

Wood

Alice Munro

Roy is an upholsterer and refinisher of furniture. He will also take on the job of rebuilding chairs and tables that have lost some rungs or a leg, or are otherwise in a dilapidated condition. There aren't many people doing that kind of work anymore, and he gets more business than he can handle. He doesn't know what to do about it. His excuse for not hiring somebody to help him is that the government will make him go through a lot of red tape, but the real reason may be that he's used to working alone—he's been doing this ever since he got out of the army—and it's hard for him to imagine having somebody else around all the time. If he and his wife, Lea, had had a boy, the boy might have grown up with an interest in the work and joined him in the shop when he was old enough. Or even if they'd had a daughter. Once he'd thought of training his wife's niece Diane. When she was a child she had hung around watching him and after she got married—suddenly, at the age of seventeen—she helped him with some jobs because she and her husband needed the money. But she was pregnant, and the smells of paint stripper, wood stain, linseed oil, polish, and wood smoke made her sick. Or that was what she told Roy. She told his wife the real reason—that her husband didn't think it was the right kind of work for a woman.

So now she has four children and works in the kitchen of an old people's home. Apparently her husband thinks that is all right.

Roy's workshop is in a shed behind the house. It is heated by a woodstove, and getting the fuel for the stove has led him to another interest, which is private but not secret. That is, everybody knows about it but nobody knows how much he thinks about it or how much it means to him.

Wood cutting.

He has a four-wheel-drive truck and a chain saw and an eight-pound splitting ax. He spends more and more time in the bush,

cutting firewood. More than he needs for himself, as it turns out—so he has taken to selling it. Modern houses often have a fireplace in the living room and another in the dining room and a stove in the family room. And they want to have fires all the time—not just when they’re having a party or at Christmas.

When he first started going to the bush Lea used to worry about him. She worried about whether he would have an accident out there by himself, but also about whether he was letting the business go slack. She didn’t mean that his workmanship might suffer, but his timetable. “You don’t want to let people down,” she said. “If somebody says they want something for a certain time there’s a reason.”

She had the idea of his business being an obligation—something he did to help people out. She was embarrassed when he raised his prices—so in fact was he—and went out of her way to tell people what the materials were costing him nowadays.

While she had her job, it was not difficult for him to take off for the bush after she had gone to work and try to be back before she got home. She worked as a receptionist and bookkeeper for one of the dentists in town. It was a good job for her, because she enjoyed talking to people, and good for the dentist because she came from a large and loyal family who would never think of having their teeth tended to by anybody but the man who was her boss.

These relatives of hers, the Boles and the Jetters and the Pooles, used to be around the house a lot, or else Lea wanted to be at one of their houses. It was a clan that didn’t always enjoy one another’s company but who made sure they got plenty of it. Twenty or thirty would be crammed into one place for Christmas or Thanksgiving, and they could manage a dozen on an ordinary Sunday—watching television, talking, cooking, and eating. Roy likes to watch television and he likes to talk and he likes to eat, but not any two at the same time and certainly not all three. So when they chose to gather in his house on a Sunday, he got into the habit of getting up and going out to the shed and building up a fire of ironwood or applewood—either of those but particularly the apple has a sweet comforting smell.

Right out in the open, on the shelf with the stains and oils, he always kept a bottle of rye. He had rye in the house as well, and he was not stingy about offering it to his company, but the drink he poured when he was alone in the shed tasted better, just as the smoke smelled better when there was nobody around to say, Oh, isn't that lovely? He never drank when he was working on the furniture, or going into the bush—just on these Sundays full of visitors.

His going off on his own like that didn't cause trouble. The relatives didn't feel slighted—they had a limited interest in people like Roy who had just married into the family, and not even contributed any children to it, and who were not like themselves. They were large, expansive, talkative. He was short, compact, quiet. His wife was an easygoing woman generally and she liked Roy the way he was, so she didn't reproach or apologize for him.

They both felt that they meant more to each other, somehow, than couples who were overrun with children.

Last winter Lea had been sick with almost steady flu and bronchitis. She thought that she was catching all the germs people brought into the dentist's office. So she quit her job—she said that she was getting a bit tired of it anyway and she wanted more time to do things she had always wanted to do.

But Roy never found out what those things were. Her strength had taken a slump that she could not recover from. And that seemed to bring about a profound change in her personality. Visitors made her nervous—her family more than anybody. She felt too tired for conversation. She didn't want to go out. She kept up the house adequately, but she rested between chores so that simple routines took her all day. She lost most of her interest in television, though she would watch it when Roy turned it on, and she lost also her rounded, jolly figure, becoming thin and shapeless. The warmth, the glow—whatever had made her nice looking—were drained out of her face and her brown eyes.

The doctor gave her some pills but she couldn't tell whether they did her any good or not. One of her sisters took her to a practitioner

of holistic medicine, and the consultation cost three hundred dollars. She could not tell if that did her any good either.

Roy misses the wife he was used to, with her jokes and energy. He wants her back, but there's nothing he can do, except be patient with this grave, listless woman who sometimes waves her hand in front of her face as if she is bothered by cobwebs or has got stuck in a nest of brambles. Questioned about her eyesight, however, she claims that it is fine. She no longer drives her car.

She no longer says anything about Roy going to the bush.

She may snap out of it, Diane says. (Diane is about the only person who still comes to the house.) Or she may not.

That is pretty well what the doctor said, in a lot more careful words. He says that the pills he's got her on will keep her from sinking too low. How low is too low. Roy thinks, and when can you tell?

Sometimes he finds a bush that the sawmill people have logged out, leaving the tops on the ground. And sometimes he finds one the forest management people have gone in and girdled the trees they think should come out because they are diseased or crooked or no good for lumber. Ironwood, for instance is no good for lumber, and neither is hawthorn or blue beech. When he spots a bush like this he gets in touch with the farmer or whoever owns it, and they bargain, and if the payment is agreed on he goes in to get the wood. A lot of this activity happens in the late fall—now, in November, or early December—because that is the time for selling firewood and because it is the best time for getting his truck into the bush. Farmers nowadays don't always have a well-travelled lane going back there, as they did when they cut and hauled wood themselves. Often you have to drive in across the fields, and this is possible only at two times during the year—before the field is plowed and after the crop is off.

After the crop is off is the better time, when the ground is hardened by frost. And this fall the demand for wood is greater than ever, and Roy has been going out two or three times in one week.

Many people recognize trees by their leaves or by their general

shape and size, but walking through the leafless deep bush Roy knows them by their bark. Ironwood, that heavy and reliable firewood, has a shaggy brown bark on its stocky trunk, but its limbs are smooth at their tips and decidedly reddish. Cherry is the blackest tree in the bush, and its bark lies in picturesque scales. Most people would be surprised at how high cherry trees grow here—they are nothing like the cherry trees in fruit orchards. Apple trees are more like their orchard representatives—not very tall, bark not so definitely scaled or dark as the cherry’s. Ash is a soldierly tree with a corduroy-ribbed trunk. The maple’s gray bark has an irregular surface, the shadows creating black streaks, which meet sometimes in rough rectangles, sometimes not. There is a comfortable carelessness about that bark, suitable to the maple tree, which is homely and familiar and what most people think of when they think of a tree.

Beech trees and oaks are another matter—there is something notable and dramatic about them, though neither has as lovely a shape as the big elm trees which are now nearly all gone. Beech has the smooth gray bark, the elephant skin, which is usually chosen for the carving of initials. These carvings widen with the years and decades, from the slim knife groove to the blotches that make the letters at last illegible, wider than they are long.

Beech will grow a hundred feet high in the bush. In the open they spread out and are as wide as high, but in the bush they shoot up, the limbs at the top will take radical turns and can look like stag horns. But this arrogant-looking tree may have a weakness of twisted grain, which can be detected by ripples in the bark. That’s a sign that it may break, or go down in a high wind. As for oak trees, they are not so common in this country, not so common as beech but always easy to spot. Just as maple trees always look like the common necessary tree in the backyard, so oak trees always look like trees in storybooks, as if, in all the stories that begin, “Once upon a time in the woods,” the woods were full of oak trees. Their dark, shiny, elaborately indented leaves contribute to this look, but they seem

just as legendary when the leaves are off and you can see so well the thick corky bark with its gray-black color and intricate surface, and the devilish curling and curving of the branches.

Roy thinks that there is very little danger in going tree cutting alone if you know what you are doing. When you are going to cut down a tree, the first thing is to assess its center of gravity, then cut a seventy-degree wedge, so that the center of gravity is just over it. The side the wedge is on, of course, determines the direction in which the tree will fall. You make a falling cut, from the opposite side, not to connect with the wedge cut but in line with its high point. The idea is to cut through the tree, leaving at the end a hinge of wood which is the very center of the tree's weight and from which it must fall. It is best to make it fall clear of all other branches, but sometimes there is no way this can happen. If a tree is leaning into the branches of other trees, and you can't get a truck into position to haul it out with a chain, you cut the trunk in sections from beneath, till the upper part drops free and falls. When you've dropped a tree and it's resting on its branches, you get the trunk to the ground by cutting through the limb wood until you come to the limbs that are holding it up. These limbs are under pressure—they may be bent like a bow—and the trick is to cut so that the tree will roll away from you and the limbs won't whack you. When it is safely down, you cut the trunk into stove lengths and split the stove lengths with the ax.

Sometimes there's a surprise. Some squirrely wood blocks can't be split with the ax; they have to be laid on their sides and ripped with a chain saw; the sawdust cut this way, with the grain, is taken away in long shreds. Also, some beech or maple has to be side split, the great round chunk cut along the growth rings on all sides until it is almost square and can be more easily attacked. Sometimes there's dozy wood, in which a fungus has grown between the rings. But in general the toughness of the blocks is as you'd expect—greater in the body wood than in the limb wood, and greater in the broad trunks that have grown up partly in the open than in the tall slim ones that have pushed up in the middle of the bush.

Surprises. But you can be prepared for those. And if you're prepared, there's not the danger. He used to think of explaining all this to his wife. The procedures, the surprises, the identification. But he couldn't think of the way to go about it, so that she'd be interested. Sometimes he wished he had got around to passing on his knowledge to Diane when she was younger. She would never have the time to listen now.

And in a way his thoughts about wood are too private—they are covetous and nearly obsessive. He has never been a greedy man in any other way. But he can lie awake nights thinking of a splendid beech he wants to get at, wondering if it will prove as satisfactory as it looks or has some tricks up its sleeve. He thinks of all the woodlots in the county that he has never even seen, because they lie at the backs of farms, behind private fields. If he is driving along a road that goes through a bush, he swings his head from side to side, afraid of missing something. Even what is worthless for his purposes will interest him. A stand of blue beech, for instance, too delicate, too weedy, to bother with. He sees the dark vertical ribs slanting down the paler trunks—he will remember where these are. He would like to get a map in his mind of every bush he sees, and though he might justify this by citing practical purposes, that wouldn't be the whole truth.

A day or so after the first snow, he is out in a bush looking at some girdled trees. He has a right to be there—he has already been talking to the farmer, whose name is Suter.

At the edge of this bush there is an illegal dump. People have been throwing their trash in this hidden spot rather than taking it to the township dump, whose open hours may not have suited them, or whose location may not have been so handy. Roy sees something moving there. A dog?

But then the figure straightens up and he sees that it is a man in a filthy coat. In fact it is Percy Marshall, poking around the dump to see what he can find. Sometimes in these places you used to be

able to find valuable old crocks or bottles or even a copper boiler, but that is not so likely anymore. And Percy is not a knowledgeable scavenger anyway. He will just be on the lookout for anything he can use—though it is hard to see what that could be in this heap of plastic containers and torn screens and mattresses with the stuffing popped out.

Percy lives alone in one room at the back of an otherwise empty and boarded-up house at a crossroads a few miles from here. He walks the roads, walks along the creeks and through the town, talking to himself, sometimes playing the part of a half-wit vagabond and sometimes presenting himself as a shrewd local character. His life of malnutrition, dirt, and discomfort is his own choice. He has tried the County Home, but he couldn't stand the routine and the company of so many other old people. Long ago he started out with a fairly good farm, but the life of a farmer was too monotonous—so he worked his way down through bootlegging, botched house-breaking, some spells in jail, and in the past decade or so he has worked his way up again, with the help of the old-age pension, to a certain protected status. He has even had his picture and a write-up in the local paper.

The Last of a Breed. Local Free Spirit Shares Stories and Insights.

He climbs out of the dump laboriously, as if he felt obliged to have a little conversation.

"You going to be taking them trees out?"

Roy says, "I might be." He thinks Percy may be after a donation of firewood.

"Then you better hurry up," Percy says.

"Why's that?"

"All of this here is going under contract."

Roy cannot but help gratifying him by asking what contract this might be. Percy is a gossip but not a liar. At least not about the things he is truly interested in, which are deals, inheritances, insurance, house break-ins, money matters of all sorts. It is a mistake

to think that people who have never managed to get hold of money aren't busy thinking about it. A surprise, this would be, to people who expect him to be a philosophical he can shoot off a little of that too when required.

"Heard about this fellow," Percy says, drawing it out. "When I was in town. I don't know. Seems this fellow runs a sawmill and he's got a contract to the River Inn and he's going to supply them all the wood they want for the winter. Cord a day. That's what they burn. Cord a day."

Roy says, "Where did you hear that?"

"Beer parlor. All right, I go in there now and again. I never have no more than a pint. And these fellows I don't know who they were, but they weren't drunk neither. Talking about where the bush was and it was this one all right. Suter's bush."

Roy had talked to the farmer just last week, and he had thought he had the deal pretty well sewed up, just to do the usual clean out.

"That's a pile of wood," he says easily.

"It is so."

"If they mean to take it all they'd have to have a license."

"You bet. Unless there's something crooked," said Percy with intense pleasure.

"None of my business. I got all the work I can handle."

"I bet you do. All you can handle."

All the way home Roy can't keep himself from thinking about this story. He has sold some wood now and then to the River Inn. But now they must have decided to take on one steady supplier, and he is not the one. He thinks about the problems of getting that much wood out now, when the snow has already started. The only thing you could do would be to pull the logs out into the open field, before the real winter got under way. You'd have to get them out as quickly as possible, make a big pile of them there, saw them, and chop them up later. And to get them out you'd need a bulldozer or at least a big tractor: You'd have to make a road in and pull them out with chains.

You'd need a crew—there was no way this could be a one- or two-man operation. It would have to be done on a big scale.

So it wasn't sounding like a part-time enterprise, the kind he carried on himself. It could be a big outfit, somebody from out of the county altogether.

Eliot Suter had not given any hint of this offer when Roy was talking to him. But it is quite possible that an approach was made to him later and he decided to forget the casual sort of arrangement that had been put forward by Roy. Decided to let the bulldozer go in.

During the evening Roy thinks of phoning up and asking what is going on. But then he thinks that if the farmer has indeed changed his mind there is nothing to be done. A spoken agreement is nothing to hold to. The man could just tell him to clear off.

The best thing for Roy to do might be just to act as if he has never heard Percy's story, never heard about any other fellow—just go in and take what trees he can as quickly as he can, before the bulldozer gets there.

Of course there is always a possibility that Percy may have been mistaken about the whole thing. He isn't likely to have made it up just to bother Roy, but he could have got it twisted.

Yet the more Roy thinks about it the more he comes to discount this possibility. He just keeps seeing in his mind the bulldozer and the chained logs, the great log piles out in the field, the men with chain saws. That is the way they do things nowadays. Wholesale.

Part of the reason the story has made such an impact is that he has a dislike for the River Inn, which is a resort hotel on the Peregrine River. It is built on the remains of an old mill not far from the crossroads where Percy Marshall lives. In fact the inn owns the land Percy lives on and the house he lives in. There was a plan to tear the house down, but it turned out that the inn's guests, having nothing much to do, like to walk down the road and take pictures of this derelict building and the old harrow and upturned wagon beside it, and the useless pump, and Percy, when he allows himself to be photographed. Some guests do sketches. They come from as far away as

Ottawa and Montreal and no doubt think of themselves as being in the backwoods. Local people go to the inn for a special lunch or dinner. Lea went once, with the dentist and his wife and the hygienist and her husband. Roy would not go. He said that he didn't want to eat a meal that cost an arm and a leg, even when somebody else was paying. But he is not altogether sure what it is that he has against the inn. He is not exactly opposed to the idea of people spending money in the hope of enjoying themselves, or against the idea of other people making money out of the people who want to spend it. It is true that the antiques at the inn have been restored and reupholstered by craftsmen other than himself—people not from around here at all—but if he had been asked to do them he would probably have refused, saying he had more than enough work to do already. When Lea asked him what he thought was the matter with the inn, the only thing he could think of to say was that when Diane had applied for a job there, as a waitress, they had turned her down, saying that she was overweight.

“Well, she was,” said Lea. “She is. She says so herself.”

True. But Roy still thinks of those people as snobs. Grabbers and snobs. They are putting up new buildings supposed to be like an old-time store and an old-time opera house, just for show. They burn wood for show. A cord a day. So now some operator with a bulldozer will be levelling the bush as if it was a cornfield. This is just the sort of high-handed scheme you would expect, the kind of pillage you might know they would get up to.

He tells Lea the story he has heard. He still tells her things—it's a habit—but he is so used to her now not paying any real attention that he hardly notices whether there is an answer or not. This time she echoes what he himself has said.

“Never mind. You've got enough to do anyway.”

That's what he would have expected, whether she was well or not. Missing the point. But isn't that what wives do—and husbands probably the same—around fifty percent of the time?

The next morning he works on a drop-leaf table for a while. He means to stay in the shed all day and get a couple of pastdue jobs finished. Near noon he hears Diane's noisy muffler and looks out the window. She'll be here to take Lea to the reflexologist—she thinks it does Lea good and Lea doesn't object.

But she is heading for the shed, not the house.

"Howdy," she says.

"Howdy."

"Hard at work?"

"Hard as ever," Roy says. "Offer you a job?"

This is their routine.

"I got one. Listen, what I came in here for, I want to ask you a favor. What I want is to borrow the truck. Tomorrow, to take Tiger to the vet. I can't handle him in the car. He's got too big for the car. I hate to have to ask you."

Roy says not to worry about it.

Tiger to the vet, he thinks, that's going to cost them.

"You weren't going to need the truck?" she says. "I mean, you can use the car?"

He has of course been meaning to go out to the bush tomorrow, providing he got his jobs done today. What he'll have to do, he decides now, is get out there this afternoon.

"I'll fill it up with gas for you," Diane says.

So another thing he'll have to do is remember to fill it up himself, to prevent her. He is just about to say, "You know the reason I want to get out there is something's come up that I can't help thinking about—"

But she's out the door and going to get Lea.

As soon as they are out of sight and he has things cleaned up, he gets into the truck and drives out to where he was the day before. He thinks about stopping by and questioning Percy further but concludes that it would not be any use. Such a show of interest might just get Percy inventing things. He thinks again about talking to the farmer but decides against it for the same reasons as last night.

He parks the truck on the trail that leads into the bush. This trail soon peters out, and even before it does he has left it. He is walking around looking at the trees, which appear the same as they did yesterday and don't give a sign of being party to any hostile scheme. He has the chain saw and the ax with him, and he feels as if he has to hurry. If anybody else shows up here, if anybody challenges him, he will say that he has permission from the farmer and he knows nothing about any other deal. He will say that furthermore he intends to go on cutting unless the farmer comes and personally tells him to get out. If that really happens, of course he will have to go. But it's not likely it will happen because Suter is a hefty man with a bad hip, so he is not much taken to wandering around his property.

"... no authority ...," Roy says, talking to himself like Percy Marshall, "I want to see it on paper."

He's talking to the stranger he's never even seen.

The floor of any bush is usually rougher than the surface of the surrounding land. Roy has always thought that this was caused by trees falling, pulling up the earth with their roots, then just lying there, rotting. Where they had lain and rotted there would be a mound—where their roots had torn out the earth there would be hollows. But he read somewhere—fairly recently, and he wishes he could remember where it was—that the cause was what happened long ago, just after the Ice Age, when ice formed between layers of earth and pushed it up into odd humps, just as it does today in the arctic regions. Where the land has not been cleared and worked the humps remain.

What happens to Roy now is the most ordinary and yet the most unbelievable thing. It is what might happen to any stupid daydreamer walking in the bush, to any holidayer gawking around at nature, to somebody who thought the bush was a kind of park to stroll in. Somebody who wore light shoes instead of boots and didn't bother to keep an eye on the ground. It has never happened to Roy before in hundreds of times of walking in the bush, it has never once come near to happening.

A light snow has been falling for some time, making the earth and dead leaves slippery. One of his feet skids and twists, and then the other foot plunges through a cover of snowy brush to the ground, which is farther down than he expected. That is, he steps carelessly—is thrown, almost—into the sort of spot where you should always step testingly, carefully, and not at all if you can see a nearby place that is better. Even so, what happens? He doesn't go down hard, it's not as if he has stumbled into a groundhog hole. He is thrown off balance, but he sways reluctantly, almost disbelievingly, then goes down with the skidding foot caught somehow under the other leg. He holds the saw out from himself as he falls, and flings the ax clear. But not dear enough—the ax handle hits him hard, against the knee of his twisted leg. The saw has pulled him over in its direction but at least he hasn't fallen against it.

He has felt himself go down almost in slow motion, thoughtfully and inevitably. He could have broken a rib, but he didn't. And the ax handle could have flown up and hit him in the face, but it didn't. He could have gashed his leg. He thinks of all these possibilities not with immediate relief, but as if he can't be sure yet that they have not happened. Because the way this started—the way he skidded and stepped onto the brush and fell—was so stupid and awkward, so hard to believe, that any preposterous outcome could follow.

He starts to pull himself up. Both knees hurt—one from being hit by the handle and one from coming down hard on the ground. He gets hold of the trunk of a young cherry tree—where he could have bashed his head—and pulls himself up gradually. Tentatively he puts weight on one foot and just touches the ground with the other—the one that skidded and twisted underneath him. In a minute he'll try it. He bends to pick up the saw and nearly buckles again. A pain shoots up from the ground and doesn't stop till it reaches his skull. He forgets the saw, straightens up, not sure where the pain started. That foot—did he put weight on it as he bent over? The pain has drawn back into that ankle. He straightens the leg as much as he can, considering it, then very cautiously tries the foot on the ground,

tries his weight. He can't believe the pain. He can't believe that it would continue so, could continue to defeat him. The ankle must be more than twisted—it must be sprained. Could it be broken? In his boot it doesn't look any different from his other, faithful, ankle.

He knows that he will have to bear it. He will have to get used to it to get out of here. And he keeps trying, but he does not make any progress. He can't set his weight on it. It must be broken. A broken ankle—even that is surely a minor injury, the sort of thing old ladies get when they slip on the ice. He has been lucky. A broken ankle, a minor injury. Nevertheless he can't take a step. He can't walk.

What he understands, finally, is that in order to get back to the truck he's going to have to abandon his ax and his chain saw and get down on his hands and knees and crawl. He lets himself down as easily as he can and hauls himself around into the track of his bootprints, which are now filling with snow. He thinks to check the pocket where his keys are, making sure it's zipped. He shakes off his cap and lets it lie—the peak interferes with his vision. Now the snow is falling on his bare head. But it's not so cold. Once he accepts crawling as a method of locomotion it's not bad—that is, it's not impossible, though it's hard on his hands and his good knee. He's careful enough now, dragging himself over the brush and through the saplings, over the hummocky ground. Even if he gets a little bit of a slope to roll himself down, he doesn't dare—he has to guard the bad leg. He's glad he didn't track through any boggy places and he's glad he didn't wait any longer before starting back; the snow is getting heavier and his prints are almost blotted out. Without that track to follow it would be hard to know, at ground level, whether he was going the right way.

The situation, which seemed at first so unreal to him, is getting to seem more natural. Going along on hands and elbows and the one knee, close to the ground, testing a log for rot, then pulling himself over it on his stomach, getting his hands full of rotten leaves and dirt and snow—he can't keep his gloves on, can't get the proper hold and

feel of things on the bush floor except with his cold bare scratched hands—he is no longer surprised at himself. He doesn't think any more about his ax and his saw back there, though at first he could hardly pull himself away from them. He scarcely thinks back as far as the accident itself. It happened, no matter how. The whole thing no longer seems in the least unbelievable or unnatural.

There is a fairly steep bank to get up, and when he reaches it he takes a breather, relieved to have come this far. He warms his hands inside his jacket, one at a time. For some reason he thinks of Diane in her unbecoming red ski jacket and decides that her life is her life, there is not much use worrying about it. And he thinks of his wife, pretending to laugh at the television. Her quietness. At least she's fed and warm, she isn't some refugee shuffling along the roads. Worse things happen, he thinks. Worse things.

He starts up the bank, digging in his elbows and his sore but serviceable knee where he can. He keeps going; he grits his teeth as if that will keep him from sliding back; he grabs at any exposed root or halfway-sturdy stem that he can see. Sometimes he slides, his hold breaks, but he gets himself stopped and inches upwards again. He never raises his head to judge how far he still has to go. If he pretends the incline goes on forever, it'll be a kind of bonus, a surprise, to get to the top.

It takes a long time. But he pulls himself onto level ground at last, and through the trees ahead and the falling snow he can see the truck. The truck, the old red Mazda, a faithful old friend, miraculously waiting. Being on the level raises his expectations of himself again and he gets onto his knees, going easy, easy on the bad leg, rises shakily onto his good leg, dragging the other, swaying like a drunk. He tries a sort of hop. No good—he'd lose his balance that way. He tries a little weight on the bad leg, just gently, and realizes that the pain could make him black out. He sinks back to the old position and crawls. But instead of crawling through the trees towards the truck he turns at right angles and makes for where he knows the track to be. When he gets there he begins to make better time, crawling over the hard ruts,

the mud that has thawed in the daylight but is now starting to freeze again. It's cruel on the knee and his palms but otherwise so much easier than the route he had to take before that he feels almost light-headed. He can see the truck ahead. Looking at him, waiting for him.

He'll be able to drive. So lucky the damage is to the left leg. Now that the worst is over a lot of vexing questions come at him, along with his relief. Who will go and get the saw and the ax for him, how can he explain to anybody just where to find them? How soon will the snow cover them up? When will he be able to walk?

No use. He pushes all that away, raises his head to get another encouraging look at the truck. He stops again to rest and warm his hands. He could put his gloves on now, but why ruin them?

A large bird rises out of the bush to one side of him and he cranes his neck to see what it is. He thinks it's a hawk, but it could be a buzzard. If it's a buzzard will it have its eye on him, thinking it's in luck now, seeing he's hurt?

He waits to see it circle back, so he can tell what it is by the manner of its flight, and its wings.

And while he's doing that, while he's waiting, and taking note of the bird's wings—it is a buzzard—he is also getting a drastically new idea about the story that has preoccupied him for the last twenty-four hours.

The truck is moving. When did it start? When he was watching the bird? At first just a little movement, a wobble in the ruts—it could almost be a hallucination. But he can hear the engine. It's going. Did somebody just get into it while he was distracted, or was somebody waiting in it all the time? Surely he locked it, and he has the keys with him. He feels his zipped pocket again. Someone stealing the truck in front of his eyes and without the keys. He hollers and waves, from his crouched position—as if that would do any good. But the truck isn't backing into the turnaround to drive out; it's bumping along the track straight at him, and now the person driving it is honking the horn, not in a warning but a greeting way, and slowing down.

He sees who it is.

The only person who has the other set of keys. The only person it could be. Lea.

He struggles to get his weight onto the one leg. She jumps out of the truck and runs to him and supports him.

"I just went down," he tells her, panting. "It was the dumbest damn thing I ever did in my life." Then he thinks to ask how she got here.

"Well, I didn't fly," she says.

She came in the car, she says—she speaks just as if she'd never given up driving at all—she came in the car but she left it back at the road.

"It's way too light for this track," she says. "And I thought I might get stuck. But I wouldn't've, the mud's froze hard.

"I could see the truck," she says. "So I just walked in and when I got to it I unlocked it and got in and sat there. I figured you'd be coming back soon, seeing it's snowing. But I never figured you'd be doing it on your hands and knees."

The walk, or maybe the cold, has brightened her face and sharpened her voice. She gets down and looks at his ankle, says she thinks it's swollen.

"Could have been worse," he says.

She says this was the one time she hadn't been worried. The one time she wasn't and she should have been. (He doesn't bother telling her that she hasn't shown worry about anything for a matter of months.) She didn't have a single premonition.

"I just came to meet you to tell you," she says, "because I couldn't wait to tell you. This idea I got when the woman was working on me. Then I saw you crawling. And I thought, *Oh my God*"

What idea?

"Oh that," she says. "Oh—well, I don't know what you'll think. I could tell you later. We gotta get your ankle fixed."

What idea?

Her idea is that the outfit Percy heard about doesn't exist. Percy heard some talk but not about some strangers getting a license to log the bush. What he heard was all about Roy himself

"Because that old Eliot Suter is all big talk. I know that family, his wife was Annie Poole's sister. He's going round blowing about the deal he got and added on to it quite a bit and first thing what have you? Ends up the River Inn for good measure and a hundred cords a day. Somebody drinking beer and listening in on somebody else drinking beer and there you are. And you have got a kind of a .contract—I mean you've got an agreement—"

"It may be stupid all right—" Roy says.

"I knew you'd say that but you think about it—"

"It may be stupid but it's the same idea I had myself about five minutes ago."

And this is so. This is what came to him when he was looking up at the buzzard.

"So there you are," Lea says, with a satisfied laugh. "Everything remotely connected with the inn, it just turns into some big story. Some big-money kind of a story."

That was it, he thinks. He was hearing about himself. All the ruction comes back to himself.

The bulldozer isn't coming. The men with the chain saws are not converging. The ash, the maple, the beech, the ironwood, the cherry, are all safe for him. For the time being, all safe.

Lea is out of breath with the effort of supporting him, but able to say, "Great minds think alike."

This is not the moment to mention the change in her. No more than you'd call your congratulations to somebody up on a ladder.

He has knocked his foot hoisting himself.—and partly being hoisted—into the passenger seat of the truck. He groans, and it's a different kind of groan than would come out of him if he was alone. It's not that he means to dramatize the pain, just that he takes this way of describing it to his wife.

Or even offering it to his wife. Because he knows that he isn't feeling quite the way he thought he would if her vitality came back to her. And the noise he makes could be to cover that lack, or excuse it. Of course it's natural that he'd feel a bit cautious, not knowing if this is for good, or just a flash in the pan.

But even if it is for good, even if it's all good there's something more. Some loss fogging up this gain. Some loss he'd be ashamed to admit to, if he had the energy.

The dark and the snow are too thick for him to see beyond the first trees. He's been in there before at this time, when the dark shuts down in early winter. But now he pays attention, he notices something about the bush that he thinks he has missed those other times. How tangled up in itself it is, how dense and secret. It's not a matter of one tree after another, it's all the trees together, aiding and abetting one another and weaving into one thing. A transformation, behind your back.

There's another name for the bush, and this name is stalking around in his mind, in and out of where he can almost grasp it. But not quite. It's a tall word that seems ominous but indifferent.

"I left the ax," he says mechanically. "I left the saw."

"So what if you did. We'll find somebody to go and get them."

"And there's the car too. Are you going to get out and drive that and let me take the truck?"

"Are you insane?"

Her voice is absentminded, because she is in the process of backing the truck into the turnaround. Slowly but not too slowly, bouncing in the ruts but keeping on the track. He is not used to the rearview mirrors from this angle, so he lowers the window and cranes around, getting the snow in his face. This is not just to see how she's doing but to clear to a certain extent the warm wooziness coming on him.

"Easy," he says. "That's it. Easy. Okay now. You're okay. You're okay."

While he is saying this she is saying something about the hospital.
“... get them to take a look at you. First things first.”

To his knowledge, she has never driven the truck before.

It's remarkable the way she manages it.

Forest. That's the word.

Not a strange word at all but one he has possibly never used. A formality about it that he would usually back away from.

“The Deserted Forest,” he says, as if that put the cap on something.