The Indian and the Engineer

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

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This story is dedicated to all of my grandparents, the Shelleys and the Ervins, as a token of my gratitude and respect. I am grateful for the stories they have told and the memories they have shared. Because of them, I am a more complete person.
The body was discovered by a group of fishermen, face down at the bottom of a rock ledge, in the Pakoba River. The swift current of the river would have carried the body far downstream, except for the fact that a pile of debris had been pushed into the river by the giant earth movers that were preparing the area for future development. The peaceful corpse had lodged mysteriously in the exact place where it landed.

The official report read that Jim Swiftwater, an Indian, died of complications caused by an accidental fall from a rock ledge approximately forty-eight feet above the bed of the Pakoba River. It was dated August 24, 1958. I wish I could say the news of The Chief's death was a shock to all and that he would be greatly missed by his many friends, but in all honesty, I cannot.

I can still remember the spring of 1954 vividly. The U.S.
Army Corps of Engineers were doing their preliminary surveying and investigating of the Pakoba Valley Reservoir. I was very impressed with the speed and efficiency that were evident as the project took place. In particular, I was impressed with the actions and leadership of the man who was in charge of the project. Walt Lennis was his name, and I was very impressed with his drive and ambition. I could tell from the moment I met him that he was a leader. He had that authoritarian air about him. Walt was fairly tall, probably about six foot or better and had the kind of demeanor that said, "I mean business". Walt must have been thirty-five or forty, but he seemed younger than that to me. A big man, weighing well over 200 pounds, he appeared to be all muscle. The sight of him in his gray work uniform, heavy boots, and yellow hard hat commanded respect.

As I became better acquainted with Walt, I realized that he claimed to be a successful, happy man. I also realized that he had travelled a long and difficult road to reach his plateau of success in the engineering field. The more I talked with him, the more I learned of his background. His parents were immigrants who had come to the United States in 1919. His father had a keen sense of business and developed a prosperous hardware store on which the family lived comfortably until the great depression. At the time of the depression, his father
lost the business and chose suicide as his alternative to losing everything that he had worked for. Because his mother's health would not allow her to work, Walt was forced to work at a young age to support her. He took a variety of odd jobs, and his position as a gopher and hod carrier for a small company piqued his interest in construction and engineering. Though circumstances forced him to temporarily discontinue his schooling, he eventually obtained a high school diploma by attending night classes. His enlistment in the Army during World War II provided him with the skills necessary to get a job on the construction crews of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers after his discharge. His diligence and hard work led to a series of promotions that in turn led to his position in charge of the Pakoba Project, and he fully intended to make the most of his opportunity.

Walt had clearly been injected with a large dose of the work ethic from his parents. Being immigrants, they felt strongly that America was one place where a man could succeed or fail based on the amount of hard work and ambition that he demonstrated. Walt was a driven man. He wanted to succeed and was willing to do whatever necessary to make it—indeed, a man willing to make sacrifices. He wanted to advance, drive Cadillacs, and be able to walk into a room and sense the respect and envy of
those with whom he came in contact. He saw the Pakoba Project as a means of fulfilling these American dreams. To succeed at Pakoba would just about guarantee his success in the future and provide him with the middle-class security he so much desired. It could be easy to look at a man like Walt Lennis with contempt, dismissing him as power-driven, greedy, and ruthless. The truth of his motives, though, was far more complex.

Walt believed in the Pakoba Project for reasons other than those obvious goals of self satisfaction. As Walt often explained, "The Pakoba Reservoir is gonna benefit almost everyone in the area in too many ways to count." Everyone could see that the local economy had grown and would continue to grow extensively. People who had spent their entire lives working hard to scrape out a meager subsistence suddenly found themselves wealthy, comfortable, and powerful as a result of the profits reaped from the sale of their properties to the commercial developers. Despite the fact that Walt's decisions weren't easy, they never seemed to cause him any regrets. He felt that he was a man of progress, the product of a society with rational values based on concrete, though materialistic, goals. He liked the fact that he was one of the catalysts responsible for taking an old, antiquated way of life and changing it for the better. During the early stages of the project, Walt once told me, "This
project has really given me a good feeling. It's almost like I'm some sort of messiah who has come to bring a new and better way of life to these people. Not only do I like what I'm doing but I also like the kind of person I've become." Such self-confidence and royal self-assurance had to be admired.

All of the people in the area referred to him as The Chief. I suppose it was a natural nickname because of his Indian heritage. His real name was Jim Swiftwater. He was the last full blooded Indian left in the area, but nobody knew who his descendants were or from where he came. Indians hadn't lived in the area for ages. The citizens of Spring Valley, one of the small hamlets adjacent to the Pakoba River, knew little more than I about The Chief. All they ever would say could be reduced to this: He was a hermit, a crazy, lonely, strange, old man.

The Chief didn't look like an Indian, nor did he really live like one. He stood about five feet, seven inches, a very small man physically. Even though he was a man of small stature, he seemed to have an uncanny ability to look straight into the very heart of anyone he so desired. Walt had often commented that he felt very uncomfortable around The Chief because The
Chief wasn't impressed by the authority that Walt wielded. Soon after meeting Swiftwater, Walt commented, "I feel completely naked before that damn Indian. He and I both know that I can't hide behind my title. It really scares the hell out of me."

The Chief always wore the same kind of clothes. Dirty, tattered, gray work pants and a beat up plaid flannel shirt with half the buttons missing were consistently part of his attire. Beneath the flannel shirt he wore what appeared to be the top of an old set of long johns that seemed to be disintegrating because of constant wear. His shoes were an old pair of canvas sneakers, the type which might have easily been obtained at any flea market. Strange as it seems, the attire that The Chief wore didn't really cause people to look down on him. It really enhanced his dignity, right down to the trickle of tobacco juice that ran out of the left corner of his mouth. He appeared to be at least seventy years old, but nobody could ever pin down his age for certain. Men like The Chief must be timeless.

Swiftwater's modest home was on the south east side of the big rapids in the Pakoba. It was a limestone cave, covertly located in the side of a fairly large stone ledge. The furnishings weren't much, just some old throw rugs, an oversized pillow,
two antiquated oil lamps, and an orange crate representing a table. I'm certain that there were other things to be found, but they probably wouldn't have amounted to much. The decor did, however, convey quite a message about the old geezer. The cave's interior was lavishly decorated with gourds and rocks and various types of foliage.

The Chief lived in his own little world. He survived by hunting small game and taking advantage of the numerous gardens in the area. It was not rare for The Chief to be the prime suspect if a few tomatoes, some carrots, or a watermelon came up missing from a family garden, but people didn't really seem to mind. The valley's residents viewed The Chief as one might view a caretaker receiving his reward for watching over something and not as a common thief. Anyway, they couldn't have ever hoped to have caught him because The Chief was extremely cunning and quick-witted.

It is true to say that The Chief didn't fit in with the rest of the area's residents and had become somewhat of a social misfit, ignored by the adults and scorned and laughed at by the children. Actually, though, he wasn't all that different from the people in the surrounding areas, except for the fact that he was a hermit. He thrived on seclusion and had no real contacts with the outside world until Walt came along. Most
people acted as if they held The Chief in contempt, much as Walt did at first, but they probably envied him nevertheless. I've always felt that since The Chief was the very personification of contentment, he posed a direct threat to the security and happiness of all who came in contact with him. The perfection of his life made the happiness that others achieved seem pale by comparison. A small flaw in someone's life seemed like a glaring weakness when compared to The Chief's purity. Because of his lack of ambition and disregard of material comforts, The Chief, in a very subtle way, refuted everything that his acquaintances tried to achieve—or so it seemed.

It became obvious that a clash was brewing between The Chief and Walt. Everything about The Chief disgusted Walt at first, including the cave that was home for the Indian. The first time that Walt had to pay a visit to The Chief he couldn't believe the way that the Indian lived. He made his feelings quite clear when he told me, "You'd have to be a real nature freak to see how there could be anything beautiful about that hole in the ground. I've spent my whole life trying to make something out of myself, to have a nice place to live, to have something to show for my efforts, and that stupid Indian, who is God knows how old, is content to live like that." Walt seemed genuinely disgusted that The Chief could have so little
and yet be really happy; he also seemed to be fascinated with the focus of his contempt.

As the work continued in the area, Walt gradually came to know The Chief. His respect for him must have grown, and I think The Chief also began to understand Walt, maybe even came to like him. Before long, Walt was delegating his responsibilities to the other project foremen and commandeering every free moment he could to converse with The Chief. I was present during many of their encounters. Their relationship continued to develop as Walt would try to explain why certain things were happening in the area and why the project would be beneficial for the local citizenry. As I recall, The Chief would counter with stories of his childhood and other parables that seemed to bring the beauty of the Pakoba Valley region to life for Walt. As I surmised, each respected one another's positions and the bond between them strengthened. I assumed that both also knew that they had each made decisions and would have to continue to make decisions and see them through to the end, for Pakoba was then out of their hands. Walt expressed the belief to me that he had to proceed totally toward the completion of the Pakoba Project, no matter what the cost. The
Chief must have known that he had no choice but to wait passively.

One day The Chief explained to Walt why the existence of the Pakoba Valley area in its natural state was so vital to his very being.

"My given name, Swiftwater, has been passed from father to son for hundreds of years, recognizing the virtue of the fast currents found in the Pakoba River rapids."

Walt could tell that The Chief knew that things were going to change soon.

"I could feel in The Chief a fear of the inevitable, yet I knew that he could also sense my fear of the future." Walt and The Chief had grown to be very close in spite of the fact that they were actually direct opposites. Jim Swiftwater and Walt Lennis seemed to realize that they were each incomplete without the other. This realization was probably the most frightening thing that either had ever had to face because both knew that the grasp of the future was rapidly approaching. The paths each had to take were clear and well defined, and neither had the option of changing its course. Walt summed it up when he told me, "The Chief and I both knew and we both understood but as time went on, we said nothing more to one another. We didn't need to."
The project progressed on schedule as the months passed. The people who lived on the flood plain, farmers and residents of Spring Valley, had all been relocated in areas away from the project. A few put up a token resistance but most left without making waves. Even most of the animals had new homes in the form of State Forests and Conservation Districts.

Although it had seemed for a while that Swiftwater had managed to shake Walt, he seemed to be back in total control of himself once again. As the official spokesman for the project, Walt was getting into his role as the leader of the construction crews. Once again, he clearly liked what he was doing, and if he was worried about his upcoming confrontation with The Chief, he was doing a good job of hiding his true feelings from me. He would prance among the workers encouraging them in their duties and exuding a confidence that was contagious to all who were near him. To me, however, it began to seem like false enthusiasm. The magnitude of the project and the way that it was changing the land were truly breathtaking, so Walt may have been revelling in the fact that he had been instrumental in creating something new and different. Time passed and the work at Pakoba continued.
PART II

The events of July 17, 1958, were related to me later. Walt awakened drenched in sweat and frozen with fear. It was time, so he thought. After procrastinating for months, Walt knew that the delays had abruptly come to an end. It's never easy for one man to tell another that he no longer has a home, especially if he is a friend, but that was the dilemma that faced Walt concerning The Chief. Work on the reservoir was almost complete and the damming of the river was to begin on August 25, little over a month away. Apparently without hesitation, Walt dressed and started the trek through the country to Jim Swiftwater's cave.

Walt arrived to find The Chief's cold, intent eyes peering right into his mind. He said that his body shook and his head throbbed at the sight of his friend, but he knew that he had to continue. It suddenly seemed so cold, so impersonal.

"Chief, you know that there are certain responsibilities that I have to carry out, regardless of how much they might
hurt you. Chief, I'm afraid that you'll have to be gone with-
in thirty days because... " The Chief cut him off in the middle of his spiel as if he already knew what Walt had to say. After a long, uneasy silence The Chief responded.

"Walt, don't continue. I know what you have to do even as I know that you will understand what I will have to do."

Walt then left quite shaken by the fact that he and The Chief would never again speak as friends even though their love and compassion for one another were eternal. Walt and Jim Swiftwater both knew that all that was left for either one was to wait for the conclusion. To face the end—and the beginning.

On August 23, 1958, Walt Lennis had completed his official duties on the Pakoba River Project for the most part. He had been given an official citation commending him on his fine work from the higher-ups in the Army Corps and the state of West Virginia had bestowed its honors upon him for a job well done. Essentially, the only work remaining to be completed on the Pakoba was some minor cleanup and landscaping in addition to waiting for it to fill with water. Walt was really just coasting. He was supposed to remain for a couple of weeks before being granted a two-week vacation and being reassigned on a new project. Things looked ideal for Walt in every respect
except one. He couldn't forget The Chief. Walt had falsely reported that all residents had been relocated, knowing that The Chief remained in his cave.

Walt awakened from a fitful sleep; the clock on his nightstand read 2:37 A.M. He got out of bed and dressed, knowing in the back of his mind that his job was not finished. He was driven by an inner force, or so he later told me, that he didn't understand, that didn't respond to logic or reason. As Walt drove to the project sight, he was in a very confused state. I gather that it was amazing that he ever made it without crashing. He pulled to the side of an old familiar gravel access road and parked his car. After completing the half mile hike that he had negotiated hundreds of times before, he arrived at the entrance to The Chief's cave. He explained to me later that The Chief was nowhere to be seen. His cave was empty, sterile, dead. Walt could sense that he was losing the last bit of control that he had over his actions, but he continued. He knew that he had to find The Chief! At that very instant Walt heard a shriek, a cold, lonely, shriek that pierced his soul. Walt rushed to the mouth of the cave. As he looked up, he could see The Chief peering down on him from the ledge above. Walt rushed up onto the ledge to be on a level equal with The Chief. Walt couldn't help but notice in the moonlight that The Chief appeared
to have aged tremendously since he had last seen him only one month earlier. His face was now contorted and twisted, not wrinkled, and the spark of life seemed to be gone from his eyes. The saddest thing was that the dignity was gone, Walt concluded. The Chief was now just a faceless, dirty, repulsive old man who was lost and out of place; this image evidently tormented Walt.

The Chief made a mad rush at Walt and started to flail wildly with his fists. The blows appeared fearsome, although Walt was much younger and stronger than his friend. For some reason, Walt did not use his superior strength to subdue Swiftwater. Instead he went for his throat. Walt told me that his grip was viselike, powered by strength from within that he had no idea that he possessed. The Chief was dying at the hands of the person who understood him better than anyone. It could be said that Swiftwater acknowledged this fact with a peaceful smile shortly before Walt sent the limp body hurtling over the edge. Exhausted, physically, mentally, and emotionally, Walt returned home and fell into a sound sleep.

The phone rang shortly after sunrise, and Walt was told that he was speaking to a police commander.

"Mr. Lennis, I hate to bother you at this hour but there's
been a problem down at the project site. You see, some old, insane hermit has apparently committed suicide to protest the completion of the project. I think we can minimize the bad publicity. In fact, it doesn't really need to be released to the press. I just thought I should let you know."

Walt explained to me later that he calmly listened to the description of how the suicide had officially happened, and then hung up the phone without saying a word. He then rolled over and went back to sleep.
The vacation was to be a chance for Walt to escape for awhile. He had decided to spend some time back at home with his mother and what was left with friends whom he hadn't seen in a long time. Walt always liked to come home, in spite of the fact that this desire ran counter to his early feeling of wanting to get away while growing up. Parkersburg always seemed like a good place to come back to, for a short visit, anyhow. During his return this time, Walt had yearned to renew some old friendships and maybe start a few new ones.

Walt's first stop upon arriving home was at his mother's house. They had always been close, quite a bit closer in recent years, particularly since the death of his father. Hal Lennis' death had been especially difficult for his widow and son and increasingly, it seemed, they had turned to one another for support, and this was only natural. Hal Lennis had been the undisputed head of his household and perhaps that was why his failure in the hardware business had been so unbearable
for him. He had worked hard, giving of himself, even sacrificing his family in order to be successful, yet he still felt like a failure when he lost his business. Suicide probably seemed like his only honorable, face-saving alternative, or so Walt surmised.

Walt never understood how his father could have been a failure; in fact, he was never anything but a hero to Walt. Walt’s mother, Joan, had never encouraged Walt to see his father in any other way, for she really felt the same way; her perception of her husband must have been based solely on love.

As Walt matured without his father, his mother became the most important person in his life and her influence had an incalculable effect on him. She raised him to idolize the memory of his father and planted in him the same ideals and feelings that had driven Hal Lennis. She often admonished him: “Son, you have to work hard. You have to give of yourself and do whatever you have to do to be a success. You know that’s what your father did and that is what he would have wanted for you.” She failed to point out that this philosophy may have cost her husband his life.

She would speak of her undying love and admiration for her husband, and this bond of affection became the link that
forged mother and son together. It was also the life force that drove Walt to become somebody, to become a success, to realize something that his father failed to do. Walt told me that he knew that his mother would be proud of him when he came home from his recent achievement, the successful completion of the Pakoba Project.

Upon arriving, Walt was shocked to find out that his mother was preparing to remarry within the next few months. He hadn't known that she was even seeing anybody; it came as a blow. He had never thought of her in terms of remarriage.

"Mom, why haven't you told me about this before now?"

"Walt, I was going to write more than once but I just didn't ever get it done. Besides, I know how busy you've been, and I didn't want to bother you with something like this."

Walt was stunned, but trying to show interest, he managed to ask her to tell him about her future husband.

"Well, uh, what's his name, what's he like?"

"Son, his name is Frank Smith and he's, well, you know, very nice, and kind, and considerate. He listens to me and I'm always amazed at how much he knows and at the way he seems to enjoy life. He makes me feel like no one else ever has and I can't wait to marry him."

"What does he do, Mom, bank president, airline pilot,
professor, chairman of the board, what?"

"He works for the city, Walt."

"Oh, he must be an attorney or a politician of some sort then?"

"Well, no. Actually, he's a janitor for. . . ."

"Mom, you've got to be kidding. A janitor, I don't believe you."

"It's true Walt. But, I don't think being just a janitor is so bad anymore. I don't even think of Frank as just a janitor. All I know is that he is truly happy and makes me happier than I've ever been. Maybe I've changed; I don't even know anymore, but I do know that I'm tired of being lonely and tired of just sitting back, living in the past, waiting to grow old."

As Walt listened, his resentment grew. When his Mother was finished, Walt was shaken but he knew that it was over. He still loved and respected his Mother, but this kind of news was more than he could handle. She was tired of living in the past, so she could marry a janitor and be happy, but suddenly Walt felt like a fool; he hadn't even realized until then that he, too, felt lonely and unhappy. Walt had been living in the past, and now he had to live with the fact that he had killed for it. The victim had not been just another human being, as if that weren't bad enough, but Walt knew that
he now also had to bear the anguish of killing a part of himself back at Pakoba.

Unable to hurt his Mother, Walt said, "Mom, I'm really happy for you and I wish you both the best." As he left, his mother smiled and waved, and Walt responded with a half-hearted wave back over his shoulder as he hurried down the sidewalk, tears streaming down his face.

Walt walked for hours and eventually he found himself before O'Grady's. It had been seven or eight years since he had been back and, after all, he was hoping he might see some of his old friends. Immediately as Walt walked in, he could tell that times had changed. The decor was different. It used to feel so comfortable, like a place you could go to just to relax and forget your troubles. Now it seemed to be so clean with its plastic furniture and soft music. The patrons seemed to be different, too. No more young, rowdy, hell raisers like Walt remembered; now the place seemed to be full of older, more dignified types in suits and ties. "God, these people seem old", Walt thought to himself. "They must be at least forty." Seeing that there was no remnant of his past in his favorite hangout, Walt decided to ask about Pete. Pete was the owner and bartender and had always been the one
in whom Walt had confided if things weren't going well. I imagine that if Walt ever needed to see him, this was the time.

"Bartender, is Pete O'Grady around? He's an old friend and I'd really like to see him if I can."

"He must be an old friend, pal, because he isn't around any more. I worked for him for a while about five years ago and then bought him out when he became ill."

"Ill?" Walt asked. "What happened?"

"Pete had Hodgkin's Disease and when it got to the point where he couldn't continue to work, he sold O'Grady's to me. He died about six weeks later but I don't know whether it was the disease that really got him. Personally, I think he just couldn't bear to lose the bar. You know, it was all he had with no family or friends to speak of."

Walt decided that he had to get out. All of a sudden he wasn't feeling too well, so he headed for the front door to get some fresh air. He was confused, angry, and tremendously lonely. His emotions had temporarily taken over the control of his body. As soon as he passed through the front door, he threw up in the parking lot, and then walked until he found his car. He got in and drove away, heading south, back to Pakoba to rest and get his next job assignment. Although he thought that more work might be the therapy that he needed, his
return to Pakoba brought about only new awarenesses and more problems.

Once back at the site of the Pakoba Project, Walt remained in the small camper trailer that the Army Corps had furnished for him. His vacation was approaching its end and while he was supposed to contact his superiors to find out his next assignment, he didn't. He just slept. He didn't really care about anything, least of all about playing in the dirt, so he stayed away from anything that reminded him of work. His telephone rang from time to time; he wanted to ignore it; but after it rang once too often, Walt ripped it out of the wall. He didn't eat. He didn't want to. He just kept the shades pulled and lay in bed. He didn't know whether it was light or dark outside. He didn't care.
After Walt had been missing for about a week, some of the men on his work crew became concerned. A group went to his trailer hoping to find a clue as to his whereabouts. After knocking on his door and receiving no response, the men kicked it in. The scene that confronted the men was almost more than they could handle.

Propped up on his bed in the corner of the room, Walt appeared to be very sick. There were a half dozen open sores on his face and he had a terrible color, sort of an ashen gray, that made his face look like that of a corpse. It was plain that he hadn't bothered to clean either the trailer or himself for a good while and the stench that met his would-be rescuers would have made many strong men sick. His hair was greasy and matted and when he tried to speak, his voice was weak and raspy. Those who had come to find Walt had found a shell of the man who had confidently and forcefully led them in the creation of the Pakoba Reservoir. Although seeing is often considered the prerequisite for believing, the men could scarcely
comprehend how this could be the same man who had seemed so strong and self-assured only about four weeks ago. Indeed, Walt appeared to be a man who had travelled half way to hell and wished for nothing more than for his journey to be completed.

The men, seeing that there was really nothing that they could do, notified the proper authorities and left. In a matter of hours one of the Army Corp's big shots arrived with a doctor and a police official.

"Are you Walt Lennis?" asked the Corps official knowing full well that it was Walt—the gray business suit and crew cut made the man look quite official.

"Yes."

"Mr. Lennis, as a representative of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, I am here to inform you officially that your services are no longer needed in the Corps. You have failed to report for work for over one week now and we have received no notice from you. Also, we feel that it is in the best interests of all involved to terminate your association with the Corps while you are in such a condition that reflects unfavorably upon yourself and your associates." After droning on about regulations and financial compensation and other inane details, the official concluded by saying that of course the trailer would have to be taken back by the United States
Government. "We will expect you to be gone within the next half hour, Mr. Lennis. Do you understand everything as I have stated it, Mr. Lennis?"

"Yes."

Apparently satisfied that the job was done, the official and the doctor and the police officer left through the door from which they had entered and waited outside for Walt to pull enough of himself together and leave. Within five minutes, Walt appeared in the lazy, mid-afternoon sun that is characteristic of the early autumn. There was, to be sure, a new fire burning in his eyes, a fire that expressed his frustration, his anger, and his regret. It was a fire that made one neither comfortable nor secure, but it suggested at least a sign of a resurrected emotional life that had not been present only minutes earlier. The sores and stench and poor coloring were still there, but the eyes no longer seemed dead; one could sense that Walt could once again feel something, even if it was hatred, despair, and frustration.

Walt left with just the clothes on his back and nothing more. As he passed by the official in the gray suit and the crew cut, the official spoke.

"Mr. Lennis, I'm sorry about what had to happen, but there's nothing I can do about it. I only hope that maybe you
can get some professional help and get things sorted out. I wish you nothing but the best from now on."

Walt looked at the official, first sympathetically and then defiantly before any words came to his lips. Finally Walt blurted out, "Sir, why don't you just shove it up your ass." Then, Walt resolutely walked away.
Walt later recounted to me that that evening as he walked away from the Pakoba Project became the most frightening point of his life. It frightened him because he knew that at that moment in time, he had nothing, or thought he did. No family, no friends, no job, no sense of direction. He didn't feel that even he had himself to lean on because he didn't know who he was. I surmised that it was probably the first time Walt had ever set out to find his true self, with no ready-made roles to follow, no crutches to lean on, and no ambitious thirst to quench.

He told me that he walked that evening for probably seven or eight hours in the country. The only signs of life in this part of his journey were the chirps of the crickets, the howls of the dogs calling to their friends and lovers, and the occasional hoot of an owl. The West Virginia landscape was very still in early autumn. Although it was fairly rugged and quite secluded, this didn't bother Walt. He later joked that he had
no idea of where he had walked or how far he had strayed from the rest of the world, but he wasn't worried because he knew it would be impossible to become more lost than he already was.

He recalled that he really didn't get hungry while he walked because he found many wild greens and berries that tasted as good as anything he had ever eaten. After following a ridge for most of the evening and afterwards finding a small waterfall bubbling out of the side of a ledge, Walt stopped for a drink. The cool, clean water refreshed him and buoyed his spirits so he decided to stop and bathe in the swiftly flowing stream. Walt recounted to me that his brief interlude with the waterfall was the first real taste he had ever had of the beauty and serenity of life despite the fact that he had worked in such surroundings for years. I felt that this brief encounter with nature had probably been the point at which he received the strength to continue his search. This isolated instance hadn't really changed his life, but I had no doubt that it led him to see things, and do things, that would render him a different person from what he had been.

After Walt had been in the water for an hour or so, he got out, dressed, and began to follow the stream through the hills. He said that it was very early in the morning when he spotted a cluster of buildings in a valley. None of the
buildings appeared to have any lights on as dawn broke except for a plain, wooden barn located at the edge of the village. As he approached, he could detect the faint sound of voices singing. He decided to creep toward the building for a closer inspection. As he listened, he determined that the voices must have been the voices of people joining in some sort of a religious service. The songs were all about the mercy of God and the salvation of Christ and the joy of being together in brotherhood. Walt had never really been interested in religion before; he had only been to church once or twice in his entire life. He had concluded that church was nothing more than a bunch of malarkey, but this seemed somehow different to him, especially at that particular moment in his life. Perhaps it was the fact that he was lonely or that he had been through such an emotional strain. Walt explained to me later that he couldn't explain this new attraction, but for some reason, he was drawn to the music coming from the old barn. It sounded so peaceful to him, and inviting. He told me of how he was almost hypnotized by the sweet, smooth sounds that escaped from the country church. I learned of how he walked around the back of the barn to get to the big open doors where he stood in the candlelight that illuminated the congregation.

The next thing that Walt could recollect was opening his
"Please don't leave," the old man pleaded.

Walt replied, "The hospitality shown by you and your wife has been most appreciated, but I have to go. I don't know who I am or where I am, or who you people are, and your wife doesn't seem to want to explain anything to me. Why should I stay?"

The old man countered, "Because we love you. The Father told us last night when you appeared at the salvation barn that your presence was a message from God, a blessing. My wife and I are honored that The Father chose us to take care of you. We all love you, each and every one of us."

Walt told me that he was really stunned by this strange response. "Why were they moved to give love to a stranger?" he thought. He wanted to know more about them.

"What is your name?" Walt asked.

"Names are not important with us. Please just call me brother and call my wife sister. Likewise with all the others except for The Father."

Walt really felt comfortable and liked the people, but his curiosity wouldn't allow him to sit still any longer.

"Can I see The Father?" Walt asked.

"Yes, Brother. I will take you there if your strength is sufficient."
Walt was led outside into the afternoon light to an old shack in the center of the cluster of buildings. After they entered the shack, Walt was left alone in the outer room while the old man disappeared behind a door. Within a few minutes, the old man reappeared and said, "Brother, The Father is anxious to see you now."

Walt told me later that he arose and walked through the door. He was greeted with a hearty hello by a man perched atop a raised throne.

"I am The Father. I'm so glad that you are feeling better now."

Walt described The Father as a large man, very muscular and forceful. He was dressed in sandals and a robe that Walt told me appeared to be made of some type of satin. He had a deep booming voice and a face with hard, but compassionate features.

"I have been expecting you."

Walt later told me that this man seemed out of place in such surroundings. Yes, he seemed strange to Walt; he also seemed friendly, and Walt soon felt very much at ease with this odd creature.

"Father", Walt asked, "where am I and what kind of place is this?"
"You are in the community of God", was the reply. "We know that we are the children of the Creator and we live together with love and discipline to fulfill the position in life that has been chosen for us. We have been chosen to be the watchmen of the world and it is up to us to see that our people remain pure, clean, and obedient to the laws of our Creator. Life here is filled with love, faith, and peace for those who are willing to make the sacrifices demanded by the Creator as revealed to me—The Father."

Walt explained to me that this man really believed he was on to something. The people all seemed to work hard, to work together, and to care for one another. Being afraid, lonely, and confused, Walt felt that he wanted to become a part of their group.

"Father", Walt said, "I want to become a part of the community of God. I need to build a foundation for myself. I've been lost for so long. Please help me to find the truth, to find myself!" Walt pleaded.

The Father welcomed him into the group. He was told that his arrival at the community of God was a blessing, for both him and the group. The Father also made it clear to Walt that he would be expected to become a willing and dedicated member of the group. Walt wanted to accept his new challenge. I assume that
he was happy to have someone else making his decisions for
him.

The next few days were happy and fulfilled days for Walt,
or so he thought. He was able to relax, become acquainted with
some of his new brothers and sisters, and contemplate on the
 teachings of The Father. Walt told me that he was taught that
the Creator was a just and loving God for those who followed
the words of The Father carefully and exactly. The Creator
could, however, be vicious and cruel to those who failed to
live according to the ways of the community of God. Walt learned
that there was to be nothing done for the glory of the individual.
All efforts and energies were to go into furthering the glories
of the community of God. All types of individual expression and
thought were to be suppressed. All energies aimed toward
the Creator. The work that was done in the community of God was
hard and the days were long, but everyone seemed to pitch in
and all shared a real feeling of accomplishment. Sex was
permitted only when approved by The Father, and then only among
the married. Also, arguments were not allowed. The Father
viewed the work of the community as a sacred mission and out-
siders were welcome to join and help their endeavor, but few
were ever granted the privilege of becoming members. Members
of the community rarely committed crimes against one another;
however, it was understood that if any occurred, the sanctions were to be severe. Special blocks of time were set aside throughout the day to be devoted to worship and meditation, and it was during this time that The Father would lead songs, speak of the love of the Creator, and encourage all the brothers and sisters to work together for the eternal glory.

As Walt recounted the story of the time he spent in the community of God, he told me that generally it wasn't exciting, but that it was comfortable. The Father, who ruled with an iron hand, was a strict authoritarian, yet he seemed to have a purpose for doing things and his interest was not selfish; he genuinely was concerned about the community of God.

Walt began to get involved in the community. He liked this restricted life. Although he had been with the brothers and sisters for only a few days, he felt that finally he was beginning to find himself. He told me that, at times, he would still think about Swiftwater and that this could unsettle him, but gradually the memories were fading. The work at the community was therapeutic.
PART VI

Walt had been with the community of God for about two weeks when the members were all called into the worship barn for an emergency meeting. Walt hadn't been called into one of these emergency sessions before. He told me that he couldn't imagine any emergencies arising in a setting so perfect as the community of God. He had spent the greater part of his time at the community in meditation and hard work, with intermittent instruction from The Father. He wondered how any emergency could interrupt this idyllic lifestyle.

The Father ascended the pulpit and began to address the members of the community.

"As you all know, one of our sisters has been preparing to give birth for some time now. We have been eagerly waiting for the child to be born into our community, and tonight the child, a boy, was born."

Walt told me that the first response from the congregation was from one of the naive, younger sisters who misinterpreted The Father's tone of voice. "Praise God," she cried not
realizing her inappropriate response. Walt recalled that the others spoke not a word, waiting for The Father to continue.

"The truth is that the child is not right. It was born without one of its limbs. As we all know, the birth of an imperfect child is a sign that evil exists in our midst. Satan tries to impede our progress in the community of God by introducing these imperfections. We have been divinely chosen by The Creator, and if we allow such a child to live in our society, it will drain our resources and prevent us from working to our utmost for the Creator above. I have spoken with the child's mother, our sister, and she and I have decided that we must all participate in a daily prayer vigil for the child. This vigil is to commence immediately and to proceed until such time as the child dies. To cleanse themselves of the evil that has been visited upon their family, our brother and sister who parented the child will fast along with you until the end."

"Father, must we let the child die?" someone quietly asked from the congregation.

The Father answered sternly. "You know the answer to that. We all love one another, and we all love life, but most of all we live for The Creator, the focus of our lives and our love. The deformed child must die for us to live."
From the back of the hall came, "All praise be to the Creator for whom we have been given this opportunity to serve! Yes, praise be. Amen, amen."

Walt recalled that the congregation broke out into the singing of hymns. The vigil was in progress.

As I understand it, Walt, at first, didn't question what had transpired. He had dutifully taken part in the prayer vigil and helped with the child's burial. It all seemed perfectly necessary to him. The Father had made it clear that the good of the community of God came first, that the evil which had led to the birth of the deformed child had to be purged by the death of the infant.

Walt was comfortable in the community of God and believed he could have spent the rest of his life in service to The Father until a dream caused him to examine his values once again. One night, soon after the child was buried, Walt dreamed about the child—and about himself.

As Walt recalled the details of the dream to me, it became clear that the dream had had a profound effect on him. The dream began with Walt entering a barren room occupied only by The Father and the dead child. Walt described his desire to pull the blanket away from the face of the child even while
being urged not to do so by The Father. "The child is evil; he must die," The Father said. Walt remembered that as the dream continued, the compulsion to look was too great and he envisioned himself approaching the child and removing the blanket. The face was not the face of a child. It was the visage of Jim Swiftwater, a visage that had been burned into Walt's memory forever.

Walt told me the dream continued with the funeral and burial of the child. Walt pictured himself shoveling the dirt back onto the grave and as he finished, he pictured the world coming to life. He could feel the earth, the hills, the rivers breathing. Walt also dreamed that he was one with everything, the rocks, the soil, the trees. He told me that it seemed so clear in the dream. He was a part of everything and everything was a part of him. The dream ended with a vision of The Father standing on a hill, silhouetted by an angry, stormy sky, crying, but not knowing why.

And that was the last thing he remembered about the dream. This dream had penetrated the protective cocoon in which Walt had wrapped himself. He could not escape the past by living at the community of God. He realized that he was staying there under false pretenses. How could that child be a major threat to their way of life? It was time to leave.
PART VII

After leaving the community of God, Walt wandered about for five or six hours through the densely forested hills of West Virginia. He told me that during this part of his aimless walking, he ran into no other souls. He was somewhat melancholy when he came across Route 219 because he knew that it was just a matter of time before someone would happen along; however, Walt had no intention of running away again. He wanted to hitch a ride, go somewhere, anywhere he could make a little money, and, hopefully, do some thinking. He had changed. He was growing, learning to appreciate his freedom, yet he still didn't know what lay ahead.

As Walt strolled along the road, he came upon an opossum lying on the pavement. It had been hit by a car. He stopped and took time to bury the dead opossum, using a flat stone to excavate the grave. As he covered the carcass, he thought about the child he had just left behind and about the times he had spent talking with The Chief. He wondered what the opossum had been doing the day it had gotten hit, and he thought
about the driver of the car that had hit the animal, wondering whether the person knew that he had hit and killed a living thing, and whether he cared. Maybe the person regretted the accident, and maybe the person was in a hurry and didn't have time to stop. Walt also wondered why such a killing on the highway bothered him so much. He had never thought about such things before.

When Walt completed his impromptu funeral, he turned back toward the highway and noticed another opossum on the road, sniffing the spot where the dead opossum had been minutes before. Walt guessed that it was a mate of the dead one and made enough noise to scare it into the woods at the roadside. Walt later told me that, even then, he felt a twinge of loneliness.

Minutes after Walt resumed his hike along the highway, a big semi-truck and trailer approached from behind. Walt waved the trucker to the side of the road.

"Come on in," the driver called.

"Thanks. My name's Walt Lennis."

"Glad to meet you Walt. I'm Junior, Junior Furlin."

"Where you headed, Junior?"

"I'm headed toward Roanoke. I've got a load of peat moss to deliver to a big garden center operation there. How about yourself?"
"I'm not really sure, Junior," Walt told him. For some strange reason he felt like confiding in this man. "I've had some bad times lately and I'm just ready to get somewhere. Anywhere's better than the places I've been. Anywhere's gotta be a better place."

"Better than where, Walt?"

"Nowhere in particular, just better in general than where I've been so far. You know, I want something to believe in. I need a niche. I don't think I've ever really had one. I thought I did, but someone showed me it wasn't right."

"Hey, hey Walt, slow down a little. That's a little bit deep for me. I'm just a dumb truck driver."

"I'm sorry man. I didn't mean to dump all of that on you. It's just been a while since I've felt like talking to anyone and I guess you happened to be the victim. I'll just ride along for as far as I can without being a pain in the ass, so feel free to pitch me out between here and Roanoke anywhere."

Walt told me later that the rest of the miles between them and their first stop, for fuel, passed quickly. The two of them had no further conversation before they stopped at the big truck stop. After the truck pulled up at the fuel pumps, Walt got out and walked to the back of the truck stop's garage. He couldn't help but notice the beauty of the mountainous terrain
as the sun was setting. The air seemed so still and clean, and life was abundant, everywhere, as far as the eye could see. Walt told me later that he could see how a person could really love the land as he stood there and daydreamed. After a few minutes had elapsed, Walt turned and headed back around the garage toward the truck. As he arrived, Junior was settling up with the attendant for the diesel that powered his truck, and preparing to depart.

"Are you coming Walt?"

"Yeah, if it's still all right with you."

"It's O.K. Jump in and let's go."

Walt recalled to me that as they began, once again, on the road to Roanoke, they got to know one another better. They talked about many things. Walt told about his past, excluding any mentioning of Jim Swiftwater, and the work he had done as an engineer. Junior was a good listener. He was the type of guy who could have been thinking about the fifth game of last year's world series or about the storm that was supposed to be coming, yet the calm, peaceful look of his face and the intent gaze which he cast as he listened made a person glad to be with him, to be able to converse about all kinds of things.

After they had been travelling for a few hours, Walt felt at ease enough to ask Junior some questions. He asked
him how he ever got into trucking. At first, Junior seemed hesitant to discuss his background, but gradually the walls came down. Junior told Walt that he had drifted into trucking about five years ago because it seemed like something he could do. It had become a comfortable way of life, a way of life that seemed to be suitable for Junior. It made him happy. He had learned to set his own schedules, to travel across the country seeing sights and meeting people, and most of all, he was able to make a living being independent, as a trucker.

They continued to talk, and as they talked, they grew closer together. Junior fascinated Walt, and the more Walt learned about Junior's past, the more respect he had for him as a man. After learning all about the virtues of the Mack Truck and the subtleties of transporting a load of peat moss as compared to a load of boxed refrigerators, Walt asked Junior about his past.

"Junior, do you have any family? A wife? Kids?"

"Well, yeah. I do, or at least I did. My mom lives out in St. Louis. I'm really not too close to her. She kept me alive until I was old enough to do it myself and that was about it. I never knew my dad. He left soon after I was born; a smart man. As far as a wife goes, I had one, but I
lost her."

"I'm sorry," Walt said. "We don't need to talk about it."

"No, it's all right. I don't really mind. She was a beautiful girl, and I loved her dearly. We met at a dance in high school. From that moment it was right. We knew we were meant to be together. She didn't have much of a family background and when we decided to marry, my mother turned on her too. To make a long story short, after we were married, I joined the army. I got sent to Korea and while I was over there, I got strung out on morphine. The war ended but the habit didn't, and when I got back I wasn't the same person. Susan was concerned with starting a life together and I was concerned with getting my next fix. Things didn't work out the way we had dreamed. I was out carousing most of the time and she was left to pick up the pieces time after time. I was so far gone that I hadn't even noticed that she had lost a lot of weight. By the time I learned that she was going to die, it was too late for us to do any real living together. Just like that, she was gone, and I was lost."

"Junior, I'm so very sorry."

"Don't be. It's over. I know now that things don't just happen without a reason. For a long time afterwards, I was mad at the world. Mad because I had screwed up so badly. I
felt sorry for myself and guilty for what had happened. For a while I was doing drugs like crazy and I'm pretty lucky now that I'm still alive. As time passed, I got into some bad things and lived hard and fast, but for some reason, the realization finally dawned on me that I was missing the boat. I knew that I couldn't help what had happened to me in the past, but I also began to realize that I didn't want to let the past ruin the future for me. Things slowly started to fall into place. I got off the drugs and began to drive a truck. The little things in life began to mean something to me, and I've found that it can be a pretty good life if I just let it."

Walt was really impressed with the things that Junior had told him. He could relate to most of the feelings that the truck driver had described, and it was a surprise to meet somebody who was coping with things so well. Walt explained to me later that he really felt close to Junior. Here was a man who had faced at least as much adversity as Walt had, and here also was a man who had learned to cope, to enjoy, and to feel.

As the miles rolled by, and as they continued to talk, Walt and Junior got to know one another ever better. Walt later related to me some of the experiences that Junior had faced earlier in his life. Not only had he been into drugs, but he had also been involved in the occult and Satanic worship.
As they would talk, Walt would sometimes express amazement at the things Junior had faced, and the pain and bitterness he must have had to overcome to reach this present zest for life.

Throughout the trip, Junior would do or say things that would underscore his respect for nature and the life that he had been given. He might point out a deer here, or some type of bird there. It became clear to Walt that Junior knew everything about his surroundings that he would ever have needed to know for survival, yet he had learned these things not for the self-centered goal of survival but out of a deep and abiding love and respect for the world in which he had been born. The discussions weren't limited to nature, though. They also touched on such diverse topics as whether UFO's exist, where the universe begins and ends, how to define time, why God allows man to suffer, and whether the Russians could be trusted.

Walt became an instant friend to Junior, but Junior became much more than that to Walt. To him, Junior in several ways seemed like The Chief. Walt felt that for some reason he had been given a second chance, a chance he wasn't going to blow this time. He knew that he could prove himself worthy—worthy of love, of feeling, and of respect for life. I suspect that what he still failed to understand was that he had nothing to prove at all. He had learned much about himself, but no
Walt's primary worry was his concern with what he would do when they arrived in Roanoke. He wanted to attach himself to Junior, to travel with him, and learn from him. He had come to love Junior in much the same way as he had learned to love Jim Swiftwater, and he feared of losing this vital contact with humanity. Walt described to me that he felt like a child preparing to go off to school for the first time. He understood that when they arrived, he would have to leave, to set out on his own. He knew that this course would be the best thing for him, yet he was fighting against accepting this reality. He just didn't think he could bear to be separated from Junior. Junior had become an object of veneration to Walt; although Walt knew it wasn't meant to be, he wasn't prepared to react in any other way.

As the distance to Roanoke grew shorter, Walt's feelings about Junior grew more intense, with the constant worry: What was he going to do when they arrived in Roanoke? Junior had told him about the next job he would have, delivering a load of tires to a warehouse in Seattle. Walt felt that he would have given anything to have been able to accompany Junior to Washington. He hoped Junior would ask him, but he never did.

Finally, Walt decided to bring up the topic himself.
eyes and seeing an old woman with a kind face standing over him and warmly smiling.

"Where am I?" Walt asked.

"There, there, now, you're gonna be fine. You was pretty exhausted. You passed out during our service this morning, so we brought you here."

"Yes, I can remember making it to the door but I blacked out you say?"

The woman nodded, and without another word, she left the room and returned with a big bowl of grits and some bacon and a big glass of goat's milk. Upon the presentation of the food, Walt's manners disappeared and he ravenously wolfed everything down. He couldn't remember when he had had his last good meal, but he said that he didn't intend to leave any crumbs from this one. The woman smiled approvingly as she returned to take care of the dirty dishes. Walt told me that he thanked her and tried to find out where he was or who the people were or what the meeting had been about the evening before. Apparently the woman wouldn't speak to him. Instead, she just told him that her husband would talk to him when he returned from his gardening duties.

After resting for another half hour, Walt decided to leave. Just then, the head of the house returned.
"Hey Junior, I don't really have any plans, so why don't I stay on the road with you for awhile? When I find a place that interests me, I'll just stay. What do you think?"

"Well Walt, I think it's a pretty lousy idea. There's no way you'll ever figure out where your life's headed if you just keep rollin' down the road with me."

"Junior, I'm not sure...maybe rollin' down the road is what I should be doing. I only want to tag along long enough to find out."

"Sorry, pal, I don't think that your trying to fit into my life is a very good thing for you—or for me. You need to get some confidence in yourself. You need to try your own wings. I need to keep making mine stronger. Those are things we can't do together. You and I will just have to part company when we get to Roanoke."

When Walt later told me the story, he underscored the fact that it surprised even himself that he couldn't be angry or upset with Junior. Junior had told him the way it had to be, and Walt was grateful, although it wouldn't make it any easier for Walt to leave his new friend. Walt knew that he had to deal with that problem when it arrived. In the meantime he sat back, relaxed, and enjoyed the rest of the ride.
About thirty-five miles from Roanoke, Junior pulled into a rest area to use the john and get a drink of water. Walt woke up and figured it to be sometime in the early hours of morning.

"Well Walt, we'll be there real soon. We've only got about forty-five more minutes to spend on the road. I'll make a quick pit stop and we'll head on toward town."

Walt remembered sitting up and shaking the sleepiness out of his head. He looked about the rest area, noticing that it seemed very desolate. There were no other trucks pulled over and only one car could be seen in the parking area. Walt waited in the truck for what seemed like an hour for Junior to return. Finally he became concerned enough to get out of the truck to see if he could figure out what was keeping Junior. It struck him as being odd that the other vehicle, the old beat-up car, still had not moved. As he approached the rest rooms, he could hear voices coming from inside. He couldn't tell what was being said, but he recognized one of the voices as being Junior's.

The next thing Walt recalled was that the door to the restroom exploded open, with the two men struggling and falling to the ground. Before Walt could respond, a shot was fired and Junior was dead. He learned later that Junior had no chance of surviving because the shot hit him at point blank range in the side of the head.
In an instant, Walt was on top of the assailant, gaining control of the gun, a small handgun, and pointing it directly at his captive.

"You son of a bitch! You killed him! I want to know why? What could he have done to you? I want to know, damn it!"

Junior's killer was little more than a kid. He didn't look like he was even old enough to shave. With Walt's knee in his chest and a gun pointed at him, the young man could barely speak.

"I, I, I, didn't want to kill him. I only wanted his money. He saw that I had a gun but he still wouldn't give it to me when I told him I wanted it. He made fun of me and when he finally gave his wallet to me, it only had seven bucks in it. He thought I wasn't looking and tried to grab me. Nobody talks to me like he did. I won't stand for it. I had to show him not to be messing with me. That's why I shot him!"

Walt listened but couldn't believe what he was hearing. One of the world's best had been killed for seven dollars. It was such a waste.

As Walt remembered it, he just sat and cried and looked at the kid below him. He could remember losing The Chief. He could remember walking away from his mother. He could remember the cruel death of the infant. Now he had to face losing Junior.
It was the loss that nearly pushed him to the brink. He wanted to kill the murderer of his friend. The gun felt very comfortable in his hand. He looked into the eyes below him and prepared to shoot. The kid was shaking as if he knew that his time was about to be ended. Walt slowly and methodically cocked the hammer into place. He later told me that it was as if everything was happening in slow motion. At the last instant, he looked into himself and saw a vision of The Chief. At that moment, The Chief became his father. He could remember sitting on his father's knee and being told stories and how good it made him feel. He then knew that he couldn't pull the trigger. He tossed the gun into some bushes a few feet away and pulled the kid who had shot Junior to his feet.

With a tight grip on the kid's arm, Walt headed toward the car and asked for the keys. He opened the trunk, told the young man to get in, and then closed it so escape was impossible. With this done, Walt went to the pay phone at the other end of the parking lot.

"Operator, could you please send the sheriff out to the rest stop on Highway 219, a few miles north of Roanoke. There's been a murder and I have caught the one responsible. Yes, I've got things under control. Yes, I'm in control. Yes. . . . . . Thank you. . . . . Good bye."
Walt returned to the Pakoba Region after nearly a year's absence. There was no crowd to greet him, no one to proclaim him a hero, and no one to reassure him that he had made the right decision. His arrival was inconspicuous, and it went unnoticed by the people who made up the new community.

Pakoba had changed. Where limestone ledges had stoically overlooked the valley, water was standing. From the point where a lucky few had once been able to stand and listen to the sound of the Pakoba Big Rapids, the sound of outboard motors and the shouts of water skiers punctuated the silence. Picnic tables were scattered throughout the territory, and ancient hardwood trees that had once stood as the area's sentinels were reduced to having orange trash recepticals strapped around their bellies. Visitors to the area would never have guessed that an entire town had earlier stood in a place that was now fifty feet underwater. Fishermen, sightseers, campers, and tourists all contributed to the general state of confusion in a region that had, only recently,
been a haven of peace, tranquility, and beauty.

Walt arrived early in the morning, and I remember the incident well; as I was taking my morning walk, I ran across him. He was sitting on one of the picnic benches that had been placed on the grounds of the recently completed Visitors' Center.

Of what we talked I can't remember, but I can remember how strongly I was struck by the fact that Walt seemed different—maybe, more at peace with himself. He had returned to his former physical stature, yet I wasn't impressed with his physical size as I once had been. His voice no longer boomed as it had when he was in charge of the Pakoba project. Instead, it was clear and strong and thoughtful, more meditative, possibly. Immediately, I noticed the piercing eyes that looked at me in a loving and caressing way. He made me feel at ease. I had never noticed this characteristic in him before, in regard to his relations with other people. Indeed, his face had aged since he had left, despite the fact that he had been gone only a year. The lines in his face only appeared to highlight his new features, though they did not make him look old. The clothes that he wore were not the heavy boots and sharp gray work shirt and pants that had been characteristic of him a year ago; instead, he was clad in some ratty overalls
and a pair of well-chewed-up brown shoes.

After a few days, it became apparent that Walt intended to stay in the Pakoba area. Without even trying, Walt regained the respect of the few left in the area who had known him before, and he made many new friends. He wasn't respected in the same way that he had been before, but it was clear that he no longer sought that type of respect. Many didn't understand him and most probably never would, but that didn't bother Walt. He was happy and living a simple, uncluttered life.

Since his return, he has pursued simple pleasures with a single-minded determination. He didn't return to the occupation that had once been the focus of his life; he even seemed disinterested in engineering now. Instead, he obtained a small deserted shack and converted it into a handicraft and souvenir shop, selling mementos of the land as it once had been.

The primary commodity of the Swiftwater Souvenir Shop isn't the tokens like paperweights, post cards, and West Virginia T-shirts, nor is it the polished rocks or tourist maps. The beauty of the dumpy little business is that the proprietor, Walt Lennis, is always glad to take time out to tell a story, to listen, and to share a bit of himself, a bit
of his life with anyone who cares to listen.

I've known Walt for a long time now. I knew him before, when he was an ambitious young leader, and I knew him after, when he had become a thoughtful, and sensitive human being. Many times since his return to the Pakoba River region, we have passed the time talking in his shop or taking hikes through the Pakoba Forest. I can't help but admire his simple Thoreau-like existence. And I only wish that more people were like Walt Lennis. Despite the tragic event which took Jim Swiftwater's life, and Walt's involvement in it, he became a man who was courageous enough to explore, thoughtful enough to seek, and strong enough to realize his limits. I came to admire him, not so much for the difficult times that he faced, but for the way in which he faced them.

In Walt's eyes, if one looks very closely, one can see the essence of the human spirit. The proof that it exists is in the light that shines from his face, and the origin of that light must be traced to The Chief, Jim Swiftwater.