The Hunting Party

by C. P. Boyko

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SHE RAN AWAY from home with an artist who, when she became pregnant, did what he believed was the responsible thing: he married her, gave up painting, and found a steady job. She never forgave him for this treachery: she had certainly never intended to marry a *bank clerk*. When the child arrived, she did not let her husband hold it, and discouraged him as much as possible from speaking to it. She did not want her baby contaminated by his conformity. She spent his salary with an air of pious reproof, like a medieval pope spending the indulgences of sinners, and surrounded her child with expensive pictures, luxurious music, and the most beautiful calfskin-bound volumes of the best books ever written. Little Lance babbled contentedly in his bassinet when she read him a page of Longfellow. She was sure that he would be a great artist.

She subscribed to the idea of art as self-expression, and this idea guided her parenting. The best way, she believed, to nurture her son's artistic self-expression was to allow and indeed encourage him to do anything he wanted to do, and never to force him to do anything he didn't. Thus she praised (silently) his every rude, cruel, and selfish act as a demonstration of his innovativeness and guts, while she disapproved (silently) of any polite, cooperative, or generous behavior as being merely derivative and toadying. Under this (silent) tutelage, Lance soon proved precocious. He uttered his earliest sentences with poetic incorrectitude, cussed instinctively, and colored outside the lines with the very first crayons she gave him. At the dinner table he belched, spat out whatever did not please his palate, and saw through such empty, arbitrary customs as cutlery and napery. Outside the home he pointed at ugly people and sniffed at smelly people, shat in unconventional

locales, and kicked puppies and pulled the ears of kitties. He was a natural-born revolutionary.

She took care to indulge his every whim, certain that it was the Muse stirring in him. When he asked for candy, it was because art must be sweet. When he was bored, she arranged play dates with other boys and girls, because art is a social act. When he threw a tantrum over horseshoes, she sent the boys and girls home, because art is nothing if not the product of solitude and reflection. And when his uncompromising individuality discomfited his teachers, she permitted him to stay home from school, because art must find its own path to the truth.

But as he grew older, his whims dwindled. The things he did not want to do multiplied while the things he did want to do decreased, until as a young man all he wanted to do, it seemed, was sit around in soft chairs in dark rooms and read books. Even this he did listlessly, as if he simply couldn't think of anything better to do. She waited in vain for all this solitude and reflection to bear fruit in the form of a novel or even a poem, but the most she ever caught him writing was a note in the margin of an anthology. When she investigated later, she found that he had jotted one single word, faintly and clumsily, beside one of the greatest stanzas in English poetry. The word was "stupid." The poet was Longfellow.

In desperation she began inviting to dinner journalists, poets, novelists, and other writers. But, when Lance could be persuaded to join them at table, he seemed immune to the charms of the writing life. The rewards of imagination, the pride of craft, the challenge of constantly reinventing oneself, the vagaries of fame, the peccadilloes of publishers, the esoteric mystery of royalties—none of this captured his interest. He sat with his chin sunk upon his chest, staring into his soup with glazed eyes, occasionally letting a deep, sawing sigh cut right through one of the guests' anecdotes.

But one night his head snapped up at the sound of his mother laughing —laughing at *him*. Reconstructing the conversation from subliminal fragments, he determined that they had been talking about the war in South Africa. A large bearded man whom Lance vaguely recognized had recounted comprehensively his participation in that event. Then one of the literary

ladies had asked Lance's mother if *he* had been in it. This was the idea she found so humorous.

"Why not?" he demanded. "I was old enough. I might have gone."

"Undoubtedly, dearest. Mummy didn't mean anything by it. It was just the thought of you, in big heavy boots, and carrying a *gun*, with a great big pack on your back, climbing a *hill*—" She was overcome again by mirth.

Lance poured his coffee into his soup, pushed back his chair, got to his feet, and sashayed with dignity from the room and out of the house. He decided to run away from home.

He ran away from home often—once or twice a week, lately. The first time, at age twelve, he'd run away to protest a stomach flu which had prevented him from eating as much chocolate as he would have liked. He'd gone around the side of the house and crouched behind a rhododendron bush for fifteen minutes, till he could be sure that the universe and his mother had noted his disapproval. Since that time his escapes had taken him farther and farther from home. He found them both soothing and stimulating, so that by the time he returned—sometimes as much as three-quarters of an hour later—he could scarcely recall the injustice he had fled. Indeed, these runnings away were the closest he came to adventure outside the pages of a novel. He took care never to retrace his steps, but each time struck out in a different direction, trying his utmost to get lost. Most of the time we see the world as a schematic representation of itself, a sort of life-sized three-dimensional map. It is only in unfamiliar surroundings that we see the world as it really is, not cartographically, but pictorially, as a painter or photographer sees it. When Lance ran away from home, he instinctively ran away from the familiar and towards the unknown. When he entered a new park or walked down a strange lane for the first time, he felt that it could be a park or lane anywhere in the world—or in another world altogether.

Tonight he had to walk for twenty minutes before he found a turning he had never taken before. For those twenty minutes he brooded upon his mother's slanderous laughter. She thought he was weak! Unmanly! A sissy! He kicked at a stone in the road, but the stone resisted; and he continued on his way, now with a slight hobble and more outraged than ever. When the

throbbing in his foot had subsided, he kicked at a leaf, with more satisfactory results.

"There! *That's* your laughter, Mummy! That's your laughing face!" He imagined himself sitting atop her, and imagined her bucking and thrashing beneath him, but to no avail. "Now who's a weakling, hey, Mummy? Now who's laughing?"

Then he realized that he had no idea where he was, and his daydreams went out like a flame deprived of oxygen. He looked around him. A rickety fence separated a row of houses from the road, which sloped downhill past a copse of silver beeches to an open field. A lopsided moon outlined every cloud in the sky. The air was warm and moist and smelled faintly of the ocean. He drank in the night—and strode forward, into the unknown.

When he returned home, twenty-two minutes later, he found the large bearded man in the garden, moistening his lips with a brandy and moistening a cigar with his lips.

"Welcome back."

"Thank you."

"Nice walk?"

"Spiffing."

"Your mother." He held the cigar out to investigate his handiwork. "Says you write."

(Mrs. Chitdin had exaggerated.)

Giggling, Lance arranged himself on a nearby bench like a butler putting away the best china. When he was settled, he said nonchalantly, "I've composed ten novels."

(Mrs. Chitdin would have been surprised to hear it.)

"Guess I could see one?" said the man.

"Hardly! I don't write them *down*."

The man rotated the cigar in his mouth. "You just—make them up. In your head."

Writhing with suppressed giggles, Lance said, "I wouldn't know where else to make them up."

A woman came out of the house and joined them. She slipped her hand inside the large bearded man's elbow and said, "Maury, we promised Beepsie we'd be back at the hotel by nine."

"Lonnie," said the man with devastating patience, "it's not your turn right now. When I'm with someone, I'm with them. And right now, as you can see, I'm with the young man. So go back into the house—and don't act all put out. This is basic kindergarten stuff, doll."

A blush appeared on the woman's face, as if she had been slapped on both cheeks. Without another word, but proclaiming her recalcitrance with every step, she returned to the house.

Lance was impressed. "Is that your wife?"

"One of my little sisters, let's call her."

"Gee." He looked at the large bearded man more carefully. "You were in the war, huh?"

"Parts of it."

"Kill anybody?"

"Oh sure," he grimaced. "But one thing you learn. It's a lot easier to shoot a man than it is to pick up his corpse."

Lance lost interest in this sentence about halfway through. He was on his feet, holding an imaginary rifle at the level of his knees, and spraying the garden with imaginary bullets and real spittle. "P-kow! P-kosh! Take *that*, Mother! Ch-chow! Bakaw bakaw! And *that!*"

"Nowadays," said Maury thoughtfully, "I mostly just shoot deer."

HIS MOTHER HAD been a great beauty. She grew accustomed at a young age to marriage proposals and declarations of love; so that when she met Grant Masterson, who did not express his emotions, she was mystified and intrigued. She soon hectored him into admitting that she was beautiful, but it was several months before he betrayed the depth of his true feelings.

One night he asked almost petulantly, "Don't you ever feel lonely?"

"I don't know. Not really. Maybe sometimes." She laughed, "I get by."

"I'd like to make you feel lonely," he said.

"Hey! That's not nice."

"No. But fair's fair."

She peered at him. "*I* make *you* feel lonely?"

His sullen silence confirmed it.

"Then you love me!" she cried, clapping her hands. She was so delighted to have caught him, to have finally pinned him down, that she agreed when, a moment later, he asked her to marry him.

She died giving birth to their first child. Though marriage had not cured his loneliness, it also hadn't lasted long enough to cure him of his illusions. He still believed she was perfect—and, by dying, she guaranteed that his disappointment would be postponed perpetually. He beatified her memory, and blamed the child for her martyrdom.

He hated Maurice even as a baby. But he was good at hiding his feelings, even from himself, and believed that he merely took a cool-headed, pragmatic approach to parenting. In practice, this meant preventing the boy from doing things he wanted to do, and forcing him to do things he didn't. He believed this was the only way to give his son backbone—and it was evident from an early age that the boy was lacking in backbone. Thus, when the baby cried, his father ignored him till the crying ceased. When the boy complained, his father thrashed him till he cried. If he looked sleepy, his father made him stand in the corner and read aloud (but not loud enough to disturb his father's work) a page of Shakespeare: Dr. Masterson could imagine nothing more tiresome than poetry. If he seemed restless, his father sent him to bed. Since he often seemed lonely, his father prohibited playmates. (Besides, he could not stand children, with their hysterical histrionics, like a troupe of clowns desperately faking merriment under threat of the guillotine. Dr. Masterson prohibited merriment.) If the boy betrayed hunger, his father devised some reason for supper to be delayed, and when the boy looked sated, his father made him clear his plate. First desserts then fruit were outlawed, for Maurice consumed them with too overt pleasure; eventually the boy's diet was restricted to liver, rye bread, and garbanzo beans—the three foods he had shown the most distaste for, before he learned to hide his distastes.

As a man of science and his son's only tutor, Dr. Masterson could not quite bring himself to forbid the boy to read, though Maurice showed hardly any disinclination for this activity. Instead, he waited till the boy appeared most engrossed in a book, then ordered him out of doors to gulp down some fresh air. Occasionally Maurice returned from his exile looking inadequately dispirited, and his father accused him of meeting with other children or of eating an apple. But Maurice assured him that he had done nothing but trudge through the woods—he showed him the mud on his boots—and this satisfied his father, who could imagine no less congenial spot than a tangle of sappy trees beneath a grey, cloud-scoured sky.

His son felt differently, but was wise enough to keep this a secret.

One day, however, he brought home a bird with a broken wing, and his father inferred the truth. The boy's imagination had made the wood a refuge, and peopled it with animal friends. This had to be stopped.

"You mustn't interfere with Nature," he admonished. "The fit survive, and the unfit—die."

"But couldn't we mend his wing? Then he would be fit again."

Dr. Masterson shook his head ponderously. "If he didn't die of shame, he'd be eaten alive by the other birds. He's got the human smell on him now. They'd take him for an outsider."

The boy looked aghast at his own arms, as if expecting to see the human stench rising from them.

"No," continued his father, "the only legitimate reason to kidnap a wild animal from its natural environment is the scientific one: vivisection. If you like, we could pin this fellow down in my laboratory and cut him open to see how his insides work."

The boy went pale.

"Otherwise, there remains only the *humane* approach," said the doctor with a sneer in his voice. "If you will not use a broken, suffering animal for the advancement of knowledge, then you must put it out of its misery. Wasteful, I call it—but it's the least you can do."

So, in the end, Maury carried the bird out to the road and dropped a rock on it.

"*HUNTING?*" MRS. CHITDIN did not like the idea at all. Wasn't it dangerous? Mr. Masterson assured her the only critters that would bite a man holding a .490 Winchester Express were wood ticks and frost. The trip would be good for Lance, would toughen him up, would put some sap in his branches. Mrs. Chitdin wasn't so sure: Could one harden butter? But Lance was so insistent that she felt it could only be the Muse urging him on. Perhaps there would be a novel in it, after all. So, the following week, she packed his trunks, fed him breakfast, dressed him warmly, and drove him to the train station.

The men reached the end of the line mid-afternoon. Maury went in search of a couple of gillies to take down their luggage, first warning Lance not to attempt this himself: "An Indian'll only do what he thinks you can't." This warning was somewhat superfluous, since Lance had seventeen trunks, none of which he could lift even the handles of. And he was deliriously fatigued from the train ride, which had already lasted longer than the entire hunting trip had lasted in his imagination.

By the time Maury returned, Lance had sprawled out on the platform and fallen into a light doze; the rail crew had piled his and Maury's luggage around his body, and the train had pulled out again, back to the coast and the comforts of civilization.

"I think I've got a stiff shoulder," said Lance ominously.

But the expedition faced even greater problems. The two Indians whom Maury had brought back with him—visibly against their will—claimed to be unable to carry seventeen trunks and eight heavy canvas packs by themselves without horses. They also claimed to be unable to speak English.

"Hay-lo wa-wa King George."

"They bloody do so wa-wa King George," said Maury affably. "They're just too lazy to bother. And this way, when they don't want to do something, they can pretend not to understand and just sit around growing hair. Isn't that right, Rocky?"

The one called Rocky shrugged, as if to say he could see Maury's point but wanted to hear other opinions on the matter.

It was decided, through a largely one-sided exchange of gestures and wa-wa, that Old Moose would go with Maury to buy pack ponies from one of the ranches, and Rocky would stay behind with Lance to watch the gear. Old Moose looked back wistfully at the younger men, who were already pushing the bags together into a makeshift cot.

In the end, however, even five ornery-looking ponies, one Rocky, and one Old Moose were unequal to Lance's trunks. For the first time, Maury paused to wonder what all Lance had brought with him. Lance didn't know, and was just as curious. "Let's take a boo!" he suggested, but did not stir from his couch. So Maury rifled through his belongings, holding up items for him to see, identify, and justify or discard.

"Those are my sleeping gowns. I need those. I sleep."

"Lend you a pair of my pyjamas. And these things?"

"Oh good—my butter paddles. Did she pack my butter too? I can't endure the salted."

"Got all the food we'll need, and you can use a knife and a billy like the rest of us. This gizmo?"

"My police rattle."

"No police where we're going, son. And this?"

"Oo, I should have that on. That's my cholera belt."

"Cripes! There's no cholera in the Cariboo! . . . Now what on God's green earth do you need a dull old knife for?"

"That's a book knife, you silly. It *has* to be dull, or you're liable to cut your fingers on the pages."

"Use the back of my filleting knife. —What the hell am I talking about? You brought *books*?"

"Just Meredith."

Maury rummaged around in the trunks. "The Life and Works of Lord Macaulay, Complete in Ten Volumes!?"

"Oh, Lord. I *distinctly* told her Meredith. I can't read *history* on a hunting trip."

The Indians, however, seemed to admire Lance's sleeping gowns and the lifework of the British essayist in ten volumes, so Maury struck a deal with them: They would be paid in advance for their services as guides with the extra chattels, which in the meantime would remain with the stationmaster for safekeeping. Lance, who was at that moment daydreaming about wrestling a panther, offered no objection.

By this time it was dusk, and too late even to inquire about a hotel. In any case, the town of Quesnel Arm seemed to consist altogether of the train station, a dry goods store, and eleven clapboard cabins facing eleven directions, like misanthropes huddling together for warmth. Rocky made a suggestion.

"Ni-ka house moo-sum po-lak-le."

Maury grunted; looked left; spat; looked right; and grunted again. "Well, let's see it."

Rocky's house was on the river, which they were able to find in the dark by its stench. It was late in the spawning season, Maury explained, and the salmon, having struggled heroically upstream to lay their eggs as high in the mountains as possible—leaping boulders, hurling themselves from puddle to puddle, swimming against rapids and even up waterfalls—had now given up the fight, and let the river carry them where it would, to be smashed on rocks, grated like cheese on riverbeds, washed ashore, and scooped up by bears, ranchers with pitchforks, and Indians. "It's shooting ducks in Central Park. It's not hunting; it's not even fishing; it's harvesting." He'd seen spots where the riverbanks consisted entirely of a crunchy white sand: the powdered, sun-bleached bones of salmon. The stench coming from the river was dead salmon rotting in the shallows faster than the Indians could eat or smoke them.

Lance gagged. "How can they stand it?"

"Oh, they don't even notice it. The Indian's sense of smell is much less acute than the white man's."

Lance peered thoughtfully at Rocky's nose, while fingering his own.

Rocky's house—which turned out also to be Old Moose's house, and the house of several other men and women and innumerable children of all

ages—seemed to corroborate Maury's claim. Surely no one with a working nose could live in such a place. A fire burned somewhere, or perhaps smoldered universally under the heaps of oily rags and children, filling the air with an acrid smoke that instantly coated the lungs and sinuses. A horrific chandelier of gutted salmon carcasses hung from the rafters, infusing the smoke almost visibly with an odor of seafood and putrefaction. Mixed with this overpowering stink were several merely unpleasant smells: kerosene, rancid lard, pine needles, stale sweat, fresh sweat, rich dirt, diapers, and milk.

"Ni-ka house," said Rocky, with blasé pride.

Maury was about to say that they couldn't possibly stay in such a squalid hovel; but seeing Lance gasping and teetering and about to swoon, he declared that it was a grand house, and that they would be honored to spend the night in it. Lance collapsed onto a pile of rags and squealing babies. One of the women placed in his hands a bowl of fish parts swimming with some of their former spawning-season tenacity in a black broth. Without thinking, he thanked her, and this reflex of etiquette sealed his fate: to run screaming back to the train station no longer seemed possible. With a whimpering giggle, he resigned himself to a night of voluptuous misery.

But the night would not let him wallow in his unhappiness. After the lamps were put out, he detected a thin draught of fresh outdoor air, but this kept moving, and he had to move with it, clambering over sleeping bodies that merely grunted when he put a knee in their groin or a thumb in their eye. Some of the children, fascinated by his white hair, pointy nose, squeaky droning voice, and total lack of good manners, followed him in his migrations; and whenever he had enough temporary warmth and breathable air to doze off, one of the children would begin playing with his face, sniffing his clothes, or tasting his hair. By the time they fell asleep, they had learned several new King George cuss words. But after the fidgeting and murmuring of the children ceased, Lance became aware of other strange sounds and fleeting movements in the darkness. Something, not a draught, passed over his foot; then something, not a child, brushed his ear. He was utterly awake, and utterly alone in his wakefulness. He wanted to shake one of the chil-

dren, but could not move. Terror filled his lungs—then burst out in a warbling shriek when something with tiny claws and a long sleek tail scurried across his face. He sprang to his feet without passing through any intermediate position and stayed as much off the ground as possible by hopping from one big toe to the other and flapping his arms for extra lift. A tremendous commotion ensued. Lamps were lit, blankets thrown off, sticks and pans and rags grabbed as weapons, and there arose from the entire household the war cry of "Tsish-o-poots! Tsish-o-poots!"

Maury rolled over, and not realizing that Lance had moved across the room, explained sleepily that Indians hated porcupines and considered them evil because they liked to chew out the brake cables from the undercarriage of automobiles. "But a porcupine doesn't know any damn better. It's just the salt we put on the roads that he likes." He rolled over again, and, disgusted, fell back asleep.

In the morning, Lance was too tired to realize fully what indignities and discomforts he was being subjected to. He was prodded upright, stuffed with fish, irrigated with coffee, somehow insinuated into wool socks, wool underwear, flannel shirt, sweater, gabardine jacket, hip waders, trench socks, puttees, boots, gaiters, mackinaw overcoat, and several hats, and set marching on a trail through the forest before he knew what was happening to him. He kept seeing porcupines at the edge of his vision, and could feel them nibbling at his hair. When at last he awoke to his surroundings, he made a stand—literally. Planting his feet in the mud, he declared that he would go no farther, that he had gone far enough.

Maury squinted up through the trees at the dark blue clouds, and said that he understood. Not everyone was cut out for the sportsman's life. "It can be glorious, and it can be rough. And mostly, I guess, it's rough. Well, your mother'll be glad to see you back so soon. So long, old son. Rocky, Old Moose: Kla-ta-wa."

"But—but I can't go back *alone!*"

Maury squinted at him as if he were a dark blue cloud. "Why?"

"Because! Because I don't know the way! Because it's not even light out! Because I'm wearing your clothes! *Because!*"

"Oh, send the jacket and things over to the Esquire. Guess I'm bound to drop in there again someday."

Lance abandoned all pretense. "What about *panthers!*"

Maury said that the North American panther, or puma, or catamount, or cougar, or mountain lion, or Californian lion as he was sometimes called in Washington State, or hy-as puss-puss (big puss-puss) as the Indians called him, was a shifty, gutless cur who'd sneak and skulk after you for miles, howling like a street cat in heat, but would hardly ever show fight directly, and had almost never been known to attack a man unprovoked.

Lance decided that he would stay with the hunting party a little longer.

The clouds overhead changed from blue to grey and slowly filled with light, till the whole sky seemed a dull, diffuse sun. Rain did not fall so much as hang in the air in microscopic droplets, so that Lance, looking back, thought he could see the path they had cut through it. Farther on, the trees traded their leaves for needles and shaggy filaments that bristled with damp. Everything was damp and musty, like old potatoes left too long in a cellar. All the rocks, ferns, and fallen logs were spattered with a grey-blue moss like mold, and the tops of the trees were white with mildew. As the trail stretched uphill, Lance was soon wheezing, but he blamed this on the air. He imagined he could feel tiny grains, like infinitesimal spores, when he inhaled. He coughed and spat till he was completely out of breath, certain that he had acquired tuberculosis, developed several new allergies, and caught a bad cold. When they paused to let the ponies graze, the symptoms abated too much for him to raise an alarm; and when they set out again he was soon too winded to speak. This was life, he thought: a cheerless footslog towards death that left you too breathless to protest.

Maury, however, had breath to spare. To him the forest smelled fresh, and the damp affected him like wine. He gave Lance the Latin and common names of the flora around them, and told him of the habits and character of the fauna that were at present nowhere to be seen. He gave the dimensions of the mountains on the horizon and explained the origin of the region's name. There had been a time when caribou had swarmed over these mountains like ants on a carcass, when a man could shoot a hundred in a single

season with a single gun. But then had come the commercial hunters. Maury's face furrowed with contempt. A man would kill anything anyhow if his sole aim was to sell it. He'd still-hunt in rainy season, burn down the forest in dry season, draw out stags with a cheap birch-bark horn in rutting season. He'd even stoop to trapping. And caribou had a fatal idiosyncrasy: at the sound of a gunshot, they would freeze. An unscrupulous hunter—a commercial hunter—could, as long as he stayed downwind, slaughter an entire herd with a single gun.

Lance asked when they were going to shoot something. His feet were sore.

Maury cleared his throat, sniffed the air, and spat. "When we're off the beaten path, little brother. Anything still alive around here only comes out at night."

Lance pointed at something moving in the branches overhead. "What about that?"

"That," said Maury, "is a squirrel."

Lance shuddered; he hated squirrels. "Well, let's shoot it."

"With an Express? There'd be nothing left."

Lance did not understand the objection. He pointed again. "There. Shoot that guy."

"Christ on a stick. That's a snowy owl."

"So?"

"You don't shoot owls."

"Why not? He's just sitting there." He had the feeling that the owl was watching him; he lowered his voice. "Go on, get him."

Rocky and Old Moose came forward and joined the discussion, nodding and pointing illustratively with their guns and encouraging Maury to give it a try.

"Hy-as gun. Ten-as kula-kula. Klo-she ma-mook poh. Easy bang-bang."

"You don't shoot owls," Maury grumbled. "Owls are hunters. You don't shoot hunters."

Rocky's gun went off. Lance and Maury jumped; the owl flapped its wings, but did not fall or fly away. The shot had gone wide, or had only been intended to demonstrate the convenient operation of the trigger.

"You damn idiot." Maury yanked the rifle from Rocky's hands. "Shut the hell up and get the hell back, goddamn you."

When they had retreated as far as the pack train, Maury turned to the owl, held the gun up over his head, and threw it ostentatiously to the ground. The owl ruffled its feathers and blinked. Then Maury began to speak to it, in a low, soothing, clucking voice. Lance could not make out the words, but the owl seemed to understand perfectly, and to be rather impressed by what he heard. He emitted an inquisitive hoot, and hopped to a lower branch to better hear the reply. Maury held out his hands and took a step forward. The owl blinked, ruffled its feathers, and cocked its head. Then, to the amazement of Lance and the Indians, it lifted itself from its perch and floated down into Maury's open hands.

"What's he doing?," Lance whispered. His view was blocked by Maury's back.

When Maury turned around, the owl had disappeared. In its place there remained only a limp clump of feathers, which Maury tossed aside like an old newspaper.

"Kla-ta-wa," he said, and continued up the trail.

Lance and the Indians were in raptures. Again and again they reenacted the seduction, the capture, the brutal murder. Shooting wasn't cruel enough for this man; he preferred to strangle his prey with his own hands! What a man! What a monster!

It was not till they stopped for lunch that Lance noticed the blood on Maury's hands. Rocky's shot had grazed the owl after all.

WHILE THE INDIANS made camp, Lance sat bored and shivering on a rotten stump, watching Maury build a fire. Maury had not spoken much since that morning, but now could not resist the opportunity to instruct.

"Cedar deadfall is no damn good," he said. "Holds the water too deep. Pine will do in a pinch. But fir is your best bet. You can see the difference in the grain. Pine's more porous."

Lance grimaced, his jaw too clenched from cold to permit a yawn.

Maury placed a log on end in the mud, balancing it for a moment with one finger; then, before it could tip over, he brought the hand-axe down in four powerful strokes, reducing a gnarled piece of tree to a perfectly smooth and rectangular stick of lumber about one twentieth its original size. When he had made thirty or so of these, he constructed a little tapering log cabin and stuffed it with paper from a waterproof tin. He then struck a match, and pausing conclusively, like a math teacher drawing a line under the figures to be summed, lit the paper. It burned magnificently, brightly and quickly, and left no trace. Only the log cabin remained, steaming slightly but otherwise intact.

Maury gave a grunt of satisfaction and explained that now the surface moisture had been burned off. He added and lit more paper, with the same results.

Evidently the region had received more rain than had been reported. Well, even a cold supper would taste good after a day's hard hiking.

Suddenly the little log cabin burst into flame. Rocky had doused it with a liter of lantern oil, and now stood admiring his handiwork and basking in his employers' unequal gratitude.

That night Maury—sitting before the fire that Rocky had started, eating the salmon that Old Moose had cooked, and drinking the blackberry wine that their wives had fermented—complained about the laziness, uncleanliness, and unpreparedness of Indians. What were they doing with lantern oil and blackberry wine, when they had not brought tents or sleeping outfits or boots? They had signed on to the expedition without even asking how long they were to be gone or where they would be going. He called that sheer suicidal stupidity. And they had lice that they didn't scratch. They didn't even mind. They were *proud* of their lice!

Lance, lying curled around the fire, paid no attention to this diatribe, but listened instead to the Indians laughing and reminiscing about their ex-

ploits. Having never learned any language other than English, and having acquired that without much difficulty, he was unsurprised to discover that he understood their language perfectly—just as long as he did not concentrate too hard. It helped perhaps that their jargon had borrowed several words from English; and from such hints as "bed," "house," "shoes," "sick," and "gun," eked out with the Indians' dramatic gestures and his own dramatic imagination, he was easily able to piece together their story. It seemed that Old Moose had been, as a young Moose, something of a rake and a daredevil. He would face any danger, perform any stunt, if a girl was nearby. One time, spurred on by the most beautiful girl in the village, he had climbed a tree to a panther's nest, and with his own two hands—

"What a load of horse crap," said Maury, staggering to his feet. "If a bear lets you crawl into his *den*, and take aim by his *breath*, and blast him in the *dark*, it's because he's hibernating—that's all there is to it. I don't care what you say. That's not hunting, that's murder." Turning to Lance, he said, "They don't hunt, they murder. They only eat the heart, the lungs, and the liver, then they sell the pelt to the Boston man and leave the rest rotting on the ground. I knew a Siwash whose brother was killed by a bear, so he went and killed six of them in revenge, and left their carcasses putrefying in the sun—as a *warning*. As if a bear understands revenge! As if a bear understands your warnings!" He sat back down, muttering that it was a damn waste.

"When are we going to shoot some bears?," Lance wanted to know.

Maury spat into the fire and said nothing for a minute. "Rocky! Potlatch gun-gun!"

Rocky went to fetch the guns. Lance sat up, giggling.

"Before you can shoot a bear," said Maury proverbially, "you have to learn to shoot. Now, a good gun is a good gun. This Express, for instance, puts their rusty old smooth-bore muskets to the blush. But even a lousy gun will shoot true within its ability if taken care of, and even a good gun will fail you if you fail it. Improper maintenance is the cause of most misfirings." He brooded for a moment over the death of the owl; then said, "I'll show you how to avoid that."

Lance sighed and lay back down. "Maybe later. I'm comfortable right now," he lied.

He stared into the fire, dreaming of the most beautiful girl in the village, while Maury explained the importance of testing your cartridges in the chambers each morning; the indispensability of extra hammers, mainsprings, and tumbler pins; and above all the necessity of regular and thorough oiling.

The Indians watched in amazement as Maury disassembled the gorgeous shooting stick and rubbed its parts with magic ointment. They could not understand how such a stupid man had built such a wonderful tool.

Lance did not sleep well that night either. As soon as he closed his eyes, the forest came alive, crackling with movement. Small rustling sounds made him think of rats and porcupines and little burrowing creatures with protuberant teeth and piercing red eyes; large intermittent sounds made him think of lions and bears and hulking muscular predators with razor-sharp claws and noses powerful enough to smell the meat under his skin. Instead of protecting him, the tent trapped him, depriving him of sight and preventing escape. He lay rigid and sweating as a panther came towards him with infinite patience, one step a minute; he heard it reach out and hook its index claw into the top clasp of the tent's outer fly—

The sight of Lance the next morning filled Maury with pity and contempt. To assuage his pity, he let him ride atop one of the pack ponies' loads; to assuage his contempt, he lectured him on the importance of self-discipline in the production of literature.

"If I waited for inspiration to strike, I'd still be writing my first novel. Hell—I'd still be writing my first paragraph."

Lance, splayed limply across the swaying mountain of equipment, mumbled that no amount of effort or strain could produce a single beautiful idea or one lovely phrase. "Otherwise athletes and energetic businessmen would write the best novels."

Maury argued that they very well might, if they applied themselves wholeheartedly to the task. He admitted that all writing had an unconscious component; occasionally one surprised oneself. But this was not a passive

process. In order to see Paris, one must leave the hotel. In order to find a bridge, one must walk along the river—sometimes for miles.

Lance bleated derisively. "Miles and miles of tedious filler! Flailing about for something to say! Drowning in ink—and taking your reader down with you!"

"Once you've found the bridge," said Maury, "you can go back and cover your tracks." He slapped down a qualm. "Besides, you can't just cross bridges all day."

Lance looked down pityingly at the top of his head. "I'm afraid that you are too old for me to be able to help you."

Maury grunted. "The Muse helps those who help themselves."

Before Lance could reply, he was thrown to the ground when the pony beneath him stopped dead. He was still absorbing this development when, not far from his head, Maury's gun went off. This threw him into a state of total disorientation which seemed to last a very long time, though in fact it was only a few seconds before he was on his feet and staring at the belly of a grizzly bear.

The bear was in a bad mood, having been poisoned already that morning, and now shot. She did not know that she had been poisoned and shot, of course; at most, she understood that she had eaten some bad meat (a coyote carcass laced with arsenic and intended for the local tsish-o-poots population), and that an unexpected encounter with the noisy, earth-hardening animals had rendered her breathless and frightened. Her fear made her angry. She roared, and clawed the air with her forepaws.

Lance understood that he was about to die. He felt no fear—only a tremendous regret. His life did not flash before his eyes; he realized that continually his life had been flashing before his eyes, and that he had paid no attention, made no effort to grasp it or comprehend it. The strength of his remorse proved that there would be no afterlife. For the first time, he understood that he was his body; and his body understood, for the first time, that it was a unique configuration of matter subject to dispersion and decay.

And yet, for the time being, it continued to draw breath and to circulate blood. There is no stillness in life, only standing waves. No idea, no thought,

not even the thought of death, can lodge itself permanently in the brain. Other ideas supplant it. Events supervene. Gradually Lance became aware of Maury's voice. He was speaking to the bear.

"Lay down, old daddy. There's nothing more for you to do. You've done your part, and done it well. Now you can rest. In fact, you're asleep already—you just don't know it yet. That bullet I put in you passed clean through like a needle. Your heart slowed it down a little. Your lungs slowed it down a little. But only the skin on your back could stop it. You're all chewed up inside, brother. You're all done in. Nothing to moan about. You've had your time, that's all. Soon enough we'll have had ours too. You're hurting, I know, but not for long. Three minutes from now, no matter how you play it, you'll be sound asleep. So you might as well take it easy as take it hard. Lay down and die, big daddy. Lay on down and die."

Lance thought Maury was speaking to him, and had almost resigned himself to being eaten, when another gun went off behind him. Old Moose's bullet, it was later discovered, passed miraculously through Lance's armpit, tearing his shirts and jackets to shreds but not so much as scratching his skin, and lodged itself in the bear's throat, just as the grizzly's open mouth was about to come down on Lance's head like a snuffer on a candle. That night at the campfire, Lance had plenty of opportunity to wonder why Maury, instead of standing there sermonizing, hadn't simply reloaded his rifle. The reason, he decided, was that Maury was crazy.

He circled the campfire and planted himself before Maury, his body so rigid with defiance that he was bent backwards. With fists clenched, eyes rolled up to one side, and through lips pursed as tightly as a knot in thread, he requested to be shown their present location on the map; he would find his own way back in the morning. Maury chuckled and philosophized that the danger of maps was that a person tended to see only what was on them. Lance returned stiffly to his side of the fire, then drooped in despair. No map!

He decided to enlist the Indians in his mutiny. But, maddeningly, though he understood them, they could not be made to understand him, no matter how eloquently or emphatically he spoke.

"Chuck-a-luck back-track pronto," he suggested.

They shrugged amicably and offered him the jug of blackberry wine. He slapped it aside, and tried again.

"Ding-a-ling a ping-pong. Zig-zag a bee-bop, big stick to Rocky house at itsy-bitsy sun-time. Chim-a-lim-a-lam-fram-jam, man!"

The Indians shook their heads and pantomimed bewilderment.

"Gah!" It was no use. It was as Maury had said: They pretended not to understand so they wouldn't have to do anything. Lazy degenerates! He was on his own.

He swiped the jug of blackberry wine from Rocky's hands and Maury's gun case from the stump where it lay and withdrew with them to the solitude of his tent, where he got quietly drunk, on his own.

When the first faint glow of dawn began at last to seep into the sky, Lance burst out of the tent and hurled himself down to the river—having waited for this moment most of the night, writhing alternately in agony from a full bladder and in terror of being eaten by a vengeful bear. He put the gun case down just long enough to relieve himself, then snatched it back up and spun around several times to make sure nothing had crept up behind him. He relaxed a little then, and with his back to the river, sat down on a log.

The woods were quiet now; the trees seemed held in place by mist. Only the river burbled behind him. Nothing moved, yet the scene was not still like a photograph, but seemed to quiver with movement too subtle for his eyes. Then a breeze soughed high through the trees, rustling the branches in swirling arabesques like the unfurling of cigarette smoke in a sunny room. For a moment, his personality drained from him as from a sieve; all that remained was the universe listening to itself breathe. Then he felt silly, and headed back to camp.

But camp was not where he had left it. He felt a spasm of doubt and fear: had he come the wrong way? But the river was not more than twenty feet from his tent; he could hardly have got lost in such a short distance. He decided that Maury and the Indians were playing a trick on him. While he was down at the river, they had moved camp. But when he looked for traces of last night's fire, or holes in the ground where they had picketed the

ponies, or the cedars from which they had stripped the boughs for their beds, he could find nothing, no sign whatsoever that the spot had been camped in. Still, the camp must be nearby; he had not travelled far enough to miss it by much. If he stayed parallel to the river, he was sure to find it. So, holding the gun case aloft like a staff to keep the branches and cobwebs out of his face, he pushed his way into the foliage at his right.

He stopped again after only a few feet. He was making too much noise; the bears and panthers could probably hear him miles away. Moving more slowly, but not much more silently, he turned back in the direction of the false camp. If the brush was not thinner on the other side, he would go back down to the river and find the correct path up to camp. But the clearing did not appear when he expected it to, and soon he realized that he was not backtracking at all but blazing a fresh trail. Panic rose in his throat like an air bubble; he swallowed it down. All he had to do was retrace his steps, one at a time, all the way back to the river. But when he turned to look for them, he could not find even the most recent. For all his crashing and hacking and stomping, he appeared not to have broken a single branch or crushed a single fern. He was hemmed in by a wall of dense, supple, virgin forest.

He panicked. He ran gibbering and thrashing through the trees, zigzagging as if dodging bullets. When his foot caught a root, he fell mouth first into a clump of devil's war-club. Five minutes later he was still removing thorns from his lips and gums and nostrils and the moist corners of his eyes —but the pain saved him from flying into total hysteria. He took several quick but deep breaths and surveyed his situation with what felt like heroic honesty and fortitude. He was filthy, yes; he was bruised; he was punctured and bleeding and probably poisoned; he was lost and he was utterly utterly alone—

No, after all there was nothing to be gained by surveying his situation. He got to his feet and began walking at random, humming to drown out honest or fortitudinous thoughts.

Unfortunately, thoughts kept surfacing. The first was that he might be walking in circles—so he walked more quickly, to escape the orbit by centrifugal force. Then it occurred to him that he might be walking straight

away from camp, deeper and deeper into the forest—so he walked more slowly. Then he had the idea that he could plot his course by the position of the sun. The only problems with this idea were that it was too early for the sun to be above the trees, that it was too cloudy for the sun to be seen anyway, and that even if he were able to orientate himself, he did not know which direction he should be going.

Then he remembered the river. If he could only find it again, he felt certain that he could follow it back to the campsite. He stood stock-still, a trembling antenna, and listened with all his might for the sound of running water. But all he could hear were the creaking of trees, the swishing of their leaves and the clattering of their branches. When for a moment the wind died down he thought he could hear—yes—*something*. It could be the river! But where? He closed his eyes, clenched his teeth, and squeezed his fists. There! No; there? He twisted his head minutely, homing in on the signal . . . A bird began squawking and twittering like a drunken idiot at a boat race; he swore and brandished the gun case at it. Then the wind returned. With a despondent whinny, he set out in the probable direction of the river, stopping and listening again every ten or twenty steps. At times he was sure he heard it; more often he could hear nothing but the infernal racket of the forest. At last he came to doubt that he had ever heard anything. He gave up listening, but trudged on in a straight line till the ground began to slope uphill and he knew that he was going the wrong way. Discouragement flooded through him like fatigue. But wait! If he knew the wrong way, he also knew the right way. All he had to do was keep moving downhill and he must eventually reach the river. Unfortunately, the ground was uneven and it was not easy to tell which direction was more downhill or went further downhill than the others. Eventually he reached a spot where the declivity, interrupted by a ridge, forked in two opposite directions. He went left.

The trees here were very tall and widely spaced, like a colonnade in a cathedral. There was less undergrowth—sunlight must almost never penetrate to the forest floor here—but the ground underfoot was spongy and squishy and impeded his movement. He realized that he was walking on years and years of putrefying leaves and deadfall—that he was slogging, in-

deed, through a giant midden. Once, as a child, after a heavy snowfall, he had tried to make an igloo out of the cook's scrap heap; but his shovel had produced a living cutaway diagram of the interior, rife with rot and teeming with worms and maggots and beetles and millipedes. Now he imagined swarms of such creatures clinging to his boots like honey to a spoon, and the thought made him gag. He walked faster, or tried to, and nearly fell. After that he walked carefully, his face screwed to one side in disgust at the thought of his fate if he were to stumble here. Probably his skeleton would be picked clean, as if by a school of piranhas, in under a minute.

Then he saw something amazing. A single stalk of green, culminating in a delicate yellow flower like an infolded flame, sprouted from the rotting offal. And then he spotted another, and another. The amazing thing was that they did not look blighted, but perfectly healthy. These plants were *thriving!* He crushed one under his boot in disapproval. But a minute later, when he emerged from the dark cathedral and encountered a thicket of brambles, the lesson was brought home to him. These bright red spiny shrubs shot out in every direction from the tangled nest of last year's dead and dried remains. So it was the same everywhere. The forest fed on itself; the forest grew out of its own corpse. Yuck!

He staggered on, not knowing what else to do. For three nights he had hardly slept; he was so tired he could not even lift his thoughts. The woods closed in on him till he seemed to be clawing his way out of a wet prickly sack. He would have lain down and slept, or died, but there was no place for him to rest so much as a foot without fear of its being nibbled by insects, overgrown with rootlets, or dissolved in ooze. He yearned wretchedly for someplace warm, dry, and soft—even some*thing* warm and dry and soft: a cream bun fresh from the oven, or a single square inch of the carpet by the fireplace in his library—anything to remind him that there was comfort and beauty in the world. Ah, beauty! If only he could hold in his hands for one minute a watercolor by Burne-Jones, or press to his chest for one minute a volume of Meredith's, or nuzzle for one minute a single sheet of Mozart, he might find the strength to carry on.

What he found instead was a stream. He was slowly coming to terms with the unwelcome prospect of having to cross it, when he remembered that he had been looking for a river, once. This one did not seem so large as the one he had sat beside, ages ago, at dawn. But rivers, he understood, were like streets: they intersected. This one should eventually meet the bigger one. But in which direction? His mind provided the answer in the form of an image: He saw a wide swollen river overflowing its banks, like a canteen springing leaks; these offshoots in turn drained into smaller tributaries. So, if he followed this one upstream, he must come to the parent river.

It was not, however, as easy a matter to follow a stream as he had imagined. The forest had no respect for boundaries, and came right down to the edge of the water, and indeed spilled over into the water. He was able to make some progress by swinging the gun case like a machete, and temporarily flattening the largest ferns and saplings by stepping on them at their base. Eventually however he came to a spot where the growth was so dense that he could scarcely peer into it, let alone penetrate it, and he was forced down into the stream itself. The water was not deep, but looked cold and dirty, and he did not trust his boots; so he hopped from slimy rock to slimy rock, snatching at branches and pinwheeling his arms to keep his balance while he calculated the next leap. He was just beginning to marvel at his own dexterity, and almost to enjoy himself, when he slipped.

Without any assistance on his part, his rear foot came nimbly forward and planted itself beneath his slewing center of gravity. He might not even have fallen had his boot come down on flat ground, instead of a rocky, mossy riverbed.

He yelped in pain—then in surprise, then again in self-pity. He had twisted his ankle, possibly broken it. He crawled, on elbows and one knee, out of the stream and into a narrow opening between two entangled bushes, then collapsed blubbering, too hurt and miserable to roll onto his back or lift his face from the mud. When, some time later, a bug crawled across the back of his neck, he did not even slap it away.

Unfortunately, he did not die from his injury, nor from grief; and eventually hunger and thirst goaded him back to life. He wriggled down to the

stream again and examined the water. A white froth collected in the slow-moving eddies, but even when he scooped water from the center of the stream in his cupped hands he could see a greenish scum floating on top. He could crudely filter the water through his fingers, leaving the scum behind in his hands, if only he had another receptacle. He looked at the gun case. It too had fallen in the stream, but did not look damp now. And when he removed the rifle and the mesh pouch of cartridges from the interior and placed them on a bed of twigs and leaves, they did not appear to be wet. Perhaps the bag would hold water as well as keep it out. So, placing the open bag between his knees, he trickled water into it through his hands. It was a slow process and his hands were soon numb, but if it spared him malaria or cholera he supposed it was worth the trouble. The end result, however, looked even dirtier and tasted like grease, but he slurped till he had exchanged his thirst for queasiness. He refilled the gun case with water to take with him, tied the cartridge-pouch to his belt, and—using the rifle as a sort of crutch, with the barrel wedged in his armpit so that it would not get clogged with mud—tried to stand.

It was no good. The pain was too much for him; he did not like pain. He could neither put any weight on the injured ankle nor let it dangle in the air. And any movement of any part of his body seemed to entail a complementary movement of his ankle, so that all movement hurt. It was clear that he would not be able to walk—not over this terrain, not for any distance. A sense of his isolation came over him. Though he had realized intellectually that he was "in the middle of nowhere," he had not truly felt it before now. At no point in the journey had he been overwhelmed or awed by the exoticism of his surroundings, perhaps because that exoticism had been achieved gradually, step by tedious step. Even yesterday he would not have been *so* surprised if they had bumped into someone he knew. But now, suddenly, he felt as if he had been dropped into the forest from a balloon—or onto another planet from a spaceship.

"Help," he said, at first without much conviction. "Help. Help me." But each repetition brought with it a little more sincerity, and soon he was shouting, then hollering, then screaming wordlessly till his throat was raw.

The only reply was the incessant chittering of birds.

The trilling of one little finch, half the size of his palm, caught his attention. He watched it call shrilly in one direction, flick its head anxiously to and fro, then hop around on its branch and call in the other direction. He felt its desperation; he shared its fear. And he understood, for the first time, the true purpose of "birdsong," that blithe misnomer. Birds did not sing; they cried for help. This little fellow had obviously been separated from his friends and was begging them to come back. The entire forest resounded with these cries of terror. Nature was not an opera house, but a colossal slaughterhouse.

He remembered what he had supposedly learned yesterday: that he was going to die. But now he could muster no resignation towards this fact. He was not ready to die. He did not want to die. Why should he have to die? His body quailed at the idea, like a dog cringing at the threat of a kick. Even discomfort, even pain was preferable to non-existence.

He would fight. He would gobble the pain like macaroons and ask for more. So, cussing and wincing and writhing with each step, he leaned into the bush till it yielded. It was slow going, but each anguished step filled his consciousness completely, leaving no room for notions of past or future. There was not even room for self-awareness; he did not even realize how tough he was being.

Then everything changed. He heard a sound. His heart began to pound rapidly. Could he be imagining it? No! There it was again: human voices, human laughter. He hobbled more quickly, putting weight on his bad ankle and allowing the branches in his path to thrash his face. At last he burst out onto a trail, tumbling into the dirt. But he hardly noticed, intent as he was on the distant voices. Yes, they were coming nearer! He was saved!

He got to his feet, propped himself against a tree, and brushed himself off. Boy, he was a real mess! He picked burrs from his pant legs and dry mud from his sleeves. He ran his fingers through his hair and was appalled to see what fell out. His hands were too filthy to wipe his face with, so he used a large leaf, dampened with saliva, as a washcloth. Then he leaned back against the tree, slung the rifle casually over his shoulder, arranged

upon his face a sardonic expression of relief, and waited for the appearance of his saviors.

There were four of them: four rough, dirty, grizzled sportsmen lugging rifles and packs, looking wearied but satisfied, at peace with themselves and at home in the universe. One of them carried an immense pair of antlers, held together, as if for lack of any better adhesive, by a small severed deer's head with glossy black marbles for eyes.

When they noticed Lance, the hunters nodded and grunted their salutations.

Lance nodded and grunted back.

"Any luck, pard?"

Lance chuckled deprecatingly. "None to speak of."

The hunters nodded and grinned, grunted their valedictions, and continued on their way. Lance watched them go, then slumped to the ground and listened to their voices and laughter fade into the distance.

Only when they were too far away to call after did he begin to rationalize his behavior. They had no pack ponies, and he could hardly have asked them to carry him. Besides, he was on the trail now, and could follow it back to civilization. He had water, and he had—a gun.

As he limped in the direction the hunters had gone, he began scanning the woods around him for animals to shoot. But all he spotted were squirrels and birds probably too small to hit, and certainly too small to eat. And since he did not relish the prospect of skinning and gutting his dinner, surely one large fleshy beast would be preferable to several scrawny ones; it would also save bullets. Then he remembered that he did not have a knife, or any means of building a fire. At home he liked his steak well done; could he bring himself to bite into the raw flank of a dead moose, or wolf, or wild boar? He was hungry enough to imagine that he could. Probably uncooked flesh tasted more or less like raw cookie dough . . .

This pleasant reverie was interrupted by the sight, far down the trail, of a herd of deer grazing. He threw himself behind a bush and waited for his pulse to return to normal so that he could think. Had they seen him? Had they heard him? Lying on his back, he kicked with his heels and slid on his

head a few inches into the trail. They were still grazing peacefully, apparently oblivious. He flopped onto his belly and wriggled back behind cover. Would they smell him? Was he downwind? He stuck a finger in his mouth, then held it out, coated in slobber. Yes; he was lucky: the side nearest the deer grew cool first.

He sat up and looked at the gun in his lap. There did not seem to be any place to put the cartridges, aside from the hole in the barrel. He was about to drop one in, pointy end up, then stopped to wonder what would hold it in place, what would keep it from sliding back out, if he tilted the gun past horizontal? He recalled Maury saying something about chambers—testing the cartridges in the chambers. He tried twisting and bending the gun along different seams. Finally he found a little sliding latch which revealed a bullet-sized trench. He inserted a cartridge; it fit perfectly. Then, with a satisfying series of clicks, like a key turning in a lock, the latch slid back into place. His heart was thumping again, but now with joy.

He peered over the top of the bush. The deer, or whatever they were, had not moved. He could see at least five of them. The closest one was facing his direction. It lifted its head into clear view between bites. He took aim.

His arms were trembling, his breath shallow. It was a beautiful beast, with sleek khaki-colored fur. A shame that it had no antlers. A female, he supposed. He waited for her to raise her head again. She had no idea that her life was in his hands. She did not even know he existed! She was in his possession; he owned her. The thought made him giddy. He could let her live, or destroy her with the twitch of one finger. She lifted her head. He held his breath. His whole body quivered with an intoxicating feeling of power. Then he squeezed, not the trigger, but the entire gun, with both hands and with all his might, as if throttling the deer from a distance. The gun kicked in his hands like a living thing, then was still.

All was still. Nothing moved; nothing had changed. But then, after what felt like minutes, the deer fell sideways into the ferns—dead. He'd got her! He'd killed her! He'd blasted her to bits! His head swam with delight. How much better than literature was life!

He was about to run forward and revel in his kill when he noticed that the other deer still hadn't budged. They stood there, sniffing the air, apparently unable to move, either from fear or confusion. He was marveling at their stupidity when something that Maury had said came back to him. Why, these must be caribou! The very same creatures these mountains had been named for, and which had been decimated by commercial hunters who had single-handedly massacred entire herds, because when you shot at them they froze! Quickly, with his breath catching in his throat, Lance reloaded his rifle.

P-kow! P-kosh! Ch-chow! Bakaw!

One by one, each time with less haste and more skill, he knocked the life out of his prey. The woods reverberated with his shots, then fell silent. Even the birds held their breath. He did not want to stop, but he had killed them all. Five shots, five dead caribou. He was a hunter. He was—

"Are you crazy?"

Maury and the Indians came bounding out of the bush. Lance noticed, behind them, the pale grey canvas of their tents and packs. He had found camp.

"What the hell are you shooting at?"

"I got lost," he started to explain.

Rocky and Old Moose had meanwhile discovered the carcasses, and were praising his marksmanship.

Maury staggered to the nearest one, fell to his knees, and put his hand on its bloody neck. "You shot our *ponies*?"

Lance, still tingling from the kill, refused to acknowledge any mistake. "They—attacked me," he said at last.

Maury's eyes grew wide. "Attacked you? These ponies?"

Lance stood rigid, rifle on shoulder, defying disbelief.

Slowly the amazement drained from Maury's face, leaving behind only a profound melancholy. He shook his head and muttered, "They must have been mad."