

CHAPTER I

## WARM UP

### A Surreal Ride



“I’m a vegetarian, you know,” Jon announced.

“You are not. They aren’t even mammals.”

“They have faces.”

“So you think they have souls?”

The creatures were so tiny we at first mistook them for spiders. Not even spiders, just a shimmer, a trick of light.

We curled into the cocoon of wet forest, cedar, and maple, thigh-high ferns. There was no reverberation of sound here. The whisp of tires on the wet backroad, ca-chink of a gear change, my laughter and Jon’s constant blather – nothing bounced back. Rather, we simply propelled ourselves into the next moment, past the next mile, through broken light, over rippled pavement. The air smelled like ice, the threat of winter. The leaves had not yet begun to change, and wouldn’t in any dramatic fashion. Not here in the North Cascades, so close to the Canadian border. Just a slow fade from green to lighter green, then yellow and ... they would fall. Nothing of great drama. Hardly the proclamation of a new season.

Beneath the glowering trees, Mosquito Lake Road disappeared into bracken and rotted cedar. A wooden post warned us to *YIELD*.

“Who puts a *YIELD* sign in the middle of the road?”

Jon was right. There was a *YIELD* sign planted in front of us. Ten miles in on a single-lane paved road, not a single intersection or home nearby, and someone had planted a *YIELD* sign.

Jon stopped.

"What's wrong with you?" I asked.

"A citizen has responsibilities. I obey the law."

I rolled up beside him and slid off the saddle.

"Do you see?" He pointed past the sign.

I did see, the faint shift of the road from west to east.

"Maybe I should have stayed away from the mushrooms," he said.

"You didn't tell me you had mushrooms. All I had were eggs and potatoes."

"In the navy. 1969. It was probably the beer more than the mushrooms. Portabella, I think."

"You don't experience hallucinations from eating Portabella mushrooms." I continued to look down the road.

"The road's moving."

"Maybe we're moving."

"It's all relative. Motion is relative," Jon said.

He stepped on his pedal and slid fifteen feet past the *YIELD* sign. "See? Relative."

I pulled alongside him. As far as we could see, the strip of pavement was crawling, bouncing, tilting, sliding. We both remounted and pedaled a few more strokes.

"At first I thought it was spiders," he said.

Ping. Ping. Ping. Ping. The road came alive, little masses of green creatures churned through my spokes, some luckier than others. The road *was* alive. No, not like some bad dream, but actually alive, green with stuff that moved. Not moss, or bouncing rain or scattering leaves, but frogs. A flood of frogs. Frogs?

"Frogs!" I screamed. Frogs everywhere, blanketing the road, hippety-hopping from one side to the other.

"You're awfully excitable today. Of course they're frogs," Jon said. "What did you expect? Just ride slow. Don't make any sudden movements. Ooh, you got one."

The frogs continued to pour from the forest. A river of them. We rode more carefully than we ever had. Jon refused to stop smiling. After more than a hundred yards, the creatures began to thin. The road tipped upward.

"Do you have a block plane?" Jon asked. The flow of his conversation was as normal as ever.

I knew Jon was about to offer me his block plane. Not because I'm perceptive, but because Jon was giving away things today. He was dying



and he needed to give stuff away. I already had a good plane my father had given me. But Jon's plane would be better, even if the handle was cracked.

"I could use a good block plane," I lied.

"You want mine?"

"Didn't I just say that?"

"This road makes no sense. It dead-ends on top of the ridge. But the bridges are backwards."

"How can a bridge be backwards?"

"The first one we crossed was dated 1949."

"So?"

"The last one said 1947. That means the road was built from the top down. That's stupid."

"No, that's Zen."

"That's what I said." He smiled.

Simplicity and banality. That was the beauty of the moment. There were frogs. And for the moment there was Jon, growing no closer to his death. Teasing me about my sincerity. In love with ironies. Allowing me to steal his block plane.

"I'm really not a vegetarian, you know. I just like frogs."

