I'd been staying at the Holiday Inn with my girlfriend, honestly the most beautiful woman I'd ever known, for three days under a phony name, shooting heroin. We made love in the bed, ate steaks at the restaurant, shot up in thejohn, puked, cried, accused one another, begged of one another, forgave, promised, and carried one another to heaven.

But there was a fight. I stood outside the motel hitchhiking, dressed in a hurry, shirtless under my jacket, with the wind crying through my earing. A bus came. I climbed aboard and sat on the plastic seat while the things of our city turned in the windows like the images in a slot machine.

Once, as we stood arguing at a street corner, I punched her in the stomach. She doubled over and broke down crying. A car full of young college men stopped beside us.

"She's feeling sick," I told them.

"Bulls**t," one of them said. "You elbowed her right in the gut."

"He did, he did, he did," she said.

I don't remember what I said to them. I remember loneliness crushing first my lungs, then my heart, then my balls. They put her in the car with them and drove away. But she came back.

This morning, after the fight, after sitting on the bus for several blocks with a thoughtless, red mind, I jumped down and walked into the Vine.

The Vine was still and cold. Wayne was the only customer. His hands were shaking. He couldn't lift his glass.

I put my left hand on Wayne's shoulder, and with my right, opiated and steady, I brought his shot of bourbon to his lips.

"How would you feel about making some money?" he asked me.

"I was just going to go over here in the corner and nod out," I said.

"I decided," he said, "in my mind, to make some money."

"So what?" I said.

"Come with me," he begged.

"You mean you need a ride."

"I have the tools," he said. "All we need is that sorry-ass car of yours to get around in."

We found my sixty-dollar Chevrolet, the finest and best thing I ever bought, considering the price, in the streets near my apartment. I liked that car. It was the kind you could bang into a phone pole with and nothing would happen at all.

Wayne cradled his burlap sack of tools in his lap as we drove out of town to where the fields bunched up into hills and then dipped down toward a cool river shaded by benevolent clouds.

All the houses on the riverbank—a dozen or so—were abandoned. The same company, you could tell, had built them all, and then painted them four different colors. The windows on the lower stories were empty of glass. We passed alongside them, and I saw that the ground floors of these buildings were covered with silt. Sometime back a flood had run over the banks, canceling everything. But now the river was flat and slow. Willows stroked the water with their branches.

"Are we doing a burglary?" I asked Wayne.

"You can't burglarize a forgotten, empty house," he said, horrified at my stupidity.

I didn't say anything.

"This is a salvage job," he said.

"Pull up to that one, right about there."

The house we parked in front of just had a terrible feeling about it. I knocked.

"Don't do that," Wayne said. "It's stupid."

Inside, our feet kicked up the silt the river had left there. The water-mark wandered the walls of the downstairs about three feet above the floor. Straight, stiff grass lay all over the place in bunches, as if someone had stretched them there to dry.

Wayne used a pry bar, and I had a shiny hammer with a blue rubber grip. We put the pry points in the seams of the wall and started tearing away the Sheetrock. It came loose with a noise like old men coughing. Whenever we exposed some of the wiring in its white plastic jacket, we ripped it free of its connections, pulled it out, and bunched it up. That's what we were after. We intended to sell the copper wire for scrap.

By the time we were on the second floor, I could see we were going to make some money. But I was getting tired. I dropped the hammer and went to the bathroom. I was sweaty and thirsty. But of course the water didn't work.

I went back to Wayne, standing in one of two small, empty bedrooms, and started dancing around and pounding the walls, breaking through the Sheetrock and making a giant racket, until the hammer got stuck. Wayne ignored this misbehavior.

I was catching my breath. I asked him, "Who owned these houses, do you think?"

"He stopped doing anything. "This is my house."

"It is?"

"It was."

He gave the wire a long, smooth yank, a gesture full of the serenity of hatred, popping its staples and freeing it into the room.

We balled up big gobs of wire in the center of each room, working for over an hour. I boosted Wayne through the trapdoor into the attic, and he pulled me up after him, both of us sweating and our pores leaking the poisons of drink, which smelled like old citrus peelings, and we made a mound of white-jacketed wire in the top of his former home, pulling it up out of the floor.

I felt weak. I had to vomit in the corner—just a thumbful of gray bile.

"All this work," I complained, "is fucking with my high. Can't you figure out some easier way of making a dollar?"

Wayne went to the window. He rapped it several times with his pry bar, each time harder, until it was loudly destroyed. We threw the stuff out there onto the mud-flattened meadow that came right up below us from the river.

It was quiet in this strange neighborhood along the bank except for the steady breeze in the young leaves. But now we heard a boat coming upstream. The sound curlicued through...
the riverside saplings like a bee,
and in a minute a flat-nosed
sports boat cut up the middle of
the river going thirty or forty
at least.

This boat was pulling behind
itself a tremendous triangular
kite on a rope. From the kite, up
in the air a hundred feet or so, a
woman was suspended—belted in
somehow, I would have guessed.
She had long red hair. She was
delicate and white, and naked ex-
cept for her beautiful hair. I
don’t know what she was think-
ing as she floated past these ruins.

“What’s she doing?” was all
I could say, though we could see
that she was flying.

“Now that is a beautiful sight,”
Wayne said.

On the way to town, Wayne
asked me to make a long
detour onto the Old Highway.
He had me pull up to a lopsided
farmhouse set on a hill of grass.

“I’m not going in but for two
seconds,” he said. “You want to
come in?”

“Who’s here?” I said.

“Come and see,” he told me.

It didn’t seem anyone was home
when we climbed the porch and he
knocked. But he didn’t knock again,
and after a full three minutes a woman
opened the door, a slender redhead
in a dress printed with small blossoms. She
didn’t smile. “Hi!” was all she said to
us.

“Can we come in?” Wayne asked.

“Let me come on the porch,” she
said, and walked past us to stand look-
ing out over the fields.

I waited at the other end of the
porch, leaning against the rail, and
didn’t listen. I don’t know what they
told to one another. She walked down the
steps, and Wayne followed. He
stood hugging himself and talking
down at the earth. The wind lifted
and dropped her long red hair. She was
about forty, with a bloodless, water-
logged beauty. I guessed Wayne was
the storm that had strangled her here.

In a minute he said to me, “Come
on.” He got in the driver’s seat and
started the car—you didn’t need a key
to start it.

I came down the steps and got in
beside him. He looked at her through
the windshield. She hadn’t gone back
inside yet, or done anything at all.

“That’s my wife,” he told me, as if
it wasn’t obvious.

I turned around in the seat and
studied Wayne’s wife as we drove off.

What can be said about those fields?
She stood in the middle of them as on
a high mountain, with her red hair
pulled out sideways by the wind,
around her the green and gray plains
pressed down flat, and all the grasses of
Iowa whistling one note.

I knew who she was.

“That was her, wasn’t it?” I said.

Wayne was speechless.

There was no doubt in my mind.
She was the woman we’d seen flying
over the river. As near as I could tell,
I’d wandered into some sort of dream
that Wayne was having about his wife
and his house. But I didn’t say any-
thing more about it, because, after
all, in small ways it was turning out
to be one of the best days of my life,
whether it was somebody else’s dream
or not. We turned in the scrap wire
for twenty-eight dollars—each—at a
salvage yard near the gleaming tracks
at the edge of town, and went back
to the Vine.

Who should be pouring drinks there
but a young woman whose name I
can’t remember. But I remember the
way she poured. It was like doubling
your money. She wasn’t going to make
her employers rich. Needless to say, she
was revered among us.

“I’m buying,” I said.

“No way in hell,” Wayne said.

“Come on.”

“It is,” Wayne said, “my sacrifice.”

Sacrifice! Where had he gotten a
word like “sacrifice”?

I’d seen Wayne look across the
poker table in a bar and accuse—I do
do not exaggerate—the biggest, blackest
man in Iowa of cheating, accuse him
for no reason other than that he,
Wayne, was a bit irked by the run of the
cards. That was my idea of sacri-
fice—tossing yourself away, discard-
going your body. The black man stood
up and circled the neck of a beer bottle
with his fingers. He was taller than
anyone who had ever entered that bar-
room.

“Step outside,” Wayne said.

And the man said, “This ain’t
school.”

“What the goddam fucking piss
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hell," Wayne said, "is that supposed to
mean?"
"I ain't stepping outside, like you do
at school. Make your try right here and
now."
"This ain't the place for our kind of
business," Wayne said. "Not inside
here with women and children and
dogs and cripples."
"Shit," the man said. "You're just
drunk."
"I don't care," Wayne said. "To me
you don't make no more noise than a
fart in a paper bag."

The huge, murderous man said
nothing.

"I'm going to sit down now,"
Wayne said, "and I'm going to play
my game, and fuck you."
The man shook his head. He sat
down, too. This was an amazing
thing. By reaching out one hand and
taking hold of it for two or three sec-
onds, he could have popped Wayne's
head like an egg.

And then came one of those mo-
ments. I remember living through one
when I was eighteen and spending the
afternoon in bed with my first wife
before we were married. Our naked
bodies started glowing, and the air
turned such a strange color I thought
my life must be leaving me, and with
every young fibre and cell I wanted
to hold on to it for another breath.
A clattering sound was tearing up
my head as I staggered upright
and opened the door on a vision I will
never see again. Where are my wom-
en now, with their sweet, wet words
and ways, and the miraculous balls
of hail popping in a green trans-
lucence in the yards? We put on our
clothes, she and I, and walked out into
a town flooded ankle-deep with white,
buoyant stones. Birth should have been
like that.

That moment in the bar, after the
fight was narrowly avoided, was like
the green silence after the hailstorm.

Somebody was buying a
round of drinks. The
cards were scattered on
the table, face up, face
down, and they seemed to
foretell that whatever we
did to one another would
be washed away by liquor
or explained away by sad
songs.

Wayne was a part of all
that.
The Vine was like a
railroad club car that had
somehow run itself off the
tracks into a swamp of
time where it awaited the
blows of the wrecking
ball. And the blows really
were coming. Because of
urban renewal, the whole
downtown was being torn
up and thrown away.

And here we were this
afternoon with nearly
thirty dollars each and our
favorite, our very favorite,
person tending bar. I wish
I could remember her
name, but I remember
only her grace and her
generosity.

All the really good times
happened when Wayne
was around. But this
afternoon, somehow, was
the best of all those times. We had
money. We were grim and tired.
Usually we felt guilty and frightened,
because there was something wrong
with us and we didn't know what it
was, but today we had the feeling of
men who had worked.

The Vine had no jukebox, but a real
stereo continually played tunes of alco-
holic self-pity and sentimental divorce.
"Nurse," I sobbed. She poured doubles
like an angel, right up to the lip of a
cocktail glass, no measuring. "You
have a lovely pitching arm." You had
to go down to them like a humming-
bird over a blossom. I saw her much
later, not too many years ago, and
when I smiled she seemed to believe I
was making advances. But it was only
that I remembered. I'll never forget
you. Your husband will beat you with
an extension cord and the bus will pull
away leaving you standing there in
tears, but you were my mother.

—DENIS JOHNSON