

Wood Grouse
on a High Promontory
Overlooking Canada

I went up there with my brother, Gary—up on the side of Goat Peak: a high promontory overlooking Canada.

That day we caught no fish at Wall Lake. They were there, watching what we did, but the weather was all wrong, too sultry, and the fish stayed down in the deep water.

That day Gary wouldn't talk about the war he'd only just come back from. "You don't want to know," he said to me. "Take my word for it, Bud." So after a while I didn't ask anymore. But I could see Gary had seen things I hadn't.

I don't know. I was fifteen. I spent a lot of time throwing rocks, I know that. Building stacks of rocks, backing off thirty yards, then throwing for as long as it took to knock the stacks of rocks apart.

We saw a flock of sheep, a sheepdog and a shepherd, up on the Wind Pass trail. "Aren't they beautiful?" said Gary. The shepherd was a silent Mexican on a horse, his dog a ragged mutt; the sheep flowed away from us in a slow white

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wave as we waded through them in the cloudless sunlight.

There were no trout for lunch but some cheese I'd kept in the streambed and a can of sardines and some dried pears. Then—later—we smeared ourselves with jungle juice, put our sunglasses on and took the compass and the Geological Survey map up on the side of Goat Peak.

Up there Gary spread the map out on a slab of rock, and laid the compass down and watched while it settled. "There's Canada," he said. "That's Eldorado Peak way over there and that's the Chilliwack Valley."

I looked up into a world of blue spruce that rolled on endlessly to a land I dreamed about. I didn't say a thing about this dream to my brother, though—about the mountains or about living off the land. It seemed the wrong dream to tell him about, now that he was back in America.

"This is the border," Gary said. "We're in Canada, Bud."

Driven into the scree up there we found the mounted iron border marker—number fifty-five, it read. We sat by it: a place to rest and watch the sun go down.

"Draft-dodger heaven," said Gary.

We kept crossing from country to country, back and forth, reveling in the freedom of not answering to anyone about it.

Eventually to the northwest there was no light other than a crescent of orange wavering on the horizon. The sky over our heads lit up, while the earth we sat on went cold in the last sweet twilight.

It was in this last light that we saw them—*hooters*, that was the name our father used—a covey of wood grouse dodging through a broken tumble of sharp gray talus rock.

"Look," Gary said. "There."

I picked up a stone about the size of a baseball and

watched them—imagining myself a hunter of wild animals.

"They're beautiful," Gary said. "Just look at them."

I let fly hard and in the gray light the covey scattered, a drilling of buzzing wings, birds tossing themselves down the mountainside, but one seemed to leap up so that for a moment it was painted like a shadow against the sky, the tips of its wings wide, a sound like *whoot whoot whoot whoot* aimed at the heavens, it did a half-roll in midflight and plummeted, describing an arc, headlong into the darkening scree.

"Jesus," Gary said. "What did you do that for?"

I had no good answer. I said, "I didn't think I was going to hit one, Gary."

We went down and stood by her where she was dying among the rocks. She was a large female—soot-colored tail feathers, some white hind shafts, a narrow, bluish band where her flanks narrowed. My stone had caught her flush in the breast. One wing had been crushed in her fall to earth.

"Jesus," Gary said. "Look what you did."

I didn't speak, though. What could I say? We stood there, the two of us, watching her.

"Jesus," Gary said again.

There was nothing left for her. The other birds were long gone. The one good wing only twitched along the rock. Her life flowed out of her, into the scree, back into the earth it had come from.

"I'm going to finish this pain," Gary said. "God forgive me."

There were tears in his eyes I hadn't figured on.

He put his boot on the dying bird's head—the sole over one alert, clear eye—and ground it suddenly into the rock while the wings gave a last frenzied shudder. They fluttered

out to their full span spasmodically in the moment just before she died.

"That's it," Gary said, not ashamed of his crying—just crying now while he spoke to me. "That's all it is. That's all there is to it, Bud."

We went down the mountain and around the canyon head to Wall Lake. No trout were feeding there; not a sound except the croaking of the marsh frogs.

After we had eaten the pinto beans with chili powder and white rice for supper we sat by the propane stove for a while.

"How has it been?" Gary asked. "What have you been up to?"

I told him about not making the basketball team, the fight I'd had with Mike Kizinski, other things that didn't really matter.

"I like hearing all this," Gary said. "Tell me some more, Bud."

But I didn't. I was young and didn't know any better. So instead I asked him about the thing on my mind: "Did you kill anyone in Vietnam?" I said.

"Did I kill anyone in Vietnam?" said Gary.

"Did you?"

"Did I kill anyone in Vietnam," said Gary. "Did I kill anyone in Vietnam."

And again he began to cry silently, in a way I hadn't figured on at all.

"I'm sorry," I said. "Really."

But he went on crying. He cried with no shame. He cried

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in a way I didn't think was possible. He didn't rub his eyes or try to stop it. He just cried.

Later we took down our sleeping bags from where they'd been airing over the branch of an arctic pine, and laid them out on the flat ground we'd cleared the night before. The two of us lay buried in our bags, only our faces showing, the drawstrings pulled around our heads so that the spilling of the snowmelt over the pebbles in the streambed was like a muted roar, a streaming music beginning and ending in our ears. We lay there side by side staring up at the stars, and talked about how unfathomable was the phrase *light years*, the possibility of life on Saturn's seventh moon, the years that would have to pass before NASA put a man on Mars. We talked about a theory Gary read about in a book—that time and space didn't really exist, that everything was in reality something else we didn't know about.

After a while we gave up on the useless things and watched for the points of light that were satellites among the forever-fixed stars. We watched them hurtling slowly to the horizon, gravity tugging them always toward the earth so that they moved in a relentless straight line out of vision. Gary said that, if need be, a satellite could take a close-up photograph of us in our sleeping bags, as soon as the sky became light enough.

"But it doesn't matter," he said. "It's beautiful up here. I'm glad we came. I'm glad we're here."

I heard him, minutes later, moving toward sleep, and I began to feel alone among all those mountains. And then I couldn't fall asleep that night; I felt ashamed of myself. But

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later on I found that Gary was awake too, and then we passed the dark hours talking.

"Two insomniacs," he said after a while. "Crazy, Bud. Insane."

"At least we've got someone to talk to," I said.

"At least we've got that," said Gary.