

Hunters in the Snow

Tobias Wolff

Tub had been waiting for an hour in the falling snow. He paced the sidewalk to keep warm and stuck his head out over the curb whenever he saw lights approaching. One driver stopped for him, but before Tub could wave the man on he saw the rifle on Tub's back and hit the gas. The tires spun on the ice.

The fall of snow thickened. Tub stood below the overhang of a building. Across the road the clouds whitened just above the rooftops, and the streetlights went out. He shifted the rifle strap to his other shoulder. The whiteness seeped up the sky.

A truck slid around the corner, horn blaring, rear end sashaying. Tub moved to the sidewalk and held up his hand. The truck jumped the curb and kept coming, half on the street and half on the sidewalk. It wasn't slowing down at all. Tub stood for a moment, still holding up his hand, then jumped back. His rifle slipped off his shoulder and clattered on the ice; a sandwich fell out of his pocket. He ran for the steps of the building. Another sandwich and a package of cookies tumbled onto the new snow. He made the steps and looked back.

The truck had stopped several feet beyond where Tub had been standing. He picked up his sandwiches and his cookies and slung the rifle and went to the driver's window. The driver was bent against the steering wheel, slapping his knees and drumming his feet on the floorboards. He looked like a cartoon of a person laughing, except that his eyes watched the man on the seat beside him.

"You ought to see yourself," the driver said. "He looks just like a beach ball with a hat on, doesn't he? Doesn't he, Frank?"

The man beside him smiled and looked off.

"You almost ran me down," Tub said. "You could've killed me."

"Come on, Tub," said the man beside the driver. "Be mellow, Kenny was just messing around." He opened the door and slid over to the middle of the seat.

Tub took the bolt out of his rifle and climbed in beside him. "I waited an hour," he said. "If you meant ten o'clock, why didn't you say ten o'clock?"

"Tub, you haven't done anything but complain since we got here," said the man in the middle. "If you want to piss and moan all day you might as well go home and bitch at your

kids. Take your pick.” When Tub didn’t say anything, he turned to the driver. “O.K., Kenny, let’s hit the road.”

Some juvenile delinquents had heaved a brick through the windshield on the driver’s side, so the cold and snow tunneled right into the cab. The heater didn’t work. They covered themselves with a couple of blankets Kenny had brought along and pulled down the muffs on their caps. Tub tried to keep his hands warm by rubbing them under the blanket, but Frank made him stop.

They left Spokane and drove deep into the country, running along black lines of fences. The snow let up, but still there was no edge to the land where it met the sky. Nothing moved in the chalky fields. The cold bleached their faces and made the stubble stand out on their cheeks and along their upper lips. They had to stop and have coffee several times before they got to the woods where Kenny wanted to hunt.

Tub was for trying some place different; two years in a row they’d been up and down this land and hadn’t seen a thing. Frank didn’t care one way or the other; he just wanted to get out of the goddamned truck. “Feel that,” Frank said. He spread his feet and closed his eyes and leaned his head way back and breathed deeply. “Tune in on that energy.” “Another thing,” said Kenny. “This is open land. Most of the land around here is posted.”

Frank breathed out. “Stop bitching, Tub. Get centered.”

“I wasn’t bitching.”

“Centered,” said Kenny. “Next thing you’ll be wearing a nightgown, Frank. Selling flowers out at the airport.”

“Kenny,” said Frank. “You talk too much.”

“O.K.,” said Kenny. “I won’t say a word. Like I won’t say anything about a certain babysitter.”

“What babysitter?” asked Tub.

“That’s between us,” said Frank, looking at Kenny. “That’s confidential. You keep your mouth shut.”

Kenny laughed.

“You’re asking for it,” said Frank.

“Asking for what?”

“You’ll see.”

“Hey,” said Tub. “Are we hunting or what?”

Frank just smiled.

They started off across the field. Tub had trouble getting through the fences. Frank and Kenny could have helped him; they could have lifted up on the top wire and stepped on the bottom wire, but they didn't. They stood and watched him. There were a lot of fences and Tub was puffing when they reached the woods.

They hunted for over two hours and saw no deer, no tracks, no sign. Finally they stopped by the creek to eat. Kenny had several slices of pizza and a couple of candy bars: Frank had a sandwich, an apple, two carrots, and a square of chocolate; Tub put out one hard-boiled egg and a stick of celery.

“You ask me how I want to die today,” said Kenny, “I'll tell you, burn me at the stake.” He turned to Tub. “You still on that diet?” He winked at Frank.

“What do you think? You think I like hard-boiled eggs?”

“All I can say is, it's the first diet I ever heard of where you gained weight from it.”

“Who said I gained weight?”

“Oh, pardon me. I take it back. You're just wasting away before my very eyes. Isn't he, Frank?”

Frank had his fingers fanned out, tips against the bark of the stump where he'd laid his food. His knuckles were hairy. He wore a heavy wedding band and on his right pinky was another gold ring with a flat face and an “F” printed out in what looked like diamonds. He turned it this way and that. “Tub,” he said, “you haven't seen your own balls in ten years.”

Kenny doubled over laughing. He took off his hat and slapped his leg with it.

“What am I supposed to do?” Tub said. “It's my glands.”

They left the woods and hunted along the creek. Frank and Kenny worked one bank and Tub worked the other, moving upstream. The snow was light, but the drifts were deep and hard to move through. Wherever Tub looked, the surface was smooth, undisturbed, and after a time he lost interest. He stopped looking for tracks and just tried to keep up with Frank and Kenny on the other side. A moment came when he realized he hadn't seen them in a long time. The breeze was moving from him to them; when it stilled he could sometimes hear them arguing but that was all. He quickened his pace, breasting hard into the drifts, fighting away the snow with his knees and elbows. He heard his heart and felt the flush on his face, but he never once stopped.

Tub caught up with Frank and Kenny at a bend of the creek. They were standing on a log that stretched from their bank to his. Ice had backed up behind the log. Frozen reeds stuck out, barely nodding when the air moved.

“See anything?” asked Frank.

Tub shook his head.

There wasn't much daylight left, and they decided to head back toward the road. Frank and Kenny crossed the log and started downstream, using the trail Tub had broken. Before they had gone very far, Kenny stopped. “Look at that,” he said, and pointed to some tracks going from the creek back into the woods. Tub's footprints crossed right over them. There on the bank, plain as day, were several mounds of deer sign.

“What do you think that is, Tub?” Kenny kicked at it. “Walnuts on vanilla icing?”

“I guess I didn't notice.”

Kenny looked at Frank.

“I was lost.”

“You were lost. Big deal.”

They followed the tracks into the woods. The deer had gone over a fence half buried in drifting snow. A no-hunting sign was nailed to the top of one of the posts. Frank laughed and said the son of a bitch could read. Kenny wanted to go after him, but Frank said no way - the people out here didn't mess around. He thought maybe the farmer who owned the land would let them use it if they asked, though Kenny wasn't so sure. Anyway, he figured that by the time they walked to the truck and drove up the road and doubled back it would be almost dark.

“Relax,” Frank said. “You can't hurry nature. If we're meant to get that deer, we'll get it. If we're not, we won't.”

They started back toward the truck. This part of the woods was mainly pine. The snow was shaded and had a glaze on it. It held up Kenny and Frank, but Tub kept falling through. As he kicked forward, the edge of the crust bruised his shins. Kenny and Frank pulled ahead of him, to where he couldn't even hear their voices any more. He sat down on a stump and wiped his face. He ate both the sandwiches and half the cookies, taking his own sweet time. It was dead quiet.

When Tub crossed the last fence into the road, the truck started moving. Tub had to run for it and just managed to grab hold of the tailgate and hoist himself into the bed. He lay there panting. Kenny looked out the rear window and grinned. Tub crawled into the lee of

the cab to get out of the freezing wind. He pulled his earflaps low and pushed his chin into the collar of his coat. Someone rapped on the window, but Tub would not turn around.

He and Frank waited outside while Kenny went into the farmhouse to ask permission. The house was old, and paint was curling off the sides. The smoke streamed westward off the top of the chimney, fanning away into a thin gray plume. Above the ridge of the hills another ridge of blue clouds was rising.

“You’ve got a short memory,” said Tub..

“What?” said Frank. He had been staring off.

“I used to stick up for you.”

“O.K., so you used to stick up for me. What’s eating you?”

“You shouldn’t have just left me back there like that.”

“You’re a grown-up, Tub. You can take care of yourself. Anyway, if you think you’re the only person with problems, I can tell you that you’re not.”

“Is something bothering you, Frank?”

Frank kicked at a branch poking out of the snow. “Never mind,” he said.

“What did Kenny mean about the babysitter?”

“Kenny talks too much,” said Frank. “You just mind your own business.”

Kenny came out of the farmhouse and gave the thumbs up, and they began walking back toward the woods. As they passed the barn, a large black hound with a grizzled snout ran out and barked at them. Every time he barked he slid backward a bit, like a cannon going off. Kenny got down on all fours and snarled and barked back at him, and the dog slunk away into the barn, looking over his shoulder and peeing a little as he went.

“That’s an old-timer,” said Frank. “A real graybeard. Fifteen years, if he’s a day.”

“Too old,” said Kenny.

Past the barn they cut off through the fields. The land was unfenced, and the crust was freezing up thick, and they made good time. They kept to the edge of the field until they picked up the tracks again and followed them into the woods, farther and farther back toward the hills. The trees started to blur with the shadows, and the wind rose and needled their faces with the crystals it swept off the glaze. Finally they lost the tracks.

Kenny swore and threw down his hat. "This is the worst day of hunting I ever had, bar none." He picked up his hat and brushed off the snow. "This will be the first season since I was fifteen that I haven't got my deer."

"It isn't the deer," said Frank. "It's the hunting. There are all these forces out here and you just have to go with them."

"You go with them," said Kenny. "I came out here to get me a deer, not listen to a bunch of hippie bullshit. And if it hadn't been for Dimples, here I would have, too."

"That's enough," Frank said.

"And you....you're so busy thinking about that little jailbait of yours, you wouldn't know a deer if you saw one."

"I'm warning you," said Frank.

Kenny laughed. "I think maybe I'll have me a talk with a certain jailbait's father," he said. "Then you can warn him, too."

"Drop dead," said Frank and turned away.

Kenny and Tub followed him back across the fields. When they were coming up to the barn, Kenny stopped and pointed. "I hate that post," he said. He raised his rifle and fired. It sounded like a dry branch cracking. The post splintered along its right side, up toward the top.

"There," said Kenny. "It's dead."

"Knock it off," said Frank, walking ahead.

Kenny looked at Tub and smiled. "I hate that tree," he said, and fired again. Tub hurried to catch up with Frank. He started to speak, but just then the dog ran out of the barn and barked at them. "Easy, boy," said Frank.

"I hate that dog." Kenny was behind them.

"That's enough," said Frank. "You put that gun down."

Kenny fired. The bullet went in between the dog's eyes. He sank right down into the snow, his legs splayed out on each side, his yellow eyes open and staring. Except for the blood, he looked like a small bearskin rug. The blood ran down the dog's muzzle into the snow.

They all looked at the dog lying there.

"What did he ever do to you?" asked Tub.. "He was just barking."

Kenny turned to Tub. "I hate you."

Tub shot from the waist. Kenny jerked backward against the fence and buckled to his knees. He folded his hands across his stomach. "Look," he said. His hands were covered with blood. In the dusk his blood was more blue than red. It seemed to belong to the shadows. It didn't seem out of place. Kenny eased himself onto his back. He sighed several times, deeply. "You shot me," he said.

"I had to," Tub said. He knelt beside Kenny. "Oh, God," he said. "Frank. Frank."

Frank hadn't moved since Kenny killed the dog.

"Frank!" Tub shouted.

"I was just kidding around," said Kenny. "It was a joke. Oh!" he said, and arched his back suddenly. "Oh!" he said again, and dug his heels into the snow and pushed himself along on his head for several feet. Then he stopped and lay there, rocking back and forth on his heels and head like a wrestler doing warm-up exercises.

Frank roused himself. "Kenny," he said. He bent down and put his gloved hand on Kenny's brow. "You shot him," he said to Tub.

"He made me," said Tub.

"No, no, no," Kenny said.

Tub was weeping from the eyes and nostrils. His whole face was wet. Frank closed his eyes, then looked down at Kenny again.

"Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere," Kenny said, "just everywhere."

"Oh, God," said Tub.

"I mean where did it go in?" said Frank.

"Here." Kenny pointed at the wound in his stomach. It was welling slowly with blood.

"You're lucky," said Frank. "It's on the left side. It missed your appendix. If it had hit your appendix, you'd really be in the soup." He turned and threw up onto the snow, holding his sides as if to keep warm.

"Are you all right?" asked Tub.

"There's some aspirin in the truck," said Kenny.

"I'm all right," said Frank.

“We’d better call an ambulance,” said Tub.

“Jesus,” said Frank, “what are we going to say?”

“Exactly what happened,” said Tub. “He was going to shoot me but I shot him first.”

“No, sir!” said Kenny. “I wasn’t either!”

Frank patted Kenny on the arm. “Easy does it, partner.” He stood. “Let’s go.”

Tub picked up Kenny’s rifle as they walked down toward the farmhouse. “No sense leaving this around,” he said. “Kenny might get ideas.”

“I can tell you one thing,” said Frank. “You’ve really done it this time. This definitely takes the cake.”

They had to knock on the door twice before it was opened by a thin man with lank hair. The room behind him was filled with smoke. He squinted at them. “You get anything?” he asked.

“No,” said Frank.

“I knew you wouldn’t. That’s what I told the other fellow.”

“We’ve had an accident.”

The man looked past Frank and Tub into the gloom. “Shoot your friend, did you?”

Frank nodded.

“I did,” said Tub.

“I suppose you want to use the phone.”

“If it’s O.K.”

The man in the door looked behind him, then stepped back. Frank and Tub followed him into the house. There was a woman sitting by the stove in the middle of the room. The stove was smoking badly. She looked up and then down again at the child asleep in her lap. Her face was white and damp; strands of hair were pasted across her forehead. Tub warmed his hands over the stove while Frank went into the kitchen to call. The man who had let them in stood at the window, his hands in his pockets.

“My partner shot your dog,” said Tub.

The man nodded without turning around. “I should have done it myself. I just couldn’t.”

“He loved that dog so much,” the woman said. The child squirmed and she rocked it.

“You asked him to?” said Tub. “You asked him to shoot your dog?”

“He was old and sick. Couldn’t chew his food any more. I would have done it myself but I don’t have a gun.”

“You couldn’t have anyway,” said the woman. “Never in a million years.”

The man shrugged.

Frank came out of the kitchen. “We’ll have to take him ourselves. The nearest hospital is fifty miles from here and all their ambulances are out anyway.”

The woman knew a shortcut, but the directions were complicated and Tub had to write them down. The man told them where they could find some boards to carry Kenny on. He didn’t have a flashlight, but he said he would leave the porch light on.

It was dark outside. The clouds were low and heavy-looking and the wind blew in shrill gusts. There was a screen loose on the house, and it banged slowly and then quickly as the wind rose again. They could hear it all the way to the barn. Frank went for the boards while Tub looked for Kenny, who was not where they had left him. Tub found him farther up the drive, lying on his stomach. “You O.K.?” said Tub.

“It hurts.”

“Frank says it missed your appendix.”

“I already had my appendix out.”

“All right,” said Frank, coming up to them. “We’ll have you in a nice warm bed before you can say Jack Robinson.” He put the two boards on Kenny’s right side.

“Just as long as I don’t have one of those male nurses,” said Kenny.

“Ha ha,” said Frank. “That’s the spirit. Get ready, set, over you go,” and he rolled Kenny onto the boards. Kenny screamed and kicked his legs in the air. When he quieted down Frank and Tub lifted the boards and carried him down the drive. Tub had the back end, and with the snow blowing into his face he had trouble with his footing. Also he was tired and the man inside had forgotten to turn the porch light on. Just past the house Tub slipped and threw out his hands to catch himself. The boards fell and Kenny tumbled out and rolled to the bottom of the drive, yelling all the way. He came to rest against the right front wheel of the truck.

“You fat moron,” said Frank. “You aren’t good for diddly.”

Tub grabbed Frank by the collar and backed him hard up against the fence. Frank tried to pull his hands away, but Tub shook him and snapped his head back and forth and finally Frank gave up.

“What do you know about fat?” said Tub. “What do you know about glands?” As he spoke, he kept shaking Frank. “What do you know about me?”

“All right,” said Frank.

“No more,” said Tub.

“All right.”

“No more talking to me like that. No more watching. No more laughing.”

“O.K., Tub. I promise.”

Tub let go of Frank and leaned his forehead against the fence. His arms hung straight at his sides.

“I’m sorry, Tub.” Frank touched him on the shoulder. “I’ll be down at the truck.”

Tub stood by the fence for a while and then got the rifles off the porch. Frank had rolled Kenny back onto the boards and they lifted him into the bed of the truck. Frank spread the seat blankets over him. “Warm enough?” he asked.

Kenny nodded.

“O.K. Now how does reverse work on this thing?”

“All the way to the left and up.” Kenny sat up as Frank started forward to the cab. “Frank!”

“What?”

“If it sticks, don’t force it.”

The truck started right away. “One thing,” said Frank, “you’ve got to hand it to the Japanese. A very ancient, very spiritual culture and they can still make a hell of a truck.” He glanced over at Tub. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you felt that way, honest to God, I didn’t. You should have said something.”

“I did.”

“When? Name one time.”

“A couple of hours ago.”

"I guess I wasn't paying attention."

"That's true, Frank," said Tub. "You don't pay attention very much."

"Tub," said Frank, "what happened back there - I should have been more sympathetic. I realize that. You were going through a lot. I just want you to know it wasn't your fault. He was asking for it."

"You think so?"

"Absolutely. I would have done the same thing in your shoes, no question."

The wind was blowing into their faces. The snow was a moving white wall in front of their lights; it swirled into the cab through the hole in the windshield and settled on them. Tub clapped his hands and shifted around to stay warm, but it didn't work.

"I'm going to have to stop," said Frank. "I can't feel my fingers."

Up ahead they saw some lights off the road. It was a tavern. Outside in the parking lot there were several jeeps and trucks. A couple of them had deer strapped across their hoods. Frank parked and they went back to Kenny. "How you doing, partner?" said Frank.

"I'm cold."

"Well, don't feel like the Lone Ranger. It's worse inside, take my word for it. You should get that windshield fixed."

"Look," said Tub, "he threw the blankets off." They were lying in a heap against the tailgate.

"Now look, Kenny," said Frank, "it's no use whining about being cold if you're not going to try and keep warm. You've got to do your share." He spread the blankets over Kenny and tucked them in at the corners.

"They blew off."

"Hold on to them then."

"Why are we stopping, Frank?"

"Because if me and Tub don't get warmed up we're going to freeze solid and then where will you be?" He punched Kenny lightly in the arm. "So just hold your horses."

The bar was full of men in colored jackets, mostly orange. The waitress brought coffee. "Just what the doctor ordered," said Frank, cradling the steaming cup in his hand. His skin was bone white. "Tub, I've been thinking. What you said about me not paying attention, that's true."

"It's O.K."

"No. I really had that coming. I guess I've just been a little too interested in old number one. I've had a lot on my mind - not that that's any excuse."

"Forget it, Frank. I sort of lost my temper back there. I guess we're all a little on edge."

Frank shook his head. "It isn't just that."

"You want to talk about it?"

"Just between us, Tub?"

"Sure, Frank. Just between us."

"Tub, I think I'm going to be leaving Nancy."

"Oh, Frank. Oh, Frank." Tub sat back. "What's the problem? Has she been seeing someone?"

"No. I wish she was, Tub. I wish to God she was." He reached out and laid his hand on Tub's arm. "Tub, have you ever been really in love?"

"Well—"

"I mean really in love." He squeezed Tub's wrist. "With your whole being."

"I don't know. When you put it like that, I don't know."

"You haven't, then. Nothing against you, but you'd know it if you had." Frank let go of Tub's arm. "Nancy hasn't been running around, Tub. I have"

"Oh, Frank"

"Running around's not the right word for it. It isn't like that. She's not just some bit of fluff."

"Who is she, Frank?"

Frank paused. He looked into his empty cup. "Roxanne Brewer."

"Cliff Brewer's kid? The babysitter?"

"You can't just put people into categories like that, Tub. That's why the whole system is wrong. And that's why this country is going to hell in a rowboat."

"But she can't be more than....." Tub shook his head.

“Fifteen. She’ll be sixteen in May.” Frank smiled. “May fourth, three twenty-seven p.m. Hell, Tub, a hundred years ago she’d have been an old maid by that age. Juliet was only thirteen.”

“Juliet? Juliet Miller? Jesus, Frank, she doesn’t even have breasts. She doesn’t even wear a top to her bathing suit. She’s still collecting frogs.”

“Not Juliet Miller - the real Juliet. Tub, don’t you see how you’re dividing people up into categories? He’s an executive, she’s a secretary, he’s a truck driver, she’s fifteen years old. Tub, this so-called baby-sitter, this so-called fifteen-year-old has more in her little finger than most of us have in our entire bodies. I can tell you this little lady is something special.”

Tub nodded. “I know the kids like her.”

“She’s opened up whole worlds to me that I never knew were there.”

“What does Nancy think about all of this?”

“Nothing, Tub. She doesn’t know.”

“You haven’t told her?”

“Not yet. It’s not so easy. She’s been damned good to me all these years. Then there’s the kids to consider.” The brightness in Frank’s eyes trembled and he wiped quickly at them with the back of his hand. “I guess you think I’m a complete bastard.”

“No, Frank. I don’t think that.”

“Well, you ought to.”

“Frank, when you’ve got a friend it means you’ve always got someone on your side, no matter what. That’s how I feel about it, anyway.”

“You mean that, Tub?”

“Sure I do.”

Frank smiled. “You don’t know how good it feels to hear you say that.”

Kenny had tried to get out of the truck but he hadn’t made it. He was jackknifed over the tailgate, his head hanging above the bumper. They lifted him back into the bed and covered him again. He was sweating and his teeth chattered. “It hurts, Frank.”

“It wouldn’t hurt so much if you just stayed put. Now we’re going to the hospital. Got that? Say it: ‘I’m going to the hospital.’”

"I'm going to the hospital."

"Again."

"I'm going to the hospital."

"Now just keep saying that to yourself and before you know it we'll be there."

After they had gone a few miles, Tub turned to Frank. "I just pulled a real boner," he said.

"What's that?"

"I left the directions on the table back there."

"That's O.K. I remember them pretty well."

The snowfall lightened and the clouds began to roll back off the fields, but it was no warmer and after a time both Frank and Tub were bitten through and shaking. Frank almost didn't make it around a curve, and they decided to stop at the next roadhouse.

There was an automatic hand dryer in the bathroom and they took turns standing in front of it, opening their jackets and shirts and letting the jet of hot air breathe across their faces and chests.

"You know," said Tub, "what you told me back there, I appreciate it. Trusting me."

Frank opened and closed his fingers in front of the nozzle. "The way I look at it, Tub, no man is an island. You've got to trust someone."

"Frank..."

Frank waited.

"When I said that about my glands, that wasn't true. The truth is I just shovel it in."

"Well, Tub..."

"Day and night, Frank. In the shower. On the freeway." He turned and let the air play over his back. "I've even got stuff in the paper towel machine at work."

"There's nothing wrong with your glands at all?" Frank had taken his boots and socks off. He held first his right, then his left foot up to the nozzle.

"No. There never was."

"Does Alice know?" The machine went off and Frank started lacing up his boots.

“Nobody knows. That’s the worst of it, Frank, not the being fat - I never got any big kick out of being thin - but the lying. Having to lead a double life like a spy or a hit man. This sounds strange but I feel sorry for those guys, I really do. I know what they go through. Always having to think about what you say and do. Always feeling like people are watching you, trying to catch you at something. Never able to just be yourself. Like when I make a big deal about only having an orange for breakfast and then scarf all the way to work. Oreos, Mars Bars, Twinkies. Sugar Babies, Snickers.” Tub glanced at Frank and looked quickly away. “Pretty disgusting, isn’t it?”

“Tub, Tub.” Frank shook his head. “Come on.” He took Tub’s arm and led him into the restaurant half of the bar. “My friend is hungry,” he told the waitress. “Bring four orders of pancakes, plenty of butter and syrup.”

“Frank...”

“Sit down.”

When the dishes came, Frank carved out slabs of butter and just laid them on the pancakes. Then he emptied the bottle of syrup, moving it back and forth over the plates. He leaned forward on his elbows and rested his chin on one hand. “Go on, Tub.”

Tub ate several mouthfuls, then started to wipe his lips. Frank took the napkin away from him. “No wiping,” he said. Tub kept at it. The syrup covered his chin; it dripped to a point like a goatee. “Weigh in, Tub,” said Frank, pushing another fork across the table. “Get down to business.” Tub took the fork in his left hand and lowered his head and started really chowing down. “Clean your plate,” said Frank when the pancakes were gone, and Tub lifted each of the four plates and licked it clean. He sat back, trying to catch his breath.

“Beautiful,” said Frank. “Are you full?”

“I’m full,” said Tub. “I’ve never been so full.”

Kenny’s blankets were bunched up against the tailgate again.

“They must have blown off,” said Tub.

“They’re not doing him any good,” said Frank. “We might as well get some use out of them.”

Kenny mumbled. Tub bent over him. “What? Speak up.”

“I’m going to the hospital,” Kenny said.

“Attaboy,” said Frank.

The blankets helped. The wind still got their faces and Frank's hands but it was much better. The fresh snow on the road and the trees sparkled under the beam of the headlight. Squares of light from farmhouse windows fell onto the blue snow in the fields.

"Frank," said Tub after a time, "you know that farmer? He told Kenny to kill the dog."

"You're kidding!" Frank leaned forward, considering. "That Kenny. What a card." He laughed and so did Tub. Tub smiled out the back window. Kenny lay with his arms folded over his stomach, moving his lips at the stars. Right overhead was the Big Dipper, and behind, hanging between Kenny's toes in the direction of the hospital, was the North Star, pole star, help to sailors. As the truck twisted through the gentle hills, the star went back and forth between Kenny's boots, staying always in his sight. "I'm going to the hospital," said Kenny, but he was wrong. They had taken a different turn a long way back.