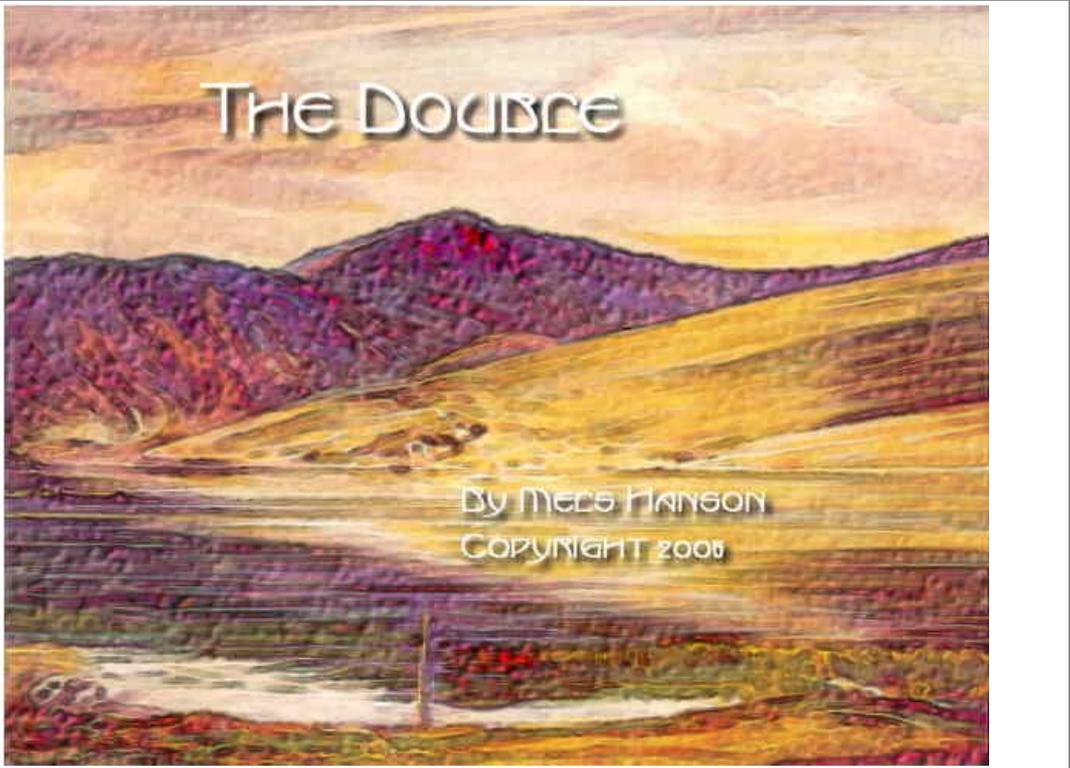


<a href="#">Home</a>	
<a href="#">Winter 2006 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Autumn 2005 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Summer 2005 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Spring 2005 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Autumn/Winter 2005 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Summer 2004 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Winter 2004 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Summer 2003 Issue</a>	
<a href="#">Editor's Note</a>	
<a href="#">Guidelines</a>	<p>The sky was black. I heard moving water.</p>
<a href="#">SNR's Writers</a>	<p>My hand found the canvas pack. I felt underneath the flap. The .38 was cold as a stone in the river.</p>
<a href="#">Mail</a>	<p>It was dark in every direction. There were no lights burning in the mountains.</p> <p>I looked for the dark line of my rod. I felt across the planks for the hump of the reel but it was gone.</p> <p>I got to my feet, leaned down for the pack, swinging it up and putting my arms through the straps. I looked back at what must have been the peaks, the dark wedges in the sky where no stars shone. It doesn't matter, I thought, and started back across the bridge.</p> <p>It was easy to lie on your bunk and make plans. I should've known the mountains would be full of people. Again I saw the man and woman dressed in Western gear, riding horses across the bridge.</p> <p>I should have shot them both.</p> <p>They were in Three Rivers by now, having drinks over dinner, their horses eating hay in the stable of the dude ranch. They asked the white-coated waiter about the squad cars, then told him about the man they'd seen fishing.</p> <p>In my dream on the bridge, the two riders had been Neal and Doris in disguise, they'd doubled back after crossing the stream, lifted me into the creek, carefully, so I wouldn't wake--</p> <p>Last night I had replayed it all again, my life with Neal and Doris, played it and played it, trying to know what to do next as the gist of Neal's letter burned in</p>

bright words. All night I looked out the window matting at the stars, hearing Johnson snoring on the bunk below me.

The lights had come on and I still hadn't decided. I dressed, waiting with Johnson until the door slid back. I moved with the others down the yellow-lit corridor to the mess and tried to eat. Then they led us out into the field.

". . . Peters, Pope, Quintana, Smeds, Stack . . . ."

Baxter called Neal's name and I stepped from the line, grabbing a folded canvas bag from the pile.

I picked the first half-hour in my row, reaching for the cotton bolls that sat like soft fist-sized baseballs and dropping them into the long sack like an empty cocoon I dragged down the narrow furrow.

In my head, I debated as I glanced across at the others working, the straps of the cotton sacks like slanted sashes across their chests, puffs of smoke coming from their mouths in the chill air.

The sun was almost up. The peaks of the Sierras were no longer rosy but jagged, back-lit by yellow light.

I turned and saw Baxter bring the walkie-talkie to his mouth. He looked back once at the field, then went into the portable toilet.

I let the strap fall from my shoulder and started running down the furrow, throwing off my soaked gloves. The stalks cut at my shirt and the cuffs and pockets of my pants but I kept my arms working above the sharp bolls. I heard the clutching of my breath and the dry brush catching and scraping past my knees.

"Go Neal! Yeah, man, run!" Johnson yelled.

I felt a rifle sighting on my back but Baxter didn't fire. Something flashed at the corner of my eye, I thought Neal ran beside me in his black suit, urging me on. I nearly fell when a quail flew up, exploding from the cotton, wings in my face.

I ran out of the cotton onto the paved road.

"There she'll be, just waiting."

The blue Plymouth was parked along the shoulder. I looked across the road, expecting Neal to walk out of the orchard, then ran for the car.

My boots and pack lay on the seat, next to the canteen and metal rod case and the cap.

I found the key above the visor, pinned to a note: "See you soon. Just like we planned." The engine hit, coughed, then fired.

The white gas needle swung over to full.

"12 midnight, Vern's Landing. Morro Bay," Neal's letter had said.

I headed east toward the mountains, away from the coast, my eyes moving back and forth between the road and the mirror, peeled for police, or a face like my

own behind the steering wheel of a trailing car. One time Neal sat beside me, his black-sleeved arm resting out the open window.

"All my fault."

I took the back roads past vineyards and plum orchards, until the land got rocky and orange groves started. I could see the brown grass on the dry hills and looked for a place to drop the car. I passed Sultana and the old copper-roofed Armenian church.

I turned down a dirt road along a full ditch lined with yellow sunflowers. I drove a quarter mile, past a grove of olives, then through a field of tall corn and pulled up into the empty barn.

A white owl batted about the rafters, then flew out an open hatch. The walls looked like x-rays with the sun shining at the knotholes and between the weathered planks. Long strings of light fell at a slant across the car.

I opened the pack's flap and saw the Smith and Wesson .38 Police Special like a snake in a nest. I felt its oiled weight, the bulge of the loaded cylinder. It was like Neal was saying, "Now it's even--now it's you or me."

I changed clothes, then wedged the big door shut with a stick.

In khakis and a flannel shirt and the boots, wearing a blue Dodgers cap, I walked through pomegranate orchards, orange and lemon groves, rows of avocados, and past wind machines, big airplane engines with propellers set on towers. I kept the revolver in my hand, then slipped it into my belt. The gun rubbed my thigh and I stopped and stuck it in the pack.

I kept moving, every 40 yards looking back over my shoulder to see if Neal was behind me. I stayed back in the trees watching for cars where the roads cut the groves.

I came out into a clearing, then climbed a wire fence and hiked up a hill of yellow grass. White-faced cows lay scattered across it. Their big eyes watched me as I remembered Neal, wondered what his plan was. I made the ridge.

The Kaweah was a fast, boulder-strewn river, its granite stones white and its million ripples shining like gold fish scales. It used to flood every year, before the dam went in and formed the lake. Fishermen had drowned in the Kaweah, slipping and hitting their heads. The river looked like a man in chain armor stretched full length, reaching with his arms.

On the far bank, something glinted, shop windows catching light. It was Three Rivers.

I turned east, moving fast along the crest above the canyon. The water sloshed in the canteen at my hip.

"A whole case on ice."

I stopped and unhooked the canteen, unscrewing the cap. I smelled it, then took a drink. I had to save it, to earn each drink. I was going up above Sequoia past the tree line, across the Divide, then down into Nevada. That's what I'd worked out in the barn, holding Neal's gun. The water had to last between creeks and lakes. I

bore north, along a converging ridge away from the river gorge.

I looked down the eastern slope of dry grass, into a flat green meadow with a stream running through it. I started fast down the hill toward the water.

The air was cooler near the wide, quick stream. I knelt on the log bridge and cupped my hand and drank. I dumped the canteen and refilled it. There was a shadow across the water. It was short, almost flat.

"I love you, Buddy."

I jerked my arm and the shadow moved with me. I stood up.

A light winked off the hill, two riders heading down the granite knoll, toward the stand of pines that bordered the meadow.

They were too far to see if they wore the high-domed hats of park rangers or the Western hats of sheriff's deputies.

I started to climb under the bridge.

But maybe they'd already seen me too. I pulled off the pack, reached in for the gun and stuck it in my belt, then lifted the aluminum pipe.

I unscrewed the metal cap, dumping the felt sock out onto the bridge. I fitted the three lengths together, then attached the reel, threading the yellow plastic line, tying the coiled leader to the end. From the cork handle I pulled the hook and tied it to the leader. I crouched on the bridge, watching the edge of the pines, feeling the gun's weight against my stomach.

Through the nearest pines, I saw the flash of checkered shirts, a man and woman on horses. The splintered light picked out a bright hat brim, silver buckle, the shine of a horse's white flank.

I stood up, bringing back the rod and flicking the line out into the water as the riders came out of the trees. They crossed the meadow and started down to the stream, the woman in front on the brown horse.

I couldn't see their faces under the wide hats. I tried to watch the way they held themselves.

Hooves hit the wood planks.

"Afternoon," I said, looking up, covering the gun butt with my hand.

The woman nodded. She wore dark glasses and had long auburn hair.

She was Doris' age, but her mouth was done up with orange lipstick. I could smell her perfume above the sweaty horse. I could see her breasts push against her red-checkered blouse. I'd loved Doris and she'd ruined me.

I looked back at the water, at my shadow beside the approaching shadow of the white horse, waiting.

I gripped the gun, cocking the hammer, as the white horse passed at my shoulder.

I wanted it to be Neal, to blow his guts out so they'd splatter across the bridge. I swiveled, staring him square in the face.

The man had a mustache and a beak nose, a round band-aid on his cheek. Blue eyes. There was red wiry hair at the edge of the gray stetson. Riding slacks. New boots.

I looked back at the water. I let the hook dance up and flutter with light before I dipped the rod again. I breathed deep, smelling the woman's perfume.

I stood holding the rod, until they'd crossed the bridge and started up the hill. I sat down and laid the rod on its side. I stuck the gun back into the pack.

I lay back with my arms under my head. I closed my eyes, thinking about

Doris, about that night in the ferns by the lake, the song she sang. But then the stream set up a rhythm. I could hear words under the hiss

of the water moving against the log piers.

Neal Neal Neal . . . .

Hands on hips, vest riding up, Neal would say, "How come you didn't meet us at the coast?"

Coming closer, he'd say, "No problem. The rest is downhill."

"You thirsty?" Neal asked. "Guess who's waiting in the car?"

I put an arm across my face.

When I woke up it was dark, the rod was gone.

I'd knocked it over in my sleep, or a trout had come down, seen the shining hook and taken it, rod and all--

I should've stayed down in the foothills with the oaks and digger pines, the wild oats and foxtails, tarantulas and rattlers sleeping under stones.

Ground squirrels lived there. Beechi beechi beechi was their scientific name, I remembered that from a safety film at the honor farm. They had fleas that carried bubonic plague. Not many people died of it, though, one or two every couple of years.

In the foothills I could find a line shack by a spring, lay in supplies, shoot a deer and dry the meat for winter.

I concentrated on walking fast, marching. I had a bad headache. Maybe Neal had put something in the canteen.

I heard an owl and remembered the white owl in the barn near Sultana.

The air felt thicker and warmer. From a crest I could see the glow of Fresno, and the dimmer shine of Reedley and Parlier in between. I was afraid the sky would start to roar, fill with helicopters, but it stayed black, only a plane crossing far

away.

Now my head didn't hurt. It was better away from the oaks with their branches like nets.

East of Laton, 20 years ago, I'd looked back at the wrecked Ford, at the Chevy pickup burning in the cut hay field--then ahead, my face close to the black steel mesh, past the hats of the two cops, through the windshield spattered with alfalfa moths.

"Don't worry, Neal. We're nearly there."

The sky had jumped, cinching tight in a hard, bright wheel of stars. Orion was the spider at the center of the shining web.

In Hanford, the lab matched blood, prints, teeth, while I stared for a week out the dark bars.

After that, the stars were always a trap--

But tonight there wasn't any web. Orion was a kite with a long tail almost touching the ground. Or a shimmering, swimming fish.

The night was open like a door, just breathing was like drinking. I felt bad I hadn't always been right here, that even for a second I'd been somewhere else.

Not even for a second? The week in the house on the lake, when I fished each morning for silver salmon?

It was fall, I was out on parole, after six years for Manslaughter One. I couldn't get a job, no one was hiring, not even farm work. The raisin harvest was over and pruning wouldn't start until December, after frost.

I watched the tall crane with the electric magnet swing in the scrap yard beyond the rusty steel fence. I sat under the Malaga overpass, where the trains went under and cut into Fresno--

That's where Neal found me, the blue Cadillac honking, Neal's arm waving from the window as he drove up along the tracks.

"You got food?"

"I've been eating."

"Let me buy you a meal."

I was hungry.

At a steakhouse in Madera I ate my fill, Neal waving to the waitress to keep the food coming.

I ate a lettuce and tomato salad with a heap of thousand island dressing, a bowl of broccoli-cheese soup, four hot dinner rolls, two thick rare New York steaks and two baked potatoes with butter and sour cream, and a serving of creamed corn, then drank five icy beers and had coffee and cream with apple pie a la mode.

"They're twins," the waitress explained to the other tables. "The one on the right just got back from Korea."

In the car Neal talked and talked about how I'd saved his skin, that night out by Laton, when he'd left me stranded and the police had picked me up in the clipped alfalfa by the burning truck. He wasn't a shit. I'd see, when I met Doris. To know Doris was to love her.

Neal had rented a big cabin on the shore of Strawberry Lake, up above Sonora on the way to Donner Pass. The back door led to the lake and the front door opened on a grove of incense cedars.

Neal had an outfit for me, rod and reel, creel, pack, Redwing boots. In the mornings I got up early to catch fish for breakfast. Neal didn't leave the cabin in daylight, he was allergic to the sun, he'd got that way in the tropics.

In the afternoons we drank beer, Carling Black Label, and listened to the Series on the radio. Neal had bought us each a cap. He was for the Yankees and I was for the Dodgers.

It began to seem all right--I had done time, Neal's time, but Neal had saved my neck, twice--the night the stranger in the Chevy pickup had fired the automatic rifle and I'd rammed the walnut tree, and now, when I was down on my luck.

We'd catch each other staring, trying to find something different. Neal kept telling me about the old movie he'd rented--Roy Rogers played two roles, Jesse James and the sheriff. They met in a line shack during the shoot-out and the sheriff let Jesse get away.

It was eerie, he said, to see Roy play an outlaw. When he drank too much, Neal would get mean, he'd mimic me.

"What's the score?"

"What's the score?"

"Doris?"

"Doris?"

Neal grabbed my chin, holding my cheek hard against his, so we looked like one face pressed to a mirror.

"Tell me, is this guy handsome or what?"

But Doris knew, she could tell us apart. Three nights later, while Neal read in front of the fire, we walked down

to the lake.

Neal said to go ahead, he wanted to finish the story, find out who the murderer was.

It was all like slow motion, like a movie running over again, it had already happened. I could hear water lapping and smelled pine smoke.

Halfway to the water, we brushed hands, then kissed.

She led me quickly toward some ferns.

Afterward she threw back her head. She ran her fingers through her close-cropped hair that was silver in the moonlight.

She said she didn't know how long she could take it.

She couldn't catch her breath, her throat closed when Neal came near her.

I asked her how Neal had first got hold of her.

She'd been a young schoolteacher in Madera and was featured one night on the local TV news, a story about Public Schools' Week. Neal had her name, that Sunday he showed up at her house just after breakfast--

He held something over her, something that could harm people close to her if she tried to run.

"We're not so different," I said.

"Who?" she said, sitting up, staring at me. "You and Neal?"

"You and me," I said.

"No, we're just alike." She dropped her head, closing her eyes. "We're like moons to his evil sun."

She said she was sorry, about the night of the shooting near Laton, when she and Neal had left me in the wrecked car against the walnut tree.

Neal called all the shots. There was nothing she could do. She'd wanted to write but Neal had friends in Folsom, Neal'd find out and make it hard on me. Her too. And on--

She started to cry.

"It's all right," I said, holding her close, breathing in her sweetness above the ferns. "We're together now."

She nodded against my shoulder. We agreed to make a break, when the time was right. We had to plan it close, there were the other people Neal could hurt. We dressed and I put my arm around her as we looked at the moon on the water before we started back to the cabin.

She hummed a sad tune.

"The water is wide/ And I cannot cross o'er . . . ."

I watched the outline of her cheek against the stars as she began to sing in the dark.

"Send me a boat . . . ."

I kissed her again, gripping her tight when she trembled.

I lay in my bed in the dark house, remembering her scent among the ferns.

When I opened my eyes I knew right away, before I went through the rooms. The wallet on my night stand was green alligator.

I opened the closet and my things were gone, pack and coat, boots, fishing rod. Neal's fancy Italian suits and shirts hung from the pole.

And Neal's Brazilian shoes, three pairs lined up on the cedar floor. The police wouldn't believe the shoes wouldn't fit.

They'd called over the loudspeaker, then rushed the house.

Neal had held up Eudora's, the expensive inn at the end of the lake. Some millionaire's daughter from L.A. was on her honeymoon, had her jewels in the safe.

The cops got rough when they couldn't find the score. The D.A. said he'd throw away the key, I'd take a hard fall.

They never found the diamonds and I got ten-to-20, 12 at Quentin, the last two on good behavior at the honor farm.

A shooting star chased itself down the sky, then two together like rain. The oaks and grass flashed up and went dark. I felt sleepy breathing the musky smell of the weeds. They had sharp seeds like the ends of arrows.

I wished I could sleep while I walked. I stopped and unhooked the canteen and drank, then splashed water on my face. I went another 50 yards, then fell to one knee when something dark and flat rose from the top of the hill.

The shape was regular, too sharp-lined for a rock. I hurried through the leafless buckeye and redbud toward the black trunk of an oak. It was a shack. High white grass grew with no break against the walls. No garage, jeep, corral, no horses staked in the yard. Windows reflected silver light.

I heard a rattle that began, sped up, then stopped just before it became constant. I reached back and took the gun from the pack. I held the gun out chest-high as I moved toward the shack.

One of the windows was half broken. There was a dark bulk on the floor. I waited for it to move, for a light to flash, Neal and Doris to jump up like jack-in-the-boxes.

Nothing happened. I struck a match and held it up.

It was a mattress, newspapers on the floor. The match burned out. The rattle began. I struck another.

Bright eyes. A pack rat held a bit of foil in its claws.

I heard the rat running across the floor as I went around to the steps.

An old stove and a wooden sink with a hand pump. I stepped past the mattress to

the screen porch. There was the thin shadow of a folding chair. I set the gun on the floor, then took off the pack and sat down.

I pulled out a candy bar and a strip of jerky from the pack. Neal had given me water and food. The jerky tasted like oiled metal from the gun. The oaks looked dark and far off through the torn wire screen. I took a drink from the canteen.

I picked up the gun and took the pack in by the mattress. I lit a matchThe floor was covered with blown sand and strewn with chewed bits of newspaper. I kicked the mattress, then lay down on it.

Neal and Doris were the ones at the bridge. When I fell asleep they doubled back with the car I had hidden in the barn where the white owl was. They put me in the trunk, then drove north, overland, across the hills.

Neal had a stone, star-shaped mansion in San Francisco, in the exact center of Golden Gate Park. He kept me locked in the cellar, except when people came. I met them, while Neal watched on a hidden camera, his finger on a red button that would fire a machine gun concealed in the wall.

Then a doctor changed Neal's face and Neal turned me in.

They kept the Rock open for me. I was alone, the last prisoner.

I tunneled and tunneled, broke out and ran into the surf and started swimming.

The moon made the water like milk, satiny where my hands cut the surface.

At the top of each swell I could see the City all lit up.

But it was cold, now the current was stronger, it was pulling me out from Alcatraz toward the Bridge.

The water seemed heavier, like mercury. Then I saw a boat coming toward me, one person rowing hard, a woman or man, I couldn't tell. The boat left a white wake. Once, the rower stopped and waved a hand, then bent to the oars and rowed again.

"The water is wide . . . ."

I tried to tread the heavy water as the rower worked the oars, singing. In the moonlight her hair glinted silver, but the distance between us stayed the same . . . .

It was cold when I came up out of sleep. They had forgotten to light the boiler. The cotton would be soggy from the heavy dew. I waited for Johnson to say, "Neal? You awake?"

Then I saw it was the shack, the cold air came in through the open half of the broken window. Sun hit the sharp edge.

A scrub jay screeched and I closed my eyes as the rearview mirror danced with headlights east of Laton--

I steered the '75 Ford through the summer Valley night, past dark blocks of Thompson Seedless vineyards and orchards of plums and Elberta peaches, the

stars dusty and close and the air cool as it blew past my arm at the open window.

They were irrigating some of the fields, and down aisles of trees long furrows of water flashed by in quick multiple V's.

I was going east out Elkhorn from Caruthers, from seeing Cathy Gilbert. I'd taken her to eat at the Sportsman's Club in Hanford, then gone for a drive and we'd parked along the Kings River and talked, then made love.

I could smell her tart scent in the car, the way her brown hair had smelled and her lips tasted, sharply sweet, like the willows by the river bank. A line of walnut trees with whitewashed trunks ticked by.

Then a yellow light swept the dashboard and mirror.

The truck had run up without headlights, right on my bumper.

I started to hit the gas, to try to out-race it, then the lights shot across the car at an angle.

The Chevy pickup drew even.

"Neal!" a man shouted, lifting a dark pipe that blew red fire.

I ducked, crimping the wheel as the bullets swarmed like metal wasps through the window and door.

I felt a jolt and saw a dark shape crashing down.

I heard gunfire again, but muffled, farther away.

This time it wasn't a machine gun but five or six single, spaced shots.

Then a blast, an explosion that ripped the air and rocked the car. The sky lit up yellow and pink above the leafless branch where the windshield had been.

I'd hit my forehead but when I touched my face I didn't feel anything wet. Past the limb I saw the Chevy pickup burning in the field of cut alfalfa.

Lit up by the flames, a black Ford like my own circled the wreck. Fire reflected across the fenders and chrome. It bounced onto the road, driving back toward me with its lights off.

The car stopped, its window down.

I saw the driver's face.

I must have been killed by the shots. I couldn't feel them anymore. I thought I was dead, that I'd split off and could see my body.

"You see that?" the man said. It was like looking into a mirror, except my reflection wore different

clothes.

"Oh." The woman was young, with short blonde hair.

"It was lucky we came along when we did."

The man kept staring. He held a black .45 automatic. Now the girl turned away.

He leaned out the window, I thought he was going to fire, that I was going to shoot myself.

"In case their friends show up." His hand dropped the gun in my lap.

I saw the flash of Doris' white face as the tires squealed. Neal had his head turned, looking back at me.

Then the Ford disappeared without taillights, like a black planet hurtling silently through the night, as somewhere a siren began . . . .

I opened my eyes. I lay there as the shack filled with sun.

I'd never figured out how Neal had set it up, got the pickup to follow my black Ford as he followed the pickup in his. At the lake, I'd never asked Neal about it. He must've seen me somewhere, planned it all out.

The mattress smelled stale and sweet, like old cotton sacks. Something glinted and ran across the newspapers on the floor.

TWO KILLED IN ROLLOVER

RAISIN PRICE UNSTABLE

The pack rat with its foil--

The spot of light jerked back and forth.

I got up and stepped to the window.

Light jumped from a pair of binoculars. I saw brown uniforms scattered in the oaks down the hill. I hadn't heard any dogs.

Maybe the man and woman at the bridge had called the cops.

I turned to grab the gun.

It wasn't on the floor by the mattress.

Something clicked, like the pack rat's rattle.

"Lose your rod?"

Neal held the gun, resting his arms on the windowsill.

"Give it to me," I said. "Or shoot."

"Give it to me. Or shoot."

Neal grinned, then climbed through the window, quick, so I couldn't rush him.

"Long time no see."

I looked away.

"You going to rub it in?" Neal lowered the gun, undoing his tie with one hand.  
"Hurry--give me your clothes."

Neal had the mole halfway up his cheek but his face sagged from the jawHis upper lip was pasty.

Neal held out his coat.

"I'm taking this rap."

"What's the angle?" I stood back. Neal was like Hitler.

"Angle? With the cops down the hill?" Neal nodded. "Toss me the cap."

I watched Neal unbutton his shirt.

"Hurry," he hissed, raising the gun.

I undressed to my shorts, then put on Neal's clothes as fast as he threw them at me.

"Here--"

Neal fixed my collar, then patted my cheek.

"You look good." Neal stepped back. "How 'bout me?"

Neal wore the cap's bill pulled low. He held himself straight with the canteen on his hip. He was wearing cowboy boots, new ones.

Spot bandage for the mole. Mustache. Blue contacts. False nose, red wig It was Neal and Doris at the bridge. That's what Neal meant, about losing the rod.

Neal moved toward me and I flinched, raising my hands.

Neal hugged me, gripping my shoulder.

"Huh?" Neal whispered in my ear. "I didn't let you down."

Now Neal was weepy, smelling of the bourbon he'd been drinking.

"Go on," Neal said, pushing me away. "Run like hell."

I started toward the door.

"No," he said. "You want to get caught?"

I turned toward the back window, then waited.

"How'd you find me?"

"Beeper. In the pack. This time maybe you can get across the bridge."

I hesitated, watching Neal's face.

"I rode a white horse, but my hat got a little dirty, didn't it, friend?"

There was a twitch under Neal's eye.

"Go on now." He lifted a hand toward me, then let it drop. "I had my run."

Something clicked again.

"You going?"

Neal had the gun up, cocked. His eyes looked black and empty as the muzzle of the gun.

I climbed up on the windowsill and jumped.

I hurried forward through the foxtails. Once I looked back and Neal was crouched at the other window. He looked down the hill where the cops were waiting.

In Neal's suit and my own boots I went down the other side of the crest I kept expecting shots. I couldn't make out the words, just the loudspeaker's blare, shouting for Neal to come out.

Maybe Neal had cancer, some terminal disease. Maybe he'd gone around the bend, got some weird religion. Maybe he didn't care about me, maybe he was trying to save himself.

It didn't add up--

A helicopter with a state seal flew low over my head. I felt naked in Neal's suit without my cap, my pack and canteen, but I kept moving and the helicopter didn't turn around.

I topped a rise and down below was a fence beside a road. I climbed down and started along the gravel shoulder. A line of white, unmarked government cars rushed by without stopping, followed by a TV van.

When a beat-up ranch truck came the other way, I held out my thumb.

"What's all the damn commotion?"

The old man wore a stained straw hat and a blue bandanna at the open neck of his long-underwear shirt.

"I don't know." I kept my face turned, toward the metal railing and the two brown, white-faced cows that stood in back.

"Well, climb in."

Everything looked different--the grass and oaks and fenceposts, the blue reservoir

the Kaweah emptied into. I was finally free of Neal. I wasn't Neal anymore.

The rancher introduced himself, offering his gnarled hand. I turned and gripped it, then told him mine.

He was going as far as the Harris feed lot near Coalinga. I thanked him but said I was headed in another direction.

At Woodlake I got out.

I looked in Neal's wallet. There was some money, about \$30, and a license with a phony name. And pictures of Doris, some of her nude. For a second, I looked at them.

On the road down the mountain, an ambulance had shot by, siren on and lights flashing. I wondered if Neal was still live. I used to think I'd know if he died--the way I'd thought I could sense when Neal and Doris made love

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?

The poster was taped to the glass door. Behind me a big white car came up the street. It looked suspicious.

I went into the grocery.

The man behind the counter nodded.

I turned my head, starting down an aisle.

"The Braves are going with the lefty . . . ." The radio was on.

"You been following the Series?"

The grocer called over the shelves.

"Not too close."

I looked at a row of pickle jars, at the picture on a cereal box of a man hitting a ball with a bat, then again toward the front window. The white car went by.

"You see the Yankees the other night?"

"I missed it." I headed down the aisle toward the door.

"Twelve innings."

"The state of California will not rest until this vicious, unspeakable animal is brought to justice--"

Now a bulletin, a breathless firsthand report from the scene, interrupted the Series game. The governor finished his angry threat, then the reporter gave a brief summary as events continued to unfold--

The chief of the California State Police had called over the loudspeaker, assuring Stark that everything was all right. The governor was on the way, by helicopter,

he'd arrive in 20 minutes, to grant the pardon and personally present a generous settlement check--

But how could you pay a person for the years of his life? the reporter wondered. How much suffering could one mortal man endure, without breaking?

"I'm innocent! Innocent, I tell you!"

The awful words shouted half an hour ago still echoed in the reporter's ears. The victim had charged from the shack, waving his arms, screaming--

A sheriff's deputy had opened up, sure Stark was going to fire the revolver--

The amazing story, which had overshadowed the World Series and the President's trip to Cuba and for the last 36 hours gained the rapt attention of a galvanized nation, had culminated, regrettably, in a bloody climax, a tragic ending worthy of ancient Greek drama--

"Again, Lane Stark, the innocent convict with a criminal's face, shot dead in the foothills east of Three Rivers, California."

I went down the aisle.

"They had him in jail for years."

The grocer shook his head from behind the counter.

"Stark had quit claiming he wasn't Stack."

I stood with my face turned to the brick wall, just outside the door. Both ways the street was clear.

I was glad Neal was dead, even if now I'd always be Neal, who'd fooled the courts and the state penal system, shamed the governor and outraged most of the country.

Neal'd made a mistake, running from the shack, playing the maddened, innocent victim--

He'd put one brush stroke too many on his masterpiece.

Or maybe it had come out perfect. Whatever it was he was trying to do--

I started to cross the street, toward an olive grove where the country started. Then I saw the unmarked car.

I pretended to look through the window of a furniture store, watching the street reflected in the glass.

Halfway by, the white car squealed its tires, swerved close to the curb I waited for the shout, ready to lift my hands.

Hell, I'd reach for a gun, make them shoot me in the back.

"You want to try for the coast?"

I'd seen her yesterday, at the bridge, for the first time in 14 years.

Her hair was blonde and short again, she wore a white, starched blouse, no orange lipstick. No make-up.

"What are the odds?" I said.

She pulled down the visor, then slipped off her dark glasses.

One eye was black. There was a dark bruise on her neck under her jaw. It looked like a handprint.

"One in 99, if we're lucky."

She replaced the glasses, then looked up the street. She smiled sadly for a second.

"The water is wide."

She spoke the words this time.

"Those sound like good odds," I said.

Now, at last, everything was simple.

I stepped from the curb, got in and slammed the door as she hit the pedal and the front end of the Ford lifted up.

She said she hadn't known Neal was going to steal the diamonds at the inn at Strawberry Lake, that she'd meant it when she'd made love to me in the ferns.

In her life, I was the only the second man she'd made love with. She didn't count Neal.

"What'd he have on you?" I asked as she drove.

"My sister and her kids." She bit her lip. "He was going to set fire to the house. At night, while they slept."

"Christ."

She told me she and Neal had just pulled a bank job in Fresno, Neal had looked right into the camera, daring the cops to catch him.

I asked her if Neal had planned to take my place and become rich and famous and admired while the cops chased us.

She nodded, but she didn't think Neal's death was accidental.

"Neal had fixed it, so we'd always have to run." She brushed a strand of blonde hair from her forehead and took a breath. "At least we're not alone--"

I watched her a minute, then moved over on the seat.

I put my hand on her shoulder, careful of her neck. She trembled but didn't flinch and I leaned close and kissed her mouth, softly, until she pulled away.

"You'll make us wreck--"

I sat back in the seat, seeing the country go by, telling her the idea I'd worked out the last night in my cell, while Johnson slept and I'd tried to decide to make the break.

I can't tell you much, about the money from Neal's bank heist, the seaplane, and how we slipped out of the country--already I've written too much, and anyway, Doris will cross it out if I say anymore.

I'll just say that where we are we're happy, that Lane Stark is alive, that Lane Stark and Doris Flanders got free of Neal Stack and the law, that somehow Neal Stack is the law.

"Lane," she said, "Lane," saying it again, looking forward at the road. She smiled. "I always thought your face fit your name."

I watched for cops, Doris doing 70, until we blew a tire west of Buttonwillow. We nearly hit a big tree, not a walnut but an elm.

I got the spare from the trunk and quickly changed the tire.

Then I drove.

**Nels Hanson** grew up on a family farm south of Fresno in California's San Joaquin Valley and has worked as a small farmer, a teacher, and a tutor for children and adults with dyslexia and other learning disabilities. He graduated from UC Santa Cruz and the U of Montana and his fiction won the Joseph D. Phelan Award from the San Francisco Foundation and an honorable mention in its Joseph Henry Jackson competition. His stories have appeared in the *Antioch Review*, *Texas Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Long Story*, *Southeast Review*, *South Dakota Review* and other literary journals. He has recently completed a novel set in Oregon and Montana and continues to live in San Luis Obispo, California, where he and his wife Vicki operate an editing service.

**Copyright 2006, Nels Hanson.** This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.