Welch said. Behind him, staff were nodding.

Rock’s and Corey’s muteness was so utter, so mutual, that it almost echoed.

Everyone looked at each other.

“Anyway!” Dr. Welch plowed on. “Mix-up acknowledged. Let’s focus on success! I mean, it was, in fact, an amazing medical moment. Historic! You each will have—no question—full and entire return of function. Which, you have to agree, is phenomenal. Your friend, Mr. Patterson, was, of course, the hero. The hands in iced tea was a stroke! We just did the work. And we were having to work very—I feel I have to add and I’m sure you both can appreciate—very fast.”

Again, there was the double silence—one that hummed, audibly, like a tuning fork.

“A stroke of luck and possible contributing factor to the, some will say, oversight, though I wouldn’t, is that you both have very similar ... digital configurations. For all intents and purposes,” Dr. Welch said, “your hands are interchangeable. Other than, of course, your knowing that you each have the other’s hand, you will, ostensibly, not know it. If you catch my meaning.”

Corey cleared his throat. He appeared to try to lift slightly from his pillows.

“Mr. Burdock—yes,” Dr. Welch said.

“You’re saying—?”

“I am,” Dr. Welch said.

“Rock—?”

“Accurate.”

“... has my hand. And I—?”

“Right.”

“—have his?”

“That’s correct.”

“You mixed them up?”

“Mr. Burdock—”

“You mixed them up!”

“I would prefer that you not use an accusatory tone,” Dr. Welch counseled.

“I’m just trying to understand,” Corey said.

“Yes, of course.”

“Our right hands, both our right hands are—”

“Right.”

“I have Rock’s hand; he has mine?”

“Well! So there we are,” Dr. Welch smiled.

The doctors behind all smiled. Professionally, it seemed something critical had been gotten through.

Dr. Welch summoned new authority. “In ten months, when you both have full and restored function and no identifiable scars, I think you’ll more fully appreciate what has happened, the saving grace of it. It’s been remarkable. Ten months from now, assuming you undergo physical therapy, there’s not a thing you’ve ever done you won’t—with full or even more-than-full strength and dexterity—be able to do. So—”

“Excuse me.”

All the eyes swivelled to Rock.

“I have a question,” Rock said. Something in him appeared, abruptly, to have come to life.

“Fire away,” Dr. Welch said. “Have at it.”

“So, okay, let’s say that there’s something I’ve never done before. Okay?” Rock began.

“Certainly,” Dr. Welch said.

“And let’s say, it’s something that my Dad, let’s say, has done.”

“Certainly,” Dr. Welch said.

“So then, like ... when I, like, reach—you know what I’m saying—to do it ...”

“Certainly.”

“... with his hand ...”

“Certainly.”

“Like ... will the hand know? Will the hand remember?”

“Uhh ...”

“Like it’s still his hand and not mine?”

“You know, that’s an amazing question.” Dr. Welch grinned. His

staff, behind him, grinned. He scratched his head. “Will the hand know?” he repeated. “Do hands retain memory? Are there receptor sites? Absolutely terrific question! I love that question.”

“So?” Rock said.

“Son?”

“What’s the answer,” Rock said.

“I have no idea,” Dr. Welch announced. “No idea.” And he seemed buoyed, even enraptured, by his ignorance. Then, “Oh!” he said. And again, “Oh.” Then “Oh,” a third time. “Something else I meant to mention.” He looked at Rock. “Given that yours and your father’s DNA will be doing a kind of line dance in you for the next little while, there’s a chance—actually stronger, something closer to probability—that you may not grow to be the size they’ve been predicting. So you probably won’t make that front cover on the *Weekly World*. Your father, on the other hand—! I’m just kidding. Anyway, you have a better life expectancy. Call it a side effect; call it a gift. Would either of you like the rubber gloves I used to operate? Some people like to keep them.”

Medicine, sometimes arrogant, falls finally toward truth. Dr. Welch was not wrong. Within two months, all the protecting and supporting “gift wrap”—the various lightweight polyurethane forms, the gauze bandages—had been sloughed, and both Burdocks were in a full regimen of physical therapy. Hydro. Hydro-massage. Electro. Something called Feldenkrais. Something also called impulse resonance. Another: neuron reorientation. Corey’s Blue Cross paid 85%. R.D. chipped in. “Look, this money’s just going to sit somewhere in a dustbin,” he said, “called a bank. We’ll figure payback another time. Life makes strange agreements.”

Corey followed his recovery program. Rock stayed with his. They scheduled sessions at different hours and didn’t discuss respective progress. There was this terrible and shocking intimacy for them now in the world that neither could confront. One time, Corey asked, “Have they treated you with the ... it’s like a penlight dipped in baby oil? They run it around and write on your skin?” And though Rock wanted to answer, he didn’t.

The problem was neither could satisfactorily figure—in some imag-

ined father-and-son talk about rehabilitation—whether to say my hand or your hand. It was easier, for Rock especially, not to speak—though he, once or twice, brought his camera and filmed a therapy session.

Both worked. Corey did more at his office—managing, planning—and less hands-on labor. Rock mostly used his left hand at the body shop and for manipulating his camera. Every once in a while, an aquatic form swam into one of Corey’s dreams—lurked, held water, blurred. Once, clearly, it was a coho salmon, silver at first. But then it rolled, belly up, and was deathly red.

At the sixth-month marker, Dr. Welch said there was substantially nothing they couldn’t return to and attempt. “You’ve been model prisoners,” he laughed, then said, “that’s a joke.”

“This is Dr. Welch telling a joke,” Rock said, filming him.

Privately there was doubt, ghost pain, the numbed presence of loss and uncertainty. At odd moments, one or the other might find himself alone—in bed, in the shower, even out, places where he could be a stranger, like in the back booth at a truck stop, and there, by himself, he would move his right hand out in front of him. Like a separate thing. Some redesigned appliance. Move the fingers. Make and unmake a fist. Stare at the darkly puffed vascular network on the back. Corey thought about sprinkler systems, sleeves of PVC. Rock imagined engine wires being spiced. Mostly, though, Rock tried to comprehend having a hand that was at least a quarter-century older than himself and what that made different and possible. Corey came, again and again, to the consideration that now his hand was young.

Still, true to prediction, ten months later, for all practical purposes, each was, again, who he had been. Corey dove even deeper into his work and he fired off a whole new round of letters. “Once again, I’d like to offer a tree. I could attempt to bring it.” Rock covered himself with transmission oil and body paint. And neither seemed any the less for what had happened.