

Light In The Window

by *Martin McCaw*

ITURNED OFF MY HEADLIGHTS before I reached the house, coasted to a stand of willows, and knocked the door open with my shoulder. When the radiator stopped gurgling I could hear the rustle of the Wallowa River. That black mass above the willows was not the night sky, I realized, but a mountain, so steep I had to look almost straight up to see stars. I tiptoed across the yard, hoping mud wouldn't ooze onto my socks. A gray and white television flickered through a window. Good. They didn't shut curtains. They trusted strangers.

My pulse was knocking in my ears, the same mix of dread and exhilaration I got when I pushed all my chips into a pot and waited for the last card to fall. On the porch I whispered the low-pressure salesman's creed, "They need me; I don't need them." Right. No sales for a three-day trip, the light bill lurking on my desk, cut-off date circled in red.

The woman who answered my knock had short black hair and friendly eyes that almost wrecked my frown.

"I'm looking for Jim Lang. I'm with ACI."

She waited. I waited, too, long enough for her to decide I couldn't be a salesman despite my coat and tie—no briefcase, no patter, no smile. Bill collector? When her face got anxious, I crinkled my eyes. "Sorry. I forget everyone doesn't recognize the initials. American Correspondence Institute."

Her smile came back, wider than before, and she swung the door open. I stepped around two kids sprawled on the floor, a boy stacking crayons on a miniature logging truck and a girl coloring butcher paper. An older girl and a man sat so close to a snowy television screen I wondered how their eyes could focus. One arm of their sofa was scorched brown from a wood stove. Everything was crammed too close together, like dollhouse furniture.

Lang laughed at something on television, a bass-drum laugh that

trembled through his upper body. Wide suspenders made his shoulders seem twice as broad as mine. His black jeans looked as if they'd been slashed at boot-top level with a chainsaw, then sandblasted with sawdust. No wonder the room smelled like fresh-cut pine.

"Honey, this is the man from the school," the woman said.

"Mark Roundtree." I held out my hand.

Lang stuck up a hand with only a little finger and ring finger. Six to ten months since the accident, I guessed, judging by the reddish scars and the puffy hand, no doubt bumped every day since he'd returned to work.

His wife herded the kids through a doorway, trailing butcher paper. If she wasn't back in two minutes I'd go get her. Too many times I'd pitched a perfect demo to a lone prospect, then heard the death knell, "Got to talk it over with my wife."

I scooted an armchair close to the television set and twisted a knob till there was no sound. Lang watched the silent picture.

I threw out my standard ice-breaker, "Quite a thing about the My Lai massacre."

"Hope they hang Calley," he said. "All those innocent women and children."

"That's exactly how I feel." I'd responded with the same five words since the court-martial had started, including last night after my prospect had said, "Them Viet Cong, you never know when some six-year-old's going to toss a hand grenade at you. Calley ought to get a medal."

Lang's wife came back and switched off the picture. She sat on the edge of the couch, leaning forward.

He looked at the front door. "Thought they'd just send me something in the mail. I didn't know they had salesmen."

"I'm the opposite of a salesman. My toughest job is turning a man down once I realize he doesn't qualify." Such as not having the down payment.

I studied his coupon. Woman's handwriting, which meant I had an ally. Occupation: logger. From our list of forty-three courses she'd checked the "Surveying" box.

"Not many loggers left in the Wallowas," I said.

"Starved out," she said. Her eyes were the color of floodwater. I

was afraid if I looked at them for more than a second I wouldn't be able to turn away.

"We're cutting one of the last stands of old-growth ponderosa," Lang said.

To bond with a prospect, relate an experience similar to his.

"My great-grandfather came through this country on the Oregon Trail," I said. "His diary mentioned ponderosa pine two hundred feet high, so thick sunlight couldn't penetrate."

"Sound carries, like you're under a canopy." Lang shoved a bark-covered log into the stove. "This morning I heard the hook tender talking on the next mountain."

He stirred the fire, holding a poker in his two fingers. The fire crackled. Smoke billowed toward me, mountain smoke, not the stale stuff I was used to breathing in Shep's card room.

"We had a canopy like that," I said. "Over an old wagon trail that ran from the barn to the Touchet River. My parents used to walk down it the summer they were courting. Osage orange trees, cottonwoods, elderberry bushes. By the time I was old enough to play alone it was overgrown, like a jungle inside. I'd pretend I was Frank Buck catching pythons and tigers."

"Is it still there?" the woman asked.

"No." I glanced at my watch. Enough bonding. Time to establish his need for a course.

She leaned closer. "What happened to it?"

"My father figured we were losing two acres we could put into wheat. And weeds kept spreading into the field. So he took out the trees with a bulldozer and we burned everything. I lit the matches."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"What?"

She smiled. "I'm sorry you lost your jungle."

My eyes brimmed. I forced a cough, kept hacking non-stop until tears streamed down my cheeks.

"Smoke got me," I rasped, reaching for the glass of water she'd rushed from the kitchen.

High-pitched voices came from the kitchen. The woman stood with her head cocked, gauging the aggression level, then went back to the kitchen.

"She took my crayon!" a kid wailed. The woman murmured something. Two kids whined in unison. The woman kept murmuring. I couldn't make out her words, but the words didn't matter; I just wanted to listen to that soft voice. I leaned back into the cushion, closed my eyes, let the warmth of the stove seep in. The kids quieted, and all I could hear was the murmur. My skin prickled. I could hear the Wallowa, the Touchet, all the rivers I'd ever known.

"Mr. Roundtree?"

I opened my eyes. She was bending over my chair.

"Are you all right?"

I stared into her eyes. Pure brown, no flecks of gold or green. I watched the pupils dilate. My cheeks felt hot. I swiped a hand over my face. "Haven't been getting much sleep."

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Apparently I need it."

A minute later she handed me a cup of something that looked like road tar. I managed a swallow without gagging. My tongue felt coated with sand. Had she boiled water and coffee grounds together? Lang took a slurp and set his cup on a warped floor board.

"Hits the spot," I said. "This will keep me awake for the drive home."

"Where do you live?" she said.

"Walla Walla."

"That's a hundred miles. Have you had supper?"

"No."

"I could warm you up a plate of spaghetti. It would only take a few minutes."

Homemade spaghetti. I could see her at a stove, pouring grease off the hamburger so her husband wouldn't get heart disease. I could smell onions simmering as she brushed diced tomatoes from her chopping board into the pan. My stomach rumbled.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'll eat when I get home."

"How long have you been away?" she said.

"Three days."

"My goodness. I'll bet your family will be glad to see you."

"Yeah."

Lights will blaze from every window, Sue's attempt to keep the

power company solvent. I'll close the front door and hear pots banging in the kitchen. Sue's back will be rigid at the sink. She won't turn around. I'll open the refrigerator.

You won't find anything in there, she'll say.

She'll be right. A stick of half-melted butter in its dish, hardened again. Three French fries in a McDonald's carton, a meatball that was there when I left.

How could there be any food when you didn't leave me any money?

I left you thirty dollars.

That was gone the first day.

If you'd learn to hang onto money —

Don't lecture me about money. You've got money to eat in restaurants while your family starves.

Keep your voice down. You'll wake the kids.

Scared they'll find out their father's a deadbeat? Mom had to buy us groceries again.

We'll argue another hour, taking turns peeking into the kids' rooms to make sure they're still asleep, before we're lying in bed, stiff as those French fries. I'll slide my hand across her thigh. Don't touch me, she'll say, but she won't push my hand away.

"Will your children still be awake?" said Mrs. Lang, a wife who would cook her husband a hot meal no matter how late he got home. She would never watch him fix his own sandwich out of a meatball old enough to kill him.

"I'll see them in the morning." And while Sue walks them to the bus, I'll lay a twenty-dollar bill on the table and head for Umatilla, taking Elm Street so I won't pass the bus stop.

"We don't see much of Jim, either. He's gone by four and doesn't get home till after dark."

"Time supper's over I'm ready to conk out," Lang said.

"Some jobs he only gets home weekends."

"I'd come home and the kids would act different," he said. "Changed just in those five days. They were getting older and I was missing out on it."

Were my kids changing that fast? I looked at the floor. A nub of white crayon lay near my shoe. Just like home. Hunched over my

chips at Shep's card table, I couldn't shift my feet without mashing a cigarette stub.

"What's your job in the operation?" I said.

"Choker setter."

The key to low-pressure selling is asking questions when you already know the answers. "Choker setter? What's that?"

"When a tree falls I wrap the choker chain around it. Chain's fastened to a cable that runs up the mountain."

"Then what?"

"I signal the yarder engineer, the guy on top of the mountain who runs the winch."

"How do you signal him?"

"With a whistle tooter. Little box I carry. When I press the button a whistle blows. That tells the engineer to drag the tree up the mountain."

"That's the only purpose of the box? One signal?"

"No. One toot means everybody stop what you're doing. Two means go ahead and bring the equipment back down the mountain. The hook tender — he's the boss — he gives that signal."

Lang lifted his cup off the floor with his good hand. Coffee slopped over its rim, and he slammed the cup down in the puddle without drinking. "Whole bunch of toots at quitting time — that means damn the son of a bitchin' yarder engineer!"

"What's three toots? Your signal to the engineer?"

"Yeah. Chain's set. You can haul the tree up."

"Four toots mean anything?"

"I'm having trouble getting the chain around the tree, so give me some slack."

His carotid artery was bobbing. If he played poker he ought to wear a turtleneck sweater.

"Clear enough," I said. "No way the guy on the winch could get mixed up."

Near the house a dog began barking. A chorus answered far away, yip-yip-yowl. Coyotes.

She stroked his arm. "Tell him how it happened, Honey."

"Six months ago. Wrapped my chain around this tree, but I couldn't get it right. So I signaled for more slack."

"Four toots?"

He nodded. "Had my right hand on the chain, ready to yank soon as it loosened. Punched the button three times, but my thumb slipped on the fourth tap. I was sweating."

"So the engineer heard three toots?"

"Yeah."

"And the chain tightened?"

His wife closed her eyes.

"Me and that tree went up the hill a ways." He rubbed his right ear lobe. The top of the ear was missing.

His wife took his maimed hand and wrapped her hands around it. "I got sick to my stomach when the phone rang."

"Premonition?" I said.

"If you're married to a logger you never want to hear the phone ring."

He chuckled. "It's not if you're going to get hurt, it's when."

"Turn around," she said.

Thumb-tacked to the pine wall behind my armchair were snapshots of laughing men standing by fallen trees, by bulldozers, by trucks piled high with logs.

"Can you guess why I circled some faces in red?" she said.

"I think so."

"To remind me I got off lucky this time," Lang said.

She nodded. "Jim's not supposed to be working yet."

"You don't work, you don't eat," he said.

"Surely your employer took care of you." I cupped my hands like the giant hands holding a family in the insurance ad. "Sick leave—" Lang snorted.

"No sick leave?" I pulled my hands a few inches apart and looked down into the gap. "How about medical insurance?"

"Gypo loggers don't pay benefits," she said.

"They can't," Lang said. "Sam's in hock for his equipment. He misses one bank payment and he's out of business."

"Jenny told me when a truck breaks down it's like the world coming to an end. She buys all their clothes at Goodwill."

"It's not if a logger's going to go broke," Lang said. "It's when."

"The store lets us charge groceries. But the bills ..." She

flicked her thumb and forefinger. "Once I flipped a coin."

"I know what you mean," I said. "Do we read by candlelight or haul water from the creek?"

"Sounds like you've been there," she said.

"My students tell me what it's like." Did Inland Power's cutoff notice say the twenty-seventh? Tonight's sale wouldn't show up on my paycheck till the thirtieth, but I could postdate a check. And if I hit Shep's poker game for fifty this Saturday ...

"My mother warned me," she said. "'Stay away from loggers.'"

He laughed. She smirked at him, enjoying his laugh, tracing his partial ear with her finger. Had Sue once smiled at me like that?

"'Marry a man with a future.' That's what Mom told me."

A man like me? No salary, credit rating lower than a hobo's, junior colleges springing up everywhere to steal my prospects. I'd majored in Ag for two years, then dropped out of college to play poker for a living. The morning I told my father I couldn't farm—hay fever, I explained, wiping my dry nose—two mutual fund salesmen got out of a green Cadillac. They minced toward us through four inches of harvest-truck dust, trying not to dull the polish on their oxfords. "Look at those new suits," my father said. "Remember that Bible verse, Mark? What shall it profit a man if he gains the world and loses his soul?" He spat into the dust. "Hard day's work would do those fellows a world of good. I'd put them out forking hay bales, give them a few honest blisters." I shoved my hands into my pockets; shuffling cards and stacking chips had left them smooth enough to pose for a moisturizer ad. Four years later, after Chi's full house busted my diamond flush in a big pot, I'd looked through "Sales Help Wanted" ads and phoned ACI.

I held my coffee cup in both hands, staring at the tarry sludge, wondering how a man could lose his soul. Would it pound against his stomach like an overdue baby, searching for an orifice to escape through? The stove's heat was making my mind wander.

"What's your education, Jim?"

"Tenth grade. I quit to work in the woods."

I whistled. "No wonder you wrote us. You can't get into something else without an education, and you can't keep logging."

She shook her head so hard the cross around her neck swung back and forth. He looked at the stove.

"What's your dream?" I asked him.

"Huh?"

"If you could do anything you want for a living."

He got up and sorted through the stack of firewood. The chunk he picked up was streaked with dried pitch the color of pancake syrup. He pushed it into the stove and poked at the fire.

She turned toward him, the muscles at the base of her neck taut. "Jim, we've talked about this."

I felt a twinge in my bowels.

He looked into the fire. "I want to be up on that mountain."

"Logging?" I said.

He nodded.

A cramp surged through my gut. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Gets in your blood."

"It's an addiction." She jerked an end cushion off the couch, slapped it with the front and back of her hand, raising dust, then plopped it back on the couch and smoothed it. "I'd be better off married to an alcoholic."

"You're running a rig, you feel the power of the engine. It wraps around you." He spread his arms, circled them over his head till his thumbs touched. "There's the smell of the earth, the saw, smoke pouring out of a truck. Everything going on and you're right in the thick of it."

The muscles of his shoulders strummed under his shirt as if he'd plugged into a couple hundred volts. Lang had the look my father got when he talked about farming before tractors, back in the days of mules and stationary threshers and twenty-man harvest crews who slept in their bedrolls under the stars. "I'd never want to go through those times again," my father often said, his eyes twinkling.

"Four years ago I nagged Jim into moving to Pasco."

Lang's mouth twisted. "Sagebrush and houses."

"My brother got him on at Oregon Beef."

"Had me swinging the sledgehammer. You aim right between the eyes."

"He'd come home nights, he wouldn't even talk to us."

"If I didn't swing hard enough, those steers would crumple on their knees. They looked like they were praying."

"No spring layoff. The only time we ever had enough money."

"That Bible verse," I said. "What shall it profit a man—"

"I got homesick just smelling our Christmas tree," he said.

"We'd come back to the mountains visiting, we'd drive through a logging town and he'd be off looking at stacks of logs, sniffing the air. Like he was passing an old girlfriend, smelling her perfume, and I'm trying to distract him, keep his eyes on the road."

"My first day back on the mountain, I felt like kissing the saw."

Something exploded like a firecracker. I jumped, but Lang and his wife didn't flinch. I glanced at the stove, half expecting to see its door hanging by a hinge.

"Don't let Lori fool you. She loves the mountains." Lang grinned at her. "Wish I had a picture, you fishing Mirror Lake. Snow up to your butt, Pam strapped on your back. She'd giggle every cast, try to catch the fly when it looped behind you."

Her lips quivered as she tried to suppress a smile.

"We've got a spot picked out, up Lightning Creek." He left the room, came back and handed me a three-ring binder. I thumbed through pencil sketches of a log house.

"Ever since we got married Lori's been putting money into a kitty. For her dream house."

"Not any more," she said.

"Well, we do keep taking it out."

There were more rooms in the later sketches, more small rectangles labeled "bed." The page after the last drawing was covered with smudges. The sketch had been erased with long strokes that had ripped the paper.

"Now that I'm back to work—"

"No!" She went to the window and looked out, arms crossed. "After supper's in the oven I stand here and watch for his truck lights. Every light I see coming down the road ..."

"You been getting sick again?" He twisted on the couch to stare at her.

"I eat antacid pills like popcorn, and you know it."

"I'm afraid we can't help you, Jim." I stood and held out my hand. Lang reached up automatically, still looking at his wife. I shook his limp hand for several seconds, feeling the scars.

"What's the matter?" she said from the window, staring at me.

"Jim doesn't need a course."

"Yes he does."

Lang rubbed his thigh. "Lori and I need to talk."

"We've talked," she said.

"Maybe you could stop next time you come through."

I shook my head. "That's against our policy. We've found if a man puts off starting a course he'll never finish it."

Lang shifted on the couch as if his shorts had wadded up.

"I've enjoyed meeting you both." A crayon crunched beneath my shoe as I walked across the room. I opened the door a crack. Cold air hit my left leg. "You folks will be on my mind." I edged the door open. Door speed is critical. Too slow and it looks contrived, too fast and I'm out the door before he says ...

"Wait a minute."

I kept my hand on the knob, knowing better than to close the door too soon. Years earlier at Shep's, I'd pushed all my chips into the pot without a pair, not a dollar left in my wallet. Chi started to toss away his cards, then noticed my hand inching prematurely toward the pile of chips in the center. He'd called with a pair of fours.

"Lori's right. I've got to do something."

"We require seven hours a week," I said.

"Maybe after supper," she said. "I can keep the kids busy so they won't pester you."

He nodded, his face glum.

"I'll get my books," I said.

Mud sucked at my shoes as I walked to my car, but I felt like I was bouncing. I could smell a river cold enough to hold trout.

Back inside, I plunked my briefcase on the floor and examined his coupon. "Why did you check surveying?"

"Friend of mine said if I finish that course he can get me on with the highway department in Wallowa."

"How does that sound?"

"Well, they're cooped up indoors all winter."

"Jack's out surveying almost the whole year," Mrs. Lang said. "I asked Sheila."

"You'd work alongside the mountains," I said. "You could afford your dream house after all."

He sighed. "Might not be that bad. Tramping all over, peeking through that telescope."

The smallest kid tottered in from the kitchen, her nose runny. Mrs. Lang wiped it with a tissue and picked up the girl. The older daughter came in and scowled at the dark television set. "I want to watch *The Wizard of Oz*."

"No TV tonight, Pam," her mother said. "Let's put Glenda to bed."

Lang beckoned to me. "Want to see something?"

I followed him into the kitchen. Squeezing past the boy, who was coloring butcher paper at the table, I rattled a wastebasket, knocking an empty spaghetti can onto the floor. I picked it up and balanced it on top of the other cans. The refrigerator was plastered with crayon drawings. So was ours, but Lori Lang's fridge would look different inside, loaded with home-cooked leftovers.

Lang raised the lid of a chest freezer. Inside lay three huge rainbow trout, their stripes faint pink. The biggest had an underslung jaw that made him look mad.

"Wow! Where did you catch them?"

"Few miles upstream. You fish?"

"I fished this river when I was a kid."

The one time Daddy got away from the farm long enough to take us camping. As we passed a man fishing from a wooden bridge, his rod arced. Daddy braked, and Luke and I were out of the car before it stopped rolling. We ran downstream, glimpsing the battle through gaps in the willows. When we finally got a clear view, the man stood knee-deep in a riffle below the bridge, his thumb hooked under the jaw of a flapping rainbow too big for his creel. We pitched our tent nearby and fished till dusk without a bite, then trudged back upstream along the road, breathing the cool piney air, listening to the rapids, Luke and I trying to convince Daddy that the big ones got hungry after sundown. "They'll be hungrier yet by morning," he'd said.

Lang closed the freezer lid. "Bring your rod next trip. I'll show you where."

Maybe I'd bring Daniel. He was old enough to take fishing. What was he, seven? Eight? He couldn't be nine yet, could he?

When Lang's wife rejoined him on the couch, I pulled out my manual. "If you folks scoot over, I'll show you what's in the surveying course."

The couch was a tight fit for three people. I held my manual open in front of Lang. She leaned over his shoulder to look, her arm across his collar, fingers almost touching my hair. The right side of my neck tingled.

"Algebra," he read. "Geometry. Trig – trig ..."

"Trigonometry," she said.

"Physics. Calculus. Holy hell!"

"I'll show you the first lesson if you promise not to laugh." I handed him a blue booklet. "We're going to start you at the bottom, assume you don't know anything. Hope you won't feel insulted."

He laughed. "Won't hurt my feelings a bit." He opened the text in the middle. His lips moved as he read. He grimaced. "Always had trouble with long division."

I snatched the book out of his hand. "No wonder. You were on page fifty-six." I tucked it safely into my briefcase.

"What if he needs help?" she said.

We looked at each other across the bridge of Lang's nose.

"Any time Jim has a question he can pick up the phone and call ACL."

"We haven't had a phone since he got laid off."

Not like me to make that blunder. I'd checked the phone book. Too little sleep. That lousy motel, logging trucks roaring by all night within a foot of my wall. Word must have spread that the weigh station was closed. After I'd finally fallen asleep the dream had come, the tiny car cradled in my hands, a kid's head poking out of a back window. Then I spread my hands apart and the car plunged out of sight, and I was sitting up in bed, sweating, blinking at sunlight shining through cracks in the blinds.

"I'll help Jim. Every trip I'll stop by."

"Do you visit all your students that often?" she said.

"No." I'd tried, my first year, studying an algebra text till midnight in my motel room so I could help my students. But I found I couldn't earn enough, even back then with just one kid, unless I made more sales demos and fewer student visits.

"I'll stop because I want Jim to succeed." And because I want to sit in this room and drink your lousy coffee and get goose bumps when I listen to your voice, and pretend for an hour that I live here. You see, Mrs. Lang, there's always a student somewhere I visit faithfully because I've got a crush on his wife. Only she never knows it.

Glenda appeared in the doorway, chewing the ear of a stuffed rabbit. Behind her the older girl said, "I read her Goldilocks but she wouldn't go to sleep." Glenda climbed onto her father's lap.

"Jim always reads her a bedtime story," the woman said.

I got home too late to do that, though sometimes I'd close the front door and hear Sue reading from a kid's bedroom in a voice I hardly recognized, gentle and stripped of anger. But it's not what you do that matters, it's what you feel in your heart, what you'd do if you could. Driving home Saturday, I'd missed my kids so much I got an ache in my throat. When I opened the door, they were dancing around because Sue had promised to take them to a drive-in movie.

"Come with us, Daddy," Daniel had pleaded.

"We'll see," I told him. Then I called Phil at Shep's Smoke Shop and asked how the poker game looked.

"Barn-burner shaping up. Spittin' Joe's had a few, raising every pot."

"How many pros?"

"Just Chi. You ought to make a bundle."

I hung up, my heart beating faster, and promised the kids next time I'd go. As Sue pulled away, Daniel stuck his head out the back window and yelled, "They charge by the carload, Daddy. You could get in free."

That kid's a born salesman, I thought as I drove to Shep's. Half-way there I remembered begging Daddy to go to the movies with us kids and Mama, and I stopped smiling.

Glenda snuggled against Lang's chest. He rocked her, swaying his shoulders the way Sue used to rock our babies.

"She's almost asleep." Lang carried Glenda out of the room.

His wife and I listened to the drone of his voice as he read from the bedroom.

"He's so patient with them," she said. "Too bad you have to work nights. Do you spend a lot of time with your children weekends?"

"Whenever I can. Saturday they wanted me to go to a movie, but I had an appointment."

"I hope you canceled it."

I nodded. "The way I see it, they're only young once."

"They grow up so fast."

We sat at opposite ends of the couch, looking at the open bedroom door. I tugged down my shirt cuffs to hide the goose bumps.

Paper rustled in the kitchen. I pictured Lang at the table working a mixed equation, staring at an example, scribbling, erasing, checking the answers' page, crumpling the paper in his big fist.

When he came back, I moved to the armchair. I felt drained. The coffee had worn off. I couldn't remember what I'd said last, what I was supposed to do next.

"Jim," she said, "what do you think about the course?"

"I don't know. That math ..."

She leaned toward me, palms pressed between her knees. "What do you think he should do?"

Our eyes locked, and my commission didn't matter anymore. I wanted what was best for this trusting woman and her daughters, for the boy coloring in the kitchen, even for Lang himself, who didn't know how lucky he had it with a perfect wife and an hourly wage. How connected we all were, how fragile. The wrong advice from me could start one wave pushing against the next like a soprano's high note, splintering this family like the wine glass in the television ad.

I silently rehearsed my answer. Mrs. Lang, all my good surveying students thrived on geometry. Jim can't fathom long division. He'll struggle for awhile, then throw his math book into that fire. You'll call him a quitter; he'll call you a nag. Save your four hundred dollars. Let him stay on those mountains, the saw whirring, the smell of diesel and smoke tickling his nostrils, doing what he loves till the last tree falls. Swallow your antacid pills and watch for his headlights, pray you'll never see blue and red lights flash by and your neighbor hurry across the yard toward your porch.

My hands were trembling. Too much coffee. Had the Langs noticed?

They were looking at me expectantly, and I realized that to them my long silence meant I was pondering her question so I could deliver

the wisest possible answer. I'd discovered a new sales technique! And how could I be certain he would fail? What I sold was the idea that dreams can come true, that a man who is mystified by long division can learn to decipher calculus.

I walked to the window and stood with my hands in my pockets. In the dim light I could see only mud.

I turned and said, "It won't be easy, Jim. You'll have to keep pushing yourself. But I see you opening an envelope." My voice sounded strained. Something had risen in my throat. I belched silently, and it was gone. "A brown envelope. Two, three years from now. There's a certificate inside, fancy printing, wax seal. Your family crowds around. What do you think it is?"

She gave me the straight line. "His diploma?"

"No, Jim got that the year before. It's his land surveyor's license. You'll frame it, Mrs. Lang. And you, Jim, you'll show it to your boss. You're working for the highway department, making good money. You'll tell him you're thinking of going into business for yourself so you can survey in the mountains. He'll beg you to stay, show you the pay chart, another five thousand a year now that you're licensed. You tell him you'll think it over."

The air smelled smoky, like when I used to huddle around the campfire with the other boy scouts, telling ghost stories. I squinted through the haze, trying to bring the Langs into sharper focus. She placed her hand over his and jiggled it. He would do fine on the math. I would help him, and he'd do just fine.

Mopping up took awhile. She had to get her checkbook, do some pencil work on her budget. The two older kids wheedled their dad into letting them watch television with the sound off. Judy Garland, a child forever, was mouthing a song, "Over the Rainbow." I could read her lips. I knew the words by heart. I'd watched "The Wizard of Oz" in the Liberty Theater with Mama and Luke and Timothy, told Daddy when we got home how the wizard puffed smoke to mask his trickery. I'd seen it half a dozen times on television with my own kids – hey, I must be doing all right as a father. When had it come on, Sunday nights when there was no poker game?

They both came out on the porch to see me off. The porch creaked under the weight of three people.

"Where'd you park?" Lang said.

"By the willows."

"Why so far away?"

So you wouldn't see my car and wonder how a man who drove a junker could show you how to succeed. "So I could hear the river."

He waved from the porch as I drove past. She had already gone inside. Would she stand at the window until my tail lights disappeared, wishing she had a phone so I could let her know I'd got safely home?

I started up Tollgate Mountain, the same canyon my great-grandparents climbed on the Oregon Trail. A field mouse skittered across the road, barely beating my tires. The temperature needle crept into the red, but it was a cool evening. I'd make it to the top easy.

Near the summit my ears popped. The radio's static cleared, and I sang "King of the Road" along with Roger Miller. Eight sales for the month already. A good day in Umatilla tomorrow and I might pass Wylie for the division lead.

Always had trouble with long division. I turned up the radio until the din rattled the dashboard, hurting my ears.

Something swooped above my headlights like a dive bomber. I swerved, hit the brakes, felt my tires shudder on gravel. The car skidded and stopped crossways in the road. I gripped the wheel and waited for my heart to slow. Did I think the owl was about to whisk me into the air, clutching my car in his talons? Field mice were the ones in danger, no match for the owl's cunning. The wise owl, squandering his wisdom in an endless search for prey.

A mile farther I nosed onto the shoulder to admire the view. Walla Walla's lights shimmered to the north. Had my great-grandparents stopped their oxen here to look? In November of eighteen forty-seven the low hills that rippled to the horizon would have been gray with bunch grass. Why had they decided to homestead there? Maybe instead of bunch grass they had pictured apple trees and wheat, whatever they carried in their seed bags. Or maybe they were tired of traveling, happy to settle anywhere before the snow came.

Those lights to the northwest would be Hermiston. What was that faint glow beyond, Umatilla? This whole expanse was my terri-

tory, no other ACI rep could breach it, and tomorrow I would drive to Umatilla and capture the division lead.

I put my car in gear and rolled downhill. As I spiraled down the mountain, pressure built in my ears. Every time I rounded a curve and glimpsed the north country, the vista had shrunk. Umatilla's lights vanished first, then Hermiston's, then Walla Walla's. At the bottom the road straightened, flanked by barbed-wire fences.

Ahead, I saw only a hill.