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

Time 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. Gainly, 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 stanched, 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.

3

It's a dance floor of giants and partners—this living. Regret two-steps with Gratitude. Mischance tangos with Chance. Loss waltzes, often, with Recovery. And if the music thralls, if the dance moves, we don't always place the dancers. Who's leading? Who's being led? As the months went by, something about Rock's maturation seemed to be moving faster, though (Dr. Welch was right) his becoming enormous slowed.

So, if Mischance cobbles one leg of the Giant, Chance gets to dance with the other. Absence becomes Presence. That October, the mail bore more news than Corey Burdock could either imagine or manage. The Committee for Christmas at Rockefeller Plaza wrote to say they were thrilled at the offer of his tree, and would Corey please call a Mrs. Lancaster at a 212 number. And the President wrote that, though he was "sad to report that an infestation had infected first the roots and then the needles of Jimmy Carter's blue spruce," nothing would please him and please the White House staff more than to install and inaugurate Corey's wonderful Sitka. The letter said that a Mrs. Loni Alvarez would be calling him within the week.

Corey hooted out loud. The gift always travels.

But where? Washington or New York? Corey knew neither; he had only seen postcards and newsclips. And in those, New York seemed—even with its fabled skyline and bordering rivers—a place with neither sky nor water. Washington had given the impression—not the government

so much as the place—of being more orderly. He asked Rock.

"It's your tree," Rock said.

"Our tree."

"Well, if you ask me, that President needs all the help he can get."

He would choose the Capital, then, for their National Tree.

A third letter, unfortunately, came from Inland Savings & Loan, announcing the regretable failure of the bank and posting notice that assets, including properties held in mortgage, were being frozen pending settlement.

"I'm sorry, but what does 'frozen pending settlement' mean?" Corey called his loan officer the next day.

"It means you can't sell your house," the woman said.

Corey told her about the spruce. "I'll have to get it on the road—five, six weeks max, mid-November," Corey said.

"No can do," she told him.

"What do you mean?"

"When the letter says everything, it means everything. The tree will have to stay in the ground and on the property. The bank, for all intents and purposes, has a lien on your tree."

A lien. Corey told Rock, who was videotaping one of the heating elements on the stove. "This is off," he was saying, and then, with a torque of his wrist, "this is high." In between, he mumbled, "Welcome to a world that likes to turn you on and off."

"What's that mean?" Corey asked.

"It's philosophy," Rock said. "It's the course I never got to take."

"Well, you chose cars and video."

"I chose being a midget, but it didn't work."

"Don't be negative," Corey said. "We can choose. We can set our course. And I said as much to the woman at the bank. I told her I had a tree to deliver."

Rock turned away. "This is the inside of the oven." His voice spoke almost secretively over the soft whirring of the videotape.

The next day, Corey came home from the landfill to discover Inland Bank had come and locked all his spruce together with a chain. It made him mad. He took a torch and severed the chain.

"Bright move! They can put you in jail now," Rock said when he got home. Still, he got his camera out and videotaped the torched links. "The Spirit of the West still lives," he recorded. "This is what my father did. It's his stand against the authorities and what's going to get his ass thrown in jail."

"No one's going to jail," Corey said, "and watch your language." He told Rock that he'd called both the White House and Rockefeller Plaza and how Rockefeller Plaza had accepted his decision: "Of course, by all means, let it be the National Tree." Corey said he'd called R.D. as well, and that R.D. had said, "Definitely do it; dig in your heels," that he was, without missing a heartbeat, aboard. He had the parts down at his yard to extend Corey's flatbed to just short of where it would require a pilot car for an oversized load. Come second week in November, R.D. had said, he'd bring the crane and they'd lift the tree, "slick as snot on lightning," out of the ground. First, they'd have a safety drill and rehearsal: "Don't want to kill any of the bank people." But it would be a done thing.

"Just—!" Rock began. He looked confused, frustrated.

"What?"

"Just don't ask me to come and visit you in the joint," Rock said. "I won't visit you in the slammer."

Where had Rock learned words like "joint" and "slammer?" More vocabulary.

"That tree's the National Tree; I'm sorry," Corey said.

The following Thursday, both members of the Sheriff's department, Calder Bennett and Wylie Fiske, paid Corey a visit at his landfill. "You cut the chain around your trees?" he was asked.

Corey blushed, then nodded.

"That chain is both bank and government property," Wylie Fiske declared.

"How's that?"

"Because, as things stand, the government owns the bank, and the bank owns the chain," Calder Bennett said. He added that if Corey didn't line up and behave, they'd have to call in the FBI.

Corey explained he'd raised the new National Tree.

Both sheriffs said, "Fine-a-ree," but warned that Corey and his new

National Tree would be homeless if he didn't dance to their tune. They said it was just like the current President to attempt to make Christmas his own personal holiday. They said the last thing Corey should do is break the law to help the dickhead out. To emphasize their seriousness, each moved and opened a front door of their patrol car, then turned and leaned forward over their doors—Calder Bennett's blue and Wylie Fisk's gray mirrorshields seeming to hover like print-negative sunspots. "We hope we've made our point," Wylie Fiske said. Then the two car doors slammed, the engine revved, and they were dust.

The next day, the editor of the *Happy Camp Register* called to ask Corey if it were true that (1) he'd been selected to supply the new National Christmas Tree and (2) Inland Savings was telling him he and his Sitka spruce would be homeless if he raised a finger to move it.

"Yes," Corey said, "and yes."

"Interesting news. Interesting dilemma," the editor said. "So, what're you going to do? Fold up? Buckle?"

"No," Corey said. "No one should make himself more invisible in the world than he already is."

"Which means?"

"Which means I'll fight. In the courts if necessary." And then Corey said something that he didn't see coming, but that, he had to admit, he was proud of. "Christmas shouldn't be held hostage."

The next day—in the *Register* first, but then everywhere, a headline screamed: XMAS HELD HOSTAGE! NATIONAL TREE HOMELESS! OWNER WILL FIGHT! And every television station Corey had ever heard of sent out crews with minicams.

Rock was beside himself. "How much for a setup like that?" he asked. "You got one one you wouldn't mind selling me? Used?"

Corey was asked:

"You see this tree as a cause?"

"How do you feel about people calling you a Modern Thoreau?"

"You willing to go to jail for this?"

"Have you talked directly to the President?"

"Does the President's wife know?"

"Have you and the President talked about what the bank is at-

tempting?"

The next day, Inland posted an armed guard on Corey's property—a man with a short black beard and sideburns Corey had never seen before. Rock walked around the man for nearly three hours videotaping. The man swatted at him like a fly. "This is the armed guard scratching his butt," Rock recorded. "This is the armed guard coughing."

Like the gift, news travels. A stranger with a better video than Rock's appeared to shoot his own guard footage. He seemed especially interested in shooting up, shooting down—from angles.

"So who are you?" Rock asked.

"Freelancer," the man said. "Was a stringer, but—"

Rock asked what he was talking about.

The man explained that he worked for himself and sold his footage to networks.

Rock started imagining. "How? Who do you talk to?" he asked.

"Listen, don't even think about it," the man said. "For action media, this is a story that's evaporating as we're shooting it. Print will drag out a couple more days. In fact," the man laughed, "this is crazy. Why the fuck am I here?" And, with that, he turned off his camera, capped it, saluted Rock, and left.

Rock continued to film. He filmed for an hour, then went inside and called the local ABC affiliate. They bought his footage, but when they ran it that evening, he was angry that they'd done voice-overs.

For three days the entire country, it seemed, was abuzz, incensed. What kind of heartless bureaucracy made the National Christmas Tree homeless? Just who and how and since when did business as usual bind the Christmas Spirit in chains? Groups of marching protesters were heard chanting: "Free the Tree! Free the Tree!" The President made a brief statement: "We love this tree. We believe in it in our hearts. I'm sure the parties at hand will work it out."

R.D. called. A self-taught engineer and completely unschooled maverick, he'd had his own wars with the authorities. Once, asked—for purposes of neighborhood sightliness—to move a camp bus parked in front of his house, he'd taken his crane and hoisted the bus onto the roof of his house. "Moved!" he'd said. Another time, surrounded by city

engineers skeptical of his project, he'd dropped a wrecking ball through the lid of a waste-sewage cistern. The report was that, as the ball was dropping, he'd yelled out, "Don't inhale!"

At any rate, R.D. had been thinking. "I'll be by around seven," he said. He had a plan. "Just be ready to put in a night's work."

Corey could hear R.D.'s rig approaching before it actually came into sight. Through the back window, he could see the armed guard at the foot of the spruce sniffing the air, listening. Then R.D. was there, the tanklike treads on his rig moving across the yard. The crane dangled a black steel box with ventilation shafts on the sides. Rock grabbed his camera and a set of halogen lamps and rushed out.

The guard was shouting at R.D.: "Stop! Stop in the name of the law! Stop right there! Don't move that rig any closer!"

Abruptly, the lamps blasted the scene with a harsh halogen glare. Overhead: the moon. It all spotlighted Rock, slung with his videocam and taping; the guard, armed with his Glock nine-millimeter service revolver, waving it in the air; R.D., mad genius that he was, pushing levers and tugging knobs.

"You getting all of this, Rock?" R.D. yelled down from the cab.

"It's a-rolling!" Rock said. "It's a-rolling!"

R.D. moved the crane closer. The metal box hovered directly over the guard. The guard looked up. He fired into the air. "That's a warning!" he shouted. R.D. lowered the box and caged the guard. Then, he shut down the crane and, except for the soft rolling of Rock's videocamera and the clicking and hissing of R.D.'s diesel cooling, there was relative silence. Until the guard started pounding inside the black box's metal interior walls.

"Okay! Let's get to work!" R.D. yelled. "Turkey's in the oven!"

R.D. had brought two pneumatic concrete saws. To ensure support, he wired the top of the spruce to the end of the crane, then he and Corey carved a twenty-foot circle around the base of the tree, digging a trench of earth, unbinding the roots.

Corey felt a strange humming in his right hand as he worked. It spooked him and it continued to spook him, but he attributed it simply to the equipment, the vibration.

Rock filmed. His right hand hummed as well. Like his father, he felt unnerved. But, his father's son, Rock simply passed it off, kept the camera rolling, and said nothing. What would be the point? Why invite a near-and-strange thing nearer?

At about three in the morning, R.D. announced that they were ready, and he climbed back into the cab of his crane and started to lift.

He was right! It was like pulling a tooth. There were sounds of small roots snapping, but they all seemed insignificant, meager, tiny pops. Within moments the seventy-foot Sitka hung, plumb, from the end of R.D.'s crane line.

"This is hot!" Rock enthused. "I'm getting it! I love it!"

R.D. hopped down. "Lend me your car," he said. Corey threw him the keys. Forty-five minutes later, another huge machine rumbled up the road. It woke Rock, asleep on couch pillows in the driveway. R.D. approached now with one of the longest flatbed contraptions Corey had ever seen. As it came into view, Rock was at his camera again. "I'm going to make a thousand dollars. I'm going to make ten thousand dollars with this film," he said. "ABC! NBC! CNN!"

They all worked. When the dawn colored, the Sitka lay on the flatbed, roots wrapped in huge poultices of burlap, all fitted with extending PVC pipe, a design of Corey's invention. "For the feeding," he said.

It was all wondrous, like some child's illustrated tale—the spun-out lore of a giant. And a tarpitch and peatish steam rose from it all with a dark and brutish magnificence.

From far in the background came the pounding and rattling of metal.

"I guess whether this tree stays in the ground or not is, as they say, academic now," R.D. laughed. He walked back to the metal box-cage and knocked. "You awake in there?" he asked. Expletives indicated the guard was unhappy. "Okay, I'm going to lift this about three inches," R.D. said, "and I want you to slide your gun out. You with me?"

More expletives—fiercer, wilder, more ragged.

"You ever see *The Wild Bunch*? Read much Zane Grey?" Like some outlaw-magician, R.D. produced a 12-gauge pump-action shotgun and racked the slide, a universal language that calmed the rent-a-cop almost instantly. "I'm only asking for an event trade," R.D. said softly, gently.

"I'll lift the cage in return for your gun."

Ten minutes later, the guard was gone and the three were enjoying coffee and biscuits and gravy in the kitchen. Forty minutes past that, R.D. and Corey were in a squad car, heading for lockup, and Rock was on the phone, arranging the sale of his footage for more money than he had ever imagined.

It was a whole day of phone calls. The President called the Governor. The Governor called his Attorney General. The Attorney General called the holding company for Inland Trust. Someone at the holding company down in Santa Clara called the Mayor of Happy Camp. By dusk, Corey and R.D.—lectured by a District Court judge so lamely that R.D. literally dozed—left the courthouse where Rock and the rest of the American media held their cameras and microphones. The President had arranged a bailout for Inland. Corey's property and what he did with it was his own. AMERICA'S HOMELESS TREE HOMELESS NO MORE, the next day's headline announced. The Free The Tree Coalition & Relief Fund wired Corey their congratulations.

Free the what? Who? Where? Corey inquired and discovered that, whatever the organization, it was real and serious and had an office in a San Francisco high-rise. Also, the FTC&RF announced that it had garnered a little more than $16,000 from anonymous well-wishers around the country and were wiring it. Where should they send it?

For the next two weeks, the Sitka stretched its eerily horizontal length on the Freuhauf flatbed outside Corey's house. R.D. and Corey mounted and welded a hundred-and-fifty-gallon watertank and pumping mechanism to the front of the flatbed, next to the roots. Then they hooked up a clock device, which, an hour before dawn and an hour after sunset, fed nourishment through the PVC into the burlap that wrapped the soil that held the roots—a concoction made up of aluminum nitrates and ferrous phosphates. Working with and around water pleased Corey.

Rock bought a state-of-the-art steadicam with his footage profits. He chronicled everything. "This is the hole where the tree was." "This is where the lawn died under the box R.D. dropped on the guard." "This is the stain on my Garth Brooks T-shirt where I spilled gravy from the biscuits when the police came and arrested my Dad."

Inside himself, Corey recorded his son's ardent recording. This is Rock—seeing the world. This is Rock—being excited. Corey was thrilled by the possibility that something was happening, something was being exchanged. And so he took his own inner tape, made his own inner commentary, imagining that he might send a copy to his own chain-smoking and carnival-loving mother. He'd add a note: "Here. I want you to have this. This is my son—your grandson." And he imagined her taking the imagined tape and playing it on her imagined television. And that, seeing it, her shaking hands would quiet and still.

From there, he imagined sending the same tape to wherever in the world his spirit-of-God-and-Kentucky-whiskey father might be. He hoped that when his father saw such a grandson, it might soften in him, somehow, the mauling bear.

Corey had never gotten to give a present to either. "Here," he'd never had the chance to say: "Take this … please. I thought of you. It would mean a lot to me."

And, of course, Delores. Not to gloat. But to show that he would still give … if he were able. He thought: Why not? She tried. He thought: She took me to her one night. He thought: She's my wife, still my wife. Jesus! Give! Give something! Think of all the times she sang.

Corey worked on his imagined film. He rolled it, edited it, made it, for himself at least, a kind of record of what trying to give something larger than himself felt like in his heart, sounded like in the small clock radio of his head. The gift travels always … and in circles.

The next, then, was inescapable. Corey asked Rock to be his partner in delivering the tree. "We've not, I know, done a lot together. Still …"

"We've shucked corn," Rock said.

"True."

"Used the same can of Armorol."

"True."

"Gotten each other's hands."

That stopped Corey.

It stopped Rock as well. He hadn't seen it coming—anywhere in his head.

Corey drew a breath. “The point is, I should have another person along, and I—”

“My memory is you already asked me.”

“Did I? And you said—?”

“I said, sure, I suppose, why not?”

“Well, I’ll look forward to it then,” Corey said. And in what had to be a self-conscious gesture, the two shook.

4

Corey met R.D. at Isa's Cantina. He needed to talk. He'd asked Rock. Rock had agreed. The two had never done anything together except lose and switch their right hands. It was going to be a three-week trip, at least, round the clock. "I thought it would be a nice gesture. I didn't think Rock would take me up on it," Corey told R.D.

"Oh, I think you did," R.D. said. "I think you had a notion not only that he might, but that he would." R.D. took a cigar out of his pocket. He left it wrapped and set it on the table, placing a packet of Isa's Cantina matches beside it. Corey got the feeling he was probably going to try to make a point with it. Or with the pair of things.

"I want to give him something," Corey attempted. He tried to think of a better way to say it. He began again, "No one ever …" But he stopped.

"No one ever what? Why do I suspect there's an end to that sentence?" R.D. said.

Corey waved what he'd begun away. "It's just that—"

"You worried you're going to foul up, right? Botch it?" R.D. prompted.

"No. Yes. It's just that this is important," Corey said. "Especially now that Rock's aboard."

"Well, yeah! Jesus. I hope to hell it's important," R.D. said. "I have an expunged criminal record. And I'm out a flatbed truck. It better be!"

Corey told R.D. about his afternoon wandering north along the Pacific. About not seeing the sign, finding himself on tribal land, watching the dancer with the fish mask and the others. "They all took something," Corey said, "then they gave back." His eyes floated with tears. He excused himself. He went into the men's room. Came back. Apologized. Saw R.D. wanted to say something. Waited. "I thought you were going to say something to me," Corey finally said.

"I think maybe you just said it to yourself."

Corey lifted his bottle of Corona, set it down. He watched R.D. watching him closely. He lifted the Corona again, poured a bit into his glass. "You have sons," Corey coughed.

"That's true; I do. On occasion."

"Grown."

"Sure."

"The point is, they all seem to … be involved. They like you; they come around; they appreciate the kinds of things you do."

"For the most part, that's true," R.D. nodded. "We sit down together. We keep up."

"So I guess I'd like—what I'm asking for—is help," Corey said.

"I could lend you a lug wrench," R.D. said. "Rock gets out of hand—you could club him with it."

Corey touched his friend's arm. He started to speak, stopped, started in again, but his mouth locked. "I don't want not to have been able to do this," he pushed out.

"Let me think about it," R.D. said.

What R.D. did was this. He arrived on the morning of their departure with a cardboard grocery box. In the box were any number of things—each loosely wrapped in newspaper. Corey greeted R.D. and summoned Rock.

"It's a Father-Son First-Aid Kit," R.D. explained. "It's my going-away present. Something happens? You get in trouble? The person who's in the trouble gives one of these things to the other. Rock, don't say anything—I know you're thinking it's bullshit." And R.D. pointed at him. "Okay. So the person hurting chooses one of these balls of newspaper and gives it to the other. Okay? Then you both sit there while the

other opens it." He said that it was absolutely essential that the person feeling injured give the gift. "I know. It doesn't make sense. But that's me; that's R.D. I don't make sense. Still, I saved both of your lives. So if I'm going to devise some sort of system, like this kit, then it's essential that its ground rules not make sense. Or at least that a person who doesn't make any sense makes them up. So, anyway, here it is. And those are the conditions. Good luck."

"Can we open just one now?" Rock asked.

"Are you feeling misunderstood? Abused?" R.D. asked.

"No. Not particularly."

"Then don't ask for trouble."

"Did you, like, a long time ago, start off in medical school?" Rock asked.

Both Corey and Rock accepted R.D.'s gift and the gift's conditions without further dispute. Rock carried the box to the truck and set it in one of the locker containers they were using to store clothes, food and supplies.

Then, quicker than it seemed it should come, it was the moment. Last items stowed. Last goodbyes—at least for a while.

"And this is my Dad and R.D. saying goodbye," Rock narrated into the spit of a mic on his steadicam. It was November. A Monday. Raining. "Two old geezers," Rock said, "and their friendship."

"Watch your mouth, twerp," R.D. said. "I've got ears like a bat."

"Nose too! Hey, R.D., why don't you come along," Rock suggested. "We could use you. I remember Dad said batshit mixed with fish emulsion's good for … whatever … the planet's digestion."

Rock's sparring was a new and different energy and Corey liked it. Still, he played the father. "Don't get smart, Rock. Just because you've got fancy equipment. We've got a long caretaking haul ahead. Don't perform for R.D."

"Right. And this is my Dad, giving father-to-son advice," Rock narrated.

"Okay, enough," Corey said. "Stow it."

"Did you hear that! 'Stow it'! This is my father with more fatherly talk."

R.D. drew Corey beyond Rock's hearing range. "You walk away from a terrier, he stops barking."

"I think you just hurt his feelings," Corey said, glancing over. "Pulling me aside. Being private."

"Listen, I'm not his father. I can't hurt his feelings. Only you get to hurt his feelings. Me, I just bring him out. Like rain does with mosquitoes."

Now Rock was moving again, his camera on them, zooming, rolling. "Okay, now do some pal stuff," he said. "Shake hands. Get each other in a head-vise. I'll call this section, 'The Two Outlaws Go Their Separate Ways'!"

"Rock?"

Rock's eye locked, like a ball-in-the-socket, in the videocam's eyepiece. "R.D.?" he countered.

"I'm about to take a posthole digger to your fancy equipment."

"Hey, R.D., say something in sidekick. Could you do that? Something gruff but affectionate?"

"It confounds me—where he picks up words like 'gruff' and 'affectionate.'" Corey shook his head.

"You get in any trouble, you need any help—I mean this—call me," R.D. said to Corey, but not loud enough so that Rock could record a word.

"You're my first and last friend," Corey confided.

"Seems that's the rule—so the Good Book says." R.D. grabbed a stand of Corey's hair in his fist and lifted it, like he was harvesting beets or carrots. "Rule of Last and First."

Washington hoped to light the tree December first. It was a rainy Monday in mid-November when the two began their trip. R.D. stood, redfaced and saluting Rock's videocam, on the hood of his rebuilt Buick. Corey turned the key, then pushed the starter button and fired up the Kenworth long-nose tractor, revving the Detroit diesel. He shifted into second and the semi belched into action. R.D. was barking, "Stay alert! Keep your eyes peeled for hard-hats and heavy equipment! Who knows? Maybe I'll show up!" Corey shifted (double-clutching) into third, then fourth, of the ten-speed Lassen Roadranger. The truck pulled out.

Everybody gave a final wave. R.D. almost toppled from his hood. The Burdocks were on their way.

The plan was to head north first along California Route 96, then east through Hamburg and Horse Creek and Klamath River, edging their way toward I-5. It was what R.D. had termed a "cockamaimy route," but because theirs was a rig unlike any other, the California Highway Patrol had imposed certain limitations. There was also the matter of picking up a critical load of tree fertilizer near Sacramento. Squirrelly as it was, it was the route broadcast on TV and they kept to it. Local populations stood roadside and cheered. There were balloons. There were banners. Red and green Sacramento ribbons giftwrapped trees.

After completing their errand in the state capital, they connected with I-80, then moved up and down through the National Forest, on toward Reno. The day they left, the headlines spoke variations of BE-LEAGURED NATIONAL XMAS TREE BEGINS TRIP.

No journey is easy or runs smooth, and both father and son, moving now, breathed the anxious and potent breath of that notion. At the same time, though, any trip is a setting-off filled with the hypnotic hope of every beckoning bend in the road. To think: Things can happen! To think: In the next hour, my whole life can open up like sky! To think: I can do this! Those are all reasons to live.

On their first day, then, the trip was—despite fraying windshield wipers—a pleasure. Truckers heading west flashed their lights. Media helicopters flapped overhead. "The next thing I buy," Rock said, "after this trip, is a chopper." He had a new squaring of his jaw when he spoke and what looked like small candles behind his eyes. Certain words—because he liked the feel of them pulling back his lips and against his teeth—he repeated. Words like, "chopper."

When they stopped to snack in Arbuckle, a manager greeted them and said, "Hey, you're the Burdocks! The tree father and son! Good luck! No charge!" To Corey it felt like the First and Sacred Salmon had just swum into the mouth of his own river.

Later, the two ate Denny's chicken-fried steak in a gray off-and-on silence outside Spanish Ranch. Somehow, the slow dusky climb up the west side of the Sierra Nevada on I-80 had dislodged a series of stored

questions in Rock that, in turns, he thought about and then asked. "When Momma left …" he began. "… how old was I?"

"Fourteen months."

"I don't remember her."

Things that were important, Corey knew, had begun to happen. "Well, you were a baby," he said.

"I was fourteen months. So you just let her?" Rock asked. "Go?"

Corey felt something flare up inside himself. He tamed it. "More, I think, she just went."

"But you let her."

"Didn't see as how I could stop her—to tell the truth. She was that kind of woman."

"Was she angry?"

"No. I don't think angry. She sang a song to you—me as well—the day she left. And it didn't sound angry. I don't think angry would be the word."

"What would the word be?"

Corey weighed several possibilities. He wanted this talk, of course. But he also wished it would go away.

"Why did she leave?"

"You want the truth?"

"It's as good as anything."

"I think—my back."

"Where it burned?"

"She pretty much hated it. It made her sick." Corey paused a long looping while with all sorts of things about Delores, and about his own mother, tangling in the loop. "That's the thing she mentioned, anyway."

"Your burned back."

Corey looked hard out the truck's windshield. Rock turned to his own window. The dusk, the weather, looked like some kind of a gel, and Corey could feel the weight of his foot on the accelerator as though it were the weight of some separate thing, not attached. Certainly he had chosen this. Certainly he had wanted to deliver the tree—to go from here to there and make the journey a gift. Move ahead. He wasn't sure, though, that he had wanted to go back as well. Which was what his

mind, set loose by his son's curiosity, found itself doing now.

How this? Why that? How had a bear and whiskey and God all come together in a man to make him walk out of a house where that same man had a son? Maybe because it was a Tuesday or because cats eyes are gold. What makes up an answer? Corey remembered his father one day working on the lawnmower. Not the power kind that you always see now, but the old push kind. And he had it all taken apart on a black tarp. Rotary blade in one place, bolts and washers in another, gears separate in a third. And he had rags with him. An oil can. A rasp of some kind, a file. The sun was going in and out of the Montana clouds. And all the parts of the lawnmower were shining. But what good was remembering a thing like that? What good was it, trying to fit it in somewhere and to something?

"So does it hurt? Still? Sometimes?"

Corey pulled his mind back from drifting. "What?"

"Your back?"

"Not any more. Did at first."

"As much as with the table saw and our hands?"

"Funny—I don't remember that. Whether it hurt. Guess it must have."

"I remember it."

"Was it bad?"

"I think."

"I'm sorry."

"Where'd they get the skin?" Rock asked. "For your back?"

"Backs of my legs. My butt."

"You're telling me … you've got butt skin on your back?"

"Some."

"Gross!" Rock made a face—twist of his nose, wrenching of his front teeth.

"Fine," Corey said. "Make a face; act disgusted. Like your mother. But seems to me—skin's skin."

"You ever try getting her back?"

"Who?"

"Mom."

"Once."

"And?"

"And she wouldn't come. She wouldn't even consider it. She said, not a chance. She said she was having too much fun—being where she was, doing what she was doing."

"So where is she now?"

Corey cast his eyes toward memory. "I'm trying to remember the last thing I heard about her. From her. Seems to me—"

"What?"

"—somewhere east. Delaware. Maryland. At some point I got a postcard from her with an oyster on it—one big oyster—and three words: 'The World … Sometimes.'"

"She ever mention me?"

"Not that we talked that often, but she would sometimes say, 'How's the boy?'"

"Not how's Rock?"

"I don't think so. No. It was, 'How's the baby?' at first. Then: 'How's the boy?'"

"She even know my name?"

"'Course she knows your name! Lord sakes, she had you. She gave birth to you. She named you."

"I don't think a lot of women," Rock announced.

"You don't think a lot of women what?" Corey asked.

"I don't think … about women … much."

"Women are fine. Women are all right. Don't judge every woman by your mother. I don't judge every woman by mine."

Rock stared out the cab window. The lights of Soda Springs went by. Then he stared—out and into the night first, but turning slowly, slowly, into the face of his father. "You know, I used to have this idea," he began. "It was just an idea in my head—that she'd come back someday. A car'd come into the drive, and I'd wonder who that car could be, and it'd be her. And she'd sit a minute. Then get out. Haul her suitcases. Stand and look at the house. Set her suitcases down. Wipe her eyes. She'd be crying. An' then, just like that, she'd come in and take over. And … I don't know. Something. Something'd be different. My life'd

be different. I'd dry the dishes, maybe, with her—I don't know—just my life'd be different. Did you ever think that?"

A million things came to Corey to say. A million fled. "No, not really," he said.

"So, for you, what? When she was gone, she was just … gone?"

"Pretty much."

Rock turned back to his open cab window. He put his arm out into the night's gathering dark, hand flat, like an airplane wing. Like his hand, he drifted, mused. "I'd like to get some footage of her—you know?—on my videotape," he said. "So what did you say before? Delaware?"

"She could be anywhere," Corey said. "Thing about your mother is, she moves around. What you can count on is that she'll never be where she was. She's a leaver. She leaves places."

"Where else?"

"North Carolina. She was there for a while. Then she moved. I think that was when she moved up to Maryland. Or Delaware. She likes water. She likes places by water. I'm not sure."

"I'd just like to get some footage on my videotape," Rock repeated.

"That'd be nice," Corey said.

Corey's mind danced like blown laundry on a line—sheets and pillowcases furling, then unfurling, making their rustling and snapping noises—all the sound and motion of wonder. He wondered, for instance: Why do any of us hold on to anything? To other people? Then, further along: Why do any of us let go? Was it something in the muscles? The reflexes? Do certain people get tired? Grow distracted? Forget? Some other place, some other person, catches their attention—they forget something's in their hand? Or they have their hands balled up in a fist? They can't roll their fingers out like a carpet? They have a kind of arthritis?

Or maybe certain people liked feeling something in their hands. Corey did. He liked earth. He liked the roots of things—trees and flowers—the way they curled, the way they tangled around your hand, even when you didn't want them. And Corey liked doorknobs. Against his palm. Turning them—making a door swing suddenly free, making a door open or closing it, not too loudly behind you. And he liked holding on to the wheel, feeling his fingers hooked around it. He felt like a

dancer, sliding his hands left, hands right, making a large thing like a flatbed trailer alter its path, sway.

So … what? What was all of this laundry of his wondering getting at? What was he trying to know—all those sheets and pillowcases fluttering? Like tongues.

They stopped that night at the Owl Motel in Truckee. Going to sleep, Corey heard Rock speaking into his camera microphone. "This is where the hot water comes out of the tap … rusty." "This is the instant coffee my mother would make in the morning if she was with us." It made Corey smile—he didn't know why—Rock's rambling. He was like a car battery on a charge.

What Corey observed most in Rock was his treasuring of the camera—no other word. He'd bought it on a whim—to take his body-shop paycheck, buy something, and own it—but when he began to use it, the world changed! With the video, he was able to hold complex machinery and operate it. He would take a light reading or he would set a lens and the camera would join in; it would respond. It was light to his touch. The fingers on his hands felt new-made, like transplanted fingers. They would work so quickly and without error. And if he ever doubted himself or the feelings—alive and newly in him—all he would have to do was insert the tape, play the film back, and have evidence. There! Look! He had taken the readings, measured the distance, pointed the lens, framed the subject, zoomed closer, spoken the commentary. See? There it was—playing back on the television.

And when professional people, people trained in television, took his phone call, heard what he had filmed, they'd asked Rock to FedEx it. They bought it. And broadcast it. Amazing. Rock the rock. Well, things were heading in a different direction. When that happened, something began to change measurably in Rock's life. At the tips of his fingers. Behind his eyes and in his heart. The world wasn't the same. He had thought it to be one thing, but it was another. And he was as important to the world, or more so, than the next person! And Rock would find himself touching his body in new ways: the back of his head, his biceps, his thighs, his eye sockets. Had these always been there? Were these really the same parts of the same person who had gone through grade

school? They didn't feel like great, useless, dying parts. It was amazing. It was a miracle.

And then—and he wouldn't have spoken these words to himself, not at the start of the trip anyway—to be important to his father! To be asked to be his father's partner in the delivering of the National Tree. It was all very large to Rock, very important. And almost overnight, it seemed, both the world and the light in it shifted. He was both making and on the news. Anyone in the world watching television knew him. And the whole sound of laughter was new—music, not noise. When people laughed, Rock laughed with them. Rock even liked his name. He felt transformed.

"This is the spackle on the ceiling in the Owl Motel in Truckee," Rock mumbled sleepily into the camera. He was stretched the length of his bed, his feet hanging over. He reached up, wide hand searching, and flipped a switch. "Now, this is the spackle on the ceiling in the Owl Motel in Truckee … with the lights out," he said. Then he turned the camera off and set it gently by his bedside in the event that should he awake to an important moment, it would be there.

The next day, the phone rang, rousting them early. It was a man from John Ascuaga's Nugget, a casino in Sparks. Corey asked how the man knew where they were. "Hell," the man said, "the whole country knows. Whole country is aware. You caught any of Eye-Watch Two? They got you tracked. You got the world following your path." He told Corey there'd been a map on the EyeWitness News (different channel) just the night before that lit up their whole route. "You guys are winners—straight up," the man said. "And if John Ascuaga's Nugget appreciates anybody, it's winners. How'd you like to be the Nugget's guests for breakfast?"

Corey asked Rock. Rock said fine. The man said the casino also wanted them each to have a hundred dollars in casino tokens to gamble. "That'd be fine," Corey said.

Something had awakened Corey abruptly earlier that morning—not a thing tangible, not a thing in the room or visible in the world. It was a sensation. In his neck, mostly, and across the raw topographics of his back. Like earth tremors. Like sand shifting under an ocean tide. Like

coral—flaking away or finding itself formed in tiny new boluses and knots. All registering in the curious seismograph of his back. But there was nothing that Corey could find actually in the world so as to locate it with his eyes. And then his eyes closed, and he slept.

"I want you to drive," he told Rock as his son lumbered out of the shower.

"Me? You want me to drive?"

"Yes," Corey said. "Year ago, you told me you'd fooled around in the lot at the body shop, with a Peterbilt cab-over. Ten-speed."

Rock fairly licked his chops. "Wow!" he said.

"Don't push. Get the feel. It'll be a good thing—if we're able to switch off."

"I can do it," Rock said.

"You're going to have to get a feel for the length. It's a long load. Different than just taking a cab-over and tooling around some lot."

"I can do it," Rock repeated.

"I suspect you can," Corey said.

"Except—"

"What."

"Who'll film, then?" Rock said. "Who'll run the video camera?"

"If you can handle this Kenworth, I can handle your videocam," Corey said. And then he grinned. "Just kidding," he said, then added, "you need to videotape, we'll stop. "It's not that far—Sparks."

So Rock drove—tentatively at first, gingerly, stiffly. Everything seemed like his own body had for a large portion of his life—bigger than it should be, awkward, stiff, hard to shift the weight of, move comfortably with. But like his own body, it relaxed. Like his own body had, the truck began making friends with him.

And Corey sat alongside, his own back mysteriously alive, suddenly, with reception, a satellite dish for any of the world's instability.

"Something wrong?" Rock sensed and asked.

"Not entirely sure," Corey said. "It's just—suddenly I'm feeling and seeing things." Fish forms, fish shadows, had begun to dart in a roaring pattern in his brain.

"That can happen," Rock said.

They were driving east, slightly north, through the Tahoe National Forest. It was dense and beautiful. Mountain country. Pinion so green they'd knock your eye out. And then patches of blight. Something in Corey's brain had the taste of chemicals dumped into a stream.

"Strange," Corey kept saying. "I don't know why, but something about me, today, is strange."

"It's not new," Rock said and grinned, his broad abdomen pressing the steering wheel, downshifting into seventh to crest a rise, then shifting up to eighth, ninth, and tenth on the slight downgrade. Rock had it—he could feel—he had control.

Then, eighteen miles into their day's drive, way up in the Sierra, in the thick and high pine, there was a mist, a sudden vacuum, it seemed, of oxygen, a yellow drift of something in the air. Corey could see Rock's eyes begin to water. Rock tried to wipe the dampness away. A man and a woman stood on the side of the road next to a Plymouth Fury. The man gave them a high-energy wave with both hands.

"People are so great," Rock said, clearing his eyes.

"I'm not sure that was the same wave we've been getting," Corey said. He looked back. The man, and now his wife, were still waving. Corey didn't like what he saw.

"What do you mean, not the same wave?"

"I'm not sure."

In a brash dismissive gesture, Rock swept his hand across the inside of the windshield. "Hey, it's fog," he said. "Early-morning fog."

Possibly—but then what Rock called early-morning fog thickened.

"Oh, Lord! Oh, shit!" Corey said, sitting ramrod, eyes like golfballs.

"Hey, c'mon. Don't go ballistic," Rock said.

Corey stared out the windshield. Plumes and ribbons and waves of flame were cutting through the trees, north to south. They were roaring, leaping, crazed—like a broken-field runner, like a thousand broken-field runners, set ablaze. Waves of jaundiced smoke poured out of the trees. Even inside the cab of the truck, Corey could hear the fibers of the huge tree trunks snapping.

There was no turning around.

"Stop the truck!" Corey shouted. "Stop! I need to get up on the

back! With the water! And the pumps!"

Finally, Rock saw it too. His hand went to his mouth. "Shit!" he said. "Shit!"

The two started shouting. Panic. Blue words.

"Dad! We're going to die!" Rock screamed.

"No we're not!"

"We're in a fire!"

"I know! We're in a fire! We're in a fire, son," Corey said, trying for calm. "So, since I've been here before, listen to me. Fire was the thing, obviously, I was sensing. Fire was why those people were waving. So, okay? We together on this? I'm trying to be clear. Stop the truck."

Rock took his foot from the gas pedal and, at first, let the truck glide over to the side of the interstate. "But, I mean, what do we …?"

"Stop the truck! Do everything I say." And then he saw it coming, all the hellishness—roiling, leaping—in front and to both sides. "Lord! Lord Jesus. Hell!" Corey cried. "Rock! I need to get up on the back with the tree and the pumps. We can't lose it; we can't lose this tree!"

"But …!"

"I won't lose this tree! I've promised it! So, as soon as I'm up … and standing … and set … I'll signal you. Then, you just drive like hell. It's not here yet. The full fire. It's still some distance. I'm not saying that it's going to do this—it may not! But the fire might cross the road. If it does, if it's there in front of you—you just put the pedal to the floor … and you drive through … you drive right through it!"

"Cross the road? The fire?"

"It may happen!"

"But …!"

"Son, we don't have time! Just act! Just set those steps in your mind—signal from me, pedal to the floor, drive through. Just act!"

So they did. Corey hopped out, climbed up, guyed himself with four extra bungee cords—through his belt, over the siderails. It gave him a slight elasticity and kept him centered at the same time. He soaked the tree—pumped and pumped water from the storage tank. He could see flames rolling through the standing forest like a hot avalanche. He could hear cracklings and crisp snaps that he hoped weren't the popping and

asphyxiation of the Sitka's xylem and chloroplasts.

All he could hope for was light, clear air and light. And all he could do was pump: Keep the tree doused—gallons upon gallons of water, emptying the tank, soaking down the tree. He could feel the heat in his lungs, building, mobilizing, his back like a microwave. And more and more, he could feel a vagueness disassociated from where he was, adrift and dizzy.

There were the mud and red and orange smokes all around. The blur of brain unhinged the landscape. The fire cooked and roiled. Half of Corey's blood and body fluid seemed to boil out. Very little continued to be real.

But Rock drove as his Dad had instructed, his foot jamming the pedal to the floor. He had managed to anchor his steadicam at the back window, switched it on and hoped for the best. Rock wondered: What if the truck blew up? Like a mine blast. What if he passed out at the wheel—his hands fisted there, gripping? And then it came to him that only one hand gripping the wheel was his own. The other was his father's. And of course, it came as well that one of the hands pumping the water was his. Who was who? Who was where? Who was driving? Who pumping? In the smoke and fire, it was all crazy. But he drove nevertheless. Or someone drove. Drove and drove.

And all the while, the fire bore down right at them in the worst scenario Corey could have envisioned, the worst convulsion he might have imagined along the meltdown receptors of his back. Fire came to the edge of the road. Fire crossed it. So they were at fire. They were in fire. Then, finally, somehow they were through. Fire was behind them.

Then behind them more.

Then, when it was at least two miles behind, Rock could see his father again, cleared of the smoke, standing in the back of the truck. Straight, blackened, rigid—a kind of matchstick puppet of himself; the pump, frozen in his hands, no more water pumping through.

Rock's breath felt like bone—stiff and porous at the same time, locked in place, yet with all these granular holes. And his heart thundered like the surf. It was so strange: His father's standing and spent figure, the tree green—beaded, even, with what almost looked like dew. The

picture didn't seem real. What would his videocam show?

So when the fire was just smoke on black, fading, distant, miles behind in the rear window, Rock pulled over the Kenworth, stopped, and got out, his heart thundering, his breath like some rib of his anatomy. "Hey! We made it!" he shouted up to where his father stood, frozen. "Dad! We made it! The tree looks fine! The tree looks great! How'd I do?"

And then he saw. His father's mouth—slack, toneless—hung open. His father's eyes—closed.

Rock leapt onto the flatbed. He tore the bungees from his father's belt, threw him over his shoulder and, cradling Corey's head against any impact on the truck side, crouched to sitting and then slid the both of them from the bed of the truck.

He laid his father on the roadside. Rock had never done this, anything like this; he had never had training, but some urgent instinct instructed. Ear to his father's chest for heartbeat: Yes! Hand to his father's mouth for breath: None! And so, again, instinct the only reflex, the only determinant, not knowledge, he set his mouth to his father's mouth and blew in. At the same time he pressed, then, rhythmically, pressed again at his father's chest.

Breath blown in.

Weight on the chest.

Arms under the back lifting up to help the breath be pressed out.

Had he seen this somewhere? In a cop show?

Breath blown in. Weight. Lift.

Breath blown in. Weight. Lift.

Breath blown in. Weight. Lift.

And Rock's own heart slamming the whole time, his own eyes soaked and spilling.

Until Corey began to make noise. One. Another. Noises only from his body. Moans and grunts. Then coughs, sniffles, coughs, groans. Some movement. Some slight flailing. Still, Rock kept up. He tried not to lose rhythm. And then louder groans and more flailing. Rock pressed. A flail caught his face. Broken skin. Blood.

But Corey was breathing, sucking in, coughing out. Rolling on the ground now—in the dirt, in the cinders—side to side, as though he

were trying to mobilize his own body, jerk and wrench it back to life.

So finally Rock eased up, sat back. His own chest felt broken. His own breath felt weak and thin. He rested on his haunches. Wiped his face. Watched. His father was twisting, making raw and angry body sounds. It was clear he needed more of an envelope, more space.

So Rock unstradled his father—trying, always, to be careful with his bulk and size. Stood. He paced around his father briefly. Then he walked into the edge of the woods, put both hands on a tree, leaned in, settled his own breathing. He took a glance back at the smoke pouring from Tahoe National Forest. It was still there, not diminishing. The fire. But it was not chasing them. They were safe.

"We make it?" he heard his father gasp.

He walked close, but "Yeah" was all, at first, he could manage, sounding to himself like who he'd been—the colossal sulking Rock—not the more graceful person he'd begun to become.

"You drove well," his father managed.

"Thanks."

"Just the way I asked. And Lord Jesus, we made it. Tree's okay?"

"Tree's okay," Rock confirmed.

"Well, hey, we're a good team, then. A pair." Corey raised himself onto his elbows.

And with that, Rock realized that he'd breathed life into his own father. His father hadn't been breathing.

Then Corey began moving, hauling himself up onto his hands and knees. Rock considered helping his father stand, offering a hand, but something said no, his father wanted to get his own body up. "Hey! You pumped like a madman!" Rock grinned at Corey.

"Well, let me tell you—" He was squatting now, hands off the ground, trying to see if his head had balance. "Let me tell you, I certainly felt like a madman," Corey said. He tipped to one side, righted himself, stayed that way. "We'll need to fill that tank up in Sparks," he said finally. "We used a lot of water."

Do you know that I breathed life into you? Rock considered asking, then stopped. It seemed like such powerful information. It seemed like all he would have to do is say it to his father, and their relationship

would never be the same again.

Instead, he kept it in. Held it. And they just both got back up and into the truck. Corey climbed into the driver's seat by habit and turned on the ignition. "You feel like driving this rig?" Corey asked. "I really can't see straight yet. And you did such an amazing job—I think, maybe, you're the one who should drive it."

Rock smiled. "I think maybe I will."

In the exchange of seats, on the soft shoulder, Rock asked, "Should we open one of R.D.'s gifts?"

"Well, that's always a possibility. He said they were for rough times, and I would say the fire qualifies."

"So, who should …?"

"He said, the person most feeling beat-up."

"Should give it, right?" Rock finished the thought. "So I guess that's you."

"How're you feeling?"

"Good. Pretty excited, actually, that we did it. Got through."

"Me too. So, maybe, it would be better to wait. Until a time when …"

"No." Rock shook his head. "No; I think now."

Corey remembered the assembled tribal men and women at the edge of the sea. There was a way, they understood, to do even simple things. The ghost of his mine-blast burns crawled the length of his back; he could feel scar tissue rising up like a contour map. R.D. had set out rules for a ceremony. "I just want to do it right," Corey said to his son. "I want to honor R.D. I don't want to do it wrong."

"I don't want to do it wrong, either," Rock said.

Corey climbed up on the truck and opened the appropriate locker. He peered in, lifted the lid of R.D.'s cardboard box, and tried staring into it. Under his shirt, rippling and alive it seemed, just below his shoulder blades, Corey could feel his skin acting out its old memory of burn. Rock stood behind at the roadside and said nothing. Finally, Corey dipped down into the box—at first with caution, then commitment: right hand, left, trying to let his fingers feel for shape, make their choice. They found something about eight inches in diameter and with

practically no heft or weight. Corey lifted it out.

"What does it feel like?" Rock asked.

"Like newspaper. Like something wrapped. One thing at a time," Corey said.

He closed the cardboard lid and locker door, moved to the flatbed's near edge, and jumped down. The paper juggled in his hand like a whiffleball. He almost lost it.

"Doesn't seem like it's very heavy," Rock observed.

Corey held it out.

"So—what? I don't remember what R.D. said. I'm supposed to take this?" Rock asked.

Corey nodded.

Rock reached forward and took the package. Held it. "Well, it can't be much," he said. "It's like one of those paper birds. Doesn't weigh shit." He saw his father's face. "I mean, anything."

"Well, it's yours now," Corey said. "It's not mine anymore. Whatever it is, it's gone from my hand to your hand. Just like R.D. said."

"Your hand to my hand," Rock repeated. He smiled.

"I know. So …"

"So, okay." Rock began to fold back the loose edges of the newsprint. Slowly. Curiously. Uncertainly. "Damn."

"What?"

"Now that I'm doing it, I see you had the easy part. All you had to do was give it. I have to open it."

"You want to change? Give it to me? Have me open it?"

Rock thought. "No." Then went back to the unfolding, pulling the paper out and away from itself.

At the center of the paper was a small six-ounce bottle of a woman's perfume—a scent called "Wanting." "What's this?" Rock asked. "Some joke?" He held the bottle up—turned it left, turned it right, turned it upside down so that the light played through it. "You think it's, like, maybe bourbon or something? In a woman's perfume bottle?" And with that he unscrewed the cap and lifted the small bottle to his face.

Corey picked up the loose news wrapping Rock had dropped. He didn't want to litter.

"It's perfume," Rock announced, flaring his nostrils, inhaling. He held the bottle out for his father.

Corey inhaled.

"So it's a joke, right? R.D. thinking he's pretty funny?"

"I don't think so," Corey said—his voice, suddenly, husky.

Rock inhaled again. Again. "Wanting." He let the scent penetrate. Stood. Got lost for a minute—Corey could see it—in some chamber. Some lost notion. Some lost urge or memory. Then he took the tiny black cap and refastened it. "God," he said. "Can you imagine a woman smelling like that?" And what Corey didn't tell him was: Yes, I can. Your mother did.