

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 1/4*

### **HUNTER MOON**

Northwest Maine near the Canadian border. It is October, the month of the Hunter Moon.

#### Chapter 1

The single lane bridge was bumpy and slick with river spray. It had no railings as it crossed the Nunotuck River. Ray Noonan gripped the truck's steering wheel. He wrestled the truck's direction, willing himself to look ahead to the forest on the other side. If he went over the edge, he and his truck would careen down this swollen Maine tributary stream with other debris – whole trees, boulders, and islands of earth pitching forward on a relentless course to join the larger Saint John River, Moosehead Lake, and hundreds of miles south, the inevitable sea. Ray had a love-hate relationship with the Nunotuck River. He'd had enough canoe and rafting accidents on it to make him respectful of the power of currents and backwashes. So many accidents that sometimes he had the suspicion he was an unlucky man. That made him careful. But it didn't make him stop taking risks. Forty three years old, a successful knife maker, he liked adventure. That is, he went back and forth from security to adventure. The highs -- when he conquered obstacles -- were great. The lows -- the accidents, the injuries -- then he wondered if disaster courted him, always waiting. But, he had been deeply impressed in high school with the Oedipus Rex, and still believed that fate would do with him what it wanted. His decisions were predetermined, as were the outcomes, so to worry was useless. Worry, his mother said, was like a rocking chair. It kept you busy and got you nowhere.

He breathed deep, and bore down on the gas pedal. The truck surged even harder on its bucking bronco course. It

slipped and slid, and flirted with each edge. The danger, his stomach lurching, and the views of raging white water he saw on each side of the bridge as the truck lunged forth and back thrilled him.

On the other side, Ray dodged potholes on the dirt road going into the Nunotuck Indian Reservation. The brutal Cascade County winters eroded the roads faster than the Nunotucks – the tribe named after the river, or the river after the tribe -- could repair them. Still, they didn't ask for State aid. Independence was more important than smooth traveling. The Nunotucks were a branch of the Algonquins. 450 pure-blooded Nunotucks lived on the reservation, along with 1000 mixed blood and 500 unrelated by blood to the tribe. The latter had married in, worked on the Reservation, or just liked the way of life there. Ray's parents were both full blooded Nunotucks. His family lineage could be traced generations back. 13 Noonans lived on the Reservation now. An uncounted number, over a hundred, had moved off recently or long ago, and lived all over the United States and abroad. Ray's sister lived in Portland, Maine.

The town of Quechec wasn't far from the bridge. It was a four block one road town, and the road was paved there. Ray drove past the Wilderness Outfitter. His knives sold well there, as they did in the next store, Indian Crafts. That was mostly for tourists. The Reservation was now listed in Maine guidebooks. It still felt like home. Chief Terence and the elders kept the traditions alive. Ray especially valued The Full Moon festivals. He didn't want to get grandiose and talk about wisdom. He had a superstition about putting into words the deep reasons that tied him to his Nunotuck roots. Many other people said the things he felt better than he did. Things like believing that people were only the stewards of the Earth. People should respect the planet that nourished them, and not plunder it. These days, he thought cynically, too bad it took the logging companies and paper mills to revive traditional consciousness. There were problems in the county between Nunotucks and the paper industry. No use

denying it. Profit drove the mills -- disregard for nature. He had seen the mills suck the life out of the earth, and working in one suck the life out of a man.

He passed the police station, and "Mon Desir Lingerie," where he had bought his ex-wife Sheila a thong bathing suit for Christmas when they were first married. She had exchanged the thong for a sweater, since it was winter and "it's fucking freezing Ray, in case you haven't noticed." The marriage had lasted seven years. The divorce was eight years ago. A woman wheeled a baby carriage past the baseball card store and a kid kicked a newspaper machine. A contingent of street people lingered by the Paramount.

Outside of Quechec, Ray slowed down as he approached a neon sign flashing gaudy as Las Vegas. "Fortune Telling by Sage," it read. "Secrets of the Universe Unveiled." The trailer behind it was set on cement blocks. It had lace curtains filming the windows and a picture taped to the door of a gypsy woman holding a horseshoe. A cowbell hung on a strap beneath the picture. "Well, Hell," he said out loud.

He pulled to a stop. He hadn't known he was going to visit Sage, but suddenly it seemed like a good idea. Not that he took Sage seriously. But sometimes he liked to drop by and give her some business. He parked by the side of the road and walked up the stone path bordered by snapdragons that had survived the first early cold spells.

The dull clank of the cowbell echoed in the quiet. He waited several minutes. She could unveil secrets of the universe but could she open her own door? He pulled the strap a second time. Nothing. He knocked. Footsteps hurried toward him. The door swung open. A heavy-set woman stood in the doorway. The background of lamplight gave her a halo. Her skirt patterned with orange roses swayed in the breeze of a background electric fan. She searched his face, and her own split into a smile. "RAY!" she said. "I've been expecting for you,"

"Hello, Sage," Ray sighed, feeling both pleased and exasperated. "I've been expecting you to open the door for about five minutes," In his opinion, Sage was both foolish and enlightened. Come to think, that was pretty much the way he regarded everybody.

"I open all doors," she said, enveloping him in a fleshy hug, sighing, "You're so down to earth. You think the spiritual realm is worse than a dog's underwear worn backwards." Ray waited for her to laugh at her own joke, then he joined in. Laughing with Sage made his stomach feel good. The laughter went down to his stomach like a piece of good blueberry pie.

She led him to the end of the trailer and motioned him to sit on a Naugahyde chair. Sinking into a recliner, she slid a folding TV table between them. She pushed aside a deck of playing cards and a score pad. Ray's mother Eileen's name was on it. Eileen played bridge with Sage, but not for money because Sage got extra-terrestrial help.

Sage picked up a plastic horseshoe, her version of a crystal ball, and closed her eyes. She really did seem to go into a trance. Her head sank onto her chest. Her voice drifted like vapor. He had a feeling of being sucked into another realm he didn't want to believe in. It made him feel dizzy. Maybe if the horseshoe wasn't plastic. He made up his mind to make her a metal one. He could do it in between batches of knives. Maybe it would be a grounding influence, if not on Sage, at least on him. Not that he came to see her often – hardly ever – but just in case.

He fixed his eyes on her face. Her eyes looked at him, but he could swear she looked right through him to something beyond. Her voice was a harsh whisper now, like a wheezing radiator. "I see death."

Ray tried to stay calm. She frowned and shook her head. "I

don't know... I don't know if it's suicide, murder or an accident."

"Maybe today's not a good day," he said, standing up.

Her head bobbed further down, giving her another chin  
"Your inner woman, Ray. Come to terms! It's never too late for the gray lizard to transform to a soaring eagle."

Gray lizard. What the Hell had got into her. He stood up.  
"I'm going now."

That brought her out of her trance in a hurry. She clapped her hands. Her bracelet clanged like a cash register. She said in a normal voice, "Thanks for the twenty five dollars. That's the going rate."

Ray sighed. He knew she charged his mother fifteen. Well, he didn't mind. People on the Res had to help each other out. Sage was a force of nature, a national treasure. Maybe he could take a cosmic tax deduction.

She heaved herself up and accompanied him to the door. He tried to quell an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach. The residue of her words was settling there.

As she opened the door, she said in her normal voice, gravely as a mining pit, "Sometimes my trance mind intrudes on my normal mind. I just got another message for you." Her voice changed to the high power whisper. "Struggles brew in this county, Ray. You're going to be involved. Make sure, make real sure you're on the right side."

He stared at her. She stared back, her eyes round and misty, but focused on him. She heaved a sigh and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't understand it either, Ray. Believe me, it ain't easy when you don't understand what comes out of your own mouth." She laughed again, so heartily and infectiously that Ray couldn't help but laugh too. It made

him feel a little better. He could hug her good bye and walk jauntily past the snapdragons to his truck.

## Chapter 2

Stacy Alwyn wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand and pushed her dark bangs to the side of her face. She flipped hamburgers on the grill, turned hotdogs and buns, and smiled at people waiting for their food. "Just another minute," she encouraged them. She'd been so busy she'd barely had time to talk to anyone in the crowd that had shown up for the yearly mill party, given to honor the first day the mill had started up, in 1788. Most of the mill's 250 employees—surveyors, road builders, truck drivers, construction men, crew managers, machine workers, secretaries, accountants, loggers, landscapers and cleaners were in attendance. Carl Alwyn, Stacy's father, and owner and CEO of the mill, did his best to ensure people were proud to work at his mill. Some had worked there all their lives and passed the jobs to their children and grand children.

Carl had invited the power brokers of other large Maine pulp and paper mills-- International Paper, Great Northern, Georgia Pacific, Domtar Industries, Katahdin Paper Co, Wausau Paper and other smaller mills that worked Maine's vast Northwest Peninsular, north of Moosehead Lake clear up to the Canadian border. All wilderness. For the mills, it was wilderness waiting to be cut. Environmental and private interest groups had other ideas. Stacy worked in a group that monitored logging and mill practice. She spent as much time as possible in the field, where the loggers had been or were working. She knew how an alder bog can take over a clear cut field in a month... She knew how treacherous it was to scramble through an alder bog, full of sink-holes and twisted, hidden roots.- The re-growth of a clear cut region was not a pretty sight, unless you liked fields of goldenrod and skinny poplars. She knew how to jump to the side when the logging trucks barreled through. They didn't stop for anything. She knew the dust stirred up on the logging roads made in clear-cut or selectively cut forests. The roads were

mazes of dust coated down with lime.

Stacy and Carl had a shaky relationship around Stacy's job. Their tacit agreement was not to talk about it unless a formal meeting was called between organizations,

Local and state politicians had traveled all the way to the little town of Alwyn Mills, named after the mill for this party. Carl had personal and political influence all over the State. He was in his element talking animatedly to a lobbyist. Stacy watched him, then turned and watched her younger brother Russ, who was also watching. Watching Carl was Russ' job. Russ, only two years younger than Stacy, owned, wrote and edited the start-up paper, "Cascade County News." He had a staff, the paper was developing, nicely. He was running into some of the same problems Stacy was. Stacy was proud of him.

Among people in the crowd, Stacy thought there were barely ten Nunotucks from the Reservation across the Nunotuck River. Relations were strained between the Mills and Nunotucks.

Now Stacy served a hamburger to hunter who had flown in for the weekend to get a bear. He and his wife both got a permit in the open draw.

Being a Maine tracker required a long education and training. They were allowed to hire themselves out to people with deer, moose, or bear licenses. For the most part the hunters and tourist were rich. Some were greedy, some were decent. Trackers could refuse weekend hunters they didn't like.

"How's the hunting?" she asked. Hunters were easy to spot. Their camouflage clothes were new, they had Rolexes, GPS;s strapped to their belts, and an awed, yet swaggering attitude.

"Not bad. My tracker filled an oil can with donuts. We had 5



bear there within an hour. Me and my wife were in a tree stand. We each got a bear. They were like sitting ducks. Our first time hunting. Just lucky, I guess. I didn't even practice target-shooting before I came up here. All's I did was buy a .347 Magnum, like the guide suggested. For all I know, the tracker shot the bears. But you can bet I'll ham it up in NYC.

Right, Stacy thought, with disgust, as the man turned away. She knew which tracker the hunter had hired. Phil Morrissey. Rotten to the core and rich to the gills. His clients always got their bear, deer, or moose. Morrissey had been reported many times for unethical hunting. The other trackers called him MacDonald's Morrissey. The only problem was that the Tourism department of the Reservation and the Cascade County Council liked the money Morrissey brought in with his clients, the tariffs he paid on his kills, and the downtown business he brought into Cascade County.

Stacy put a package of hotdogs on the grill. Carl thought it was democratic for the Alwyns to do the work rather than cater it. It seemed almost a family affair, except Stacy noted now that she was serving a few out of towners and curious tourists. Well, it was all good for business.

Finally she turned off the grill. People were laughing and chatting under the tent that had been set up because the weather was chilly and rainy. Winter was coming. Winters started with rain that turned freezing. By November there would be a foot of snow.

Stacy began removing red, white, and blue crepe-paper garlands festooning the metal fence around the mill. More red, white, and blue crepe paper streamers decorated the two-block-long fence that protected the red-bricked mill buildings. Carl was proud of the meticulously kept-up buildings, the clean-swept sidewalks, delivery ramps and parking lots, and the window frames that got fresh yellow trim every year. The fences were newly-painted black. Carl insisted on keeping up appearances. It fostered trust; it was

good for business.

Eleanor, Stacy's mother, was starting to ask families if they wanted to keep their decorations. Many did, to enhance the wooden railings of the narrow-porch row houses clutched onto the steep hillside above the mill. Eleanor had been in charge of the decorations. She had asked the residents of the houses and most of them had agreed to the decorations. The houses had been constructed for workers in the eighteen hundreds. Company row houses in a company town. The families that owned or rented them now had made each house unique. Each porch was painted a different color. Some had kids' toys, some rocking chairs, some plastic lawn furniture. One had a regulation-size American flag nailed to the back wall. Pick-up trucks detailed with names like FROGGIE, SKINNY DAVE, MARIE, STORMY WEATHER were usually parked in front of the houses, but had been moved elsewhere during the festivities.

Michael Alwyn, Stacy's oldest brother, came over and asked for some of the left-overs. He enveloped Stacy in an affectionate hug. "Sorry I couldn't help, Sis. You know how it is."

"You did fine. Did you have a good time?"

"No."

Michael had been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Stacy had never agreed with the diagnosis. She was convinced he was just different from the Alwyns and ordinary society. He was unique and had unique talents. She was a little alarmed he had come to this party. He was a trapper. He lived in a tent on the Nunotuck Reservation. He wore his usual dress—the skins of badgers, raccoon and squirrel. He could act wild and hairy – adapting the nature of the animals whose skins he wore.

Now Carl stepped up to a microphone to begin his annual PR

speech—the history of the mill, its goals and benefits. Stacy scanned the crowd. The women with bouffant hairdos hairsprayed hard as rock dressed like the men, in jeans, hiking hoots and gabardine jackets. How out of place her mother looked in her paisley dress and her “pumps.” Russ snapped a picture of her, and then turned to Louise, next in age to Michael. Louise’s job was officially administrative assistant at the Mill, but really, she was in charge of finances. She fiddled with her glasses, held by a thin gold chain around her neck. She put them on, took them off, as if she couldn’t decide which perspective she needed to view the party. Russ took a picture.

Carl’s voice filled the tent. “Welcome all, to the Alwyn Mills yearly celebration. We are delighted to have you. You are good worker and good neighbors. Without your help and cooperation, Alwyn Mills would perish, as so many small mills have perished in this age of conglomerates and outsourcing. You are invaluable; I cannot begin to stress my gratitude.

Someone beside Stacy yawned. Turning her head, she saw Ray Noonan, who had been in her high school class. Ray closed his eyes and shook his head slowly back and forth as Carl recited well-know facts—largest remaining in Cascade County, but not in Maine any more, as it used to be. Beneficent employer, stimulant to the economy.

Ray Noonan. He had sat behind her in math and picked stray hairs off her sweaters. “Everybody sheds. It’s good.” She remembered him as soft-spoken, patient, brilliant in math when he did his homework and very Nunotuck. She still didn’t know what that meant. She felt she could never get to know him. There was an unspoken wall. Here he was standing beside her, looking at her as he leaned against the tent pole set over the grill. “You’re going to knock down the tent,” she said in a low voice as Carl continued his speech.’

“Superman,” Ray said, grabbing the pole, pretending to save

the tent from falling, flexing his biceps.

She laughed. He looked pleased.

Oh God, now Michael was tapping Carl on the shoulder, in the middle of his speech. Carl hated to have his act interrupted. Stacy was sure that was why Michael had chosen that moment. He started to hand something to Carl. First he held it up to show the crowd. It was a fist-sized white stone with a tiny tree growing out of it. He ostentatiously handed Carl a note along with the stone. The note was on a large white sheet of paper like a diploma.

Carl took his time deciding how to react. Maybe the crowd saw a poker-face pause, but Stacy knew his anger. A hush settled on the crowd. "Ah Michael," Carl said finally. Stacy felt the energy it took him to keep his voice gentle. "A symbolic gift. Very apt. Thank you for reminding us of another thing that is truly important about Alwyn Mills. We value the natural world. Our most precious resources are clean water and healthy land. We are leaders in conservation and research toward these ends. He held up the stone as if it were a trophy,

"Shit: Stacy thought. I wonder if Carl accepts it or if Michael will get hell. She heard Eleanor behind her hiss beneath her breath, "A goddamn stone."

Stacy turned to Ray, who, it seemed, had not taken his eyes off her. "Michael is an anarchist," she said, looking right into Ray's eyes, that were bright blue and clear as a summer's day. Somehow, she knew that she didn't have to explain to Ray.

Ray said, "Michael's gesture was poetic—and relevant."

The fireworks began. Maybe Carl had given the signal to begin a little early to distract people from Michael. At the noise and lights, Ray winced. "Are you OK?" Stacy asked.

“Yeah, except for Vietnam,” he said. “PSTD. I killed people.”

She kept her eyes on him as he walked out of town, past the row houses, past the tidy brick buildings of the mill.

When the fireworks were finished, she could hear the soothing swash of water from the Nunotuck River slipping over the milldam. The crowd had thinned out. A quiet hum of conversation blended with water sounds.

Eleanor was talking to Nunotuck Chief, Chief Terence. Stacy had met the Chief a few times, professionally, in meetings between organizations. Her mother was laughing, swaying a little bit with fatigue. At one point she tottered so much toward Terence that the soda she was drinking splashed onto his leather coat. Terence stretched his arm to steady her, and she leaned into his shoulder. Terence squeezed her against him. She looked tiny and fragile. Terence looked kind. Stacy hadn't realized her mother even knew Terence and here they were kind of hugging.

Where was Carl? Eleanor regained her balance, patted Terence's cheek gently, and moved toward the refreshment tent calling, “Children!” Russ took a picture of Terence turning and walking away. Stacy finished unwinding crepe paper decorations from the factory fence. Louise was sorting recyclables from garbage and sending the loads to the respective waiting trucks.

Michael stood at the edge of the river and stared at the pulsing Nunotuck currents. He stood there for a long time. When she was finished undoing the crepe, Stacy went over to him and took his hand. He did, his face changed expressions. Stacy had the illusion that his face went from light, to dark, and then to another light. From being the beautiful brother she had always idolized, he went to being a stone, an animal, a part of the natural world, then to his smiling, secretive, his knowing self.

### Chapter 3

Rain poured for the next week. Ray liked the repetitive sound on his roof as he worked at the anvil and forge. His thoughts turned to the Nunotuck River, where he and his buddy Bacon were planning a canoe trip that weekend. Gentle as the rain sounded on his roof now, it was revving the river up, for sure. Ray was starting a new order. A Texan wanted a utility knife for himself and one for his wife.

Ray did not like to repeat designs. He had done hundreds of utility knives in the past. This blade would be longer and thicker, the point narrower and sharper, the handgrips more defined. Ray usually filled an order then made it into a series, with enough differences so the customer still got a unique knife. The Texan had huge hands, and his wife had tiny hands. Ray drew the two designs to size, then drew a series of generic utility knives based on the design, considered the balance, the weight, the metal, and handles. He checked his supply room for oil, steel bars, walnut burl, deer horn. He called Miranda to ask her if she was free to engrave a series of utility knives in a few weeks. The Texan did not want engravings. However, many tourists liked a design on the blade. She drew things like Victorian woman in a flowing dresses, nature designs, or Native American symbols.

"Sure," Miranda said. They had discussed going into business together, but nothing had come of it yet.

The phone rang. "Sill up for the trip tomorrow? Bacon asked.

Ray had known Bacon since childhood. They had played together as kids, and, as teenagers, had tracked deer, moose and bear. Bacon was totally at home in the wild. Ray hadn't been surprised when Bacon became officially registered as a Maine guide. Bacon had a gift for organizing and leading. He had been known to get lost, and he claimed he did it on purpose, for the pleasure of finding his way again. Ray

believed that. Bacon liked finding solutions to problems, and he was good at it.. Ray trusted Bacon as a friend, canoeing companion, and wilderness guide more than he trusted anyone else. It was not in Ray's character to trust anyone completely.

Truth be told, Ray had been thinking about cancelling this trip, because of the rains. The river would be swollen and the canoeing might get ugly. It was crazy that with this weather, Bacon wanted to do the most dangerous section of river, the Falls, which they had never done. Ray remembered Sage's prophecy. "I see death." He thought about it. He saw himself in his workshop for the next few weeks, grinding out knives in a routine that while fascinating to him, also brought out his dark side –the lust to do something different, something dangerous. The adventure-seeking, death defying Ray.

"We're on," Ray said to Bacon. Meet you at the boat landing 8 a.m. The telephone connection crackled, then cut off.

Ray took out his knapsack and canoe gear. He and Bacon went so often, he had everything ready in a few minutes. He sank slowly into sleep, reviewing his week, satisfied that his work was done. He would start making the new order of knives next week. Tomorrow he would play.

In a light sleep, still hovering between reality and the unconscious, He dreamed. Three loons swam on a lake. The whooped a few times, then began the unearthly chuckle that had given the birds their name and led to the expression "loonie." In the dream, Ray didn't think the loons were crazy. He thought they were laughing at humans and their futile endeavors. One loon dived under water and stayed for a long time. One loon had a baby on its back. She tipped it over, and it paddled a few strokes before scrambling up to its mother's back again. The third loon swam to an island, and disappeared. .

Ray woke at 6 a.m. He loaded his gear, hit the road and made

for the river. He parked his truck at the boat landing. Bacon had already arrived and was stowing gear under the seats of the canoe. It reassured Ray. A good guide should always be ahead of you. Even in the informal, friendly trips Ray and Bacon took together, Bacon was ever the professional.

Water lapped over the launching dock and overflowed the banks. The currents sputtered and frothed. The marking post was completely covered -- the previous high water mark was under water. Bacon etched another, near the top of the post. It was raining today. Ray buttoned the collar of his shirt and zipped his hunter- orange water-proof windbreaker up to his chin. He remembered last spring, when he'd nearly died on one of Bacon's rafting tours. That had been on another stretch of the river. It hadn't been Bacon's fault. The woman sitting next to Ray had lost her balance, slid across the raft and pushed him overboard into thirty five degree water so turbulent they hadn't even seen him go under. He tossed about for what seemed a lifetime before being grabbed and hauled to safety. He had had such a headache he thought his head would explode.

Ray tightened the drawstrings on his jacket hood and said to Bacon, "The river looks fun but I don't know about chancing the Falls today. The water's high."

Bacon continued loading. "I told you before. We've got exact directions from someone who did it. And if it looks too dangerous, we can always portage around the Falls. You remember the directions??"

"Yeah," Ray said. "Strong right before the falls at your signal."

"Bacon asked, What food did you bring?" He slid Ray's duffel bag under the prow seat.

"Fitness bars," Ray answered.

"Those cardboard excuses for nourishment?" Bacon



grimaced. "I should have known." Bacon fancied himself a gourmet. Ray wouldn't be surprised if he had managed to slip a bottle of chablis or a tooth-pick hors d'oeuvre on board. It made him a popular guide with wealthy tenderfoot yuppies. Both Bacon and his wife loved to cook and they loved to eat. Bacon stowed a small package in a corner of the bow. This is Rose's chicken cacciatore. She dehydrated it so it fits into a sandwich bag! We can rehydrate it and in twenty minutes we'll be eating at a four star restaurant."

"I can't wait," Ray said. His tastes ran more to plain, especially since his divorce. No fun to cook for yourself. Better to pare things down. Cans. Jars. Fast food restaurants.

They floated the canoe and climbed in. It bucked evenly up and down. Ray made up in mass what Bacon took in height. They had no problem switching bow and stern. They were complete opposites, and that was probably why they got along so well. Bacon's hair, thick and Indian black blew straight up in the wind. Ray's windbreaker hood covered a bald spot, ringed by a short, neat wreath going gray. His hair used to be brown and he had worn it long like a hippy. Bacon was tall, rangy and dusky, Ray was olive-skinned, almost Mediterranean looking, and short, with a massive muscled chest, developed from blacksmithing.

Bacon took stern. They paddled a few strokes out, negotiating cross-waves. The canoe surged ahead in a powerful, seamless motion. The trees blurred. A second river fed in, its .with satisfaction, after the wrestling stretch.

"Character." Ray had found that repeating segments of conversation was a useful social tool. He was starting to relax. His shoulders felt warm. He felt in the peak of health. He took off his jacket. The misty rain felt cooling and healthy.

"Holy hell. Look up ahead ---" Bacon said. They had come around a bend, and ahead of them, the river narrowed, and the current picked up. "Popping like popcorn," Ray muttered

to himself in between bounces, as they were caught in the maelstrom. This was the kind of challenge that got Ray high. The danger that made him feel alive. But they were jetting through currents swollen from record rains, and Ray was getting ever more inclined towards portaging around the Falls.

They careened around a few more curves of the river. As they shot out of one rapids the banks of the river rose in a gorge where the water surged with a speed a little too exhilarating. Probably over class 5 rapids, Ray speculated, as he balanced over an open hole he sensed, then saw behind them, after they had passed over the weak spot in the backwash. The rapids broadened as two other streams joined the river, forming a new series of whirlpools.

Ray's senses, alert from the start, went into overdrive. Again Sage's words came to him: "I see death." A local swimming spot usually marked by a strip of sand on the river's edge was only visible by the top of a post with a life preserver hanging on it. Over the roar of the water and wind, Bacon yelled back to Ray, "Remember the plan." Ray did. They'd gone over it thoroughly. Stay left. If at the strainer roots of a tree trapped on a boulder near the top of the Falls the current is too strong, cut hard right, make for shore.

The canoe rested lightly on the water. Under it, water simmered. Ray had never had such an acute experience of water about to boil over. As they were caught up in an overpowering swell, he shouted to Bacon, and at the same time, Bacon cut the water at a ninety-degree angle. The canoe veered, not so much that they caught the current broadside, but enough to head them diagonally toward the rocky bank of the stream.

They landed with a bump on the strip of beach. "A dent in a canoe is like a stamp in a passport," Bacon said, as they climbed out of the canoe. "Damn that current. Glad we made it out." He picked up a branch and cast it into the middle of

the stream. It sucked under the water's surface, then bobbed up in time to disappear precipitously over the lip of the falls. That was when Ray was aware of the fall's roar and the silence where they stood. The current they had been in looked like a lion's mane rearing up. Where the neck joined the head, not too far in front of them, the water ruffled like fur, and the falls cascaded down from the promontory of the lion's brow.

## Chapter 4

They half hoisted half dragged the canoe down a path beside the river. It terraced at a meadow from which they couldn't see the river. The meadow had a trampled look – muddied grass, flattened goldenrod, littered with empty rifle cartridges and shotgun shells. Ray hated that.. They crossed through a grove of trees. Following the contour of the falls; the path plunged into another clearing filled with late white asters, among which Ray could see more empty cartridges, and a pile of cans for target shooting. Fuck, why couldn't people pick up their litter? The weight of the canoe required his attention. That and not slipping on the muddy path that careened downhill parallel to the waterfall. As they approached the bottom of the falls, the noise of the water was deafening.

They had reached a point of land where they could re-enter the water below the falls. It was Ray who saw the thing first. Water spewed out, and a mist drifted from the place where the mass of the falls landed. A little to the side of the falls and clearly visible to them was the whirlpool. It was a swirling in the stream, and it had something turning in it. At first Ray thought it was a branch, but as he peered closer, he could see that it was a canoe on its end, its tip turning round and round, swirling like a pinwheel.

"Hope no one's in it." No sooner had Ray said it than he saw something just under the surface of the water flinging around with the rotations of the canoe. "What's that?" Bacon asked the water. They waded in as close as they dared. The whirlpool was small so they got a good view into it. Ray didn't like what he saw. He felt like vomiting. It was a brown almost furry looking arm, the fingers splayed out, and swinging round. Was this what Sage had seen? "I see death."

"Dead," Bacon said.

The phrase lingered in the air and sank down like the canoe itself, as if words had no meaning and nothing had any meaning but that terrible rotating canoe tip and the hand stretched out. "We can't get close enough to do anything," Ray said

"It's going to take a lot of guys to pull him out." Bacon said in a low voice, as if the breath had been pulled out of him.

They waded back to shore. "The river's calmer from here on," Bacon said. "We can make Quechec in an hour and get help."

Ray mentally let go of plans to arrive early for the Hunter Moon Festival. For him, that was the purpose of the trip. Not going over the Falls. Ray calculated that they would still make dinner and the midnight ginseng hunt. At previous festivals, he had been too busy socializing. But his forty-fourth birthday was approaching and he wanted to see how the supposed herb of eternal youth grew in the wild. He wanted to taste it.

They hoisted up their own canoe high enough to clear the underbrush and set it back in the stream. Ray couldn't clear his mind of the image of the arm turning. He said to Bacon, "He must be wedged in the canoe."

Bacon nodded. "Must be tangled in there pretty tight not to get thrown out in that current."

As they were about to push off, Ray saw something else. A ball of fur curled in the matted grass by the river. He picked it up and it nestled into his chest, put its paws around his neck, and poked its nose into his jacket. He wiped its eyes and stroked its back, tufting the wet fur.

"We got ourselves a mascot," Bacon said