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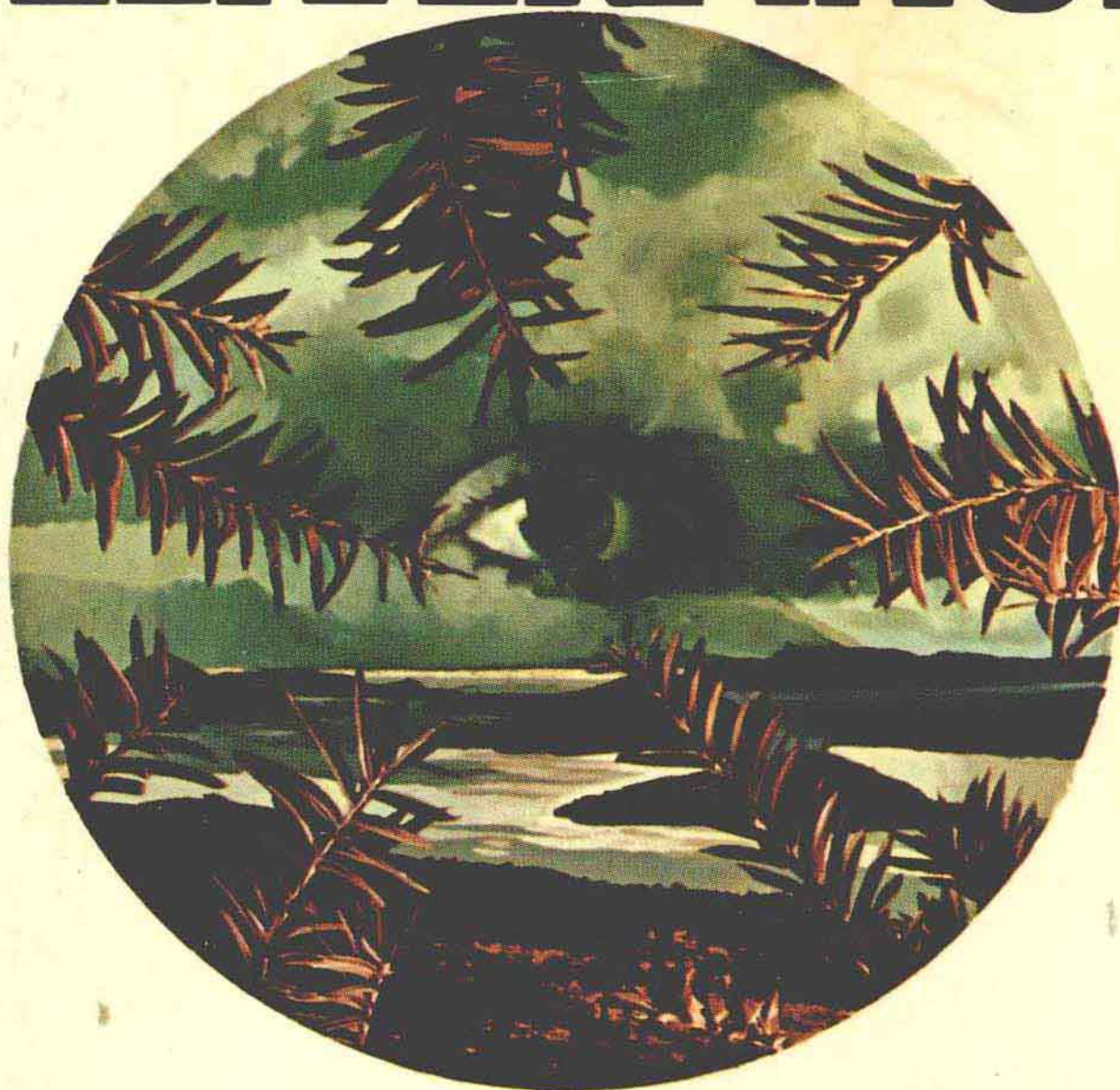
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A DELL BOOK

**To Edward L. King and
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Before

It unrolled slowly, forced to show its colors, curling and snapping back whenever one of us turned loose. The whole land was very tense until we put our four steins on its corners and laid the river out to run for us through the mountains 150 miles north. Lewis' hand took a pencil and marked out a small strong X in a place where some of the green bled away and the paper changed with high ground, and began to work downstream, northeast to southwest through the printed woods. I watched the hand rather than the location, for it seemed to have power over the terrain, and when it stopped for Lewis' voice to explain something, it was as though all streams everywhere quit running, hanging silently where they were to let the point be made. The pencil turned over and pretended to sketch in with the eraser an area that must have been around fifty miles long, through which the river hooked and cramped.

"When they take another survey and rework this map," Lewis said, "all this in here will be blue. The dam at Aintry has already been started, and when it's finished next spring the river will back up fast. This whole valley will be under water. But right now it's wild. And I *mean* wild; it looks like something up in Alaska. We really ought to go up there before the real estate people get hold of it and make it over into one of their heavens."

I leaned forward and concentrated down into the invisible shape he had drawn, trying to see the changes that would come, the nighttime rising of dammed water bringing a new lake up with its choice lots, its marinas and beer cans, and also trying to visualize the land as

Lewis said it was at that moment, unvisited and free. I breathed in and out once, consciously; my body, particularly the back and arms, felt ready for something like this. I looked around the bar and then back into the map, picking up the river where we would enter it. A little way to the southwest the paper blanched.

"Does this mean it's higher here?" I asked.

"Yes," Lewis said, looking quickly at me to see if I saw he was being tolerant.

Ah, he's going to turn this into something, I thought. A lesson. A moral. A life principle. A Way.

"It must run through a gorge or something" was all he said though. "But we can get through that in a day, easy. And the water should be good, in that part especially."

I didn't have much idea what good meant in the way of river water, but for it to seem good to Lewis it would have to meet some very definite standards. The way he went about things was strictly his own; that was mainly what he liked about doing them. He liked particularly to take some extremely specialized and difficult form of sport—usually one he could do by himself—and evolve a personal approach to it which he could then expound. I had been through this with him in flycasting, in archery and weight lifting and spelunking, in all of which he had developed complete mystiques. Now it was canoeing. I settled back and came out of the map.

Bobby Trippe was there, across from me. He had smooth thin hair and a high pink complexion. I knew him least well of the others at the table, but I liked him a good deal, even so. He was pleasantly cynical and gave me the impression that he shared some kind of understanding with me that neither of us was to take Lewis too seriously.

"They tell me that this is the kind of thing that gets hold of middle-class householders every once in a while," Bobby said. "But most of them just lie down till the feeling passes."

"And when most of them lie down they're at Woodlawn before they think about getting up," Lewis said.

"It's the old idea that you're going to get yourself in shape, one of these days. Just like you were when you were on the B-team in high school and had to do all those wind sprints. Some few people may jog, once in a while. But who runs sprints? Who goes down rivers?"

"Well, you've got a chance to go down one," Lewis said. "The chance is coming up this weekend, if you can get Friday off. Either Ed and I will go, or we all four can go. But you have to let me know right now, so I can get the other canoe."

I liked Lewis; I could feel myself getting caught up again in his capricious and tenacious enthusiasms that had already taken me bow-hunting and varmint-calling with him, and down into a small, miserably cold cave where there was one dead, crystalline frog. Lewis was the only man I knew who could do with his life exactly what he wanted to. He talked continuously of resettling in New Zealand or South Africa or Uruguay, but he had to be near the rental property he had inherited, and I didn't much think he would ever leave. But in his mind he was always leaving, always going somewhere, always doing something else. These techniques and mystiques had built up in him something that impressed me a good deal, even so. He was not only self-determined; he was determined. He was one of the best tournament archers in the state and, even at the age of thirty-eight or -nine, one of the strongest men I had ever shaken hands with. He lifted weights and shot arrows every day in a special kind of alternating rhythm and as a result was so steady that he could easily hold a sixty-pound bow at full draw for twenty seconds. I once saw him kill a quail with an aluminum target arrow at forty yards, the arrow diving into the back feathers at the last possible instant.

So I usually went with him whenever he asked me. I had a bow that he helped me pick out, and a few tags and odds of secondhand equipment, and it was enjoyable walking in the woods with Lewis, when the weather was good, as it usually is in our part of the South in hunting season. Because it took place in such pleasant country, and because of Lewis, I liked field archery—with its

faint promise of one day killing a deer—better than golf. But it was really Lewis. He was the only man I knew determined to get something out of life who had both the means and the will to do it, and it interested me to see how, as an experiment, this turned out.

I was not much on theories, myself. But I had a good feeling about this trip. After so much shooting at paper images of deer, it was exciting to think of encountering a real one.

“How, exactly, do we get to the river in the first place?” Drew Ballinger asked.

“There’s a little nothing town up here, just past the high ground,” Lewis said, “name of Oree. We can put in there and come out in Ainty a couple of days later. If we get on the water late Friday, we can be back here the middle of Sunday afternoon, maybe in time for the last half of the pro game on TV.”

“There’s one thing that bothers me,” Drew said. “We don’t really know what we’re getting into. There’s not one of us knows a damned thing about the woods, or about rivers. The last boat I was in was my father-in-law’s Chris-Craft, up on Lake Bodie. I can’t even row a boat straight, much less paddle my own or anybody else’s canoe. What business have I got up there in those mountains?”

“Listen,” Lewis said, knocking on the air with his foreknuckle, “you’ll be in more danger on the four-lane going home tonight than you’d ever be on the river. Somebody might jump the divider. Who knows?”

“I mean,” Bobby said, “the whole thing does seem kind of crazy.”

“All right,” Lewis said. “Let me demonstrate. What are you going to be doing this afternoon?”

“Well,” Bobby thought a minute. “Most likely I’ll see a couple of new people about mutual funds. I have to draw up some papers and get them notarized.”

“How about you, Drew?”

“See some more route salesmen. We’re making a cooler count to figure out who’s doing what, and where we’re falling short. We’re trying to find ways to up the cold-

bottle sales, the same as always. Sometimes they're up, sometimes they're down. Right now they're down."

"Ed?"

"Oh," I said. "Take some photographs for Kitts Textile Mills. Kitt'n Britches. Cute girl in our britches stroking her pussy. A real cat, you understand."

"Too bad," Lewis said, and grinned, although talk about sex was never something he seemed to enjoy. He had made his point without saying anything about the afternoon. He looked around the suburban bar and brought his hand under his chin, waiting for the other two to decide.

I thought that they probably wouldn't go. They were day-to-day happy enough; they were not bored in the way Lewis and I were bored, and Bobby, particularly, seemed to enjoy the life he was in. He came, I believe, from some other part of the South, maybe Louisiana, and since he had been around—since I had known him, anyway—had seemed to do well. He was very social and would not have been displeased if someone had called him a born salesman. He liked people, he said, and most of them liked him—some genuinely and some merely because he was a bachelor and a good dinner or party guest. He was always around. Everyplace I went I saw him, or caught a glimpse of him going by or leaving. If I was at a driving range or supermarket I would be sure to see him; when I thought beforehand I would see him, I would, and, if I didn't, I'd also see him. He was a pleasant surface human being, though I had heard him blow up at a party once and hadn't forgotten it. I still don't know what the cause was, but his face changed in a dreadful way, like the rage of a weak king. But that was only once.

Drew Ballinger was a straightforward quiet fellow. He was devoted to his family, particularly to his little boy Pope, who had some kind of risen hornlike blood blister on his forehead that his eyebrow grew out of and around in a way to make you realize the true horrors of biology. He worked as a sales supervisor for a big soft-drink company and he believed in it and the things it said it stood

for with his very soul. He kept a copy of the company history on his living room coffee table at home, and the only time I ever saw him get mad was over a rival and newer company's sales claims having to do with its drink's weight-reducing properties. "Goddamned liars," he had said. "They've got just as many calories as we have, and we can prove it."

But Lewis and I were different, and were different from each other. I had nothing like his drive, or his obsessions. Lewis wanted to be immortal. He had everything that life could give, and he couldn't make it work. And he couldn't bear to give it up or see age take it away from him, either, because in the meantime he might be able to find what it was he wanted, the thing that must be there, and that must be subject to the will. He was the kind of man who tries by any means—weight lifting, diet, exercise, self-help manuals from taxidermy to modern art—to hold on to his body and mind and improve them, to rise above time. And yet he was also the first to take a chance, as though the burden of his own laborious immortality were too heavy to bear, and he wanted to get out of it by means of an accident, or what would appear to others to be an accident. A year or two before, he had stumbled and crawled for three miles to get out of the woods and back to his car and then driven it home using a stick to work the gas because his right ankle was so painfully broken. I visited him in the hospital mainly because he had asked me to go to the woods with him and I hadn't been able to go, and I asked him how he felt. "It's luxury," he said. "For a while I don't have to lift weights, or work out on the bag."

I glanced over at him. He had a face like a hawk, but it was a special kind of hawk. Instead of the front of his head seeming to be made from top to bottom, his looked like it had been palm-molded into a long-nosed shape from the sides. He was clay red and sandy haired, with a whitish patch back up toward the crown of his head, where the other hair was darker.

"Well well," he said. "What about it?"

I was very glad I was going. While I thought about