

## The Man Who Never Came

“Good job!” she said and, slipping from the rail, tugged the hem of her summer-dress back down towards her knees.

Tom tried to catch his breath. He couldn't really say the earth had moved. 200,000 tonnes of Canadian Pacific rolling stock had intervened, stomping across the swing-bridge above them like a peg-leg pirate. Somewhere about truck 34, that lonesome whistle blew and Nellie came. Tom couldn't keep it up past 68.

“You'd best put that away,” she shouted above the din. “No point in getting busted.”

Tom tucked himself back out of sight, feeling somewhat short-changed by the Canadian railway system. The last ore truck clunked east towards the Great Divide. The moon shone on the lake.

She took his sticky left-hand, switched it for his right- “Well, here we are,” she said.

“Yes, here we are.”

“Your accent's cute,” she said.

“You said.”

“Yes. Didn't I. Your place or mine?”

“There's more?”

“Of course there's more. This is Canada.”

“I've got a camper van,” Tom said.

“How big?” Nellie asked

“No one's ever happy.” His father said so.

Tom and his father were walking past MacLardie's, cutting down the little path which ran from Auchencairn to the Lamlash Road. It was hot. The brambles were almost black so it must have been late summer. The fruit and thorn tangled in the barbed wire fence all down the path. His father had his golf clubs slung on his left shoulder. His father was tall, fit, tanned, muscular. He wore really short shorts.

“That’s it,” Tom thought. “That’s the truth of it.”

They carried on in silence for a while, past the ruins of the old church, until they reached the bus stop at the foot of the Barn Road. Tom had no recollection what happened then. He only remembered the clarity of that moment and that fatal assertion.

Perhaps they parted. Perhaps his father continued along the seafront towards the golf club or stopped by the Cameronia or the Royal for a skinful. Perhaps he took Tom in for one, though Tom would still be underage.

More likely Tom wandered down to the shore and turned north again towards Kings Cross. Maybe, walking along the rocky shoreline, he fantasised martial feats and heroic adventures then sneaked into the hawthorn scrub for a quick wank in the warmth of the evening. Maybe the sea was calm and pale pale blue from the reflected sky. Maybe, as Tom came, heaved out and cast away that personal exhaust of bliss, maybe he said it again.

“No one is ever happy.”

And so Tom never came.

She never came. They never came. He never came. They stayed.

Thirty years later, Tom quit his job as a quantity surveyor and hired a camper van on the Internet from a Hertz outlet near Vancouver Airport.

The camper van was parked-up on the campsite near the edge of town. The serviced lot was squeezed against the screen of pines which marked the site’s perimeter. Through the branches, Tom could see floodlit signage proclaim Sicamous - the Houseboat Capital of Canada.

“This ain’t so big,” Nellie said. It seemed like it was a night for disappointments. Nonetheless, she pulled the cotton dress over her head and shimmied up close, pressing him against the little stainless steel sink still cluttered with his plastic breakfast bowl and a tumbler stained with the dregs of Okanagan Red. Through the window behind Nellie’s head, Tom could see the two guys in the big chrome motorhome with California plates. They seemed to be dancing a samba in the vanilla-light pushed out by floor-level uplighters. He wanted to snap the blind as Nellie went down. For a moment, the guys distracted him and then it ceased to matter much.

Imagine that.

The hawthorn scrub. The shoreline. And now this. Nellie in a campervan in upstate British Columbia. The big cathedral stillness of the sky. Houseboats on the lake. The moon.

No one is ever happy.

Tom had flown in two nights before.

All the way across the Atlantic he still refused to imagine it. The wrong side of America. The road. Guys on choppers and trucks oncoming. He stopped the first night in Kamloops. Pressed on, next day, only as far as Sicamous.

“Well, now we’re talking,” Nellie said, though talking was the last thing on his mind. The boys in the bus were taking a break from the samba. They gazed towards him, each with a Budweiser in his fist and a look of curious empathy.

“Nellie,” Tom said. “Let me shut the fucking blind.”

“No need to curse,” she said, then spotting the neighbours, “Awesome. Assholes.”

It started in the spring of 1975. The first brochures came in brown envelopes, thick, with tattered corners. Alberta.

The brochures were colourful and spacious. Everything seemed flat except far away there were always mountains. The mountains were blue and capped with snow. The flats were soft, ripe, sandy, hay-brown, prosperous. Cowboys had tanned faces, laughter lines and spotless white hats. Oil derricks looked shiny. Skyscrapers had had their windows cleaned specially. Come to Alberta. Make a new start.

New start, his mother said. Or words to that effect.

Tom and his father looked at the pictures. It might as well have been Mars.

“Tom, you talk to him,” she said.

“Why?”

“It’ll be good for us,” his mother said. “We need this. It’s the time.”

Months were to pass before that fateful exchange on the path between Auchencairn and the Lamblash Road.

“Why Alberta?” Tom asked.

“Why not?” she said.

At least the second time the Canadian Pacific Railway did not intervene and Tom enjoyed a modicum of satisfaction in the sexual act. Once again, Nellie acknowledged a job well done and proceeded to pass out on the narrow bunk. She snored. The moon was full.

When Nellie woke up the campervan was moving. She rubbed her eyes, took in the strange surroundings, sat up straight. Edging open a blind with her fingertip she saw aspens and birches, rock and sky stream by in a blur of colour and alarm.

“Shit!”

Her head hurt and her mouth was dry. She was naked beneath the covers. Tom. The guy’s name was Tom. If her mother had ever warned her she would have warned her about days like this.

“OK,” she said to herself. “Who is he? Where am I?”

She was in a campervan. It was moving. There wasn’t a lot of stuff. Some bowls and plastic tumblers. A towel and a pair of shorts. Trainers tipped onto their side in the well by the door. There was a big bag of golf clubs in the corner. The heads of the clubs rattled with every bend and bump. She could see

her yellow dress bunched up on the worktop by the little washbasin. She found her underwear beneath the bunk.

“OK.”

Bundling up behind him in the cab, she grabbed his sleeve. He swerved. A big transcontinental truck blared like the angry lorry in a children’s book.

“Where the hell are we?” Nellie asked.

Tom pointed to the highway sign.

“Sixty miles from Golden?!”

“Yeah.”

“Stop this vehicle, you bastard.”

“Calm down,” he said.

Nellie considered the situation. It was a misunderstanding. He forgot. What did he think he was doing? Perhaps if she explained.

“Honey, my old man will be coming home from fishing just about....” she glanced at the clock above the dashboard, “Shit!”

“Your old man? What old man?” he said.

Nellie decided to up her game.

“You abducted me. Do you realise how serious a crime that is? They are going to lock you up and throw away the key.”

“This is Canada,” he said.

“Even in Canada. STOP. THIS. VEHICLE.”

“I need to get to Alberta,” he said.

“Alberta? Shit that’s hundreds of miles. Roy is going to be so pissed.”

Tom kept his eyes on the road. She could see he was thinking about something. He smiled. “Do you do this often?” he asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Pick up strange men on the beach?”

“I’m getting out,” she said.

“We’re doing sixty, Nellie. Don’t be daft.”

“Then turn back, dammit.”

“Sorry. Can’t,” he said.

“Why the hell not?”

“Timetable. Look. I’ll get you back.”

“Huh?”

“I will. I promise. Just bear with me. Day after tomorrow.”

“What am I going to tell Roy?”

“You got lost,” he said. “You floated out onto the lake on a li-lo and drifted. Somebody kidnapped you on a houseboat.”

“Somebody kidnapped me?...you’re weird,” she said.

“I’ve got a cute accent,” Tom said.

“I’m not so sure.” Nellie dropped down into the passenger seat and crossed her legs and half-turned to examine him.

In daylight and filtered through the thick gauze of her hangover, Tom was kind of grey and kind of fat.

He sat up straight and high in the driver’s seat, pushing and pulling the rim of the steering wheel through his hands. His eyes scanned nervously across the dashboard dials like he was landing a plane or something.

“You ever drive one of these things before?” she asked.

“Not before the day before yesterday?”

“They’re real easy,” she said. “The brake’s right there by your left foot.”

“I know.”

“So stop dammit!”

“Nope.”

“Tom. It’s Tom right?”

“You remembered.”

“Sure. Tom. I remember. Why are we goin’ to Alberta?”

“It’s a long story,” he said.

“You didn’t mention Alberta last night.”

“You didn’t mention Roy.”

“What d’you do? Back in Scotland?”

“I’m a quantity surveyor. I was a quantity surveyor. I quit.”

A quantity surveyor seemed safe. Nellie had known a quantity surveyor once. He was a sort of accountant. Then again accountants could be scary. All that adding up was a bit like going mad. They had to repress all the juiciness of life and just count stuff. Quantities. She needed more clues.

“You’re here on vacation, right?”

“Sort of.”

“Try and keep to the right side of the road, Tom. I’d feel safer.”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“Look,” she said. “I need to get right back to Sicamous. If you could let me off at Golden maybe I could hitch a ride or something.”

Tom glanced right. Nellie had set her left foot on the dashboard fascia and leaned back.

“I can see your panties,” Tom said.

“Guess you can,” she snapped her thighs together and pulled down the hem of her dress. He pulled into a lay-by up ahead. He stopped the engine.

“It’s two hundred miles,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“You couldn’t let me have some cash?”

“Sure. My wallet’s lying by the bed.”

“You shouldn’t be so trusting,” she said.

“I didn’t get kidnapped.”

“Fair point,” she said. She got up and walked back into the living space. His billfold lay on the shelf by the bunk. The duvet was all twisted and there were stains on the white sheet. She opened the wallet and clipped off fifty dollars from the crisp stack of ATM fresh bills. She tugged out his cards, VISA and an entry-level frequent-flyer, a UK drivers license with his photograph. There were no shots of kids or dogs or parents.

“No family?” she shouted through.

“I used to have a wife.”

“Divorced?”

“Not really.”

She sat back down in the passenger seat, handed him the wallet and flashed the \$50.

“Guess I can’t pay you back,” she said.

“No need,” he said.

“Keep that safe,” she said, pushing the wallet towards him, showing him his cards were all intact.

“You married?” he asked. “To Roy?”

“Yeah. Fifteen years. I still get frisky though and he goes fishing regular.”

A constant stream of transcontinental traffic rushed past on both carriage-ways. On either side of the highway, mountains rose awesomely high clothed in dark conifers.

“Think he knows?”

“God knows. Roy? That’s another matter.”

“Why d’you stay with him?”

“He’s a nice guy. Really sweet.”

Tom let off the handbrake and moved the trailer back into the streaming eastbound traffic. “Buckle-up,” he said.

Nellie planked both bare feet against the fascia and gazed at the highway winding up ahead. The temperature was rising outside.

“You’ll need gas at Golden,” Nellie said. “You can drop me there. You could have woken me,” she said.

“You were asleep. I didn’t like to disturb you.”

“So you abducted me and drove two hundred miles into the Rockies?”

“I’m shy,” he said.

“You’re weird,” she said.

“A loony, right?”

“You think I’ll call the cops?” she said. “I should. Christ knows what else you’ll do.”

“Give me a couple of hours head start,” he said.

“Alberta, right?”

“Alberta.”

“You want me to come to Alberta with you?”

Tom was standing at the window of the tenement flat in Foxbar. He prised apart two slats of the venetian blinds. The slats were grey with dust. Outside three children were playing hopscotch on the tarmac pavement. It was a summer’s evening, early summer. Beyond the narrow pavement, across the strip of new mown grass, the damp drifts of cuttings flecked with shredded cigarette cartons and chopped dogshit, there was a chain-link fence topped with three rows of barbed wire and beyond the fence the golf course, a long, languid rolling out of fairways, greens and clumps of trees. And beyond the golf course was the sky and

the sun was setting among the trees on the ridgeline. The low evening light cast long shadows. Golfers on the far side of the fence flowed in calm flotillas from green to green in polite, urbane complicity. Tom's father was at work at the car factory on the edge of town.

"Yes," his mother said.

"But what if dad stays?"

"He'll only stay if you stay," she said.

Tom turned. His mother was sitting at the end of the mock-leather sofa, her bare legs curled beneath her, picking the hard skin from her toes. She had on a blue nylon housecoat over a slip. He could see the lace hem of her slip through the split in the housecoat. The slats of light from the window banded her body, alternate blue and lemon, as though she were an exotic creature in a zoo.

"That's not true," Tom said.

"Aye it is. You're doing this. Not him."

Tom said, "You always want more."

"More than this. Why not?"

She had bleached her hair again, ash blonde and the darkness had not yet crept back among the roots. Her face, by then, had started to get puffy with the drink or maybe age or maybe just her genes. The gas fire was on though it was warm outside, a single panel hissing pink flames.

Tom turned again to peer through the blind at the world outside. A five year old was shinning up the concrete lamppost directly outside the tenement. He had almost reached the bulb, high above the pavement and the kerb. Tom watched to see if the kid would smash the bulb with his stick. He tried to imagine Alberta. Would street lamps be different there, he wondered. Another band of golfers left the 7<sup>th</sup> tee as the next group putted out the 6<sup>th</sup>. Tom could see 2 boys hiding in the ferns beside the fairway, waiting to steal any balls that dropped too close to them.

"I've got a life," he turned to her.

"No you haven't. You've got this. This is all you've got to look forward to."

"This is all you've got to look forward to."

She sipped her Emva Cream Sherry, stroked the wrinkles on her forehead, stared into the jets in the gas burner.

“It won’t last,” she said.

A minute later, a stray golf ball smashed the window behind Tom. Splinters and shards of glass scythed through the blind and fell onto the dark red carpet with its sworls of chocolate brown. The golf ball thumped into the anaglypta opposite, denting the plaster board, then stotted off the ceramic tiles on top of the coffee table and ended, spinning, a dense white ingot of kinetic energy in the fireplace. As Tom straightened from his involuntary crouch, he felt a nip on the side of his neck and the cool, wet flow of blood.

It happened every year or so. It was why they had installed venetian blinds.

Up ahead the highway broke out in a rash of fast-food outlets and gas stations. Below them on their right, an ugly spill of industrial units and railways sidings filled the valley floor.

“Guess that’s Golden,” Nellie said.

Tom checked the fuel gauge.

“You’ve never been?” Tom asked.

“I’ve not been this far into the Rockies. We go to Sicamous each year or maybe Kelowna down on Lake Okanagan. Roy’s not a mountain kind of fellow.”

“Where d’you live?”

“North Van. Out towards the terminal. Why d’you do it really? Drive away like that?”

Tom checked his mirror, indicated right.

“I was in a hurry. Didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Not mind?”

“You were kind of casual, last night. No rush. Not fussed.”

“I’m standing here in a summer dress and flip-flops. No-one is that casual.”

“I didn’t know you had some guy,” he said.

“A husband. What did you mean...not really? When I asked if you were divorced?”

“I haven’t got round to it,” he said.

“Left her?”

Tom shrugged and eased the camper van into a PetroCanada station.

“Kids?”

“Never got round to it.”

“Was it hard? Breaking up?”

“I just left one morning. Caught a plane.”

“Three days ago?”

He nodded.

“A fresh one, huh? She doesn’t know where you are?”

“Nope.”

“You should have woken me. This will be so much hassle.”

“Sorry,” he said.

Tom passed her, opened the door and climbed down onto the forecourt.

He was filling the big tank with Regular, amazed at how much fuel the tank could hold. Nellie was leaning against the side of the van watching.

“Why Alberta?” she asked.

”Why not?” Tom said. “Across the great divide. Come with me.”

“As what?” she asked. “Look. I’d need to get some underwear, fresh clothes.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Roy’s pissed already I guess.”

“As well hung for a sheep as for a lamb, they say.”

“So what are you?”

“I’m just a guy going to Alberta.”

“You think I’m easy.”

“No one’s easy,” Tom said. The meter pinged. The fuel cut off. He walked into the kiosk to pay. Nellie walked around to the edge of the highway and watched the traffic rushing west to east and east to west, just going on forever back and forth.

When he came back she said, “Okay.”

“Tomorrow is my mother’s anniversary,” he said.

“Cool,” she said. “How long has she been married?”

“Forever,” Tom said.

Beyond Golden the valley opened out for a while then narrowed and wound into the mountains. Down to the right the Kicking Horse River was brilliant, glittering gold braided through a bed of new split rock and glacial gravel. The mountains were young and raw and capped with snow and here and there exciting overhangs of ice. The sky was just blue. The distance rolled on and on and yet it was towards a gateway, somewhere up ahead, Kicking Horse Pass and the Great Divide and out beyond, Tom thought, Alberta, flat and straw-golden with its shining derricks and its laughing cowboys. Not like Mars at all. Not any more.

And Nellie was in a pair of 501s they bought in Golden with three souvenir tee-shirts and some lacy lingerie. She was gazing to the front, drinking in the road and Tom was wondering about Roy and what the man was thinking. Roy would be dazed and worried but mostly, Tom guessed, afraid that she would leave him, just take off without a warning, not even waiting long enough to pack, or leave a note – just go – not waiting for permission or agreement or refusal even – just take off - as though he had never owned her - and save herself – and leave him to his fate. As Tom had done, a week before, though he had taken golf clubs, photographs, old clothes. Enough to suggest a plan of sorts. If his wife chose to search (she would have searched by now – not believing he would up and leave), their car was parked up, long-stay, at the airport and the Visa records would show a car rental in Vancouver and a booking reference at a Lake Louise resort. He wasn't dead. He had not disappeared. He had just gone for more.

The golf clubs would puzzle her. They were his father's clubs. His father played on the municipal course, work's outings and day-tickets on his holidays. It was his space. Or more precisely he existed best in the wound tight unwinding moment of a golf swing, complex and fluid as a mollusc's shell, transparent and defining. Tom remembered standing back to watch, in sunlight and in driving rain, in awe, the grace and power and concentration of his father's drive down a long tenth or a short fifth with a dogleg, over gorse. He played off two. He never got to scratch.

As they passed through Field another CPR train hauling more ore and oil and lumber headed west, its melancholy nasal blare rolling across the wide valley from rock to rock to rock.

When his mother died his father had her planted, one more dutiful catholic interment in a row that inched its way uphill towards a drizzle-grey skyline. They stood in the rain, holding the cords, waiting for the sextons to slip the battens from beneath the box. His last surviving aunts and distant cousins jostled for standing room on the tarmac, sank into the mud, spilled into the spaces between the yew and holly bushes. Already his uncle Frank had sneaked away for a quick fag.

His mother never wanted buried. The idea of waking in a sealed box and never being able to escape terrified her. She always said that she would rather burn. But the resurrection of the body, and immemorial practice and the sheer blind mechanics of the funeral business picked Tom up and carried him. His father had insisted, bitter at the thought of separation, not so shocked he wouldn't have his way.

"We'll be together in the end," his father said. "Together, in the ground, forever until the resurrection calls us to a better place."

"You believe that?" Tom asked.

His father pulled a face.

"It's what I want."

And she was dead. What did she care? Still though, it was hard, dropping that farewell handful of wet earth to drum upon the coffin lid then walk away and let some stranger seal her in.

At the head of the pass the land dropped away again and there was more, the great conceptual flatness of Canada, stretching east, limitless and spacious from the arctic to America, wilderness and prosperity and hope. The sun was behind them then and already there were shadows in the valleys as they ran east into Alberta.

Nellie snapped on the radio and it was Jackson Browne singing *Take it Easy*.

When Nellie woke again it was still dark. The darkness was filled with the smell of air-freshener and the sound of the air conditioning and the sense of Tom's body lying close by, not touching, radiating heat. She tried to make out the shapes of the room's expensive furnishings. Nothing. She had no real memory of it.

She wondered if Roy had started a manhunt yet. Were the police already dragging the lake a Sicamous? She sort of doubted it. Probably someone saw her at Hungry Jacks with Tom, as they had seen her before, at Hungry Jacks or the Boatdeck with Seb or Mike or Jay. They only had to enquire and it would all come out, everything that Roy had never thought to ask about, the whole blind spot, the other half of Nellie.

And she supposed all of that made it more likely that she was at the bottom of the lake, strangled, her thong stuffed in her mouth, cut or god knew what. So she was dead, or missing, for the moment. Just like Tom - a sort of walking ghost to all of his past. Two ghosts in a king-sized bed. Her hand reached out to find him.

The hotel was really swanky. After they checked in, Tom insisted they go to dinner in the big restaurant by the lakeside to celebrate.

"Celebrate what?" she asked.

"The anniversary."

"Oh, that," she said. "Well are you going to call her?"

"No," he said. "Besides. It's not until tomorrow."

"Then why are we here now?"

"It's a tradition," he said. "A wake the night before."

They had four courses, dessert and cheese and fruit and two kinds of wine. The red was European and kind of dry and bitter. Afterwards they sat out for a while and gazed at the Lake. It was really beautiful.

The sun had gone and the glacial blue of the lake quickly lost its light and deepened to a dense black stillness on which the lamps of the hotel seemed to flicker like lambent flames, playing upon its surface, never penetrating. In the distance, the last ricochets of daylight caught the slumps and edges of the snow and ice that still clung to the ridgeline. The rock was dark and sharp as a broken knife-edge against the night sky.

But the temperature dropped quickly and soon it was too cold to be out in just the clothes she bought in Golden.

“Let’s go in,” she said, for she was feeling frisky again and giggly with the wine.

“OK,” Tom said. But I’ve got things to do.”

Things to do involved a box of golf-balls, or sort of golf-balls. In the golf bag he brought up from the camper-van Tom had a box of twelve little golf balls made of hard resilient plastic, perforated all around. Each ball had been wrapped up in grey gaffer tape. They looked awkward and ugly and he had left one perforation still open in every ball.

“What are those for?” she asked.

But Tom was acting like some terrorist assassin.

“Shh!”

He produced a canister of grey dust from inside the golf bag and a spoon and a little kitchen funnel. He started to funnel the dust into the golf-balls, tamping the grains down tight then sealing the last perforation with another layer of gaffer tape.

“What’s that?” she asked. “Some kind of poison? What are you up to?” And she remembered that film, the Day of the Jackal and how the killer picked up some woman as cover for his journey, knowing the police would be looking for a single man.

“Tom? What is that?” she asked.

“Poison,” he said.

“What are you going to do with it? Is it some kind of bomb?” Suddenly there was fear and fear was sexy, fear was more.

“No,” he said.

“What are you up to?”

”Wait,” he said.

He taped down the last perforation. There was only enough dust for eight of the spheres.

“OK,” He said. “We’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” she asked.

“What did you have in mind?”

He reached out for her and she found herself responding, though she knew the Jackal had strangled the woman in the morning after their night of passion. Still, with her eyes wide open, she opened up to him.

And she wasn't dead. Not yet anyway and he was still sleeping. Nellie slipped from beneath the duvet and crossed the darkened room to where the spheres and the canister sat on the table. She lifted a sphere in each hand. They were heavy and dense and hard to the touch though the surface of the tape was slippery. She opened the canister. Her finger scraped some dust from inside. It was gritty and smelled of smoke. She quelled a foolish urge to taste it.

Through the big windows now she could see the dawn coming, easing light onto the surface of the lake.

"What are you doing?"

"Watching the dawn," she said. "Is this the part you murder me?"

"Murder you?"

"I saw it in a movie. You pick me up as cover for your assassination plot then strangle me when I have served my purpose."

"And what is your purpose?"

"I don't know. I fuck guys."

"That's not it," he said. "Why are you still here, if you think I might kill you?"

"I guess I might already be dead in Sicamous."

"You're a big girl. No one is going to jump to conclusions."

"You're not as sweet as I thought you were," she said.

"But I've still got a cute accent."

"Yeah. You've still got a cute accent. So what's this all about?"

"Come back to bed," he said. "Until the sun comes up. I can't do it in the dark."

"Do what?"

"Wait and see," he said.

"Tom. What was your wife like?"

"She was really sweet," he said.

"Like Roy."

"I suppose so."

"Were you happy?"

“No one’s ever happy,” Tom said.

“Guess not. Even in Canada.” She kissed him on the mouth.

It was still cold. In the dawn, the lake was a still dense blue-grey, heavy with glacial sediment, cold as snow-melt and deep. At the end of the valley, the ice-fields which edged the ridgeline recovered their twists and wrinkles with the coming light, twisted and stretched and, it seemed, began to flow again even as they began to thaw.

Nellie was bundled up in Tom’s down jacket and Tom had put on a fleece and knee length shorts and trainers, white socks almost to his knees. They rattled down the wide staircase of the Chateau Lake Louise, the golf clubs slung across Tom’s shoulders. Bell hops and waitresses paused to watch them pass. Tom nodded to the desk clerk and led her out across the terrace and down onto the little promenade.

The sky was duck egg blue above blue mountains capped with pale blue snow. This was enough, he thought, these mountains. His mother would have liked it here, like Scotland only bigger, much, much more.

They passed the little riverside shack that offered boat and kayak rental and slipped into the trees, losing themselves among the spruce and pines until Tom could no longer see the hotel and the hotel could no longer see him.

“What is this?” Nellie said.

“Shh!” he said. “I said I wouldn’t kill you.”

“Isn’t it afternoon in Europe. Don’t you want to call you Mom?”

“She’s dead.”

“Dead? You said it was her anniversary. How long?”

“Ten years. Today.”

“Oh. Shit. But we?”

“Life goes on.” Tom winked.

Tom stopped at a little grassy platform by the lakeshore. A solitary waterbird floated on the surface of the lake, its sharp features cocked in jerky interest at the rattle of the clubs as Tom set down the bag.

“A loon,” Nellie said.

“Like me,” he joked.

He chose a driver, a big, old-fashioned Jack Nicklaus wood, steel shaft and a redwood head with white and black facing. It had been his father's club. Tom gave up golf in his teens. He wouldn't play. Two months before, the day after his father's cremation, Tom took the clubs which had lain in the lobby cupboard for a decade. He took nothing else of the old man's. At night, Tom would go down to the local driving range and just hit balls, one after another, off into space, just standing there hitting ball after ball into the floodlit darkness.

He pressed Nellie back to the edge of the little clearing and took two practice swings.

"You're good at that," she said. "I thought you didn't play."

"I don't," he said.

He set a tee in the thick lakeside turf and set the first of the balls onto its little cup. He addressed the ball. He glanced out to the lake. The surface was mirror-smooth now, the mountain and the glacier reflected in its perfect surface.

His body wound up tight into the back-swing then released.

The club hit the ball and there was a smack-crack and his eye followed the ball up into the duck-blue sky.

"I've lost it," Nellie said.

The loon started to race across the lake's surface as the ball landed with a splash ten yards from it.

Tom set the tee again. Addressed the second ball. Crack-splash. Three four five. Each swing more powerful and fluid than the last, the energy flowing out of him, through the lovely geometric arc of the club, transmitted into the ball, propelling it into a long smooth parabolic trajectory.

"Should we be doing this? I mean the lake?"

Six, seven. He paused before the last ball.

"What is it?" Nellie asked.

He placed the ball and hit it. The loon had disappeared. A pattern of intersecting ripples spread out from a tight locus not very far out, hardly a hundred yards from the shore but deep he guessed, deep enough. The ripples wove together in a pattern that seemed for just a minute to mean something. The first wave lapped against the shards and splinters of broken rock along the shoreline near his feet. The loon flared on black wings and settled again in a blur of wavelets back onto the lake. Tom waited till the surface settled back to a dense

immanent stillness. He picked up the tee, slotted the club back into the golf bag and slung the bag on his shoulder.

Nellie was bunched up in the down jacket, shifting from foot to foot in the cold.

“There,” Tom said. “Now no-one got what they wanted. Who’s not happy now?” He slipped his free arm around Nellie’s waist – said, “Let’s go back to bed.”

In the hotel room the phone was already ringing.