

2003

# Refractions

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**REFRACTIONS**

**By**

**Linwood R. Lancaster**

**B.A. University of Maine, 2001**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the**

**Requirements for the Degree of**

**Master of Arts**

**(in English)**

**The Graduate School**

**The University of Maine**

**May, 2003**

**Advisory Committee:**

**Welch Everman, Professor of English**

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# REFRACTIONS

By Linwood R. Lancaster

Thesis Advisor: Dr. Welch Everman

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)  
May, 2003

This project allowed me to pursue one of my greatest joys, expressing my feelings, emotions, and thoughts through the written word. As we march towards a world dominated by technology, there are those that think the day of the storyteller has passed. Television, movies, and electronic games have become the vehicle for amusement in the world today, supposedly leaving no room left for the lowly storyteller. However, these entities are stories told but in a different medium. The ideas that drive these devices still have to come from someone, an author. Even video games now are intertwined with the storyteller, “Laura Croft” was a video heroine before she was a movie idol. So, as you can see, the role of the storyteller hasn’t diminished, just the vehicle for delivery has gone through a metamorphosis. The story is still a collection of the author’s thoughts, feelings and emotions; this hasn’t, nor will it ever change. I have chosen the conventional, if antiquated, method of type and paper to express this voice.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am a native son of the state of Maine. My father, who was illiterate, demanded that we, my sisters and I, learned to read, write, and cipher. From the age of eleven, I spent summers, school vacations and long weekends in the backwoods with my father in various woods camps. Electricity, running water, or central heat was not provided in these domiciles. Days were spent bucking and piling wood, nights consisted of a quick meal, washing dishes and then playing cards or reading by the gas lights suspended from the ceiling. My father, usually in the company of a couple of his work mates would sit and listen to me stumble over the words of whatever book I had dragged along. It was several years before I realized this wasn't the norm in most families. At first they listen to me reciting various comic books, classics illustrated soon became a favorite of mine and theirs.

I eventually moved on to the stories of Jack London, the poetry of Robert Service, before discovering Steinbeck, Hemingway and Conrad. Like my mentors I don't hold to the belief that stories have to have a happy ending.

In fact, I believe that happy endings in life are very rare and when it appears everything is going as planned something will louse it up.

This collection would never have come to pass without the support and guidance of several individuals. Welch, Bob, Elaine, Ben, Margo, Tony and my wife, Julie, I could never write enough words to express my thanks and gratitude; so a heart-felt, thank-you will have to do.

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## POEMS

### BOB

It is hard to tell his age  
Face of ruddy grooves  
Yet hair that's hardly gray  
The eyes tell though  
Much has passed before them  
The voice was rich  
Deeply resounding timbre  
Telling of remembrances  
It hesitated and skipped  
Starting smooth-flowing, then  
Betraying the years and tears.  
Hauntingly alone, missing friends  
Confidants, mentors, contemporaries  
That have passed, he is one of the last.  
Memories are all that's left  
He no longer dreams  
The Mediterranean Sea  
The desert sky  
Blue

## **DOES IT HURT**

I need to know

If it hurts

Does it burn

Is it just smoke and noise

Do you feel the pain

Or the bullet too fast

Your chest contracts

Before it explodes

Is the pain unbearable

Does your mind overload

What hurts more

The sudden blast

Or to rot away

Slow to pass

**Hunt's**

What's the point

Prostitutes

Pimps

Trash

Endless warehouses

A bend in the river

It's pointless

The pointless point

That's the "Point"



## **Yestermorro**

What was once future  
has long since passed  
so many dreams  
aspirations dashed

clear eyed  
trusting love  
believing it all  
a better tomorrow

wife job children  
demanding demands  
it seems that we  
quickly lose command

cold hard  
trying to screw  
while getting screwed  
cynicism survival

the possible  
became impossible  
a rat on a wheel  
an insipid race

what once was future  
now lies in the past  
the fire on life  
is no more than ash

## **FEELING**

Inside out

Outside in

Why did it start

When will it end

Churning, gnawing

Sweating in the cold

Cold in the heat

Poked prodded

Piece of meat

Mind is swirling

Memory gone

Effects of

Effects of

I don't recall

## **ESCAPE**

I ran from the Palm coast

I knew it was time to run

Her father hated me

He had money

Enough to make me

Disappear

Her white ass bounced

In the back of

My old green Dodge

Peeling paint

Didn't look like much

Over sized engine-made to run

The surf pounding the sand

Her ass pounded the faded paint

And he call me white trash

I knew, He knew

I didn't love her, I hated him

Snobbish prick

He wanted rid of me

He got his wish

I dropped her off

And headed north

Leaving them

A reminder

Months later a note arrived

Telling of the child

I glued the envelope shut

Return to sender

Scrawled across the white expanse

No forwarding address known.

There is always a time to run

When the springs groaned

And she complains

When the windows are steamed

From the rising heat of argument

Instead of the short, hot gasps of lust

When condom is no longer  
Nothing but a rubber band  
Encircling me, strangling us  
I try to withdraw  
To escape from  
Feeling doomed

I didn't put up much fight  
Her fingers dug in my cheeks  
Pulling me back  
Back in the recesses  
An eruption  
Sweat and lust.

I stayed until  
Her breast grew heavy  
Her hips spread  
Her belly encumbered  
Any kind of movement  
I stayed too long

Round, hard, huge  
A dark strip of hair started  
Between her breasts  
Ending below her navel  
I slip out the back door  
During that strange time

It wasn't night  
And not yet morning  
I never looked back  
She married another  
He claimed the child  
Good for the kid

There was a time  
I didn't run fast enough  
I was married before  
I knew what happened  
No, she wasn't  
The child finally came

I worked in a mill  
I hate being inside  
The boss was not my age  
Pimple faced panty waist  
He went to school  
While I served

He got his nut off  
Getting in my face  
The look of disbelief  
A dirt encrusted hand  
Broke his nose  
As my boot separated his balls

I ran off  
It was time to run  
Diapers and noise  
Wet nosed bosses  
Her demands faded  
In the rear view mirror



**To whom it may concern**

It doesn't

not their problem

it's mine

could they help

if they want

they don't

not concerned

my concern

I'm the whom

not they

who

should care

could care

do you care

does anyone care

does anyone really care

## SHORT STORIES

### Rolling

The alarm clock shattered the stillness of the early morning as the sun tried to penetrate the smoke-tinted window of the bedroom. Jack swung his feet to the cold floor, and stumbled to the kitchen. His scuffing feet sent a beer bottle spinning out of control, causing the old collie-shepherd mix to jump. The dog yelped and cowered as the kick aimed at him by his master missed. "God Dam dog, you're always in the way. I didn't get any sleep last night, all I did was toss and turn. Frigin rain and thunder, I hate this frigin weather. But, what do you care? Frigin, flea bitten waste of space." The distant echo of thunder still echoed in Jack's head as he opened the door of the trailer and stepped out in to the bright sunlight.

The diesel engine groaned as Jack pushed the starter button. He took his thumb from the switch, spat out the window, and pushed it again. The engine turned slowly, smoke rolled from the exhaust, but it still didn't start. "GOD DAM PIECE OF SHIT! Don't do this to me. If I'm late again they'll fire my ass." He pushed the starter button again. "Come on, start. How in the hell am I going to pay

support for three kids if I lose my job? Just frigin start!" The truck seemed to respond to Jack's pleading and roared into life.

The truck fairly flew down the road as Jack held the accelerator to the floor and pumped the gear shift in a blinding flurry. He glanced at his watch. Only fifteen minutes to travel the twelve miles to the job site. He never saw the Golden Retriever that darted across the road. He only heard the loud thump accompanied by cries of pain as the truck bumped over the dog.

Jack looked in his mirror as he pulled over on the side of the road. The dog lay twitching on the pavement. "Jesus Christ, not this, not today. GOD DAM IT!" The moans of the animal reached Jack's ears as he opened the door; long pitiful moans that told of unbearable pain and approaching death. Jack drove the palms of both hands over his ears. A tear traveled down his cheek as he clinched his eyes shut. The inescapable moans mixed with the distant echo of thunder in his head. Jack's face turned dark and gray. He dropped his hands to his sides. He rolled his head side to side and opened his eyes. The four foot pipe that he used to tighten the wheels of the truck found its way from behind the seat to his right hand. He walked back to the dog, and swung the pipe with

all his might, striking the dog behind the right ear. The moaning stopped. Jack dragged the carcass by the tail into the ditch. He slid the pipe back behind the seat as he climbed up into the cap of the waiting truck. Jack started whistling to the song on the radio as he pulled back on to the road. He didn't ever notice the splatters of blood that were drying on his face.

Marshall Jacobs eased the tractor-trailer on to the interstate. It was just a little past seven o'clock. He had to run a little over a hundred miles up state to pick up a load. With loading time, travel time, and screw-off time, he wouldn't be home until eight or nine o'clock that evening. He pushed the baseball cap back on his head. "Hell of away to spend an anniversary. I don't know what's kept her around all these years. I've got to learn to say no to those ass-holes." Those ass-holes were the dispatchers, the ones that decide who was going to take what load where. They had been giving him some good loads, and he didn't want to screw it up. So when they called, he hauled ass to wherever they said. After all, it was only their twenty-seventh anniversary. It wasn't the first time he had missed an important date, he hoped it would be the time.

The clock in the radio flashed 7:15 as Jack pulled into the pit. "God Dam it! God Dam it, last frigin truck again." The truck rocked as the loader dropped the gravel into the body. The loader operator signed him with two short blasts from the horn to let him know he was loaded. He was almost out of the pit when he met Roscoe, the job super.

The lights on the CB flashed as Rocco's voice squawked out of the speaker. "Jack, you want to hold up? I've got to talk to you."

Jack grabbed the microphone off the dash. "What the hell is the matter now?"

"Just stop so we can talk without everyone in the world listening."

Jack eased the truck to a stop. He climbed down and as Roscoe came to the door. "What do you want?"

"You were late again this morning."

"No shit. I hit a frigin dog on the way in, I couldn't help it, I had to take care of the poor bastard."

"It's always something with you, isn't it, Jack? It's always something that you couldn't help. Truck wouldn't start; traffic was backed up, always some excuse. People that are good at excuses usually aren't

worth shit at anything else. No more excuses, you've earned yourself the rest of the week off."

"I'm not jerking you around, Roscoe. I did hit a dog. Jesus Christ, how in the hell am I going to make ends meet if you send me home for the rest of the week?"

"Jack, don't give me any shit about this. The front office told me to send you home for good. I went to bat for you. Christ, Jack, I'm trying to save your job! Take the time off and be thankful."

"Thanks for nothing, you fat prick! Screw you and screw the front office! Tell that wife-stealing asshole you call boss to take this frigin job and stuff it up that prim ass of his."

"No, Jack, SCREW YOU! I laid my ass on the line for you so you can keep your job and you call me a fat prick. Get in your frigin truck and get off my job site. I don't give a shit if you ever come back. Just get out of my sight." Roscoe spun on one heel and headed towards his pickup.

"Roscoe, wait a minute."

"What for? So you can call me more names."

"No, man, come back here. Please."

Roscoe turned back to face Jack, his face was red with anger. Jack's left hand rested on the end of the pipe behind the seat. The pipe came out from behind the seat in a long swinging arch. Jack never heard the gasp of breath that rushed over Rocco's lips. Jack didn't feel the crunch of bone that reverberated through the pipe or realize that blood had splattered across his face. He just kept hitting Rocco's head with the pipe as Roscoe fell to the ground. Rocco's body twitched twice as a gurgling sound escaped from his throat. The only thing that Jack was aware of was the muted sounds of voices and the distant roll of thunder. He tried to clear his head of the noise as he grabbed Rocco's body by a leg, dragged it to the side of the road, and kicked it into the ditch. He wiped the blood from his hands on the front of his shirt as he slid the pipe behind the seat. The voices whispered and the thunder echoed as he climbed back into the truck.

Marshall backed the truck into the loading dock. The trailer came to rest with a thump and a shake. The loading supervisor peered over his glasses at Jacob as he looked up from the loading manifest. "You're not supposed to be here until this afternoon."

"I'm already into the dock. Can't you load me early? It's my anniversary and I'd like to spend a couple hours with my wife."

"It always something with you frigin freight haulers. Your mother's sick, you'll miss your load on the other end, it's your anniversary. Yea, it's always some damn excuse."

Marshall knew this was the start of a long spell of screw off time. "Listen man, I don't need this shit. It is my anniversary and I don't give a shit if you believe me or not. I just want to know when you can load me."

"Some time this afternoon, cowboy."

Jack brushed the dried flakes of blood from his face as he raced down the road. He had to get his load to the work site. He started whistling a tune that could have been playing on the radio. He had turned the radio off when he stopped to talk to Roscoe. The miles clicked off. The pavement gave way to hard packed dirt. A cloudy plume of dust followed Jack's truck down the road. A smaller plume appeared in the distance. As the vehicles



drew closer, Jack recognized the car. It was Bob Hayward's gray Mercedes. Bob was Roscoe's boss, his boss, old man Hayward's oldest son, and Jack's ex-wife's new husband.

Jack pushed the accelerator pedal hard against the floor. Black smoke poured from the exhaust as the old diesel engine rattled to life. The speedometer hovered at seventy when Jack yanked the steering wheel hard to the left. The truck hit the gray Mercedes head-on. The truck reared up into the air like a bucking stallion. It fell back to earth with a deafening crash, sputtered, and stalled. Smoke and steam billowed out from under the twisted hood. Jack had been thrown to the passenger's side floor. The Mercedes was a crumbled ball of gray metal wedged under the front axle of the truck. The screams of the man who had been operating the car pierced the air.

Jack kicked out the passenger's side door window and climbed out of the twisted wreck. He crawled under the steaming mess and grabbed the screaming man by the hair on his head. Jack yelled at him, "I'll see you in hell, you wife stealing bastard," and then spat in the bleeding face. Jack crawled from under the wreckage and walked towards the woods. He started whistling the same tune

again, the tune that was now playing endlessly in his head in perfect harmony with the voices and the ever loudening sound of thunder.

Officer Kemper had only been on the force for a few weeks. This was his first job after graduating from the academy. The vomit spewed from between his teeth when he peered into the wrecked Mercedes. A trail of puke followed him from the crash to the edge of the road. After he stopped retching, he returned to his patrol car. "Ethel, this is Kemper. You had better call Sally at the coroner's office and send her out to the interstate access road they're building off route 16. We're going to need a couple of wreckers, one big enough to haul a dump-truck. We'll need the fire department to hose down the road too."

"I send them right along. Tom, do you need an ambulance too?"

Tom realized he hadn't checked the truck to see if Jack was still in it. "Yes, Ethel, send an ambulance." Tom stood by the patrol car. He couldn't find the courage to go look in the truck. He couldn't stand to see another sight like the one in the Mercedes.

The two-way crackled to life. "Tom, they're on their way to you. Do you need anything else?"

"Yes, you had better call the Chief and have him come out."

"I already did. Tom, what happened?"

"I just found Jack Henderson's truck parked on top of Bob Hayward's car with Bob still in it."

The Chief's car came over the slight rise with lights flashing and siren screeching. He slammed on the brakes, sliding the car to a stop beside Tom's patrol car.

"What the hell is going on?"

"I'm sure you heard what I told Ethel."

"I heard. Is he dead?"

"Yea, he's dead."

"What about Jack?"

"I haven't looked. After seeing what was left of Bob, I couldn't, I just couldn't."

The Chief nodded in a knowing way as he heaved his overweight body out of the cruiser. The glass crunched under his feet as he reached the truck. He groaned as he pulled himself up the side of the truck. The Chief looked through the broken window into the empty cab. "Tom, start looking around for some clue as to where this son-of-a-

bitch took off to." The Chief carefully lowered his hulking form down the side of the truck as the two-way blasted from his car.

"Chief, call the station as soon as you can."

Tom searched the accident scene in an ever widening circle as the Chief made his way to the car to use the cell phone. He nodded his head and waved his free arm as he talked to Ethel. Tom made his way towards the Chief's car, hearing the Chief blurt into the phone, "Jesus Christ, what's going to happen next? You keep this quiet until I get over there." The Chief tossed the handset back into the car. "Tom, you're going to have to take care of this mess. I've got to go over to Hayward's pit; they just found Roscoe Knowlton's body in a ditch. Looks like someone beat him to death."

"Ok Chief, I'll take care of things here."

"Tom, don't say anything about Roscoe until I talk to you."

"Sure thing Chief, Chief, there's tracks leading from the wreck to the woods.

"I'll call the state police and have them bring up the dogs. If he gets into the swamp we'll need their help."

The Chief left as the wail of the sirens from the approaching fire trucks sounded in the distance.

Sally from the coroner's office arrived seconds before the fire trucks and minutes after the wreckers. She opened the rear of the black station wagon and pulled on rubber gloves. "Tom, how many and where are they?"

Sally was always right to the point. Tom liked that about her. "Just one. Bob Hayward, he's under there," Tom pointed to the rumbled gray mass under the front of the truck.

Sally's breath escaped between her teeth. "That doesn't look like a good place to be." Sally crawled into the little gray car with one of those funny looking black bags that doctors always seem to carry. She pulled a stethoscope from the bag and pressed it to the bloody pulp that had once been Bob Hayward's chest. She struggled out from under the truck. "Get the wrecker to pull the truck off Bob's car so we can extricate the body."

As Tom directed the massive wrecker to the back of Jack's truck, Jack was running further from the accident. Jack knew these woods like the back of his hand. He had hunted, camped, and played in these woods since he was old enough to walk. The sound of thunder in his head was

so loud it hurt. The voices had progressed to screams. Jack clinched his head between his hands, trying to block out the sounds. It didn't work. He knew he had to keep moving. Something, no someone was after him, and he didn't know why. Jack knew these woods like the back of his hand. Jack was lost.

Marshall paced the length of the small break room while sipping on a cup of coffee. It was almost dark and they still hadn't started loading his truck. The supervisor was being a real dick-head. They only ran two shifts in this shit hole. If they didn't start loading him within the hour, he would have to lay over. Just what he wanted to do, call and tell his wife he wouldn't be home at all on their anniversary. He had missed too much of life already. He knew he couldn't make up for lost time, but he didn't want to miss anymore. She had raised the kids by herself. He was always out on the road, either going or coming but, never staying. The money had been good and he had sent most of it home. He wasn't one of those guys who blew the paycheck on lot lizards. Oh, there had been some indiscretions. She didn't ask and he didn't tell. He didn't know if she had ever been

unfaithful and he didn't want to know. He believed what his Grandfather had told him years before, "A woman is just like a well. If someone comes along and takes a dipper of water and you don't know about it, it doesn't make the water any less sweet when you're taking your drink. Some things are better left alone and unknown." Grandfather was a smart man.

The setting sun framed Jack's truck as it was hauled off, the long shadow it cast pointed toward the crumpled Mercedes. The volunteer firemen were busy with a hydraulic cutter and the jaws of life peeling the car apart so they could get Bob's body out of the twisted gray clump. Tom was waiting for the Chief to return. He had called the Chief when he found the pipe he now held, the pipe that he had removed from behind the seat of Jack's truck. The pipe was covered with blood and hair.

Sally hung up the phone in her car and walked towards Tom. "Tom, I've got to have that pipe so I can run tests on it. From the Chiefs description of the wounds on Roscoe, it's probably the murder weapon. I won't know for sure until after I examine Roscoe's body and check out the hair and blood on the pipe."

Tom didn't hear the car pull up behind him over the noise of the firemen's equipment.

A head poked out of the unmarked car. "Officer Kemper?"

Tom turned to face the voice. "Yes, I'm Kemper"

"I'm Detective Johnson from the state police force. Your Chief said that you would fill me in."

"Jack Henderson, the owner of the dump truck that just left on the wrecker appears to be hiding in the woods. It's likely that he killed Roscoe Knowlton with a piece of pipe before he ran over Bob Hayward's car. We found a pipe behind the seat of Jack's truck that had blood and hair on it. Sally, the coroner, said it fit the description of the weapon used on Roscoe. That's about all I know right now."

"Sounds like you've kept on top of things. It will be dark by the time the K9 unit gets here. Do you think that this Henderson guy is trying to hide or did he just wander off?"

"Bob Hayward, the guy in the gray Mercedes, was married to Jack's ex-wife. Jack always blamed Bob for his wife's leaving. There's no doubt he ran over Bob on purpose and he's out there because he wants to be out there."



"How dangerous do you consider him?"

"Look at that car and you tell me how dangerous he is."

"Do you think we should wait until morning to go after him?"

"Jack is a hell of a woodsman; he knows that stretch of swamp and forest better than you know your name. He can be one nasty son-of-a-bitch. He isn't right in the head, hasn't been for years. There's no way in hell I would go in there tonight to try and find Jack Henderson."

"I'll have the K9s hold up until first light. Tom, what do you mean he isn't right in the head?"

"I've known Jack my whole life. He and my brother were best friends. They played football together, got drunk together, and went out on double dates together. Hell, Jack spent more time at my house when he was a teenager than he did at his own house. Not that anyone could blame him for not going home. His Daddy raised him. His mother got tired of the beatings and took off when Jack was seven. His Dad was a hard man. He taught Jack how to poach, drink, and take a beating. There wasn't any tears shed the day Doug Henderson died."

"His father really turned Jack into someone to be feared?"

"No, Jack was a scrappy bastard, but he wasn't really mean, at least not like his father. That came later with the constant drinking, after he came back from the Army. I don't know what happened to him. He came back home drunk, pissed-off and with a chest full of medals. Jack and my brother used to talk about it. Neither of them would talk to anyone else about what they had seen; it was like they were members of some secret society."

"Perhaps your brother can shed some light on to the situation?"

"That isn't possible. He shot himself eight years ago."

"Jesus, I'm sorry. I"

"Don't worry about it; it happened a long time ago. Anyway, after that Jack got worse, and his wife couldn't take it anymore. She took their three kids and moved back in with her mother. She married Bob about two years after that. Jack just kept drinking and fighting. He pushed anyone that gave a shit away from him."

"Sounds like we may have our hands full. I hope I can count on you to help."

"No problem, I want Jack caught."

The loading dock crew screwed off long enough so that Marshall had to stay the night. They told him they couldn't finish loading him until the morning. He stood leaning against the cool brick wall with the payphone in his hand, "May, you were right. I should have told that bastard to stick this load up his ass. They've jerked me around all day and I'm still not loaded. The dock boss really has a hair across his ass about something. Yea, I know that we had plans for supper and everything. Call the kids and see if they want to go out and eat with you?....You don't have to tell me how disappointed you are. I'm really sorry. I'll make it up to you....I know that I'm always saying that. It won't happen again, I promise....I'll be home as early as I can tomorrow. Maybe you can go with me on this run, you know, take some time off from work. Yea, we'll see. Yea, I love you too. Good night."

Jack sat on the edge of a stream, watching the shadows grow as the sun settled below the horizon. His steely gray eyes roamed along the bank, looking for any movement of brush, a glint in the waning light, anything

that was out of place. He removed his shirt and smeared his body and face with the black ooze from the water's edge. Rocking back and forth, he mumbled, "Got to make myself part of, got to hide, make myself part of, part of the forest." He slowly blended into the shadows. Slumped against a tree, he fell into a fitful sleep, oblivious to the cold. The dream slipped upon him as smooth and thick as a summer fog, sealing off everything but itself.

He is standing on top of a hill looking down on a small village. He starts a cautious descent into the valley. He picks his way over the blackened earth, past charred rocks, and splintered trees. As he nears the floor of the valley, the air grows heavier, hard to breathe. He feels his chest tighten. He wants to run away, but can't. He tries to swallow the lump in his throat and gags. The smell of death hangs in the air, a sweet sickly smell that enters your body through every pore, hanging on like a leech. He knows no one could survive such carnage. He turns to leave

Jack bolted upright from his sleep, screaming, his breath was coming in short hurried gasps, and he didn't remember the dream.

The first streaks of dawn were breaking over the ridge as the K9 unit prepared to start the hunt. The only hint that there had been an accident there the day before was the dark stains in the gravel where the Mercedes had come to rest. The sergeant was giving instructions to his men. "Remember, this isn't a wanderer or a lost person. He is a murder suspect and consider him extremely dangerous."

A mere three miles had separated Jack and the police when the chase started. At eight o'clock, they had reached the place that Jack had spent the night. Jack had been on the prowl since the echoes of the screams had awakened him hours before dawn.

The dogs were in frenzy. The trail was now fresh, and they wanted to go. Jack's lead had dwindled to just over a mile. Jack sensed them. He didn't know who they were, but he knew they weren't friendly.

It was a quarter to three when they finished loading Marshall's truck. It seemed that everything that could go wrong had. It would still be more than an hour before he would be free to go. Now they were dragging their feet about getting him a bill-of-lading, without which he couldn't deliver the load. Then the security guard would

have to wake from his semi-comatose state and check the locks on the doors of the trailer before opening the gate so he could leave this hell-hole. Yea, he had a good hour more to be jerked around.

A little past three o'clock, the search party walked right past Jack and didn't even realize it. The bays of the dogs had warned Jack that they were close. He had backtracked and wedged himself under a blown down tree. He pulled damp leaves and clumps of soggy moss over himself to hide from his pursuers. The dogs were in such a hurry to catch him, they ran past his hideaway. Jack lay perfectly still and waited as the dogs and the men passed. He slid out from under the debris he had buried himself in so quietly that not a leaf crackled. Jack grabbed the man walking drag from behind, pinching his nose between his thumb and index finger. He covered the man's mouth with the remaining three fingers. The stick that Jack had sharpened to a point in the dark slid easily under the man's ribs, finding its way to his lungs as Jack twisted it back and forth. Jack let the man fall forward. The man tried to breathe into lungs that could no long hold air as his eyes turned glassy and empty. Jack trotted off; away from the strange men with dogs.

"Fred, where in the hell is Luke?"

"Christ, I don't know. He was right behind me a few minutes ago. LUKE! LUKE! I don't know, maybe he stopped to take a piss."

"Call the dogs back and we'll wait for him." Fred lit a cigarette as they waited. He took long slow drags while waiting for Luke to appear from the undergrowth.

"Jesus Christ! You suppose the frigging moron got lost?"

"He's probably got his head stuck up his ass and can't pull it back out with both hands."

"Damn it, Phil, we'll have to go back and see if we can find him."

The men joked and laughed as they stumbled back through the brush looking for Luke. They found him lying chest down; his head was turned to the left and his gaze frozen for eternity.

"Jesus, OH! JESUS! PHIL, LOOK WHAT THE ANIMAL DID TO THE KID!"

"Radio it in Phil. Ask someone to come out here and pick up Luke."

"Aren't we going to wait for more help to come?"

"YOU DO WHATEVER TO FUCK YOU WANT! I'm going to have that bastard's balls hanging off my belt before morning." With that Fred, unleashed the dogs and commanded them to attack.

Jack sensed the dogs closing in on him long before he heard the pant of their breath. The first dog broke from the underbrush with a snap and a snarl. Jack grabbed the dog by its lower jaw and twisted. The dog yelped in pain as Jack threw it aside. Jack never saw the second dog, but he felt the burning pain of the bite as the dog sank its teeth into his leg. Jack beat the dog unconscious as it hung from his calf. The third dog stayed back, out of Jack's reach. Jack turned and ran, oblivious to the steady flow of blood from the wound the dog had inflicted. He only knew he had to get away.

Phil heard the dog's yelp and then saw a flash of a half naked man running. He drew his gun, but didn't have time to fire before Jack disappeared into the dense growth. "HOLD IT! HOLD IT RIGHT THERE! I SAID STOP, YOU SON-OF-A-BITCH!" Jack never slowed his pace. The words were unintelligible to him. An eerie smile crept across Jack's stone face.

It was dark when Jack reached the fence that separated the woods and the highway. Beyond the fence, the lights of the passing vehicles flashed. Jack didn't recognize the highway; it was a no-man's land that he knew he had to cross. The bay of the dogs was getting closer. He knew he couldn't stay here. Jack jumped the



fence and crawled through the dew covered grass to the edge of the road. He watched the lights slip over the rise in the road and then flash by. Jack's breath was coming in short gasps. His palms were wet with a nervous sweat. He waited for the lights to flash by one more time. He jumped and ran. The lights froze him midway across the pavement. He stood there and waited in wide eyed wonder, staring at the approaching truck.

"Listen, officer, there wasn't anything I could do. It was the strangest fucking thing I ever saw. He just stood there looking straight into the headlights like some dumb animal. FUCK!"

"I know that it was beyond your control. We were pursuing him when he jumped out in front of you."

"This is fucked. I just couldn't stop. I TRIED, I REALY TRIED!"

"Did he say anything before, well before he died?"

"No, not really."

"Then he did say something?"

"Watch out for the bad men with the dogs. That's all he said. Then his body shook a little and he was gone. Fuck!"

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Jacobs. I know this has been hard on you. The Chief is going to give you a ride home. If I need anything else I call you tomorrow. Mr. Jacobs it wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could have done."

"Yea, Ok."

Late that night Marshall Jacobs bolted upright in bed, waking his wife. The only thing he could remember about the dream was the distant sound of thunder mixed with the soft echoes of voices.

## Freedom

Mike paced five steps to the wall, five steps to the door. Back and forth, back and forth, staring at the concrete floor, thinking. It had taken a long time for him to arrive here, and this is the last place he thought he would end up. But, things never seem to work out as planned.

A voice filtered through the door, "Hey man, what ya doing?"

"The same God dam thing you're doing, burning time."

"I heard ya shuffling around. What ya thinking about?"

"It's none of your damn business, you dumb ass-hole. I was just thinking."

"Sorry, man. I just thought you might want to talk?"

"Talk about what? What's done is done."

Mike's soft steps could once more be heard as he continued his journey from the wall to the door and back again. Pictures popped into his head; scenes of his children playing, of his wife brushing her hair, of his father sipping coffee at the kitchen table, a jumping panorama of his life. The pictures moved faster, all mixed up, friends, relatives, school, childhood, adulthood, all together. He pressed his palms to his

temples, trying to push the thoughts from his head. He wanted to be left alone, alone to the gray of the room.

Again the grating voice drifted in under the door, "Man, I didn't want to piss you off. I just thought ya might want someone to talk to. Ya know, kill some time."

"Time, that's all we have isn't it, time."

"Uh ha, what's your name?"

"Does it really matter what my name is?"

"I guess not."

Mike rubbed his head. Maybe, just maybe, talking to this bozo would help keep the pictures from flashing through his head. "So what do you want to talk about?"

"I don't care. Ya got any kids?"

"Two, but I won't talk about them."

"How come they never come to see you?"

"Are you fucking stupid! I told you I will not talk about my fucking children!"

"Calm down man, I just wondered why you never have any visitors."

"Because, when they come, I refuse to see them."

"How come?"

"You really are a fucking idiot. I don't want anyone to see me in this fucking cage. Not my kids, not

my wife, not my mother, not my sister, not any FUCKING ONE!"

"Ok man, I was just asking."

"You ask about too much that's not any of your business."

"My moms use to say the same thing, Sam ya ask to many questions. Jesus, I miss my moms. She died last year"

"I know what you mean. My only friend died years ago and I still miss him."

"Ya never know what they mean to ya until it's too late."

"You got that one right Sam."

"Hey, I heard them say you're a short timer."

"Eight days, only eight days more in this snake pit. What the hell did you ask my name for if you already know who I am?"

"Just trying to be polite, ya know how some folks get in here." "Yea, I know how folks get in here."

"Christ, you must be nervous. I've got months left to stare at these gray walls"

"Nervous? I haven't got anything to be nervous about. Just eight more days and I'm out of here."

The first rays of light stole through the narrow window; Mike was still counting the steps from the wall to the door.

"Hey Mike, you awake? I just thought of something funny."

"What's that?"

"Our initials, they're S and M, get it."

"I get it, but the humor some how escapes me. It must be the environment."

"Well, I thought it was funny."

"You would."

The conversation ceased. The only sound was the scuffling of Mike's feet as he made his tract from the wall to the door. The pictures were once more flashing in his mind. Knotted, like a plate of spaghetti, all tied together, yet each strand representing a different time-a different place; All at once, each piece different-each the same. "Jesus, am I losing my mind?" Mike once again pressed his hands to his temples, trying to push the visions away. But, the flashes kept coming, in no logical order, just flashes of the past, jumping back and forth across the years.

"Hey Sam, you got quiet all of a sudden."

"Maybe, I'm tired of you always talking like I'm stupid."

"Well, if the shoe fits. No, I'm just fucked-up, got all these things in my head, I don't mean anything by it."

"I got feelings, too, ya know."

"We all have feelings, Sam, though they're not always good."

"Mike, how did a smart guy like you get in here?"

"I'm sure you've heard the stories, this place is full of stories."

"That's the problem, man which story is the truth?"

"All of them, none of them."

"Ya see, there ya go, making me feel stupid. I don't know if I want to talk anymore."

"Jesus Sam, what I meant was that it doesn't matter what the truth is, it only matters what people believe. If someone believes that you're the reincarnation of Satan, then no matter what you do, you'll still be Satan to them."

"I get ya, it doesn't matter if you're guilty, if people think you're guilty then you are."

"Well, that's not exactly what I meant, but it's close enough."

"Then what you're saying is that you didn't do it?"

"Didn't do what?"

"Ya know, what landed you in here."

"I never said I didn't do it."

"Well, what is it that you did or didn't do?"

"Do you want to know what I did or why I did it?"

"There's a difference?"

"Yes, how can you acknowledge or condemn what a person did without knowing the force that drove him to do this thing in the first place?"

"I guess you can't."

"That's right, so do you want to know what I did or why I did it?"

"Both, I guess."

"That's the only answer, my friend."

The soles of heavy boots echoed from the other side. They drew closer, stopping in front of Mike's door. The rattling of keys and the groan of worn hinges pierced the air. But it was the door on the other side of the dark corridor that opened.

"Walker, come with me."

Mike measured the many minutes left of the day pacing off the distance from the wall to the door. The



dismal gray of the day had given way to a parched yellowed moon when Mike heard the steps that heralded Sam's return. Neither man spoke. The night was passed in silence. The only interruption were the dancing images in Mike's mind of a life that once was.

As the pasty light of the night gave way to the forlorn white dawn of another day; the images marched through Mike's mind.

"Mike, are ya awake?"

"Who said I slept?"

"Ya feel like talking?"

No, he didn't feel like talking. But, anything was better than watching the flickering history that was running through his head. Anything at all, even talking!

"Sure, Sam, I don't mind talking for a while."

"Ya remember what we were talking about yesterday. About why a man does what he does."

"Yes, I remember."

"Why did you do what you did?"

"It's a long story. A real long story."

"Hey man, I haven't got anything but time. I've got ninety-two days of nothing but time."

"You got your date yesterday?"

"Yep. Mike, do you believe in God?"

"NO."

"What do you believe in? If there's no God, what is there?"

"Nothing. There's nothing other than what we have right now. Man is just some accident of nature, a mutated slug that crawled out of the primordial ooze eons ago. Man is the most cataclysmic accident that ever happened to this ravaged planet."

"Man, I don't understand all of what you just said. But, I don't like being called a slug."

"Don't take it personal. You asked me what I believed in, I told you."

"Well, I believe in God."

"Good, I'm glad for you."

"Are ya making fun of me?"

"No, just telling you what I think. How in the hell did we get on the Christian crusader bullshit anyway?"

"Don't know; guess it's not a good subject for us."

The silence once again grew to a deafening proportion. Mike sat on his bunk clasping his knees, rocking. He banged his head against the wall with every backwards motion. It hurt like hell, but it kept the visions from returning.

Mike's father looked at him with those piercing gray eyes. A deep furrow ran across his forehead. He cleared his throat. "I sure as hell hate to see you like this, Mike. No matter what, I want you to know I love you."

Mike bolted up-right on the bunk.

"Why couldn't you tell me that when you was alive?  
You BASTARD!"

"Mike, ya ok? Mike are ya there?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Who ya talking to"

"The past, no one."

"So Mike what did they get ya for?"

"None of your damn business."

"Don't get pissy, man. I was just curious."

"I'm not getting pissy, as you so eloquently put it.  
What are you here for?"

"I'm here on bullshit. I'm not guilty, it's all a  
mistake."

"Sorry, Sam, I forgot I'm the only guilty person  
here."

"There you go, man. Talking like I'm stupid again."

"I was just making a statement. But if you want to  
know why I'm here, I'll tell you. But, with a few  
conditions"

"What's the conditions?"

"You can't interrupt, you can't tell anyone else and we only talk when I want to talk."

"Sure, man, no problem."

"I guess for you to understand what brought me here, you have to know something about my life. My old man was a tough son-of-a- bitch, never gave anyone a word of praise. He was quick with his tongue, and even quicker with his hands. He only ever gave me two things; a bloody thrashing and a tongue lashing. I still hate the bastard.

Before my cousin Bones moved in with us the only creature that loved me for me was this frigin stupid dog, Dickey. He was some kind of Spitz mix, he followed me everywhere I went. When I felt like the world was closing in on me, he would keep nuzzling me until I patted him. No matter how many times I told him to quit, he would just keep pushing his nose against my hand until I patted him, and I would always feel better. One day Dickey and I was walking down the road and old man Case came weaving around the corner, drunk as usual. I scrambled out of the way, Dickey wasn't so lucky. The old drunk ran over him, killed him instantly. I lugged him home and buried him behind the barn. A couple of weeks later Case dropped

off this Black Lab, told my mother it was to replace the dog he accidentally killed. We had him about a month when the sonofabitch bit me, almost took my thumb off. My old man grabbed him and threw him out the door, snatched his rifle off the wall and shot him right on the front lawn. I drug him out back and tossed him on the manure pile. You put shit where it belongs."

"Damn man, that's cold"

"I felt good when the old man shot the little black dog. I should have felt sorry; the dog didn't know any better. I let anger take control and it felt good."

"Naw man, when someone does ya wrong, ya settle the score."

"That my friend is why we are both here."

"What does the dog have to do with you being here?"

"Well, as I said, Dickey was the only creature that accepted me for me before Bones came to live with us. Bones became my surrogate big brother. If anyone had it worse than I did, it was Bones. His father was a drunk and his mother worked all the time to support him and his five siblings, not to mention his father's habit. Well, Bones got in trouble when he was fourteen and was sent to reform school. When he got out his PO sent him to live with us. My mother was his only other relative.

The old man gave Bones the same treatment he did me; a bark and a slap. But, no matter how bad it was, Bones never said a word. When I bitched, he would tell me it's not that bad; at least you've got three meals a day and have a roof over your head. You could be in a lot worse places."

"I'm not here to listen to some sob-story."

"You're here because you're a fuck-up Sam, just like me. I told you, if I'm going to tell you my story you're not to interrupt. Now, do you want to hear the story or not?"

"Yea, I'm listening."

"Well, Bones lived with us for two years. He was three years older than me but, we did everything together. Christ, I drank my first beer and had my first cigarette compliments of Bones. When I was fifteen, he moved out, he got this girl knocked-up and set up house with her. What a winner she was, already had a kid by some guy that supposedly took off as soon as he found out she was pregnant. But, Bones had to do the right thing, so he married the dumb cooze.

"I don't know, probably thought that the kid deserved a better chance than he got. Anyway she came from a family as fucked-up as Bones\_. Not only was her

father a drunk, he liked to have his way with his daughters. Her mother finally got sick of his shit and shot him when Nell was about sixteen. The same time she was pregnant with her first kid. The rumor was the kid was her father's, but who the hell knows for sure? So a year and a half later she's knocked-up again, her father is dead and her mother is in the state hospital. So Bones marries the bitch and tries to make a home for the ready made family."

"Damn, Mike, it sounds as though you really hate her?"

"I don't know if hate is a strong enough word. I despised her with every fiber of my body. She was a slut when they met, a cheat when they were married and a whore when it was done. No, I far more than hated her!" Mike fell silent.

Sam could hear his heavy breathing but, no words came from across the hall. "I'm sorry I interrupted. Will you tell me the rest of the story?"

"Sure, tomorrow."

"You've only got five days left."

"Plenty of time, we'll talk tomorrow." Mike spent the rest of the day watching a beetle crawl up the wall, only to fall as it tried to go over the ledge under the

window. They both seemed doomed to the same fate, banging their heads against the wall while doing their time.

The metal tray slid through the slot at the bottom of the door. Warm oatmeal, dry toast and caramel colored water that was suppose to be coffee. The tray crashed against the wall and rattled to the floor after Mike kicked it. The oatmeal made a slow track down the wall.

"Go ahead Mr. Beetle, have a feast."

"Mike, what's all the racket?"

"I dropped my frigin tray."

"Ya holler down and they'll bring ya another."

"It isn't worth the bother."

"Are ya ready to finish the story?"

"I don't know, what the hell, why not."

"Cool."

"Well, Nell came with some other baggage. She had a brother a few years younger than she was and she looked out for him. So when Bones and her tied the knot, Jimmy came to live with them. Now every time Bones and I went to do something, Jimmy tagged along. Christ, we couldn't make a move without that twit's nose drove up Bones\_ ass. I got some sick of that shit. But Bones kept telling me



to give him a chance. After a while I got to the point where I could put up with the fuck-wad, but I still didn't like it much."

"Man, you really had a thing for this Bones guy. Didn't ya?"

"What the fuck is that suppose to mean. I really had a thing for him. I 'm not any god-dam rump-ranger, if that's what you're saying! FUCK! If I could get my hands on you, I'd rip your fucking lungs right out through your throat! You sick mother-fucker-you are a dead man!"

"Man, I didn't mean it like that! I mean you loved him like a brother, only more. Ya know, I didn't think there was any thing funny goin on."

"I'm not like those fags down stairs that spit on their dicks to pave the dirt road!"

"I know that, man. I won't say any thing again, I'm sorry man."

"Fuck-you."

"Come on, Mike, I didn't mean it that way and ya know it."

"Fuck-you, story times over."

The sun cast long shadows through the high window as the day slipped away. Mike had not uttered a word since early that morning. Sam too had also grown quiet, tired

of apologizing to a person who refused to acknowledge him. The dusk faded to night, a few small stars could be seen through the thin veil of clouds that hovered over head. Mike sat on the edge of his bunk, staring across the room at nothing, as the on going panorama played out in his head. Sleep would be nice, but sleep never came. The only visitor was the rolling cadence of fleeing memories that never would be again. Tears rolled down the coarse stubble on Mike's cheek. Yet he made not a sound as he waited for the sun to return. Four days left!

"Hey, Mike, Mike, ya still pissed at me? Come on, Mike, answer me".

"No, I'm not mad at you. I'm just a little sensitive about Bones, that's all".

"I really didn't mean it the way it sounded".

"I know, Sam, let's just forget it".

"How did he get a name like Bones?"

"He always carried a set of dice with him. When he was thinking about something he would roll them around in the palm of his hand. So his friends started calling him bones, like the slang for dice and it stuck."

"Cool."

"Like I was telling you yesterday, Bones kept throwing me and Jimmy together. He used to bring Jimmy

out on those lazy summer days and we would go down to the river fishing. We sat on the ledges by the big eddy and lay back in the sun listening to the waves lap the shore. The little red and white bobbers would bounce up and down with the current as we drank a beer and talked. Those were good times, no worries, just the three of us and the river. After a while, I began to like Jimmy.

"The next few years passed and I graduated school. That was the same year Bones died. He fell off a roof that he and Jimmy were shingling. Jimmy seemed to take it as bad as I did. It was just a freak accident, everyone said. Bones lost his balance and fell thirty feet to his death.

"Time passed and it didn't hurt so much. I got a job in the mill and moved to the next town. I finally escaped from my Father's domineering hand. I started dating a girl that worked in the office at the mill. Before I knew it we were married, and saving a few dollars to buy a small house. About a year after we had settled down, my wife's brother and a couple a guys from work started coming over on Wednesday night to play poker. I felt sorry for Jimmy, he didn't seem to have any friends, so I invited him over to play one night. After that night he was a regular. He kept me posted as to what Nell was up

to, even though I told him I didn't really care. She went through a running succession of boyfriends. The first one being the guy she was running with when Bones got killed. This seemed to distress Jimmy as much as it did me.

"The next year I got a small promotion and Carol gave up work to be a mother. We had twins. Things got kind of tight, to say the least. So I worked all the doubles I could. But, Wednesday night was still set aside for all of us to get together and play cards. The night the girls were born, everyone came to the hospital. Jimmy came dragging in with Nell; he rolled his eyes and whispered that he couldn't ditch her. While everyone was cooing over the girls, I went outside to grab a smoke. Nell followed. She stood there looking up at me as I leaned against the wall and told me that if I needed a woman's company while Carol was recuperating to stop by."

"Jesus, Mike, what did you say?"

"Nothing, I just slapped her down, like the bitch dog she is."

Silence once again filled the air, the pale light faded from the window. The single bare light bulb flickered to life from within the wire basket that encased it. Mike fell back on his bunk. Three days to go.

"Mike, you really don't believe in God?"

"There can't be a God. If there was I wouldn't be here, he would have done what needed to be done before I did."

"What did you do that God couldn't?"

"Not couldn't, wouldn't. I took care of the little black dog."

"I don't understand."

"Like I was telling you yesterday, Wednesday we got together and played poker. Four, maybe it was five years after Bones died, we were playing cards. Carol had taken the twins to visit her mother. So it was just the five of us guys in the house, drinking beer and talking. One thing led to another, we all started confessing our sins. Luke was screwing around on his wife. Ned was stealing stuff from work. All kinds of stupid shit that we should have been ashamed of, but was proud of. Jimmy just started bawling. It was fucked-up. Between the sobs I heard he didn't mean to do it. I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, do what? Kill Bones. He looked me right in the face with the tears and snot running down his face and said kill Bones."

It seems that he and Bones had been arguing. Jimmy got mad and hit Bones with a hammer. That's what caused Bones to fall."

"Jesus, Jesus Christ."

"I lost my head. I dragged Jimmy outside and beat him until he couldn't move. The other guys tried to stop me, but I just wailed on them too. While Jimmy was lying there, I walked to the garage and got the gas can for the lawn mower. I poured a gallon of gas over his head and lit him up."

"Shit, no man, you couldn't."

"I stood there smoking a cigarette and watched him burn. It was strange, he never screamed or nothing. He just curled up in a ball and looked at me. The black smoke poured out of his body as his skin melted and he just laid there and looked at me. He reminded me of the little black dog my father shot; it wasn't a clean kill, he lay there panting as the blood gushed from the wound. He looked at me with big questioning eyes. He couldn't understand what he did to deserve this."

Mike's voice fell silent. He stared at the walls, but it wasn't the molted gray paint he was seeing. The flames jumped in front of his eyes, the rancid smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils. He was aware of nothing, but the past.

The plat plat plat of rain could be heard through the window. The last day had arrived.

The echo of the heavy soled boots stopped in front of Mike's door.

"Your family is waiting for you."

"I don't want to see them; I just want to be left alone."

"I'll tell them, but if you change your mind just holler." The echo from the heavy soled boots grew fainter as they moved away.

"Hey Mike, Mike, MIKE! You're making a mistake."

"A mistake about what, Sam."

"Go see your family."

"I can't."

"Then ask God for forgiveness."

"If there was a God, he isn't the one who could forgive me."

"Aren't you sorry?"

"I'm sorry for the pain I've caused my wife. I'm sorry that my daughters have grown up without a father. I'm sorry for the heartache I've caused everyone, but they can't forgive me. The only person that can give me absolution I killed!"

"I pray for you, Mike."

"You do whatever you want. Just shut the fuck-up and leave me alone."

"I'll pray for God to forgive you!"

Silence once again enveloped Mike's room. The seconds seemed like hours, the hours like days as Mike waited for the echo of boot soles to return.

The window appeared as a black void as the sound of rain continued. Finally the echo of the boot soles on the concrete reverberated from the other side of the door.

"It's time."

Mike stood as they put the shackles on his wrists and ankles. They led him out the door and down the hall. They passed through a door and into a small room with a table. Curtains covered one wall. The warden, a doctor and two guards stood solemnly at the foot of the table. Mike sat on the table. After they removed his shackles he swung his feet up and lay down. The two guards strapped



his feet, head, and arms down. Then they pulled a wide leather strap tight across chest. The doctor slid the needle into his arm. The curtains opened, Jimmy's family filled the gallery. Spots of colors burst in front of his eyes, finally blocking out the dancing pictures in his head. His vision blurred until just a spot of light was left. The spot grew brighter and larger.

"Tell them I was.....

END

## Youth's Last Summer

Maybe it's the invitation to my class reunion or maybe I'm just feeling nostalgic; I guess it doesn't matter, but here I am looking through my high school yearbook. Has it really been thirty years? I turn to the next page and there she is, right in the middle of page 96. A confusing mix of emotions comes flowing back from her likeness. I doesn't seem possible that it's been three decades since I saw her, held her, or touched her. So long ago and yet it seems like it was only yesterday.

The summer was drawing to an end. In a few days some of the gang would return to school, while the rest either had to find a job, or discover their own way in the world. I had decided to join the service. Being in the military was still considered an honorable thing to do in our rural community. Those that believed in God, country, Mom and the girl next door and had no concrete plans were expected to serve. In just a few days I wouldn't be hanging around at the drive-in, sneaking Dad's beer from the fridge, or shooting hoops out in the yard. The bull sessions with all of us guys sitting on the porch lying about how many girls we had been with would come to an

end. Of course, if the truth had been told, the lot of us was still virgins.

Although summer was almost over, it wasn't yet done. There was time for one more blowout at the pond, the last beer bash of the season. We thought it would be the party of the year--maybe the decade--barbecue, cold beer, and a bonfire. We had planned the perfect day. The party coincided with my last day in town, allowing me to spend the day with my friends and Sue.

Sue had been the object of my desire for over two years. My heart almost stopped the day she agreed to wear my high-school ring. She was tall with auburn hair down to her waist, full red lips, and dancing green eyes, the prettiest girl in the county. I wondered if it would be the day we finally, you know, that special day that would seal our love.

The day was perfect, sun shining in a clear sky, with just the hint of a breeze. The heat wave that had tormented every living thing for the past month had broken. Everyone met at Day's drive-in. I had my hand-me down Ford pick-up. My Uncle had bought it used ten years ago, my father got it from him a couple of years after that, and then it became mine last year. It had a million miles and was more rusty red than the dark blue it had

once been, but it was all mine. Josh borrowed his sister's car. Dickey, the lucky SOB, had scored his older brother's van, affectionately called the shagging wagon. The word had gotten out about the party and every teenager in town was waiting for a lift to the lake. They piled in, on, or aboard one of the vehicles. I took up a collection so that I could stop at Big Al's store on the way. Al was a balding, middle aged man with a pot-belly and a quick smile. He sold me some beer at twice the normal price. Hey, when you're underage, you think it's a good deal at any price.

At the time I believed it was the best day of my life and it probably was, up to that point. We all pigged-out on the barbecue; I ate so much it hurt to breathe. However, I found room to down a few beers and Sue never once left my side. Who could ask for more? A bunch of us played Frisbee on the hard packed sand along the lake's edge. Then Sue and I took a swim out to the float to cool off. Sue sent my mind racing and my chest pounding in her aqua-blue swimsuit, her auburn hair pulled back, and her emerald eyes sparkling with mischief. We lay on the float for hours, necking and talking. We had no doubts about our future together, what we would have and how life would fill our expectations.

We swam back to shore as the sun disappeared behind Catherine's Hill.

We held hands and splashed along the edge of the water as Dickey and Josh built a bon-fire. The darkness of night settled around us, shadows swayed in the distant fire light, sparks from the burning logs danced across the night sky. We found ourselves wandering closer to the fire to catch some of the warmth of the glowing ambers. We sat on the damp sand in front of the fire. I held her tight as the light from the flaming drift wood caressed her face. Her face was full of life and bright as life when the fire blazed; only to turn dark and unrecognizable when the flames dropped off. The moon made a path across the star-incrusted sky as we made our way down the beach to be alone. When the bon-fire appeared no larger than a match head, we crumbled to the ground, our tongues and bodies intertwined. Desire, want, and emotion crashed down around us as the waves licked the shore. We lay on the damp sand holding each other tight. I was so dizzy, I knew if I let go I would fall from the earth. I could feel her heart beat under the curve of her breast. We were oblivious to everything else in the universe. It was just the two of us and a thousand stars to bear

witness to our love. I kissed her softly on her lips. "I wish we could stay like this forever."

Sue sat curled up under my arm as the sky lightened in the East. We struggled to our feet and walked back to the bodies scattered around the cold fire pit. It was way past the time to leave. We roused our friends and headed home. Sue sat next to me staring sullenly out the windshield. Sue's cousin, Mary and her beau, Jim, had wedged into the cab with us. Jim tried several times to start a conversation, but got little response. He gave up and we all sat in silence. Jim and Mary got out of the truck when I stopped at Sue's house. Sue and I sat there in silence, just holding one another. She turned to me and kissed me long and slow. She then nibbled on my ear and whispered, "I love you." Then she was gone; running into her house as she wiped the tears from her cheek. I slipped the Ford into gear and drove home.

My father was sitting at the kitchen table when I slunk in through the door. Normally he would have been on me in a flash for staying out all night. Instead of his teasing banter, the room was bathed in silence. Mother stood with her back to us cooking sausage and eggs. She seemed mechanical in her motions. She wasn't humming or laughing as she always did. Dad often said that the

reason he married her was her good disposition in the morning. I once asked him how he knew what her disposition was like before they married. He told me her father had told him, and then he pealed off a big old belly laugh.

The silence was torn apart by father's deep gravelly voice. He picked and teased about many of the stupid things I had done while growing up. We all laughed and hawed as he reminisced. We all kept checking the clock; it would soon be time for me to go. An awkward silence fell on the table as my mother sobbed about missing me. I made the excuse that I had to pack and retreated upstairs. Actually, I had packed days before, but I didn't want them to see the tears that were welling up in my eyes. I waited until the last possible minute before I came downstairs with my suitcase. Dad was going to take me to the airport, just Dad. I didn't want anyone else there. I didn't think I could take it if Mom, Sue, Sis, or anyone else came. I still think I was right. Dad and I hugged at the gate and I ran to the plane as he quickly turned towards the exit. Real men wouldn't allow another man see them cry.

Basic training was the longest ten weeks of my life; ten weeks of true hell! It wasn't the five o'clock mornings or the double time everywhere we went; it wasn't even the yelling and name calling. I missed my family. I missed Sue! The DI was a dick head, a trained ape with rippling muscles who could find fault with the Pope. The man knew about guns, hand to hand, how to survive. He had the social graces of an alley cat and the intellect of a rock. The only way I survived was to think of home. We were promised a leave after basic, and with every day that passed I was that much closer to holding those that I missed. The week before we graduated, word came down that those of us scheduled for advanced survival training would go directly to tech school. There would be no sorties home for another six weeks.

We trudged through swamps, ate roots, roasted bugs, and were taught how to blow things up. In other words we had a ball. The instructors here were tough, but they showed us how to survive in a hostile environment, and talked to us like we were human beings. They allowed us to go to town on weekends, if we hadn't screwed up too badly during that week of training. My company got to go to town twice during the six week training period. The



second time was the last week of training. This came as a surprise to all of us. We had really pulled some bonehead stunts that week. We found out the reason for this leniency Monday morning.

The company was called to formation at five o'clock as usual. The Lieutenant walked up and down the line with his eyes cast towards the ground. He stopped, turned to face us, called us to attention, and made the announcement. Our orders had been changed. There wouldn't be time for any trips home, no visiting friends or family, no Sue. The company had been called up for immediate duty; we would ship out the next day at 0800 hours. I was pissed. They had lied to us repeatedly. First no leave after basic, now no leave at all. We would be sent halfway around the world. Away from everything and everyone we knew. I wanted to go home! Who was the idiot that came up with this plan? I didn't want to wait another year to go home. Twelve more months before I could hold Sue, kiss her full lips, and hear her voice whisper in my ear. It wasn't fair!

I called my dad that night to tell him the change of plans. He was disappointed, but being a vet, he knew how things worked. He tried to cheer me up, joking about the

military's lack of any reasoning. I asked him to tell mom and sis about the change of plans and that I loved them and I would see them in a year. I didn't dare talk to them. I knew I would lose it. I wrote Sue before I went to bed. I told her that I loved her and I would be back before she realized I was gone. I repeated the plans we had made by the lake. It was going to be a long-long year.

I had been in country for over seven months. I saw things and did things that no eighteen year old kid should ever be privy to. The only way I kept going was to think of Sue. To play out in my head what our life would be like once I returned to the real world. I ran to mail call everyday, drooling over her letters like Pavlov's dog. Then came August eleventh. I only had one hundred and twenty seven days to go. The day I received a note that was only a half page long, and it tore me in two. Sue thought that we should see other people, she was lonely and tired of waiting. She said that I must be lonely too, and it wasn't fair to either of us to put our lives on hold any longer. If we were meant to be, it would happen, and we would get together when I returned. Sounded like a good plan for her but, who in the hell was

I going to see in this shit hole? The only women within a hundred miles were three tooth honeys, two days older than dirt, or whores. Screw her! I never wrote back.

I slowly close my yearbook. Returning it to its resting place on the top shelf of the hallway closet, I headed towards the kitchen. The house seemed empty. My wife had been gone for almost a year, and the kids are all grown with kids of their own. Once again, I am alone.

I didn't get a chance to talk to Sue again. She was pregnant and married before I returned home. She and her husband had moved to Jersey. I heard their marriage ended in divorce a few years later.

Would I like to see Sue again? Yes. No! Sometimes things are better left as they are. I don't want to relive that part of my life again. To think you have it all in the palm of your hand only to realize you have nothing. To have the last summer of your youth to pass without even knowing it's gone until years later, makes it all futile.

Opening the back door, I step out to feel the cool mist fall on my face. Zipping the zipper of my coat, snapping my collar up, I walk away.

## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Linwood Lancaster was born in Bangor, Maine on August 14, 1955. He was raised in Eddington and attended Brewer High School. He left school in 1972 and joined the service where he obtained a high school diploma. He worked a variety of jobs in the forestry industry and construction while he and his wife raised four children. In 1994, he returned to school on a part time basis. During 1994 and 1995, he served as a representative to the student senate and was acting president of the Bangor campus. He received an award as Outstanding Student of the Year in 1994. He graduated with an Associate of Arts in Liberal Studies with Honors in 1997 from the University of Maine. He continued his studies, and in 2001 Linwood graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English from the University of Maine.

After receiving his degree, Linwood opted to continue on to graduate school. Linwood is a candidate for The Master of Arts degree in English from The University of Maine in May, 2003.