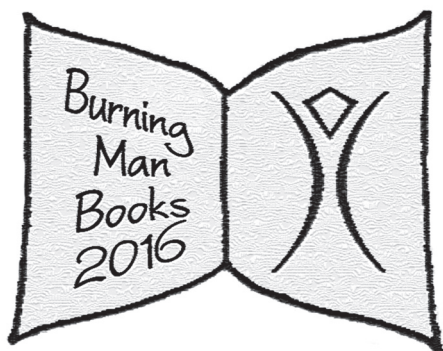


Like Homecooking



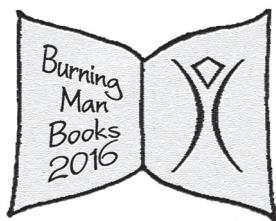
Selected Short Fictions of Richard Brautigan



Edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.
& Kassandra Soulard

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Number Seventy

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This volume was composed
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*I first saw your work in a bargain bin,
as you were spiraling down.
This book to praise your writing anew,
& share you on.*

It Was the Second Year After World War II Ended



It was the second year after World War II ended, when they rattled down a rutted, mud-hardened road toward the pond in an old pickup truck that had their fishing furniture piled on the back. It was always around 7 o'clock in the summer evenings of 1947 when they pulled up beside the pond and began taking their furniture off the truck.

First, they took the couch off. It was a big heavy couch but it was no problem for them because they were both big heavy people. She was just about as big as he was. They put the couch down on the grass right beside the pond, so they could sit there and fish off the couch.

They always took the couch off first and then they got the rest of the furniture. It took them no time at all to set up their things. They were very efficient at it and obviously had been doing this for years before I saw them and began waiting for them to arrive at the pond and became, in my own small way, a part of their life.

Sometimes I would arrive early and wait for them.

As I sit here on August 1st, 1979, my ear is pressed up against the past as if to the wall of a house that no longer exists.

I can hear the sound of redwing blackbirds and the wind blowing hard against the cattails. They rustle in the wind like ghost swords in battle and there is the steady lapping of the pond at the shore's edge, which I belong to with my imagination.

The blackbirds sound like melancholy exclamation marks typed on the summer late afternoon, which has a feeling of bored exhaustion because a hot wind is blowing from the south. That kind of wind is always tiring and gets on my nerves.

A plank has been crudely engineered with the help of a small log at the end and some stake-like pilings to form at best the world's saddest fishing dock.

It's really pathetic, and all of my own design and construction,

so there's really no one else to blame, and I'm standing on the end of it, about twelve feet away from the shore. The plank cuts a narrow corridor through the cattails to get to the open water of the pond. The plank sags in the middle, so it's covered with three inches of water, and it's not solid enough to jump over.

My clown-like dock would collapse if I tried that, 1 so I have to wade through the water to get to the dry end of the plank to fish.

Fortunately, twelve-year-old boys don't care if they get their tennis shoes wet. It means practically nothing to them. They couldn't care less, so I'm standing there with wet feet, fishing into the southern wind, listening to the blackbirds and the dry sword-like rustling of the cattails and the steady lapping of the water against where the pond ends and the shore of the world begins.

I'm fishing directly across the pond from where they will come in a few hours and set up their furniture.

I'm waiting for them by watching my bobber bobbing up and down like a strange floating metronome and slowly drowning a worm because the fish are not interested in the slightest with its plight.

The fish just aren't biting, but I don't care.

I'm just waiting and this is as good a way to wait as any other way to wait because waiting's all the same anyway.

The sun is shining on the water in front of me, so I have to keep looking away. Whenever I look at the sun, it is reflected back to me like a shiny bedspread whose design is hundreds of wind-driven roller coasters.

There is no freshness to the sun.

The sun turned boring in the middle of the afternoon, as it does so often for children, and was almost out of style like old clothes that were poorly and uninterestingly designed from the very beginning. Maybe He should have thought twice about it.

The sun was burning me slightly but I didn't care. My face felt a little flushed. I wasn't wearing a hat. I seldom wore hats when I was a child. Hats were to come later on.

I had almost albino white hair.

Kids called me "Whitey."

I had been standing there so long that my tennis shoes were almost dry. They were at their half-life, which is the best time for tennis shoes. They felt as if they were truly a part of me like an extension of my soles. They were alive at the bottoms of my feet.

I didn't like it when my tennis shoes completely wore out and we didn't have any money to buy another pair. I always felt as if I had done something bad and was being punished for it.

I must be a better kid!

This was how God was punishing me: by making me wear fucked-up old tennis shoes, so that I was embarrassed to look at my own feet.

I was too young and naive then to link up the meaning of those ridiculingly defunct tennis shoes that I was forced to wear with the reality that we were on Welfare and Welfare was not designed to provide a child with any pride in its existence.

When I got a new pair of tennis shoes, my outlook on life immediately changed. I was a new person and proud to walk on the earth again and thanked God in my prayers for helping me get a new pair of tennis shoes.

My Name

I guess you are kind of curious as to who I am, but I am one of those who do not have a regular name. My name depends on you. Just call me whatever is in your mind.

If you are thinking about something that happened a long time ago: Somebody asked you a question and you did not know the answer.

That is my name.

Perhaps it was raining very hard.

That is my name.

Or somebody wanted you to do something. You did it. Then they told you what you did was wrong—"Sorry for the mistake,"—and you had to do something else.

That is my name.

Perhaps it was a game that you played when you were a child or something that came idly into your mind when you were old and sitting in a chair near the window.

That is my name.

Or you walked someplace. There were flowers all around.

That is my name.

Perhaps you stared into a river. There was somebody near you who loved you. They were about to touch you. You could feel this before it happened. Then it happened.

That is my name.

Or you heard someone calling from a great distance. Their voice was almost an echo.

That is my name.

Perhaps you were lying in bed, almost ready to go to sleep and you laughed at something, a joke unto yourself, a good way to end the day.

That is my name.

Or you were eating something good and for a second forgot what you were eating, but still went on, knowing it was good.

That is my name.

Perhaps it was around midnight and the fire tolled like a bell inside the stove.

That is my name.

Or you felt bad when she said that thing to you. She could have told it to someone else: Somebody who was more familiar with her problems.

That is my name.

The Kool-Aid Wino

When I was a child I had a friend who became a Kool-Aid wino as the result of a rupture. He was a member of a very large and poor German family. All the older children in the family had to work in the fields during the summer, picking beans for two-and-one-half cents a pound to keep the family going. Everyone worked except my friend who couldn't because he was ruptured. There was no money for an operation. There wasn't even enough money to buy him a truss. So he stayed home and became a Kool-Aid wino.

One morning in August I went over to his house. He was still in bed. He looked up at me from underneath a tattered revolution of old blankets. He had never slept under a sheet in his life.

"Did you bring the nickel you promised?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It's here in my pocket."

"Good."

He hopped out of bed and he was already dressed. He had told me once that he never took off his clothes when he went to bed.

"Why bother?" he had said. "You're only going to get up, anyway. Be prepared for it. You're not fooling anyone by taking your clothes off when you go to bed."

He went into the kitchen, stepping around the littlest children, whose wet diapers were in various stages of anarchy. He made his breakfast: a slice of homemade bread covered with Karo syrup and peanut butter.

"Let's go," he said.

We left the house with him still eating the sandwich. The store was three blocks away, on the other side of a field covered with heavy yellow grass. There were many pheasants in the field. Fat with summer they barely flew away when we came up to them.

"Hello," said the grocer. He was bald with a red birthmark

on his head. The birthmark looked just like an old car parked on his head. He automatically reached for a package of grape Kool-Aid and put it on the counter.

"Five cents."

"He's got it," my friend said.

I reached into my pocket and gave the nickel to the grocer. He nodded and the old red car wobbled back and forth on the road as if the driver were having an epileptic seizure. We left.

My friend led the way across the field. One of the pheasants didn't even bother to fly. He ran across the field in front of us like a feathered pig.

When we got back to my friend's house the ceremony began. To him the making of Kool-Aid was a romance and a ceremony. It had to be performed in an exact manner and with dignity.

First he got a gallon jar and we went around to the side of the house where the water spigot thrust itself out of the ground like the finger of a saint, surrounded by a mud puddle.

He opened the Kool-Aid and dumped it into the jar. Putting the jar under the spigot, he turned the water on. The water spit, splashed and guzzled out of the spigot.

He was careful to see that the jar did not overflow and the precious Kool-Aid spill out onto the ground. When the jar was full he turned the water off with a sudden but delicate motion like a famous brain surgeon removing a disordered portion of the imagination. Then he screwed the lid tightly onto the top of the jar and gave it a good shake. The first part of the ceremony was over.

Like the inspired priest of an exotic cult, he had performed the first part of the ceremony well.

His mother came around the side of the house and said in a voice filled with sand and string, "When are you going to do the dishes? . . . Huh?"

"Soon," he said.

"Well, you better," she said.

When she left, it was as if she had never been there at all. The second part of the ceremony began with him carrying the jar very carefully to an abandoned chicken house in the back. "The dishes can wait," he said to me. Bertrand Russell could not have stated it better.

He opened the chicken house door and we went in. The place was littered with half-rotten comic books. They were like fruit under a tree. In the corner was an old mattress and beside the mattress were four quart jars. He took the gallon jar over to them, and filled them carefully not spilling a drop. He screwed their caps on tightly and was now ready for a day's drinking.

You're supposed to make only two quarts of Kool-Aid from a package, but he always made a gallon, so his Kool-Aid was a mere shadow of its desired potency. And you're supposed to add a cup of sugar to every package of Kool-Aid, but he never put any sugar in his Kool-Aid because there wasn't any sugar to put in it.

He created his own Kool-Aid reality and was able to illuminate himself by it.

The Post Offices of Eastern Oregon

Driving along in Eastern Oregon: autumn and the guns in the back seat and the shells in the jockey box or glove compartment, whatever you elect to call it.

I was just another kid going deer hunting in this land of mountains. We had come a long ways, leaving before it was dark. Then all night.

Now the sun was shining inside the car, hot like an insect, a bee or something, trapped and buzzing against the windshield.

I was very sleepy and asking Uncle Jarv, who was stuffed beside me in the front seat, about the country and the animals. I looked over at Uncle Jarv. He was driving and the steering wheel was awkwardly close in front of him. He weighed well over two hundred pounds. The car was barely enough room for him.

There in the half-light of sleep was Uncle Jarv, some Copenhagen in his mouth. It was always there. People used to like Copenhagen. There were signs all around telling you to buy some. You don't see those signs any more.

Uncle Jarv had once been a locally famous high school athlete and later on, a legendary honky-tonker. He once had four hotel rooms at the same time and a bottle of whiskey in each room, but they had all left him. He had grown older. Uncle Jarv lived quietly, reflectively now, reading Western novels and listening to opera on the radio every Saturday morning. He always had some Copenhagen in his mouth. The four hotel rooms and the four bottles of whiskey had vanished. Copenhagen had become his fate and his eternal condition.

I was just another kid pleasantly thinking about the two boxes of 30:30 shells in the jockey box. "Are there any mountain lions?" I asked.

"You mean cougars?" Uncle Jarv said.

"Yeah, cougars."

"Sure," Uncle Jarv said. His face was red and his hair

was thin. He had never been a good-looking man but that had never stopped women from liking him. We kept crossing the same creek over and over again.

We crossed it at least a dozen times, and it was always a surprise to see the creek again because it was kind of pleasant, the water low with long months of heat, going through country that had been partially logged off.

"Are there any wolves?"

"A few. We're getting close to town now," Uncle Jarv said. We saw a farmhouse. Nobody lived there. It was abandoned like a musical instrument.

There was a good pile of wood beside the house. Do ghosts burn wood? I guess it's up to them, but the wood was the color of years.

"How about wildcats? There's a bounty on them, isn't there?"

We passed by a sawmill. There was a little log pond dammed up behind the creek. Two guys were standing on the logs. One of them had a lunch bucket in his hand.

"A few dollars," Uncle Jarv said.

We were now coming into the town. It was a small place. The houses and stores were rinky-tinky, and looked as if a lot of weather had been upon them.

"How about bears?" I said, just as we went around a bend in the road, and right in front of us was a pickup truck and there were two guys standing beside the truck, taking bears out of it.

"The country's filled with bears," Uncle Jarv said. "There are a couple of them right over there."

And sure enough . . . as if it were a plan, the guys were lifting the bears out, handling the bears as if they were huge pumpkins covered with long black hair. We stopped the car by the bears and got out.

There were people standing around looking at the bears. They were all old friends of Uncle Jarv's. They all said hello to Uncle Jarv, and where you been?

I had never heard so many people saying hello at once. Uncle Jarv had left the town many years before. "Hello, Jarv, hello." I expected the bears to say hello.

"Hello, Jarv, you old bad penny. What's that you're wearing around there for a belt? One of them Goodyears?"

"Ho-ho, let's take a look at the bears."

They were both cubs, weighing about fifty or sixty pounds. They had been shot up on Old Man Summers' Creek. The mother had gotten away. After the cubs were dead, she ran into a thicket, and hid close with the ticks.

Old Man Summers' Creek! That's where we were going hunting. Up Old Man Summers' Creek! I'd never been there before. Bears!

"She'll be mean," one of the guys standing there said. We were going to stay at his house. He was the guy who shot the bears. He was a good friend of Uncle Jarv's. They had played together on the high school football team during the Depression.

A woman came by. She had a sack of groceries in her arms. She stopped and looked at the bears. She got up very close, leaning over toward the bears, shoving celery tops in their faces.

They took the bears and put them on the front porch of an old two-story house. The house had wooden frosting all around the edges. It was a birthday cake from a previous century. Like candles we were going to stay there for the night.

The trellis around the porch had some kind of strange-looking vines growing on it, with even stranger-looking flowers. I'd seen those vines and the flowers before, but never on a house. They were hops.

It was the first time that I had ever seen hops growing on a house. That was an interesting taste in flowers. But it took a little while to get used to them.

The sun was shining out front and the shadow of the hops lay across the bears as if they were two glasses of dark beer. They were sitting there, backs against the wall.

"Hello, gentlemen. What would you like to drink?"

"A couple of bears."

"I'll check the icebox and see if they're cold. I put some in there a little while ago . . . yeah, they're cold."

The guy who shot the bears decided that he didn't want them, so somebody said, "Why don't you give them to the mayor? He likes bears." The town had a population of three hundred and fifty-two, including the mayor and the bears.

"I'll go tell the mayor there are some bears over here for him," somebody said and went to find the mayor.

Oh, how good those bears would taste: roasted, fried, boiled or made into spaghetti, bear spaghetti just like the Italians make.

Somebody had seen him over at the sheriff's. That was about an hour ago. He might still be there. Uncle Jarv and I went over and had lunch at a little restaurant. The screen door was badly in need of repair, and opened like a rusty bicycle. The waitress asked us what we wanted. There were some slot machines by the door. The county was wide open. We had some roast beef sandwiches with mashed potatoes and gravy. There were hundreds of flies in the place. Quite a crew of them had found some strips of flypaper that were hanging here and there like nooses in the restaurant, and were making themselves at home.

An old man came in. He said he wanted a glass of milk. The waitress got one for him. He drank it and put a nickel in a slot machine on his way out. Then he shook his head.

After we finished eating, Uncle Jarv had to go over to the post office and send a postcard. We walked over there and it was just a small building, more like a shack than anything else. We opened the screen door and went in.

There was a lot of post office stuff: a counter and an old clock with a long drooping hand like a mustache under the sea, swinging softly back and forth, keeping time with time.

There was a large nude photograph of Marilyn Monroe on the wall. The first one I had ever seen in a post office. She was lying on a big piece of red. It seemed like a strange thing to have on the wall of a post office, but of course I was a stranger in the land.

The postmistress was a middle-aged woman, and she had copied on her face one of those mouths they used to wear during the 1920s. Uncle Jarv bought a postcard and filled it up on the counter as if it were a glass of water.

It took a couple of moments. Halfway through the postcard Uncle Jarv stopped and glanced up at Marilyn Monroe. There was nothing lustful about his looking up there. She just as well could have been a photograph of mountains and trees.

I don't remember whom he was writing to. Perhaps it was to a friend or a relative. I stood there staring at the nude photograph of Marilyn Monroe for all I was worth. Then Uncle Jarv mailed the postcard. "Come on," he said.

We went back to the house where the bears were, but they were gone. "Where did they go?" somebody said.

A lot of people had gathered around and they were all talking about the missing bears and were kind of looking for the bears all over the place.

"They're dead," somebody said, trying to be reassuring, and pretty soon we were looking inside the house, and a woman went through the closets, looking for bears.

After a while the mayor came over and said, "I'm hungry. Where are my bears?"

Somebody told the mayor that they had disappeared into thin air and the mayor said, "That's impossible," and got down and looked under the porch. There were no bears there.

An hour or so passed and everybody gave up looking for the bears, and the sun went down. We sat outside on the front porch where once upon a time, there had been bears.

The men talked about playing high school football during the Depression, and made jokes about how old and fat they had grown. Somebody asked Uncle Jarv about the four hotel rooms and the four bottles of whiskey. Everybody laughed except Uncle Jarv. He smiled instead. Night had just started when somebody found the bears.

They were on a side street sitting in the front seat of a car. One of the bears had on a pair of pants and a checkered shirt. He

was wearing a red hunting hat and had a pipe in the mouth and two paws on the steering wheel like Barney Oldfield.

The other bear had on a white silk negligee, one of the kind you see advertised in the back pages of men's magazines, and a pair of felt slippers stuck on the feet. There was a pink bonnet tied on the head and a purse in the lap.

Somebody opened up the purse, but there wasn't anything inside. I don't know what they expected to find, but they were disappointed. What would a dead bear carry in its purse, anyway?

Strange is the thing that makes me recall all this again: the bears. It's a photograph in the newspaper of Marilyn Monroe, dead from a sleeping pill suicide, young and beautiful, as they say, with everything to live for.

The newspapers are filled with it: articles and photographs and the like—her body being taken away on a cart, the body wrapped in a dull blanket. I wonder what post office wall in Eastern Oregon will wear this photograph of Marilyn Monroe.

An attendant is pushing the cart out a door, and the sun is shining under the cart. Venetian blinds are in the photograph and the branches of a tree.

The Cleveland Wrecking Yard

Until recently my knowledge about the Cleveland Wrecking Yard had come from a couple of friends who'd bought things there. One of them bought a huge window: the frame, glass and everything for just a few dollars. It was a fine-looking window.

Then he chopped a hole in the side of his house up on Potrero Hill and put the window in. Now he has a panoramic view of the San Francisco County Hospital.

He can practically look right down into the wards and see old magazines eroded like the Grand Canyon from endless readings. He can practically hear the patients thinking about breakfast: I hate milk and thinking about dinner: I hate peas, and then he can watch the hospital slowly drown at night, hopelessly entangled in huge bunches of brick seaweed.

He bought that window at the Cleveland Wrecking Yard.

My other friend bought an iron roof at the Cleveland Wrecking Yard and took the roof down to Big Sur in an old station wagon and then he carried the iron roof on his back up the side of a mountain. He carried up half the roof on his back. It was no picnic. Then he bought a mule, George, from Pleasanton. George carried up the other half of the roof.

The mule didn't like what was happening at all. He lost a lot of weight because of the ticks, and the smell of the wildcats up on the plateau made him too nervous to graze there. My friend said jokingly that George had lost around two hundred pounds. The good wine country around Pleasanton in the Livermore Valley probably had looked a lot better to George than the wild side of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

My friend's place was a shack right beside a huge fireplace where there had once been a great mansion during the 1920s, built by a famous movie actor. The mansion was built before there was even a road down at Big Sur. The mansion had been brought over the mountains on the backs of mules, strung out

like ants, bringing visions of the good life to the poison oak, the ticks, and the salmon.

The mansion was on a promontory, high over the Pacific. Money could see farther in the 1920s and one could look out and see whales and the Hawaiian Islands and the Kuomintang in China.

The mansion burned down years ago.

The actor died.

His mules were made into soap.

His mistresses became bird nests of wrinkles.

Now only the fireplace remains as a sort of Carthaginian homage to Hollywood.

I was down there a few weeks ago to see my friend's roof. I wouldn't have passed up the chance for a million dollars, as they say. The roof looked like a colander to me. If that roof and the rain were running against each other at Bay Meadows, I'd bet on the rain and plan to spend my winnings at the World's Fair in Seattle.

My own experience with the Cleveland Wrecking Yard began two days ago when I heard about a used trout stream they had on sale out at the Yard. So I caught the Number 15 bus on Columbus Avenue and went out there for the first time.

There were two Negro boys sitting behind me on the bus. They were talking about Chubby Checker and the Twist. They thought that Chubby Checker was only fifteen years old because he didn't have a mustache. Then they talked about some other guy who did the twist forty-four hours in a row until he saw George Washington crossing the Delaware.

"Man, that's what I call twisting," one of the kids said.

"I don't think I could twist no forty-four hours in a row," the other kid said. "That's a lot of twisting."

I got off the bus right next to an abandoned Time Gasoline filling station and an abandoned fifty-cent self-service car wash. There was a long field on one side of the filling station. The field had once been covered with a housing project during the war, put there for the shipyard workers.

On the other side of the Time filling station was the Cleveland Wrecking Yard. I walked down there to have a look at the used trout stream. The Cleveland Wrecking Yard has a very long front window filled with signs and merchandise.

There was a sign in the window advertising a laundry marking machine for \$65.00. The original cost of the machine was \$175.00. Quite a saving.

There was another sign advertising new and used two and three ton hoists. I wondered how many hoists it would take to move a trout stream.

There was another sign that said:

THE FAMILY GIFT CENTER, GIFT SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY

The window was filled with hundreds of items for the entire family. Daddy, do you know what I want for Christmas? What, son? A bathroom. Mommy, do you know what I want for Christmas? What, Patricia? Some roofing material.

There were jungle hammocks in the window for distant relatives and dollar-ten-cent gallons of earth-brown enamel paint for other loved ones.

There was also a big sign that said:

USED TROUT STREAM FOR SALE. MUST BE SEEN TO BE APPRECIATED.

I went inside and looked at some ship's lanterns that were for sale next to the door. Then a salesman came up to me and said in a pleasant voice, "Can I help you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm curious about the trout stream you have for sale. Can you tell me something about it? How are you selling it?"

"We're selling it by the foot length. You can buy as little as you want or you can buy all we've got left. A man came in here this morning and bought 563 feet. He's going to give it to his

niece for a birthday present,” the salesman said.

“We’re selling the waterfalls separately of course, and the trees and birds, flowers grass and ferns we’re also selling extra. The insects we’re giving away free with a minimum purchase of ten feet of stream.”

“How much are you selling the stream for?” I asked.

“Six dollars and fifty-cents a foot,” he said. “That’s for the first hundred feet. After that it’s five dollars a foot.”

“How much are the birds?” I asked.

“Thirty-five cents apiece,” he said. “But of course they’re used. We can’t guarantee anything.”

“How wide is the stream?” I asked. “You said you were selling it by the length, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he said. “We’re selling it by the length. Its width runs between five and eleven feet. You don’t have to pay anything extra for width. It’s not a big stream, but it’s very pleasant.”

“What kinds of animals do you have?” I asked.

“We only have three deer left,” he said.

“Oh . . . What about flowers?”

“By the dozen,” he said.

“Is the stream clear?” I asked.

“Sir,” the salesman said. “I wouldn’t want you to think that we would ever sell a murky trout stream here. We always make sure they’re running crystal clear before we even think about moving them.”

“Where did the stream come from?” I asked.

“Colorado,” he said. “We moved it with loving care. We’ve never damaged a trout stream yet. We treat them all as if they were china.”

“You’re probably asked this all the time, but how’s fishing in the stream?” I asked.

“Very good,” he said. “Mostly German browns, but there are a few rainbows.”

“What do the trout cost?” I asked.

“They come with the stream,” he said. “Of course it’s all luck. You never know how many you’re going to get or how big

they are. But the fishing’s very good, you might say it’s excellent. Both bait and dry fly,” he said smiling.

“Where’s the stream at?” I asked. “I’d like to take a look at it. “

“It’s around in back,” he said. “You go straight through that door and then turn right until you’re outside. It’s stacked in lengths. You can’t miss it. The waterfalls are upstairs in the used plumbing department.”

“What about the animals?”

“Well, what’s left of the animals are straight back from the stream. You’ll see a bunch of our trucks parked on a road by the railroad tracks. Turn right on the road and follow it down past the piles of lumber. The animal shed’s right at the end of the lot.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I think I’ll look at the waterfalls first. You don’t have to come with me. Just tell me how to get there and I’ll find my own way.”

“All right,” he said. “Go up those stairs. You’ll see a bunch of doors and windows, turn left and you’ll find the used plumbing department. Here’s my card if you need any help.”

“Okay,” I said. “You’ve been a great help already. Thanks a lot. I’ll take a look around.”

“Good luck,” he said.

I went upstairs and there were thousands of doors there. I’d never seen so many doors before in my life. You could have built an entire city out of those doors. Doorstown. And there were enough windows up there to build a little suburb entirely out of windows. Windowville.

I turned left and went back and saw the faint glow of pearl-colored light. The light got stronger and stronger as I went farther back, and then I was in the used plumbing department, surrounded by hundreds of toilets.

The toilets were stacked on shelves. They were stacked five toilets high. There was a skylight above the toilets that made them glow like the Great Taboo Pearl of the South Sea movies.

Stacked over against the wall were the waterfalls. There

were about a dozen of them, ranging from a drop of a few feet to a drop of ten or fifteen feet.

There was one waterfall that was over sixty feet long. There were tags on the pieces of the big falls describing the correct order for putting the falls back together again.

The waterfalls all had price tags on them. They were more expensive than the stream. The waterfalls were selling for \$19.00 a foot.

I went into another room where there were piles of sweet-smelling lumber, glowing a soft yellow from a different color skylight above the lumber. In the shadows at the edge of the room under the sloping roof of the building were many sinks and urinals covered with dust, and there was also another waterfall about seventeen feet long, lying there in two lengths and already beginning to gather dust.

I had seen all I wanted of the waterfalls, and now I was very curious about the trout stream, so I followed the sales-man's directions and ended up outside the building.

O I had never in my life seen anything like that trout stream. It was stacked in piles of various lengths: ten, fifteen, twenty feet, etc. There was one pile of hundred-foot lengths. There was also a box of scraps. The scraps were in odd sizes ranging from six inches to a couple of feet.

There was a loudspeaker on the side of the building and soft music was coming out. It was a cloudy day and seagulls were circling high overhead.

Behind the stream were big bundles of trees and bushes. They were covered with sheets of patched canvas. You could see the tops and roots sticking out the ends of the bundles.

I went up close and looked at the lengths of stream. I could see some trout in them. I saw one good fish. I saw some crawdads crawling around the rocks at the bottom.

It looked like a fine stream. I put my hand in the water. It was cold and felt good.

I decided to go around to the side and look at the animals. I saw where the trucks were parked beside the railroad tracks. I

followed the road down past the piles of lumber, back to the shed where the animals were.

The salesman had been right. They were practically out of animals. About the only thing they had left in any abundance were mice. There were hundreds of mice.

Beside the shed was a huge wire birdcage, maybe fifty feet high, filled with many kinds of birds. The top of the cage had a piece of canvas over it, so the birds wouldn't get wet when it rained. There were woodpeckers and wild canaries and sparrows.

On my way back to where the trout stream was piled, I found the insects. They were inside a prefabricated steel building that was selling for eighty-cents a square foot. There was a sign over the door. It said

INSECTS

I Was Trying to Describe You to Someone

I was trying to describe you to someone a few days ago. You don't look like any girl I've ever seen before.

I couldn't say: "Well, she looks just like Jane Fonda except that she's got red hair and her mouth is different and of course she's not a movie star."

I couldn't say that because you don't look like Jane Fonda at all.

I finally ended up describing you as a movie I saw when I was a child in Tacoma, Washington. I guess I saw it in 1941 or '42: somewhere in there. I think I was seven or eight or six. It was a movie about rural electrification and a perfect 1930s New Deal morality kind of movie to show kids.

The movie was about farmers living in the country without electricity. They had to use lanterns to see by at night, for sewing and reading, and they didn't have any appliances, like toasters or washing machines, and they couldn't listen to the radio.

Then they built a dam with big electric generators and they put poles across the countryside and strung wire over fields and pastures.

There was an incredible heroic dimension that came from the simple putting up of poles for the wires to travel along. They looked ancient and modern at the same time.

Then the movie showed Electricity like a young Greek god coming to the farmer to take away forever the dark ways of his life.

Suddenly, religiously, with the throwing of a switch the farmer had electric lights to see by when he milked his cows in the early black winter mornings.

The farmer's family got to listen to the radio and have a toaster and lots of bright lights to sew dresses and read the newspaper by.

It was really a fantastic movie and excited me like listening

to "The Star-Spangled Banner" or seeing photographs of President Roosevelt or hearing him on the radio.

" . . . The President of the United States . . . "

I wanted electricity to go everywhere in the world. I wanted all the farmers in the world to be able to listen to President Roosevelt on the radio.

That's how you look to me.

The Surgeon

I watched my day begin on Little Redfish Lake as clearly as the first light of dawn or the first ray of the sunrise, though the dawn and the sunrise had long since passed and it was now late in the morning.

The surgeon took a knife from the sheath at his belt and cut the throat of the chub with a very gentle motion, showing poetically how sharp the knife was, and then he heaved the fish back out into the lake.

The chub made an awkward dead splash and obeyed all the traffic laws of this world SCHOOL ZONE SPEED 25 MILES and sank to the cold bottom of the lake. It lay there white belly up like a school bus covered with snow. A trout swam over and took a look, just putting in time, and swam away.

The surgeon and I were talking about the AMA. I don't know how in the hell we got on the thing, but we were on it. Then he wiped the knife off and put it back in the sheath. I actually don't know how we got on the AMA.

The surgeon said that he had spent twenty-five years becoming a doctor. His studies had been interrupted by the Depression and two wars. He told me that he would give up the practice of medicine if it became socialized in America.

"I've never turned away a patient in my life, and I've never known another doctor who has. Last year I wrote off six thousand dollars worth of bad debts," he said.

I was going to say that a sick person should never under any conditions be a bad debt, but I decided to forget it. Nothing was going to be proved or changed on the shores of Little Redfish Lake, and as that chub had discovered, it was not a good place to have cosmetic surgery done.

"I worked three years ago for a union in Southern Utah that had a health plan," the surgeon said. "I would not care to practice medicine under such conditions. The patients think they own you and your time. They think you're their own personal

garbage can.

"I'd be home eating dinner and the telephone would ring, 'Help! Doctor! I'm dying! It's my stomach! I've got horrible pains!' I would get up from my dinner and rush over there.

"The guy would meet me at the door with a can of beer in his hand. 'Hi, doc, come on in. I'll get you a beer. I'm watching TV. The pain is all gone. Great, huh? I feel like a million. Sit down. I'll get you a beer, doc. The Ed Sullivan Show's on.'

"No thank you," the surgeon said. "I wouldn't care to practice medicine under such conditions. No thank you. No thanks.

"I like to hunt and I like to fish," he said. "That's why I moved to Twin Falls. I'd heard so much about Idaho hunting and fishing. I've been very disappointed. I've given up my practice, sold my home in Twin, and now I'm looking for a new place to settle down.

"I've written to Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, Oregon and Washington for their hunting and fishing regulations, and I'm studying them all," he said.

"I've got enough money to travel around for six months, looking for a place to settle down where the hunting and fishing is good. I'll get twelve hundred dollars back in income tax returns by not working any more this year. That's two hundred a month for not working. I don't understand this country," he said.

The surgeon's wife and children were in a trailer nearby. The trailer had come in the night before, pulled by a brand-new Rambler station wagon. He had two children, a boy two and-a-half years old and the other, an infant born prematurely, but now almost up to normal weight.

The surgeon told me that they'd come over from camping on Big Lost River where he had caught a fourteen-inch brook trout. He was young looking, though he did not have much hair on his head.

I talked to the surgeon for a little while longer and said good-bye. We were leaving in the afternoon for Lake Josephus

located at the edge of the Idaho Wilderness, and he was leaving for America, often only a place in the mind.

The Library

This is a beautiful library, timed perfectly, lush and American. The hour is midnight and the library is deep and carried like a dreaming child into the darkness of these pages. Though the library is “closed” I don’t have to go home because this is my home and has been for years, and besides, I have to be here all the time. That’s part of my position. I don’t want to sound like a petty official, but I am afraid to think what would happen if somebody came and I wasn’t here.

I have been sitting at this desk for hours, staring into the darkened shelves of books. I love their presence, the way they honor the wood they rest upon.

I know it’s going to rain.

Clouds have been playing with the blue style of the sky all day long, moving their heavy black wardrobes in, but so far nothing rain has happened.

I “closed” the library at nine, but if somebody has a book to bring in, there is a bell they can ring by the door that calls me from whatever I am doing in this place: sleeping, cooking, eating or making love to Vida who will be here shortly.

She gets off work at 11.30.

The bell comes from Fort Worth, Texas. The man who brought us the bell is dead now and no one learned his name. He brought the bell and put it down on a table. He seemed embarrassed and left, a stranger, many years ago. It is not a large bell, but it travels intimately along a small silver path that knows the map to our hearing.

Often books are brought in during the late evening and the early morning hours. I have to be here to receive them. That’s my job. I “open” the library at nine o’clock in the morning and “close” the library at nine in the evening, but I am here twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to receive the books.

An old woman brought in a book a couple of days ago at three o’clock in the morning. I heard the bell ringing inside my

sleep like a small highway being poured from a great distance into my ear. It woke up Vida, too.

"What is it?" she said.

"It's the bell," I said.

"No, it's a book," she said.

I told her to stay there in bed, to go back to sleep, that I would take care of it. I got up and dressed myself in the proper attitude for welcoming a new book into the library.

My clothes are not expensive but they are friendly and neat and my human presence is welcoming. People feel better when they look at me.

Vida had gone back to sleep. She looked nice with her long black hair spread out like a fan of dark lakes upon the pillow. I could not resist lifting up the covers to stare at her long sleeping form.

A fragrant odor rose like a garden in the air above the incredibly strange thing that was her body, motionless and dramatic lying there.

I went out and turned on the lights in the library. It looked quite cheerful, even though it was three o'clock in the morning.

The old woman waited behind the heavy glass of the front door. Because the library is very old-fashioned, the door has a religious affection to it.

The woman had a look of great excitement. She was very old, eighty I'd say, and wore the type of clothing that associates itself with the poor.

But no matter . . . rich or poor . . . the service is the same and could never be any different.

"I just finished it," she said through the heavy glass before I could open the door. Her voice, though slowed down a great deal by the glass, was bursting with joy, imagination and almost a kind of youth.

"I'm glad," I said back through the door. I hadn't quite got it open yet. We were sharing the same excitement through the glass.

"It's done!" she said, coming into the library, accompanied by an eighty-year-old lady.

"Congratulations," I said. "It's so wonderful to write a book."

"I walked all the way here," she said. "I started at midnight. I would have gotten here sooner if I weren't so old."

"Where do you live?" I said.

"The Kit Carson Hotel," she said. "And I've written a book," Then she handed it proudly to me as if it were the most precious thing in the world. And it was.

It was a loose-leaf notebook of the type that you find everywhere in America. There is no place that does not have them.

There was a heavy label pasted on the cover and written in broad green crayon across the label was the title:

GROWING FLOWERS BY CANDLELIGHT
IN HOTEL ROOMS
BY
MRS CHARLES FINE ADAMS

"What a wonderful title," I said. "I don't think we have a book like this in the entire library. This is a first."

She had a big smile on her face which had turned old about forty years ago, eroded by the gases and exiles of youth.

"It has taken me five years to write this book," she said. "I live at the Kit Carson Hotel and I've raised many flowers there in my room. My room doesn't have any windows, so I have to use candles. They work the best.

"I've also raised flowers by lantern light and magnifying glass, but they don't seem to do well, especially tulips and lilies of the valley. I've even tried raising flowers by flashlight, but that was very disappointing. I used three or four flashlights on some marigolds, but they didn't amount to much.

"Candles work the best. Flowers seem to like the smell of burning wax, if you know what I mean. Just show a flower a

candle and it starts growing.”

I looked through the book. That’s one of the things I get to do here. Actually, I’m the only person who gets to do it. The book was written in longhand with red, green and blue crayons. There were drawings of her hotel room with the flowers growing in the room.

Her room was very small and there were many flowers in it. The flowers were in tin cans and bottles and jars and they were all surrounded by burning candles.

Her room looked like a cathedral.

There was also a drawing of the former manager of the hotel and a drawing of the hotel elevator. The elevator looked like a very depressing place.

In her drawing of the hotel manager, he appeared to be very unhappy, tired and looked as if he needed a vacation. He also seemed to be looking over his shoulder at something that was about to enter his vision. It was a thing he did not want to see and it was just about there. Under the drawing was written this:

MANAGER OF THE KIT CARSON HOTEL
UNTIL HE GOT FIRED
FOR DRINKING IN THE ELEVATOR
AND FOR STEALING SHEETS

The book was about forty pages long. It looked quite interesting and would be a welcomed addition to our collection.

“You’re probably very tired,” I said. “Why don’t you sit down and I’ll make you a cup of instant coffee.”

“That would be wonderful,” she said. “It took me five years to write this book about flowers. I’ve worked very hard on it. I love flowers. Too bad my room doesn’t have any windows, but I’ve done the best I can with candles. Tulips do all right.”

Vida was sound asleep when I went back to my room. I turned on the light and it woke her up. She was blinking and her face had that soft marble quality to it that beautiful women have

when they are suddenly awakened and are not quite ready for it yet.

“What’s happening,” she said. “It’s another book,” she replied, answering her own question.

“Yes,” I said.

“What’s it about?” she said automatically like a gentle human phonograph.

“It’s about growing flowers in hotel rooms.” I put the water on for the coffee and sat down beside Vida who curled over and put her head on my lap, so that my lap was entirely enveloped in her watery black hair.

I could see one of her breasts. It was fantastic!

“Now what’s this about growing flowers in hotel rooms?” Vida said. “It couldn’t be that easy. What’s the real story?”

“By candlelight,” I said.

“Uh-huh,” Vida said. Even though I couldn’t see her face, I knew she was smiling. She has funny ideas about the library.

“It’s by an old woman,” I said. “She loves flowers but she doesn’t have any windows in her hotel room, so she grows them by candlelight.”

“Oh, baby,” Vida said, in that tone of voice she always uses for the library. She thinks this place is creepy and she doesn’t care for it very much.

I didn’t answer her. The coffee water was done and I took a spoonful of instant coffee and put it out in a cup.

“Instant coffee?” Vida said. “Yes,” I said. “I’m making it for the woman who just brought the book in. She’s very old and she walked a great distance to get here. I think she needs a cup of instant coffee.”

“It sounds like she does. Perhaps even a little amyl nitrate for a chaser. I’m just kidding. Do you need any help? I’ll get up.”

“No, honey,” I said. “I can take care of it. Did we eat all those cookies you baked?” “No,” she said. “The cookies are over there in that sack.” She pointed towards the white paper bag on the table. “I think there are a couple of chocolate cookies left.”

“What did you put them in the sack for?” I said.

"I don't know," she said. "Why does anyone put cookies in a sack? I just did."

Vida was resting her head on her elbow and watching me. She was unbelievable; her face, her eyes, her . . .

"Strong point," I said.

"Am I right?" she said, sleepily.

"Yup." I said.

I took the cup of coffee and put it on a small wooden tray, along with some canned milk and some sugar and a little plate for the cookies.

Vida had given me the tray as a present. She bought it at Cost Plus Imports and surprised me with it one day. I like surprises. "See you later," I said. "Go back to sleep."

"OK," and pulled the covers up over her head. Farewell, my lovely.

I took the coffee and cookies out to the old woman. She was sitting at a table with her face resting on her elbow and she was half asleep. There was an expression of dreaming on her face.

I hated to interrupt her. I know how much a dream can be worth, but, alas . . . "Hello," I said.

"Oh, hello," she said, breaking the dream cleanly.

"It's time for some coffee," I said.

"Oh, how nice," she said. "It's just what I need to wake me up. I'm a little tired because I walked so far. I guess I could have waited until tomorrow and taken the bus here, but I wanted to bring the book out right away because I just finished it at midnight and I've been working on it for five years."

"Five Years," she repeated, as if it were the name of a country where she was the President and the flowers growing by candlelight in her hotel room were her cabinet and I was the Secretary of Libraries.

"I think I'll register the book now," I said.

"That sounds wonderful," she said. "These are delicious cookies. Did you bake them yourself?"

I thought that was a rather strange question for her to ask

me. I have never been asked that question before. It startled me. It's funny how people can catch you off guard with a question about cookies.

"No," I said. "I didn't bake these cookies. A friend did."

"Well, whoever baked them knows how to bake cookies. The chocolate tastes wonderful. So chocolatey."

"Good," I said.

Now it was time to register the book. We register all the books we receive here in our Library Contents Ledger. It is a record of all the books we get day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year. They all go into the Ledger.

We don't use the Dewey decimal classification or any index system to keep track of our books. We record their entrance into the library in the Library Contents Ledger and then we give the book back to its author who is free to place it anywhere he wants in the library, on whatever shelf catches his fancy.

It doesn't make any difference where a book is placed because nobody ever checks them out and nobody ever comes here to read them. This is not that kind of library. This is another kind of library.

"I just love these cookies," the old woman said, finishing the last cookie. "Such a good chocolate flavor. You can't buy these in a store. Did a friend bake them?"

"Yes," I said. "A very good friend."

"Well, good for them. There isn't enough of that thing going on now, if you know what I mean."

"Yes," I said. "Chocolate cookies are good."

Vida baked them.

By now the old woman had finished the last drops of coffee in her cup, but she drank them again, even though they were gone. She wanted to make sure that she did not leave a drop in the cup, even to the point of drinking the last drop of coffee twice.

I could tell that she was preparing to say good-bye because she was trying to rise from her chair. I knew that she would never return again. This would be her only visit to the library.

"It's been so wonderful writing a book," she said. "Now it's done and I can return to my hotel room and my flowers. I'm very tired."

"Your book," I said, handing it to her. "You are free to put it anywhere you want to in the library, on any shelf you want."

"How exciting," she said.

She took her book very slowly over to a section where a lot of children are guided by a subconscious track of some kind to place their books on that shelf.

I don't remember ever seeing anyone over fifty put a book there before, but she went right there as if guided by the hands of the children and placed her book about growing flowers by candlelight in hotel rooms in between a book about Indians (pro) and an illustrated, highly favorable tract on strawberry jam.

She was very happy as she left the library to walk very slowly back to her room in the Kit Carson Hotel and the flowers that waited for her there.

I turned out the lights in the library and took the tray back to my room. I knew the library so well that I could do it in the dark. The returning path to my room was made comfortable by thoughts of flowers, America and Vida sleeping like a photograph here in the library.

Binoculars

Suddenly the stagecoach stopped on top of a ridge that had a meadow curving down from it. There was an Old Testament quantity of vultures circling and landing and rising again in the meadow. They were like flesh angels summoned to worship at a large spread-out temple of many small white formerly-living things.

"Sheep!" the driver yelled. "Thousands of them!"

He was looking down on the meadow through a pair of binoculars. The driver had once been an officer, a second lieutenant in the cavalry during the Indian Wars, so he carried a pair of binoculars with him when he was driving the stagecoach.

He had gotten out of the cavalry because he didn't like to kill Indians.

"The Morning County Sheepshooters Association has been working out this way," he said.

Everybody in the stagecoach looked out the windows and then got out as the driver climbed down from his seat. They stretched and tried to unwind the coils of travel while they watched the vultures eating sheep down below in the meadow.

Fortunately, the wind was blowing in an opposite manner so as not to bring them the smell of death. They could watch death while not having to be intimate with it.

"Those sheepshooters really know how to shoot sheep," the driver said.

"All you need is a gun," Cameron said.

Books

"I like your books," she said. "But you already know that."

He was stunned. He stood there looking at her. He waited for her to say something else. She didn't. She just smiled. Her smile was so subtle that it would have made the Mona Lisa seem like a clown performing a pratfall.

"Would you like a drink?" he said, suddenly pulling out of his psychic nose dive. Without waiting for her to answer he went into the kitchen and got a bottle of brandy and two glasses. It took him a few extra moments to get the brandy because he stood there in the kitchen, trying to figure out his next move.

He wanted very much to go to bed with this quiet and beautiful Japanese woman who miraculously was sitting on the couch in his apartment. It was something that he imagined would never happen. How was he going to succeed with her? He thought of her seduction as an exotic puzzle.

The pieces were floating like clouds across his mind but he couldn't even put two of them together. What was he going to do?

Suddenly he was very depressed, a feeling of hopelessness replaced the clouds in his mind. He sighed and walked back into the room.

The Japanese woman had taken her shoes and socks off and was sitting on the couch with her legs gracefully folded in a sort of meditating position that had a sensual quality. It was as if sensuality had brushed her body like a gentle summer breeze.

He was not prepared to see her sitting there with her shoes and socks off in that position. It was the last thing in the world he expected. Just a few seconds before in the kitchen his thoughts of seducing her had all turned to despair.

When he saw her there on the couch it completely turned his mind around and he was instantaneously relaxed. All thoughts of seduction had disappeared. He was very calm. He

put the bottle of brandy and the two glasses down on a table. He did not pour himself or her a drink. He just left the bottle and glasses alone on the table and he walked over to the couch and sat down beside her and reached out and took her hand which was reaching toward him.

He held her hand softly in his hand.

He looked very carefully at her fingers as if he had never seen fingers before. He was enchanted by them and thought that they were beautiful. He never wanted to let go. He wanted to hold her hand forever.

Her hand tightened in his hand.

He looked from her hand to her eyes.

They were narrow dark spaces filled with a reaching softness.

"You don't have to do anything," she said. Her voice, delicate as it was, had a strength to it that made one realize why a teacup can stay in one piece for centuries, defying the changes of history and the turmoil of man.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She smiled again and looked beyond his face to the room where his bed was. Without saying anything more he got up and led her there. Though he walked slightly in front of her, holding her hand, she was really the guide.

Firebug

Speaking of things going not according to plan, the morning that I moved over from the strange house in Berkeley back to San Francisco, the bus taking me here to the Japanese section of town, where I am at a hotel, was rerouted because a building was burning down.

Then the driver stopped and asked us all to get *off* the bus and change to another bus, so obligingly we all got off, but then somebody came running up to the bus, carrying himself in an official manner and uniform, yelling at the driver, trying to get his attention.

I paid no other attention to what was going on with the bus because I was too busy watching the building burn down. It was a huge fire with smoke rising like a vaporous tower from a disorganized fairy tale that I had failed to finish reading when I was a child or so the smoke seemed.

I had walked away from the other passengers to observe this burning phenomenon of architecture gone awry. It was a huge building and flames were pouring out the roof. Suddenly, almost instinctively, I turned around and saw the bus I had just gotten off driving away with all the passengers back on it. We all got off when we were told to, and then they all got back on again, except of course for me. I think it had something to do with the official who was running up to the bus, yelling. He must have told the driver to let the passengers return to the bus, which they all did, except for one passenger who was busy watching the fire.

That passenger decided to walk to his hotel. He did not want to deal anymore that morning with buses that had revolving doors. The fire was on the way to his hotel, so he stopped briefly and watched the flamey doings. The passenger had never been fascinated with burning buildings before, so his watching the fire was an exception to his lifestyle.

There were three ladder trucks with firemen on top of

long-flame-reaching ladders pouring water down on the fire, and there was a good crowd of people watching the building go.

The passenger noticed that there was almost a festive feeling among the observers. Many were smiling and some of them were laughing. Not attending fires regularly, preferring movies, he was fascinated by this.

A man complete with a sleeping bag and backpack containing what he called his life was sitting down across the street from the fire drinking a bottle of wino-type wine. The man looked as if wherever he went was his address, and only a bloodhound had any possibility of delivering his mail.

He enjoyed long, carefully thought-out sips of wine from a bottle in a paper bag while he watched the building burn down. It would be an easy matter for a trained mail-delivering bloodhound to track this man down. All the dog would have to do would be to follow a trail of paper bags with empty wine bottles in them to deliver this man a letter from his mother saying: "Don't ever come home again and stop calling. We don't want to have anything to do with you anymore. Get a job. —Love, your ex-mother."

It was not a building occupied on a Sunday morning, so there was no drama of life and death to mar or perhaps enhance the fire viewing. The passenger had no idea why people gathered to watch buildings burn down, especially if it had nothing to do with them, if it wasn't their house burning down or one nearby threatening to burn down where they lived.

Yes, the passenger found it all very different and interesting, and then he remembered a woman that he had been involved with years ago. They'd had an often very intense love affair that occupied large portions of his time in the late 1960s and finally dwindled out in the early 1970s. It was the kind of involvement referred to as "off and on."

During a time when he was not seeing her, she had picked up an undue interest in fires and become a fire truck

chaser. She would go out of her way anytime, day or night, to be at the site of a burning building. One morning around 4 a.m., she found herself watching a duplex join the kingdom of ashes and ruin when she noticed that she was wearing a bathrobe over her pajamas and had a pair of slippers on. She had just jumped out of bed when she heard the sound of nearby fire engines, slipped on her bathrobe, put on her slippers, and headed out the door toward the fire.

She had been watching the fire for about half an hour before she noticed what she was wearing. Her attire startled her. She had gone a little too far, so she hung fire-watching up.

She had absolutely no interest in becoming a nut.

She probably wondered how it had gotten this far.

She went home and vowed to denounce the siren call of sirens.

The passenger years later, watching a building burn down in San Francisco, decided spontaneously to call her on the telephone if she still lived in San Francisco. She had done a lot of traveling since he had known her in the later '60s. The last time he had seen her, accidentally meeting, she was living in San Francisco.

Perhaps she was still there.

He decided to call her up from a telephone booth right across the street from the fire. It seemed like a logical thing to do for a passenger whose bus had gone off without him.

What are old former fire-groupie lovers for?

The passenger dialed information and sure enough, she still lived in town. He called her and when she answered, she immediately identified the passenger's voice, though he had only said, "Hello," and she said hello back using his given name, which of course was not Passenger.

Though it would have been slightly amusing if she had said, "Hello, Passenger."

That would have startled and given the passenger cause

to think.

But no such thing happened, thank God, and the passenger returned her greeting by saying, "I was just thinking about you."

"Oh," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I'm watching a building burn down, and I thought I'd give you a call."

She laughed.

"I'm right across the street from it," he said.

She laughed again and said, "I just heard about it on the radio. They say the smoke is eight stories high."

"Yeah," the passenger said. "And there are three firemen standing at the end of ladders pouring water down onto the roof, but you probably know more about this than I do."

Again: laughter.

"Well," the passenger said. "That's about it. The next time I see something burning down, I'll give you a call."

"You do that," she said.

They both pleasantly hung up.

In the past there had been many exchanges between them that were not nearly as pleasant. The passenger thought about their past together: of first meeting, then becoming lovers, and days and nights together, crossing from one decade into another and then events crumbling away into blank years and the silence of emotional ruins.

The passenger thought about the telephone call that he had just made to her. Somehow it seemed perfect in its bizarre logic.

He never would have made that telephone call if the bus had not driven off without him, stranding him at the site of the fire, which he decided to investigate, having nothing better to do.

I guess that's what a passenger's supposed to do, pass from one place to another, but it doesn't make it any simpler. About all you can do is wish him luck, and hope that he has

some slight understanding of what uncontrollably is happening to him.

Kraft Dinner

The truck rattled to a stop and they got out. They were not surprised to see me because I was their uninvited houseguest, almost every night.

“Hello,” they both said in very slow unison that sounded as if it had originated quite close to Oklahoma. It was not a big friendly hello nor was it a little unfriendly hello. I just said a simple hello. I think they were still making up their minds about me.

I was sort of on probation, but I felt as if I were making some progress toward developing a minor pond comrades-in-catfish friendship with them. I had all summer to get to know them. I would outlast them.

Last week they asked me if I wanted to sit down on their couch with them, though that was very difficult because they both were so big that they practically took up the entire couch themselves. I barely made it on the couch with them like the last final squeeze of toothpaste from a tube.

They were both in their late thirties and over six feet tall and weighed in excess of 250 pounds, and they both wore bib overalls and tennis shoes. I haven’t the slightest idea what they did for a living because they never said a single word about what kind of job they did.

I had a feeling whatever they did for a living, they did together. They were the kind of people who looked as if they were never apart. I could see them coming to work together, working together, having lunch together and always wearing the same clothes. Whatever they did required that they wear bib overalls and tennis shoes.

I could see them filling out employment forms.

Under the line that asked about previous experience. They just put down “bib overalls and tennis shoes.”

I also had a feeling that whatever they did, they came directly from work to the pond. I don’t think they changed their

clothes because different, but always matching pairs of bibs and tennis shoes were their entire wardrobe.

I could imagine them even having special overalls and tennis shoes for church with the rest of the congregation sitting apart from them.

Well, whatever they did for a living hadn't made them rich because the furniture on the back of their truck was well-worn and looked as if it had not been very expensive to begin with. It looked like ordinary used furniture or the stuff you'd find in any furnished apartment where the rent was cheap.

Their furniture was a replica of the furniture that I had lived with all my twelve years. New furniture has no character whereas old furniture always has a past. New furniture is always mute, but old furniture can almost talk. You can almost hear it talking about the good times and troubles it's seen. I think there is a Country and Western song about talking furniture, but I can't remember the name.

After their perfunctory hello to me, they took the couch off the truck. They were both so efficient and strong that the couch came off the back of the truck like a ripe banana out of its skin. They carried it over to the pond and put it down very close to the water's edge, so they could fish right off it, but still leaving enough space so as not to get their tennis shoes wet.

Then they went back to the truck and got a big stuffed easy chair. The chair did not match the couch which was an Egyptian-mummy-wrapping beige. The stuffed chair was a blood-fading red.

She took the chair off by herself while he stood there waiting to take something off himself. As soon as the stuffed chair was on its way to join the couch by the pond's edge, he got two end tables off the truck and put them on each side of the couch. By this time she had gone back and gotten a rocking chair and set it up.

Then they took a small wood cookstove off the truck and they began creating a little kitchen in the corner of their living room.

The sun was just setting and the pond was totally calm.

They took a box of food and cooking things off the truck and a small table to use for preparing their evening meal. The man started a fire in the stove. They even brought their own wood. He was very good at starting fires because the stove was hot enough to cook on momentarily.

Redwing blackbirds were standing on the ends of the cattails and making their final night calls, saying things to other birds that would be continued the next morning at dawn.

I heard my first cricket chirp.

That cricket sounded so loud and so good that he could have been a star in a Walt Disney movie. Walt should have sent some scouts out and signed him up.

The man started cooking hamburgers.

The woman got three once-electric floor lamps that had now been converted to kerosene use off the truck. The kerosene worked real nice, though of course the lamps were not as bright as they would have been if they used electricity.

There was another interesting thing about those lamps. The people had never bothered to remove the cords. They were still fastened to the lamps. The cords didn't look wrong, but they didn't look right either. I wonder why they didn't take them off.

The woman put a floor lamp next to each end table beside the couch and lit them. The light from the lamps shined down on the end tables.

Then the woman got a cardboard box off the truck and took two photographs out of the box. They were in large ornate frames. I believe one photograph was of her parents and the other photograph was of his parents. They were very old photographs and tinted in the style of long ago. She put them down on one of the tables.

On the other table she put an old clock that had a heavy somber ticking to it. The clock sounded as if eternity could pull no tricks on it. There was also a small brass figure of a dog beside the clock. The figure looked very old and was a companion and watchdog for the clock.

Did I mention that she put a lace doily on the surface of that table before she put the dog and clock there?

Well, I have now, and there was also a lace doily on the end table that held the photographs of their parents. I might add that their parents were not wearing bib overalls and tennis shoes. They were dressed formally in perhaps the style of the 1890s.

There was another kerosene lamp burning on the worktable beside the stove where the burgers were cooking, but it was a traditional lamp. I mean, it looked like a kerosene lamp.

The man was also boiling some water for Kraft dinner and there was a can of pears on the table.

That was going to be their dinner tonight: 32 years ago.

The smoke rising from the stove sought desperately for a pipe but not finding one just drifted slowly around like an absentminded cripple.

Their living room was now completely set up except that I have forgotten to mention the *National Geographic* magazines that were on both end tables. Sometimes when the fishing was slow they would just read the *National Geographic* while waiting for a bite.

They drank a lot of coffee from a huge metal coffeepot that he was now filling with water from the pond. They also drank the coffee out of metal cups. They put a lot of sugar in their coffee. Every night they used a pound box of sugar. You could almost walk on their coffee. An ant would have been in paradise if it drank coffee.

While they were setting up this living-room ritual of life beside the pond, I sat in some grass nearby, just watching them, saying nothing.

They hardly spoke either and this evening, their conversation was mostly about people who weren't there.

"Father, Bill would have liked this place," she said.

They always called each other Mother or Father when they called each other anything. They did not spend a lot of time talking to each other. They had spent so much time together that there probably wasn't much more to be said.

"Yes, Mother, he would have been happy here. This is a good pond."

"I don't know why people have to move all the time, Father."

"Neither do I, Mother."

He flipped over a hamburger in the frying pan on the stove.

"Betty Ann moved in 1930," he said.

"That means Bill must have moved in either 1929 or 1931 because they moved a year apart," she said.

"I don't know why either of them moved," he said.

"Well, don't forget: we moved, too," she said.

"But it was different with us. We had to move," he said. "They didn't have to move. They just could have stayed there. They could still be there if they wanted to be," he said.

She didn't say anything after he said that.

She just busied herself with the living room beside the pond, futzing like women do when they want to think something over and it needs time.

More crickets had joined in with the first cricket, but the new crickets were not star material. They were just ordinary crickets. No one from Hollywood would ever come to Oregon and sign them up.

"How's the Kraft dinner?" she asked, sort of absentmindedly.

She had a feather duster in her hand and was dusting off their furniture that had gotten dusty because of the long gray destroyed road that had taken them to this pond in Oregon in late July 1947 the second year after the sky stopped making all that noise from endless flights of bombers and fighter planes passing overhead like the Hit Parade records of World War II, playing too loud on a jukebox that went all the way to the stars.

I was so glad the War was over.

I stared into the silence of the sky that used to be filled with warplanes.

"It's OK," he said. "I always thank the Kraft people

for inventing Kraft dinner because you never have any trouble cooking it. A lot more things should be like Kraft dinner. Nice and Easy. Take it nice and easy is my motto.”

“I guess it would be just as well if we don’t think about Bill and Betty Ann any more,” she replied to his observation about Kraft dinner. “We’re never going to see them again, anyway. We got a postcard from them in 1935. I was happy they got married. We haven’t heard a word since. Maybe they went to work in a plant during the War. They could be anywhere now, but I think they would have liked this place.”

The man was dishing up the Kraft dinner and hamburgers. They would have their dinner and then do some fishing. They would eat their dinner off cheap plates on the couch. When they started eating, they never said another word to each other until they were finished.

“Maybe they don’t even fish any more,” he said, bringing two plates of food over to the couch where she had just sat down. “People change. They give up fishing. A lot of people are interested in miniature golf. Maybe Bill and Betty Ann don’t feel like fishing any more.”

“I suppose,” she said. “But we’re too big to play miniature golf, not unless they wanted to use us for the course, Father.”

They both laughed and fell silently to eating their hamburgers and Kraft dinner.

I had become so quiet and so small in the grass by the pond that I was barely noticeable, hardly there. I think they had forgotten all about me. I sat there watching their living room shining out of the dark beside the pond. It looked like a fairy tale functioning happily in the post-World War II gothic of America before television crippled the imagination of America and turned people indoors and away from living out their own fantasies with dignity.

In those days people made their own imagination, like homecooking. Now our dreams are just any street in America lined with franchise restaurants. I sometimes think that even our digestion is a soundtrack recorded in Hollywood by the television

networks.

Anyway, I just kept getting smaller and smaller beside the pond, more and more unnoticed in the darkening summer grass until I disappeared into the 32 years that have passed since then, leaving me right here, right now.

Because they never spoke during dinner, I think after they finished eating they probably mentioned a little thing about my disappearance.

“Where did that kid go, Mother?”

“I don’t know, Father.”

Then they rigged up their fishing poles and got some coffee and just relaxed back on the couch, their fishing lines now quietly in the water and their living room illuminated by kerosene-burning electric floor lamps.

“I don’t see him anywhere.”

“I guess he’s gone.”

“Maybe he went home.”
