

In the Grip of Rust

by Mark Hummel

The funny thing about stories like this one here is people think they know all the truth just cause they can tell you a few facts. It's kind of like lifting the hood and being able to name all the parts but not knowing how they work or what they got to do with one another. Naming parts is not going to get your car fixed. I been hearing other people tell parts of this story for a long time now. And the stories I hear got nothing to do with the truth.

See, Sean come over to my house that night, late. Knocked on the basement window like he always done when we snuck out. He was pretty well gone. Course it don't take much to get Sean drunk. Soon as I got dressed he stuck a bottle of Southern Comfort in my hand and said, "Drink up." I couldn't stand the taste of that stuff, but I never turned down a free bottle in my life.

Sean had wrecked his truck the week before—slid down a wash and rolled it. He said he needed to get out somewhere and talk. I grabbed my keys. In those days I always parked my car with its rear end up the slope out between the house and my dad's workshop. That way I could let it roll real quiet like down the gravel and on out into our dirt road. Our road was downhill all the way to the river, so I didn't have to start it until I got out to the bridge. Me and Sean sneaked out that way all the time, but that night he shook his head when I made for the car and said that he felt like walking. So we hoofed it through the woods to the river, then up river to where the railroad crosses. We walked through the dark without talking much, just passing the bottle back and forth and cussing when we tripped over logs and rocks. When we come to the tracks, we turned up them. I

could tell something was bothering him cause he was quiet, which wasn't like Sean. I thought maybe he was still upset about wrecking his truck. Anybody would be—it was a sweet-looking Jeep pickup cherried out with lots of chrome and a lift kit, but he took it real hard, I think cause it had been Mike's.

See, this story is as much Mike's as anybody's. Even though Mike was several years older than Sean, they were tight, Mike treating him like the little brother he never had. Sean worshiped Mike. I think he believed that Mike was everything he could never be—an athlete, a solid, serious working man type, easy going but dependable. The kind of guy that was easy to like. They were cousins, but if you saw how close they was you'd think they were brothers, which was funny cause they were so different. Mike was a big guy, and handsome, kind of serious like. Sean was skinny and a little funny looking, not ugly—all the girls liked him—but he was the kind of guy who could make silly faces and anybody would laugh. Sean breezed through life; he could imitate all our teachers, and he made up cartoon voices and spoke funny accents for whole days or made up movie scenes based on people at our school. But even though they were so different, nobody was closer to him than Mike. Sean even lived with Mike's family for a while after his folks split up. But Mike got killed. This story I'm telling comes back round to that story.

Everybody around town knows the story of how Mike got killed. It's sure to start a fight cause some side with the guy that killed him and some with Mike. All I know is Mike didn't deserve what he got and nobody who knew him been the same since. Like after Mike died is when Sean started going beyond having a good time, drinking till he got sick and playing around with acid and shrooms. He started hanging out with guys we didn't know, older guys who were known as big dealers in the valley. And he started

talking down about people at school—the preps and jocks—something he never used to do and told others not to.

Anyway, Mike's story goes like this. A couple years after he got back from Vietnam, he was working construction here in the valley and living back at home again. He was real tight with this good-looking brunette named Karen. The thing was, Karen had separated from her husband. Sean always said that Karen and Mike were just good friends, two people helping each other through some rough times, but that's where a lot of people start in blaming Mike, saying he was sleeping with another man's wife. The way I see it, it don't really matter one way or another if the woman chose who she wanted to spend her time with.

Her husband, Richard Barker, he's the son of one of the richest men in town, one of the first to start selling off parts of this valley to all the developers from Texas and California. He was known to have a short fuse, and one night he followed Mike and Karen around town, to dinner and down to the Watering Hole, and when Mike dropped her back at her house he was waiting for them. He took one of his hunting rifles out of his gun rack and made Mike get out of his truck. They stood there yelling at each other in the middle of the street with Karen crying and screaming. Mike tried to push the end of the rifle away and get back in his truck. Barker shot him in the gut, the rifle no more than a foot away. He had the thing loaded with a hollow-point round, went in the size of your little finger and come out bigger than your fist. Mike died in the street. Then here's the kicker. The D.A. filed for manslaughter instead of murder, and when they found Barker guilty, the judge sentenced him to five years, with time served.

Can you believe that shit? Five years for killing a man? Mike could have taken Barker out if he wanted. They teach you how to do that in the Marines. I mean, the man survived a year in Vietnam and come back in one piece. Course they used all that to help Barker, saying how Mike was a threat since he was so much bigger and dangerous cause he was trained to kill people. If you want to know what I think, it all comes down to money—who has it and who don't. The truth was, Mike would never hurt nobody. That was where he and Sean were alike—they always wanted everybody to get along.

A year or so after Mike died, his parents gave Sean his truck. Sean didn't want it, but Mike's mom convinced him it was important he have it. Sean took incredible care of that truck, washing it every week. He had me do all the work on it cause Sean wasn't any good at that kind of thing. Like I said, it was a cherry truck and I done my part to keep it that way.

I've never been any good at knowing what to say to people when I know I need to or asking the right kind of question when something's wrong. I just never feel right talking to someone, even someone like Sean, who I've known all my life. We stopped at the edge of a little clearing and sat down on a couple of big rocks near the railroad grade. It was a dark night, clear, but only a quarter moon. The trees on the other side of the clearing were nothing but a dark line, and the mountain ridge behind them was another, darker line, like a thunderhead building. In the mountains it's cold at night even in June. Sean loaded up the little concert pipe he carried with some Hawaiian weed one of his old girlfriends sent him in the mail, and we smoked a couple of bowls. Sean used to joke about moving to Hawaii and going to work at her old man's farm. I remember that was a great summer for weed, lots of Colombian around anytime you wanted it, plenty of Sens

with buds as big around as your finger and then this letter from Kona with these buds so big they made the Sens look like midgets. He rolled his baggie up and put it back in his sock and started walking again.

We walked another half mile, climbing up the grade towards the ridge and the old stone quarry. It'd been a long time since I'd been out that way. While we walked, stepping from tie to tie, I started remembering how Sean and I used to play out here in the woods when we were kids. Whenever the ore cars come down out of the mountains, Sean loved to play chicken, see who could stay on the tracks the longest. He always won. Sometimes he'd sit right down on the tracks and he'd wait so long you'd think he'd never make it, but then at the last second he'd jump out of the way.

"I figured you'd be over at Laurie's tonight," I said. Laurie was a sweet girl, a tiny thing a year younger than us. She was cool and always gave us free pizzas at the restaurant where she worked. She was pretty, too, not knock-down, but good looking with a pretty face and a nice ass that she showed off in shorts in the summer.

"I was over there for a while. We watched some TV," he said, then stopped like he had planned on saying something else. I heard him reach in his jacket for a cigarette. It was too dark to see his face until the flame come up on his Bic. "Things aren't going so well," he said. The light went away and I followed the glow of his cigarette.

"You guys will work it out. You got a good thing."

"I don't know. Things are fucked right now. She told me tonight that she didn't want me around."

"Call her tomorrow."

“No, man. I screwed it up bad. She's right.” Sean took another drag on his smoke and I watched the tip flare up orange.

We walked on a ways further without talking until we come to the quarry. We left the tracks, which curved down around the low side of the quarry and on south, further into the mountains. A spur ran off to the loading belt, its iron sides rusted and black with age and its timbers rotten and leaning with the slope. We hiked up the rim towards the high side where the rock face stood out white in the dark night.

“You got to promise me something,” Sean said.

“Sure, anything.”

He pulled himself up on a large boulder at the quarry's edge. I could see his face against the white of the rock. “You got to keep this to yourself. It's nobody's business really. I shouldn't be telling you,” he said, “but it's been eating me up inside.”

Sean leaned against the rock. I sat on a square-edged boulder that stood at the rim where they had cut away giant marble blocks that became the walls of courthouses and capital buildings. The stone was cold on my butt, but not nearly as cold as I imagined the lake was at the base of the cliffs. It always struck me as funny to have a square lake, like a swimming pool only there was no way out of it and the water—all snowmelt and rainwater—would freeze you down to your nuts. I sat looking down into that water, which was darker than the night, waiting for Sean to say something.

See, I guess you got to know more about Sean. Some of us have never thought our lives really amount to much, but I think Sean believed in his. He wasn't like most people. When other people got hurt, I think he hurt for them worse than they did themselves. Friends meant more to him than anybody I know. Probably because his

family was so messed up. When he was sixteen, his dad took off with another woman. Sean and his mom didn't get along so well and she kicked him out a year later for a few months. You never heard him complain. He was the kind of guy who could be walking down the road beside you and all of the sudden lay down on the yellow stripe for no reason. He'd ride around in people's trunks or bring your mom flowers or buy old men meals in coffee shops. One time, just a couple weeks before graduation, he borrowed a motorcycle and rode it wide open through the halls at school. Left rubber everywhere.

That's what people saw and expected, the school jokester. He was popular, in his own way, and he slept with a whole lot of real lookers. We always gave him a bad time about all the girls he went to bed with, joked about him having a horse dick or something. I guess a lot of us were jealous. Really I think I was more jealous of what he and Laurie had. You could look at them and see they had something good going. You could tell Sean and her made sure they stayed friends first, like he respected her the way I seen my folks act with each other. They were talking about moving to Boulder in the fall and going to school. Sean was smart. He had the grades to be in college but not the money. He didn't belong in a dead-end place like this.

He was still leaning against the cliff above me, and I really couldn't see him or his face, it was so dark, more just the outline of his body against the white rock cliffs behind him, standing up there with one foot against the rock. So I listened mostly, not looking at him but down into the dark water. His voice sounded far away and sad like it was part of the wind. That's when he told me the whole story about him and Laurie and how the week before while her parents were out of town the two of them had planned to spend the night together, and he told me everything they'd done together that evening up-valley in

Aspen and how right it seemed and how ready they were. He told me how fine she looked in candlelight and how good she smelled and how bad he wanted her. But when he lifted the pretty silk thing she was wearing, she cried and said she couldn't do it, and that's when she told him she'd been raped.

He said she cried on an off all night and he just held her. He didn't know what else to do. She was fourteen when it happened. She knew the guy. He took her upstairs in the middle of a party her brother was having and did it right there in her own room.

“All night she kept saying she was sorry, like it was her fault or something,” Sean said. “I held her. I told her it wasn't her fault. I told her I loved her—and I really do. But I couldn't take away the tears.”

“I'm sorry, man. Nobody should have to go through that.”

“The thing is that it's never over for her. The memory never goes away, and there's no way to take away the pain.”

“What'd they do to the guy?”

“Nobody even knows. Other than her sister, I'm the only person she's ever told.”

“I'd like to kill the guy who would do something like that,” I said.

“If I knew who it was, I would kill him. Cut his dick off first and use it to choke him.”

Sean lit another cigarette. “Look at everything he took away from her. She can't trust anyone. Making love can never be what it should be for her. Deep down inside she still thinks it's her fault. I think about it and I get mad all over. That morning I was so pissed at the world I couldn't sleep. After I left Laurie's I bought a pint of J.D. and drank the

whole thing. I stopped at the Phillip's station to piss. I tore the shit out of the bathroom. Ripped the damn stall down, broke the mirror.”

Sean bent over and grabbed a handful of rocks and started throwing them down towards the water at the bottom of the pit. “When I went back to Laurie's that afternoon, she said she wanted to get out of the house, so I took her shopping up-valley. I was still mad, not even so much at the guy as at living in a world where shit like this happens. The whole time we were shopping in those fancy-ass Starshower stores I wanted to break something, smash the display cases with my hands or knock one of those smug clerks through a wall. Laurie kept asking me what was wrong. I knew I was hurting her by not saying anything. I think I even knew she would misunderstand the mood I was in, but I couldn't snap out of it and was getting mad at myself because I knew I was being stupid, that she was the one who had been raped and here she could handle it and I couldn't and nothing happened to me.”

“You got every right to be pissed.”

“Maybe. But I got no right to make her see that.”

“Things will be fine. You'll see.”

“The thing is,” he said, “every time I'm with her all I can think about is what an awful thing he did to her and it makes me want to kill him.”

Sean got another handful of rocks and one by one threw them into the water. “A couple of days ago she said, 'Don't hold it against me.' I remember thinking she was way off track, that it was the wrong kind of thing to say. I only wanted it never to have happened to her. But I think I know what she meant because every time I look at her now I see her differently, like all I can see is the way someone hurt her and I remember the

way she cried when she told me but I can't remember what we did together the day before or what we talked about that afternoon. Maybe, without meaning to, that's holding it against her.”

I don't know how much I understood what he was talking about at the time. But I do know a little something of what he meant cause ever since he told me I can't look at Laurie the same way.

“She's right, you know,” Sean said to me. “I've been selfish and I can't take back the way I've acted any more than I can make her past go away.”

“Just talk to her. Tell her what you told me.”

“It's too late,” Sean said. “I already fucked up. I tried talking to her tonight before she told me it was over. I tried to explain how I wished I could do something, like kill the bastard. She said that wouldn't help any because she'd still remember. I told her she had to forget and get on with her life. But then I started thinking about Mike and how I've never forgotten what he looked like in his casket or the look on his mom's face.”

Sean was quiet again. He kept picking up rocks and throwing them into the water. I lit a cigarette and handed it to him but he waved it away. So I sat back down and we didn't talk for a long time. It was getting cold and my butt hurt from sitting on a rock so long and I felt like Sean wanted me to say something. I was pretty drunk and I felt dizzy sitting up high above that water. So I just listened to the splash the rocks made when they hit.

“How deep you think this water is?” Sean asked.

“I don't know.”

“My grandpa used to take me out here,” he said. “He used to stand way up there on top and throw big rocks down into the water. Told me to listen for the splash. Then we'd watch the ripples come out to the edges. I don't think I could even throw a rock from way up there.”

“That why you always come out here? Cause of your grandpa?”

“Yeah, I guess. It's quiet. I used to come out here a lot when my mom and I fought.” Sean threw another rock. “Grandpa worked this quarry when he was young. Mined all the good marble out of it and then some, he said. They finally closed it down after a couple of men died. A big slab fell on one of them. Grandpa said there was so little left of him when they took the slab off, they left him where he was and threw some tailings in on top of him. By the next spring he was under water.”

“I guess once you're dead it don't matter where you're buried.”

“Grandpa used to call this old water, because it started collecting down there way back when he was working.” After a minute Sean asked, “You ready?”

We started walking out, back the same way we'd come in on the tracks.

“I saw Barker in the grocery store today,” Sean said.

“I thought he was in jail.”

“He was. Parole. Early release for good behavior. Three years. Can you believe that shit? Man, I wanted to kill him on the spot. I can't believe he can come back here like nothing ever happened.”

“This is a fucked-up world. You get three years for killing a man. That's not right,” I said.

Sean didn't say anything but I knew he was thinking about Laurie.

“Fucked-up world, man,” I said. “Somebody should do something.”

Then out of the blue he said, “You want to do something about it?” and he handed me the end of the Southern Comfort. “Finish it.”

Finding Barker was easy. His Firebird was parked in the dirt lot behind the Watering Hole just like he never went away. Same car he drove before he went to prison. Course it had been new then, a '72, red with black racing stripes and the black firebird, chrome wheels, wide rims. It was closing time and it wasn't long till Barker come stumbling out with Cliff Chambers. They hung around the front door. It was easy to see their faces from the glow of their cigarettes. Sean and I sat in the dark car up by the road where there were thick bushy trees. His eyes never left Barker and one hand was holding onto the dash, stiff, like the car was about to go over a cliff.

The door to the bar swung open, lighting Barker and Chambers and part of the parking lot. One of the waitresses come out and stood in the light. Barker jumped up from the rail he was leaning on like he'd been waiting for her. The two of them stood there talking a while and Barker kept putting his arm around her and she kept slipping out from under it and taking a step away. Finally I heard a loud laugh from Barker and a softer one from Chambers. She walked away fast then but not before Barker slapped her on the ass. She kept on walking towards a yellow Mustang Fastback and Barker and Chambers laughed loudly and then walked around the corner to the Firebird.

He left rubber turning onto the highway and we followed him slow and I left the lights off until he turned onto Jefferson. I kept my distance. Then he turned onto County 42, which goes out towards the railroad yards and the power plant.

I was driving a GTO at the time. My boss was a good guy, gave me my own key and let me work on my car any time I wanted after hours. Had a hot engine but the body was shot. I'd been doing some work on it, replaced both rear quarter panels and was working on cutting some bad rust spots out of the under-carriage. I knew my boss kept a .45 under the counter, a big bore job he brought home from World War II. Sean had acted nervous when I pulled that gun out—he wasn't the type that had been around guns much—but he took it and stuck it under the front seat of the car. It had a full clip, and we took that too.

My boss kept a little fridge in the back which he always had stocked with beer and Sean and I had taken a six pack with us too, so I pulled a bottle out to give me something else to do besides think about Barker, when all the sudden he turned off 42 into a trailer court. He dropped Chambers off at a rusty Airstream. Chambers stood at the open window of the Firebird and we could hear them laughing. When Chambers went inside, Barker headed back down 42, weaving a bit, then drove the length of town and across the river, where he turned down into what we called the jungle. Nothing more than a bunch of old clapboard houses, most of them shacks really, set down in thick, twisted cottonwoods and willows by the river. Started out as miner cabins, some of them. Mostly construction workers lived there--that, and a lot of migrant workers from up-valley during ski season. I cut the lights as I turned into the dirt road which curved down a steep hill to the houses. It was dark down there. My window was open and I could hear the tires on the gravel and the river over in the darkness. Barker pulled up on the grass in front of a purple bungalow with a screen porch and a rusted-out VW on blocks in the side yard. “Not exactly his mommy and daddy's neighborhood,” I said.

Sean looked at me for a second, turned away and said, "We got to do this." Then he reached the gun out from under the seat. I knew it was now or never so I punched it and pulled my car right up behind Barker's. He was halfway between the house and the car and he was drunk enough that he didn't hear the car at first. Sean was out before Barker even turned all the way around.

Like I said, Sean was just a skinny guy, and he looked even smaller standing there in the yard with that big gun in his hand. Barker wasn't a real big guy either, but it looked like he'd been lifting weights in prison. Sean just said Barker's last name. It was so dark I couldn't see Barker's face, but he said, "Hey, man," like he couldn't see who was talking to him.

"Is there anybody in the house?" Sean asked.

"Huh?"

"Anybody in the house?"

"Who are you?"

"Never you mind."

"Cool it, man."

"Shut up, Barker. Anybody in the house?"

"No, man, Dave's working in Telluride all summer," he said, like we were supposed to know Dave or we were asking to spend the night.

"Get inside then, real slow. Don't talk."

I got out of the car. I still couldn't see his face real good, but his whole body kind of flinched when he saw the gun for the first time and realized what was going on. He

started doing everything Sean told him, real polite like. We walked in a line around the side of the house and in a door which was unlocked.

“You sure nobody's home.”

“Yeah, man, nobody. Dave and Sarah are letting me crash here for the summer.”

“Turn on a light then.”

We were in the kitchen. Everything was gray, the sink, the linoleum floor, even the cupboards. There was a little table in one corner and an old white refrigerator by the door.

I felt then like I'd stepped into another life, like there was a line drawn somewhere that I never seen and on one side of it you were one person and everything was familiar and fit just right, but on the other side it was almost like stepping into another body, like even the clothes you wore might have changed when you crossed that line. I was trying to figure out how I come to be there and if it was really me doing the thing. Then Sean put that gun in my hand and it felt like my hand was going to sink down to the floor. I brought my other hand up to help hold the weight. It's a silly thing. I've handled guns and shot them with my dad for as long as I can remember, but I thought I was going to have to sit down to hold that thing up. Sean motioned Barker over to the counter and searched him. He took his car keys and put them in his own pocket. He tied up Barker's hands with a rope he picked up at the shop, then he looked at me kind of funny and took the gun back and nodded for Barker to sit down at the table. He told me to go check out the rest of the house.

Walking through that little house was eerie. I felt like all the things hanging on the wall were watching me. There was a big rack full a baseball hats at the end of the hall

that looked like somebody standing there in an overcoat. I pulled my Buck out of its belt case and went through the whole house, real slow and quiet.

When I come back into the kitchen, Sean and Barker were both sitting at the table, the little light on over the sink. If you didn't know better and you didn't see the gun in Sean's hand resting there on the table pointed right at Barker's chest, you'd think they was a couple of good friends sharing an after-hours beer.

"Who are you guys?" Barker asked.

"Friends of Mike," Sean said.

"Mike who?"

"Fuck you."

Barker looked up at me then back at Sean. "What are you going to do?" he asked, his voice real calm.

"We're going to kill you, Barker," Sean said. "Same as you did Mike."

"Oh," he said. He looked down at the table. "It really wasn't like it looked. More of an accident really."

"I'm not going to talk to you," Sean said blankly. "Come on. Were going to take a ride. You walk us to your room, show us all your stuff. Keep it quiet and easy. Understand?"

Barker nodded. Then the two of them got up and we walked through the house in a little line all the way to the back bedroom. Barker showed us a duffel bag and a carry-on in the closet. I stuffed all the clothes laying around on the floor and some things off the dresser into them, then we walked back to the kitchen. We shut the light off in the

kitchen and walked back around the house. Sean got in the back seat with Barker and told me to drive.

We drove back through town and I turned onto the old highway that ran south up into the mountains towards the stone quarry like Sean told me. Everybody was real quiet. I kept looking in the rearview to see Sean and Barker. Sean was staring straight ahead, but his eyes looked like he wasn't seeing nothing. He kept that gun steady on Barker. Barker had his head down, like he was examining something curious about the floor. We drove that way for what seemed a long ways. We passed the turn-off for the back road to my house, and I looked at Barker's bags in the front seat and it kinda set in that what we were doing was for real.

When I turned off the highway onto an old dirt road which cut through the pines towards the quarry, Barker looked up and saw my eyes in the rearview. "You guys don't want to do this," he said. His voice was real flat, like he was reading lines out of a book.

"I just got out. You guys don't want to go to the joint. It's rough in there. Everything bad you hear and ten times worse. This is something you don't want to do."

His voice was kind of warming up. The more he talked the more he had to say. "Why don't you guys just let me out here. Give me my stuff and I'll walk." He looked over at Sean, then down at the gun. "Listen. I could just leave town. I got all my stuff here. I could walk back down to the highway and hitch a ride somewhere. Maybe head out to California like I was telling you."

Sean and I, neither one said a thing and Barker got quiet again. I drove on down the dirt road, darker still in the trees. It got bumpier and more rutted the deeper you went

until it just ran out where it used to turn up towards the quarry. They'd run a Cat across there twenty years ago to keep people out. I stopped the car and turned off the engine.

"You guys want to get high," Barker said. "I think I got some smoke in one of my bags. You can have it if you want."

"Get out," Sean said.

All three of us got out of the car. Sean told me to get Barker's bags, and then he motioned Barker to start walking up the old road, which was overgrown with weeds and sprigs of grass.

"Come on, guys. You don't want to do this. They won't—"

"Shut up," Sean said.

"Come on, guys. You scared me. Now let me go. You want money? I could come up with some if that's what you want. My old man's always good for cash."

"I said to shut up."

About halfway to the quarry the railroad tracks come up close to the old road and we walked over on the railroad grade cause it was easier. When we could see the old conveyer line, we turned off the tracks and crossed an open slope of piled cut and broken rocks, some of them twice as big as a man. It was hard going and Barker was stumbling around what with his hands tied and all. Two thirds of the way up top he fell, hitting his head on a rock. I stepped over to help him up, but Sean told me to leave him alone. There was a little spot of blood on Barker's head and you could tell his knee hurt when he got up.

We clambered on until we come to the edge of the quarry, lower down from where Sean and I had sat earlier, and right up almost to the water's edge. Sean made

Barker stand on a rock facing the water. He dug through Barker's bags until he come out with a big overcoat, a leather job that probably cost a bundle. "Cut the rope," he said to me. I did as he said, using my big Buck to cut Barker's hands free. I didn't want to touch him or even get too close. When I bent down, I could hear him breathing, but I was behind him and he didn't look at me and I didn't want to look at him.

"Put this on," Sean said, throwing him the coat. "Then fill your pockets up with rocks, as many as you can fit."

Barker stood there a minute, not doing a thing. I kept waiting for Barker to do something or to say something, but he just stood there staring into the water. That water looked dark and scary, dropped straight off the rocks with no slope, all the way to the bottom I suppose.

"Go ahead and get some rocks too," Sean said to me. "Put them there in his pockets." I didn't move.

"I don't even know you guys," Barker said. "What you want to do this for?"

"Shut up and fill your pockets."

"Jesus, Sean," I said. He looked like the shadow of a shadow set up against the surrounding boulders and the night sky. But I could feel that big gun there in his hand, feel it pointing at Barker. "Come on, man, let's go get a drink. He's got a point. Let him take off for somewhere like he said."

Sean told Barker for the third time to get some rocks.

Barker didn't make a move. "That's a brand-new jacket, man."

"What do you care?"

"It's new, man. Stop messing with my stuff."

I moved further away from Barker, easing along the cliff and watching where I put my feet.

“What do you thing you're doing?” Barker asked.

“You can't kill somebody and just walk away from it,” Sean said. “His mother’s gonna have to see you at the grocery store or see you out on the street when she’s going to the post office. It isn’t fair.”

“I did my time.”

“Hardly.”

“I did everything the courts told me. The time. Parole. I even got sent to a shrink.”

“Fill your pockets like I told you.”

“Fuck you,” Barker said, turning fully to face Sean. “You're going to have to do this yourself.”

“The rocks are just to sink you after I put a hole in your ugly fucking head.” Sean raised the gun a little. I could see he was shaking. I took a couple steps back and almost tripped over Barker’s bags.

Barker’s face looked calm, like he was the one holding the gun. “This here's murder. You guys will go away for a long, long time. The rest of your lives.”

“What you did was murder,” Sean said. "This is justice."

“Get real, man. You sound like some kind of goddamn John Wayne movie or something.”

Sean told him to shut up again but he said it so quiet I could hardly hear him.

“Your friend there,” Barker said, pointing at me, “he can't even look at me, he's so scared. He'll go straight to the cops and tell them everything. So if you're going to shoot me, go ahead. Then shoot him too so he doesn't talk.”

Sean's hands were shaking, the gun shimmering in the moonlight.

“You're stupid,” Barker said. “That's what you are. What the hell do you think this will do? Make you tough? Make up for something your friend couldn't do? Your friend—Mike, the big time football hero, the war hero—he was a chump. Went down like a heart-shot doe. Begging with me not to do it. Big hero he was.” Sean didn't move. They stood there staring at each other for a minute, then Barker said, “You chicken shit bastard.”

Barker walked towards me. I took a couple steps to the side. He picked up his bags and threw the duffel over his shoulder. Then he just walked away, and I heard him laughing. He just walked off into the dark.

Sean dropped the gun. It fell from his hands in slow motion. He sat down on the rock behind him like his legs just gave out. I kept to where I was. Neither one of us said anything for a long time. I kept listening for Barker in the dark but he must have beat it on out of there. Finally, I went close to Sean. He was real pale looking.

“I just couldn't do it,” he said. “Bad as I wanted to.”

I was glad he hadn't pulled the trigger. I couldn't have handled that. But I was scared too and it made me embarrassed. After a long time of just listening to the wind, I asked him, “What are we going to do?”

“About what?”

“About this,” I said, sweeping my hand in a circle around me.

“Nothing happened. Not a damn thing.” Then after a while Sean said, “Sorry I drug you along.”

I didn't say anything.

“You take the gun and go back to town. Put it back where you got it. I'll walk out.”

“Come on with me,” I said. “I'll drop you off.”

“No, that's all right. The walk will do me good. Clear my head.” Sean stood up. He got a cigarette out and reached in his pocket for his lighter. He come out with Barker's car keys. He looked surprised to see them, then threw them way out into the middle of the water. “Hope he doesn't have another set. At least maybe I can be a pain in his ass.” He smiled. “Go on, take the gun and get home.”

“You sure you don't want a ride?”

“Go on. I'll be fine.”

He started walking through the rocks and boulders back down towards the tracks. I watched him for a minute, then I done what I was told. I don't remember much about walking to the car, seemed like one minute I was up by the quarry and the next I was driving into town. About halfway down, where the old road come near the tracks I remember hearing the low moaning vibration of a train way up the line.

I went on back to the shop, put the gun away and locked up tight. I drove home. My head was hurting bad.

My dad come in to wake me up about 9:00 in the morning, chewing my butt cause he didn't want me to be late for work. As soon as I rolled over to get out of bed I thought I was going to be sick, but I worked my shift just the same.

I was at work when I heard. A friend come by and told me. People around town called it an accident. Course they found that bag of Hawaiian in his sock and they done an autopsy showed he'd been drinking a lot, so they said he was drunk, wandered out on the tracks and got run over. People will believe what they want to based on the facts they got in front of them. But he wasn't drunk. We'd sobered up the second Sean pulled that gun, same as Barker did when he saw it.

I went up to the quarry a couple weeks later. I walked out the tracks the same way we'd done that night. It was hot, the sun shining on the steel of the tracks and shining on the water too when I got up there. I climbed up on the old sluice. Between the creosote and time, the timbers were black and some of them were burned from where somebody had tried to set them on fire. The metal was rusted and full of holes, and it smelled old and dead, especially in the hot sun. I stood out on the end above the water and looked over to where we must have took Barker. Even in the sun the water was black like ink.

When I left, I walked back out the tracks again, stepping from tie to tie. I could smell the creosote in them too. My grandpa worked for the railroad all his life. Used to bring old ties home and use them around the yard. I wondered if maybe he'd laid some of these, or put down some of this rail. When you first look at it, you think the rail, for as far as you can see to the next bend, is the color of rust from all the years of rain and trains passing through. You look close enough, though, and you see all kinds of colors—bright metal where the brakes hug them, and dark drips of oil and grease turning green in the sunlight, and orange spots of deep rust eating away at the track. I got to thinking how

Sean's blood would have faded even with the rust to where you couldn't find where he sat down if you knew exactly where to look.

I suppose once in a while somebody thinks they're telling his story, talking about how some kid got drunk and wandered onto the tracks, probably as some kind of warning to their own kids, but they never met me and they never knew Sean or Laurie or Mike, and they never seen how dark water is at night or the way you can smell death in rust, and so, as far as I'm concerned, they don't have a story to tell at all.