Ira Hubbel was talking to his two attentive boys at the single pump of his Jenney station on the main street of Stockton Springs. They heard a car slowing down, but seeing it was Warren Root's new Chevy convertible, the two boys walked over to a stack of tires which, for a time, they kicked, glancing back at their father and Root. And then they sauntered closer to the car and stood gaping in their beaked baseball caps and greasy overalls like two birds, trying to hear.

'Just up from Bangor this minute,' Root was saying.

Ira looked into Root's reckless face from under the long visor of a faded green fisherman's cap on which a license was pinned. Ira's face was tanned, creased rather than wrinkled, and gave the impression of having been smoked and cured like a tobacco leaf. His alert eyes were a luminous blue and watched Root with the close curiosity of pity.

'Better check the water,' said Ira. He motioned to one of the boys, who heard. The boy got a large watering can and carried it to the front of the car. He hoisted the hood.

'Same old damn town,' said Root, looking across the main street. He shifted away from the steering wheel and made a right angle of his arms, one extended across the top of the front seat, the other along the door. He hooked his thumbs and began drumming emphatically with his fingers.

'Ain't Bangor.' Ira was squirting water in droplets from a Windex bottle onto the mud-speckled windshield.

'Leave that be, Ira. I'm going to wash the car soon's I get home.'

'Never mind, Chub.' Ira rubbed the windshield with a handful of squeaking chamois.

'Ain't Bangor is right,' said Root, shaking his head. 'Why they got a ritzy new hotel opened up there, with two or three bars and a big ballroom and what all. People come all the way down from Portland to have a gander at it.'

Ira was silent, busy with the windshield. Then he said, 'That so.'

'Picked me up some chicken wire at the feed store,' said Root.

‘Trunk wired down good?’

‘Not too good. But it didn’t flap open.’

‘That’s a blessing,’ said Ira. He looked at the pump. ‘You wanted it full up?’

‘I guess.’

‘It’s full up now,’ said Ira. ‘That’s five sixty.’

Root gave Ira a ten-dollar bill.

‘Expected you yesterday,’ said Ira, taking the bill.

‘Gave myself an extra day,’ said Root. In reflection, he pulled on his nose.

‘Myron says you wasn’t at the boarding house,’ Ira said politely.

‘Now how does Myron know that?’

‘Tried to call you up last night. They said you wasn’t there.’

‘Moved to the new one on Thursday,’ said Root. ‘The hotel I was telling you about. The boys that carry your bags got these funny little suits and say yes sir. I got sick of that Jesus boarding house.’

‘Myron didn’t know.’

‘No, Myron didn’t know,’ said Root. ‘And I’ll tell you something else. Lavinia didn’t know neither.’ Root grinned.

Ira looked at the ground, then said softly, ‘I’ll get your change.’

‘Stoved-in front,’ said Hubbel’s boy, slamming down the hood.

‘Skunk,’ said Root. He measured with his hands. ‘’Bout yay big. I stove him!’

Root was outside the car, stretching, examining the dent on the grill, when Ira came back with the change. Ira counted it into Root’s hand, pressing the coins, flattening the bills, saying, ‘Five sixty. And forty is six, and one is seven, and two is nine –’

‘But I’ll tell you something,’ said Root, closing his hand on the money, ‘they still haven’t learned to shoot pool in Bangor, and that’s the God’s truth. How about a quick game?’ Root rubbed his palms and nodded at the drugstore, where there was a pool

table.

‘Maybe later,’ said Ira.

‘I’m all stiff with the driving,’ said Root. ‘Come on, Ira.’

‘Got to watch the station,’ said Ira.

‘You got your two boys to watch your Christly gas station, Ira. Now get over and shoot a game with me.’

Ira hitched up his pants and followed Root across the street.

A game was in progress, but the two players looked up and backed away from the table when Root and Ira entered the store. A man in an apron behind the soda fountain greeted Root solemnly.

‘Hi, Wayne,’ said Root to the man in the apron. To the players he said, ‘You boys should be in school.’

The boys put down their cues.

‘That’s okay,’ said Root. ‘I don’t care if you play hooky. Used to do quite a bit of that myself, didn’t I, Ira?’

‘They’re giving us the table,’ said Ira.

‘Finish your Jesus game,’ said Root.

‘You go ahead, Mr Root,’ said one of the boys.

‘I don’t like to horn in,’ said Root.

Ira took a cue and began chalking it. Root did the same.

The boys obligingly racked the balls and dusted chalk marks off the rails.

‘Didn’t know you two worked here,’ said Root, and laughed. He spotted the cue ball and lined up his shot, then gently sent the cue ball into the triangular formation. It nicked a corner and came to rest an inch from the barely troubled formation.

‘Don’t leave me with much,’ said Ira. But instead of nudging the cue ball, he blasted, breaking the formation and spreading the balls all over the table.

‘You want me to win,’ said Root.

Ira coughed.

‘I’d like a drink,’ said Root, sinking a ball.

‘It ain’t three yet,’ said Ira.

‘I’d like a drink. Here,’ Root said to one of the boys, ‘go get us half a pint of vodka next door. Tell them who it’s for.’

The game proceeded quickly, Ira fumbling his shots, Root scoring often. The boy returned with the vodka.

‘Oil up with Orloff’s!’ said Root. He knocked back two swallows, then gasped and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He passed the bottle to Ira.

Ira looked around the store before he drank; then he took a sip.

‘Take a real slug,’ said Root. ‘Oil up, Ira!’

Ira tipped the bottle and took a mouthful. His eyes were watering when he handed it back to Root. He said, ‘Don’t that stuff burn.’

‘First time I heard you complain about a free drink,’ said Root.

‘I’m not complaining, Chub,’ Ira said quickly. ‘I appreciate it.’

‘Then have another one,’ said Root. He lined up a new shot.

‘I’m seeing spots,’ said Ira. He screwed the cap onto the bottle.

Root said, ‘Son of a whore. That was an easy one.’

One of the boys came forward and held the pool chalk out to Root. ‘Thank you,’ said Root, and smiled at the boy. The boy crept back to the raised bench and sat down.

As Ira was taking his next shot the door flew open with a bang and a man came in. He was heavy, rawboned, wearing a torn felt hat and overalls dusted with yellow chicken meal. He saw Root and closed the door carefully, turning the knob and making no sound. He said, ‘Sorry,’ and squinted, then bought some cough drops, nodded respectfully toward Root and, easing the door open, slipped out.

‘What’s he tiptoeing around for?’ said Root. He rested the pool cue on his thumb and

whacked a ball into a corner pocket. ‘I don’t say this is the grandest town, but people treat you right.’

‘Yep,’ said Ira.

‘Bangor’s a waste from that point of view. Mighty unfriendly – reminds me of the navy, Bangor does. Those crazy Indians come up from Stillwater. Oh, they’re a tough bunch when they get a little Orloff’s in them. Look at you with them big square faces. I saw a hell of a fight a few nights back.’

‘Don’t get down Bangor way very often,’ said Ira.

‘It’s a good experience,’ said Root, watching the table. ‘Like the navy. We’ll go down there together next time, what do you say?’

‘I’d like that, Chub.’

Root grinned. ‘Might even get laid, eh? What would your old woman say to that?’

Ira cleared his throat and looked around. He grasped his pool cue with two hands. One of the high school boys was smiling.

‘You mind your own business, sonny,’ said Root.

‘Sorry, sir,’ said the boy.

The next time Root looked over both boys had gone.

‘Have another swig, Ira. It won’t kill you.’

‘Chub, I don’t think –’

‘Ira.’

‘I think I’ll just have a bottle of tonic,’ said Ira.

‘Put some of this into it,’ said Root. He showed the vodka.

‘All right,’ said Ira. He smiled while Root splashed some vodka into his glass of orangeade. But he did not drink. He set the glass down on the raised bench.

‘I can finish this game in three shots,’ said Root. He walked around the table, then began knocking the balls into the pockets. The balls dropped in three gulps. Root said, ‘How about another? You gave me that one, didn’t you?’

‘No, no,’ said Ira. ‘I’d better scoot back to the station.’

‘Another game wouldn’t hurt.’ Root looked at his watch. ‘Half-past three,’ he said. ‘Bet Lavinia’s tearing her hair.’

Ira didn’t move.

Root giggled. ‘She’ll bust a gut when I get back, so I’m in no hurry. Women,’ he said, facing Ira, ‘they’re so damn con-trary, ain’t they?’

Ira flicked his head up and down. ‘Sure are,’ he said. He glanced at Wayne, the man behind the soda fountain. At the glance, Wayne picked up a coffee cup and started to wipe it.

‘You know what I always say, Ira?’ Root held up the vodka bottle, saw there was still an inch left, and took a long pull. ‘I always say: You can’t live with ’em, and you can’t live without ’em. And frankly, Ira, I know what the hell I’m talking about.’

‘You do, Chub. A good woman –’

‘Ain’t no such animal!’ said Root. He laughed and drank again. ‘Now my name’s Warren, as you know, and that’s the name I use in Bangor.’

‘Warren,’ said Ira.

‘Know what they call me? Take a guess.’

‘Can’t guess,’ said Ira.

‘I’ll tell you. It’s Don Warren – like Don Juan. Get it?’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Ira.

Root shook his head and said, ‘Jesus.’

‘I’d better scoot back to the station,’ said Ira.

‘You do that.’ But as Ira was leaving, Root called, ‘Ira, wait!’ startling the old man. Root pointed to the glass of orangeade on the bench. ‘You forgot your drink, Ira. Set down and finish it.’

Ira picked up the glass and drank it down with his eyes closed. He left, coughing.

‘He’s a funny old hayseed,’ said Root. ‘Ain’t that right, Wayne?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Wayne, and began to blink and sniff in a rabbity way.

One of Ira Hubbel’s boys was standing near the convertible. ‘I washed your car, Mr Root.’

‘Much obliged,’ said Root. He tried to give the boy a tip. The boy refused it. ‘Groceries,’ said Root.

At Mason’s, the grocery store, Root took a wire carriage and wheeled it around, filling it with cans. Harold Mason was at the cash register. Root said, ‘No cartons of Luckies.’

‘Aren’t there any on the shelf, Mr Root?’

‘Not a one.’

‘Must be in the stockroom. I’ll get you a carton.’

‘That’s all right. I’ll be back later.’

‘I won’t be a minute,’ said Mason, hurrying to the back of the store.

‘Didn’t mean to cause him any bother,’ said Root to a woman holding a child. The woman, gawking by the door, seemed surprised that Root should address her. Root smiled. The woman turned away and left the store.

‘Here you are,’ said Mason. ‘One carton of Luckies.’

‘Didn’t mean to cause any bother,’ said Root.

‘No bother at all.’

‘What’s the bad news?’

‘Pardon?’ Mason looked shocked.

‘The bill. How much do I owe you?’

‘You don’t have to pay now,’ said Mason. ‘You must have your hands full.’

Root smiled. ‘I don’t have an account here, do I?’

‘No, you don’t. But –’

‘So how can I put it on account if I don’t have an account? You tell me.’ Root looked around for a witness. He saw no one except Mason’s wife, watching from the frozen-food section at the rear of the store.

‘Suit yourself,’ said Mason. He added the column of figures on the paper bag, then rang up the amount on the clanking cash register. ‘That will be nine dollars and forty-eight cents.’

Root paid and started to leave.

‘Mr Root?’

Root turned.

‘I’m very sorry,’ said Mason, and he did not take his eyes from Root’s.

Root shrugged and went out to his car.

The Root farm was just outside town, on a slope, at the end of a stony, rain-eroded driveway. Root put the car into second and drove casually, holding a knob attached to the steering wheel, spinning it slightly as the car slid sideways on the gravel and shuddered and jounced to the front of the house. He was out of the car and reaching into the back seat for the bag of groceries; drunk, he spoke his thoughts: ‘Hell with it. I bought them, she can lug them in.’

Inside the house he called, ‘Lavinia! I’m back!’ And again, ‘Lavinia!’ sharply.

There was no reply and not even much of an echo. The doors were open all the way out to the sunlight on a saw-horse at the back. A plump, reddish chicken bustled mechanically, as if it ran on a spring, and pecked at the floor just inside the kitchen. Root turned and looked back at the car, then at the driveway. At his split-rail fence, which bordered the road, some children stood and were staring up at him. He went to shoo the chicken, but he did not go all the way to the kitchen, for halfway down the hall the sound of his own feet stopped him. He called his wife’s name again, now softly, nearly a question; and then he took a sip of air and held it in his mouth.

Later, upstairs, he found the severed length of rope, the note, the overturned stool.