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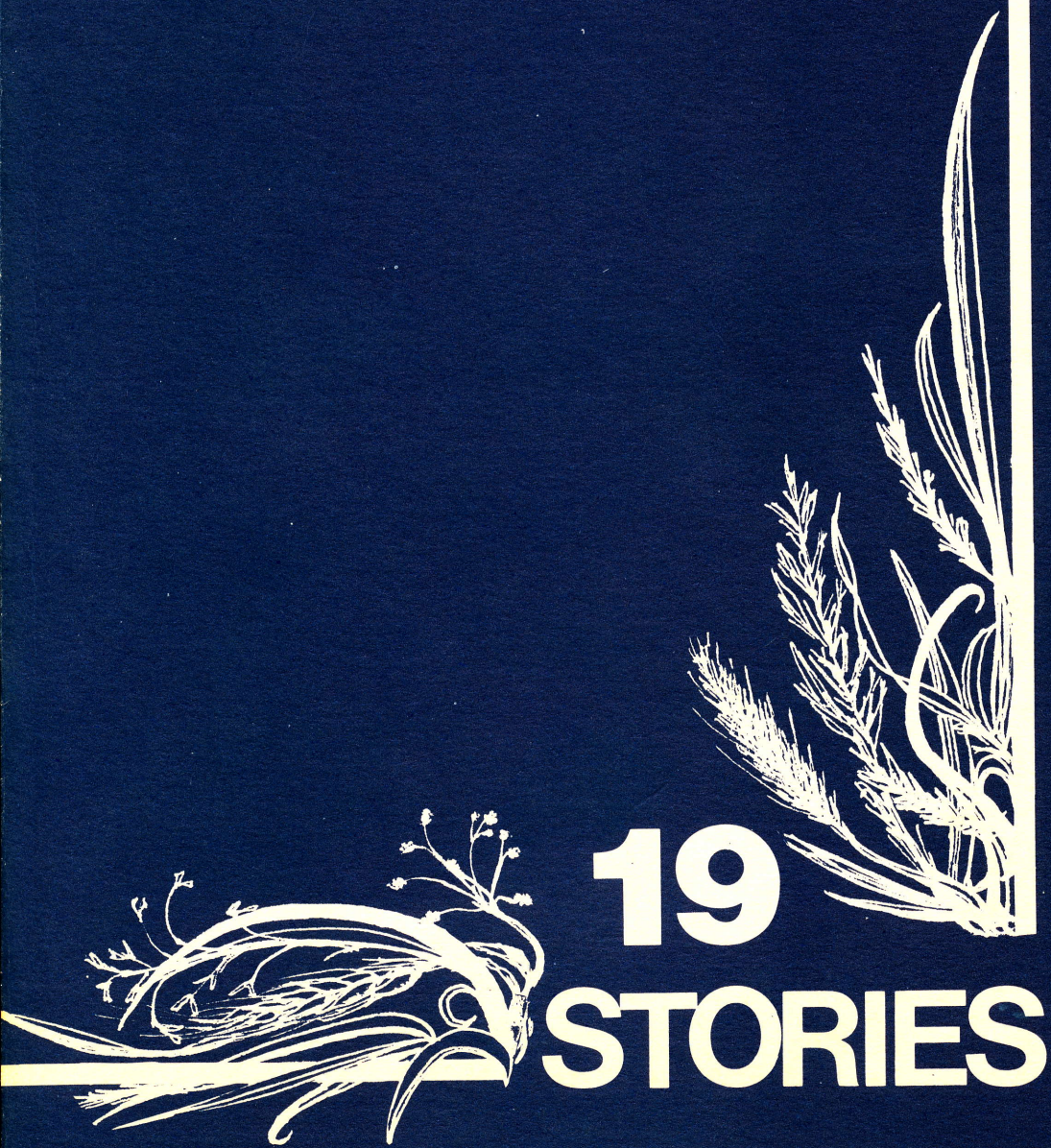

19 STORIES

Nineteen STORIES

Contemporary Fiction by Kansas Writers

edited by
Melanie Farley and
Sharon Oard Warner

Book Production:
Erleen Christensen

COTTONWOOD REVIEW PRESS

COTTONWOOD REVIEW DOUBLE FICTION ISSUE

Cottonwood Review welcomes submissions of fiction, poetry, graphics, photography, translations, and reviews of small press literature from both regional and non-regional writers and artists. Poetry submissions should be limited to the five best. We are unable to return submissions which do not include a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

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EDITORS' NOTE:

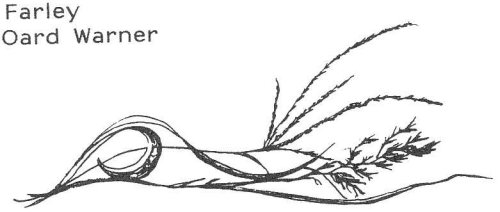
Most anthologies of contemporary literature have a unifying theme or exemplify a certain kind of story. The only requirement we imposed on submissions for this collection of stories was that the writers be current residents of the state of Kansas. The writers included live and work in a variety of locales, from Olathe to Pittsburgh, from Peabody to Lawrence.

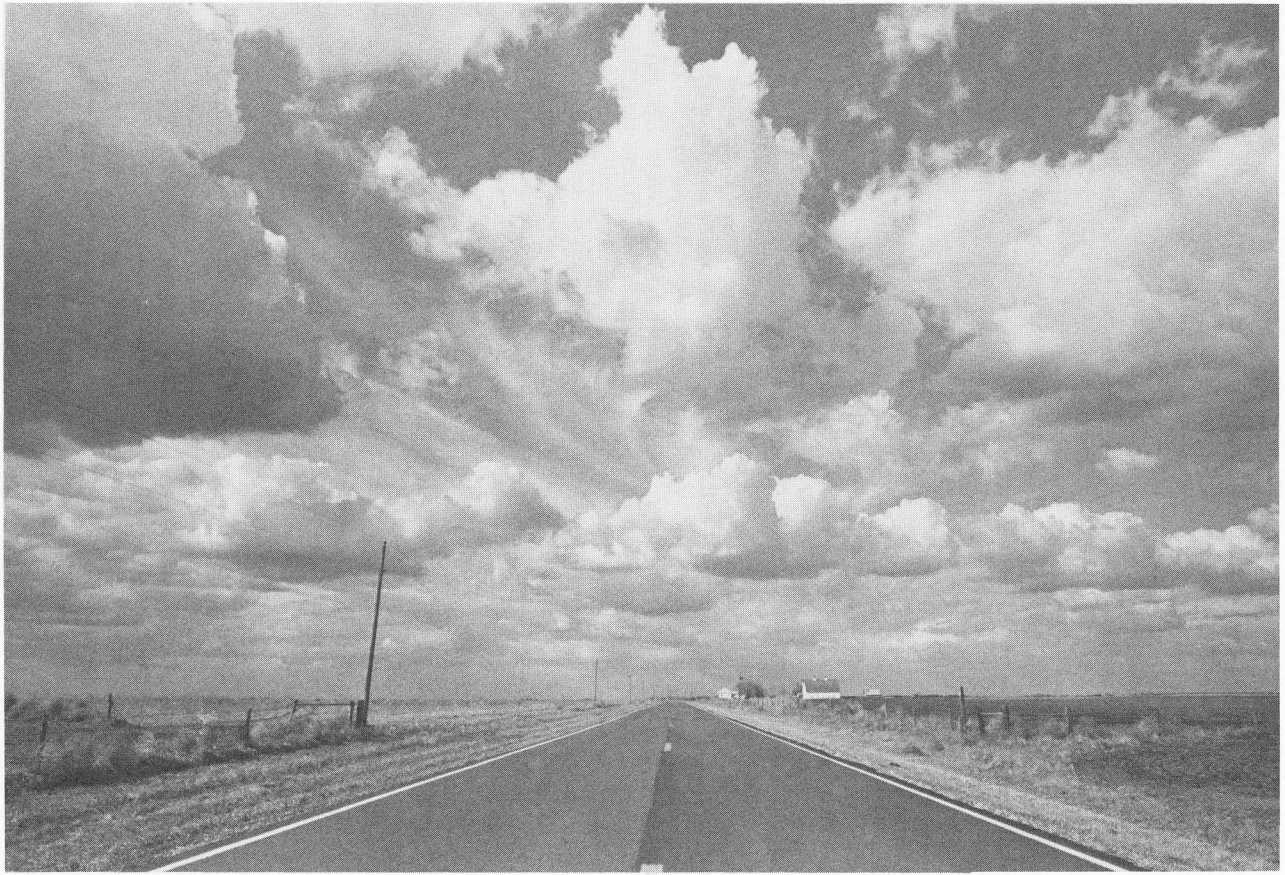
Having read manuscripts for Cottonwood Review for some time, both of us sensed that there exists a great diversity of perspectives, interests, and approaches to writing among Kansas writers that no one really knows about. We wanted to show readers that this diversity exists, as well as counter possible preconceived notions about Kansas and its writers. Anyone reading this book will see that these writers are neither bland nor culturally barren.

The book's advertisement stressed that the stories need not be about Kansas, and in fact, few of the stories can be termed "regional." In this book are examples of science fiction, "commercial" stories, surrealism, regionalism, and other "genres" of short fiction (many of them experimental). Yet the stories are by no means typical; that is, elements such as exposition, character development, and resolution are not emphasized. Instead, stylistic experimentation is the important feature.

All these writers view their characters' lives, pasts, or environments with an acute sense of the discrepancy between reality and imagination, between what appears to be and what really is. This strong vein of irony strikes us as being peculiarly Midwestern.

Melanie Farley
Sharon Oard Warner





Thomas Fox Averill

HELEN SINGLETON AND THE DEAD CAT

Helen Singleton stared with deep concentration at the pocked asphalt road that would become Sixth Street when it reached the outskirts of Lamar. Francine and Mamie, her shopping companions, began talking, a luxury Helen dared not allow herself when she was driving. The three old women were bundled against the cold, their fur coats wrinkled between them like little animals, their bare fingers sticking out like pale tongues from their bulky sleeves.

Helen felt cramped. Francine, who tinted her hair dark brown and wore a layer of powder on her cheeks, seemed to be taking up more of the seat than usual. And, Helen thought, she'd overdone her perfume again. Mamie, the oldest of the three sat next to the door. All Helen could see of her was her pointy chin, which had begun to sprout black hairs, and the roll of the black tam she wore wore to cover her thinning hair. Like Helen, Mamie watched the road closely.

Helen wondered why it always rained or was muddy or cloudy or gusty when she had to drive to town. Francine had taken them on their weekly shopping trip the day before, and it had been perfectly clear. But Helen had to return a five dollar bill a clerk had accidentally given her in place of the one dollar he'd owed her in change, so she'd called Mamie and Francine and they'd decided to make another day of it. Now Helen had a quiet, dull headache like the kind she'd gotten years before when her children had sometimes kept her awake most of the night with fever or nightmares or loneliness. She was not even listening to her friends.

Then, just as she wished to herself that the weather would hold off, a gentle rain misted the windshield, and she took one of her small, liver-spotted hands off the wheel and turned on the wipers. They jerked across the window, dirtying it with a brown film that Helen could hardly see through. She automatically applied the brakes.

"Look out! Mamie shrieked as a car passed, honking and spraying the windshield.

Helen jammed against the brakes, her heart pounding, her face chalky white. Then another horn blasted behind them and a black car swept by, just missing them and an oncoming van by inches. They stopped dead. Helen flipped on the right turn signal and rested her head against the steering wheel.

"Oh, no! Look!" Mamie touched the window with a bony forefinger. "Isn't that a sight?" Mamie pressed her hands into her fur coat. Six feet ahead, in the center of the road, was a large, tawny cat, its back arched so high that its legs bowed in like the curved ends of a horseshoe. Its tail twitched in tight circling spasms as it tried to pull away from its head--a flat, bleeding pile of orange fur and red and white noodled brains which seemed to be the first real colors Helen had seen all day.

Her heart swelled in her chest and her stomach and knees trembled. She dropped her head onto her chest, moaning faintly.

"At least you didn't run it over." Mamie, her head bobbing at the end of her thin neck, looked around Francine at Helen. "It was that white van. I saw it."

"Oh," Helen shook her head. "I shouldn't have slowed down so much, though." She peered through the steering wheel at her tiny feet, which were encased in clear plastic boots. They looked unnatural mounted side by side on the wide brake pedal. "Maybe if I hadn't stopped."

"Helen," Mamie said sternly, "I will not have you blaming yourself for other people's foolishness. Why do you always think everything's your fault?"

"I don't," Helen declared. "At least not always."

"Don't be silly; of course you do--you have for as long as I've known you. You told me yourself you couldn't even sleep last night after you realized that man at Penney's gave you four extra dollars. You'd think you'd stolen it, for Pete's sake."

"Well? How's he to know I didn't? Tell me how." Helen pouted, her thin lips pursed so that all her wrinkles funneled to her mouth.

"Because you didn't, that's how. Good grief. You're the only one who thinks you're so horrible." Mamie looked askance at her friend. Francine sat stolidly between them, her legs tucked neatly to the right of the hump on the floor. She was the only one who saw a little woman, in blue jeans and a yellow rain slick, hop delicately across the roadside ditch and stop, her small body almost on tiptoe, just above the cat, which now lay quite still in the gathering rain.

"Oh," Francine's voice fluttered. Helen and Mamie stopped staring at each other and noticed the small woman, who covered her mouth with one hand while the other, bunched into a small fist, jerked at her side. Her hair was a nest of tiny black curls that lengthened like tired springs as she stood bewildered in the rain. She looked back and forth between the cat and Helen's green Chevrolet several times before Helen signalled her to the car, snapping up the lock on the back door. The woman looked both ways, then walked hesitantly over to them. She slipped quietly into the back seat and the three older women, too tightly packed in front to turn all the way around, craned their heads on stiff necks to stare at her. She spoke without looking up.

"I just happened to be at the picture window when I heard all the honking and looked out. I saw Snoppy start across, and I just knew." She looked up, her face wan, her long nose dark, like a shadow on her face. Her eyes were deep hollows, with dirty rings under them. She shook her head to keep her curls from drooping onto her face. The older women nodded their sympathy, their eyebrows raised in concern, their mouths downturned in funeral grimace.

"We didn't even see it until it was all over," Mamie said. "I just looked up and there it was."

"He was," corrected the young woman.

"I'm so sorry," Helen said, pushing her left arm against the steering wheel so she could fully face the cat's owner. "It's all my fault, I know. If I hadn't slowed down like that, and slammed on the brakes--" Her voice trailed off into speculative self-crimination.

"Helen Singleton!" Mamie shouted. "You weren't speeding around in the rain. You weren't passing cars and splashing mud all over. And you did not run over that cat. The van did." She nodded her head with such authority that she had to readjust her black tam.

They all looked at the cat again. The blood pooled around its smashed head had turned from bright red to deep purple. Helen felt sick. "I'm so sorry," she repeated. "Is there something I can do? Anything? I just feel horrible."

The young woman sat listless. Another car passed, just missing the dead cat. Helen was afraid she'd be sick to her stomach if the cat was run over again. She looked in the rear view mirror several times but saw only the young woman's sad, hopeless eyes and the trunk of the Chevrolet, which she always mistook for another car.

"Please?" she asked, turning again. "If there's any way we can help we'd like to."

"That's right," said Francine, "we'd like to help."

"What's your name?" asked Mamie impatiently.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Gloria Barnes." She smiled for the first time. "It's just a shock. I don't know what I'll say to the kids. They loved him so much."

"Are your children home?" Helen asked quickly.

"No. They're all in school now."

"Are you sure there isn't anything we can do?" Helen was worried about the cat in the road. Two more cars had passed, and each seemed to swipe closer to the dead animal.

"Well, there is one thing, now that I think about it," said Gloria.

Helen sighed. Her headache had become a stiffness and aching all over her body. "Yes?"

"Well--I don't want the children to see Snoopy like--like that. So you could do me a favor, if you would."

Helen forced herself to smile at the younger woman.

"If you could help me get rid of the cat. If you could maybe take him away somewhere so the kids wouldn't have to see him."

The rain had stopped and Helen turned off the wipers. "How can we do that?" she asked. "We're going shopping." But she could tell by the purposeful calm of the young woman's face that she had it all planned. Helen wished for a moment that she'd driven on. Of course, then she would have blamed herself for weeks, and forced herself to go back and find out about the cat later. She sighed. The morning seemed to lengthen in front of her like the pocky aspalt road.

"You wait here," said Gloria, pulling on the door handle, "I'll go get a paper bag to put him in. Then maybe you could take him somewhere and dump him."

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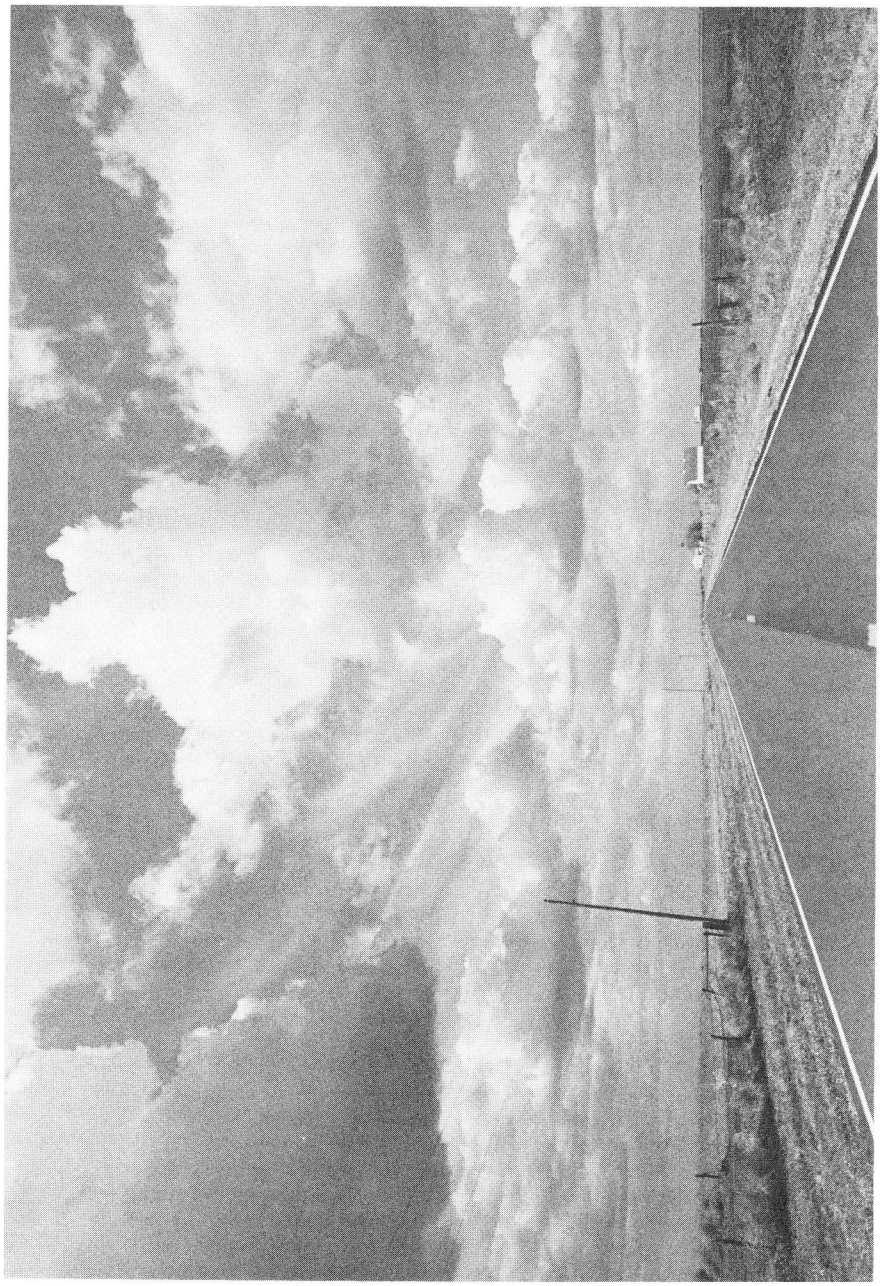


"You can't just dump him here?" asked Helen.

"The kids'd find him." Gloria looked repulsed by the idea. She stepped out of the car.

Helen rolled down her window and stared at the cat. "Bring a shovel!" she shouted.

Gloria waved and hopped over the ditch.

I think I'm going to be sick," said Helen. "I never imagined she'd ask us to do such a thing."

"That's what you get," said Mamie. "If it was me I'd never have stopped. You're the one who asked what you could do. You're the one who's always wanting to help."

"Now, now," said Francine, "we'll all help, and it'll be done with soon."

"I'm not helping," Mamie pouted. "Helen got herself into this mess and she can just get herself out of it. She's always doing this and I'm sick of it. I wouldn't have even come along today if that blouse hadn't turned out to be the wrong shade of blue."

"Mamie!" Francine scolded.

"It's all right," said Helen, staring straight ahead. "Of course I was going to treat you both to lunch at Myron Green's. But now we can just go to Penney's to return the money and come straight home."

"I have to go to Sears to exchange my blouse," Mamie said, determined.

"We'll just see about that," Helen retorted.

Francine shook her head in disgust.

Gloria returned with a grocery sack and a chipped, teflon-coated spatula. Helen and Francine joined her over the cat; Mamie sat rigidly in the car.

"My husband carries the shovels in his trunk," Gloria apologized. She squatted down like a little girl might and tentatively poked at the cat. Helen gulped, then puckered her lips so tight they hurt. Francine bent over and held the bag open. Gloria lifted the cat's head with the spatula and pulled the rest of it up by the tail. She carried it slowly, carefully, but, seeming to lose her will at the last moment, she dropped the cat awkwardly into the bag so that it's body flip-flopped and its head wound up backwards on its neck. Its eyes rolled back into its head. The spatula was caught under the cat's chin and they didn't bother to retrieve it. Francine folded the bag and picked it up gingerly.

"Now all I have to do is wipe the blood away." Gloria stood just above where the cat had been.

Nearly gagging, Helen walked quickly to the car and pulled the keys from the ignition so she could open the trunk. She was not going to have a dead cat in the car with them.

"Thanks again," Gloria said. She walked slowly away.

Francine brought the bag around to the back of the car and lifted it into the trunk, which Helen immediately slammed shut. She leaned heavily against the car.

"It's all over now, thank goodness," said Francine.

"No, it's not," Helen frowned. "I won't be happy until I've thrown it in the trash. And until I get that Mamie Lichenstein

home," she whispered.

"Helen Singleton!"

"Well it's true. She's being so ugly. You watch. She'll do nothing the rest of the day but tell me how stupid I am to be stuck with this cat."

"I think you've done a nice thing for that woman."

"Maybe so. But Mamie's probably right. I wouldn't have done it unless I thought it was all my fault. And now she'll pester me all day."

"Hogwash." Francine walked to the passenger door and Mamie got out to let her climb into the middle of the seat. Helen had her door closed before she remembered that the keys were still in the trunk lock. She recovered them, angry with herself. She decided that if Mamie said a word she'd bite her head off.

But Mamie was silent all the way to the mall. And after the three women shopped an hour, their tension started to fall away. Helen felt better for returning the money to the man at Penney's and they did go to Sears for Mamie. Then, since they were at the mall, they looked at slippers in two different stores, and Francine bought a pair. They looked like Mamie's hat--black, and fuzzy, with little pompons just above the toes. Soon after, they found a special on stockings, and Helen just couldn't resist. In fact, after two hours they had as many packages as they could carry and they decided to drop them off at the car and have lunch at Myron Green's after all.

Helen opened the car trunk, and Francine leaned in and pulled out the bag with the cat in it. She placed it on top of the car and they loaded in their packages. They had bought even more than they had the day before, and the boxes and bags completely filled the trunk.

"Goodness, we're going to have to hitch up the trailer come Christmas time," Francine joked.

"Wouldn't we look a sight?" Helen smiled.

"Let's eat," said Mamie.

Helen slammed the trunk shut. "It's my treat still," she said, and when Mamie raised her eyebrows she added, "I insist, Mamie."

"I won't argue," Mamie said. "You'll have your way anyhow."

It was one o'clock and the lunch rush was over, so they went right through the cafeteria line. As Helen paid, Francine and Mamie chose a table near a window. Helen joined them and they unloaded the food from their trays and sat in the heavily padded chairs. Helen sighed and looked out at the sky. The clouds were scudding away and she could see patches of pale blue. She felt more relaxed than she had all day; at least it would be a nice drive home. Then she looked at her car, and there on top of it was the brown paper bag with the dead cat in it. She shivered, and the blood in her head seemed to drain to her stomach and drown her appetite.

"Look," she pointed a trembling finger, "we've left our cat on top of the car."

"What do you mean, our cat?" Mamie asked.

"Don't you worry about it, Helen," said Francine. "We'll be back out there soon enough."

But Mamie's tone had made Helen angry. "It's my cat," she said, "and I'm not going to leave it there."

"It's not going to run away, Helen." Mamie's voice was condescending.

"I know that." Helen spoke between clenched teeth.

"I'll go put it in the car," said Francine, standing. "Where are the keys?"

"No," Helen rose, but felt weak. "It's my cat and my responsibility."

"Don't be silly," insisted Francine. "I'll be back in a second."

"Francine, I said I'd do it." Helen sneered at Mamie, who was determinedly chewing on a chicken drumstick. She picked up her pocketbook and was starting away when Mamie called her back.

"Look." Mamie motioned out the window.

Near the trunk of the car they saw a tall, but very stout, middle-aged woman, shaped like a bowling pin. She wore an old black car coat that was shiny on the backside. She made a wide circle around the Chevrolet, her head cocked to one side, then stopped by the outside mirror of the car. She glanced in every direction, as though sniffing out a bad odor with her thick nose, and the three women watched her lean down, take a tube of lipstick from her purse, and apply it in a few strokes.

"Good grief," said Helen, She could have gone inside to a ladies room to do that."

"Hush," Mamie commanded, as though afraid Helen would frighten the woman away.

They saw the woman peer all around once more, circle the car again then pull the paper bag off the roof and walk quickly from their view, her head jutting forward, her black coat billowing behind.

"My word!" said Helen.

"Oh no!" said Francine.

Mamie laughed, and in a second Helen joined her. The whole cat episode was so silly, she thought. And nothing to have been so upset and angry with Mamie over. She imagined the poor woman hurrying home to see what she'd stolen and opening the bag to find the horrible cat. "Oh, my word!"

Francine began laughing, too, and none of them quit until they had tears in their eyes.

They had begun eating again, smiling and pleasant with each other, when Mamie hissed loudly and shifted her eyes to the cafeteria line. Helen and Francine turned abruptly.

"Don't call attention to us, for Pete's sake," said Mamie.

But none of them could help but stare. In the line, the grocery bag taking up over half her tray, was the woman from the parking lot. She served herself chicken salad, soup, and a huge roll, which she paid for in cash.

"My goodness," said Helen, "how can she steal something and then find enough money to come and eat in a nice place like this?" She noticed that the woman had runs in both stockings from her heels to her knees. She shook her head, disgusted.

The woman took a table across the room from them. She emptied her tray and put the bag on the floor next to her chair. Her hand lingered over it for a second, and Helen feared she might open it. The thought made her sick. But the small-headed, huge-lapped woman was more hungry than curious and began to eat.

Helen pushed her food aside. Mamie finished her plate quickly, as though the incident had increased her appetite.

"Oh, no," Francine whispered. The woman leaned over and looked at the bag, almost reached for it. Then she straightened up and ate some more. Helen was relieved. It was horrible, really, she thought. She rose to leave, but Mamie reached across the table and grabbed her arm.

"If she's going to look, I'm going to watch her," she said fiercely.

"You're horrible. Just horrible. Let's leave her alone." Helen's voice was plaintive.

"I thought you said it was your cat."

Helen sat down. She sighed, tears in her eyes. "Maybe it's not the same bag," she hoped aloud. "Maybe it's something she really bought."

"Don't be a Pollyanna," said Mamie. They watched the woman lean over the bag with real purpose this time. "It has to be the cat. And it's her own fault, Helen."

"I know it," muttered Helen. She held her breath and watched the woman across the room slowly unfold the bag and look inside. The woman gasped, then groaned as though in pain. She slumped off her chair, her head landing with a thud on the thinly carpeted floor. Her body curled around the bag as though trying to protect it.

"Oh,no!" said Helen.

"Well, come on. "Mamie scooted her chair back. She quickly crossed the room and stood over the big woman as though in triumph. Francine went straight for the paper bag, folding it along its crease, then pulled the woman's legs straight so that she lay flat on her back. Helen stood apart unsure, wishing again that she could leave. Mamie grabbed the woman's water glass, stuck her thin hand in it and flicked water on the woman's face. That failing, she wetted a napkin and patted the woman's bulging forehead.

"What happened?" A white-uniformed woman from behind the cafeteria line joined them.

"She fainted," Mamie said.

Helen held her tongue. She could think of nothing but the awful cat in the paper bag which sat, neatly folded, between her and the thief, who looked horrid stretched out on the floor, the toes of her big, patent-leather shoes pointing in opposite directions, her fat knees and thighs exposed, her black coat twisted under her like an old tire tube.

When Mamie cuuldn't rouse the woman with a napkin she gently slapped her face. The woman from the cafeteria found a cushion and kneeled down to put it under her head. But no matter what they tried--rubbing her temples and her wrists, lifting her legs up off the floor, dousing her face with more

water--they simply could not revive the woman.

"She's breathing all right, isn't she?" asked Francine.

Mamie bent closer and put her ear to the woman's gaping mouth. "Yes, she is. She's breathing fine."

Helen sighed with relief. She watched as Mamie continued to bathe the woman's forehead with cold water. She was glad that Mamie seemed to know what to do. If it had been her, she thought, she'd probably have fainted, too.

"We'd better call an ambulance," Mamie ordered.

The woman from the cafeteria left. She returned with the manager, a dark, willowy, sincere-looking man whose hands dangled awkwardly at his sides.

"Do any of you know this woman?" he asked.

"No," said Mamie.

"No," said Francine.

Helen shook her head, shuddering, and looked away. She wished she were home sitting comfortably next to the heater and knitting, or smelling the rich, sweet aroma of a cake baking in the oven. Instead, she had spent her whole day tentatively: doubting, wondering, feeling guilty and horrible--about the extra money she'd been given, about nearly having an accident in the rain, about the cat that she hadn't even killed, about the way she and Mamie had been bickering all day, about the woman who was now stretched out in a dead faint at her feet. She felt resentful and wondered why such things had to happen to her. Perhaps, as Mamie had told her over and over again, she did always take the blame for other people's foolishness. She saw herself suddenly as she thought Mamie must, as a silly old lady always trapped in other people's silliness, pettiness, and now, thievery.

Then, before she knew it the ambulance was pulled up next to the door and two young attendants were wheeling a stretcher inside. They asked a few questions, then lifted the big woman onto the stretcher. One of them picked up her purse and laid it beside her. The other looked over at Helen, who was standing closest to the grocery bag.

"Is that hers, too?" he asked.

Helen hesitated, took a deep breath, pursed her lips. "Yes," she said finally. She picked up the bag herself. It was the first time she'd lifted it, but it was just as heavy as she expected. "This goes with her, too." She handed the bag to the attendant, who placed it on the stretcher in the space just above the woman's head. Helen nodded bravely, her face a mass of tight wrinkles. Mamie nodded back at her, smiling so reassuringly that Helen felt relieved. Francine was frowning terribly, her face flushed but hard, almost carved with her disgust.

The attendants rolled the stretcher away, and the three women silently returned to their table for their coats and purses. As they started out the door, they saw the ambulance just leaving the parking lot.

"Helen Singleton!" Francine sounded the name like a curse. "How could you do such a thing?"

"You be quiet, Francine," Mamie said. "Helen did exactly the right thing."

They marched to the car in a line: Francine, then Mamie, then Helen trailing behind, miserable. Though the sky had cleared she did not want to drive. In fact, she did not want to do anything. She felt ashamed, and humiliated. She done what Mamie would have done. The wrong thing, exactly, she wanted to shout. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

But she kept her feelings to herself until the three of them were settled in the car and Mamie said, laughing, "I can just imagine what they'll think when she gets to the hospital and they look in that bag."

Helen tightened her grip on the steering wheel and stared straight ahead. "You just be quiet, Mamie Lichenstein!" she shouted. "I have enough to think about already. Enough!"

"Don't you blame me!" Mamie leaned forward, her head seeming to dangle in mid-air next to Francine's. "Nothing that happened today was my fault."

Helen was shocked and hurt, but she knew that this time Mamie was right. "I'm not blaming anybody but myself," she said quietly. She took a deep breath, then sighed. She got a firm grip on herself and put the car in gear. Like it or not, she had to drive them all safely home.

Andrew Porter Brown

TWO HITS, TWO RUNS, ONE ERROR

Jacob stepped down off the front porch and spit on the Spalding baseball in his right hand. Using the thumb and index finger, he worked the spit in as he walked across the red-dirt yard of the farm to where a catcher's glove hung suspended before a backstop of haybales. Steadying the glove by use of a hang weight so that it hung as he wanted it to behind a home plate, Jacob walked to a raked up pitcher's mound and attended to it by kicking a few loose clods into shape. Then he faced the plate and the sun, which was just off to the side and low enough that it could be seen without hurting the eyes.

His left leg rose in an arc, the right arm went behind his body, and then as the whole of him lunged toward the mitt, the arm came over and down as a whip. The ball, an extension of the fingers, made the mitt jump and pop before it slid off to raise red dust from the hay.

With the left sleeve of his worn baseball jersey flapping empty, Jacob walked to retrieve the ball. Juggling it in his hand he walked back to the mound, stopping to watch a flume of red dust grow toward him from three miles down the road. He started to pitch again when the woman spoke from the shadows of the barn door. Her voice broke his rhythm, and the ball missed the mitt.

"You don't ever give it up do you, Jake?"

"You made me go and miss the target," he said without anger and walked to retrieve the ball.

"You want me to catch for you?"

"No. I saw Henry's truck on the road."

"I could throw a few back," she ventured.

"You don't need to do that." He had the ball and was back at the mound. This time the mitt all but tore loose from the leather strap that held it in place; as it was, it spun like a child's top. He stopped as he walked to the ball. "Are you going to the game?"

"Maybe."

"You could ride with us I suppose."

"No, I'll take the truck, if I come."

"Suit yourself." He walked on.

"Jake, why do you keep playing ball?"

"I like it."

"I know that."

"Well, that's all there is to it then." He had the ball, and a red pickup made redder by the dust bounced over the irrigation ditch and into the yard. Jacob turned to the black and white entrance of the barn and tried to pick out his wife in the shadows.

She stood well back, hardly visible. "What are you doing in the barn?"

She stepped to the light. A tall woman with long red hair, a loose blue shirt, and faded jeans. "I was looking for where

the mother cat had hidden her kittens. I didn't want Spike to find them." Spike was the cocker spaniel Jacob had bought to train for quail, but who had turned out miserable when pitted with the local springers. "He'd kill the kittens."

"It's a fact he might," Jacob started to turn to the big man who was getting down from the pickup, his belly hanging out over his uniform pants, a can of beer in his hand. He turned back to his wife. "Did you find the kittens?"

She shook her head, "No."

He nodded and turned away. "Hank," Jacob walked to the passenger side of the truck, "let's go."

Henry looked around, saw Meg and smiled at her. He lifted his DeKalb feed hat and started to speak, but Jacob hit the horn so he clamped the hat down and got back into the pickup. Inside Jacob was opening a can of beer that he had wedged between his knees. "Ain't Meg going?"

"She'll drive the truck."

"Hell, I could have had Sue pick her up in the car. Sue had to go early cause the club is selling beer and pop, and she had to do the icing."

"It's all right. Let's get going."

Jacob glanced out of the corner of his eye as the truck circled the yard and went out the way it had come in. Meg still stood in the door, though now she was in the light and framed by the darkness.

Baseball on a Sunday night is a way of life along the border of Oklahoma and Kansas. Tonight it was a team from Sweetwell that had crossed the twenty miles of range and oil land, dry farm and irrigation ditches to play New Hope.

The towns were all much the same. Viewed from the air, they were little more than crosses formed by intersecting roads, a few side streets and garden patches, and a high school that was more nearly empty than used--the windows boarded, the glass removed. A few of the towns still operated grade school, but the ones on state highways were joined together now by the consolidated school. And on the edge of each town, the ball diamond. A level green outfield and a freshly dug infield of packed red clay. Around the whole a line of telephone poles black in the sun with cups of light reflectors. Next to the ball field the rodeo grounds. Both bigger than the population would seem to warrant, but this was farming country and distance was relative.

Behind home plate, the well-kept bleachers--small but functional, and painted white. The scoreboard a gift, for advertising consideration, given by DeKalb, the same company that three years ago had given the town team its uniforms, and who would in two more years give another outfit. The Oklahoma team had the same arrangement, but theirs was with an irrigation firm from Guymon.

"Henry?"

"What, Jake?"

"I was just thinking of something."

"What?"

"How long we been playing baseball? Over twenty years isn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess we been playing twenty years, there abouts." Henry pulled the pickup into a slot at the end of a line of pickups and cars stretching down the distance toward the right field foul line. "Jake, why you asking this?"

"Something Meg said, something she sometimes says a lot."

"Well?"

"Well, look at us. We graduated from high school twenty years ago, and we spend our Sunday summer evenings playing baseball, and the Sunday winter evenings playing basketball. I got one arm, and you got a keg for a belly. What do we do it for?"

"Look, Jake, I'm gonna tell you something about that wife of yours, don't get mad, 'cause we been friends for as long as I could recognize you weren't one of the family, but that woman of yours just came from up country. She's a good woman, and I never would argue that. But she believes you have to do something with your time, and that's a crock. We both work hard, and we like our games. Hell, you can still pitch, even if you can't hit, and I can still hit and catch, and that's that." He said it all slowly then reached down on the cab floor and pulled another can of beer from the cooler. "You want another? Well, come on then, or Cap'll be on us 'fore we know which way to run."

They got down from the pickup and walked over to the first base gate where the home team had their dugout. The sky was red, and the lights were just coming on, even though they would not be needed for an hour or so. Clouds stacked up black in the southwest, but clouds from there never posed a threat at this time of the year. The game would be played.

Miranda McDonald sang the national anthem. She was the leading voice in the Missionary Baptist Church, and while the Baptists didn't really hold with baseball on Sunday, their minister David Dupree was only two years out of an Oklahoma Bible seminary, where he had been a more than creditable first baseman and a hitter of some power. The Missionary Baptist Church made allowances. Being the only protestant and evangelical church in the town, the predominantly Catholic community kept the balance of business in hand and scheduled nothing to conflict with Wednesday night prayer meetings, and, furthermore, a happy town was a winning town.

Miranda sang while both benches stood at loose attention, and then the New Hope men took the field.

Meg slipped into the bleachers and spoke with courtesy to the neighbors around her, but her attention was on her husband who stood at the mound with the ball on his hip and waited for Sparky Smith to quit dusting the plate and for Homer Johns to step up and the game to get started. She was aware that on the Sweetwell bench Gurdy Howard was talking with animated gestures to his talented pitcher-hitter-runner, Billy Season, and that as

he talked he kept pointing at her. Then Meg realized that it wasn't she who was being pointed at, but the man who had quietly sat down beside her.

He saw that she was looking at him and smiled. He seemed to wink, but his eyes were hidden behind heavily shaded sun glasses so she wasn't sure.

"You're staring."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I was just wondering who Gurdy was trying to impress Billy with."

"Managers have a way of doing that. Put a scout in the stands, and they have to show off their prize. I had hoped to see the kid play in a high school game, but this ought to be just as good."

"You're a baseball scout?"

"Yes, ma'am, I surely am." He smiled and kept looking at Meg, even though Jake had already run the count to two and 0.

She tried to look at the game, but he didn't turn his eyes, or at least through the glasses it seemed like he was only watching her. She wanted to turn her head when the applause told her that Jake had struck out Homer Johns. "Aren't you going to watch the game?" she said.

"I only came to watch the Sweetwater kid. The rest don't show much. They're just old men, and a one-arm pitching freak. What's there to see?"

Meg started to say something, but the words lost themselves in the intricacies of her thought. She forced herself to look out at the field.

"After all, ma'am," he said it softly to her. "There can't be much for a pretty girl like you to see out there either." His hand came down between them and rested next to her hip.

Jacob watched a yellow and black grasshopper walk along the grain of the dugout wood. He had given up a hit through the first three innings, and now in the bottom of the third he waited his turn at bat.

He'd played against the Sweetwater boys enough so that they knew he could do more than flap the bat. Lord knew, he thought, that Billy was humming the ball today. Cap had said there was a scout in the stands, and by process of elimination it had to be the blonde fella with Meg.

The thought to be jealous, or even curious, never crossed his mind. The man was sitting with Meg, and that was all there was to it. She had come to the game. That was enough for him.

He looked out at Billy Season and admired the way he whipped the ball in a smooth overhand motion. Billy was such a good hitter that he had batted cleanup, and so Jacob had faced him in the second inning as the lead-off hitter. He grinned as he thought how he ground out on a change of pace. Billy hadn't looked good on that. The thought didn't really make him feel good, so much as stimulated. He realized that it was like a father challenging his son. He smiled at the thought. Billy at eighteen could have been the son he didn't have. They had been playing against each other for the last three years, and Jacob

realized that he was proud of the boy. Proud of the pitches he had shown him in friendly sessions after the games.

Dink Halsey, the Co-op manager, hit a pop-up for an easy out, and with two down, and no hits and no runs Jacob got up from his seat.

He swung the shortened bat a couple of swipes as he walked to the plate.

Dixie Lee, which was the scout's name, made a few desultory notes on his pad and then pocketed his ballpoint to concentrate on laying his hand down over Meg's. By the end of the third inning he had developed a regular pattern. When Billy pitched he made a note, and then when Jacob pitched he paid not the slightest attention to the field and concentrated on talking with Meg. The one exception was when Billy batted. His grounder was met with a flurry of sharp notes.

"You know I broke in with Mantle, and I scouted Bench. We didn't get him, but I did scout him. Still Mantle's the greatest Oklahoma ever put out."

Meg knew by now all about Dixie Lee's abbreviated career. How he had crashed the fence in spring training in his second year and busted his shoulder so bad he could never throw the ball again with any range, but how he just had a natural baseball mind.

She felt the pressure of his hand, slightly sweaty, the fingers massaging lightly. Her mouth went dry, and she nodded with her head to the batter's box where Jacob stood. "I think he can hit," she said.

"Not him. If he hits at all, he'll hit like a freak."

She steadied herself for what she asked. "Why do you call him a freak?"

"'Cause he is. He's a one arm thrower. Hell, he could never play in a man's league, just in a pickup town game like this. You know if you can't play in the big league, there ain't no sense in playing at all." He slid his hand up to her wrist and put a pressure on the forearm. "You just watch."

By the sixth inning all darkness had come to the sky, and the light of the field had formed a tent that cut off the outside. Children too young to hold attention, and adolescent girls and boys with other intentions had drifted into that dark, when those in the cars along the sidelines and those in the stands realized that the game had taken a change.

Neither team had managed a hit. Neither team had put a man on base.

In the stands Dixie Lee was now up to Meg's shoulder, and when he wasn't writing he had devised a new trick of putting his hand in the small of her back and moving his fingers in small circles.

His knowledge and his soft voice he used like some men use a rose and poem. "Why, I remember the time that I was in Knox, Georgia, and there was this little fella thought he could dust me off. He got me on the knee cap, but I just came hobbling back. Mick got three hits that day, and I got two to lead the whole Yankee team. Well, Mick saw what this fella done, and he

waited till he had a chance to steal a base. That cracker came over to cover second, and he thought Mick would slide, but Mick just put his shoulder into him and broke the little jackass's jaw. In baseball, you stick together."

"I could use a coke," Meg said.

"Here I got to watch this. You get 'em." He handed her fifty cents.

Meg couldn't say why she got up and went for the cokes, but she knew that she would have even if he had told her to go without her bringing the subject up.

At the tub of iced drinks Meg avoided questions from Henry's fat wife on how the game was going. Back at the bleacher she handed over the opened can and then knowing what she was doing, sat down even closer than she had been before, so that now she could feel the full length of thigh beneath his red double knit jeans.

"Want some bourbon in it?" he asked. He poured some into his can and swirled it around.

"No!" she said.

He didn't press the point but put the pint back in his pocket, moving his leg against her as he did. "You should have seen what that one-armed fella did to Billy Season."

"What?"

"He struck him out on three straight pitches. That's what he did." The hand came down from writing a note to the inside of her thigh. She stiffened a little. "Don't worry," he said, "At a ballgame all these locals do is watch the field. I know."

She didn't ask him how he knew.

As he faced the last man of the inning, Jacob felt his arm began to tire.

Youth, he thought. Look at that kid Billy. I'll bet he's never had to dig down once.

The count was two balls and a strike, and so Jacob elected to try for the corner with a curve and even the count. The ball refused to break. The wrist, a fraction slower in reaction, turned a fraction too late, and the ball had just started to turn as it moved over the heart of the strike zone. Duane Lamont, a hail insurance salesman two years out of Oklahoma State where he had been a so-so intramural player, drove the ball past Doug Wilkie, the forty-two-year-old druggist shortstop.

"Screw it," Jake said when he got the ball back and Lamont was on first. "It had to happen."

"Well I'll be damned," Dixie said. "Do you know we went just about eight innings without a hit? I never would have believed it. Don't say much for Sweetwater's hitting."

"Maybe the one-armed man can pitch," she said.

"Oh a little, but most of these farm guys can't really hit a curve, and that's what he has been using. You watch them hit him now if the curve gives out."

Jacob struck out the next batter and looked up as he left the mound to face Billy Season. He reached out and touched the kid on the arm. "You tired?"

"Are you?"

"You better damn well believe it."

"Think you'll finish?"

"Why not? I hear the scout is looking at you."

"Sure is."

"Well, show him what you can."

Jacob walked on to the bench and glanced up at the stands, but through the wire and light he couldn't see his wife. Hank sat down blowing fine bubbles with each breath, and from his side popped the top of two beer cans. He handed one to Jacob.

"Drink for Christ's sake. We still got an inning to go. You gonna last?"

Jacob took the beer and let it mix with the sweat-salt on his lip. "Sure. I'll last. I just won't throw any more curves."

He took a long, slower drink. Unless New Hope got a hit, he wouldn't be up this inning anyway, and the beer would give him energy. He looked at Billy and wished he knew what the scout was thinking. The kid was pitching a marvelous game, flogging the ball with all the speed of youth, and with the unnatural accuracy that was a gift. The boy was good, and if the scout was good, he would know it.

The scout wasn't seeing any of Billy's moves now. He was seeing only the tight nape of Meg's neck as he looked for a place to take her. They were in the truck that Meg had driven to the game, but the truck was close enough to the concession stand that Dixie told himself he coudn't chance getting caught by a passing kid. Besides, an inning wasn't really enough time to do it right. No, he needed this time to convince her to meet him after he got rid of Gurdy and that fastballer.

Jacob walked to the mound for the top of the ninth and surrendered a single. The next batter was Billy Season, and he stood grinning at bat, with the trademark turned up. "You gonna hit, Billy?"

"Don't you know it."

Jacob smiled and reared back, cocking the whip. The ball dropped hard, low and away, missing the outside corner of the plate, but the impulsive Billy slashed at the ball and missed for a strike.

Hank delivered the ball to him with a practised soft throw that Jacob caught with a sweep of his hand. He turned his back on the batter's box and looked out at the lip of darkness. Adjusting his fingers while holding the ball behind his back, he turned to face Billy. As the whip came over, twenty years of age fell with it. Jacob wondered why, as he released the ball. A hummer, he thought. A good old-fashioned blue-hummer. The kind of pitch he had made as a kid when he had still dreamed that, despite the fact he had been born with one arm, he would still don the mantle of big league greatness. He could see the lace. The ball seemed dead in the air, and yet he knew that it was moving faster than he had ever thrown it before. A frustration for the batter, a pleasure for him as slower and slower,

yet smaller and smaller the ball moved away, turning over and down, then seeming to rotate up like a corkscrew.

Billy saw the pitch and started his bat. It was all stop for the two men, but for everyone else it was snap. The ball was gone into the darkness beyond the light where rabbits' eyes were points of red, and the snowfence checked Mark Thatcher's vain pursuit.

Jacob straightened up and walked to home plate to extend his hand to Billy. He wished the game were over now, but it wasn't, and with no outs, there were still batters to be pitched to and men to put down. They still had a chance, but how could a one-armed hitter turn the tide? He didn't feel sorry for himself. You lived with the pitches that you threw.

The noise and the crack of the bat pulled Dixie up into a sitting position, and he worked to extract his hands from under Meg's shirt where he had cupped her breast.

"If that kid hit one. . . Damn it." He could see the confrontation at homeplate as the one-armed guy with the flapping sleeve held his hand out to the kid. "Come on sugar, we got to get back. I just missed that kid hitting a home run."

With the ice broken, most expected a flood, but Jacob struck out the next batter and then got the next two to pop up and ground out, respectively.

At the bench, he sat down and looked at Hank. Hank popped another can, but Jake shook his head "No."

"Man, Jake, you sure did try to flog it past him. I saw that coming, and I thought, my God what's he done." He belched. "You know, I only seen you pitch one time like that."

"When was that?"

"The day you weren't chosen to play on the American Legion team at Culbertville."

"I forgot about that. That coach said I couldn't pitch because of my arm; I struck out eleven and gave up one hit, and he still didn't take me."

"Damn fool."

"Maybe. Look I got to hit, so I better get on deck. You know that kid Billy has yet to give up a hit."

Dixie didn't go back into the stands but stood at the fence and laced his fingers into the screen. Meg stood beside him listening. "You tell me, damn it, why I miss these moments in life? It never fails, all my days I miss the things I'm supposed to see, and never get to do the things I'm told I can do."

"I missed a baby once."

"What?"

"I said I missed a baby once. I was pregnant and I lost the baby, and then I lost..." She let her voice drift off to silence in the weeds. He wasn't listening.

"This means, Honey, I ain't gonna be able to be with you tonight. I'll have to drink some beer and listen to this kid and his manager brag it up, because I can tell right now I'm gonna have to tell the folks in Tulsa the kid can hit and throw."

"I wanted that baby."

"What?"

"Nothing. It was nothing at all."

"Then pay attention, girl. If Billy strikes out this old one-armed freak, he done thrown himself a no-hitter. You know what it would mean to me to be able to turn in another Warren Spawn or Sandy Kofax?

"Please." It was all she said.

With his old black bat, Jacob limbered himself and grinned at Billy. "You got yourself a no-hitter going."

The catcher growled, "Jake, you ain't suppose to say that; you'll spoil it for him."

"I intend to do just that."

"How you gonna do that?" The catcher asked.

"Just his way." Jacob said as the ball came over.

He bunted. He bunted and he ran with his long legs flowing out. The catcher heaved himself up, but it was no use, and Billy stood with his mouth open and a drop of spittle clinging to the tip of his lip. The drop fell as Jacob crossed the first base bag. The catcher was just fielding the ball and starting to make his throw.

The official scorer, Mrs. Corn, the assistant banker who loved the game, called out in a high voice. "A hit."

It was anticlimactic, as those things are, but Billy struck out the next batter on three pitches, two that weren't even swung at, and then everyone went for beer or cokes, mostly beer with the good father selling from the tub and shaking hands with everyone.

Jacob leaned against a part of the fence and sipped the beer. Meg came up to him and stood with her hands behind her back. "That was a dirty trick you pulled, Jake." She smiled.

"I know, but you have to stay competitive."

"Don't you!" she said, and reached up and gave him a kiss.

"Did you see the homer I gave up?"

"No. I missed it."

"Doesn't matter. I tried to flog it through, and I missed it. You know something. Twenty years ago I still would have missed it. That kid's good, but I did fool him, and it was a dirty trick." He put his arm around her and steered her toward where Gurdy Howard was leading a discussion with Dixie in the center of members from both teams. Billy was oddly off to the side with a can of beer, and he stepped up to meet Jake and Meg.

"You really got me, Jake."

"Well, it was a very cheap hit."

"No it wasn't. It was a good bunt, and I got to learn how to field those things. Dixie says I got a real chance to make it if I learn how to handle things like bunts."

"You'll learn."

"I hope so."

"Look, Billy, hope's just perseverance. All you got to do is work at it."

"If you say so. Jeeze, Dixie said he never saw anyone hit a ball the way I did. Funny thing, though, for a scout he sure

missed his pitch. He thought you hung a curve, but hell that was a blue-darter if I ever saw one."

"Just goes to show you," Meg said. "A scout doesn't see everything."

In the truck, settling back in the seat, Jacob fingered the Spalding baseball.

"Well?" she said, "How long you going to keep playing, big boy?"

"I don't know. I'd like to get it right once."

She started the pickup. "You want a drink?" She held out a bottle of Bourbon. "Someone must have dropped this in the seat by mistake."

Jacob took the bottle. It had been lowered by a couple of swallows. A good brand. He unscrewed the lid and took a long drink. "Well," he said. "We all make our errors. I gave up the homer, Billy gave up the bunt, and this guy just dropped his bottle."

When he put the cap back on he saw that Meg was crying.

Gary T. Brown

PALLBEARER

I was sneaking out just like I'd planned to so many times in the past, racing the rising sun that would arouse my parents' eyes and reveal my absence. But unlike in my dreams, I had a trailer along, someone like in basketball who is there in case you miss the layup, though who I had behind me wouldn't know what to do if I did, and in the dream version, if it ever came to pass, I would be sneaking away from him as much as anybody else.

"Did you get the poles?" I asked him. He stared at me with his hollow eyes that glowed, and I knew he hadn't. "Well, we can't go without the poles." He turned around after blinking a couple of times and snuck back into our room, me hearing his every crawl and just waiting for someone to lower the boom. Then he came back and prodded me with the poles, and I said, "Did you get the tackle?" And he blinked some more. "That's okay," I said. "Because I did." I laughed real low. He just blinked those eyes.

The eyes of a thousand thoughts were trapped in that little round head of his without a way to his mouth. All the time, road repairs or something. If he ever said a thing, it was sure to be worthless compared to what his eyes could say. That is why for eighteen years I'd become accustomed to ignoring his mouth. If he had something to say, it would beam out of that pocketed deepness and over his short, bent nose right out into the open, which was where we were now, surrounded by cool morning air and the shadowy blueness that stilled the world. Had it been daylight we would have been able to see down into the long, tree-lined valley, and then up again to the thin chimney of Uncle Caleb's house, where the breakfast smoke would be wafting, and on across the ridge to where Uncle Waymon's paint-peeled home would be looking like it couldn't last another day. Next to that was what could be my own forty acres, just waiting for me to reconnect the family square.

I stared at Delane and laughed because of the blind way he walked, sort of loping and never looking at his feet, but at some obscure spot in front of him.

"You ever disobeyed Momma before?" I said. He looked at me real quick and then turned back to his spot.

"All the time," he said, then repeating it as if he'd suddenly become proud. "All the time."

I laughed. "We'll be back before sunup, so don't worry."

He gave me another glance and fiddled with the poles that were tangling. "I ain't," he said softly, but his eyes said he was.

I had to untangle everything when we got to Caleb's pond. It was more on Waymon's land than his own, but Caleb had always said Waymon deserved to be in a nuthouse more than he deserved a pond. He had a point. Waymon spent all his time riding his ex-

ercycle and then drinking himself to sleep. And if he didn't show up in his field for a while, which was more often than not, nobody put up a fuss. That's the way it is around here. Nobody visits nobody. You get together on Sundays for dinner, and once a week, by God, you at least look like a family.

The pond sat in the bottoms, fed by our very own creek, the only thing besides a dirt road out of here, and I'd often caught myself canoeing right on into town in a flurry of visions to go see Ray at the furniture store where he'd set me up with my own tools and the vacant apartment upstairs, but my boat always got stuck in the sandy mud, and I would have to sit there helpless. Speaking of helpess, good Lord, what a case I had with Delane. Each in our family line had been deviled with his own weakness, the most going to the oldest, Waymon, and then getting less and less with me seemingly as the cutoff to where it started all over again. Waymon had fallen out of his rocker a couple of years ago, Caleb was barely hanging on, Dad was settled in real good, and I was just getting comfortable. But Delane never had no rocker to begin with.

"You can't tie a hook like you tie your shoe," I told him, and he blinked at me and handed over his pole.

I had to cast for him too, for he would always cross my line, but then, as if I were cursed, he would always get the first fish. "Hey, Delane," I said, pointing to his wagging pole.

He rustled in the weeds where he had been peeing and then, still fiddling with his fly, he bounded out and grabbed for his pole. His smile crowded his ears, and he yelped as the fish struggled near the shore, yellow belly gleaming in the fading moon.

"It's a carp," I said, but Delane didn't hear me because the strong fish pulled back out and bent Delane's pole double. I just laughed. Then, out of nowhere, we heard the gunshot echo and the whoosh of air close by, and Delane's eyes leaped at me. Someone was shouting on the ridge, and another shot pealed through the morning.

"Caleb!" I hollered, but I was answered with another bullet, this one splashing the pond. I grabbed Delane's arm, but he wanted his fish, and I had to beat on his shoulder to make him let go. Then we were both running up the hill, hurdling the high weeds toward Waymon's with the shouting getting closer because Caleb was running downhill. We ran all the way to Waymon's drive, hoping to find him awake so we could hide in his house, but all we saw was his exercycle out in his yard, with him slumped on it like a blanket. We went right up to him, and I jostled his stiff shoulder and took my hand away like a shot. Delane touched him too, and a weird look crept onto his face as he turned to me.

"What's the matter with Waymon?" he said.

Then the puffing came up behind us, and Caleb was still trying to shout, crawling over the hill and staring.

"You," he wheezed. "Why didn't you speak up? I coulda nailed somebody." He caught a glimpse of Waymon then, and his dark eyes widened as he coughed and stood slowly, brushing off

his shirt. He waited, either for us or for Waymon to say something, but then as he peered at the body for a while, his eyes became frightened and his shoulders tensed.

"No more exercising for Uncle Waymon," Delane said, and Caleb took one look at his gun, and another back at Waymon before he screamed and tore off running the other way. I chased him a little ways, but I was tired and Caleb was out of control, so I went back to where Delane was touching Waymon again with quick little jabs. Caleb's screams faded.

"He's dead, ain't he?" said Delane. I was still staring at Waymon. "We're gonna have to tell Momma." And he smiled because he'd made a decision.

The sun was on its way, but we didn't run back to the house, nor did we say anything along the way. I was thinking of Waymon, of how I never knew what to think of him, and of how he made me laugh when he was never trying to be funny.

"What's that?" I remember asking him.

"Called an exercycle, son," he said, raising thick gray brows and grinning.

"What's it do?"

"It's just like a bicycle."

"Then how come it don't go nowhere?" I said.

"Just a second," he said. "Let me get up this hill." He pumped his wobbly legs until his face got all red and then he pooped out and slumped on the handlebars, looking as dead as he was now, and all the time I was staring at him real odd, figuring something was wrong.

"Did you make it?" I said.

"Of course I did," he said angrily. "How's a man supposed to work a forty-acre field if he can't get his bike up a little hill like that?"

I asked Dad once if Waymon had lost his marbles, and he didn't answer me one way or the other. That was Dad all right, Mister Middle-of-the-Road. He ran the business end of our one-sixty spread, efficient down to every detail. Dad hired the workers, ordered the equipment, and scheduled the seeding and harvesting, but after that, every man's work was his own, except for Delane. His work was mine. It was like when they finally figured Delane wasn't right, they handed him over to me. "What happens when he gets old enough for his own land?" I remember asking. Dad looked at me like it was the first time he'd thought about it.

"Then I guess you'll have to help him," he said. That was the first time I thought about leaving. I had carried Delane enough. But it was all a batting order to Dad. Everybody had his turn.

And now he was staring us down in our dirty fishing clothes like we'd left work early and come in late at the same time, with Momma right behind him in her black Sunday heels trying to frown just like him and stand us in our tracks.

"If you can't handle a few rules," said Dad, "then maybe you aren't ready to handle a few acres." Delane stared at the dirt. "What were the gunshots?"

"Caleb was chasing us," I said.

"Well, I would've too," said Dad, and then he stared us down some more before he said, "You and Delane can drive the truck into town and meet us at church when you've changed and washed up. And see that you're not late."

"We saw Uncle Waymon," said Delane almost as an afterthought, and I jabbed him with my elbow. "He was on his exercycle."

Dad and Momma exchanged strange glances and walked past us to the car, their eyes avoiding us as they drove off in the dust.

We were behind them before the dust settled, after putting on different shirts and slapping warm water on our faces, and Delane was trying to sing over the roar of the two-ton echoing through the steel insides of the cab. I gave him a look, and he stopped.

"How come you didn't tell Momma?" he said after a wait.

I shrugged. "I figured maybe they'd go to church and pray for him and bring him back to life, that is, if they think that much of him."

Delane mulled that one over for a long time with his little head bowed and his eyes lowered, looking at his knobby knees that were sticking up because the floor wasn't deep enough to store his long legs.

"If you could grow corn like you grow them legs, why shoot," Waymon had told him. "Who planted 'em for you anyway?"

But Delane just stared at him for a bit and then checked his shoes for dirt.

"The boy's missing, ain't he?" Waymon whispered to me. I nodded and found myself staring into his eyes that wavered between green and blue like they didn't know what to do.

"You shoulda told Momma," said Delane in the truck.

"You shoulda told her," I said.

"I didn't kill him," said Delane.

"Neither did I," I said, smiling. "Uncle Caleb did."

"He did not."

"I know."

"Then you shoulda told him he didn't."

I laughed at him and saw how his eyes were like Waymon's.

Delane was praying in church for Waymon to start peddling again. His eyes were shut tight, and his thin little lips were sort of mumbling around. Then he opened his eyes real quick and caught me staring at him, and I smiled, but Momma thought we were joking and gave me a nudge. I thought about shouting then that Waymon was deader than these pews and half the people in 'em, but Dad would've flailed me good afterward. I not only do Delane's share, but I catch his share too.. It's like they want me to keep a handle on my own life as well as keep Delane from going crazy. But I vowed years ago to get out because before long it would be me going nuts, and nobody would ever know.

Delane was singing again on the way home, and I let him go, but he stopped when I turned off onto a deep-rutted road that wound through a bunch of elms, redbuds, and oaks.

"You'll get lost," said Delane. "And that will be the end of us."

I shook my head. "This road winds around to my land."

"Your land," said Delane. "Hrmph."

"Someday, they'll give you some too," I said. "Maybe they'll set you up with Waymon's, or maybe they'll give you mine."

"Why would they give me yours?"

"If I don't take it, that is."

"Why wouldn't you take it?" he said, and I smiled at him real big, and Delane started laughing, though his eyes were a little worried. Then I hit the brakes hard when I saw something off the roadside.

"Well, would you look at that," I said. There were ten or twelve long telephone poles piled up in the ditch with a red flag tied on the end of the longest. "Now if you was to build a house, right here's where you'd start."

"In the ditch?" said Delane.

I gave him a weird one. "You'd get yourself four of these long poles and dig yourself good solid holes and then stick 'em in where they're reaching for the sky. Then you'd bolt on a bunch of two-by-twelves before you start putting in floor boards and stuff, and then..." By the look in Delane's eyes, I had lost him in the ditch. Then he lit up like a firecracker.

"If we use them poles," he said, "maybe they'll give us free phones."

I dipped my head onto the steering wheel. Then I looked at him for a bit before I started the truck moving again. He was way off in some dream, building his own house, I supposed, though who knows who he'd get to build it for him, because by the time they did give him his land, if ever, who knows where in the world I'd be.

We drove around the forty they were giving me. It had been Dad's father's, and it hadn't been cleared or nothing for a long time. Most of it was good pasture waiting to be plowed, but on the north side there was a big hill plastered with oaks.

"Why wouldn't you want all this?" said Delane.

I gave him the same look I gave Dad when he told me it was mine.

"You don't look real happy about it," he had said.

"Just overwhelmed, I guess," I said.

"But you knew it was part of the deal when you were old enough," he said. We stared at each other for a while, him looking sort of worried and me knowing that look to be one belonging to a man who gives promotions and raises. Nowhere in that rigid face could I find my father. But if I had been him, I suppose I might not have seen family in my eyes either, for I was looking like an employee wondering whether or not to change jobs. I felt no family here other than duty. It was my job to take care of Delane, just like it was everyone else's job to farm their own fields. If i wasn't around, they'd just rent it out to somebody else. I managed a weak smile, and Dad left thinking everything was okay.

I pushed in the clutch, and we coasted down the long decline to the house. Dad and Momma were home already and had probably planned between them what they would say to us. I suddenly didn't want Delane to be in the line of fire.

"I'm going in," I told him. "Why don't you take the truck for a spin."

"I ain't never drove it before," he said.

"You've driven the tractor," I said. "It's just like the tractor." I was smiling, and his eyes lit up when I showed him how to work the gears. "You can't miss," I said, and I stepped out and gave him a playful salute.

"Maybe I'll go get them poles and build you a house," he said. I laughed, and he drove off in a stern-faced stare of concentration.

I watched him disappear, and then I walked through the porch door to find them waiting for me in the hallway. I walked quietly past them and sat down.

"You probably figure you're the best thing that ever happened to him, don't you?" said Dad. "If he ever gets back alive, it'll be a miracle. Maybe he won't come back at all. Maybe he'll just keep on going like you probably told him to do, just like everything else you've told him to do. Why don't you do this, Delane, why don't you do that, Delane. Well, let me tell you, Delane can't do nothing, and I'll be damned if I let you tell him he can."

"Uncle Waymon is dead," I said.

Dad's eyes sort of hung there along with his mouth, and Momma's widened up under her big flowered hat.

"What?" said Dad.

"I said Uncle Waymon is dead."

"He can't be," said Momma. "I've got a roast in the fridge that he's supposed to help eat tonight."

"Well, he's declined the invitation."

"But he said he'd come last Sunday," Momma said, and Dad gave her a look.

"Maybe if you'd bothered to go see him since then he'd be coming," I said. Then Dad gave me a look. "Or maybe if you'd have done so much as send one of the workers after him when he didn't show up in the fields. But no, Uncle Waymon was too busy falling off his rocker for you to bother with him. You're too busy here tying Delane up in knots and making me feel like I should step right in and be one of you. Well, I guess I ain't."

Dad was coming at me with tensed shoulders and tightened fists with a look in his eyes that I had seen only once before when one of the workers turned into a horse thief. I was shrinking back a little, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Momma looking scared and shuddering. But then we heard somebody screaming outside, and Dad's eyes cooled, and I followed his glance to the door. When Dad opened it, we saw Caleb.

"Come out here and get your killer," he hollered, holding his hands up behind his head. "You heard me. There's my gun." He pointed an elbow to the rifle on the ground. "I shot him, dammit, just like in the movies. Thirty paces and bam." We all stood there and didn't say nothing. "Well, do something before

I decide to bolt."

"You couldn't have shot Waymon more than you could've shot a rabbit at thirty paces," I said.

"I nailed him good, boy," said Caleb. "And if you had any smarts, you'd get your daddy to tie up his family's hunter."

"You ain't no hunter," I said. "Hunters at least shoot straight."

"Goddamn you, boy, I said I..."" The roar of the truck coming over the hill drowned him out, and Delane was leaning his head out the window whooping it up. Caleb stood frozen in the drive while Delane bounced around in the cab.

"Get out of the way!" he shouted, and Caleb's eyes were all white before instinct made him leap into the yard while Delane blew past in a cloud of dust and then swerved off to the side to a jolting halt. Delane crawled out and brushed himself off as Caleb struggled to his knees.

"Brakes could use some work," Delane said, and then he walked past us all into the house.

Caleb got up with a look of disbelief and stomped in after him. Dad's face had regained fire as well as Momma's, and they both flashed blaming eyes at me, but I just shrugged them off.

"You coulda killed me, boy," Caleb shouted at Delane, who had his head in the refrigerator.

"If I'da knowed you was in the drive, Caleb, I'da taken the back way."

"Like hell you woulda. Did you see his eyes?" Caleb said to Dad. "He was after me, I tell you."

"Just like you was after Waymon," I said.

"You said I didn't kill Waymon."

"We didn't find no bullet holes anyway."

Dad frowned at me real hard. Delane was slapping sausage slices on rye bread and layering them with lettuce and onions dipped in vinegar.

"What the hell is he eating?" Caleb said. Nobody answered. Caleb grabbed the breadsack from Delane and pulled out two slices for himself and then took the sausage from Delane's other hand. "Coulda killed me," he said, slicing sausage. "Give me the lettuce."

"Delane didn't mean anything," said Dad. "He wouldn't have even been in the truck if it weren't for big brother here."

"So it was you," Caleb said, squinting yellowish eyes at me. "You're the one told him to bump me off." Caleb dipped his hand in the onion jar and came up empty. "You took the last one," he told Delane. "Didn't even leave me a goddamn onion." Delane separated his sandwich and offered Caleb an onion slice. "Forget it," Caleb said. "Probably poisoned." Then he looked at Dad. "And you," he said. "Why ain't you after me? Everybody else is."

"We should be discussing Waymon," I said loudly. "Remember? Tall, skinny guy, liked to ride bikes?"

"He's the only one who ain't after me," said Caleb. "Though he would if he could."

"He's dead, for crying out loud!"

Caleb stopped chewing, and Dad stared at the floor. Momma was chopping another onion.

"You're absolutely right," said Caleb. "We'll have to remember not to set a place for him at dinner tonight."

Delane sort of snorted a laugh through his mouthful of sausage, and Caleb grinned at him, but then stopped because he remembered he was mad at him. I left the room, past my sad-looking father who was staring the floor down like there was a bug holding him at gunpoint.

I walked out to the barn and looked at my tools, and at all the pieces of oak, white pine, and cedar spread around, just waiting for me to make them look like something. That I could do anywhere. There was nothing special here that made my wood look any different. I used to think there was, something binding other than the deeds of our land and the deeds of our labor. We were like the wood to an unbuilt house, and I had thought that I could put things together, but I could do nothing more than build our coffins, with no feeling for their contents or their pallbearers.

Waymon's I was making with a wavy-grained oak floor and routeredged sidewalls connected by wood pegs. I had just backed away from the circular saw when I felt Dad behind me. I paused and gave him a glance, then went back to work, figuring where the four bronze handles would go.

"Kind of looks like a big drawer, doesn't it?" Dad said.

"For things that won't be taken out," I said.

Dad sighed, and there was silence for a while.

"You probably think I never cared much for him," he said. I stayed quiet. "There's something running inside us all that you can feel without saying," he said. I looked and saw his eyes trying to explain that, but I turned away.

"I like things out in the open," I said.

"So you have condemned me, I suppose."

I didn't say nothing.

"This is the first thing you've made for Waymon, isn't it?" he said. "Good Lord, you've built half the things we own, nice ones too, Delane's bed and dresser, our kitchen table, Caleb's rocker. How many are there?"

"Enough for a small fortune in town," I said.

Dad walked up close behind me and sat on a hay bale, and when I crouched to start drilling handle holes I was right next to him. I looked at him and his eyes were on me firm and gentle at the same time, like there were two different people looking at me, and I had to put down the drill.

"There's nothing says you have to stay," he said. I never wanted him to say that. "But before you go, you better watch who you go laying blame on. There wasn't any of us who could've stopped Waymon from dying."

"But nobody even tried," I said through gritted teeth.

"Including you," said Dad, standing. He walked to the barn door and opened it so that a triangle of light came through and lit up the oak. "Why didn't you make something else out of the same wood before so that Waymon could've seen?"

"Waymon was too crazy to have appreaciated it," I blurted. "Ask Caleb. He'll tell you. It's all he thinks about. Waymon's crazy, Waymon's nuts."

"Just like Delane," Dad said with a weird grin.

"Yeah, just like Delane. And it won't be long before we're burying him too because you'll have isolated him just like everybody else."

"Just like you have," he said.

"Like hell. Look at all I've done for him."

"Maybe he needs something besides furniture."

"Well, why don't you give it to him instead of chaining him to a pole."

"He'll get his own land. What else do you want me to do?"

"Try being his father," I said. "Try being my father."

He paused, and I looked away from him. "If I weren't your father, I'd make you stay," he said. "Delane chains himself to a pole because he needs to. You don't. That doesn't change my feeling for either one of you. If you'd stop blaming everybody in sight for your own lack of what you call family, you'd see that."

We looked at each other for a long time before he blanked out the triangle and left me to finish my job, which I did, very mechanically, as if I were somewhere else.

That afternoon, me and Delane rode in the truck bed while Dad drove and Caleb kept him company in the cab, though when I peered in the window, I never saw no lips moving. Me and Delane didn't say nothing either. His platinum hair was flying in the wind, and every once in a while he'd prop his big feet up on the oak box and I'd have to get on him about it.

"Get the clompers off," I'd say. He'd lift 'em quick, mouth smiling and eyes apologizing, but two minutes later he'd have his feet back up there again, and I finally gave up yakking at him. I was wishing the truck would keep moving because I liked the motion, the bouncing, and the breeze. But we would stop where Waymon had stopped, and that would be the last thing to do. Then I could be moving again.

We hopped out of the truck and me and Delane carried the box up Waymon's drive to where Dad and Caleb were standing sadly. Caleb was working over some tobacco, and Dad had his hands in his back pockets while he stared at Waymon's old house, the browned pea vines, and the disturbed limestones bordering the yard. We set the box beside the exercycle and stared at each other. Then Delane went up and tapped Waymon on the shoulder.

"Time to go, Waymon," he said, and we all looked away.

I glanced back and found him trying to measure a grip on Waymon, so he could get him off without a struggle, but he ended up flopping his hands down at his sides.

"He don't want to go," he said.

"What do you mean he don't want to go?" said Caleb.

"He's stuck."

"Oh, goddamn," Caleb said, and he angrily pushed Delane aside. "C'mon, big brother," he said. "I've seen you on this blasted thing for the last time." But Caleb almost knocked him

over trying to get him off. He tried again with no success and kicked at the dirt.

"Well?" I said.

"He's stuck, goddammit," said Caleb. "Rigor-mortared right on there." And Delane smiled because he had been right.

"Maybe we should wait awhile," said Dad, but Caleb shook him off.

"If we could get him off and put him in a big book," Delane said, "we could flatten him out like they do with leaves." We all gave him looks.

"You a live one, ain't you?" said Caleb.

We drove back the same way we drove in, only this time me and Delane steadied Waymon from falling off the truck as he and his exercycle bounced stiffly in the opened oak box.

"Gonna have to make a new lid," said Delane. I nodded. "Gonna be a weird one." And he laughed, then cut short with his eyes becoming real serous. I smiled at him the whole way home.

Of course, Momma was horrified.

"Get that thing out of my house," she said.

"It's Uncle Waymon," I said.

She looked hard at what we held, and then shuddered. "Well, don't bring him in here."

"We can't just leave him in the yard," Caleb said. He'd look like a cast iron lawn dog."

"Well, put him in the barn, for heaven's sake. I'm trying to make dinner."

Dad put his arm around her and led her inside, and Caleb followed them, shaking his head and laughing quietly. Me and Delane looked at each other and blinked.

"Guess we oughta put him in the barn," he said. So we each grabbed a wheel and hoisted him into where the air smelled of freshly cut wood mixed with musty hay and horsehide. We stood there staring for a moment until Delane said, "Sort of looks like a nativity scene, don't it?" and I though about giving him another look, but I just nodded and left him next to Waymon, sitting on the straw-covered floor and sticking his head into the bowl of his overgrown hands.

I walked into the house, smelling boiled potatoes and broiled roast, and heard Caleb's rising voice.

"What do you mean he ain't gonna take it? You're his father. Make him take it. Does he think Delane can run it himself?" Then I came in and everything got quiet. I looked them all in the eye and took my place at the table. Caleb knew I had heard him, and he leaned toward me from his chair and said, "It's just that you is supposed to take care of your own."

"Caleb," said Dad.

I started to say something, but decided not to, smiling instead at Caleb, which puzzled him and made the brightness of his eyes fade.

"Dinner's ready," said Momma. "Go get Delane. And tell him to wash up, for God's sake."

I got up and went out to the barn, but Delane had left Waymon by himself. I looked around to where the slope into the valley began and I spotted his backside slowly sinking down the

path through the tall weeds. I walked after him, in no hurry, for the mystery of his mind lured me, and I was happy following him for a change, to see how it felt.

He led me all the way beyond the pond and up the east ridge to where we buried our past. There was about half an acre between Waymon's forty and what would be my own with evergreens and elms shading the stones and crosses. Delane went past the gate and stood next to the last grave in the long, single file and stretched his gaze first one way, then the other. I came up behind him and rustled, but he did not jump, for he might've known I was behind him all along.

"How far do you think the line will go?" he said.

I shrugged, and there was silence. Then I told him dinner was ready.

"You came all the way up here just to tell me that?"

"I thought you might be hungry," I said.

Neither one of us moved.

"You know, one of these days," he said, "we're gonna have to start a new row or else we'll bust right out of the fence."

I waited awhile, then said, "Momma fixed a roast."

"Maybe Waymon would like to start a new row," said Delane. "I think he'd get a kick out of it."

I stared at him for a long time, watching his eyes survey the graves. Already, he'd thought about Waymon more than any of us had all day. He'd prayed for him, flattened him out in a book, and put him in a nativity scene. All I had done was to build a lousy coffin.

"There's potatoes and gravy and everything," I said.

He turned to me, smiling. "Okay," he said. "There's no beating Momma's gravy."

We were late getting back, but Momma didn't say nothing, though she wanted to, and all you could hear during dinner were the tinkling of knives against china and Caleb's loud coffee slurps. I spent the time watching Delane's mouth eat and his eyes think of Waymon. He caught me staring and gave me a big grin.

In the morning, we all gathered at the barn. I had spent most of the night reconstructing the lid to where the whole thing now looked like some squared-off car without wheels. Momma couldn't keep her eyes on it too long before she'd either bust out bawling or else hide her head in shame. Her head was hidden anyway behind a mass of black veils so that she couldn't even see where she was, and Dad had to hold onto her arm.

"Well," Caleb said to me and Delane. "Load him up and let's get it over with." Then he turned to Dad. "The workers digging?"

"They should be finished by now."

Me and Delane didn't move.

"C'mon," said Caleb. "You think he's gonna get in by himself?"

"I think we oughta carry him," I said.

"What, all the way? Are you out of your mind?"

I looked at Dad and he sighed. "Look," he said finally. "We can drive past the pond and walk him the rest of the way."

"Well, do something," Momma said. "We don't have all day."

So me and Delane loaded up the truck and rode alongside of Waymon until the bouncing stopped past the pond. Dad helped Momma out of the cab and Caleb hobbled out after her and watched us unload. Me and Delane each grabbed a handle and Dad came over and joined us. We were all bent over waiting for Caleb.

"I thought you was going to have the workers pallbear," he said.

"We take care of our own," I said.

Caleb sneered at me. "Well, if it ain't Mr. Tradition," he said. "I hope your town friends do as well for you when it's your turn." He laughed, and Dad told him to shut up. Then we started, with Caleb grabbing the last handle and Momma stumbling along behind us.

"We oughta have some music," said Delane.

"Well, don't ask me to sing," said Caleb. We were quiet the rest of the way.

When we came over the ridge, we saw that the workers hadn't done a thing. The three of them were sitting on the ground passing whiskey between them and wiping their mouths with their sleeves.

"What the hell," said Caleb dropping his end and causing us to thump Waymon to the dirt. He stalked over to the workers and stood tall above them, scowling and grabbing the bottle away. He started to say something, but then just stared at each one of them, then at each one of us before he sat heavily and tipped the bottle to himself. The workers started laughing, but stopped when they looked at Dad. One of them tried to get the bottle back from Caleb, but Caleb pulled it away from his reach and spit at the worker's hand.

I picked up one of the shovels and went over to where Dad's father had been buried and thrust it into the grass but stopped in mid-dig and matted it down again. Then I walked all the way back down the row to where, looking back, Dad and Delane were merely figures without eyes. And below the first grave of a forgotten tie I began digging, soon to be joined by Delane and then Dad, with none of us saying nothing until we had gone far enough, and we all stopped when we knew. We went back and got him then, and Caleb grabbed his handle, carrying the bottle in his other hand, and we passed Momma, looking like she was sleeping, and the workers, who surely were.

"Of course," said Caleb, "you just had to start a new row. Anything to get me to walk a little farther."

He sat and watched us as we put back the dirt, finishing the whiskey and not saying a word. The noon sun was over us now as we smoothed out the hump, and we all stood there leaning on our shovels. Caleb got up and tossed the empty bottle onto the grave and smiled.

"He always liked to save 'em," he said. We stood there for a while, and the look in everyone's eyes matched Delane's, which was the first time all of us had been on his level.

Then we went back to the truck. Dad kicked the workers awake, and then nudged Momma and helped her into the cab. We were all moving again, heading into the white, billowing clouds

coming in like mountains and chasing the sun away from us. It was like the race I found myself in now, running from what I knew would catch me, that had been gaining all along, giving me the itch. It would be raining soon, and I wondered if all the loose dirt would wash away and leave the awkward box out in the open. All afternoon I waited, waited for the darkness to overtake the sky.

The rain began after dinner, after I had told them I was going to bed early, and its thumping on the roof lulled me into a sleep made uneasy by the thunder and my thoughts. I fought the urge to leave then, for I knew they would be awake, and if I had seen just one of them, I would not have been able to go. I had made myself believe there was nothing binding us, but the eyes I had seen today were working on me like june bugs on a porch light. Still, I was trying to keep a promise to myself.

I kept seeing them all in the box, one by one, having to carry them all, dragging them through the mud, and Caleb laughed at me every time I passed him, and even when I carried him, he laughed from the inside, through the box and the rain. Then it was Delane I carried, over and over, from the barn to the ridge, where I dug another hole. And when I'd go back to the barn, he'd be there again. And I kept sawing the oak slabs until I had boxes piled up to the roof, all for Delane, and then I kept digging holes on past the fence, on into my land.

The thunder got me then, and I realized I had been out for a long time. The house was as quiet as it was the morning we fished, and the rain was all I could hear. I put on the thickest shoes I could find and wrapped a change of clothes in an old fishing coat before I wrapped myself in one as well.

I wasn't careful in sneaking out because I was in too much of a hurry. Nothing mattered because I was moving, running against the rain and the wind, the only things that kept me from thinking I might still be asleep. I was moving toward not having to worry about them, and moving from swiftly approaching knowledge that what Dad had said might have been true, that there was something in us, well-hidden in them, that I had decided was no longer in me. It was like I could see it gaining and could feel its presence as I was adding to the walls around me, for I built them as well as coffins. But they weren't high enough to block out what I saw and heard as I ran across my land. The steady booms of metal against wood penetrated the rain, and a sheening, raincoated figure stood shadowed in the lightning. I slowed to a walk now, forced by some power other than my own that had beaten me. I was on my own land, and my boots were sinking into the mud.

Delane smiled when he saw me and stopped swinging the sledgehammer.

"Didn't think I could do it, did you?" he shouted through the rain. "I figured since it was muddy, it would be easier getting the poles in." He pointed to his raised, rain-dripping brows. "Pretty smart, huh?" I looked at the five or six foot pole he'd managed to get in the ground and then back up at him. "I tied 'em to the back of the truck and dragged 'em," he said. "They were a little muddy, but I wiped 'em off good in the barn

before I cut 'em."

I stared at him and trembled in my frustrated anger. "You weren't supposed to cut 'em, Delane, goddammit!" I shouted. "You weren't supposed to cut 'em!" I threw down the fishing coat full of clothes, where they fell out and soaked up the rain. Delane did not look at them, but at me instead, and his smile disappeared before he turned to look at his shortened poles. He stared at them for a long time and we stood there getting wet until he looked up with a glimmer in his eyes.

"It could still be a house," he said. "A short one."

Something told me to laugh, but I didn't. The first pole was set, and though it was defective, my house had begun, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was carrying Delane again, as I always had and always would. I was his pallbearer, even though he was alive, for what is a pallbearer but somebody who helps somebody else get to where he can't go on his own.

Delane turned to look at the clothes, and then gave me his puzzled eyes.

"I thought you might want to change," I said.

"But they ain't no drier than what I got on."

I shrugged. That's because it's raining."

"Oh," said Delane. He blinked at me for a while.

"You know," I said. "Fishing's pretty good in the rain." His eyes smiled. "Maybe if we catch something and cook it for breakfast, Momma won't be so mad."

"You don't want to finish your house then?" he said.

"No," I said.

"Oh," he said. "I just thought you might."

"Well, I don't," I said. "I'd rather go fishing."

"Okay, then we'll go fishing," said Delane. "That's what we'll do."

And that's what we did.

Charles Cagle

THE MUSEUM

She had Tad dressed and ready when he got there, a smart little blue suit and open white collar. The last time he visited, the boy had been wearing a baseball cap and wheat jeans, so Harry had complained. Tad's bright gold hair was Harry's gold hair, and his father's before him--and the swift, sharp blue eyes were his, too, the old Welsh stock going back to the mists of the American colonies and before. He often wondered how it would be to enter a time machine and return for a chat with the long parade of his ancestors, pushing it as far as possible, back to the Gauls, back even to the Celtic tribes sitting in the twilight of some forgotten world around the slow-rising blue smoke of a campfire, chatting with the sculpted faces of the bloodline.

"Hello, Harry--how are you?"

Christi had her hand out, like a goddamn careerwoman. He half expected her to try to sell him a policy.

"Fine, Christi, and you?"

"Fine."

The ritual. He wished for once she could just can it, just forget the civilities, quit trying to be the charming, worldly-wise sophisticate who had it all together now, who could change flats and be knowledgable about screwdrivers, and whip out her own tax forms with her mod glasses perched on the end of her pert nose.

"He didn't feel well last night," Christi said, lowering her voice so the boy wouldn't hear. "Nothing drastic, just a little coughing and restlessness. I don't think you ought to overdo it, though."

"I thought I'd take him to the museum, would that be overdoing it?"

She looked at him with that vague, supercilious air that had been the beginning--a part of the beginning--of his knowledge that it would all end between them. "Museum?" she said.

"Nothing strenuous."

He saw the glint in her eyes, and it amused him to be faintly malicious, so he added, "If you have no objection to the boy being force-fed a bit of culture."

"I have no objection, I just wondered what kind of museum."

"A museum is a museum is a museum. Gertrude Stein."

"Harry, I just want to know what he'll be doing."

"I'm taking him to a bar, actually. I want him to learn to drink Scotch like his daddy."

"That isn't the least bit funny."

"Good, I'm glad you detected that." He smiled. "The old war museum on Pennington Avenue."

He saw her lips firm in an ugly way, and he had the faintest dull recollection of how he used to marvel at those same lips, the chiseled perfection of them, how he could never

get enough of kissing that softly yielding flesh--how one rainy night a week after they were married he had told her he wanted to make a shrine of her mouth to worship forever, forever.

"I don't want to overdo this, Harry," she said, "but Tad is a delicate child, and he hasn't been well. I didn't mean that you shouldn't try to have a nice day with him."

"You are generous," he said, and before she could reply he had turned and clapped his hands at the boy, who was hanging back in the depths of the apartment like a shy little warrior. "Hey, tiger!" he called. He clapped his hands again.

The boy ran to him, into his arms. He gathered him up and kissed him on the cheek. The child felt like a cluster of swan feathers in his arms.

Christi gave them both her polished, bland smile. "Be a good boy, Taddie," she said.

"Daddy," the boy said, "can we go ride the boats in the park like last time?"

They didn't go ride the boats in the park. Instead, they went to the war museum on the north side of the city, a place Harry hadn't been himself since he was a boy a bit older than Tad. He justified the tour by telling himself his son should see such things, that he would enjoy the armor and the history--but in fact he knew it was because it was the fartherest point away from Christi. It would be like getting Tad away from the magic circle of her influence, like escaping from a witch. He smiled at that. Christi was no witch, she was still too beautiful for that. Except wasn't there something in history about Satan invading the bodies of beautiful women? Weren't they called "white witches" because they could seem to do good magic?

"Daddy, will there be any cowboys in the museum?"

"There might be, Tad. I don't remember. We'll ask the man when we get there."

"I saw a cowboy movie on TV the other afternoon, it was really good." The boy made a gun with his hand, his index finger pointing straight out and his thumb imitating the hammer of a Colt-45. "Pow, pow, pow-pow!" he yelped, shooting imaginary Indians off imaginary horses outside the car window.

"Does your mother let you watch a lot of television?" Harry asked.

"No, I never get to."

"Does she ever read to you?"

"No, but Cinny does."

""Cinny? Who's that?"

"She watches TV, too."

"Cinny. . . is that a babysitter? I mean, is she somebody who stays with you sometimes when Mommy is out?"

"Yes."

"What does Cinny read to you?"

"Story books. I like the frog best."

"Frog?"

"He's a frog and he eats out of a golden bowl. She puts him under her pillow and he turns into a prince."

"You like that one, eh."

"It's funny, Daddy, can I have a frog?"

"I don't think your mother would approve."

"Yeah, she already told me. She said it would eat my goldfish." He looked at his father slyly. "If I can't have a frog, what can I have?"

"Maybe we can find something you'd like in the museum. I think they have a room where they sell things. We'll see."

The museum was an old solemn structure which had been designed and built around 1906. A huge, sprawling red-brick building with a base of reddish sandstone and dozens of huge, arched windows framed in bronze-green metal, the roof was covered with sharp cornices and stone trimming that made the whole place look faintly like a castle. Harry could remember that just the sight of it sent thrills through him those long years ago when his father would bring him here. He glanced over unobtrusively to see if Tad was repeating his own youthful wonder, but the boy didn't seem to be noticing. In fact, Tad wasn't looking ahead through the windshield but instead was glancing out the side window at the large oaks that lined the approach. The boy was counting the oaks as they went by.

"Big building, Tad," Harry said. "Doesn't it remind you of a castle?"

The boy looked, but said nothing.

They parked in the broad, half-empty parking lot and Harry locked the car. The sun was beating down, and the museum looked cool and inviting. When they got inside, Harry had to ask the guard--an old man in a dingy uniform--where the directory was. He vaguely remembered that there was a big diagram or something just inside the hall, but he couldn't find it, and the guard told him they had removed it twenty years ago, but they now had brochures to follow and he and the boy could get one for a dollar at the desk over by the marble columns.

The brochure was divided into five categories, and a blue slip of paper inserted added a sixth--the Age of Nuclear War. Glancing at the brochure, Harry said, "Let's skip the ancient stuff--the Greeks and the Romans. Let's see...'The Crusades,' that sounds like a winner."

He and the boy went down the cool, polished hall to where a small sign directed them to the section called Medieval Warfare. The area was divided into three big rooms, Early Medieval Warfare, The Norman Conquests and the Crusades, and The High Middle Ages. All the rooms were filled with glass cases, maps, wall hangings, and instruments of war. A dozen or so mannequins dressed up in mail-shirts and plate armor were ranged around the rooms, and spotted here and there on the high walls were clusters of swords, battleaxes, and crossbows.

At first Harry tried to keep Tad with him, to explain things, to prick the boy's interest in the history of some of the stuff--like the big diorama of the battle of Agincourt which had hundreds of little lead soldiers dressed in period costumes--the French men-at-arms and the massed English archers with their crossbows raised. But Tad's attention-span was much too limited to keep him corralled, so finally Harry just let the

boy wander on his own. Oddly enough, the big museum brought back no special memories for Harry. He had thought a wave of nostalgia or something would sweep him along, but he wasn't a boy any longer--and instead of wanting to study the exhibits thoroughly and go on to what the brochure called "The Era of Nelson, Napoleon and Wellington" and "The Beginnings of Modern War," Harry found himself bored. But, he thought, if Tad could really enjoy the day then it would have been worth it. He didn't want the boy not to like baseball, say, but he didn't want him to grow up a baseball idiot, either.

He finally found Tad again--in the Eastern Warfare room--standing mesmerized in front of a huge mock-up elephant that was wearing a suit of eighteenth-century armor. The explanatory sign at the foot of the exhibit said that the warriors of India had relied heavily on elephant warfare, and that this particular elephant armor had been used at the battle of Plassey. Harry couldn't remember anything about the exhibit, and wondered if it had actually been there when he was Tad's age.

"He looks funny," Tad said, grinning.

"Not like the ones the zoo has," Harry agreed.

It was while Harry was in the same room, standing in front of a large painting showing the Moghul capture of Bakadur Khan that he heard his name called. He turned and regarded the large, smiling red-haired man coming toward him. It took a few seconds before Harry recognized who it was--Bill Fletcher, with a few pounds on him. Harry held out his hand.

"What the hell are you doing here, pal?" the man said, pumping Harry's hand warmly.

"Boning up for the next war," Harry answered, grinning. "I'm showing my boy around."

"That him?" Fletcher asked, nodding at Tad, who was now around the other side of the huge elephant, staring up at the tusks.

"Seven last month," Harry said, proudly. "He's growing up."

"How's Christi?"

"Fine. We're divorced, you know."

"You're kidding me," Fletcher said, looking abashed. "I'm really sorry to hear it, Harry."

"Yes, well...it happens. How's your wife""

"Junie is just great. Fat and sassy. Say, where have you been keeping yourself, pal. I haven't seen you for a couple of aeons."

"I'm living in New York. I come down to see the boy now and then--when Christi says it's okay. She's got him, of course."

Fletcher smiled dimly. "Isn't that the way it goes."

Harry regarded the large man again. Once, come to think of it, they had been pretty good friends. He and Christi had even been out a couple of times with Bill and his wife, but it seemed such a long time ago--his drinking period--that all of it was sort of vague. Actually, he couldn't even remember if Junie Fletcher was a brunette or a blonde.

"Well," Harry said, "what brings you to the wars?"

Fletcher looked puzzled momentarily, then grinned. "Oh, you mean this place? I love it. I come out here a lot on my afternoons off, believe it or not. It's peaceful."

Harry smiled at that. "How do you like the longbowmen of Agincourt?" he said.

"The what?"

"The big diorama in the Crusades room."

"Oh, yeah, that one. Really super what they've done out here. Say, could I meet your boy?"

"Sure." Harry glanced again at the elephant, but Tad was no longer there. "If we can find him, that is," he said.

They found Tad in the next room, in the middle of the model ships of the Spanish Armada in full sail. Harry introduced the boy to Fletcher, who bent his big frame down to shake Tad's hand. It gave Harry a curious feeling, seeing that, seeing Tad shake hands--a curious and rather melancholy feeling. He had a strange notion that the boy might grow up overnight one of these days when he was off in New York--and he'd come back to find a stranger instead of a son.

"Did you see the iron elephant?" Tad asked Fletcher, earnestly.

"Hey, no," Fletcher said, pretending great interest. "They got a real iron elephant out here? I'd like to see that--wanta show me?"

"You come, too, daddy," Tad said, and reached up to take his hand.

On the way back to the elephant, Fletcher glanced at Harry and said, "Gee, pal, I've really missed you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, you always replaced the divots."

Harry grinned. "I was a lousy goddamn golf player, and you know it."

"Aw, you could slice pretty good. How's your game, seriously."

"Terrible. I've played once or twice in Jersey. Yours?"

"I still win all the driving contests--and lose the tournaments."

"Par," Harry said, smiling.

He liked Fletcher. Now that he was thinking about it, he remembered the really good times they did have at the country club--before it all started with Christi and he quit going. Fletcher was an investment broker, or something like that, although it had been one of those cardinal rules not to shop-talk at the club. He had a picture in his mind--a bit sentimental, he had to admit--of very happy times, the long rounds on the brilliant greens, then a couple of drinks back in the clubhouse bar. The thought of the drinks sent a pang almost as keen as lust through him. Yes, he would like a Scotch, so why the hell deny it. And no, he would not have one.

When the elephant came into view, Tad released Harry's hand and ran forward.

"Christi getting along okay--with the boy, and all?" Fletcher asked.

"Christi is a white witch."

"She's a what?"

"She makes good magic with Tad."

Fletcher grinned. "Hey, pal, you're way over my head."

"Sorry. I was just being stupid. Christi and Tad are getting along fine without me. She had a good job a long time before I actually moved out."

"Secretary, isn't she?"

"Freelance shorthand reporter. She studied the stuff in school. She's good, too. Would you believe two-hundred words a damned minute."

"Pays well?"

"Very--and she's always working. You'd be surprised how many hot-air artists at conventions and conferences want their every syllable recorded for posterity."

"I'm glad she's not hitting you up, that could be hell."

"I pay into the trust fund for Tad, of course."

Fletcher blinked. "Oh, sure. I didn't mean--well, you know what I meant. A guy at the office has to live on sardines and beer. He pays through the ass to his ex."

"You mean I'm lucky."

"The guy was going out on his wife--I mean even bringing women home in front of his kids. The judge threw the book at him."

Harry knew a cue when he heard one. He debated for a few seconds, then said, "I was a drunk, Bill."

Fletcher glanced at him to see if he was joking. "Hey, I don't remember you having--what do they call it?--a problem."

"It had me."

"We used to have a couple of drinks, I remember."

"What you don't remember, because you weren't around, was that I kept drinking after I got home. I didn't bring women home, I brought bottles."

"Doing okay now?"

"Fine."

"You can handle it, then?"

They had stopped now, out of Tad's hearing, and Harry held out his hands, palms down, like a brain surgeon. "See," he said, smiling, "steady as the proverbial rock."

"That's good, pal," Fletcher said, without smiling back.

Something about the way Fletcher spoke annoyed Harry. There was the faintest tone of something--not a patronizing tone, exactly, but the kind of tone you used to hear in high school when you fumbled the football and some jock said, "Forget it, kid--it could happen to me, too." Only it never did happen to the jock. Fletcher, Harry decided, was acting like a jock.

"Why don't you come back to the motel and we'll have a drink, for old times sake," Harry said, lightly.

He made sure Fletcher was looking at him when he said it.

In the exchange of looks, Harry knew what Fletcher was thinking. Saying no would only make Fletcher look distrusting--a most serious offense to the old country club ties.

"Be glad to, Harry," FLetcher said.

When they reached the elephant, Tad was touching the great fake tusks that hung down with gold bands spaced around them.

"Big devil," Fletcher said.

"And dangerous," Harry added. "They say Hannibal lost more men from his own elephants stampeding than he did to the Roman centurions."

"That a fact?"

Harry grinned. "I wouldn't know. I just made it up."

Fletcher returned the grin. "Same old Harry Bates," he said.

Before leaving the museum, Harry took Tad to the souvenir shop and let him select anything he wanted. In the end, the boy wanted a space gun, one that shot sparks, and he tried it out by killing Fletcher and Harry three or four times.

"I'll follow you to your motel," Fletcher said, outside on the parking lot. "Where are you staying?"

"In a dump. Let's go to the Pearl Room at the Statler-Hilton."

"That's pretty far downtown. Junie--"

"You can call her. I'd like to see the Pearl Room again--and they can handle Tad there."

Fletcher shrugged, then smiled. "Sounds great," he said, "but I can only stay for one drink. Junie really does expect me home."

"I never have more than one drink these days," Harry said.

The Pearl Room was what they call a very posh restaurant bar with a flashy decor, this one Polynesian--waiters in rainbow-hued sports shirts, tables built around fake palm trees with pineapple-shaped candles, and the piped-in music of Hawaiian guitars. But the best part of it was the "tot's beach," a glass-enclosed room adjoining the bar with real sand and a panoramic, lighted picture of the shore of Waikiki. Big stone turtles and other amusements were there for the youngsters of patrons, so that you could sit and enjoy a drink without having the bother of tending your brood. It had been a favorite place for Harry and Christi in the old days.

They got Tad into the swing of things on the beach, then Harry and Fletcher settled themselves so they could watch the boy. Fletcher ordered a brandy and Harry treated himself to a double scotch.

"I envy you, Harry," Fletcher said as they waited for the drinks.

"You mean you want a divorce, too?"

Fletcher smiled. "No, I mean your background. You're very well educated, I remember."

"Quoting Swinburne doesn't get you much. Anyway, I just went to the school my father sent me to."

"Harvard, wasn't it?"

"Exeter. Daniel Webster and I were classmates--but not for long. I never finished."

"What happened?"

"The usual. Parties, girls, drinking. I spent more time in New York than I did in New Hampshire. My father finally decided I could do without the finer nuances of a private education, so he put me to work in one of his companies." Harry smiled. "Thus began my odious climb up the corporate ladder. I did learn to read at Exeter, however." He glanced toward the bar, then said, "The service isn't what it used to be in this place."

In a few minutes the drinks came, and Harry felt the welcome, acrid taste of his first scotch in a month. He'd made up the business about one drink a day for Fletcher's benefit.

"When did you meet old Christi?" Fletcher asked.

"Ah, yes, old Christi. I met her at a dinner dance my father gave. She was the daughter of one of his business cronies."

"Love at first sight?"

"Hardly. I didn't like Christi at first. She was--arch."

"Arch?"

"It means mischievous, gaily mischievous or something like that. She wouldn't let me know how she felt about things. She hid herself behind a beautiful face and a cunning wit." He took another sip of his drink. "We didn't sleep together until we were married."

Fletcher grinned. "Pretty rare these days, that," he said.

"A lost commodity."

"You both seemed very happy. I know Junie and I thought so. We talked about what a happy couple you two were."

"I was hiding my unhappiness behind my beautiful face and cunning wit."

"What did your dad think?"

"About what?"

"About your breaking up with Christi."

"A father knows his own son. He still thinks we'll get back together. He and Christi's father sit in Dad's panelled drawing room in their smoking jackets and talk about how soon it'll be before we kiss and make up. They dream such shit with their noses in their brandy snifters. Oh, sorry."

Fletcher smiled again, and took a sip from his own brandy.

"Actually, I think I could go back to her," Harry said, glancing over his drink toward the glass beach room. Tad was having a big time with another little boy and the new space gun. "I think my son needs a father."

"You'll always be his father," Fletcher said, helpfully.

Harry looked back at his Scotch, then lifted it and drained the glass. "Let's have another," he said. "I was just lying about only having one drink a day." He smiled lightly at Fletcher. "I lied about Hannibal, I lie about scotch."

"Same old Harry," Fletcher said. "This round's on me, pal."

It was a while later, when Harry was standing in the men's room in front of a pastel-blue urinal that he heard his name called again. "Hey--Mr. Bates, how <u>are</u> you?"

Harry glanced over his shoulder and saw the young assistant bartender drying his hands on a paper towel and smiling at him.

"Joe," Harry said, pleasantly, his voice only slightly slurred by the second drink, "How are you?"

"Fine, Mr. Bates, how have you been?"

"Sober, lately."

The bartender grinned. "I knew I hadn't seen you in here in quite a while. Your wife has been in a few times, though."

"Oh, really?" The news gave him a sharp uplift.

"She comes in with the guy you're sitting with. He a family friend, or something?"

Harry looked away. "Yes," he said.

The young bartender rolled the paper towel into a ball and shot it expertly into the receptacle. "I never told you, Mr. Bates," he said, "but you were about the best tipper in the place. You ought to see how some of them tip these days."

"You mixed a rare drink, Joe."

"Thanks. Hey, good to see you again, sir."

When he was gone, Harry still stood in front of the urinal. He looked up into the mirror. His own dulled blue eyes looked back at him.

When he returned to the table, Fletcher was watching Tad through the glass window. He smiled briefly as Harry sat down.

Harry caught the waiter's eye and ordered another round. Fletcher made no effort to stop him.

"So," Harry said, as brightly as he could manage, "you like to go to the war museum on your afternoons off?"

"The stuff out there fascinates me."

"All except Agincourt, you mean."

Fletcher looked at him uncertainly, then said, "It's a big museum."

"It's a big diorama--but maybe you just don't like battles. Maybe you would prefer to avoid them, battles."

Fletcher hestitated, then said, "Say, are you sure--"

"Am I sure I'm not getting drunk, pal?" Fletcher's eyes squinted slightly, and Harry took that to be the calculating thought process of the beast. Fletcher sighed and pulled back his coat cuff to glance at his watch. "Maybe I'd better run on. Like I said, Junie is expecting me."

"Or Christi."

The two men looked at each other squarely.

"Christi?" Fletcher said.

"Yeah, you remember old Christi. She's the one who--" Harry broke off as the waiter approached with the drinks. As he put the glasses down, Harry said, "You can make me another one just like this." The waiter nodded then looked at Fletcher, who shook his head. The waiter left.

"Christi," Harry repeated, his voice trembling with anger, "she's the one who sent you out this afternoon to spy on me and my son."

"That's ridiculous, Harry. Who told you that?"

"A little fucking bird."

Fletcher was silent. Harry made a grim, disgusted face and drank off half of his fresh Scotch.

"She worries about the boy, Harry," Fletcher said, softly.

"Indeed. And what do you worry about, pal?"

"Me? Nothing."

"That's good, that's very good. I think it's best not to worry about fornicating behind your wife's thighs."

Fletcher's broad face was suddenly suffused with a deep red. Harry noted that, and pursued the bastard with vindictive pleasure. He leaned toward the man and whispered, "What do you like best about it, pal--the way Christi gets that cunning little enigmatic smile on her face when you do it just right?"

"Shut up, Harry."

"Ah, touche'. Now you're getting the message, pal,"

"You're not married to Christi, anymore." Fletcher said, flatly. "You're divorced."

"But you're not, pal--or are you?"

Fletcher looked down at his drink. "No."

"See? The plot thickens. You're just a lucky fellow who's taking advantage of modern times, aren't you, pal? You just found some lost commodity to swing a little bit with. Tell me, when did it start, this fiery romance between you and my wife? Last week, last month, last year? Did it start in the country club bar when poor old Harry was too much in his cups to notice?"

"What do you think I am?" Fletcher said.

Harry grinned wryly. "You know what you are, pal."

Fletcher stood up. For a moment Harry thought Fletcher was going to hit him, to make a scene in the middle of the amiable Pearl Room. He found himself wishing it would happen. But what did happen was worse. Fletcher looked down at him with a small, deprecating smile and said, "You're a loser, Harry." Then he took out his wallet and tossed a twenty-dollar bill on the table.

In the motel room Harry turned on the big color TV and let the boy lie in front of it and switch the channels as much as he wished. He poured himself a good drink from the bottle Joe had allowed him to buy, then called room service and asked that a deluxe hamburger and fries be sent up with a coke. When it arrived Tad shot the man with his space gun, and the man laughed. Harry tipped the man generously.

"Are you okay?" Harry asked, after the man had gone.

Tad looked up from the TV screen, his mouth full of hamburger. "Uh-huh," he managed.

"Do you want to stay here tonight with Daddy--and I'll take you back to your mother in the morning?"

The boy nodded and looked back at the action on the screen.

"You enjoy youself and eat all your hamburger, and I'll be back in a minute."

He left Tad and went down to the lobby and found a pay phone.

Christi answered on the first ring. "Where are you," she demanded, a frightened and angry catch in her voice.

"Tad is staying with me tonight. He wants to."

"He'll do no such thing!"

"I'll bring him back to you in the morning."

He could hear her panic in the silence that followed. He knew what she was thinking, that she was trying to hastily compose exactly the right verbal ploy in her quick little brain. Harry," she said, using a threateningly soft voice, "please bring Taddie home. He--he needs to take his cough medicine."

"He isn't coughing. He hasn't coughed once all day."

"He will cough in the night."

"Is Fletcher there?"

"Yes."

"Then you don't need Tad tonight. I do."

"Where are you?"

"Go to hell."

"I--I'll call the police, damn you."

"You do that. And I'll call Junie Fletcher. Maybe she'd like to babysit for you and her husband next time you go out. Could save money. Besides, Tad knows Fletcher now, so you could all four be just like a real family."

He heard her take an infuriated breath. "Now you listen to me, Harry. I don't care what you think about what I do, but you have no legal and moral right to keep Taddie overnight someplace. Bill told me you were drinking like a fish this afternoon."

"Good old Bill."

"I don't have to remind you of what the judge said he'd do if you came around Taddie drunk."

"Screw the judge--or have you, already?"

"Stop it, Harry!" He heard her begin to cry. "I want my baby back--please, Harry. Oh, please!"

"You'll get him back, you sentimental bitch, but in the morning. You and your stud enjoy yourselves tonight, hear?"

He hung up.

Back in the room, Tad was switching channels again. Harry picked up the drink he had left and took a healthy sip.

"Mommy said it would be fine for you to stay with me tonight," Harry said. "But she told me to tell you if you started coughing again I have to take you home."

The boy looked up at him. "I don't cough," he said, innocently.

Harry smiled down at him. "Well, that will be perfect then, eh?"

Tad went back to watching the screen and chewing on the large fry in his hand.

Harry messed up the pillows on one of the double beds so that he could lie on the bed with his head propped up to watch his son and drink comfortably. The plastic ice bucket and the bottle of Scotch were on the table in easy reach.

In less than an hour Tad began to show signs of fatigue. He lay now in front of the set and yawned a great deal, but kept his eyes glued to the screen, watching two or three programs at the same time, making an effort each channel-change to lift his arm to the dial. His attention span is very limited, Harry thought, but maybe that was natural for all seven-year-olds? He

could only remember being nine, because that was when his mother died. He sipped again at his drink, and marveled that the Scotch was having such little effect on him. It even made him wonder why anybody had ever considered him a drunk.

Finally, when he noticed that Tad's head was drooping to the carpet every few seconds, Harry got up. "C'mon, tiger, time for your bath."

Tad opened his sleepy eyes and made a petulant face. "Aw, daddy, do I--"

"Yes, you do. Mommy wouldn't like it if I brought home a dirty little frog instead of a handsome prince."

That struck the boy as funny, and he giggled.

"On to the tubs, commander," Harry said, pointing with his scotch glass toward the bathroom.

After the bath, Tad said, "Daddy, I didn't bring my pajamas."

"Pajamas are only for frogs," Harry said, winking at him. "You're a prince now."

He tucked the boy into the other bed, adjusting the covers around his chin. "Daddy," Tad said, "will you sleep with me?"

"Does Mommy sleep with you?"

"No."

"Then I will. I wouldn't want you to turn into a frog again."

The boy grinned. "What if I do?" he said, mischievously. "What if when you wake up in the morning I'm a big frog?"

"You won't be. I've got white-magic powers, too."

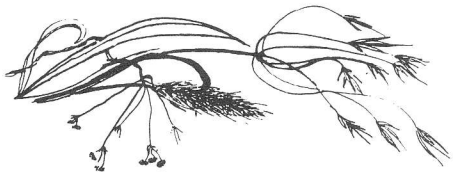
Before Tad could say anything else, Harry bent down and kissed the boy's soft cheek. "Go to sleep, tiger. I'll get in bed with you real soon." To his delight, the boy lifted his thin arms out of the covers and put them around his neck. Then he leaned up and kissed Harry quickly on the mouth.

For a long time Harry sat on the edge of the bed, watching Tad go to sleep. When the boy's eyes closed for a final time, he got silently up and made himself another drink.

A bit later, when he wanted another drink, he carried the ice bucket and the bottle into the bathroom, tip-toeing as he went. He didn't know how well kids slept--or how well Tad slept. He didn't want the boy waking up. He didn''t want to find out if Christi had been lying or not about the cough.

On his way back from the bathroom he spotted the space gun. It was wedged half under the television set, the handle of it resting on the plate that had held the fries. He looked at the gun for a few seconds, then stooped down to pick it up. It was made of some kind of new metal--like aluminum but not that--and it had red and blue plastic attachments to the handle. The damned thing had cost a fortune, and it was nothing but junk, Harry thought, like everything else these days. He tried the grip, then held the toy gun and turned it this way and that. He sighted the barrel toward the wall, then along the wall to a picture hanging there. Impulsively, he then put the barrel to the side of his head and whispered, "Pow."

It was much later, down into the dying hours of the night, that Harry began thinking about his own father again. He should have called him, he knew that. Well, he'd do it before he took the plane back to New York. He'd call the old man and tell him he wanted to come over and kiss him on the mouth. He chuckled drunkenly, then looked over to the other bed to see if Tad was still sleeping. The boy was quiet as death, but Harry could see the slow breath movements of his hunched little body under the covers. Something like anguish pulsed through Harry. Christi wouldn't tell the judge about his being in his cups around Tad. She couldn't be that goddam vindictive, surely? He took another deep sip from the drink he had been holding balanced on his chest. He tried to remember if his father had ever bought him anything at the museum. Then he tried to remember if his father had ever really taken him to the museum at all--or was that just something he thought must have happened? Maybe it was somebody else who had taken him, an uncle or a family friend or somebody. Maybe his father had just paid somebody to take care of his only son that way. He tasted a sudden, dank bitterness for the father he had never known. He had a strange impulse to get up right then and call the bastard, to get him out of bed and ask him if he'd ever taken him to the museum. No, better, if he'd like to break into the museum with him that night, and have the adventure they never had together, two good pals standing there holding hands in the dark, listening and waiting for--something. He felt his heart beating faster. Waiting for anything. Waiting for--for the beautiful whoosh of the arrows at Agincourt.



James B. Carothers

FRIENDS OF THE LIBRARY

At first the blonde woman in the tan pantsuit and the greying man in the suede jacket went around the long tables of used books in opposite directions, working their independent ways in squared loops across the courtyard of the covered shopping mall toward the checkout, where volunteers pencilled totals on paper bags and made change. Twice they passed one another indifferently, as people do in supermarkets, he yielding way in automatic courtesy, she accepting the gesture in kind. Outside it was April. Inside there was no season. Baskets of plastic ferns descended from the ceiling and real palm trees thrust upwards towards the skylight. Beside the checkout a mechanical waterfall descended over a granite ledge into a clear pool spotted with small change. The third time they passed she smiled at him briefly, adding a book to her blue canvas shoulder bag, and when they passed in grave minuet to the bland music for the fourth time, she burst into laughter, "We've got to stop meeting like this!"

His first impulse was to run. Blushing, he turned to see whether anyone in the crowd had noticed her outburst. He stepped back in the aisle in exaggerated capitulation, and found himself looking into her laughing grey eyes. He looked away, towards the waterfall.

"Pardon me," he said. He looked down at her sandalled feet. Paints her toenails. What is that color? Plum. "I certainly wasn't following you."

"You're blushing," she said, "That's cute."

I am not cute. "I hope not," he said. Again he wanted to run, seeing himself bolting suddenly like a football player, tumbling bewildered shoppers and their books across the crowded aisles. Turning abruptly, he found his way blocked by a fat woman with a wire-wheeled basket.

"No offense meant," the girl said.

He risked another look into her bold grey eyes and registered a catalogue of her features. Blonde, probably natural. Irons her hair. Fair. No mascara, no eyebrow pencil, no freckles. Younger, about 25. Confident. Dangerous. Get away. "No offense taken," he said.

"Good," she said evenly. She swept her arm in a brief arc. "Follow me if you want." She repositioned the blue bag at her shoulder. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"Not really," he said, feeling himself drawn into the arc. A small test, then. "Benchley," he said. "Thurber and Perelman. DeVries." He shrugged.

She nodded. A New Yorker man," she said. "Dorothy Parker too?" Testing me right back. "Not so much. Not especially." "Male chauvinist?"

"She's so bitter," he said. "Threatening. Chauvinist, if you like." Here's another one of them, then.

"You might as well live," she quoted.

"Yes," he said. He nodded at the blue bag. "What about you? Are you looking for anything special?"

"Not exactly," she said. "I know what I see when I want it. Whoops!" She hunched her shoulders and brushed the blonde hair away from her face. "I mean, you know, I know what I want when I see it."

He permitted himself a short smile. "Lead on, then."

He fell into place behind her as they continued along the tables, taking care not to jostle up against her, averting his eyes from the taut curve of her tan slacks. He saw the serried rows of books pass beneath the darkly lacquered nail of her moving finger. Plum it is. She passed rapidly along the tables, examining, considering, rejecting. From time to time she added a volume to the blue bag. The bland music played above them. It's a wonder they don't have bird calls. Or monkey cries. She had filled the canvas bag and cradled new selections in one arm.

"Here's a Benchley for you," she said suddenly. She thumbed a faded green volume. "Oh, wait. It's got pictures." She regarded the glossy prints, offering him a look. Reluctantly he took a corner of the cover, like a stranger in church accepting his neighbor's offer of a hymnal for a familiar tune. Benchley sleeping. Benchley pointing at a chart. Benchley tangled in telephone wires. "Production stills," she said simply. "I haven't seen this."

"It was something they did to sell the book," he explained. "During the war. Benchley had just about quit writing by then. The volume is just reprints."

"Those films were marvelous," she said. "What a funny man."

"Yes," he agreed. "He was the most amusing writer of his kind, I think. 'In America, there are two ways to travel: First class, and with children.' Perfect sentences on trivial topics."

"I don't know his writing so much," she said. She closed her half of the book over onto his. "Well, do you want it or not?"

"Thank you," he said. "I already have a copy." He examined the spine. "It was a library book anyhow," he said. "Not particularly valuable."

"We might be able to use it some time," she said abstractedly. She added the green volume to her stack, cradled the lot in both arms now, and turned back toward the table. "Onward."

He wondered briefly who "we" were. He saw that she wore no ring. Though you can't tell anything by that, these days and times either. We shall see. Perhaps.

"May I carry your books for you?" The line burst out of him and he regretted it instantly. Fool.

She regarded him skeptically, her grey eyes cool. "What are you, anyway, some kind of a throwback?"

He blushed again, forcing himself to meet her gaze. She too colored slightly.

"Sure. Okay. Why not?" She pushed the armload of books at him. He sagged at the weight, trying to carry it with a single arm against his thigh. As men are supposed to. What has she been picking out? Furtively, he examined her selections. Fodor's Travel Guide to England. An illustrated Sherlock Holmes. A Christmas Carol, bound in imitation leather. A collection of photographs: The Coronation of Her Majesty, Elizabeth. Two patterns suggested themselves to him. Anglophile. Or is she planning a trip? He shifted the books to his chest and scanned the tables for an opportunity to confirm his theories. "There's a Pamela," he ventured, after a time.

She turned back to him in confusion and examined the book without interest. "Virtue Rewarded," she mused. "How nice for them."

"I just thought it might fit with these others," he explained. "You seem to be interested in the British."

"Not exactly," she said. "Anyhow, I've got about enough for one day."

Intrigued, he placed the stack of books on the checkout table and waited patiently beside her as she emptied the blue canvas bag. A gaudy Alice in Wonderland. A collection of Rackham's illustrations. Does she have a child? The clerk calculated her total--he had bought nothing, he discovered--and packed her purchases into a paper shopping bag. She wrote out a check and he overcame his natural discretion to read the printed name on the check. "Friends of the Library." Ah. She asked for an itemized receipt.

He turned from the checkout table and found himself looking into the pool below the waterfall, at the change glinting on green paint. His hand was in the pocket of the suede jacket, feeling for change amidst the handkerchief and keys. He sorted out the pennies. I wish I knew her name. I wish I didn't blush. I wish I knew what to do now. I wish I could stop that awful music. One. Two. Three. Four. What else? And one to grow on. He spilled the coins into the pool. Five pennies make a nickle.

"You have a lot of wishes," she said, behind him. The blue bag hung empty from her shoulder.

He felt himself color slightly. So there's one I didn't get. "Yes," he said, "I suppose I do."

"Such as?"

Do I dare to eat a peach? No, I don't. Never have. "They say you're not supposed to tell." The bland music swelled sweetly above them.

"So they say."

She is waiting for me to do something. What? I do not know my lines.

"Since you're being so gallant," she said, "maybe you wouldn't mind carrying these to my car."

"Certainly," he said. That's the last penny. I wish I knew what I was getting into here. If anything.

He followed her up the escalator and out of the shopping mall into the parking lot and the April sunshine. The twine handles of the shopping bag cut into his hand and he shifted the

load from time to time. She strode noisily ahead, wooden sandals clacking on the asphalt. Why do they wear shoes like that, I wonder. And is she wearing any... underwear, or just the sort of hosiery they're advertising on television now?

Her car was small, red, foreign. She unlocked it and did something he could not see to raise the black convertible roof. As she shrugged the empty blue bag from her shoulder, the natural cloth diamond at the front of her blouse gaped for a moment and he went cold with sensual knowledge, his mind stuttering toward a shrill negative. Bare ti--... No. There's a br--... No. She's Not wearing a brassiere! Forcing his mind back to his manners, he set the shopping bag on the passenger's seat.

"Not there," she said, "The bastard will buzz at me. Or I guess I could put the seatbelt around it, and then it couldn't get a whiplash and sue me."

"Buzz at you?" he said. "Whiplash? Pardon me, but what..." he forced himself to go on, "what bastard?"

"The seatbelt interlock system."

"Oh, I see." He wedged the sack beneath the low dash. "There." He shut the light red door carefully and rubbed his hands together.

"Thank you," she said. "You've been very nice. Now I'll tell you about the books, if you're interested."

"Of course I'm interested."

She hoisted herself to the hood of the little red car and sat kicking her sandalled feet in slow rhythm. He watched the painted toenails. Plum is the only word for it. She opened a leather cigarette case and offered him the pack and lighter.

"No, thank you," he said. Smokes. I might have guessed. It would taste when you kissed her. He took the lighter and struck the wheel to flame. She bent forward, cupped her cool hands over his, and drew on the cigarette.

"They're for an exhibit," she said, exhaling smoke. "At the Public Library. Downtown. I am a librarian there. The children's librarian."

"That's wonderful," he said. "How lucky for you."

She shrugged. "It's a living."

"No, no," he said severely. "You musn't say that. You must have so many opportunities to form young minds." He stopped. Fatuous phrasing. You sound like a brochure.

She tapped the ash from her cigarette, looking down. "Sometimes it's fun," she admitted. "Last month's theme was Animal Friends and so we built a Noah's Ark out of chicken wire and plastic foam." She smiled at the memory. "And hotly debated the question of sex-role stereotyping. Whether the giraffes, for example, should be, you know, endowed. Or just one of them taller than the other."

He did not want to know about any of this. Animal Friends in a library. And that other is out of the question. He shifted the ground. "And this month's theme?"

"Merrie England," she said. "Thus, Pooh, but not Pamela."

"I see," he said. Or, at least I think I do."

"We make collages from the pictures. And show films. Our support group, The Friends of the Library, gives me some money for supplies. Like these." She waved in the general direction of the invisible shopping bag.

"You cut up the books?"

"Yes. The point is to attract the children's attention, get them interested. Whatever it takes. We've got to compete for our share of the market."

"Well," he said. "That's too bad."

"It makes you think" she said. "We're arguing now about whether to put in a television."

Good God.

She glanced at her wristwatch, flipped the cigarette away, and slid down from the car. The sandals clumped on the asphalt. He had forgotten to position himself to take advantage of her blouse. "Got to go," she said.

Waiting for me again. I cannot. I will not.

"Do you have a car, or can I give you a lift somewhere?" She scanned the asphalt expanse. "Or maybe I should offer you a ride to your car."

I am at a dangerous intersection. There is no safety island here. "I don't have a car," he said. "I would accept a ride home, if you're on your way downtown, and if it wouldn't be out of your way."

She laughed. With me or at me? "You certainly are careful," she said. "Don't worry. I won't try to take advantage of you."

They got into the car. He cramped his feet between the sack of books and the door, looking directly at her profile. The open diamond was on the other side. Women's blouses button right over left, whereas men's shirts button left over right, both of which phenomena have causes I do not know. So, if she were sitting where I am, which she should be, and if I, likewise, were in the driver's seat, as tradition has it I should be, then I could see what I shouldn't. And want to. Suddenly very much want to.

She turned the ignition key and the engine fired to life. She adjusted the choke and listened to the idle. A buzzer began to sound. "You'll have to strap yourself in," she said.

He was confused.

"It's behind you," she said. "On the floor." He fumbled at the black strap. "Pull it out easy," she said. "Here." She reached across him and he closed his eyes and held his breath, feeling her shoulder against his thigh. She pulled the strap out and away from him and snapped it into place. The buzzing ceased. He opened his eyes, willing the cold desire from him. Have you no shame? Yes.

"Look," she said, facing him directly, "if you're going to carry my books, encourage my career, and let me strap you in to automobiles, there's something I ought to tell you."

He waited, listening to the idling engine. She's married. That's what it is. She's got one of those horrible "open" relationships. The husband does something with computers. They

don't want children so she's on The Pill.

"Janet," she said finally, extending her hand. "Janet Macgregor. Now, you tell me yours."

He blushed for the fourth time that morning. It's a fifty-fifty proposition whether to tell her the truth. What would I make up? Truth, then. "Excuse me," he managed. "I'm, terribly sorry. I'm Paul Howerton." He held her cool hand.

"That's that, then." She released the handbrake and moved the gearshift forward. "You've got nice manners, Paul Howerton, but you're afraid to touch people. Hang on."

The car lurched into motion. His spine snapped back against the seat and he braced himself against the dash. She gunned a hard right turn out of the parking lot into the traffic. The air rushed by him and he raised his left hand to the top of his head, holding on to his hair. He watched her decisive shifting of gears. I couldn't drive one of these things if I wanted to. If I had to. She was shouting something at him and he leaned across to hear, feeling the strap cut into his chest. "What?"

"You don't have a piece, do you?"

"Pardon?"

"A hairpiece. A wig."

"Lord, no."

"Good. Listen, Paul."

"Yes?"

"What do you do, anyway? Besides haunting booksales."

Tell the truth. "I'm a pharmacist," he said, into the wind.

"A what?"

"A pharmacist."

"Like, drugs?"

"Yes."

"Weird."

Not really. More dull than anything.

She drove on. "Listen, Paul?"

"Yes?"

"There's just one thing more."

"Yes?"

"If I'm going to take you home, you're going to have to tell me where you live."

Quietly, not really wanting to know whether he was heading for glory or doom, Paul told Janet his address.

W. D. Clements

AFTER THE FLOOD

"These people don't even know what welfare is!" Mayor Benito Petrone exclaimed. A big man with a military-style haircut that permitted the skin of the sides of his head to show, he leaned forward until his magnificent Roman nose was almost touching the rain-streamed windshield. The wiper blades of his city-owned '78 Chrysler needed changing. "Ah," he murmured. "River Road." He turned the car south. "I bet they were never even counted in the census."

"Mmmmmmmm," I murmured, wishing he'd temper his voice. Overwhelmed with loneliness, I'd gotten drunk on blackberry brandy the night before, and had a bitch of a hangover. I'd been in the city little more than a month, and knew no one save the people at work and in city hall. Hence the loneliness.

This morning I'd arrived at city hall much later than usual, about 9 o'clock, and found Petrone waiting for me in the Chrysler, out front. He'd told me to get in; he'd made a discovery during an inspection tour of the flooded parts of the city the afternoon before that was "worthy of your attention for news."

Earlier in the week, unusual February rains had caused the Sizemore River to rise above its banks. The lower-lying parts of the city were flooded. Petrone told me he'd found "an incredible pocket of poverty" on one of the flooded streets, Staltonstall Street.

"I didn't even know these people existed," he now averred.

I burped and experienced the cloying aftertase of blackberries. The taste and the soft, rocking motion of the big car made me feel nauseated.

Petrone glanced over at me. "Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"No, you're not. You're hung over."

"How'd you know?"

He grinned. "Well, shut up in the car like this, with the heat on, and all this humidity. . ."

I smiled ruefully. "A certain odor?"

He nodded. "How come you got drunk?"

My loneliness was personal. I wanted to keep my relationship with Petrone adversarial. "I'll be able to function, Mr. Petrone." I got out my notebook. "How badly damaged were the homes along Staltonstall Street?"

"The ground floors were flooded, but that happens in a lot of places near the river. But that's not the point."

At that instant my sinuses popped, sending sharp pains across the top of my head, overloading my already-taxed emotional system. I found myself suddenly angry at the man next to me, and at my editor, Albert Swint. They were keeping me from being the kind of reporter I was capable of being, wanted badly to be--an independent lens through which the readers of my

newspaper, the Sizemore Trumpet, could view their mayor and his minions. Petrone fed me a "media event" every day, one which, when reported, shored up some aspect of his public image. In office little more than a month--I'd arrived in town about the time he was inaugurated--he was already a hero to the oppressed and unemployed of Sizemore, who were legion.

As for Swint, he contributed to my "shill" status by insisting I cover each trumped-up story Petrone threw my way as if it were Watergate. The Trumpet had supported Petrone's candidacy for mayor the previous fall.

And here I am headed for more of the same, I thought. I longed for a bottle of sinus tablets and my bed.

"But that's not the point," Petrone said again. His voice sent ripples of pain shooting through my head.

"What is the point?" I snapped.

"Just because you made yourself sick is no reason to be short with me," Petrone said tartly.

I managed to curb my anger enough to murmur, "I'm sorry. What is the point?"

"That these people are miserable all the time. You should of seen them. The flooding didn't make any difference. Since they're right out on the Sizemore River flats, they get water in the house every time it rains."

"They must be really bad off."

He glanced at me, raising his eyebrows. "You're beginning to get the picture, Mr. Wellington."

River Road paralleled the river from the New York Thruway at the north end of the city southwestward to the Town of America. It was lined with dead or dying mills and factories set apart by weedy fields. Between the buildings could be seen the roily, brown river waters. Two days before the river had crested at three feet above flood stage, after the city had experienced eight inches of rain. Since then the rain had become intermittent, and the river had dropped to a foot above flood stage.

Petrone turned the Chrysler between two crumbling factory buildings onto an unpaved road. I saw no street sign on either of the corners.

"This is it--Staltonstall Street," Petrone said as he braked the car to a crawl. The roadway, very nearly a quagmire, appeared to run into the river. Ahead I could see only bare-branched trees and chest-high brown and tangled weeds.

The car squirmed forward on the muddy road. We dropped below a rise and I saw perhaps a half-dozen dwellings--if you could call them that--on both sides of the road. All were single-story shacks. Some had worn clapboard siding. Others had crumbling, fading asphalt shingle siding. None of the shacks was plumb. The yards were seas of mud in which were visible the rusting hulks of automobiles, smashed tricycles and bicycles, corroded 55-gallon drums, jagged, sopping chunks of cardboard, broken or worn out furniture, and other effluvia of civilization too numerous to list here.

"Jesus!" I whispered.

"That's exactly what I said when I first saw this."

"It's even worse than Rum Valley." Rum Valley was Sizemore's ghetto.

"Rum Valley is a palace compared to this," Petrone replied. "Those homes were nice at one time at least. These shacks have never been nice. You'll see. . . I hope your shoes are waterproof, Mr. Wellington." Shit! I thought. I was wearing my low-cut oxfords and over those a pair of low-cut Totes. The mud would be ankle deep at least. I glanced at Patrone's feet. He wore calf-high galoshes, into which his tan whipcord slacks were tucked. "No comment," I muttered.

Petrone chuckled. "Well, you'll get a good story out of this, don't you worry. I guarantee you it'll be worth it. You're getting quite a good reputation around the city, Mr. Wellington, and . . ." His voice trailed off.

I knew what he was implying: that I had him to thank for my reputation. He wanted me to say that, but I had no intention of doing so. It was true that he kept me well-supplied with stories the hoi polloi loved to read. But it was also true that I had no time to research stories of my own, stories that may have shown him in a less-favorable light, because he kept me glutted.

He stopped the Chrysler before the last shack on the right side of the road. Two other vehicles, both mud spattered, were parked there--the WSIZ-TV van, and Rocco Coppola's city-owned black '76 Valiant. Rocco, the mayor's nephew, was also his public relations man. Petrone called him his "press secretary."

The shack was more-or-less L-shaped. Sided with clapboards that had been painted green, long ago, it appeared to have no foundation. Its front walk was fashioned of bits of wood from packing crates that poked out of the mud at odd angles.

We got out of the car. I looked back toward River Road. The only hint it was there was the sound of tires swishing along on wet pavement. The only buildings visible were the two factories. I looked the other way and noted that the edge of the river was perhaps a hundred feet away. Staltonstall Street did indeed run directly into the river.

Petrone had slogged around the Chrysler and stopped beside me. As if he were reading my mind, he said, "The street stops at an embankment, but that's all under water now."

We moved toward the shack. Halfway there I stepped onto a board, which promptly sank into the mud. Cold muddy water flowed over my shoe into my sock. Grimly I pulled my foot free and continued toward the front door. Beside the shack were piled perhaps a dozen muddy rat corpses. The largest rats were about a foot long.

"My God!" I gasped.

"This neighborhood is infested with rats," Petrone said from behind me. "These people have a little dirt basement that they get to through a trap door. When it flooded, these got trapped down there and drowned. The woman here, Mrs. Butkiss, that's B-u-t-k-i-s-s, opened the trap door yesterday and found them. She collected them and put them out here. When the ground freezes she'll throw them in the river."

Nausea again threatened me, but I inhaled deeply a few times and felt better.

Petrone edged past me and pushed open the front door, which was fashioned of nailed-together planks and fastened to the jamb with rusty hinges. He called, "Mrs. Butkiss, may we come in?"

"Yow!" called a voice from within.

I followed Petrone into the house. The sweet-sour smell inside was beyond description. All I can say is that it was a mixture of the odors of unwashed human bodies, feces, burning kerosene, decaying wood, rotting furniture cushions, dead rats, and God knows what else. My stomach turned over and I rushed outside. I vomited all over the rats. Blinded by tears, I stood there gasping fresh air, until my head cleared and my stomach settled. I took out my handkerchief and wiped away the tears and bits of vomit that clung to my lips. Then I inhaled deeply and bravely plunged back inside.

Petrone smiled at me, shaking his head. I stood in the doorway until my eyes adjusted to the gloom. The only illumination in that front room came from an old kerosene lantern hanging from a dark, warped overhead beam. There were no windows. The prevalent colors in the room were gray and brown. The walls were the unpainted insides of the clapboards. Strips of light showed between some of the boards. The floor was made of warped wide wood planks. Old faded rugs of no particular color covered parts of it. The boards and rugs were sopping wet.

A tall, fat woman approached. As she moved beneath the lantern, I saw that she wore a floor-length skirt of faded blue-and-white gingham. On her feet were red sneakers. Her upper torso was covered with a ragged gold sweatshirt, across the front of which was the inscription "U.S. Military Academy, West Point," in black. Over her shoulders was a tattered gray wool shawl. Her face was puffy, white as unbaked pastry. Her stringy gray hair hung to her shoulders. Her small eyes were sunk at least an inch into her face, or so it seemed in that ghostly atmosphere. I could not tell their color.

Petrone said, "Mrs. Butkiss, this is the reporter I told you about, Mr. Wellington. He's going to tell the people of Sizemore of your predicament."

The woman clearly felt threatened by Petrone. She shrunk back at his words, then demanded. "What's this predicament?" Her voice creaked like an unlubricated hinge.

I realized she didn't know what the word meant."Your situation."

"Your, uh, problems," Petrone contributed.

She cackled, then said, "I ain't got no problems now't that frickin' river's gone back down...Whatya want with us anyway?"

"To help you," Petrone said.

She pointed to a doorway at the rear of the room. "What's't thing with the lights on't anyhow?"

Petrone replied, "A camera." Her confusion deepened. "From the TV station," he added.

Her face brightened. "Ah. The TV. We ain't got'n, havin' no power 'n' all."

At that point Rocco stepped through the rear doorway. Behind him came the WSIZ reporter, Fred Welk, and his crew, a soundman and a cameraman. Rocco and Fred were a study in contrast. Rocco was large enough to be a lineman on a pro football team. His face, swarthy, lightly freckled, always made me think of some predatory animal; he seemed to be enjoying the squalor. Fred was skinny, a foot shorter than Rocco. Heavy black-rim glasses dominated his sharp, pale face, which was now clenched with distaste. Clearly this assignment was not to his liking.

But when Fred saw Petrone, a solicitous smile snapped onto his face. He strode up to Petrone, saying, "Your honor, I want to thank you for providing us the opportunity to film this story." He extended his right hand.

Behind Fred Rocco was smirking.

Petrone, shaking Welk's hand, said, "It's my duty, Mr. Welk. "When I found out how these people live, I knew I had to bring it to the people's attention. You can quote me on that. It's my duty."

"Sure thing. Let me make a note of that." Welk took a scrap of paper from his coat pocket, then fumbled through all his pockets for something to write with. Finally I gave him one of my Bics. He scribbled on the paper, then extended the pen to me.

"Keep it, Fred," I said. "You may want to make another note sometime."

"Oh. . . Thanks." Welk pocketed the pen. I decided he had no sense of irony at all. After he and his crew were gone, Petrone said, "You don't like him much, do you."

"Fred? I like him all right."

Petrone smiled. "Whatever you say. Now, let me show you the rest of this place." He turned to Mrs. Butkiss. "With your permission, of course."

"Oh," she rasped. "Well, I don't know why you wanna see this place, but go on."

Petrone and Rocco led me to an upright 55-gallon drum toward the rear of the room. Black smoke rose from it. I peered over the edge and saw an orange flame toward the bottom.

"Their heat source," Petrone said.

"It is?"

He nodded. "Kerosene. When they want heat, they just light it. It burns slow, so it isn't dangerous. Just smells bad. God knows what chemicals it puts out."

I put my hand over the drum. The heat rising was minimal. "Not very efficient."

They nodded. Then they pointed out the dilapidated condition of the ragged couch and easy chair that were the room's only furniture. Wet gray stuffing showed through on both. A rusty broken spring extended above the center of the chair's seat.

Seeing us regarding the chair, Mrs. Butkiss said, "We ain't usin' 't much now 'cause 't got wet from the river. It'll dry out soon enough."

The "kitchen" consisted of an old two-burner kerosene stove in the back corner of the room. It was mounted on a rickety

table. Mrs. Butkiss told us the house had no running water; they obtained all their water from the river and boiled the water they drank in an old coffee can.

She opened the back door to show us the outhouse. A board walk led up to it.

In the side room, whence Rocco and Welk had come, we found an old man lying on a sagging, filthy bed. The bedstead was rusted iron. All manner of litter covered the floor.

"That's the mister," Mrs. Butkiss said. She'd followed us in there. "He's been feelin' poorly since the river rose up. I think he took an ague of some sort."

The old man, considerably shorter than his wife, lay trembling under a muddy quilt. He appeared to have no hair nor teeth. He hadn't shaved in awhile, and his pale cheeks were shrunken. His eyes were closed. He seemed unaware there were strangers in his house.

Petrone said, "I believe you told me, Mrs. Butkiss, that you buy food with Mr. Butkiss's disability checks."

She nodded vigorously. "From the veteran's 'ministration. I go up to the city once a month 'n' get his checks. Then I get groceries 'n' tote 'em back here. Takes me all day... course we plant veg'tables, tomatoes 'n' beans 'n' stuff like that."

"Where do you bathe?" I asked.

She gestured toward the river. "Over there, a course. We don't wash up so much when 'ts cold, but when 'ts warm, we wash least once a week. Sometimes more if 'ts hot."

"Seen enough, Mr. Wellington?" Petrone asked.

I nodded. I was eager to leave.

"We'll go then, because you need time to write this up. You were late for work this morning don't forget. Oh, by the way, you'll find photos of this place waiting for you back at the paper."

"What?"

He smiled. "I took the liberty of calling the city desk early this morning. Mr. Zamora sent out, um, George, ah..."

"Habib."

Yes, Habib. He was here at eight. Shot a lot of pictures. Wanted me to pose, but I didn't think it was appropriate."

"You should have gone into public relations," I said, trying but failing to sound lighthearted. "You'd have gotten rich."

"I <u>am</u> rich," he replied, "because I think of everything."

Rocco snickered.

Ten minutes later Petrone parked the Chrysler in front of the <u>Trumpet</u>. I started to get out, but he grabbed my arm and said, "You're not your usual alert self today, Mr. Wellington."

"That's true," I conceded.

"How are you going to handle this story?"

I could not stop the anger that boiled out of me. "Any damned way I please!"

He shook his head reprovingly. "You really shouldn't drink, Mr. Wellington. . . The reason I asked is that there are a few questions you'd normally have asked, but haven't."

He was right. "I'm sorry . . . just what do you intend to do about that place? God! I've never been anywhere that disgusting in my life! I knew there was poverty in this town, but I never suspected it was that bad!"

Petrone nodded. "That's exactly what I thought, and I grew up poor, too. But bad off as we were, we had a clean house and bathroom. We washed every night. My father was a shoemaker, and was out of work during much of the Depression. But he persisted, and..."

"So what're you going to do about the Butkisses and the other people on Staltonstall Street?"

"Well, try to get them into public housing, if there's room. We just can't leave those people there now that we know about them."

I peered at him. Was he dissembling? I couldn't tell.

He accepted my scrutiny. After perhaps thirty seconds, he said, "You can say that I'm going to go all out to help those people. You can say that I believe that they could lead decent, productive lives if they were exposed to the right environment."

I jotted down his words, then said, "Well, it turned out to be an interesting morning, Mayor."

He nodded. I got out of the Chrysler and he drove off.

My story that day had three main elements: Petrone's discovery of this "incredible pocket of poverty," invisible to the rest of the world; a description of the Butkiss dwelling, including the rats out front; Petrone's determination to move the people of Staltonstall Street, fifteen in all (Rocco Coppola supplied me with that statistic by phone a few minutes before deadline), into the Francis Gennaro Estates, one of the city's public housing projects.

George Habib's photos were superb. Ron Zamora, the city editor, decided to run two of them with my story--one showing the house from the front, including the pile of rats, the other a narrow vertical shot of Mrs. Butkiss proudly pointing at her "furnace," the drum of burning kerosene.

Zamora was so pleased with my story that he gave me the afternoon off. "It's the best writing you've ever done, V.J.!" he exclaimed as he followed me to the coat rack."

He was wrong--I'd done far better writing on the Chicago Record during my last stint as a reporter, but I didn't tell him that. Instead I put on my coat and said, "Thanks. And thanks for the time off."

"Yeah. Maybe you can sleep it off."

"Jesus! Does everyone know I overindulged last night?"

Zamora laughed. "No. Rocco told me. I won't spread it around. Even if I did it wouldn't hurt you. Everybody knows all good reporters drink."

Back in my apartment, I collapsed into my Morris chair before the gas fire and watched the north wind turn the rain to sleet. The thaw that had caused the flooding that brought the plight of the people of Staltonstall Street to the attention of the world-at-large was ending. I'd become semi-comatose when my phone rang. It was Petrone.

"Can you go back to Staltonstall Street with me?" he asked.

That was the last place I wanted to go, but to tell him that would have been unprofessional. "I guess," I muttered. "What's going on?"

"I've arranged for two-bedroom apartments in the Gennaro project. They had just enough units open. There's a waiting list, but I persuaded Ed Ratkowski--he's the manager--to jump these people to the front of the list because they're so bad off. They can move in tomorrow and..."

"You're going out to tell them."

He chuckled. "I see you've recovered your ability to think, Mr. Wellington. You'll have it exclusive...' By the way, your story today was outstanding, the best writing you've ever done."

"Thanks," I muttered, uncomfortable.

He picked me up in fifteen minutes. We drove back to Staltonstall Street in sporadic snowfall. The surface of the unpaved roadway had frozen, but the heavy car broke through to the mud beneath.

As we pulled up in front of the Butkiss place, Petrone said, "Here's my plan. I'm personally going to tell them, all of them, that they don't have to live here any more. "We'll use city trucks to take them to the project beginning tomorrow along with what property they want to take. I don't imagine they'll want to take too much."

"What're you doin' back here?" Mrs. Butkiss demanded after answering Petrone's knock.

"I have some good news for you. May we come in?" the Mayor replied.

She shrugged. "Sure."

The air indoors was less foul than earlier. I decided the drop in temperature must be responsible for this small blessing. The floor was now ice-glazed. Mrs. Butkiss went to the kerosene drum and stood over it, rubbing her hands together.

"I have some good news for you," Petrone repeated.

She cackled, then said, "Well we sure could use somma that."

"You'll be pleased to know I've made arrangements to take you out of here," he said, beaming.

"Why?" she wailed. "We ain't done nothin'!"

Surprised, Petrone said, "We've found all of you on Staltonstall Street some decent housing, in the Gennaro project. It was built last year. You and your husband will have a lovely two-bedroom apartment, with central heat. Why, we can even get you on welfare so you'll have more money to spend."

Tears streamed down her face. Then, after a few seconds, rage replaced anguish. "How come you come here?" she screeched. "We're happy here!"

For the first time since I'd met him, Petrone was nonplussed. "B-b-but the welfare has lots of programs to help people like you..."

"Welfare!" she wailed. "Don't want no welfare! All these years me 'n' the mister got by without no one's help! All we get's the disability from the veteran's 'ministration, and the mister, he earn'd that, in Italy, during the world war!"

"B-but you can't go on living like this!" Petrone protested.

"Sure we can! We been here years 'n' years!" She made a sweeping gesture that took in all of Staltonstall Street. "We're a family! We help each other!"

"But..."

"We're prouda not bein' a burden!"

Petrone was scowling. He crossed his arms and said, "Well, this house is substandard. It violates all the city codes, plumbing, wiring, structural. You have to go. Once you're in the project, you'll be glad I took you out of here."

The woman collapsed into the easy chair, weeping. I winced at the thought of the rusty spring poking her bottom.

Petrone stared at her a few seconds, then muttered to me, "Let's go next door."

It was the same everywhere on Staltonstall Street. All the residents wanted was to be left alone in their abject misery. I could not fathom it. To me the thought of living as these people did was unbearable. Foregoing independence seemed a small sacrifice to make in exchange for cleanliness and central heat. But at the same time I found myself admiring them for resisting Petrone's will.

It was a shaken mayor of Sizemore who drove me back to my apartment as dark descended on the city. When he'd stopped the car, he demanded, "How are you going to handle this?"

"I have no choice. I have to report it the way it happened."

I slid toward the door, but he grabbed my arm. "You wouldn't have even known they refused my largesse if I hadn't taken you out there."

I sighed, gently extracted my arm from his grasp. "But I do know. How I got to know it isn't the point."

Enraged, he shouted, "That's exactly the point! I've fed you good story after good story! Just because one turned out bad is no reason to bite my hand that feeds you! I've been good to you!"

I lost my temper. "Well I never asked you to! Why don't you just run the goddamned city and let me report what happens!"

He became nonplussed for the second time that afternoon. He stared at me, lower jaw sagging. Then he recovered and hissed, "Well, now you show your true colors, Mr. Wellington!"

His voice sent a chill through me. I realized I'd been unprofessional. "I'm sorry I said that, mayor. Attribute it to the sorry state of my mind and body." I forced a wry smile as I spoke.

But he refused to be cajoled. He grabbed my arm and declared, "You'd better not write a story about this. You'd be biting my hand that feeds you. You bite too hard and I may stop being generous."

I wrenched my arm away and heaved my bulk against the door of the Chrysler. When I was out, I ducked my head back in and told him, "I'll do what I have to do. You do the same. Goodbye, Mr. Petrone." I closed the door, gently.

Petrone sat looking at me speculatively for perhaps twenty seconds. I met his gaze all the while. Then he looked away. I walked off. I heard the Chrysler start and move away.

The next day he called Swint and asked him to kill my story, which had as its theme that Mayor Petrone had striven to improve the living conditions of the Staltonstall Street people, as Fred Welk had dubbed them, but that they had refused to move. Swint subjected me to intense questioning as to my "motives" and how they might have influenced my "interpretation" of the facts of my second visit to Staltonstall Street. He seemed to believe what the mayor had told him, that I was out to make him look bad. Finally, though, Swint conceded that there was no solid news reason not to run the story.

As I sat on the naugahyde couch in his cubicle, Swint, jaws tight, dialled Petrone's private number at city hall. When Petrone answered, Swint said, "I'm sorry, Benny, but I have to run the Wellington story. It's solid, I'm afraid. But I'll make it up to..." He winced, then replaced the receiver in its cradle. He looked at me as if he hated me. "Hung up."

"Thanks for backing me up."

He grimaced. "I had no choice... Damnit! I wish you hadn't backed me into this corner!"

Shocked, I sneered and blurted, "Well excuse me!"

He missed the sarcasm. He waved a hand and sighed. "You couldn't help it. I accept your apology. I'll find some way to make this up to Benny. After all, the news is the news."

I left his cubicle in disgust. I slumped into my desk chair.

Don Nathanson, another reporter, came over. "What's all the excitement about!"

I waved a hand. "Oh, poor Swint just ran afoul of his hero Petrone." I told Nathanson of the Staltonstall Street donnybrook.

Nathanson was chuckling when I finished. "Hoist by his own petard. But I don't know why he's so upset. The readers'll hate those people for being ingrates, and they'll love Benny for trying to help the poor. His ego's so huge he can't see your story'll help him."

I could only nod my agreement.

The next day I went to city hall to keep an appointment I'd made with Petrone three days before. I was to interview him on his forthcoming budget proposal. During his campaign, he'd promised to cut the city payroll drastically to help get the city out of the red. Wanting to put to rest rampant rumors about where the cuts would fall, I hoped to goad him into telling me which jobs would be cut, and how many.

But the interview was not to be. He sent Rocco out with a note: "I'm too busy to see a hatchet man from Chicago. B. Petrone." Alarmed, I scribbled a note begging him to reconsider. I tore it out, was about to give it to Rocco to take to the mayor. But then I remembered a story idea I'd had the night before, before dropping off to sleep: research and write a story on how the city would fight a lawsuit brought by the Sizemore

Brotherhood of Crime and Fire Fighters, the police-fire union. They'd sued to have seven rookie cops Petrone fired shortly after taking office reinstated. Though the suit had been filed back in mid-January, I'd had no time to do more about it than report it existed, and superficially at that.

Abruptly I saw that Petrone's displeasure with me was a blessing. I crumpled the note and put it in my overcoat pocket. I had some time to myself! Feeling cheerful for the first time in days, I dashed out of the mayor's suite before Petrone could change his mind. I trotted down the hall to the office of the city attorney, Alphonse Scarlatti, a wizened old man with an unruly shock of white hair. He was happy to see me. For an hour I listened, taking copious notes, as he laid out his plans for fighting the union's suit. Then I went back to the Trumpet and wrote a story saying that the city would, at trial time, depict the former mayor, Francis Carlucci, as a lame duck who had no authority to hire the seven rookies. Carlucci had sworn in the rookies the day before he left office. I also included Scarlatti's admission that the city's case was weak, because Carlucci had a clear-cut legal right to hire anyone he pleased as long as he was mayor. As I wrote this section of my story, I thought that Scarlatti may have been too candid for his own good, but that at the same time I admired him for having the guts to tell the truth, a rare quality in a public official.

I also found myself hoping that Petrone's anger would last so I could work on more of my own story ideas. I'd thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon.

I left a note for Zamora saying my union suit story was in the computer and went home. I spent a pleasant evening listening to Mozart symphonies before my gas fire.

But the next day it was business as usual at city hall. Petrone held a press conference to announce that he would soon confer with one Herman Scanlon, a Syracuse developer, about a possible new office building on a city-owned lot across the street from city hall. He even suffered my skeptical questioning with uncharacteristic good humor, admitting there was little substance to his announcement--Scanlon had agreed only to discuss putting an office building in Sizemore.

"But the way things have gone in this poor town under my predecessors the past twenty years, that's big news, Mr. Wellington," he told me without a hint of animosity.

Swint agreed. Delighted that the Trumpet seemed to be back in the mayor's good graces, he ordered Zamora to run the Scanlon story on page one. He had the newspaper librarian dig an old photo of the vacant lot out of the files. It would run alongside my story. He wrote this caption for it: "Ugly duckling vacant lot may soon become beautiful swan in the form of a new office building, thanks to Mayor Petrone. See accompanying story."

When I read the caption, I felt ill. This was out-and-out pandering. I went to see Swint. He was at his desk.

"Let me rewrite that caption for you," I said, trying to sound tactful.

Apparently I failed. Bristling, he demanded, "Why? It's fine like I wrote it, isn't it?"

I tugged at my collar. "Well. . . I was just thinking that we could say something like...'Syracuse developer will consider putting an office building on this vacant city-owned lot'...Or something like that."

He was shaking his head. "Too bland, Mr. Wellington. When you've been in this town a little longer, you'll realize that the hope of a better future is about all the people here have. That hope is embodied in Benny Petrone. That's why we support him, and that's why we're going to play up this story."

I stifled a sigh of disgust and turned to leave. Though I'd been on the paper only five weeks, I was already used to losing in-house arguments over standards.

"Uh..." Swint began.

I stopped. "Yes?"

"About your Scarlatti story?"

I brightened. "Yes. I was wondering if you were going to put that on page one. But if there's not room now that you're putting the Scanlon story there, it could go inside. I don't mind."

Extremely uncomfortable, Swint looked away from me and said, "We can't, Mr. Wellington."

"No space today? It could run tomorrow, I suppose."

He was shaking his head. "It's well...so speculative."

Comprehending, I muttered, "You aren't going to run it at all."

Still not meeting my eyes, he muttered, "I can't."

I lost my temper. "That's the city's strategy for fighting that lawsuit! I got it from Petrone's own lawyer!"

His gray bloodshot eyes ablaze, Swint shouted, "I'll thank you not to shout at me!"

Forcing myself to speak softly, I said, "It's not speculative."

"It is. That's the word I got."

"From whom?" I demanded, my voice rising.

He looked away. "The mayor. He repudiated it because..."

I remembered Scarlatti's candor. "Because Scarlatti admitted Petrone was probably wrong to fire those cops."

He nodded. "He wasn't authorized to speak to you."

I walked out. Swint did not protest. Back at my desk, I sat in an agony of despair. I got out my notebook and began to draft a letter of resignation. My despair intensified as I wrote. Then it crested, and I slid into a lethargic depression. I tore up my letter. I couldn't quit. No other paper would hire me if I quit this job after only five weeks.

I told Zamora I was feeling sick--no lie!--and went home. I drank myself into a stupor, using Scotch this time. When I awoke the next morning, I had a dreadful hangover, but felt cheerful. As I'd sat in my cups the night before, a way out of my dilemma popped into my mind. Somehow it had survived the erasure effect Scotch usually has on my memory. I would goad Petrone mercilessly, every chance I got, but always under the

guise of responsible reporting. Sooner or later he'd become furious with me, and by extension, the Trumpet and everyone else associated with it. If I could drive Swint and Petrone apart, I could write the kind of stories I liked-- real stories--and recover my self respect. It was vital that I recover my self respect. I could not live without it.

I chuckled as I waited for my coffee to perk, head throbbing. Petrone had shown me his Achilles heel when he'd demanded I pretend his Staltonstall Street debacle hadn't happened. I could hardly wait for the coffee to finish: I wanted to get to work and start implementing my plan. I'd begin by following up the Staltonstall Street story. He'd sworn before all of Sizemore to relieve the misery of the people there. I'd ask him when he planned to keep his promise. I'd ask and ask till, Vesuviuslike, he blew. Swint would have to back me up. Benny Petrone himself had made the Staltonstall Street people news. And, as Swint said, after all, the news is the news.

As for the people themselves, they'd be safe. They'd remain in their hovels hard by the cruel brown river. Petrone would never make them move. I knew now he had no time for anyone too stupid to appreciate the boundless goodness of his soul.

Victor Contoski

CONFESSIONS OF A STRANGLER

I have been clever with my hands ever since I can remember. When I was still in my cradle my favorite pastime was twisting and pulling sheets of cloth. Later my parents watched in horror as I twisted the heads off teddy-bears. I twisted limbs off too, for I was then too young to know the difference between parts of the body.

As I grew older I discovered the difference between twisting animate and inanimate objects, and I began practicing on small animals. In grade school and high school I took no interest in sports, for they gave my hands no satisfaction. The hours my playmates spent on the basketball court or the football field I spent in various exercises strengthening the muscles of my hands and fingers. By this time I was able to take on some of the fullgrown dogs in the neighborhood. And even then I hoped that someday I could become the best strangler in the world.

Upon graduation from high school, I was admitted to a midwestern university where I majored in strangling. Hitherto I had depended entirely upon the strength of my wrists and fingers, but there I learned to strangle with the subtlety of a professional. I mastered the various grips and positions, holding the victim close to me so that I could feel the death throes not only in my hands but throughout my body. To the surprise of my parents and acquaintances I graduated with honors.

Then I found myself faced with the hard economic necessities of life. The only employment open to me was in organized crime. My professors offered to give me letters of recommendation to several gangs in and around Chicago, but something inside me rebelled. To me strangling was an art, and against the advice of all who knew me, I went into business for myself, setting up a small strangling studio in Greenwich Village.

With pride I painted a small sign which proclaimed: "Strangling-- confidential, moderate cost." With pride I hung it in the window of my two-room apartment and waited for customers. Alas! Work at the beginning was slow indeed. In shame I took odd jobs, waiting on tables, sweeping floors, or washing dishes. I thought about my fellow students at the university, all of whom were comfortably set up in New York, Chicago, or Miami with a steady income guaranteed. Once or twice I passed former acquaintances on the street, but I was so haggard and poorly dressed that they did not recognize me--thank God!

After about a year of merely existing in the big city, I found my work picking up. One or two critics remarked that several dead animals showed a clean technique of execution. Then one day, much to my surprise, I was asked to give an exhibition. After much thought I chose to strangle a Great Dane and a horse. Nobody had ever tried to strangle a horse, so

there was much critical to-do about it. People talked about "creativity," "decadence," and "organic unity."

But the show was hardly a critical success. The Great Dane bit me twice before I managed to get my fingers around his neck. He was a fighter and took quite a while to die. Thus by the time I got to the horse I was exhausted. Though he did not fight as actively as the dog, he was tremendously strong and stubborn. I took him down immediately, but his neck muscles were thick and unbelievably strong. We lay on the floor together for about forty-five minutes, and I cound tell that some of the audience was losing interest. A few people walked out, Finally the horse began to heave its body back and forth, and, excited by the impending climax, I forced new strength into my fingers. I never worked so hard in my life. When the animal gave its final, convulsive shudder, my fingers were buried halfway in its throat. I was so weak I could not rise, and some of the spectators had to help me disengage my hands.

I left the hall in a daze. Aimlessly I walked the streets exhausted, doubting if I could ever strangle again. One hour. Two hours. On a strange street I stopped in a coffeehouse. Pulling my hat down over my eyes, I took a table in a corner of the room and let my head sink into my hands.

When I raised my eyes I found myself looking at a short girl in a black dress and black sweater who stood before my table. Her face was pale white and beautiful as a mask. It could have been chiseled in marble. Dark hair fell down to her shoulders. She was thin, but her neck was firm and well muscled. Her small breasts stood out through her sweater, and she carried her body with pride. I watched the light play in her hair and over her gaunt cheekbones.

"Are you all right?" she asked me.

"Yes," I told her. "I'm fine."

"You look pale," she said, taking my head in her hands as naturally as if she'd done it all her life. "Let me get you something."

A pasty-looking liquid in a small bowl seemed to materialize out of the air. It tasted sweet and felt thick in my mouth, and it somehow revived my spirits. My tongue is awkward, so I let my hands speak for me. I held them out to her. She took them and sat down.

We talked late into the night about ourselves and our plans. She was a poisoner from a small town in Iowa who had come to the big city like myself in hope of making a better life. But she was even worse off. Her main income was derived from poisoning barking dogs. She had poisoned only a couple of people, both from poor families, so there was no great profit in it for her. But she assured me that poisoning people was infinitely more satisfying than wasting her talents on brute animals.

She said she loved the impersonality and remoteness of her work, that she loved to watch the death agonies in utter immobility. Both times when she had poisoned people she had an urge to laugh or shout or dance or sing or cry--anything to show that she was human. But she found it ecstasy to sit still as

stone, letting the emotion well up inside. Her dark eyes gleamed as she spoke.

I told her of my boyhood ambitions, my small studio, and the exhibition I had given that afternoon. I showed her the marks of the dog and the stiffness of my fingers that would feel the horse for days to come. When I told her that someday I hoped to perform the perfect strangling, she took my hands in her own and stroked them.

When the cafe closed I walked her home to her attic apartment. All the way to her place we did not say a word, and I was surprised to find I knew the street on which she lived. I had often seen the old, rotting houses without suspecting that anyone lived in the attics.

"It's quite a climb for you every day up to the fifth floor," I said.

"I don't mind it," she replied. "My work is either doing research or mixing formulas, so a little exercise does me good."

We climbed again a while in silence.

"Besides, I like it at the top," she said. "It's quiet. I feel that there's only the wind, the stars, and the black night."

Then we were both silent again. When we came to the door of her apartment, I entered it as naturally as my own. It was bitter cold in her one room. As we stood and looked at each other in the dark, her eyes glowed like a cat's, but I found it hard to distinguish her body from the surrounding blackness. I touched her, and she was cold. First I rubbed her, trying to give her warmth. She neither said nor did a thing. Then I hugged her to my body, feeling the soft points of her breasts against me. I could no longer restrain my hands. They were in her hair, on her face, over her breasts, and buttocks, and thighs. I had trouble with the catch of her brassiere, for my fingers were stiff with cold and still sore from the horse, but she neither helped nor hindered me. Shivering with cold, I made love to her, but she did not move a muscle. She just looked at me with her glowing eyes, and I saw the excitement welling up inside her, knew the fight she was making to keep from kissing me, running her hands over my body, squirming, shouting, and sobbing. When I entered her only the barest whimper escaped her lips, and at the climax her body was trembling--not from the cold but from her efforts to control her reactions. And control them she did. Only her eyes told me of her passion, but they spoke eloquently. She was a born poisoner!

Soon afterwards she gave up her attic apartment and came to live with me. She rarely spoke after the first day, but I found her controlled passion stimulating and challenging. She in turn was fascinated by my hands. Many times she would simply sit and look at them. Once or twice she made so bold as to put them on her body, but she was always passive when we made love. Her eyes spoke volumes, but her body might have been that of a corpse.

Then little my little my business began to pick up. The strangling of the horse, though not an artistic success, did serve as a sort of advertisement, and my name gradually became

known throughout Greenwich Village.

Then came my first human victim. I remember her well: about sixteen years old in the first flush of youth, short yellow hair, open blue eyes, and an adolescent plumpness that was not unattractive. Her uncle, who would inherit her fortune in case of her death, had lured her up to my studio on the pretext that he was taking her out for some ice cream. My little poisoner, who began at this time to serve also as my receptionist, escorted the girl in to me. I greeted the child in what I hoped was my best professional manner, but for some reason the poor girl was terrified. Suddenly she turned around and bolted for the door. I seized her by the shoulders, but not before she emitted a scream that must have left her throat raw and bleeding. I grabbed her neck from behind, hardly an artistic position, and her wild thrashing made my work sloppy indeed. When I finally let the body drop to the floor, I saw the eyes of my little poisoner looking at me, glowing.

Thereafter she watched me in all my stranglings, silently with a strange mixture of horror, exultation, and compassion. After the first rather difficult experience I found strangling humans no more difficult that strangling dogs and cats and much easier than strangling horses. It was more satisfying too, because I felt at last that I was filling my place in the vast order of the universe.

Word got around about my proficiency. People had to call for appointments, and sometimes I was booked solid for weeks. My prices went up. We moved out of our shabby apartment to a house in the country and became commuters. But there remained a basic difference between me and the corporation stranglers. Although I made money at my profession, strangling for me continued to be first and foremost an art. Yet in those days, try as I would, I could not achieve the satisfaction that only perfection gives. My work during this period was good, and some was excellent--I remember the cases of two children in particular--but none was perfect.

Then one beautiful starlit evening in May I was summoned on a house call by a good client. I kissed my little poisoner at the door and told her not to wait up for me, since there was no burial detail and I had to do much of the manual labor myself. But by the time I arrived at the house, my client had been unable to retain the victim, and I had nothing to do but return home. Imagine my surprise when I drew near the house to find another car in the driveway.

Silently I stole up to the house and opened the door. She was on the couch, eyes glittering. Bending over her lovely body was a little-known mass murderer whom I had met once or twice socially. He was not even a good mass murderer; almost half of his victims still lived.

My first impulse was to strangle them both, but that would have been childish and unsophisticated. I coughed discreetly, and they looked up in surprise. Confused, the mass murderer got up and went out. My little poisoner followed him without a word. As his car went off, I sank to my knees, cupped my head in my hands, and--for the first time in my life--wept.

Later that night, much later, I walked out into the darkness and strangled as I had never strangled before. At last my timing was perfect, my technique, down to the last twitch of the smallest finger, beyond reproach. All who came my way that night in the dark fell before the holy and awful power of my hands.

Since then I have strangled many people, old men tottering to the grave and children barely able to walk, beautiful young virgins and young men in the full bloom of health and vigor. Not that my work has been perfect, but it has been good enough to make me the foremost authority of my time. And some of it has been perfect, for now I know the secret of art, the secret I would have died to obtain when I was young and which now I find the heaviest burden of man. I have known it ever since my little poisoner betrayed me that starlit night many years ago.


Camelot
INN

Patricia Cullen

THE VISIT

Maggie stood at the kitchen window and ate a bowl of blackberries and milk. The berries tinged the milk reddish-purple, and crystals of pink sugar clustered on the rim of her spoon.

Granny was upstairs throwing laundry out the window into the back yard. Grampa's work pants thudded to the ground. Sheets unfurled and billowed in the breeze before collapsing in front of the cellar door.

Maggie stirred the juice in the bowl and hummed. The sun felt warm through the window. Today is the day, she thought. Today is the day I leave here and go see Mama.

Her grandmother stopped her singing. "Maggie," she called, "go down and bring those clothes into the cellar. Don't touch the wringer on the machine, mind."

Maggie went down the steps to the cellar, one at a time, keeping her eyes averted from the cobvwebs on the stone walls, and dragged the dirty sheets inside. Steam and the smell of javelle water hung in the room. Outside, she could see the other kids playing in the sun with the new kittens. The dog watched from where he lay under the wagon. Today Maggie's wish would come true. All she had to do was get on the bus, and go see her mother. As soon as they saw each other, it would be okay, and she would move back to Lincoln Street, and go to fourth grade at Lincoln Street School.

Jackie shrieked outside for her to come and watch the kitten walk on its hind legs. Maggie looked. The baby sat next to the dog, holding a fistful of hair on its neck, and talked to it softly. Maggie wondered how they would feel without her. They could not all go home. Mama had to work. Would she make Maggie leave them? They were used to her taking care of them. The last time they had gone to see their mother, oh when was that? The beginning of summer? When the cab had dropped them off and no one had been there to let them in? It was a good thing, her grandmother had said, that Maggie was there to call the cab back, and have the driver take them all home. Then Granny's lips had tightened, and Maggie had felt ashamed, as if she had done something wrong instead of right, as if it had been her fault that her mother hadn't been there when she said she would.

Maggie turned back to the cellar and watched the water churning and jumping in the washer. Her stay here was supposed to be brief, a little visit, her mother had said. "Call your Granny," she had told Maggie, "and say can you come for awhile and visit?" Maggie hadn't wanted to call, had whined about calling, but her mother insisted. Maggie, standing on tiptoe, had put her money in the payphone, and, whispering so no one in the candy store could hear, had asked could they come for a visit. Of course, Granny said, yes, of coursé. Now here it was months later, and she was going to visit her mother. Visit her mother! She was visiting the farm, and it was time the visit

was over.

Granny was calling her. It was time to get cleaned up for her trip. Maggie waved to her brother and sister.

"Goodbye, Jack, goodbye Sally," she called.

Granny combed Maggie's hair back from her face. She twisted long curls around her fingers and tied a bow aound them.

"How long that will stay in this heat, the Lord only knows. Now, Maggie, you just wait on the corner until the bus comes. Tell the driver, it may be Henry Glynn, you remember him, just tell him you're Tom Curran's girl, and you want to go to Beaton's Market."

Maggie pulled away, but the comb was snarled in her hair, and pulled her back.

"Don't talk to strangers, Maggie, and ...oh, you'll be all right. You're a smart girl. I don't need to worry over you."

Granny hugged her, but Maggie danced away, impatient to be off.

There were four steps from the porch to the sidewalk, eleven squares in the concrete path to the dirt road. Maggie clutched the nickels for the bus tightly as she stepped carefully over cracks in the path. The dirt road in front of her grandparents' house seemed like the end of the world. Pastures and fields sloped down to the Merrimac River that came from the White Mountains she could see in the distance. The little road twisted up from the house, up the hill where it turned around the reservoir.

The oak tree across the road had fewer leaves today. Sometimes at night a cold wind came down from the mountains and blew some of the leaves away. More fields and more of the river could be seen through the branches now. Maggie thought this might be a good time to count the leaves again. When they had first arrived here last spring, she had begun to count the leaves, spending hours on the porch steps, counting until the sun pushed out more and more leaves along the branches, counting until the warmth of spring spread the green so thick she couldn't tell one leaf from another, couldn't find her place once she left off counting.

Trying to count. If she moved back to Lincoln Street, how would she get the stars counted? She had been trying all summer. Grampa said no one knew how many stars there were in the sky. On hot nights when they slept outside on the lawn, Maggie had watched the stars, stil cold from spring. Each night she had swept her eyes across the heavens trying to find the star she had counted last the night before. The sky curved like a teacup. Stars swirled out of the cup until they were dumped, and sparkling, and mashed on one another like grains of sugar. Too many stars; they blurred before her eyes until she fell asleep. Each night, it seemed, more and more stars crowded around the dish of the world until she felt herself whirling and spinning along with them as the earth spun and turned her into sleep.

She counted the stars, and she counted the leaves, and she counted the ants that crossed her path on the concrete, and she tried not to think of moving back with her mother. How would

she finish her counting in the city?

She kicked a rock down the street. She looked at her scuffed-brown oxfords, her floppy socks, and her scratched and goose-pimply legs. She could feel eyes on her. People were looking out their windows at her, turning to whisper and call to others to come and see, look who is walking down the road. A voice or a laugh from a backyard, and she pulled her arms closer to her sides, took smaller steps, trying not to be seen. Very carefully she punctured tar bubbles that the sun had raised on the edge of the road. Sometimes she saw the people who lived on this street. On their way to church on Sunday mornings, she and Grampa would meet them going to Mass. "Good morning," the grown-nups would call, and the men would tip their hats.

Company came on Sundays. In the afternoons men in their vests, with their gold teeth, would go out back with Grampa to see his tomato plants and have a smoke. They would look at the goats, or lean on the wagon and puff smoke, nodding and talking, cigarettes burning down between their yellow fingers. Ladies didn't smoke. Dirty things, they called cigarettes. Instead, the women sat in the parlor, sharing the news from Lynn and Boston, talking of deaths and wakes and funerals. And always, always, came that pause, when Maggie would pull herself close to the wall behind the chair, and the ladies would look at each other and Granny, and would begin to talk in low voices about "her" and "them." "Her" Maggie knew, was her mother. "Them" was either her father and mother, or all the kids. It depended. It was hard for her to follow the conversations. Sentences trailed off, silences shamed her. The air was full of questions her grandmother could not answer, and questions Maggie could not ask. Somehow information was shared and passed along, and the ladies would relax and say, yes, they guessed they could do with another cup of tea before getting along. And Maggie would sit by the wall, trying to piece together information, wondering how everyone else could know what was going on in her life when she didn't.

The hill was so steep that the bus came halfway up and no more. Most people on the hill walked to the stores at the bottom, or borrowed a car. Granny thought if you walked as far as the bus stop, you might as well walk all the way. Maggie had seldom been on a bus. Granny had told her to wait on the corner. What if the driver wouldn't stop for a kid? Should she wave? Or step off the curb? Should she look as if she didn't care one way or another so that if the bus didn't stop she could just pretend she hadn't wanted it to begin with, was just out for a walk, and had stopped to admire something on Beacon Street? How silly. Everyone was watching her and probably knew where she was going, and that she had never taken this bus before. They were waiting for her to make a mistake so they could laugh and call Granny and say, See she is not so smart as you think, Mrs. Curran.

Here was the bus, pulling over to the curb and waiting for her. Taking a deep breath, Maggie climbed on and carefully put her nickel in the box. She took a seat halfway down the aisle, near the rear door. This would be a long ride, down the rest of

the hill, across the bridge, and past the mills. Downtown the bus would stop, but she must not get off. She would have to stay on, and ride to the end of the line where she would put in another nickel, and then get off.

More people got on the bus. Some she had seen at church. Was she supposed to speak to them, or smile? She stared out the window, pretending not to see anyone. If she heard a whisper or a laugh, she blushed.

Downtown. Across the river that split the city. Groups of men hung around the cigarstore in the square. The "Lowell Sun" sign shone high in the sky, looking like a round hot sun with electric flares shooting out of it. It was a sun she could look at without blinking.

People went in and out of bakeries, five-and-tens, or stood in clumps and read the movie ads at the Strand. Maggie had been to the movies. Once she and Jackie and Sally went to see "Pinocchio." Another time Ma took her to a show that had a train in it. The train came speeding out of the screen and headed right for her, Maggie, until she screamed and ducked her head, and it disappeared. Still, she liked movies. Music and motion. The darkness where she could smile or cry and no one could see. She wished she lived in a movie where the grass was bright green and the birds sang.

After changing drivers, the bus turned onto the busiest street in town. Stores and cafes lined both sides. In barroom windows steamy from beer, Maggie could see round pots of plants and men with their hats on. There were "ladies entrance" signs on the side doors. Dada drank beer, she knew, and so did Ma. Granny didn't. Beer, she said, was horse's piss. Granny didn't think that ladies should chew gum either, but Maggie had a piece saved on the metal rail of her bed. She chewed it only at night while she said her prayers.

The bus moved slower now. So many passengers had gotten on that several men had to stand. They clustered near the fare box and talked to the driver about the Red Sox. Others sat and talked rapidly to each other, gesturing, their faces wrinkling and rearranging. If someone who knew her stepped on the bus, what would she find to say?

After they left downtown, Maggie looked carefully at the street signs. Her hand tensed, ready to pull the cord. What if it didn't work? She would ride all day, trapped. She sucked in deep breaths. Was that her stop? She leaned forward and squinted out the window. Beaton's Market. She'd better stand up and pull the cord.

The driver must have been watching her. As soon as she stood, he pulled the bus over, opened the doors, and announced, "There you are, young lady." Everyone turned and smiled. Maggie flushed and scampered down. Beaton's. This was the store that had the cookies in the glass jars. Big cookies that had jam and cream and specks of stuff on them. When Ma gave them pennies, Maggie used to take the little kids up here to buy cookies.

She smiled and twirled around. How many times had she come up here, going to the store, looking at shops, visiting

churches, and admiring flowers in gardens?

Not many people were on the streets. Everything was quiet, the houses closed, as she walked along. Not a door slammed. Where could everyone be? Gardens were empty. Dry brown leaves clogged the flower beds. A fat rose, yellow and white with brown edges, leaned over the sidewalk. When Maggie looked messy, her grandmother called her the last rose of summer.

Maggie walked and studied the grey-grainy sidewalk. Walk straight, they said, be proud you're tall. Instead, she bent over, hunched herself in, protected herself, warmed herself, kept herself together as she walked, head down, eyes sweeping the ground, following a line that looked like a little railway of ants and crumbs of stones, clumps of grass, and grains of dirt. Shadows hung over her and she shivered, then came into the sun and blinked as bits of silver winked from the cement. Here was her old school. Smooth stone bannisters went from the doors to the sidewalk. Bannisters big kids would slide on after the teachers had gone home.

Home. She could feel the song start in her. She skipped. Home. Two blocks more, every step full of ghosts of herself running, jumping, going to school, going home. Here was the house where the bad kids lived. Stay away from the Keegan boys, Ma said. Bad. Old Lady Gray lived over there. She wasn't in her window waving and smiling today. Maybe she had gone somewhere. Maybe today was a holiday and Maggie was the only one who didn't know. But Granny would not trick her. Besides, hadn't she heard Granny phone Mrs. Kelly and ask her to tell Angie that Maggie was coming to visit today? Maggie had hidden in the cubbyhole under the stairs and listened to the phone call. Hmmm, Granny went, meaning she was being polite to Mrs. Kelly, but probably wanted to tell her to mind her own beeswax.

Maggie's mother didn't like Mrs. Kelly either. "Old toad," she would mutter. "The old toad," but never so Mrs. Kelly could hear. The Kellys had the only phone around and let neighbors use it. So the family could listen in, Ma said. She would die of shame, Ma had said, to listen to other folks' business the way the Kellys did. Stop eating, they would, with the fork full of cabbage halfway to their mouths and none, for once, breathing through their adenoids, for fear they'd miss a word or bit of gossip. Wonder what they know abut me, Maggie thought, and kicked at a stone in the path.

In the next yard was a baby in a buggy covered with a net. Maggie peeked through the net. She wanted to push it like a doll buggy down the path, but was afraid the mother would come out and yell. The baby was very small. She wondered how big her mother's baby was now. A new baby. At her mother's house. Why a new baby? There were the rest of them who couldn't live with Ma. Why would she get another baby? Would it be there today? Would it cry and sit on her mother's lap while Maggie visited? Maggie was determined to ask her mother if she could come home to live. I will be so good, she meant to tell her, if you let me come back, I will never be bad again.

Could she say that if the new baby was there? Babies didn't know words. The baby wouldn't hear her ask. Maybe she

could take care of the baby while her mother worked. Little Mother, Dada used to call her. Could she ask her mother anything in front of the new baby?

Maggie hesitated. The next house was hers. There was their green door. The second door led to the upstairs people, and the third down to the cellar where the oil barrels were, and the old man whose pants were held together by a safety pin.

Her fingers caressed the splintery gate; her shoes scuffed across the dirt yard. Three steps, creaking and loose, led to the grey porch floor and the front door with the bell key sticking out.

The bell rasped when she turned it. Maggie couldn't see past the lowered shade, but she could hear the bell shrilling on the other side. Open, it said. Someone is here, Maggie is here, why does she ring the bell? Open, I say. Maggie rang the bell again. The bell would sound all the way to the back of the house. Ma might be asleep on the couch by the stove. Ring the bell and wake her up. Get up and tie your robe tight, push your hair back and yawn, but come and answer the bell. Maggie rang again. If Ma is taking out trash, or on the back porch, she thought, she won't hear the bell. Maggie ran down the yard and around the corner. She hoped no one was peeking out from behind the shades at Kellys. "Fat toad," her mother had said, "always hiding and peeking. Never misses a trick." Maggie ran past the window to her old bedroom. When she reached the back gate, it stuck, had to be shoved, leaned on, pushed at, until it threw itself open, and she could run onto the back porch. Shades were drawn on this side of the house too. The house slept. The street was quiet.

All the houses were silent, waiting, listening, wondering what that girl would do now. She shattered the stillness with a knock, then a banging. She pounded the door with both fists, then kicked it. Waited. No answer. She tried the window. It was locked. She went back and started to knock again. Answer, she prayed, answer.

It occurred to her that her mother was not at home. Maybe Ma went to the store to get ice cream, she thought. She sat on the steps. Sounds drifted to her; a car on another street, a phone ringing and not being answered. Somewhere a baby wailed. Maggie turned towards her mother's house, but the cry was faint and far-away, and soon hushed. She liked it when grownups picked up crying babies right away. She stood up and beat on the door again.

The voice came from behind her. "She ain't gonna answer. Knock all day, she won't let you in. She's sicka kids, my ma says."

Maggie turned. Sally Mallow. Sally used to be her friend. Sometimes. Trash, Ma had called Sally.

Swinging her foot by the gate, standing half-in, half-out of the yard, Sally said, "She's home. She's home all the time now. Stays with that little baby she got when you all went away. My ma says your ma is going to hell. She oughta be in jail, my ma says."

Maggie drew back her fist and prepared to spring on Sally. No, she thought. Listen. Listen. Everyone knows something but me.

"Are you coming back here to stay? I'll be your friend, Maggie." Wait, wait for more to be said. Clench fists, bite lips. "Do you wanta go to a funeral? Old Lady Gray died. 'member her? Usedta sit at a window all day? I went to her wake yesterday. She's got a black ribbon and a diamond on her neck, and red fingernail polish. Wanna come? I been to every funeral on this street this year. Every one. None a them gonna see the sun shine no more. Never, never. Never see nothin no more."

Dead. Maggie did not want to see anyone dead. She closed her eyes against the picture of old hands with red nails. Her mother polished her nails red. Old ladies shouldn't have red nails. She turned her head away so Sally couldn't see her face. Dead. Dead in the dark, no light, no sun.

Sally laughed. "Yep. She's going to hell all right."

Maggie flew at her, pushed Sally from the fence. "Get out. This is my yard. You get out." She pulled the gate to and latched it. The other girl hesitated on the sidewalk.

"Well, I gotta go. Sure you don't wanta come? I'll take you, Maggie, my ma won't know."

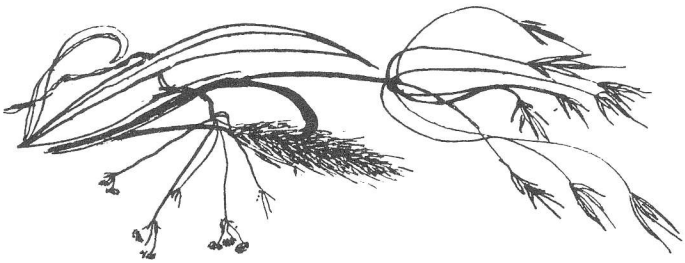
Maggie waited, stonefaced. After a minute, Sally walked away. She whistled and tapped fence slats as she went down the street.

Maggie sat on the step. She was tired, cold. The sun, she noticed, had stretched away down the street, the shadows were longer, and the dark closer to her. She got up and knocked another time. Waited, knocked again. There was still some sun in the corner of the house. She kept on knocking, softly now, and waiting, she was so tired, until the porch was completely in shadow. Then she fled out of the yard, leaving the gate open, and ran up the street to the corner where she could get the bus for home.

The trip home seemed to take no time at all. Sunset lit up the sky, and the "LOWELL SUN" sign downtown was turned on and glowing. At Beacon Street, she got off the bus and walked rapidly up the hill, feeling the cold red of the sunset like fire on her bones. She was cold. Running down to her house, she shivered. Cold and dead, she thought. She slowed down near the house, and slowly walked up the four steps and into the kitchen.

Granny was making pies. Pit, pat, roll and lift. It was like a dance, her rolling out pie crust. Maggie sat by the stove. The heat from the oven spread all through her; the music and the hypnotic rhythm of the rolling pin lulled her. Her grandmother began to whistle, sounding like water twisting and burbling over rocks in the sun. How could she make that sound? When other people whistled, it was a flat-out piece of song, not like this melody that curled around the room and hung in the air long after Granny was somewhere else. Maggie saw her grandmother watching her as she listened to the music. Maggie felt sleepy, as if in a dream, rocking and swaying on the air, just as the

trees outside the kitchen window swayed in the breeze, their leafy branches sweeping the sky. Dead, she thought. Never, never to see the sun. She huddled closer to the stove to get warm.



Keith Denniston

SUSPENDED SENTENCE

When the whole truth is known, when everything is finally and totally out in the open, open as much as anything in this world ever really can be, though there is always probably a good deal that only God can know, and if he does, he won't tell, which undoubtedly is a good thing for us who can only manage to do whatever it is that at any particular time seems to be the, at that moment, best that anyone can do, even though later, not fully understanding, others will decide that he did some terrible wrong and will be happy to tear him to little pieces, blaming him for every single thing that ever went wrong, things that happened in the distant past when he had absolutely no control over events and happenings that he was too young even to fully understand, let alone cause to happen, as well as present events like the unexpected ones that no one could possibly have foreseen which occurred to us this Good Friday when Mother, my sister Sharon, and I were sitting around the kitchen table, lunch over, the dishes washed and put away, our dog fed and asleep on the back porch, Mother kneading dough for hot cross buns for Easter dinner because she said that this year she was going to go to mass whether anyone else in her family did or not so she was getting her work out of the way and simply giving up on us though she had tried to raise us right since Father up and left us in the lurch which she always said several times a day when we were home from college, and Sharon, all in black, as usual, which she swore she would wear forever so it was no use for Mother even to try to talk her out of it for she would mourn forever and ever or to try to stop her from playing Lennon's Double Fantasy over and over on her own record player in her own room, was dyeing Easter Eggs purple and yellow to make a decoration for the table for Easter Sunday, being careful, as Mother told her to be, with old newspapers spread over one end of the kitchen table to catch the dribbles, dipping hard boiled eggs into a bowl of purple and a bowl of yellow dye with a wire gadget she had made and then carefully placing them on Mother's cake-drying-rack, while I was just sitting there, smoking king size cigarettes, trying to catch up on my philosophy assignments, which after attempting four other academic fields with little success or interest is what I have now declared my major to be, when our doorbell, one of the old fashioned kind you twist not push, rang, and Mother said, since I was doing nothing, which is what she calls reading philosophy assignments, I should answer it, so I lit another cigarette and went to the door, expecting nothing except, since it was Good Friday, some Jehovah's Witnesses or school kids with the day off who wanted to sell some kind of stupid tickets, so imagine my surprise, if you can, when I opened the door and there stood, I couldn't believe my eyes at first, our dog who was supposed to be asleep on our back porch after lunch because he is real real old, four-

teen, and Mother will not have him in the house because he drools, but she had just had manure spread on her garden patch and no one can stop him from rolling in it and since he is so old and decrepit as well as huge, he is very difficult to bathe, which of course is a chore that always falls to me, but, of course, I am no idiot, whatever Mother and Sharon may think, so I almost immediately realized that it wasn't our dog standing on his hind legs but an old man in a long black overcoat who had a mop of reddish grey hair, bushy eyebrows, and a huge mustache of the same wiry reddish grey hair and a protruding mouth which made him for an instant look remarkably like our dog, an uncanny resemblance, which I was still pondering as he said, "Hubert, I need to see your mother," so I realized that he knew who I was and in a flash I realized who he was, of course, our Uncle Rufus whom I had not laid eyes on for fourteen years since that dreadful time that Father up and left us in the lurch nor he me, to my knowledge, since he was Father's brother, and, as we believed, felt guilty about what Father did to us, so all these many years he has let Mother, Sharon, and I live in this house which he owns and we just pay taxes and upkeep, the taxes which kept going up every year so the upkeep we have let go down because all these years Father has sent only child support checks to Uncle Rufus which Uncle Rufus forwarded as regular as rain by the fifth of the month, which explains why Sharon and I continue in college though she is twenty-three and I am twenty-four because when we graduate the child support checks will cease which constitutes our income, not generous, but it has been sufficient to our needs, especially since we only have to pay taxes and upkeep on Uncle Rufus' house which we call our home, so with these thoughts racing through my mind I escorted Uncle Rufus into our kitchen, hardly noticing that he kept muttering, 'poor little tyke' at me, why, I knew no reason at that time, but Mother, always alert, recognized him immediately and said, "Why, Rufus," pulling her hands out of the dough, but Uncle Rufus said, looking at Sharon, her black dress contrasting violently with the purple and yellow eggs, "Oh, you know already," with great sadness, and Mother, her doughy hands arrested in midair said, "What, Rufus?" and Uncle Rufus bowed his shaggy head and said, "I hate to have to be the one to tell you, but Hubert is dead," so in a trice Mother and Sharon looked at me and I was totally bewildered, knowing myself to be alive and started to remonstrate when Mother understood and said before I could utter one syllable, "Your father, Children," and, like a ton of bricks, it hit me because I had been named Hubert after my father, Hubert, so in reality I am Hubert, junior, but seldom if ever have I thought of myself as so, so Sharon shrugged, understanding too, and went back to her eggs, but Mother looked stunned and said, "How, Rufus?" and immediately I thought but did not say, 'social disease,' those very 'thought' words shoving my mind down a dismal corridor of painful repressed memories and old guilt that I never really deserved to feel because Mother had always been violently opposed to drinking in any form and had always said that all you could find in drinking establishments were prostitutes and social diseases, I think

because she had always suspected that Father frequented such places, so when I was merely eight years old and had to return to school because I forgot my coat and I accidently saw Father and a blond lady get out of his Buick and go, pretty as you please, into the Triple Cross Bar and Grill, thinking to save Father from a social disease, not even knowing what one was, I rushed home and told all to Mother, wouldn't you have done so, though little did I expect the three days of violent arguments that followed my, I insist, innocent disclosure, which ended by Father up and leaving us in the lurch, running away in his Buick with the blond lady to Tucson, Arizona, where he opened a rather lucrative garden center business, Mother having divorced him with Uncle Rufus acting as intermediator because Mother and Father refused to have any more intercourse, but Uncle Rufus seemed to side with Mother so she received child support payments and, thanks to Uncle Rufus, a roof over her and her children's heads, though he dropped out of sight, perhaps not wanting to be reminded of his brother's infidelity, but before that while the divorce settlement was being arranged, he noticed that I especially seemed to be taking Father's absence hard, and indeed I was because I felt that I was totally to blame and guilt was gnawing at me, but Uncle Rufus mistakenly thought I was simply grieving over the loss of Father, so, feeling by proxy, guilty himself, he brought me a dog for company, a reddish-brown puppy of indeterminate species, saying to Mother, "It's no substitute for a father, but maybe it will cheer the little tyke up," and no one can remember whether it was Sharon or I, we both have argued over it endlessly, who first noticed that the dog remarkably resembled its donor, Uncle Rufus, so Rufus the dog was called and Rufus it is called to this day as it now lay sleeping on our back porch, so my confusion at the front door is little wonder, but as Uncle Rufus was explaining to Mother about Father's heart attack, his interment in Tucson, Arizona, and his will favoring the blond lady who had become his wife, I was thinking about the generosity Uncle Rufus had shown us over these last fourteen years and about what the future might hold for us if he discovered that his wards had named Rufus Rufus after him, and Sharon must have been following a similar train of thought because she stopped dyeing her eggs, looked at me, and said, "Where's Rufus?" to which Uncle Rufus replied, "I'm here, Child. You're wearing black? Did you already know?" while Mother who had always said that we should not call Rufus Rufus simply spluttered, looked at me, and pointed with her doughy hand to the back porch where Rufus was having his nap, so evidently both Mother and Sharon had placed the total responsibility on me for keeping Uncle Rufus ignorant of his look-alike and namesake, Rufus, the dog, so while Sharon was telling Uncle Rufus that what she wore was her own business and Mother was remembering her manners and asking him to take off his coat and sit down after so many years, I quietly slipped out the kitchen door to the back porch, tried to get Rufus to get up, but the dog was sleeping like a log so I dragged him down the back steps into the back yard by Mother's garden patch where I smelled the fresh manure, and knowing it would be my luck for

Rufus to finally wake up and roll in the manure which he loved to do, it being his nature, I continued to drag him by the collar through the back gate and into the alley, thinking he was too old to up and leave and would remain there until Uncle Rufus concluded his visit and/or his business with Mother and we would know our fate now that Father was dead, but after carefully closing the back gate and running across the yard so I would not be missed by Uncle Rufus, I had just reached the back porch door when I heard our neighbor, Mrs. Hurley yelling, "Oh, Hubert, Hubert, Rufus is run over. I think he's killed," so back I flew in a panic because I loved Rufus, and I could hear Mother and Sharon and Uncle Rufus, too, following, all having heard Mrs. Hurley's loud yells, and sure enough there in the alley was poor Rufus, his middle section all squashed and oozing out, and a 1950 dark green Dodge shiny as a brand new car, with white sidewalls, had stopped and out the driver's door stepped a little lady in a bright print dress wearing short white gloves and a flat little white straw hat with lilies-of-the-valley and a white half veil holding down her silvery grey cork screw curls, who said very calmly, "I am so sorry. He ran right in front of me," but Mrs. Hurley shouted, "I'm a witness. I saw it all from my kitchen window. He just lay there. You ran right over Rufus," and dumbfoundedly Uncle Rufus said, "No, I'm here," and I said, "That dog can't run," and Sharon said, "Just like Lennon. Struck down by an assassin's bullet," and began to cry, but the lady said, "I never carry a gun," and Uncle Rufus said, "What Lennon? Does he live around here?" and Sharon said, "John Lennon, the Beatle, you old fool," and Mother wiped her eyes and said, "Poor Rufus," and Uncle Rufus said, "Oh, I'm all right. I been called worse," and Mother started to say, "Not you, Rufus, the dog...," but Mrs. Hurley interrupted and said, "Why Rufus, Is it Rufus? Why, it's been years," and Uncle Rufus remembered her and smiled and said, "Is it Mattie Hurley? Why you haven't changed a bit. How's your mother?" so while Mrs. Hurley was explaining how her mother and Mr. Hurley had passed away years ago and Uncle Rufus was explaining how Hubert had died of a heart attack in Tuscon, Arizona, just last week, his brother Hubert, not me, and Sharon was explaining to the lady in the white hat that she was not in mourning for the dog because she could not have known he would be run over, but for John Lennon and had sworn always to wear black, I leaned down by poor old Rufus, the dog, and I started to think that maybe he had died on the back porch, which was why I couldn't get him to wake up while dragging him down the back steps, across the yard and into the alley, that he was dead before the lady in the white hat had run over him in her new ancient green Dodge, but I decided to let well enough alone because I remembered all the guilt I felt for telling about Father and the social disease which started all our troubles and he died of a heart attack after all, so keep mum, I thought, after all, what they don't know won't hurt me because ever since the day Father up and left us in the lurch I knew that sooner or later I would get the blame for it all since for all these years I have been living the life of a convicted criminal who has been given a suspended

sentence, and the lady in the white hat was talking to Sharon, telling her how she understood though the didn't even know who John Lennon was because she had once spent New Year's Eve at the Waldorf Astoria dancing to the music of Guy Lombardo with her late husband who had bought her the Dodge the year he had died, and Mother said she couldn't understand or for the life of her think how the dog had gotten in the alley since he was too old to jump the fence, but he was an old dog and she supposed it was just his time, though he was supposed to be on the back porch, she said, giving me a straight look which I avoided, and besides, she said, it was clouding up and getting chilly, and the lady in the white hat agreed and said it always did that on Good Friday, it seemed like, so she was on the way to Mount Hope cemetery to put some flowers on her late husband's grave before it rained, but after the accident, she said, looking at Rufus, the dog, she guessed she would let it go, and they all stood there around Rufus, so finally Mother said why didn't they all come in and have a cup of coffee and get acquainted, or reacquainted, and everyone nodded and Sharon said she would be happy to play Double Fantasy for the lady in the white hat and for Uncle Rufus and the lady in the white hat said that would be very nice and that she would be more than happy to drive home and get her Guy Lombardo records, but Mother told her she wouldn't need to do that because she had some that it would be nice to hear again, she was so deathly tired of Double Fantasy, that she and her late husband Hubert used to enjoy dancing to the sweetest music this side of heaven, and the lady in the white hat giggled and winked behind her half-veil, but I asked Mother, "But what about Rufus?" and Uncle Rufus smiled and said he could certainly stand a cup of Mother's coffee and a little music, especially if Mrs. Hurley would come over too, and she smiled back at him as if they both knew a secret, so I said quietly to Mother, "No, I mean our dog," so she said, "He was your dog so you can bury him deep in my garden patch and then have your coffee," so Uncle Rufus took his hindlegs and I took his front paws and we dragged him back into the back yard, and then Mother led and they all started in, but the lady in the white hat said, "Oh, Oh," and ran back to her Dodge and brought back a bouquet of jonquils in a coffee can wrapped in tin foil and handed them to me saying, "For the poor puppy," and she followed the rest in, so I got the shovel from the shed and dug a deep hole and dumped old Rufus into it without any ceremony thinking it should have been me and filled the grave getting lots of Mother's manure in around Rufus because he loved it so and when the grave was level, I raked it smooth and put the can of jonquils on it and it looked nice, and I could hear the music from the house, both Double Fantasy and the sweetest music this side of heaven, and I knew that when the music stopped they would all start to figure it out, then Uncle Rufus would know I named, though it may have been Sharon, Rufus after him, and the lady in the white hat would guess Rufus was already perhaps dead and Mother would figure out I had put Rufus in the alley, and Mrs. Hurley might even have seen me do it and might be just biding her time to tell Uncle Rufus who would tell Mother who

has been waiting all these years to get back at me for driving Father away, and they would all come roaring out of the house like the thunder of God, and it would be the end of me, when, God knows, all I was ever trying to do was something expedient.

Bradley Denton

FLAG ZONE

--1--

Nicole's hands were slick. She tried to wipe them on her slacks, but it did not help. Her legs were hot and moist, too. Her clothes clung to her skin, and when she pulled them away to let some air in, there were noises of sucking and tearing.

Unable to sit still, she got up from the hard, dusty brown divan and walked to the apartment's single window. She pulled the faded blue curtains away from the window and looked out over the city for a few moments before her right hand automatically reached for the battered black field glasses that were on the windowsill. Although the apartment was high above street level and most of the surrounding rooftops were stories below her vantage point, she was just barely able to see the outline of the Statehouse five miles to the northwest. It was a hazy day, and she would have to use the glasses to see if anything had been raised on the pole that jutted up from the Statehouse dome.

She could not seem to hold the glasses steady. The focus was bad, and her fingers slipped on the hot metal of the little wheel that adjusted it. The window was dirty, and she had to wipe it. Danny had told her not to do this; it was far too early, he said, for a Flag. Yes, it was quite warm for April, but it was still only early Spring. There was only the slimmest chance that a Flag would appear before the heat had enough time to do what it always did. To wrap around the city like a warm, wet sheet.

So there was no need for Nicole to watch the Statehouse. There would be no Flag because it was only April.

A very warm April. The mugginess that surrounded Nicole made her feel as though her body were encased in lead. It was hot enough. Hot enough for Topeka. It didn't take much for Topeka.

She was finally able to hold the glasses steady enough to make out the Flagpole. A small, almost ragged square of cloth at the top moved limply in the dull breeze.

Black.

Nicole's hands jerked, and the field glasses slipped out of her grip. They hit the windowsill, bounced off, and banged against the floor near her feet. She stooped slowly to retrieve them and saw that one of the objective lenses was cracked.

Danny was in the Zone, and it was Black.

She snapped her head around quickly to look at the small electric clock on the opposite wall of the apartment's gray living room. Four-fifteen. Danny's last appointment in the Zone had been for three. He might have been able to finish his rounds in time to get out through a Checkpoint before the Flag had gone up. If he had not made it out in time, the chances that he was still alive were slim. It was daytime, and there would be almost no place to hide. No place that would do much good for very long.

Nicole bit the side of her forefinger hard until she could feel the pain. She had grown up on the Zone's edge, and she had watched through the barbed wire sometimes when the Flags went up. Some of the people had tried to get out through the Checkpoint that was a block from her mother's house. She had never seen anyone make it.

Now Danny was in there. Maybe. If the Flag had just gone up a minute or two before she saw it, he was probably out and safe. But the Flag might have been up for an hour or more. She had not been watching constantly. If it had been raised any time between three and four, Danny was probably dead. Or wishing he was. Nicole knew what would happen to him.

She sucked in a huge breath of sticky air and held it for a long time. "Easy," she muttered as she let the breath out. "Easy, now." Danny might still have a chance. Even in the Zone, he had a chance if he was still alive. A tiny chance was better than none. Maybe.

She dropped the field glasses again, turned, and walked the seven paces across the room to the heavy steel door opposite the window. If Danny was still in the Zone, she could keep him alive. She had to get there as fast as she could. It was a little over five miles to the Statehouse Checkpoint, and it was two miles or so from there to the area where Danny made his rounds. Nicole's teeth ground together as she slammed the apartment door shut behind her. "Too far," she whispered as she began running down the dim hallway. Her shoes hitting the bare concrete made sharp noises that echoed up and down the corridor. Their synthetic rubber soles were hard and slick. She slid a few feet as she hurried down the stairs, bruising her left forearm. It would be fifteen or twenty minutes before she could get to the Statehouse Checkpoint even if she was lucky enough to find a bus right away. There was usually not much left of someone who spent more than ten minutes in the Zone under the wrong Flag.

She stepped out of the building and began jogging down the street toward the Statehouse, taking deep, even breaths. After jogging a block, she suddenly began to sprint madly, her arms pumping hard, her hands in tight knots. Her breath came and went in violent wheezes. Danny had been in the Zone too long. She should have seen him walking toward her as she left the building. He was trapped.

After almost three blocks of hard running, Nicole gradually slowed to a jog again. Her breathing was still violent enough to make her quiver as she ran, and hot sweat was matting her hair and getting into her eyes. But after a few hundred more paces, her lungs were pumping almost as smoothly as they had when she first left the apartment building.

"Cool head," she whispered as she ran, scanning the streets for a bus. "Cool head. It's the only way."

--2--

There was a bus station on the way to the Statehouse Checkpoint, and it was possible that she could get aboard a bus there

and rest for the two miles that remained.

Then she would have to go on foot again through the Zone. But it was still over a mile to the bus station, and if there wasn't a bus there, she would have to run all the way. There was not enough time to wait at the station.

Nicole looked down and watched her feet as she ran. One two, one two, one two, one two. Like a mantra. The concrete of the sidewalk was grainy and broken, the grains flashing by like sleet. Irregular pieces of the sidewalk were missing, and she stumbled on the exposed patches of hard-packed dirt. Often she had to jump to avoid tripping over a chunk of concrete that jutted up in front of her. A layer of sand and trash coated the gutters. The buildings that surrounded her became older, shabbier, and grimier as she approached the station. Fewer and fewer windows had glass. Most windows that were not open holes were covered with heavy brown paper. Gravel-like bits of broken glass ringed the base of almost every streetlight. She was getting closer.

As she reached a street corner, Nicole was suddenly aware of the heavy stench of burning coal. She was barely able to stop herself from running into the path of the bus that came roaring up from her left. Her shoes slipped on the grit as she ran onto the street, waving her arms wildly.

The bus lurched violently as it came to a quick stop. The front door unfolded with a loud, snapping noise, and the wild-eyed, red-haired driver screamed at Nicole. "Goddammat, you, you trying to kill us? You trying to kill us or what?" The driver's hands twitched as he yelled. His right hand moved close to the butt of the pistol that rode in a holster on his thigh. He stared at Nicole.

"I'm sorry," she said, gasping. "I'm in a terrible hurry." She started to step up into the bus, but the driver cocked his head and touched the pistol with his fingertips. She hesitated.

"What you running for?" the driver said. His voice was low, and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Nicole was still almost out of breath. "I told you, I'm in a big hurry. I have to get to the Statehouse by four-thirty. Are you going anywhere near there?"

The driver took his hand away from the gun and gripped the steering wheel. His mouth twisted. "Yeah. Drew that route today of all days, dammit. But you ain't going to make it by four-thirty. Nearly that now."

Nicole stepped up into the bus and pushed her right hand into her right front slacks pocket. All she had with her was a five-dollar bill. She held it out to the driver. It was crumpled and damp.

"Don't make no change. Read the sign."

"I don't want change. Take it, please, I'm in a hurry." She dropped the bill on the dashboard by the steering wheel, found an empty seat, and sat down.

There were twelve other passengers, all watching her. The driver made no move to start the bus moving again. He looked at the bill and said, loudly, "What the hell you want t' be goin' out by the Statehouse for . . . miss?" He did not look back at

her.

Nicole's skin was hot, wet, and itching, and her throat was raw. "Please drive," she said hoarsely.

"Maybe you want t' get in on the fun, miss? Black Flag day, I see. First one of the season."

She could see the man's face in the big rear-view mirror that was mounted above and in front of his head. His face was twitching as if worms crawled just under the skin.

She looked away and said the only thing she could think of. "We're not in the Zone," she said.

The driver's face relaxed. He nodded slightly, put the bill into a shirt pocket, and hit the lever that threw the bus into gear. It accelerated slowly, spitting small clouds of coal fumes and steam into the already wet, already dirty air. Nicole coughed. Her window was open.

She carefully glanced at some of her fellow passengers. They were not looking at her anymore. Some read newspapers, some stared out the grimy windows, and some simply sat. None of them looked at her or at each other. "Just like normal," she mumbled, her words masked by the loud rumbling and hissing of the bus. It was supposed to be that way. There was no reason, as far as they were concerned, that things should not be normal. This wasn't the Zone.

But she had seen the driver's face. She had not seen any of the passengers' faces during the exchange with the driver, but she was sure she had felt what their looks were saying. What the driver's was saying.

She closed her eyes for a brief moment. When she opened them again, she whispered "Danny." She had to remember what was important. She had to stay alert; she could not let herself become afraid. Fear would not help Danny.

She was not sure what would. She knew that she would not be harmed in the Zone because it was under the Black Flag, but she did not know how she could use her immunity to help her husband. Whatever she did would be illegal, and if she was caught at it by a Zone cop, she would be in trouble too. But the chances of running into a Zone cop were not great. Most of them stayed out of the way during Flags.

If the Flag had only been a White, Danny could be safe and she would not have to do this.

But it was not White. And White or Black, the Zone was a hell. Danny didn't belong there.

--3--

The bus shuddered to a stop an entire block from the Statehouse. Normally, it stopped beside the walk that led to the Statehouse steps. Nicole's forehead crinkled. The other passengers awoke from their dazes and looked at the driver.

The driver slapped the lever into neutral and half-turned toward the passengers. "This is as far as I go. The city can have my ass if it wants, but this is all the closer this bus gets to the Zone."

A few of the passengers complained loudly. The Statehouse wasn't in the Zone, and the first of the fences was on the opposite side of the building from the bus stop. The driver had no legitimate reason under the law to refuse to take them to the Statehouse.

The driver shook his head. "This is as far as I go," he said again. "Th' last few Flags last summer, the Guard had to blast some to keep them in the Zone. Folks're losing respect for the fences. One o' these days it'll all spill out o' the Zone, and I don't want to be there if it ain't my Flag."

Some of the passengers still wanted to argue, but most left their seats and stepped toward the open side doors.

Nicole was ahead of them, running out of the bus. Her feet hit the pavement hard, and she almost fell. She twisted her body, straightened, and sprinted toward the Statehouse.

The bus driver yelled after her. "That's right, honey. Run hard. Get there before it's all gone. We'll see how you run, next White Flag. You bet we'll see then!"

Nicole ran harder. One two, one two. The sounds of her breathing and her shoes slapping the pavement soon drowned out the man's voice.

She was not wearing her watch, and she did not know how long it had been since she had left the apartment. It couldn't be more than a few minutes past four-thirty. Couldn't be. Not if she was going to have any chance at all.

No, that wasn't true. What mattered was getting to Danny as soon as she was able to. What mattered was doing the best she could.

The Statehouse was huge and crumbling. She glanced up at it as she ran past; the Black Flag was still there. The Flagpole protruding from the old stained copper dome was like a spike driven into a decaying green skull. Nicole took her eyes away from it. Why was it taking her so long to get around the big building? She left the street and cut across a parking lot.

When she finally reached the Statehouse's tiny north lawn, she could see the Checkpoint across and a few hundred yards down the street that was the north boundary of the Statehouse grounds. She ran across the deserted street to the sidewalk that lay parallel to the outer Zone fence. She looked through the links and tangles of the twelve-foot-high, fifteen-yard wide conglomeration of fences as she ran west toward the Checkpoint. Black smoke curled up lazily somewhere inside the Zone. It drifted toward her slowly.

One body was visible through the fences, but it was not Danny. It had brown hair.

Nicole thrust her fingers into the links of the first gate of the Statehouse Checkpoint and shook hard. Just inside the gate, the guard was dozing inside her little black-and-white striped hut. She awoke at the sound of the clanging gate and stood up slowly, staring at Nicole through the open upper half of the hut's Dutch door.

Nicole's stomach and chest were heaving in and out. "Hurry, please!" she said. Her voice was a loud, hoarse whisper. "I have to get inside!"

The guard was old, and she shuffled on legs that were permanently bent at the knees. "You may not want to go in, dear," she said, wheezing. "I hear a rumor, an'the rumors I hear're generally true. Rumor says White Flag goes up before dusk. Y' don't want to get in on Black all that much, d'you?"

Nicole shook her head violently, and drops of sweat flew from her braided hair. "No. You--you don't understand. I don't want to get in on Black--"

"Ah, sure. Just like I wouldn't get in on White if I was younger and didn't have to do guard duty."

"--I just have to get in. My husband's in there."

The old woman raised her nearly bald eyebrows. "Ah, I see. You already heerd th' rumor. You want to be warning your man about the White."

Nicole opened her mouth but then closed it suddenly. What the guard thought did not matter. She had to get in. "Yes, that's right," she said after a moment.

"Well, let's get the preliminaries out th' way, then," the guard said. "ID?" The old woman squinted at the plastic card Nicole took from her pocket. Why was this damned old woman so slow? "All right," the guard continued. "I'd generally like t' skip this part, 'cause ever'body knows it anyway, but I have to have you answer 'yes' to these questions. Okay?"

"Yes. Yes, please hurry." What would happen if she climbed the gate and forced her way past the guard?

"Do you agree to adhere to the laws and decrees of the State Ruling Council concerning the Topeka Free Flag Zone, realizing that these laws and decrees include, but are not limited to, the fact that the color of the prevailing Flag will be the dominating and superior color for the duration of the Flag's flying, and that the opposite color will refrain from resisting that authority?"

"Yes." It took less than a minute for a man to be cut in two in there. What time was it?

"Do you also agree to obey the law which states that there will be no aggression by factions of either Flag when no Flag is flying?"

"Yes." Less than half a minute. No time at all, if there were flamethrowers. God, god.

"Do you also agree to obey the law which states that neither faction will engage the other outside the boundaries of the Topeka Free Flag Zone unless it be within the Zone of some other city or state?"

"Yes." Jesus God.

"And do you also realize that the State will take no responsibility for your well-being and safety while you are in the Zone, save that which follows from the laws and decrees already mentioned regarding the Topeka Free Flag Zone?"

"Yes." That was the last one, wasn't it? Or had they added more? Nicole had been in the Zone many times since becoming a medtech, but she had not had to go in for several months. The formalities didn't change very often, but the Council was unpredictable.

The old woman grinned at her through the links of the gate. Her gums were mottled. "Congratulations, dear," she said, chuckling and coughing. "Y'just won a free trip to beautiful downtown Topeka." She pulled a ring of keys from a pocket and unlocked the gate. Nicole pushed it open and stepped into the wire-framed corridor that led to the Zone.

She had to pass through five more gates. The old woman frowned and moved more slowly at each gate.

"Hate to see a little girl like you go in alone," the old woman mumbled, "even if it is your Flag and I'd be hiding if I wasn't a guard. But White'll be up soon. Sure y'want to go in?"

Nicole nodded. The old woman didn't know what she was talking about. It would be cooling off in a few hours, and the Flags traditionally stayed up only in the heat of the afternoon. The Flags wouldn't be switched that evening. The Black would remain until dusk, as it always had during previous seasons. Then the Zone would have at least a night to rest.

The last gate swung open. Nicole sprinted through, shoving past the guard.

The old woman coughed. "Whatcher hurry?" she called. "Y'anxious to--"

Nicole did not hear the rest of the old woman's words.

--4--

Something exploded in the nearest building on her right. Fragments of brick and glass bounced off the street like hailstones. She kept running. She felt a few sharp raps on her arms and back, but she did not slow down or look behind her.

Bombs were unusual at the edge of the Zone; they were almost always confined to the central portions. So things were worse than usual, and Danny was caught in it.

She knew where to go. Danny had not made it out before the Flag. She was sure of that now. If he had, she would have seen him on her way to the Checkpoint. He would either be inside the apartment of his last afternoon appointment or somewhere along the shortest route between there and the Statehouse Checkpoint. When she had made rounds that took her into the Zone, her last appointment had frequently been the same old man Danny was seeing. She knew where he lived.

She did not know if the old man, Mr. Farron, would hide Danny until the Flag was lowered. Probably not. It was his Flag. But he was old, and he had lived most of his life without the Flags. Maybe he didn't pay much attention to them. Maybe. The Flags did things to people.

She saw few people as she headed for the old Topeka Boulevard bridge. Those she did see were either very young or very old. The rest would probably be near the center. That was where most of the action usually was. But she could sometimes hear yelling and the snap of gunfire close by.

The few faces that looked out through doors and windows did not look afraid; they were all protected by the Black Flag. "Any others were hiding. But the faces she did see were dull

voids. They did not yell or smile, and they did not seem to notice when shots were fired. Perhaps the older children, those approaching puberty, did. But no one else did, and no one asked her why she was running. The Flags were not for children and old people.

There was no vehicular traffic. A few automobiles were parked along the curbs, but most of those were rusted badly and did not appear to be capable of moving. The street was filthy with grit, and the stench from piles of rancid garbage choked her. She was not sure she could make it.

She had almost made it to the bridge when she stumbled. She wrapped her long, slim arms around the rusty pole of an old streetlight and did not fall. Her chest hurt and her legs were shaking. She rested until sweat stung her eyes. When she took her hands away from the pole they were stained with brown and orange.

She walked across the bridge and looked down when she was over the river. The Kaw was little more than a narrow, shallow strip of slow brown. Flats of mud and sand surrounded it. Nicole could see a few bodies amid the trash on the banks.

The noises of the inner Zone were louder across the bridge. There were screams and popping noises and occasional rumbling sounds that shook windows in the buildings she walked past. She was within a few blocks of Farron's tenement. Turning right at an intersection, she left Topeka Boulevard and headed east for Kansas Avenue. The shouts and screams and other noises became louder still. There was a gang somewhere close. The tenement was half a block from Kansas Avenue. It was an old brick and steel structure that was broken and cracked in many places, but it did not look as though it had been bombed. It wouldn't be, Nicole realized, as long as the Black was up. Farron and everyone else in the building--she thought--was protected by it. The pain in her legs and chest sharpened as she hurried toward the building. This was where Danny should have been when the Flag went up. She rubbed her hands on her thighs, trying to make her palms feel drier.

She reached the steps leading to the tenement's entrance and tried to sprint up them three at a time. She slipped once on broken glass. Something small and brown at the end of one of the steps looked dead.

When she reached the open doorway at the top of the steps, she hestitated and looked toward Kansas Avenue. The gang had just come around the corner and was heading down the block in her direction. She could see what they were doing. They were going into each building, searching.

--5--

She went into the dark hallway. The old man lived on this first floor, only three doors from the open entrance. She found th door easily; the old man's name was spray painted on it in large letters.

She closed her eyes for a moment and then rapped the thin, stained door with damp knuckles five times in rapid succession.

There was no response. After several more attempts, she tried the door.

The knob turned with a scraping sound, and she slowly pushed the door open. It was warped and rubbed against the doorjamb. "Hello?" she asked as she pushed.

When the door was open wide, she saw a bony, wrinkled body on the floor. It was Danny's appointment, Mr. Farron. He was lying on his back, and he was not moving. The old man's thin shirt was ripped open so that his shrunken, scarred chest was exposed.

Nicole sucked in a deep breath. She closed the door behind her and was at the body in two quick steps. She knelt down beside it. "Mr. Farron?" she asked. The old man's eyelids were half-shut, and the exposed whites were dull. Nicole touched the chest with her fingertips. It was warm, but there was no breathing motion. She could feel no heartbeat. She took her hand away from the chest and grasped one of the skinny wrists. There was no pulse.

"God," she whispered. There were no marks on the body other than old scars. He couldn't have died violently, anyway. The Zone was under a Black Flag, not a White.

"Nicky?" The voice was to her left.

Her body tensed for a moment, but then she turned and saw Danny stepping out of the only closet in the room. He looked strong but tired. His straight black hair hung down over his forehead like wet threads.

She wrapped her arms around him, staining his shirt. "I had to come," she said. "I was afraid." Her throat was raw and hurting.

"It's all right," he said, pushing his arms gently between her arms and his sides. "It's all right, but I have to look after Farron."

She let him go, and he picked up a square brown case from the floor of the closet. He went to the body, squatted, and opened the case.

"I think he's dead."

"Yeah, I know. But I've got to try."

"I'll give you a hand." She went to the opposite side of the body.

"Not really a damn thing to do. Why the hell don't they let us carry adrenalin?"

He tried resuscitation with a throat tube. Nicole straddled the chest and pumped with the heels of her hands. One two, one two, one two. The body did not respond.

"It's no good," she said after a few minutes of work. "There's no way."

Her husband moved away from the body and closed the brown case. "He was a real radical, y'know? Hid me in the closet. I heard him fall, and I was just starting to work on him when I heard you at the door. I thought it might be one of the gangs checking up on him. So I got back into the closet." He twisted a few strands of his dark, damp hair between his fingers. "Stupid of me. If it had been a gang, they would've seen him on the floor and had me out of the closet in about two seconds. If

I hadn't gone back in there we might have been able to do some good."

"I doubt it," Nicole said. Then she gasped and stood. "Dear God, Danny," she said in a voice so quiet that it surprised her, "they're coming. I saw them just as I got here."

"How close?" He had the brown case in his right hand and was stepping over the body of Mr. Farron toward the door that opened into the hallway.

There were voices outside.

They dragged the body into the closet, and Danny stayed there with it, holding it upright. It was the only way they could both fit. Nicole pushed the closet door shut and sat down in an old, dirty, overstuffed chair. The apartment door vibrated crazily as the people outside pounded on it. "Come in," she said. The door flew open and hit the wall. Two big young men were standing in the doorway.

"Sorry," one of them said. His voice was thick and deep. Nicole thought she could smell blood. "Didn't mean to push that hard. Seen any Whites?"

Nicole rubbed her hands on her thighs. "No, can't say that I have. Why? Is a Flag up?" Was that stupid? Should she have said that?

The second man stared at her. "Been up a few hours now. Where you been? How come you're not out getting some?"

"I've been asleep." Did she sound like she had been asleep? How did sleepy people sound?

"Sorry," the first man said again. "Say, where's old Farron? Thought he lived in this hole."

"He does. He's out now, I guess. He told me he was going out, just before I feel asleep." Weak.

"Uh. Who're you?"

"He's my uncle."

"Where you from, Farron's niece?"

Why wouldn't they leave? "Outside the Zone. Outer Topeka."

The second man was still staring at her. "I know old man Farron. He ain't never said nothin' about a niece in outer Topeka."

He didn't believe her. She could see it, taste it. It was in the back of her throat, creeping up.

The first man sneered at the second. "Why the hell should he, to you? He knows better than to tell you anything, man."

The second man did not seem to hear. "How come you're so sweaty? What's all that on your arms? Fall off the chair in your sleep?"

"Hey, what you botherin' her like that for? Just because Farron ain't never told you about her ain't no reason to--"

There were loud shouts and screams from the street. "<u>There</u>! <u>There's</u> <u>a</u> <u>White</u> <u>one</u>!"

The first man turned quickly and ran out the door. "C'mon, man!" he yelled over his shoulder. "They found one! C'mon!"

Despite what was happening on the street, Nicole felt her muscles beginning to relax. There was a distraction. They would leave now. The first was already out the door. The

second would follow him, screaming White! Blood! White Blood! Then she and Danny would decide how to get away, out of the Zone.

But the second man did not follow the first. He was looking toward the open door, but he was not moving. Then, slowly, as if forcing himself away from something that smelled delicious, he turned back towards Nicole. He licked his lips.

"You're dressed very nicely, miss," he said. Nicole could hear the bus driver again. "I hope you don't mind my staring." The sleeves had been ripped off his shirt, and she could see his arm muscles contracting. His right hand was curled around a short length of steel pipe. The fingers were tightening their grip; Nicole was sure of that. She could see small flakes of rust falling as he squeezed the pipe.

"I had to work a long time to be able to afford these clothes," she said. "I'm a medtech." Why was he staying? Why didn't he leave?

"Oh," he said. "Do you usually work in the Zone?"

"I just started."

"You know what your uncle always says about the Zone, don't you?"

Nicole said nothing. All she could think about was his hand and the pipe in it. She heard him, but his words seemed to be coming from the end of the pipe.

"He says the Flags are the way we give in. Says we're all fools. He's famous around here for shit like that. You know what else I've heard him say?"

Get angry. He expects it. If you don't, he'll know there's something wrong. That you're afraid. "What's your problem? How would I know what he's said to you? Why should I care?"

"I've heard him say that he's an only child. And so far as I know, he ain't never been married."

"You don't know jack shit. He's been married twice."

The man moved towards the closet, holding his right arm and the pipe rigid at his side. "I've been asking myself," he said, "why a pretty young woman like yourself would lie to a handsome young man such as myself."

He reached for the knob of the closet door, and Nicole stood up, breathing in short gasps. "I'm not his real niece, no," she said loudly. "He's just always called me his niece." Anything. Say anything to distract him, get him away from there.

He half-turned and looked at her. His upper lip curled away from his teeth. "That's enough lies. I won't hear any more of that shit, got it?"

The closet door opened as the man was turning back toward it. It almost hit him. Mr. Farron's body fell out of the closet, and the man dodged to one side, avoiding it. While the man's eyes were still staring at the body, Danny swung something slim and black at his head. It connected solidly, and the loud sound of it echoed in the bare room. Nicole watched the man go down and for an instant was certain that Danny had killed him.

He had not. The man swung the length of pipe as he fell. It hit Danny on the wrist, and the slim black rod flew away and then slid and rolled across the floor. There was another sound, a cracking sound, not so loud as the first, but terrible to Nicole. She saw the muscles of Danny's face twisting, and somehow she was next to him.

She brought her foot down hard on the young man's wrist. Retribution. She was only wearing joggers, but the force was enough to loosen the man's grip on the pipe. She kicked it away from him.

"What you doing?" the man cried out, his mouth a huge pink cave. "It's a Black--a Black Flag--I got a right..."

"Shut up," Nicole said. The man's face was blurred, and her eyes were hurting, stinging. "Shut up or I'll have to kill you."

She felt Danny touch her arm, and she looked at him, at his eyes, away from the horrible man on the floor. "Nicky, this hurts a lot," he said. "What are we going to--"

The young man crawled, scrambled toward the apartment door. "White!" he screamed. His voice was like thin sheets of glass shattering. "There's a White in here!"

Danny and Nicole began moving at the same time, but Nicole was faster. She snatched up the black rod from the floor, jumped after the man, and brought it down hard on the back of his head. He slumped to the floor, moaning. She hit him again, as hard as she could.

The young man was still. Nicole stood over him for a few moments, watching. She could see something dark and damp seeping up through the tight curls of his hair.

Danny was beside her. "Come on," she said suddenly, taking his arm. "They might have heard him."

He yelped. She had grasped his right arm close to the wrist. "I think he broke it," he said. "And we can't go, he's hurt. I couldn't help it. Where did Farron get a billy, anyway? Souvenir from the old riots, maybe. He was a radical, he was."

Nicole cupped his face in her hands and kissed him quickly. "I know," she whispered. "I know. But we've got to get out of here."

"I shouldn't have hit him. It was illegal for me to hit him."

"Come on." She took his left arm and pulled him out of the room.

There was no one in the hallway. Nicole hoped that meant that the yelling outside had prevented the gang from hearing the screams of the man she had just clubbed. Hanging on to Danny's arm, she headed for a stairwell at the end of the hall opposite the building entrance. One short flight led down to the rear exit. She paused, biting her lower lip.

"Which way?" she asked. "Up or down?"

Danny's face was slack and dull. It frightened her.

"Danny, what's wrong? Listen to me. We've got to do something. If they find us, they'll kill us."

He stared at her, and finally his forehead crinkled. He frowned, looking puzzled. "No," he said. "Not us. Me. It's a Black Flag. They won't hurt you."

"Maybe. They might forget the rules. We have." She looked down at the billy club's strap around her right wrist. "Now we've got to get out of here. Or something. Can you make it? How's your arm?"

"I don't walk on my arm." But she knew that he was in pain. His face was pale, and his right wrist was swelling rapidly. The pipe had probably shattered it.

"Okay, so do we go down and out or up to the roof?"

"The roof. They're still outside. We can hide up there until the Flag's down."

It was six stories to the roof. They climbed the first three flights rapidly, but then Danny stumbled and tried to break his fall using both hands. He blacked out from the pain, and Nicole was afraid that he would not regain consciousness before it was too late. He did not stay unconscious long, but he was weak when he came to, and Nicole had to help him up the steps. They moved slowly, surrounded by dirty walls and obscene graffiti.

--6--

The door that opened onto the roof had no latch or doorknob. It was held shut with twisted strands of thin, rusty wire that wound around two large bent nails in the doorjamb. Nicole fought with the twisted wire for several seconds until Danny took the billy club from her, held it in his left hand, and hit the nails in the doorjamb with it. The hard rubber of the club striking the wood and metal made loud whacking sounds that reverberated down the stairwell.

"Danny!" Nicole hissed, reaching for the club. "Stop it, they'll--"

A small chunk of wood ripped out of the doorjamb, carrying one of the nails with it.

Danny kicked the door, and the noise was louder than the club's pounding had been. He was holding his right arm away from his body, and he nearly lost his balance.

"Let me try," Nicole said quietly. "You're still weak, and I don't want you to get hurt any worse."

She threw her whole body against the door as hard as she could, right shoulder first. The remaining nail wrenched out of the doorjamb with a loud squeaking, rasping sound. Nicole fell to the gravel of the roof.

Danny came out after her and stooped to help her up.

"I'm okay, don't," Nicole said. "I don't want you to fall on your arm again." She got up slowly. Gravel stuck to her clothes and to the heel of her right hand. There was some blood when she brushed it away. Danny pushed the door shut, and they moved away from it.

The roof was littered with glass and old furniture. Soft tar stuck to their shoes. "Well, what now?" Danny asked.

"Feel like jumping from roof to roof?"

"No. You don't look like you do, either. We couldn't make it that way, anyway."

"Well, then, we have to hide. Behind that old sofa. It's big enough."

Danny shook his head. "They'll look up here, and that'll be one of the first places they look."

"Nothing else is big enough. And you just said yourself that we can't make it roof to roof. So if they come up I'll bluff them. I'll say I've already looked and didn't find any Whites."

They walked across the roof toward the sofa. "I guess we'll be all right if we can stay up here until dark. A few hours," Danny said.

There was a noise at the door behind them. Nicole looked over her shoulder and saw the first man who had spoken to her in Farron's room. He had the pipe that she had kicked away from the other man.

"Isn't this sweet?" the man said, walking toward them slowly. "Isn't this just sweet as hell?" He held the pipe in his right hand and patted his left palm with it.

Nicole felt her body stiffen. But the muscles were only tight, not frozen. "Danny," she whispered. "Give me the club." Danny only had one good hand. She could use both of hers and hit harder.

They had both turned to face the man. Danny did not move, and Nicole reached for the billy. He held it away from her. She looked at his face then and saw that he was smiling. "No," he said. "I can use it."

The man stopped a few yards away from them and hefted the pipe. "Looks like you already used it once. That's illegal. No violent resistance. You know that. Now you gonna pay for it."

"He didn't do it," Nicole said, watching the pipe. "I did." Danny had struck the first blow, but she had finished it.

Looking quickly at Danny, she saw that he was still smiling. "It doesn't matter now," he said. "Anything I do now is legal." He pointed.

Far across the dirty skyline of the Zone, across the invisible brown river, Nicole could see the green dome of the Statehouse. It was not quite twilight, but there were floodlights shining on it. Something white was suspended above the dome's apex.

The man holding the pipe looked and began to move rapidly back toward the roof door. When he was halfway there, he paused and looked back. "Come on," he said. "Come on, woman, we've got to get hidden. Get away from him now, before he has a chance to realize what he can do."

Nicole said nothing. Her body relaxed, and her breath came easily. Danny was safe now.

"Come on!"

He was safe.

The man ran for the door. "Have it your way," he yelled. "I ain't gonna wait for his buddies to show up. You ain't gonna

like it."

When the man was gone, Nicole kissed Danny and smiled. "We need to rig up a sling for your arm," she said. "I can use your shirt, okay? Then we can get out of here."

She began to unbutton his shirt but stopped when she saw his face. "What's the matter with you?" he asked.

She was stunned for a moment. "I don't understand," she said when she could talk. "I have to make a sling for you. We could use gauze from the kit in layers, but this would work better."

"No, no. Not that. Sure, use my shirt. But you aren't thinking very clearly, Nicky."

It took longer than it should have for her to realize what was wrong. It wasn't her Flag. She couldn't go anywhere.

"We can hide up here until dusk, I suppose," Danny said. "They've never left a Flag up after dark for very long, at least not in Topeka. It's for the heat of the day."

"Yeah, and for the summer. It's not summer yet."

They sat down behind the old sofa, and Nicole made a sling out of Danny's shirt. "I think we'd better do something about this quick," she said, looking at his wrist. "It needs to be set in a cast, and now. I don't think we'd better wait until after dark."

"So try to set it now. I'll clench my teeth."

"No. I don't know how he did it, but I think it's shattered. Looks like it splintered bad. Need to get to a hospital. But if I go get the kit--"

"You know you can't. I'll go."

"I'm going with you."

"It's a White, Nicky. Don't be stupid. I'll be right back."

"What if you pass out again?"

"I won't."

She stayed behind the sofa while he went. She counted the pieces of gravel between her feet. Then she counted them again. And again. He was taking an awfully long time.

She bit her lip when she heard the shuffling noises coming toward the sofa, but it was him. "It's gone," he said as he lowered his body to sit beside her. "That fellow who was up here must have taken it. The other guy's gone, too."

"Farron?"

"Still there."

They waited for the dark. The air was getting cooler, and Nicole shivered as her sweat evaporated. Finally, she cried.

"Goddamned Council," she said.

Danny held her with his good arm. After a few minutes, he said, "It's not really the Council's fault. They don't have any more control over social tension than we do. When the observers' reports say that tension in the Zone and the areas around it is just about to hit that point where hell breaks out and can't be stopped, the Council has no choice but to raise a Flag."

"You can't still believe all that."

"Well, sure it's bad while a Flag's up. But it's a safety valve. Without them, we'd be back to the old riots."

Nicole laughed, surprising herself. "These aren't riots?"

Danny shook his head and frowned. "You're just upset now because we're caught in one. But you know they're necessary. This way the tension can be let off in moderate amounts within a limited area. Otherwise, it'd build until we'd have massive riots that covered the whole city. Without a safety valve, the summer would make this city explode--a lot of other cities, too. Look at what happened to Miami. If they hadn't put off a Flag Zone ordinance until it was too late, all those people wouldn't have died."

"People are dying here."

"Not as many as would have without a safety valve."

They were both silent for a few minutes. Nicole pressed against her husband, trying to stop shivering. Then she said, "I can't believe all that. Farron didn't believe it either. And I don't think you do. You're saying it because you have to. Because you have to make yourself believe it. Otherwise what you see in here hurts too much. I said the same things when I worked in the Zone. I may have to believe it all again."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"The hospital laid me off this morning. I guess I'll have to see if the Welfare Bureau will take me back."

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"It's not worth it. We can find a cheaper apartment."

She looked at his face for a long moment. The lines at the corners of his mouth looked tighter than usual, closer together. There were tiny clear pearls of sweat above his upper lip. They quivered when his lips trembled. He was in pain. But his large eyes were clear and brown, looking at her. Dark pools. She reached up and touched his face.

After a few more minutes, she said, "Maybe the Flags used to act as a safety valve. But not anymore. Now, people see a Flag and go crazy. They--"

"Please. Let's not talk about it."

They sat next to each other without speaking, waiting.

--7--

Something's wrong."

"What?"

"The lights on the Statehouse are off."

Nicole looked. The dark outline of the dome was visible, but that was all.

"I wonder what happened? All the other buildings are lit up. So are the streetlights."

Her hand brushed his wrist in the dark shadow, and he moaned.

"Okay," she said, standing up. "Let's go. We can't let them wait any longer."

"No. Something's wrong. The lights are supposed to be on the dome. They were on earlier--too early, in fact. Now we

can't tell if the Flag's still up or not."

"You said yourself that they don't leave a Flag up after dark."

"And it's not summer. Like you said."

"But today was as hot as summer. And now it's cool. They wouldn't leave it up in the cool, would they?"

"I don't think so," Danny said after a few minutes. "Tension goes down with the temperature."

When they went out, Nicole turned her head away from Mr. Farron's apartment.

They were silent as they left the building. At the bottom of the steps they paused, listening. The sounds Nicole heard seemed to be coming from far away. But the buildings around them stank of fire and filth.

"Let's get out of here, Danny," she said as they started walking. She held his left arm tightly.

"We are, babe. It'll just take us a little while. I don't feel much like running."

She looked at her feet. One two, one two. "I don't mean that. I mean out of Topeka. I don't want to live here anymore."

"You know we can't do that," he said softly.

"We have to. I can't take this. It seems like they put up more Flags and start earlier every year. Summer hasn't even started yet, and you were almost killed. We have to leave."

He did not answer at once. She dug her fingers into his arm and watched his profile. He did not seem to be able to turn his face toward her.

"You know we don't have the money to leave," he said finally. "The nearest big city without a Zone is Omaha, and I hear that's just as expensive as the little towns. And we couldn't get work in a little town, anyway. They might take some doctors, but they don't want or need medtechs. We'd have to get two more years of school just to move. And we can't afford that either."

"We can live in the country, then," Nicole said, knowing that they couldn't.

"That takes a fortune." He looked at her, smiled weakly, and kissed her forehead. "I know how you feel, though," he said.

Nicole looked between two buildings towards the Statehouse. The floodlights were back on. The White Flag was still there. "Oh no," she whispered.

"Damn!" Danny said. "That should be gone by now. I guess we'll have to hide again."

"No, Danny. Your wrist. We can make it."

"The hell with my wrist." He was breathing hard, and his left hand was curled into a tight fist. Nicole could feel his arm flex in her hands. She looked at his face and did not recognize him for an instant. He was glaring at the Flag. After a moment his eyes moved and he said, "We have to hide. It's too far to the Checkpoint. There's an alley across the street. Or we could go back to Farron's."

"No." Nicole could still feel herself swinging the club, could still see the bodies on the floor.

"The alley, then."

They had only come a block since leaving Farron's. The alley was almost in the middle of the block they were in now, on the south side of the street. Just as they reached the mouth of the alley, Nicole heard noises coming from the west, close to them. She looked and saw two armed men rounding the corner and heading towards them.

"Whites," Danny said. He half-dragged Nicole into the alley.

When they were a few yards into the alley, Nicole's feet touched something lying on the pavement. She squinted and saw what it was. "Blacks, I think," she whispered. "They're dead." She tried to feel something for them but couldn't. She thought of the men coming down the block.

"Yeah, I see. Good."

"What?"

Shouts and the sounds of running were coming closer to them.

"Lie down, quick!" Danny hissed. "On your stomach! Now!" His face was horrible, twisting, changing.

Nicole heard a loud buzzing that seemed to come from just under her skull. She saw men with guns framed in the mouth of the alley, and she saw Danny in front of them, his unfamiliar eyes glaring at her. She saw his left arm, naked, swing out from his body, felt the heavy sting of his hand striking her cheek. It took hours for her to fall. She tried to cry out to her husband but could not.

Her body twisted as it fell, and she hit on her back, bent suddenly across one of the bodies on the pavement. She could see her stomach like a blurred hill above her eyes. Someone that looked like Danny was above her too, tearing at her clothes, hitting her, beating her, cursing her. She heard voices.

"Good, looks like one o' our boys has got himself some luck tonight," one of the voices said. She knew the voice. She had heard it before.

Then she felt a sudden, stabbing, awful pain. Everything was jaggedly sharp, jaggedly clear. She saw men above her, laughing kicking, spitting.

"How'd y' manage this one, buddy? Looks like your arm's busted up." Nicole saw the man clearly. It was the bus driver.

"Had to kill these buggers," a voice from Danny's mouth said. "They did it. Didn't want me fooling with her, I guess."

"Goddammit, do all these people forget the law on purpose?" the bus driver said. "Hey, I think I've seen that one before. How you like it now, honey? Glad you got in on the Flag?"

Another voice said, "I'm going to have a look on down the street

"Okay," the bus driver said. "Think I'll stay here a while." He grinned down at Nicole. "Buddy, you won't kill her, will you? I got some ideas I'd like to try."

"Sure," Danny said. "Now if you want."

Nicole wanted to close her eyes, to black out, to die, and couldn't.

The bus driver held out his assault rifle to Danny with one hand and fumbled with his belt with the other. "Here," he said, "hold this, will you?"

Danny took the gun with his left hand and pointed it at the bus driver's head. "Lie down," he said.

"Well, I'm going--" The man made a gurgling noise in his throat. "What d'you--"

"Back farther in the alley. Lie face down, spread-eagled. And take off your holster and drop it. Don't take out the pistol. If you yell I'll kill you."

The bus driver stumbled into the alley, kicking Nicole in the ribs as he passed her. Danny hit the man in the back of the head with the rifle butt, and he fell to the pavement just behind Nicole and the bodies. "You gonna pay for this," she heard him say. "I got more friends coming this way. Lots of them. Some from the West Side of the Zone. Tough mothers. Mean mothers. Don't like Blacks at all. Not one goddam bit."

"Shut up," Danny said.

"You just can't do this," the bus driver said. "It ain't right. It's illegal. We went to too much trouble to set it up right so we'd have a fair chance. Bill even got his cousin to cut the lights on the Flag for a few minutes so more would be out. Goddammit, it just ain't fair. We never get a chance worth a shit."

Nicole's hand found the black billy club beside her. She had dropped it when she fell. Now she held it tightly and got to her knees. She hit the bus driver until he was quiet.

She felt Danny's hand on her shoulder. "That's enough, Nicky," he said. "You don't want to kill him, do you? We've got to get out of here now."

A voice from far down the street yelled, "Flag's down! Flag's down! Let's go home before we get arrested or something!"

The bus driver's head moved slightly. "You hear that?" he whispered, trying to twist his head up from its face-down position. "It's over. Let me up, okay?"

Danny pulled Nicole to her feet. The rifle was slung over his left shoulder, and its butt dug into Nicole's back as she stood. "If you poke your head out in the next twenty minutes," Danny told the bus driver, "I'll blow it apart."

They walked slowly out of the alley. Nicole limped. Her ankle had twisted somehow. She felt something thick and moist on her cheek, but she did not try to wipe it off.

--8--

They had not quite reached Topeka Boulevard when the cleanup truck appeared. Danny let the assault rifle fall to the sidewalk. They were standing at the edge of the bright circle of light created by an unbroken streetlamp, and Nicole looked at his face for the first time since leaving the alley. He was

grinning, laughing. "We made it, Nicky," he said. "We made it." He waved his left arm at the man driving the truck. The truck stopped, and the driver gestured to them.

"He can take us to the Checkpoint," Danny said, putting his arm around Nicole. It felt hot across her shoulders. She tried to move away from it.

"Nicky? What's wrong?"

She forced her head to move back toward him and stared at him.

"Your cheek," he said. He touched her face, and his hand came away with blood on it. He looked at it. She knew he did not understand.

The truck made a noise at them. "You coming or not?" the driver yelled.

"You hurt me," NIcole said.

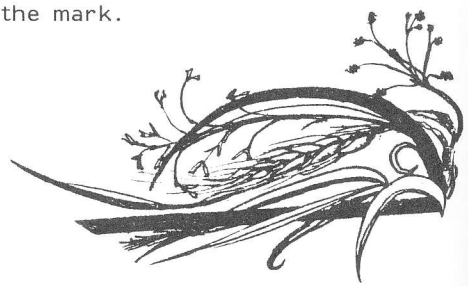
He touched her cheek again. "No," he said. "Not like that. I had to."

She looked at his bare left shoulder. The strap of the gun had left a red mark there.

"I had to," he said again.

Her hand tried to rub away the mark.

"I know," she said.



George H. Gurley, Jr.

WINTER GUEST

He was looking around the living room, trying to guess what Preston's impression would be. There were some oriental rugs, but they were faded beyond any suggestion of respectability or success. There was a crystal chandelier above the dining room table, but it was so comically elegant and ostentatiously cheap that it couldn't be mistaken for a sign of pretense. The grandfather clock was a valuable antique, but it had been in the family. Preston had seen it in Reeser's leaner, lonelier bachelor days. He wouldn't be able to suspect it of being a show.

It was true there were tokens of comfort and complacency: the glass top table with a stack of Wall Street Journals, a crayon drawing of an orange turtle hovering over a field of lollipops, hung in a chrome frame and signed by Ned, their-- his second wife's--son, the ubiquitous Swedish ivy, the imitation Herman Miller chair, the collected works of Robert Louis Stevenson bound in red leather, and, of course, on display in the kitchen, the Cuisinart. But there wasn't any affectation betrayed by the worn, soiled upholstery of the arm chair, the stark, spackled walls. What charge of exhibitionism could Preston bring against him with a Sesame Street poster scotch-taped to the window, the portable electric heater in the vestibule? No one was putting on airs in this house. Reeser looked down at his shoes. They were Hush Puppies, not Gucci's. And he was wearing white socks. Wedged between Dr. Jekyll and Treasure Island was a photo of him standing on a promontory in the Brook's Range with a back pack and staff--evidence that he hadn't sold out. Nevertheless, he removed the Wall Street Journals and stashed them in the closet.

Reeser stood in the doorway to the kitchen. He watched his wife move slowly from the sink to the cupboards, whispering reminders to herself. "I forgot to tell you," he said. "Preston is what they call a 'natural athlete.' Once, he picked up a squash racquet for the first time and trounced the number one player in Kansas City...What do you say to that?" She was sifting flour onto a football shaped piece of dough. "But he's forsaken sports because he hates competition...I think that's interesting. Don't you?"

"If you're interested in things like that," said his wife. She was ceremoniously chopping an onion north-south, east-west.

"If you're one of those people who's interested in interesting things?" said Reeser. She was holding her sleeve to her eyes. "What's the matter, Sarah? What did I say?"

"It's that mother onion," she said. Tears were flowing. "Hand me that towel." Reeser took a terry cloth towel from the oven door handle and gave it to her. She wiped her eyes.

"I thought I'd said the wrong thing," said Reeser. "I thought perhaps I'd offended...What are you making for us,

Tiny?" Sarah rubbed her eyes again, sifted some more flour, clenched a table spoon between her teeth, looked up at the ceiling and closed her eyes. A portly beagle trotted through the kitchen, barked once at nothing, then dropped on a disheveled pillow in the pantry. Sarah shook her head and snapped her fingers at the dog.

"Chien," she said. "Blanquette de Chien." She rolled the dough out to a thin layer.

"Blanquette de Chien?" said Reeser. He studied the dog and the ragged sheet of dough. "I see. Is that something like 'Pigs in a Blanket?' Blanquette de Chien Provencal or Diable?" Sarah held up a sack of dog food.

"Avec Alpo," she said.

"Ah, Blanquette de Chien avec Alpo," said Reeser, making the chef's circle of perfection with his thumb and forefinger. He took the sack of dog food, shook it thoughtfully, then put it back in the space between the refrigerator and the wall. "Well, that'll give it the real meat taste Rover loves so much," he said in an announcer's voice. "Yorick!" He addressed the dog. "How would you like it if we started calling you 'Rover?'"

"And I'm going to start off with 'Soup de Jour,'" said Sarah.

"Is there any soup finer than 'Soup de Jour?'" said Reeser. He browsed pensively around the kitchen, turning over a spatula, tasting the rim of a bowl, rearranging some measuring cups. "It has a certain 'je ne sais quoi.'"

Reeser wandered out of the room and paced in the hallway. "I'll go get the liquor," he called back to his wife. Then he stood still in the hallway for a minute. Yellow water stains streaked outward from the ceiling light fixture, a glass ball etched to suggest a tulip. An assortment of garish raincoats hung on a rail. The gloomy hall, with its preposterous wallpaper--daft lutanists with puffed sleeves serenading matronly turtle doves--was Reeser's sanctuary. He thought there was in their house, with its air of improvisation, of using what was at hand, a pleasing quality of equilibrium. It was the quality of life rescued and lived for itself, a patched-together quality which reflected patched-together families. Their first marriages had been billed as something, and there was the inescapable sense of the things they owned as extensions of themselves. The signatures etched in their crystal, the silversmith's mark imprinted in their silverware, the insignia on their bone china-- any of the signs which mean genuine, sterling, original--were intended to speak for the marriages themselves. Everything about the second marriage was different. For Reeser, it was like second growth after clear-cutting or a forest fire.

But Preston's visit filled him with some of the old feelings he used to have about marriage. There was no way of getting around it--the paraphernalia of family life seemed to proclaim a certain orthodox and servile stupor. Preston would come unburdened with possessions and he would bring memories to bear-- memories of their college days, their idealism and freedom. He wondered if Preston would be charitable enough to

see those signs of second growth. He expected to be measured and accused.

Reeser wondered: do we want our old friends to like us, to accept us, or do we want to impress and daunt them? A feeling passed through him--he wished they were rich. He wished they were welcoming Preston into a citadel of success. He would have liked the walls to be plastered with Raushenbergs, Stellas, Frankenthalers, illuminated with museum lights. He would have liked pedestals with African masks, display cases filled with scrimshaw, Boehm birds, and Steuben glass. He would have liked to welcome Preston at the door wearing a burgundy smoking jacket and wolf's head slippers. No, better yet, to have him met by a stooped servant with a name like "Ponder," or "Griffen." "Griffen--show Mister Preston into the study." He wished to throw up the most vulgar and meretricious barriers and to defeat his guest. Reeser imagined himself sitting next to Preston in the car which was right now driving west, and he felt its approach like a scythe. Reeser laughed and shook his head. Then he turned and went back into the kitchen.

"You'll probably like him," he said. Sarah looked up from kneading the dough. "Hell, you'll probably fall in love with him."

"The Good Book teaches us to love, Hank," she said.

"Don't call me Hank," said Reeser.

"All right, Conrad. The Good Book teaches us to love."

"That's what happened to Necker," said Reeser. "And don't say, 'the Good Book.' "

"Who's Necker?" said Sarah. "What happened to Necker?"

"Necker was Preston's best friend. Preston appropriated Necker's girl friend, married her, and divorced her."

"I think you told me about it," said Sarah.

"They roomed together. Necker didn't have one girl friend all four years of college. When he got out, he joined the Navy, moved to San Diego, and found this girl he was crazy about. He fell in love for the first time. Of course, he told Preston every detail about it, because Preston was sort of his confessor. Preston arranged to pay them a visit. Necker felt him approaching California like a scythe. He told Heather."

"Who's Heather?"

"The girl, Tiny."

"Told her what?" said Sarah.

"That she and Preston would probably be attracted to each other."

"Self-fulfilling prophecy," said Sarah.

"Ironical, isn't it?" said Reeser. "Ironic and fateful." He picked up the spatula and moved it slowly like a blade through the air. "Preston has an insatiable need to suffer."

"So he cuckholds his friends?" said Sarah.

"You watch," said Reeser. "Preston believes in telling you all his feelings even if it creates a frenzy. He digs himself a hole with people so as to make a mountain. Everything has to be an intense struggle. Because he needs to crawl up his own mountain to redeem himself."

"The Mountain of Redemption," said Sarah. She took the spatula from Reeser and held it gravely like a sceptre.

"You laugh," said Reeser.

"Why are we inviting this cad into our house?" said Sarah. "I don't want this place dug up with mountains of redemption. I don't want anyone's damn stigmata bleeding on my oriental rugs. Good heavens!"

"Don't say 'good heavens,' Sarah," said Reeser. "It sounds provincial."

"Don't say 'Mountains of Redemption,'" said Sarah. "It sounds lofty."

"It's a lofty subject," said Reeser. "Besides, I didn't say, 'Mountains of Redemption,' --you did." Sarah picked up a small piece of dough, rolled it into a ball, and threw it at Reeser. He ducked and the dough-ball hit the wall behind him, flattened and fell to the floor.

"All right," said Sarah. She began to shape the entire slab of dough into a ball. "You bring a flagellant into my house, I'll scourge you both with dough balls." Reeser slipped quietly from the kitchen. He waited behind the door for a moment and listened.

"I love the guy, Sarah," he said. "So will you."

When Reeser got back from the liquor store, Preston's car was in the driveway. He had always driven some offbeat kind of car--a Citroen Deux Chevaux, a Morgan, a Henry J. But this time, it was a Cadillac Seville, glowing like an anthracite monolith under the light of the street lamp.

Reeser was sorry Preston had beaten him home. He had wanted to have a drink, make a last minute assessment, and establish a beachead. This threw him off balance. When he went in, he could hear Preston and Sarah talking in the kitchen, already acquainted. An image of himself, Necker and Preston on a country road in Ireland cycled through his mind. He straightened himself and headed in, feeling slightly ridiculous behind the sacks of liquor, like an intruder, a delivery boy, a menial.

The last couple of years had passed lightly over Preston, like a cloud of ash from a wood fire. He didn't look older. He looked somehow less corporeal, as if veiled by mosquito netting. He was wearing a shabby Albert Einstein cardigan, tennis shoes (not today's variety with ankle padding and lightning bolts of color, but plain old white canvas tennis shoes with a piece of rubber torn back like a slab of flesh), and a remarkable pair of baggy wool pants with patch pockets the size of catcher's mitts. He looked around as Reeser entered the room, studied him with his ironic, painful smile, and tapped him on the shoulder as if to verify his tangibility or to transform him into another state of being.

"Hi, Henry," he said. "What happened to your beard?"

The three of them sat in the sun room and drank. Preston always had some special, artistic way of drinking, and this night he drank beer from a glass, pouring in little jolts of rum from time to time. He told them about the end of his second marriage. He and Jill had lived together for four years. They

had a farm in Connecticut and goats that came into the kitchen and a squad of domestic geese which patroled the place for trespassers. Jill had encounter groups in New Haven and Preston had twenty patients in his psychiatric practice. They made precisely the right amount of money to be happy, in other words, not quite enough. They would still be together if they hadn't gotten married a year before. Six months after they'd plighted their troths, they were divorced. The ending had been brutal and abrupt. Preston had flown to Santo Domingo to purchase the most expeditious decree available.

Reeser listened quietly to Preston and watched his agile, athlete's hands play with the glass. Sarah listened too, attentively Reeser thought, and he wondered if she had been touched yet by that strange, oblique charm which had seduced and stung several of his best friends.

There was the thunder of children running in the upstairs hall and down the stairs. Ned charged into the room and stopped dead, skidding the carpet into folds. With his hands on his hips, scowling at Preston, he asked, "Who's this?"

"This is Edward Fardel Preston the Seventeenth," said Reeser. "Say hello, Ned."

"What's he doing here?" said Ned.

"I just got out of prison," said Preston. "I stopped over for a minute to rob your Dad." Preston made his finger and thumb into a pistol.

"He's not my Dad," said Ned. "He's my Step-Dad." Ned crouched, his hands waving. He gave a karate yell and flew at Preston. They wrestled briefly until Preston got him in a half-nelson. That satisfied Ned, and he settled into Preston's lap. A small, angular girl in leotards appeared in the doorway.

"I wish you would learn how to behave in front of company, Ned," she said. "My name is Lacey," she said to Preston. "In case you're interested." Lacey performed her version of the dying swan, including quacks, honks, and crippled attempts at flight. Ned tried to break up the act with machine gun fire and straffing runs, and Reeser had to remove him from the room. After lecturing Ned, he puttered in the kitchen. He could hear Sarah and Preston chatting and laughing.

Reeser remembered two guests who'd visited just before the idea of divorce first bloomed in his first marriage. Peter Weslaw had come with a package of his poems and a bead necklace and impressed Nicki, Reeser's first wife, with the life of freedom and creativity. Nancy Souvain had come, it was Labor Day Weekend, and told Nicki she'd changed, she'd given up, and that the two of them didn't have much in common any more. Nicki had cried hard about her lost life. She looked away from Reeser, and when she looked back, she was talking about divorce.

When Reeser came back into the room, Preston was telling Sarah about the monastery he'd been staying in. "It's Benedictine," he said. "At the most, there's never more than ten people. You have to drive over twelve miles of dirt road to get there. It's in the middle of a canyon in New Mexico."

"What do you do there?" said Sarah.

"Meditate," said Reeser.

"I meditate sometimes," said Sarah.

"What are you looking for?" said Preston.

"Oh, I don't know," said Sarah. "The usual stuff, I guess. 'Who am I?' That sort of thing."

"I don't think that's just the usual stuff," said Preston, "I don't know any other question that's more important."

"What are you looking for?" said Sarah.

"I'm not sure there's a word for it," said Preston. "Maybe 'bliss' comes closest."

"I don't know about bliss," said Sarah. "Is that pleasure, or what?"

"Beyond pleasure," said Preston, "It has something to do with extinction, I think. Being nothing. Conscious oblivion. Memory of the stone. I can't say what it is, since I've never experienced it."

"Then how come you know it exists?" said Sarah. "Don't you run the risk of chasing after something that might not be there?"

"The beast in the jungle?" said Reeser.

"Don't think I'm not afraid of that," said Preston. "I've had a history of wild goose chases..." He went on to tell them that the issue he and Jill had gotten divorced over was children. Jill wanted to have one. Preston wanted to have a child with Jill, but something happened to him which made it impossible. He couldn't put it into words, but it had to do with the feeling that he was being called.

"Maybe it was just your own voice saying, 'Don't get involved, don't get tied down,'" said Sarah.

"Maybe," said Preston. He smiled bitterly. "And maybe bliss is death."

"Maybe it's one of those things that's in the chasing rather than the catching," said Reeser. "You know--getting there is half the fun." His voice trailed off. "When you go Greyhound."

"But the only thing I have to go on," said Preston, looking intensely at Sarah, "is that I've met a few people who seem to have found it."

"At the monastery?" said Sarah.

"There ...and in India," said Preston.

"You've been to India?" said Sarah.

"Not exactly," said Preston. "There's a monk there I'm interested in."

"You're going to India?" said Sarah.

"I've been going there in a way."

Sarah touched her temples. "You mean this way?" she said. "What's this monk's name?"

"He doesn't have a name," said Preston. "It's possible he never existed."

Sarah left the room without saying anything. Reeser couldn't tell if she'd been moved, threatened, or just annoyed. She might return with some sort of mystical mark on her forehead, or she might come back in yelling that she wouldn't have any flagellants spilling blood on her oriental carpets.

Resser took out his photos of the Brooks Range. Preston's spirits changed.

"God, it's beautiful, Henry," he said. They were looking down the valley of a small glacial stream, banked with sedge tussocks and wild flowers. White fog rolled over the tops of the blue mountains like a great surf. "What the hell are we doing here?" said Preston. "Let's head for the Noattuk." Sarah had come back into the room with coffee.

"What are we doing here?" she said. "Why can't we pack our bags and head for Barter Island? Because next week I'm going into the hospital to have my bum knee carved up. Because we've paid in advance for ten weeks of trombone lessons for Ned, and Lacey's half way into getting her braces." Her voice was rising and her eyes shined. "Why are we sitting here languishing, consumed by our own crass materialism?"

"Sarah," said Reeser. But Sarah was on her feet.

"Do you want to know why we can't follow you to Tibet to find your guru in his remote, blissful cave? Well, I'll tell you why. It's because Hank here has Rotary on Thursdays and I'm on the Altar Guild of the Country Club Christian Church. That's why." There was a silence. Sarah looked hard at Preston. Then her eyes squinted and she was laughing. For a moment, Preston looked confused. Then he began to laugh hard. "Obviously I've had too much to drink," said Sarah, falling back into her chair. "My jokes aren't that funny."

"You had me worried," said Preston. "I thought I was going to get crucified." He laughed again and slapped his hand on the arm of his chair. Suddenly, his face was transfixed with pain and he yelled.

"What's the matter?" said Reeser. Preston stood up and showed his hand. An upholstery pin fell to the floor and a thin bead of blood dripped from Preston's hand.

"Oh, my God," said Sarah. "It's the stigmata."

They talked and drank. The subject turned to Iran, and Preston said he was interested in the idea of a religious revolution. The Ayatollah wasn't any crazier than the people who were playing with H-Bombs, and the revolt against materialism and consumption, the vehement thirst for a spiritual correlative wasn't hard to understand. Reeser imagined Preston dressed like a bedouin with a scimitar in his hand at the door of the American Embassy. Listening to Preston, it seemed to him that revolutionaries and monks are people who have no responsibilities. They don't have mothers-in-law with broken hips and children who wet their beds. People who don't have cranky kids and monthly payments to worry about are trouble makers. They are alone, and having no one to love and fight with, they want to love, embrace, and devour humanity. Angels in helmets.

"The trouble with the Ayatollah's idea, " said Reeser, "is that you can't get back to the 13th Century from where we are today without the aid of the computer."

"I like your brocolli," Preston said to Sarah. "You're the only cook I know beside myself who can get it hot and keep it crisp at the same time." Sarah laughed and faked a blush.

"The secret's in the micro-wave," she said. "Reeser thinks it's dog food."

"I'd be happy to be a dog if I got dishes like that," said Preston. "I like to eat. But the biggest high I've had is not eating at all."

"What do you mean?" said Sarah.

"Fasting. I just did a six day fast at the monastery."

"I thought you looked a little gaunt," said Sarah. "Six days. Wow! How many pounds did you drop?"

"I don't know," said Preston. "I wasn't dieting. I didn't weigh myself."

"It must have been strange," said Sarah.

Preston smiled distantly. "It was strange. Strange and painful. I mean, it was probably the most beautiful time I've ever spent. You can see why fasting is at the heart of any religion."

"If I went six days without food...," said Sarah. "God, I bet you weigh less than I do."

Something about Preston's line with Sarah seemed almost effeminate to Reeser. It was like two housewives discussing recipes or washday miracles. He had to check himself from piping in with something like, "How do you two get your whites so white?" He felt out of it. He watched Sarah. It seemed as if she was affecting disdain for Preston and a certain tomboy air to mask her fascination with him. It was obvious that Preston was enjoying the company of a woman after two months in the monastery. In fact, he was seducing her. He was playing a game--attracting her, arousing desire so that he could test himself and savor the pleasure of abstinence. Reeser remembered how Ghandi slept with two women, so that his chastity would be more rigorous, tantalizing and sublime. These ascetics are the ultimate erotics, Reeser thought. Their fasting is gluttonous.

"I fasted once," said Reeser. "As the day wore on, I got less and less hungry. By six o'clock, I had no appetite at all. I thought, 'This is easy. I'll keep it up for a few days, have a few visions, lose a few pounds.' Then, about seven-thirty, I had my first vision. It was the image of an entire slab of corned beef, irredescent purple corned beef covered with horseradish lying on a plate waiting in my refrigerator. Without any struggle, without guilt or hesitation, I went to the refrigerator and devoured the entire slab standing up. I ate it with both hands like a piece of pie. I didn't even sit down. By the way, Pres--I weighed over two hundred at the time."

"You don't look it now," said Preston.

"I dropped about fifteen pounds on the Brooks Range trip," said Reeser. "We had our rations scooped out into Sierra Cups, you know. A scoop for breafast, a scoop for dinner, and a fig and a cracker for lunch. If you're hungry for more, it's tough. Just like Oliver Twist. There's no Quik Trip around, no one you can take your cup to and ask for more. It's easy to lose weight in the Brooks Range. We did have gorp for emergencies. I woke up a couple of times with hunger attacks and crammed handfuls of gorp into my mouth."

The kids came down to say goodnight and everyone played a round of a word game. Reeser could only come up with simple words--'sat,' 'off,' 'it.' He watched Preston deftly manipulate the letter blocks, producing compound and exotic words like a sorcerer--'agony,' 'imitate,' 'drowsy.' Reeser cursed himself as he saw words materialize that he should have caught. He felt competitive, hostile, as if every word were a weapon.

"Don't let him beat you, Dad," said Ned. Reeser felt his mind freeze. He wanted to win so badly--for Sarah--that he couldn't think. He was reminded of the myths where someone's enemy appeared in his house and the laws of hospitality and the inviolability of the guest forced the host to feed and bed him--Hunding finds Siegmund im eig'nem Haus flirting with his wife: "My house holds you, Wolfing, today; but tomorrow your weapon must defend you."

Reeser remembered again the two guests who'd invaded his house and sprinkled poison on his first marriage. They had both talked bravely of independence, nonconformity, and mocked the straight life, money, security. Then, shortly after their visits, they had both married--the poet to some girl who claimed a distant relation to the Du Ponts, the girl to a stockbroker with a half-interest in a Lear Jet.

Reeser put the kids to bed. When he came back down, Preston and Sarah were having coffee, port, and cheese. I could go back to living alone, Reeser thought. I made it once before. I could find my way back to that cabin on Lake Shrader and live alone. What is it that women fall in love with? Reeser thought that sometimes when he made love to Sarah, he imagined other women. Whose home is this? he thought. Whose guest am I? He remembered the story of how Zeus and Mercury came down to earth disguised as beggars, and how everyone turned them away until they came to the hut of Philemon and Baucis. The Gods destroyed everyone who'd refused them their hearths, and made Philemon and Baucis immortal in the linden and the oak. "How do you like them apples, Yorick?" he said to his dog. Yorick rolled over on his pillow and snorted without opening his eyes.

The grandfather clock chimed, and Preston got up to go. "I'm just not ready for comfort," he said, looking around the room. It seemed to Reeser that he was saying, "I'm not quite ready to become a slave to possessions."

"About the Cadillac, Henry," said Preston. "In case you were thinking about holding it up as contrary evidence--it's my parents'."

"The thought never crossed my mind," said Reeser. As they walked towards the door, Preston reached out and spun the leather arm chair on its swivel.

"Is that a real Herman Miller, Henry?" he said.

"No, it's a fake," said Reeser. "Like all the objects of our senses."

"But it's an authentic reproduction," said Preston.

"Oh, for sure," said Reeser. "It's a reasonable facsimile."

"Well, then it's real," said Preston. "It'll go up in value." He stopped in the hallway and put on a navy, knit cap.

He pulled it down over his forehead and looked at Reeser with his eyebrows raised as if inviting approval. "Well, Hank," he said. "Are you happy?" Reeser hated that question. It was like an accusation. It never seemed to be asked with good intentions, it was always as if the questioner was hoping for a confession of misery. There is something in the downfall of our best friends which is not unpleasant to us, said some philosophical authority. How can you assert that you're happy without sounding like you're covering something up? "You have all this--yes--but has it made you happy?" That's what the question meant. Reeser wished the space between him and Preston was stacked with real Herman Miller chairs, fin de siecle's, Louis Quinze's, Lafite Rothschild's. Who the hell is happy?

"Yes, of course I'm happy," said Reeser. "The Sanitation Department says they may have an opening for me any day. I own my '53 Plymouth free and clear. I haven't blacked out for three weeks now, and my nerves are settling down just great. I have prospects, that's what counts. Am I happy? Gwaan!" Preston laughed and patted Reeser on the head.

They shook hands out by the Cadillac. Reeser thought of the two of them shaking hands over the last twenty years, across the country, the Atlantic and back, in an Episcopal church in New Haven, a basketball court in Columbia, Missouri, a duck blind in the Cheyenne Bottoms, a cemetery in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. He looked at Preston without saying anything and as if he were trying to beam some power through his eyes that would make them eighteen again. He wanted Preston to say something, some statement of recognition.

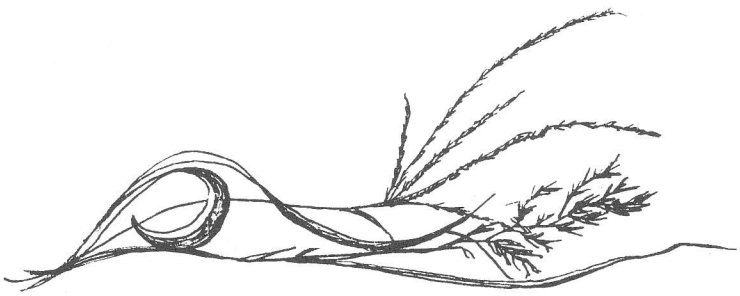
"You've turned into a real family man," said Preston. This wasn't what Reeser wanted. It made him wince and he felt tension in his sinews. It sounded patronizing. What he wanted was for Preston to confess that he envied him, that he realized he'd thrown away his life, he was an outcast from life's feast, because he'd saved himself for some vain dream. Preston looked back at the house. The downstairs lights were going off.

"You have a nice family, Hank," he said. "It looks good."

Reeser looked at him and saw that he was smiling, not his ironic smile, but a transparent, smiling "yes." He knew that this was what he'd wanted Preston to say. That they were both beyond judgment now, that there was no longer anything to prove, but that they simply were, they were forty, they were ready and alive. That was enough. That was what Reese wanted to hear. No confessions, no accusations, but simply that it was good. He liked the way Preston had said it. It sounded liked something a shaman would say. It sounded like a blessing: "It is good."

Preston slipped into the driver's seat and made a jaunty, waving gesture with the car keys. Reeser nodded as if in assent. As he watched the car move off with a silent, almost funereal gravity, he felt as if some shape were leaving his body and following, seated now too behind the wheel of the luminous Cadillac, and that he too was passing alone back through the long alleys of battered stalks and bent cane and the dead December prairie flanking the turnpike to Kansas City. He turned and jogged up the incline of the lawn, even though he was

out of shape and forty, clumsily but with a sense of weightlessness. And he conjured an image leaving the rear view mirror of the vanishing car, jogging back up the street to catch him, joining him there and entering again as he returned.



Edwin Moses

OBJECTS FOUND IN THE WOODS

I've liked to walk in the the wooded bottomlands along Wildcat Creek for many years, ever since I was a boy. In those days I rambled simply for the rambling's sake. Then as a young man I walked to keep from thinking too much. Now I go merely out of habit, I suppose. From my room I can get there on foot in twenty minutes or so; I used to do it in less, but Sunset Lane seems steeper now, I can feel my heart pound as I climb the hill, and my breath comes short. I think that perhaps I will just stop here one day--a hot day--sink to the pavement, and roll back down to the bottom like a half-deflated beach ball.

At the top of the hill I cross Sunset Avenue and walk along the fence that separates the Girl Scout Park from the cemetery. The Girl Scouts' property resembles a golf course; rolling, mostly open grassland, it has a clubhouse in the middle and a municipal water tower near the back. The cemetery is park-like too, with old trees and grave-markers dating back to the late 1850s. Most people are afraid of cemeteries, and I remember, as a boy, regarding this one with superstitious dread; exploring it alone at night was a great adventure. But now I like it: it's a peaceful place, and I like to think of all those people, whose names I read on their stones, whose lives, most of them, were bitter and lonely, at rest in their everlasting dark.

I stay on the Girl Scouts' side of the fence, though, until I come to the back of their land; then I scramble through the wire and walk along under a row of Scotch pines, down the gravel road that borders the cemetery. Today, a bright afternoon in late November, fox squirrels scold me from among the graves, blue jays squawk at me as they pass by overhead. Soon I reach the rim of the creek valley. This area has been much built up over the years--across the creek, where once there were open fields, now there's a vast trailer park--but the bottomland itself remains unchanged. It remains a refuge for the small animals--beavers and muskrats, coons and possums, an occasional fox--that around the margins of towns, in a world not their own, still survive. You don't go down into the creek-bottom to get from one place to another, just if you're out wandering, so there aren't many beer cans; but there's lighter detritus, now and then, plastic bottles and suchlike washed into the woods by floods.

To reach the creek I plunge straight down the hill, through bushes and small trees, on a path so faint I sometimes lose it completely; then, pushing through scrub cedars, I have a scratchy walk. The creek itself runs brown in summer, clear, bright green over algae in winter, and is small enough to ford knee-deep wherever there's fast water. You can go fishing in it for carp and channel cat, but they run puny, so that it's really boys' fishing. It hasn't seemed worthwhile, not for a long time. Once at the creek I turn right, upstream, and for fifty

yards or so walk along the foot of a steep hillside; not quite a cliff, but you'd climb it on hands and knees, scrabbling for footholds, kicking loose shale down the slope into the water. The path is safe enough except at one treacherous spot where a spring keeps the ground perpetually soggy; I slipped there once and skidded in, waist-deep in the murk. In this same pool last winter, in eight feet of water, a woman drowned. She was walking across on the ice and fell through. She stayed in the water for almost a week, until I in my turn walked out on the ice, frozen harder now, looked down at my feet, and saw her lying there, all shadowy, as through a chipped, scored, translucent pane of glass.

Once past this pool I reach the flat bottomland, and there the walking becomes easy. I have constantly to wind about, though, dodging thorns: greenbriar; gooseberry (long ago we came here to pick gooseberries for jam and pies, but now the trees have grown so high and thick that the bushes, in deep shade, bear no fruit); and honey-locust. The locust thorns are three or four inches long and hard as ironwood, and I dream, sometimes, of walking into them at night and putting out my eyes.

But now it's mid-afternoon, with bright fall sunlight filtering through the trees, and I walk along in peace, until I see on the ground in front of me a small heap of bright-colored objects. There's a red felt-tipped pen; a little red plastic skeleton, of the kind sold by dimestores for Halloween; a third-grade arithmetic and a third-grade reader, each with "Property of Debbie Fairchild" inscribed in red on the flyleaf; and finally there's a small plastic-covered notepad. In this is printed in block capitals, again in red,

CLUB
PRESIDENT -- DEBBIE
SECRETARY -- ELSIE
TREASURER -- JOHN
MEMBER --

Nothing else out of the ordinary is in view. I sit down on a log and look at these things. I think about them for a long time, until it is almost dark.

I

The three children, all carrying schoolbooks, scramble down the hill to the creek and set out single-file along the path. Debbie, in the lead, seems not so much oblivious of the obstacles in her way as disdainful of them. She flicks branches aside carelessly, so that John, immediately behind her, has to duck and swat at them, and soon falls farther back. When she comes to the soggy place, she plants her foot squarely and firmly in the wet, flooding her shoe and sock with a geyser of muddy water. She skids, flails with her arms to keep her balance--she almost pitches her books into the creek--and continues on without looking back. When John in his turn arrives at this place, he plants his left foot solidly and swipes viciously at the ground with his right, lifting a dollop of mud the size of a half-dollar onto the back of Debbie's dress.

Elsie tiptoes across fastidiously; even so her black-and-white saddle shoes turn a uniform dark brown. As they near the point where the path opens out into level woodland, John and Elsie lag farther behind, until the formation suggests not a leader and two followers, but a victim and two conspirators. Once on secure ground, Debbie glances back, imperiously beckons them on, and sets off again, weaving her brisk way through the brambles. The other two reluctantly close the gap. It's a sticky afternoon for late October, and they sweat and itch in their heavy school clothes.

Debbie leads them to a little glade, stops, and sits down crosslegged on the grass. She takes out of her coat pocket a pen, a notepad, and a little pastic skeleton. The others come up and stand facing her, surveying her sulkily. "This is the headquarters for the club," Debbie announces firmly. "It's a great place."

"It's a rotten place," John says.

"Rotten," Elsie echoes. "My shoes are all muddy."

"Crybaby," says Debbie fiercely. "It's a great place."

"I'm thirsty," John says. "And hungry. If we had it in my basement like I said, we could go up in the kitchen..."

"John's basement is nice," says Elsie.

"I'm the president, so you have to do what I say, so we'll have it here."

"You're not a president. You're a dictator, isn't she, Elsie?"

Elsie, not knowing what a dictator is, nods cagily.

"It's a stupid club anyway--it doesn't even have a name. How can you have a club without a name?"

"It's--it's the Skeleton Club," Debbie says, raising the skeleton triumphantly aloft.

"Dumb name," Elsie says.

"And besides, if you're the president, and I'm the treasurer, and Elsie's the secretary, who's the members?"

"We'll get Lynn for a member."

"I hate Lynn," John says.

"Lynn's dumb," Elsie says.

"I'm the president, so we'll get Lynn," Debbie says, opening the notebook and posing the pen to write.

But John says suddenly, "Let's have a vote--how many want Debbie for just a member? Me!"

"Me!" says Elsie. And now John chants, and Elsie joins him, "Debbie's just a member, Debbie's just a member...!"

"Shut up, Shut up, Shut up!"Debbie cries.

"You can have your old club," John says. "Elsie and me'll start our own. And Elsie, you can be the president."

"We'll both be the president." They join hands and turn--"So much for you," Elsie sniffs over her shoulder--and slowly, hand in hand, they thread their way through the trees and out of sight.

Debbie sits there for a long time. She's no longer a president, now, but a queen, brooding on the direful punishments--the boiling in oil, the feeding to the moat-creatures--that she'll visit on her traitorous subjects. When

she finally looks up, it's deep twilight. Hastily she gathers her things together and sets out, but she goes the wrong way, deeper into the woods. Brambles snatch at her. In blind panic she begins to run, trips over a root and falls, and everything goes flying. She scrambles up and hurries on, fighting tears, running and walking and running again; hopelessly turned around, she circles back toward the deep pool in the gathering dark.

II

Debbie stares at her mother's gravestone, wondering why she isn't sad. Experimentally she screws up her face to see if she can cry, but nothing happens except that she feels silly--"Like a monkey in the zoo!" she says to herself, and glances around to see if anyone is watching. She doesn't even know why she keeps coming here--her mother's been dead for almost a year now--unless it's because her father tells her not to. "It's unhealthy," he says. This makes no sense to Debbie--as if you could get sick just from walking around in the cemetery--and she hates her father anyway, but still, coming here straight from school was a dumb thing to do. She's missed the bus, and to walk to the Wildcat Creek Trailer Park from the cemetery takes almost an hour, and when he asks her why she's late, what will she think of to say?

Unless she doesn't go around by the bridge after all, but walks straight down the hill and wades across the creek! She giggles at the thought: her father would have ten fits. He's forever warning her against going near it, because, he says, "You're all I have left, darling--if anything happened to you, I don't know what I'd do." When he talks about how she's all he has left he gets very weepy and sentimental and she hates him more than ever. So now the idea of wading the creek, breaking one of his rules to get away with breaking the other, grows in her mind until it becomes irresistible. She sets off down the hill.

But when she gets to the bottom, she sees it isn't going to be as easy as she thought. The trailer park is right across the creek and up the far bank, but the water looks much too deep to wade and the bank is too steep to climb. She looks about irresolutely, wondering if this is where her mother drowned; shivers, and wishes she were on her way home on the school bus. It's too late for that, though, and too late to go around the long way--she has to go ahead, so at random she turns right, upstream, and starts walking. This turns out to be a mistake: almost at once she sticks her shoe into a soft spot, and drags it out coated with mud. So now she's going to catch it whatever happens. When she gets to where the path opens out she stops, no longer in a hurry to get home, and sits down to think things over.

She's gazing so intently into the water that she doesn't notice the stranger until he's standing right behind her. He says, "What are you looking at, little girl?"

She stares up at him and sees a tall young man, dark-haired, wearing khaki pants and an old army jacket; she's prepared to be frightened, but his calm face and quiet voice

reassure her.

"Nothing," she says. Then she adds, self-importantly, "My mother was drowned in that pool--she fell through the ice, right over there."

"That's too bad," says the stranger. "You must be lonely. But there's another little girl, you know, just like you, that lives in the water there--look down." She looks, and sees, in the clear green autumnal water, her reflection, with the stranger's looming darkly over it.

"That's silly," she says.

"That's right--you're a big girl now, aren't you? Too old for make-believe. So if you can't be friends with the girl in the water, why don't you come and be friends with me?"

"No, thank you," She says, a little uneasy now. "I have to be getting home. My father will be worried."

"I'll take you home," the stranger says. "But first I want you to come and play a game with me."

"What sort of game?"

"Just a game--I'll show you how to play. And then I'll take you home to join your mother."

Debbie thinks the stranger must be confused, but she doesn't want to offend him--she really does need someone to help her across the creek--and anyway, he has her by the hand and is hurrying her along into the woods. "Not so fast!" she says.

The stranger glances down at her. "Those things you're carrying--they're slowing you down," he says. "Leave them here."

"But my books, and the stuff for my club..."

"You won't be needing them anymore," he says, "now drop them!" And he gives her arm a twist, so she lets them go.

The game lasts a long time, until twilight. When it's finally over, the stranger scoops Debbie up in his arms and carries her back to the deep pool in the gathering dark.

III

Debbie's father has developed a ritual: every Sunday he brings her to the cemetery and makes her read aloud what's written on her mother's grave:

Ellen Fairchild
Born 1945.....Died 1981
Devoted Wife and Mother

She reads it in an expressionless monotone, like someone reciting in a language she doesn't understand. When she's finished her father says, "You see? Your mother's dead. Her body is right down there, in the ground. And her soul's in Heaven."

Debbie, glad to have gotten this foolishness over with for another week, doesn't bother to argue. She knows where her mother is: she's in the woods down by the creek, where they so often used to go, just the two of them, "To get away and be by ourselves for awhile." Except for the two months during the summer when she was in the "home"--though that's certainly not what it was, she knows what a home is like as well as anybody--she's been going down into the woods almost every single day,

ever since her mother left her. Her father has tried all sorts of ways to stop her--he's argued, pleaded, threatened her, and once he even whipped her with his belt. Last spring he hired a girl from the high school to meet her at school, take her home, and watch her until he got home from work; but she scratched and kicked so fiercely that after three days the girl wouldn't do it anymore, not even for ten dollars a time. Now, except for the weekly trips to the cemetery, he seems to have given up: when she comes home from school at six o'clock instead of three, he only stares at her sadly.

Debbie knows the way so well that today, a bright afternoon in late October, she skips dryshod across the wet place in the path without even noticing it. She wanders around in the woods for a long time, singing to herself, talking to her mother under her breath. For the two of them this is home now, a refuge from her father and from the doleful sympathetic face with which the world regards her. So when her mother actually appears before her in the twilight, wearing the long white dress she was buried in, Debbie is not even surprised--it seems so natural. She's a little shy at first, though, awed by her mother's beauty, the pale delicate face, and the black hair hanging loose below her shoulders. But then her mother smiles--"Why, what's the matter, don't you love me anymore?" she says, gently mocking; she holds out her arms, and Debbie rushes into them. "Mama," she cries, "Where have you been, I've missed you so!"

"Why, I've been in the creek," her mother says. "Didn't you know? And Debbie, it's the loveliest world--all clear and green, the fish swim to and fro, and the birds sing for me in the trees..."

"The trees?"

"The trees that you see when you look into the water, you know. But darling, I've been ever so lonely without you, so I've come to bring you back home with me; and we'll live all by ourselves, in the water-world together."

"But won't Daddy be sad?"

"He will. But you must choose. Now who you love better, your father or me?"

"I love you."

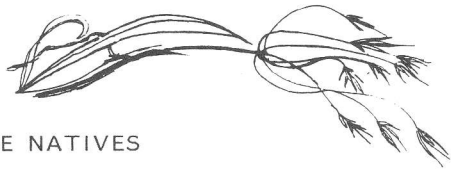
"And your books and your school friends, or me?"

"You."

"Then leave your things here, darling, and come with me."

Debbbie sets down her books, her notepad and pen, her little red Halloween skeleton, and follows her mother through the trees: her mother seems to float along above the ground, untouched by thorns and brambles. Soon they reach the water. "Look there," her mother says, "that's where I live; where we live now." She peers down and sees her own face, and her mother's, smiling, beside it. Her mother takes her hand. "Darling, come with me," she says, and leads her down into the deep pool. Silently, with hardly a ripple, they sink together into the dark.

Susan Nelson



MAKING CONTACT WITH THE NATIVES

I saw them for the first time when I carried the garbage down to the pit I had dug.

Thin and malignant looking, they stared at me silently: the girl was eight or nine, with deep-set eyes and matted hair the color of a grocery sack; the boy, younger, was yellowish all over, as if he'd been carved out of laundry soap.

I stared back at them, dumped the garbage without speaking, and walked up the hill to the cabin. I could feel their eyes after I had shut the door, and I imagined them frozen in space, like lizards on rocks.

The next time I saw them, they were stealing food out of my ice chest in the creek.

I'd been writing all morning and was taking a break, lounging casually in the clear mountain sun. Screened by the wild hedge along the creek, I watched the whole thing; I could tell it was a familiar routine. The girl squatted matter-of-factly in the water, holding the box on her lap. From the side, the boy unlocked the lid and, with the care of a surgeon lifting a flap of skin, he scaled off thin slices of cheese, butter, meat. They each took a sip of milk, clamped down the top, carefully replaced the box in the creek, and disappeared into the woods. If I hadn't seen them, I would never have missed the food. The bright day and the white trunks of the aspen with their black-rimmed eyes blunted my anger. I decided to overlook the whole thing, remembering the children's thin arms and scabby skin.

The next day when I went for my breakfast, all my milk was gone.

Furious, I stood up, spraying water angrily as I wrestled the box from the stream and heaved it toward the bank. The lid sprang open and then tore loose from the bottom, one hinge hanging as a rebuke. I kicked it and stalked back to the cabin, resenting the trip to replace the milk as much as the theft.

When I returned from town with supplies, I knew they had been in the cabin. There was a faint smell--sweat or dirt--and that unmistakable sense of human presence. I checked carefully, but nothing was missing; they couldn't, after all, slice off thin pieces of my bed! I brought the chest up from the creek, replaced the hinge, and tried to think how to make it safe from their sly hands. I had bought a heavy, old-fashioned combination lock in town, but there was no easy way to attach it to the chest. Finally I wrapped a length of chain around the box, clamped on the lock, and returned the chest to the creek. Getting food became irritatingly complicated, but nothing was missing after that.

Once, feeling vaguely uneasy about their skinniness, I left a jar of milk and some fruit on the bank near the chest.

The next morning, I found the fruit smashed against the tree and the jar turned upside down in the middle of a soggy grass pool of milk. Grudgingly acknowledging their pride, I never left anything again.

It was two weeks before I realized they were following me.

My pattern was to get up for an early morning hike, moving gingerly out of the cabin into the cold, wet grass. Steam would be rising from the creek below and the sun would still be lost behind the mountains. I'd climb until I was tired, then sit and watch the light spill slowly into the valley.

One morning, slumped against a wide pine, I fell asleep. Waking suddenly, I saw the children standing nearby. The girl leaned toward the boy, as if to speak, and then they realized I was awake; they were gone instantly, drifting into the bushes like smoke. I didn't believe they had simply stumbled upon me, and my morning excursion began to lose some of its charm. I discovered I was hiking closer to the cabin, as if protecting something.

As the weather began its slow turn toward winter, I started laying in a supply of wood. I had the use of the cabin until the end of November and I was already visualizing evening fires. There were plenty of windfalls to cut up, but what I really needed were dead trees still standing, their wood dry but not rotten.

I'd bought a small saw with a lovely red and silver blade that slipped cleanly into the dry wood, and I became addicted to wood gathering. On my hikes, I found myself taking note of possible trees so that later I could come back, saw in hand, and gather them in. Several times I wondered if the children were still following me, but as I saw no sign of them, I gradually let their presence slip away. My cuts became straighter, neater, my wood pile grew; I began having evening fires, getting rid of the evidence of my early sawing which showed unmistakable signs of inexpertise. On some days, I spent more time sawing wood than writing, a contradiction I recognized but refused to deal with.

I don't know when I decided to build the hut--perhaps it was when I saw the round smoothness of the wood I was cutting. At any rate, one day I cut, notched, and stacked four logs into a rough house shape. On my weekly trip to town for supplies, I bought huge nails and secured each corner piece.

Then I added another layer. At first I was simply playing, curious to see if such a structure could be built, but gradually I became obsessed.

All my life I'd been given lessons in how to do things--now, suddenly, I wanted to do something without being shown how. I began to welcome each problem as it arrived, wallowing in the awareness that my solutions were probably simple-minded and inefficient. I simply didn't care; I thought of dogs, rolling deliciously in dirt just for the pleasure of it. I sawed and pounded away on my hut, designing windows and a door as cheerfully as a child.

My compulsive building was interrupted by a letter from my brother. Our mother had fallen and hurt her hip: she was mending well, he could be with her this week, could I come for the following one? The last thing I saw as I turned the jeep onto the dirt road was my partially built hut, looking vaguely rakish in the middle of the last summer wild flowers.

The visit with my mother was pleasant despite her injury. A self-sufficient person, she demanded no more care than necessary--which of course made the people around her solicitous. I found it difficult to adjust to the city again and kept opening windows. I tried going for walks, but the streets were full of fumes that made the apartment air seem clean in comparison. By the end of the week, Mother was on her feet and we were beginning to get on each other's nerves, snapping over where to put old tea bags. It was clearly time for me to leave.

The first thing I did when I returned was check on my hut. I found the children had been playing in it, and my anger rose, unreasoning, visceral... I cursed, threw things around, stomped to the cabin and began to unpack. There was plenty to do, and by the time I got settled, I was able to laugh at myself. I had realized, while I was in the city, that I had grown a little strange from my isolation. The most obvious evidence of this had been in my description of the children.

"Where do they live?" my mother had asked; I had not even wondered about that everyday fact. She had laughed, also, at my picture of them: "You've been reading too much. . . You don't talk about them as if they're people . . . Are you sure they're evil?" I tried to convey my impression of them but found her questions unsettling; eventually, I had joined in her laughter, sheepish about my exaggeration. I had continued to insist on their dirty hair, however, to maintain some credibility.

Now I went back to my hut to re-examine the evidence of their invasion. They had made a fire in the center and had surrounded it with smooth, flat rocks from the creek. Their cooking utensils consisted of a small, rusted-out skillet and three tin cans with the labels removed. They had put together a table out of my firewood, with stumps for chairs, and there was a bed of leaves in the corner. My anger left as quickly and inexplicably as it had come.

Perhaps I remembered myself as a child in our back yard, perhaps I saw my more recent pleasure in cutting the logs. My mind unwrinkled for a moment, flat and tight as a newly-made bed. I laughed out-loud, and turned to find the children watching me. They stood, framed by straight edges of trees, glaring at me as fiercely as stray cats. I returned their look then simply went back to the cabin and started fixing my supper. When I looked out the window, they had gone.

That night I dreamed I was prospecting for gold in Alaska, a place I had never been. Left alone by a TV-Eskimo, I was convinced I was going to freeze to death in an abandoned whiteness. I woke up to discover my sleeping bag on the floor and my body curled into itself to conserve warmth. I got up, moved around a

little to get warm, and idly pulled the burlap curtain back from the window. Outside, the two children were moving back and forth in the moonlight, removing their possessions from the hut. They carried one item at a time, preciously, and their footsteps were as silent as the moon. I watched them until they finished their job and disappeared; then I went back to bed, zipping my sleeping bag tightly around me.

I slept late the next morning, which gave me an excuse not to start on a new chapter. Instead, I decided to confront the problem of a roof for the hut. I had abandoned long ago any notion of magnificience, consoling myself with my amateur status. But I did want to provide some kind of roof--something not quite flat--and I'd decided I needed a larger center beam I could work from. Staying fairly near the cabin, I began looking for my beam.

It took me all afternoon to cut down the tree. Since it was going to be the only live one I took, I had tried to expiate my sin by choosing one I thought was going to be crowded out by the trees around it. This may have saved my soul, but it did nothing to make the cutting easier. I shaved off as many of the branches as I could reach, but still, when the tree fell, the upper part ripped and tore through the clump of surrounding trees like a falling person grabbing for support. Saw in hand, I stood knee deep in leaves and silence, my cross beam at my feet. I still didn't know how I was going to get it on top of my log frame, which for some reason now looked fragile and tentative, a first draft of a building.

I measured the width of the hut and cut the tree the necessary length. After I dragged it a few feet from the clump it had been standing in, I brought the jeep up and pulled it the rest of the way with a chain; now it lay, smooth and heavy, right in front of the hut. Staring at it, I wondered how I'd gotten into such idiocy, this obsession with building. I poured a cup of coffee, started work on the next chapter, and let my roof beam lie quietly in the sun, waiting perhaps for some wood god to raise it. I wrote until the type and the page began to blend into greyness, then went to bed. I didn't even glance at the log, but I felt it lying in my head like a forgotten appointment.

The next day, I sat in the yard and drew pictures of ways to winch the log up into place--everything looked unworkable. I began drawing two circles, stacked, which became cats and rabbits: the cats had short ears and long tails, the rabbits the reverse.

The log seemed to have gotten heavier during the night; I could barely lift one end, let alone move it anywhere. I wrote all day, avoiding the log which lay accusingly in the yard. That night, I dreamed my last chapter was being read by three people I'd never seen before. They started by complaining about the format, then moved on to sentence structure. Looking over their shoulders, I was horrified to find they were reading a long, rambling letter I'd written to a friend; it had cats and rabbits drawn in the margin. I woke up depressed and uneasy. . . The three critics lingered in my thoughts as I made my

breakfast.

I went outside, tired of ideas, and dragged the log inside the shell of the hut. Throwing a rope over the top where I had cut the notches for the beam to rest, I tied the other end to the log and then backed the jeep as close as I could. It was a crude and awkward plan, but I was bored with theories; I tied the rope to the bumper and slowly pulled one end of the log up toward its resting place. Just as the log was almost high enough, the rope began slipping off--I could feel the lessening of tension, even in the jeep. Turning off the engine, I got out and hurried toward the hut, afraid the log would fall back to the ground. I pulled up one of the stumps the children had used for chairs, climbed on it, and began see-sawing the rope back toward the roughened cut where I had originally tied it.

I saw the hemp begin to fray and felt the rope give at the same time; the stump shifted under me, I grabbed for something. . . There was nothing, and the rope tore loose, the log coming toward me in a smooth, inevitable arc. We dropped to the ground together, the log banging past my arm and collapsing finally on the lower part of my back; I lay there, not even in pain for a few minutes, staring at the grass against my face. A beetle walked slowly up a leaf. And then I saw my arm, lying half under me, twisted toward me in a curious way with a piece of white china sticking out one side.

The whiteness began to turn pink, and I realized I was staring at a bone. Then my back began to hurt, and I forgot about my arm because I realized the log was lying on top of me and that I couldn't move.

I threw up--from fear or pain. Everything hurt, my arm, my back, my legs.... and my face was half-buried in my own vomit. I turned my head the other way and simply lay there, caught up in another wave of nausea.

As the areas of pain became localized, I regained some control. My back and my arm were the major sources; nothing else seemed to be hurt. By lifting myself slightly with my left arm, I could take a little of the weight off the arm that was broken--but I was afraid to try to move it out from under me for fear of pushing the bone further through the skin. I couldn't tell whether my back had been badly hurt or was simply in pain from the pressure of the log. I tried my toes. . . they moved weakly, as if detached from my legs, but they moved. I put my face down on the ground and lay quietly, trying to think about what I could do.

I realized I was going to have to try to get my right arm out from under me: it was true I might hurt it by moving it, but the continued weight of my body wasn't doing it any good, either. I could raise the top part of my body only a little--the log seemed to be diagonally across me, with most of the weight on my lower back. The broken bone was sticking out right above the wrist, which meant I still had movement in the upper part.

Taking some of the weight off with my left arm, I pulled my other arm out from under me, inch by inch, with time out for nausea. When my arm was finally free, I found myself making

soft pain noises like a dog. And I either passed out or went to sleep, because everything disappeared and when I was conscious again, the shadows were beginning to lengthen and the air was turning cold.

The children came into focus, beginning with blurred colors and ending with the sharp edges of their skin. They were staring quietly, their thin dirty faces as expressionless as ever.

"I'm alive," I called to them, thinking that they might be afraid I was dead.

"I need help. My arm is broken. . . Go get some help." With my head turned as far as I could turn it, I paused, looking up at them.

They stood like cows, staring at me as if I were some casual object they had come upon.

"Listen," I said, "you have to help. My back may be broken. Go tell your folks...0r maybe you can move the log."

I tried to keep my voice reasonable, placating. They stood quietly, their eyes dark and opaque. I realized I did not know them at all, did not know how to talk to them, did not know their names. Swallowing, I pulled my voice under control.

"Look," I said, "I'm hurt. But I have money. You can have mv..." I paused, trying to imagine what would appeal to them," . . . my cabin. You can play house there--it has a roof. And a bed. But you have to help me out, first. Okay?"

For the first time, their eyes shifted. They looked at each other, a glance quick as a cat's, then back at me. And still they did not move. Pain wracked my arm and my voice leaped at them, raucous as a crow's.

"You filthy little animals, get me out of here. . . get this log off me or I swear to God I'll get out of here and I'll come after you..."

The girl's head jerked up, her face alert and fearful, and she seemed to slide backwards, away from me.

The chill from the mountains surrounded me. Tears filled my eyes, and the children blurred once more into pale shapes of color.

I raised my left hand, then dropped it. "Please," I said, "It hurts so much..."

And then they heard me.

The girl spoke some soft syllable; I saw the boy's bare feet coming steadily toward me through the grass.

I caught the sweet, heavy smell of their bodies, felt the log moving painfully down my legs, then knew it gone and my mouth full of clear mountain air.

Melissa Nolte

AN IMPERFECT ROOM

"I never was much of a fighter," she said, lazily, as if the words didn't hold any meaning for her. "He tried to fight with me often, but I didn't give in. I didn't let him sneak up on me like he did with the others." The room was stuffy, so she thought twice before she lit her cigarette. It was tight and closed like rooms during a long winter. She looked around and noticed there were no windows. The corners were exact, all the walls were brand new. There was one stain on the ceiling that captured her attention continually, a flaw her eyes would examine. It was the only feature in the room that sparked any interest for her. "I guess there's a leak in the upstairs or something," she said, inhaling her smoke. Her throat scratched. She coughed.

"What?" her mother asked her.

"They tried to make this room perfect so that you wouldn't notice anything in it except yourself. But there's a place on the ceiling that brings you back." She stood. "I wish I knew how I was supposed to feel."

"Oh, Sandy," her mother said, annoyed. "You aren't supposed to feel this or that way. Just relax." She straightened her skirt and then stared at her daughter. "Don't drink any more coffee."

Sandy laughed and sat back down. "You're the one who has trouble with coffee. Not me. I drink it to relax before I go to bed." She put out her cigarette. "Why do the things I say irritate you?"

Her mother sighed. "You're just talking nonsense, that's all. I don't like to hear you talking nonsense."

"It's not nonsense to me." Sandy looked at the stain and it vibrated for her. "I'm so tired that all I have left to say are things that float up." She turned to her mother. "Like the time we went to Florida. Remember? I think I was about, uh, fourteen. I had a funny tan, because I had been sunbathing with shorts on, so when I put on my bikini there was about six inches of white thigh right below the panty line. And my stomach was all white. I looked so silly in the pictures you took. You told me how good I looked. But I looked so silly."

"So what about it?"

"From our apartment we could stand and watch the gulf. The sand was as white as bleached bone and the gulls and shells and everything that went with a real beach scene--all stand out like a post-card. It was a different world from Kansas. It was like a dream."

Her mother's eyes glazed and Sandy thought she might cry again. "Those were good times."

"I guess so. I only remember a few things. One day I was watching the gulf from the apartment and I saw a fin churling in the water and I knew it was a shark. I thought, 'How could a

shark be swimming so close to land?' And I got really scared and thought I'd better tell Dad about it. He looked and stared seriously for several minutes. He watched it so carefully that I knew I was right and that he was scared, too. What I didn't know was that he was just a Kansas bumpkin, like me, and didn't know a shark from a jelly-fish." She smiled. "But then he figured it out and he told me. "Those are dolphins," he said, 'let's go look at them from the beach.' We went to the beach and sure enough that's what they were. They were leaping and playing and having a gay old time. We could hear their squeals and flips in the water, and it made us real happy. I was happy, I could tell that Dad was happy, too. The sun was going down and they were playing so close to shore that I could have paddled out on a surf board and joined them."

"Where was I?" her mother asked.

"Oh, you were doing something else. Taking a shower or something." Sandy stared at the stain. "I remember it so well. I thought he was so smart. To know that. To know that they weren't sharks." She could smell the sea water again.

"He is smart," her mother said. "He's the smartest man I know. I can ask him anything and he knows the answer."

"He knows the punchline to every joke in the world," Sandy said. "That always used to amaze me. Later I figured that he just winged it when he heard the joke. But that's still amazing. To be able to ad lib." She felt a small gulp in her throat.

"He's never wanted to be in this state," her mother sniffed, "he'd rather die than be like this." She put a tissue to her face.

"If he'd rather die, why hasn't he?" Sandy asked. "No, he's a fighter. He was always trying to get me to fight with him. But I wouldn't."

"The hell you wouldn't. You were always fighting." Her mother kept her eyes closed. "Please just be quiet. If coffee relaxes you, drink some for God's sake. Just be quiet. I don't want to hear you talk anymore."

Sandy felt herself jerk into movement and she took herself to the coffee machine down the hall. The floors were shiny as if coated in glass and her eyes searched continually for imperfections, like the ceiling stain. A nurse passed her and she noticed, with satisfaction, that the woman had a run in her white stockings. Another woman, about her age, stood at the machine waiting for the cup to fill. Sandy waited behind her. Normally, she would have struck a conversation, but she felt her thoughts were so scrambled that she had better not let them fly at a stranger. The woman picked up her cup and left. "How are you feeling now, Mr. Coffee?" she asked the machine. "It's the middle of the night and here I am again. What was that? You're not Mr. Coffee? Well, excuse me." She punched black and waited. "I've known your type before. You act like you don't know me. But you do, you do. We've had an intimate relationship going here now for, how long? About two weeks, I guess. Come on, can't you fill any faster? My mother can't stand to be alone." Sandy felt her eyes filling. "My mother just can't

stand to be alone."

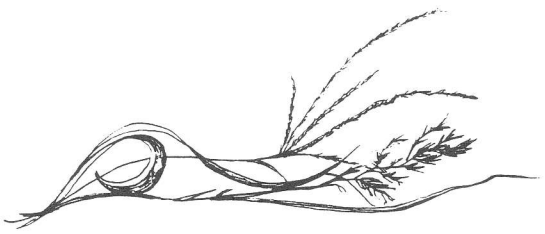
"Excuse me," the other woman was back. "I forgot I was supposed to get another cup. Yours is filled now."

Sandy whirled around. "Oh, yes, I'm sorry." She took her cup. "Oh, the other woman, eh?" she asked.

The woman tried not to look at her.

Sandy saw her father's doctor pass her and go into her ceiling stain room. She dropped her cup and leaned against the wall. She hugged herself. "Are you all right?" the other woman asked. Sandy nodded and told her to go on.

After she saw the doctor leave the room, she glided, feeling as if she were on four feet instead of two. It took her so long to find the room. She was dreaming, rushing through lights in her car, digging sand on a beach, splitting the newspaper with her father, setting the table, riding her bike. Her mother's voice didn't penetrate, she was swimming.



Michael Paul Novak

WHATEVER FLAMES UPON THE NIGHT

Poet Dies In Fall

(AP) Richard Arensburg, 60, Pulitzer Prize winning poet, died yesterday morning in a fall from the 10th story balcony of his office at Northwest University. Arensburg, a professor at the University, apparently fell accidentally.

In 1973 his Selected Poems won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for poetry. His first book, The Long Silence won the Younger Poet's Award in 1947.

Arensburg was considered by some critics and readers of poetry to be one of America's leading poets.

He is survived by his wife, Sylvia, his daughter Helen, 10, and his son from a previous marriage, Axel, 26.

I was watching NBC that night, and it wasn't even mentioned. Then a friend of mine called me to say Richard was dead. It had been on ABC; apparently they even read some lines from "Night Storm," his best known and least favorite poem. The next day the papers stuck it on the back pages, along with the horoscope, garbling all the facts and dates, emphasizing his death rather than his work. So America honors its great poets.

I probably was as close to him as anyone, in so far as one can get close to a dynamo, an inferno. Many nights we spent together talking about poets and poetry. Well, of course, he did most of the talking. He loved to rank writers, from the past to the present, placing them in their proper niches. He was sure he was the best poet of his generation and there were some nights he was sure he was better than that. "Politics--Neruda or me. The music-- the singing music--Thomas was good but I think I've finally surpassed him. The dramatic--Eliot or me. Goddamn right, me."

He did a great deal for me, I don't deny it. His name got me a Guggenheim and a stay at Yaddo, and even, one night, half drunk, in a long-distance fury, a nomination for the National Book Award. But not even all his energy and connivance could get me the award. When the winning book was announced, he looked at me, grinning slyly out of that cracked plate face, and said, "Maybe you didn't deserve it. Your book is OK but small. Such little poems, very well done, of course. Such perfect little images. Everything shined to perfection. All together they make a nice bag of marbles."

I laughed, but I was deeply hurt. He had always encouraged me and then this curious insult. At the time I thought he suddenly saw me as a rival rather than a protege, and the realization had quite a bit to do with my leaving Northwest two years ago. Now I'm no longer certain.

Of course, he killed himself. He figured out a way to surpass those that had gone before him. He was mad for death, ate with it, drank with it, drove a car as if he had an urgent appointment with it. One night he harangued Kees, Plath, Berryman, and the others, saying they were all cowards. "I'll die in bed or at a bar stool." Afraid, I'm certain, he would go the way of the others.

Now that he's gone, maybe I can work again. I've done so little in the last few years. If not, my place in literature will be a paragraph in the biography of Richard Arensburg.

Certainly Arensburg wrote some good poems, quite good to be just, but a long time ago. And he was a shit, a first class shit.

That summer we spent together at McDowell was agony for me. Arensburg was always competing--morning, swimming; afternoon, tennis or handball; evenings, poetry. I'm not much for sports so naturally this ox of a man won again and again, but the evenings were the worst. Who could recite the most lines of Yeats, who could write a sonnet on garbage in an hour, who could make a sestina with the end-words coming from a cereal package. Stupid parlor tricks. He even won the competition for the fair-haired woman novelist. I just happen to write better poems than he.

He told everyone how he had beat me, even wrote a comic poem about it, I've been told, although I've never seen it. Then one day I happened to be casually paging through some old little magazines in a library when I came across the sonnet--"Garbage by Richard Arensburg." Well, the competition is over. I'll write a generous and minor elegy for him.

I suppose he did kill himself, or maybe he was drunk and fell. Possibly he thought, in his arrogance, he could fly. The flying bit could go into my poem although it might seem vulgar to mention how he died. Just implied.

Now, of course, I have to compete with his ghost.

Richard did not kill himself. He loved me and our daughter, his poetry and his teaching were reaching new heights. Everything was going fine for him--why should he kill himself? Certainly not to fulfill any silly myth of the doomed poet.

Only last week when we had some students over for a picnic and built a bonfire on the beach, Richard was in the best of moods. So good, he stripped down to his shorts and began doing a funny war dance around the bonfire. Then, swaying close to the flames, he started chanting in that dear, enormous voice of his a new poem about fire. It was a performance full of energy. Admittedly, the next morning he had a terrible hangover and some slight burns on his chest and legs, but still if anyone had seen him that night in front of the fire, he would have known he was looking at a lover of life.

He drank too much, yes, and then there was the womanizing (more talk than action), but what recent artist doesn't that describe? Richard once said it was caused by two factors--the intensity of the creative act and the insanity of modern life.

To escape both, artists drank. "So many trips to the abyss, lead to so many trips to the bar." That fawning worm of a biographer--Richard's only literary error--is going to ask all kinds of prying questions, I suppose. He probably will be worse than that detective who seemed to think that some lines for a new poem Richard had been writing were a suicide note.

Richard flirted with many women, just as he had once flirted with me. I had known him casually for about two years; my first husband had been a colleague of his. One day I was just walking down the hall at the university when he came up behind me and said "You have the most beautiful legs, you don't mind if I touch them, do you?" "I certainly do," I answered, but before the day was over he had touched me in more places than my legs.

He was a great lover, and I don't mean so much physically. He looked at me with those great soulful eyes, said things to me, wrote things for me, touched me deeper than I had ever imagined possible. Then there are the poems for me, which are everyone's--but mine also.

There is so much to do. Today is the funeral, tomorrow the memorial service at the university. I so want it to go well, the beginning of his new career, in a sense. A kind of beginning for me as well. I plan to edit the final poems and the letters and to watch closely every word that goes into that biography. I did so much for him when he was alive, and now I can do even more.

"Axel." Dear old Dad would have loved that. It's bad enough to be saddled with a name like Abel, heavy with meaning, without carrying all of modern literature on my back.

What's it like to have Richard Arensburg as a father? One of my English major friends in college used to ask me all the time. (I majored in physics.) It's like having the wind for a father, I finally answered, being literary myself for once. He was the rattling coming from behind the closed door of the study, puffing shade passing through on another trip out of town, the moaning coming from down the hall at three in the morning.

In some ways he was a bag of wind too. He didn't want me to be a poet or writer, but, instead, some kind of super-jock. He would recount to me his own great accomplishments as a youth, all exaggerations if not outright lies. One of his stupid friends thinks he was an All-American football player--I wonder who told him that-- rather than having sat on the bench of the junior varsity. Also that scar was not from was shrapnel but the result of a fall from a tree as a child. He sat on the bench in Georgia during the war.

I must have been about ten or eleven that time he decided to teach me how to box. He fought on his knees, but still his enormous mitts kept mashing my face. "Hit me, don't be a baby, hit me, come on, you coward." So I finally hit him as hard as I could, and much to my surprise and horror his nose started to bleed, gush forth, the blood pouring down his chin onto his chest. But he wouldn't quit. The blood got all over me too,

and I was afraid I was killing him. But he made me continue, until we were both soaked in his blood.

He was very proud of me, he claimed, but a couple of weeks later he gave one of those playful cuffs that he loved to give and split my lip open. He was so sorry, he actually cried. Of course, he once cried because Mother threw out his old college tennis racket.

Luckily, I didn't see that much of him. He blew out of my life and our house over a decade ago. I'm not going to the funeral. I don't even own one of his books.

He couldn't have killed himself. He was the best teacher I ever had. He loved poetry, not just his own as some people say, but all good poetry. Something would occur to him while he was talking in class, and he'd pull a book down from the shelves that lined the room, find the page, and start to recite. He almost never looked down, it was all there in his memory. And his voice was like the sea, deep and profound, a music enveloping, entrancing us all. Just last week he gave one of the best classes I ever had, and all he did was read "Lycidas" out loud. Didn't analyze it or anything, just read it beautifully.

It happened about a year ago at a party. I was just sitting there on the couch talking to Arensburg casually when he said, "You have beautiful breasts, can I touch them?" All all of a sudden he was feeling me up right there in front of half dozen people, including Randy, the husband, the perpetual next-year-I'll-finish-my-dissertation-graduate student. Randy, not wanting to disturb a world-famous poet at work or at play, had the good manners to leave the room.

That's about all there was to it. As the evening went on, his ardor waned, he said we'd certainly meet again, but at the next party he barely said hello. I doubt if he could have gone any further. After all, sixty years old. Still I can say that I was touched by a great poet.

Those were the halcyon days, when we were golden lads. That's the kind of stuff we used to say. College was a series of fantastic discoveries--Hopkins and Freud and Kafka and sex, everything modern seeped into our pores as we wrote stories and poems, carloads of poems. Dick, of course, loved word games--all those crazy sestinas where we had to choose the end words from the college catalogue or a cereal box.

Funny, I was the one who published first, even got into Poetry first, but I always knew he'd surpass me because he had the energy. That's what genius is, I think, energy. Not just for the writing either. He was the one who travelled over a thousand miles one Easter vacation to worship at the feet of Anthony Duke who had just happened to have been appointed the judge for the Younger Poet's contest. He was the one who later got Duke to introduce him to Marie Flannery, short story writer and influential editor, whom Dick fell in love with for a while, even though she was fifteen years his senior.

Well, that's what it takes. As I said, he had the energy, I didn't.

The last time I saw him was about ten years ago. It was during the Vietnam War, and he came with a group of poets to the university in town to read. There must have been a dozen other poets on the platform, but he was the whole show. He read last but long before he was dominating the evening--embracing people, giving the poets instructions, prowling up and down while the others read.

When he got up to read, he peered over those owlish glasses from that broken face, and said: "Fuck the war and that toad in The White House." A few gasps, silence for a moment, then laughter, applause, and cheering. Then he read, poem after poem (twice as long as anybody else), most of them having nothing to do with The War or wars, but full of feeling and sound. He swayed when he read, and his booming voice took us all in. The rest of the poets could have stayed home.

I had come with some vague notion of talking to him, but after the reading, with so many people crowding around him, I knew I couldn't. I wore a blazer and well-creased slacks, I wasn't even sure what I thought about the war, and I was no longer a poet. I left for home, feeling rather proud that he once had been my friend.

Any kind of accidental death has to be investigated, and it was my unlucky task to draw this one. I have a nephew who teaches English in a junior college, and he makes me nervous. I'm always afraid he's going to catch me in some grammatical error or something, and I'm the one who has to investigate the death of some hotshot poet.

I found out just about nothing. His wife was sure it was an accident; she thought that maybe he got so excited about some poem he was writing he simply feel over the rail of the balcony. It seems that he often stood outside there talking to himself, gesturing. (cause of death; excitement over poem.) Most of his fellow teachers (he didn't seem to have any friends) thought he killed himself, and they gave me a history lesson about all these other looney poets who had killed themselves in recent years.

The evidence, such as it is: he had been drinking heavily the night before and the half-bottle of brandy on his desk and the autopsy revealed he had been drinking that morning. But this was not unusual for him. No one noticed anything odd about him lately, just his ordinary poetic self. For example, one night last week he danced naked in front of a bonfire on the beach. He left a note, some scribbling on a page--"lines," his wife insisted on calling them. Some words--"flame," "solitude," "waves, " "water," "exit," "exile," "glass," "flesh," and "self." Also, over and over again, "the flame understands ashes," "the fire anticipates ashes," etc. Maybe this is a kind of suicide note, maybe it's some poetry crap. I'll leave it up to some literary type to decide.

He was not a poet of the first rank. Admittedly, I praised his first book rather extravagantly and later wrote a critical article about his work, but that was a long time ago. As we all know, he tried: Freud and surrealism and politics and Whitmanesque pronouncenents and that long endless poetic drama; and at the end all that transcending. God even made a few discreet appearances in his last book. But it was all just trying. Too much transcendence is inhuman, ultimately boring as well. God and Love and Courage belong to some other century.

After I praised his first book, I began receiving letters from him. I believe it was in the second one he designated me "the greatest critic of poetry in America" The letters continued, new poems, interpretations of the poems. And when I made the error of saying I might write an article about his work, my mailbox overflowed with poems, pleas, and praise. He just wanted me to write an article I could be proud of.

Then he was responsible for my getting a visiting professorship at his university, a very easy and lucrative post, so the article was written. Wnen we finally met, we didn't hit it off. I wasn't certain why. Admittedly I found him vulgar and arrogant at times, but he could also be interesting and amusing, so I tried to be friendly. But he obviously didn't like me.

Then one night when I was alone with him at his house and he was a little drunker than usual, I found out why, although maybe I suspected all along. He lurched toward me, pinning me, in a corner and glared at me through those bottled eyeglasses."You're a queer, aren't you, Tollston?" "I'm homosexual, yes. I've never disguised it." "You should, it's disgusting." "Well, some people might find your sexual behavior a little hard to take." "I suppose most critics are queers, or homo-sex-u-als. Sucking around literature, producing nothing." "If you weren't so drunk, Richard, I could refute that statement rather easily." "Oh, sure, I know, the daughters of Sappho and all that. Her sons, too, I suppose, except she didn't have any kids." He stabbed me with one of his mutton fingers. "That's why you couldn't quite write a major article about me, you know. Couldn't understand the real power, the sexual power of my work. That's why you are not going to be my biographer." "I shall have to go and cry myself to sleep." "No queer is going to be my biographer."

The next time I saw him he pretended nothing had happened. After I left the university, he still wrote me, sent me new poems, praised my writing, although not in the overwhelming abundance that he had earlier. I answered his letters, promptly and politely, but never wrote another word about him.

I'll be at the shindig this afternoon--read my early review, a little from the article, and say nothing more. For the perceptive, what's omitted should say much.

I often used to wonder what it would have been like to have known Byron or Shelley or Whitman. And now I know. I have seen Richard Arensburg plain. And now I will write his biography--I have almost half of it finished, although that's a little secret I kept from him since I knew he would have been looking over my

shoulder all the time. Probably, I'll edit the complete poems and letters, too. Certainly I should, but it's something I'll have to get straight with Sylvia when I see her at the memorial program.

I have been given the dubious honor of being the master of ceremonies introducing the more famous speakers. That includes A. L. Tollston, Richard's discoverer in a sense. Rather awkward, since I know from Richard how badly Tollston wanted to write the biography. I'll certainly take the opportunity to get in my own comments. "This poet of solitude and song. . .this giant of man and poet. . .or this singer of sea and fire and soul. . ." Well, the right words will come to me.

It was funny how I became his biographer. I had written a a composite review and singled out Richard's book, The Fires of the Night for its risk taking, contrasting it with Lawrence Coll's polished but less ambitious book, The Dark Edge. (Coll, of course, was often considered Richard's major rival as the best American poet of their generation. He has sent his regrets for today. There will be a very amusing passage in the biography about their stay together at the McDowell Colony.) Before the literary quarterly containing the review appeared, I received a telephone call from Sylvia Arensburg saying that Richard had seen an advance copy of my review and asking me whether I could come and meet him that weekend. It meant taking a plane and then a bus to his summer place on the coast, but I went. After all, I had never been summoned by a poet before.

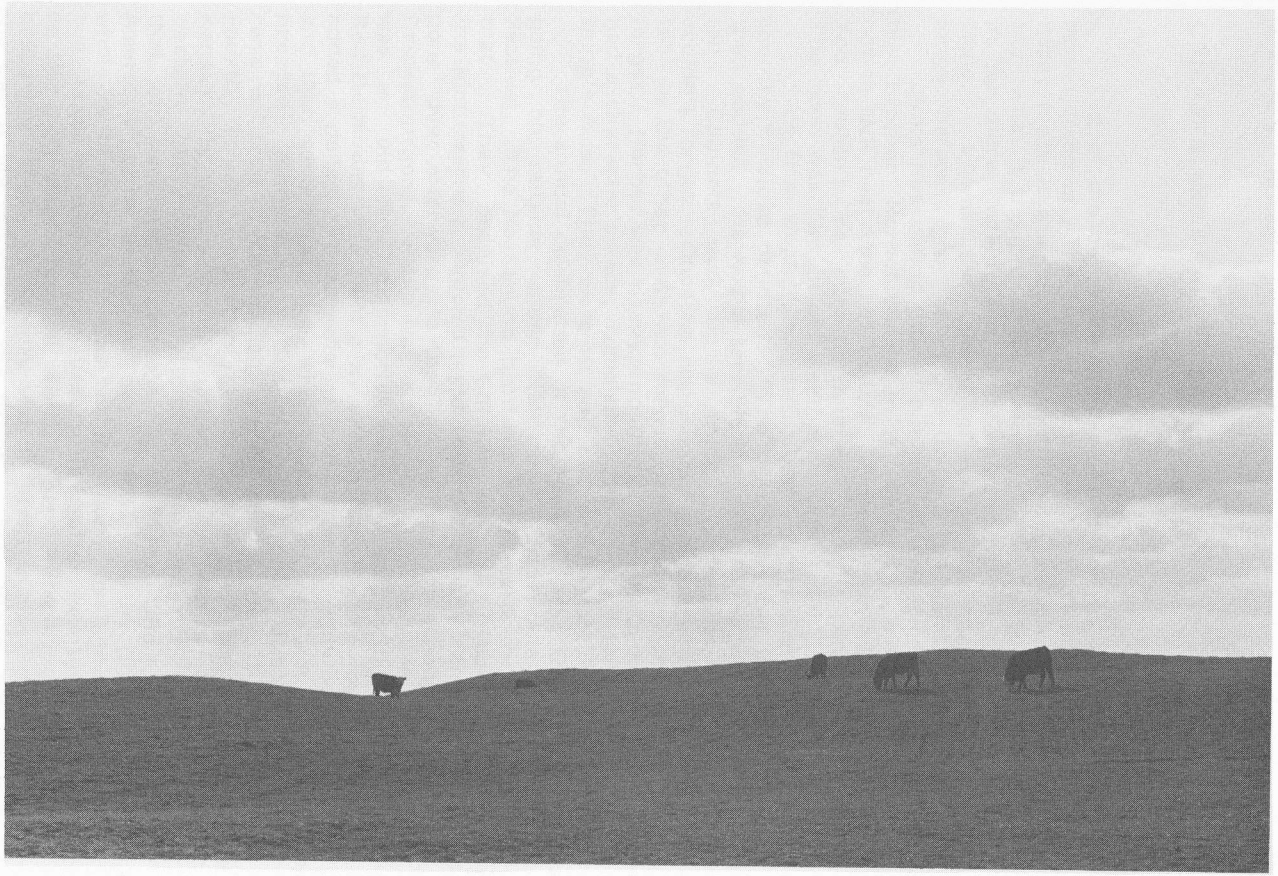
Summoned was the right word. They treated me royally but there was no doubt who the king was. In one weekend I was treated to much of his life story and left carrying a pile of photocopies of everything from his freshman college essays to drafts of recent poems. Also every volume of his poetry--all first editions, eight at that time, I've since received the ninth--all autographed. My career was made, my life's work was clear. For the last six years, I have read, thought and dreamt of nothing but Richard Arensburg. Now we have the Orphic ending. Now my life truly begins.

Even though I don't know a great deal about poetry, I'm glad I went. Richard Arensburg was my neighbor out at the beach and I liked him, so I felt I had an obligation to go, never realizing what an impressive event it was going to be. The charming little man who did the introductions had tears in his eyes when he spoke of Richard, the dignified old critic spoke so well of the discovery of Richard's poetry, and the young students read the poems so touchingly. And I'll remember also the telegram from Lawrence Coll--even I've heard of him--"The master of sea and air is gone, but his flame still burns through the night of this darkest of centuries. I regret I cannot be there to honor his magnificent song."

To me he was a neighbor, usually pleasant and friendly, minding his own business, desiring his privacy. It was true he obviously drank too much at times and sometimes I heard him yelling angrily in the middle of the night. I suppose some people would call this evidence of the poetic temperament. But

I also drink too much on occasions and some nights he must have heard me acting a little crazy at two a.m., and I'm a tax lawyer.

One evening two weeks ago he did seem to be playing the poet. I looked out my window and saw him with some people out in front of a bonfire. He had his clothes off and he was dancing and jumping as if he were performing some primitive rite. His voice drifted across the sand to me and I could hear the words "flame" and "night" and "fire" being repeated in some kind of chant. It was as if the flames responded and leaped to his voice. I'll remember him that way, dancing and singing with the fire.



Thomas L. Russell

CRICKETS AND PRAIRIE LEAVES

I

Out of the big front window at Pablo's place a stern white moon stood up, the face of glum devotion. For a fact, it had a nosey piety like a churchwoman's gossip, always rearing up to say what it thought about someone. The Flints were showing off in her glare, looking like a flattened snowfield or livid ash slope. It was the middle of summer, middle July. How much longer before a good blow, one to take the smirk off things?

Jinks Nossamund stared out the window from the booth he and his brother Norbet shared in the Talking Cow Cafe. It was too hot to talk heat, too hot to talk. Norbet didn't listen anyway. You couldn't be sure he listened. Finally, Jinks went ahead. The moon was like an old weathered skull now.

"It's true what Walter said night before last about the country," Jinks grunted. "Too true." Norbet looked flat-eyed, then nodded. He had a terrible memory, like a wad of waste cotton. Couldn't soak up a thing. Jinks on the other hand couldn't forget. Once he remembered a grocery list he'd forgotten in the other coat--not forgot, left on purpose, he couldn't forget. Norbet was heavy and thick, like an old knob. Jinks had a character's face, rumpled to the point of ugliness--an old thing's face. They were tit and tat, people said. Tit and tat.

The annual celebration of the Merkley Days Chicken Run was going on outside under that moon. Some called it a Bohemian Festival. The Nossamund brothers hadn't come in to Merkley for that. They despised the Chicken Run. No, they were there for the picture show, which they'd watched already, and now they'd gone over afterwards to the Talking Cow for a couple of Pablo's Cricketburgers. Pablo was a Mex, but that was all right. He was an old Mex, a forgotten Mex. He still grilled the sliced Red Bermudas in a chile mix, exactly the same way as always, added a dollop of homemade mayonnaise and a sprinkle of jalapin, and then sorted out the whole mess Texas-style between two breaded tenderloins. Crickets: the only damn thing that remained true in Merkley since their school days. Outside on Fourth Street a bunch of weekend strangers from as far away as Kansas City were wearing Chicken Run souvenirs on their crisp Western party suits-- buttons and pins and little flag banners that said some-such nonsense as Merkley Wild West Days or America's Little Bohemian Town. Nowadays the Chicken Run was a whole lot of hoopla. It was nothing like it used to be: twenty-two teams of local housewives chasing after twenty-two chickens on the high school football field, then butchering them and preparing them in twenty-two different Bohunk dishes. That's the way it started out in the fifties. For those who remembered, it would always be the Chicken Run. Now there was a Shriner parade and a daredevil fair and a heritage day and a

prayer breakfast and a county museum tour. It was enough to freeze out any surrounding town like Newson, 23 miles west through the Flint Hills where the brothers lived. And all because Merkley was on the western train line once and Newson didn't even have a side spur, just a meeting of county roads. A hundred years ago one dumb Bohunk family got off the Night Emperor at Merkley and decided to stay. Now there were so many fashionable Bohunks they had to have a Chicken Run and make every bit of property to the west of the tracks a place called Bohunk Town, this big, lofty ideal of an immigrant community right smack in the middle of Kansas. Why didn't the Chamber of Commerce just throw in the towel and rename the town altogether with one of those Slovak handles: Merkovich? Go whole hog or keep quiet. Just don't pretend something that isn't true.

The way it is, strangers come flocking into the Flints, thinking they all have something in common to see and wanting to share a true-to-life nigger holiday. Everybody on a kick. It was a shame no one could be proud of who they were no more. Bohunk Chicken: tastes just like Creole pie. Walter Cronkite was right when he said on the news night before last about this great sullenness creeping over the country like molasses, Jinks remembered. Couldn't seem to move in it anymore without running out empty. Things weren't going right and people knew it. People were getting mean about it, finally. Finally. Walter hit it on the head. A hemorrhoid commercial had come on after Walter. Could there be that many suffering from private conditions? Jinks wondered. He'd watched the damn thing over and over on the TV but hadn't thought about it until Walter set things straight. No, of course not. It was another one of those Excedrin plots, another bit of sullenness. A chicken run made for television. The doodads ran out to buy something they didn't need just in case--just in case of what?--just in case the commercial trade talked everyone else into believing they better have something on hand. That was all that was holding the country together now: a little dab'll do you. Look at that damn picture show tonight, Jinks thought angrily. Norbet was playing in a spill of salt on the table. That picture show, Red Desert, turned out to be a bust like everything else. Didn't it promise to be a Western? Hell, yes, it did! Taking something American like that--American red desert--and letting the Bohunk Italian foreigners have at it.

"Had about as much desert as Greenland," Norbet suddenly said.

Jinks looked over at him. They must have been reading each other's minds. "Greenland, hell," he said. "Th'Atlantic Ocean." Norbet shrugged and swirled the salt with his finger. Red Desert had nothing to do with Westerns. Bunch of foreign doodads looking wasted on themselves. And why shouldn't they? Couldn't be in a Western if they tried. "Greenland, hell," he muttered again and looked out at the skull of the moon. He felt mean like Walter said. It was terrible what was going on, but what could be done about it? Chicken Run cowboys from Wichita and Salina and Topeka, a lick of Levi here, a fake cowhide frill there. What's a Cricket? mocked a table of insurance types,

some nights he must have
n., and I'm a tax law-

seem to be playing the
w him with some people out
othes off and he was
performing some primitive
to me and I could hear
e" being repeated in some
responded and leaped to
dancing and singing with

Fifteen years ago Giffie had been in The Talking Cow for his last Cricket, Pablo thought stupidly. He tried to remember that day, but he couldn't. He never imagined anyone leaving for more than a year or two. Everyone seemed to come back sooner than later. It was never hard to know your regulars around here. Now Giffie was coming back later, Pablo thought, but he was coming back. He would fix the boy a Royal Cricket for his wedding. And one for his wife, too. She was a Hollywood actress and probably wouldn't understand such a gift. But Giffie would, Pablo was sure. No one can forget his youthful places; he may go away for an eternity, but he never forgets his beginnings.

"Well, boys," he said through the window while slapping two Crickets on waxed paper, pinning them up with toothpicks and settling them into the sack on top of the Leaves.

"Put mine on the top," Norbet said. Pablo could see him trying to peek over the ledge into the kitchen with his big lop cheeks. He loved having Norbet come in year after year. He's always been hungry. Jinks is a more deliberate fella, then and now, when it comes to food. He can take it or leave it. But Norbet has been a growing boy all his life. He can't wait to see the satisfying weight of his order straining against the bottom of the sack when it's mailed out to the Cow's waitress, Miss Didy.

"Don't let them get cold now, will you, Norbet?" Pablo said. He was taking off a batch of Leaves and carefully laying them out on the cookie sheet.

"No sir," Norbet whispered, watching the sack pass from hands, then plopping down on the counter.

"Big day for you tomorrow, isn't it, boys?" Pablo said. He didn't look up then. A batch of Prairie Leaves on a cookie sheet was the prettiest thing. "Family wedding and all is a wonderful thing." Now he did look up. Jinks was shovelling out a bill from his wallet. Norbet held the sack with both hands. "Yessiree," he continued, watching them fondly, "Giffie coming home to get married. Quite a day." The bill didn't cover it, so Jinks had to go to Norbet for the remainder. Pablo would have let it slide this time, but Miss Didy didn't approve of charity, even to regulars, especially to regulars. Norbet wouldn't give up the sack to reach for his wallet. All the time, Jinks muttered oaths and curses and squirmed along the counter. Brothers to a man, Pablo thought. "It's coming," said Norbet lamely. "It's coming." Jinks touched his mouth to keep from shouting.

"I love a big wedding," Pablo said, putting his chin on his knuckles in the window. "One of these days I'll be coming to one of your--"

"He's got it now," Jinks broke in loudly and grabbed Norbet's wallet from him. He paid Miss Didy quickly and tapped his nails on the counter, one-two one-two, waiting for the old lady to make change.

"I've only got two hands, Mr. Nossamund," she explained, fumbling in the cash drawer. Norbet didn't care how long she took. He held the warm sack against his stomach and cradled the

Crickets and Prairie Leaves.

"You stay out of trouble, all right," Pablo said as they turned to go. "Pablo's watching over you."

He watched them go by a table of strangers who were discussing his menu. Crickets and Prairie Leaves? Is that Bohunk food? Strangers aren't regulars; they have to be taught.

"It's the herbs and spices," Jinks said loudly at the door. The table looked up at the brothers and smiled. Jinks put his hand in his armpit and squeezed slowly. "The herbs and spices," he said.

II

It was still early. They drove home in Norbet's Chrysler, taking the county road through the Flints, a rolling prairie of ancient hills waving to the shadow of a white moon. It was all as stupidly calm and lonely as it ever had been, Jinks was thinking; dogass dull with a wild creature now and then silhouetting himself on a hill a mile or two away. That was the thing about the Flints. An outsider driving through them at night had no trouble feeling at home. Why? Because they didn't have to live here. They could be proud as strangers, talk about them like strangers: the awe-inspiring Flints. The Nossamunds on the other hand were Flints. They didn't appreciate being told how well-off they were, living in a land that was virtually unchanged for a million years. Merkley got a lot of mileage out of being in the scenic hills. Newson felt nothing by it. Only a Nossamund--or another diehard Flint countryman--could ignore so much travel poster stuff. It was grazing country first. Cattle kept it honest, like a whore with her skirt up.

They worked over their Crickets and Prairie Leaves slowly, hoping to nurse them along for ten miles or so when the radio once again cut through the static and broadcast Wichita, KLOM Nightline. There was a series of programs all week long on cattle mutilations: was it Martians learning butchering or a coven of witches from Nevada using helicopters to swoop down on a herd and take the prime stuff for their sacrificials? They rode silently most of the way, a little white Cordoba threading itself between two bobbing limestone flanks. Ahead the highway pierced something like a brown fog--nothing but the sweep of grassland and serrated limestone cuttings. The dark sky seemed moldy and tucked-in on them. Stars were scattered among shadows, cirrus clouds going from cumulus on a clear night without the energy to storm.

Norbet had one hand on the wheel and was picking through the last of his curlicues on his lap with the other. Jinks didn't want his Prairie Leaf, so Norbet had both.

"Well," Norbet said, "saw her name in The Trib-- Giffie's girl." The Trib was the Merkley paper. It was full of snide little sayings. Once it reported cattlemen ate twice as much pork as school teachers. People in Newson took The Tulsa World if they wanted the truth.

"Did, did you?" Jinks said. He huddled over his remaining curls the way he did whenever he was eating near his brother.

Norbet wasn't beyond the "borrowing" stage, yet; he'd borrow from your lips if you let him. "She's nothing but a slut," Jinks grunted.

"May be," Norbet said slowly. "Prob'ly. Said she was famous though. Famous in Hollywood."

"I never heard of her."

"Me neither."

"Famous how? It say or not? Wouldn't be surprised if it did." Jinks didn't eat when he was moody, thought Norbet. "It mention Giffie, goddamn him?" Jinks went on. "He's trashing us good this time."

Norbet stayed silent now. He'd let Jinks work himself up good, then his brother would put aside the curls in disgust.

"Didn't, huh?" Jinks answered himself. "Didn't. . . . Well, don't tell me no more Trib trash. Slut's all she is. I ain't a gossip like some that reads The Trib." He glanced over at Norbet and covered his food with his left hand. Norbet's heart sank. "Hey, you don't suppose Giffie invited old Pablo to the wedding, do you?" He could see it now: the old Mex introducing himself to their mother as a friend of her boys. She'd never be caught in a dump like The Talking Cow. The food would get her right off. No, Giffie wouldn't do that, bring in an outsider like that to his wedding. Hell, how would he remember the old Mex after all these years? No, he wouldn't invite him.

"Say, I hear Cousin Giffie took in fifty thou on one of them deals of his last week," Norbet said, suddenly brightening. Mention of Giffie's deals always got a rise from Jinks.

"Fifty thou, my eye!" Jinks bellowed. His hand came off the curls. "Who feeds you that bull? Trib? Hell's bells--" He threw his curls on the floor at his feet.

"Fifty thou," Norbet repeated, rubbing his thumb over his fingers on the wheel. "Fifty thou's what I heard." He gave a low whistle of admiration. "Pocket change, too, what I hear."

"What you hear--" Jinks curdled.

"Oh yeah," Norbet nodded solemnly, "Giff's out there in big moneyland now. I'd like to count his pennies cashwise sometime, you bet." It didn't seem like Norbet could stop himself about Giffie's success.

"Several would," Jinks said quietly. "Ask the taxman sometime."

"Fifty thou! Whew! Man-oh-man! Little old Cousin Giffie. Can you believe it? Fifty thou!" Jinks glanced over at his brother, as though Norbet were touched. It didn't stop him. "Fifty thou and a damn actress to boot. Famous Hollywood actress. I just don't know how he done it. Why he can't even drive a damn stick. Couldn't drive one when he was here. Of course, he might've learned out there, but I doubt it. They got chauffeurs out there to take you around."

"Whyn't you shut up for a while once," Jinks grumbled. They drove silently without turning on Nightline. Tonight you were supposed to find out who was doing it: Martians or Nevada witches. Finally Jinks couldn't stand the quiet any longer--the hills seemed to be bearing down on them. "Hell, I never heard

of her," he said suddenly.

"Well, me neither for that matter," Norbet admitted. "But they say she's famous. Famous out there in Hollywood. They say that all right. Fifty thou--my Lord!"

"They--" Jinks grunted contemptuously.

"Well, you can say what you want." Norbet's hands came off the wheel, then fell back. "You can say what you want." He whistled again. "But fifty thou and a Hollywood actress! How did he do that?"

Jinks turned abruptly on Norbet. "He give up his soul a long time ago," he growled."

Norbet gave his brother a quick, stiff-necked look. "You starting to sound like mama," he said nervously. "You know that?"

"Some things you don't do," Jinks said deadly flat. Norbet stared straight ahead. "We could all be sitting on rich mountain, too, if we done the things Giffie done."

"Show me--" Norbet began to say, but held himself.

"We got pride though, brother," said Jinks. That's the difference."

Norbet puzzled up his brow at the road. "Hell, he can't even drive a stick, can he?" he asked. "Man can't drive a stick marries an actress."

"Shii-- Just watch the road. You give me the heebs."

"Fifty thou--"

"We going over to Aunt Grace's tonight?" Jinks asked. Every Friday after the picture show, if it was still early, they stopped off at their Aunt's on their way home. She wanted to hear about the movie they saw. Red Desert was going to be one hell of a disappointment to her, thought Norbet. "We going over Aunt Grace's or not?"

"Wedding's tomorrow, Jinks," Norbet said. "I don't know if we better--"

"Hell, I know it's tomorrow."

"Well, Aunt Grace she might be too busy for us tonight."

"You're going to the damn wedding, ain't you?" Jinks asked quickly. "Don't want to miss seeing a slut, do you?"

"Thought I might," Norbet said, trying not to sound guilty for something he wasn't guilty of. "Free food after all."

"Shii--" Jinks always did that to him, Norbet thought: made him feel he never chose proper. Jinks got that from their mother. Why didn't he have it? Norbet wondered. They were all family.

"Aunt Grace, she wants us to go," Norbet said.

"Rubbing our noses in it is what he's doing. I wouldn't dignify--"

"Well, I guess I am going, then," Norbet spoke up. "For Aunt Grace. I guess I will for her, then. Giffie remembers us, I s'pect, even with fifty thou in his pocket--"

"Well, go, then, goddamn it! Go! Nothing I ever done for you but be your brother."

"When was that exac'ly?" Norbet said.

"Shii--" Then just out of spite, Norbet thought, Jinks raised his foot and brought his boot down. He killed the last

good curls. "Well, hell," Jinks said frustrated. "Well, hell, I'm going too--but only for Aunt Grace. You hear?"

"Sure, that's right. We'll go for her."

"Giffie can go to hell, far as I'm concerned."

"That's right," Norbet said, humoring his brother. "This way we get to see a famous actress up close."

"Hell's bells, they paint their damn toes one at a time like anyone else."

"What I hear," Norbet said. "What I hear."

"Shut up once and drive."

III

The Nossamunds drove into Newson about 9:30 and made a slow turn through the Sonic Burger lot. Still too early to get into any trouble. Norbet cut over behind the funeral home, flicking his high beam spot, which had recently been mounted on the dash, on a couple of young neckers. They beat it behind a high hedge, while Norbet scanned the beam over their heads like a big-house guard. Old man Crandell came out on his back porch and shouted out their names, and they got out of there fast. Then they went up Oak by Aunt Grace's to see if she had any late evening company. Her porch light was on the same as usual. Even with the wedding tomorrow, she expected them--wanted them to tell her the long plot, Jinks thought, how some injustice was done to the hero so he had no recourse but to even things up. She loved real movies, but she hadn't seen one herself since The Robe. Television movies didn't count. Jinks worked the close details for her of the movies they had seen--the type of guns used, the disposition of the posse, the getaway plan. Nor went in more for who did what, who saw who, who fell dead, who lived on: Norbet remembered faces, but got confused about reasons and motives; he needed Jinks to make stories come out right.

Aunt Grace always sat forward in her old needlepoint chair--the one she fixed up for Uncle Newell when they knew he was going to die--wringing her hands or clattering them on her thighs. She was a frail little thing, so frail, Jinks thought, you wanted to help her over everything, make her hold on to you for understanding. She had no stomach for violence, even make-believe movie violence, so her nephews often had to weave her around the truth. Man still died in the old way for Aunt Grace, with the final truths on his lips. Even the bad ones never went down like squirming meal sacks. Sometimes there seemed to be nothing more in a movie but shots of heaving gore. Those nights, Jinks thought, they had to tell her terrible lies, make everything come out right.

She was a hoot all right, they both agreed. She believed in live and let live, she said, or suffer unto us little children, although not to excess. Her son Giffie was disciplined with the same wooden spoon her mother--their grandmother--had disciplined her with, she said. Tradition was still important to her, a strong tradition. Of course, Jinks used to think, if their own mother had gotten the old spoon from Grandma Stint instead of Aunt Grace, they could have turned out like Giffie,

too. Instead, their mother worried them to death about their behavior; she never once struck them, but she did everything in her power to pry out their secrets, to share with her their indiscretions. She picked, picked, picked until they sometimes, without telling each other, wondered about her sanity. But that was all in their childhood past. There was nothing that could be done about it now. Now, they were on their own.

They had to listen to Aunt Grace carry on about how she raised Giffie, as though she'd turned out a saint, instead of a Hollywood doodad. No one should ever strike a child except in anger, she said, and then only medium hard, lest he should forget he's being loved and hate you the more. Parents always had to expect some hate from their children. Otherwise, it wasn't fair to hit them. She was definitely a hoot. Giffie, after all, had left her. That showed how much her loving anger counted. He hadn't been home for three years. Both her nephews saw her more than Giffie ever did, treated her more like a loving son should. Even when they were growing up in the same town, before their mother and dad had their break-up, the Nossamund brothers couldn't stand having Giffie let Aunt Grace down. They always got to him before her wooden spoon did. And she treated them just like her own, took them to all the places she took Giffie, found them snacks everyday after school, petted and fussed over them. After a while it just seemed natural to let Giffie know that he better not give Aunt Grace any cause for worry. Jinks did the warning, but he had to have Norbet's size to enforce it. Maybe they went a little too far in their love for Aunt Grace, but it had to be done, they convinced themselves. Aunt Grace, after all, was a widow and needed more than Giffie could give. She deserved more.

Their mother--Aunt Grace's sister--was healthy as a horse, she reminded them, making the distinction between her and Aunt Grace quite clear. There was nothing they ever hoped to do for their mother--no kindness was enough--or else she would pry at them for being so solicitous and accuse them of confusing her with "little Gracie." Their mother was jealous, they knew, jealous of all the time they spent away from her over at Aunt Grace's. She'd pick and pick at them to tell her what she already knew; Aunt Grace was a better mother to them, a more deserving one for their affections. Sp she made Aunt Grace out to be frailer than she was, a little delicate flower with a useless son. She just made it worse for herself by encouraging her boys to think how hopeless it all was for Aunt Grace without them. Their mother wasn't a hoot. She made that crystal clear to anyone who knew her.

They parked on the street in front of the house. Norbet detached his high beam spotlight from its dash mount and carried it with him. It cost $119.95, and he wasn't about to leave it in an empty car. He swung it at the end of his arm like a brakeman's lantern, an obsessive little behavior that Jinks could not ignore. His brother, he thought, was beginning to remind him of those dotie people who carry their few prized possessions in their pockets and must bring them out for show like family pictures.

Aunt Grace let them in. She seemed frail until she hugged you, then she squeezed the life out of you. "Oh, I'm so glad you stopped in tonight," she said.

"Been to the picture show," Norbet said first. "Red--"

"--Desert," Jinks finished off.

"About as much desert as Greenland," Norbet muttered, watching his feet. He waited for Jinks' come-back, and, not getting it, finally let his head come up. Jinks walked around Aunt Grace's living room. It had been transformed for the wedding with hanging white ribbons and folding chairs and a huge arrangement of pink roses and naked ladies. Even the chain chandelier was polished down to its brass and finished off in tiny white bows. Norbet couldn't believe the change. He thought there might be a few chairs and the crystal punch bowl, but this was a Hollywood set.

"Why, where's your Zenith console?" he asked incredulously. It must have weighed 500 pounds and usually sat under the front window.

"In the back room," Aunt Grace beamed, "along with the highboy." She was right. Her highboy was missing, too. That was another 250. "Well what do you think?" she asked, looking quickly at both boys. "Do you like it?"

"Now Aunt Grace," Norbet said concerned, "you didn't do that Zenith by yourself, did you?"

"Oh, Norbet"--she slapped at him--"of course not. Do you like it? It's not too"--her fingers danced in the air--"weirdly, is it?"

"That's the biggest set in town." Norbet bragged on Aunt Grace's TV whenever he could.

"Well, do you like it?" She turned to Jinks.

"It's different," he said slowly.

"You don't like it. I should have known. I went beyond the bounds of simple good taste. But what can I do now? All these beautiful silk ribbons."

"It's just different is all," Norbet said now. "Your big Zenith is gone."

"It'll come back, honey," she said, grazing his cheek with her fingers.

"He ain't here, is he?" Jinks whirled suddenly, peering up the stairs along the bannister.

"Who, honey? My Gifford, you mean? Oh no, he's not here. They come in tomorrow morning from Salina."

"Not much time even for his wedding," Jinks muttered. "In and out."

Aunt Grace ignored that. Giffie hadn't been back but once in three years, and then only for Christmas Eve. He flew to Salina and rented a Torino, automatic, of course. There was a big blackout in the East that night, the news said. The world was in snow in one form or another that night, Jinks remembered. Walter even had a frog kept coming up every few minutes, and he would have to turn away to clear his throat. Nothing helped, not even the hemorrhoid breaks, but he got through it. The family was all together in Aunt Grace's living room--this room, the wedding room--watching the news and waiting on dinner.

Their mother who was sitting on the couch between her sons said she had a recipe for a garlic poltice, but Walter would have to apply it three straight days. The camera man would have to put a clothespin on his nose for three days, too, but Walter would be cured of frogs. Go through disasters like butter, then, she said. Aunt Grace got up and went to the kitchen.

"Have you met Walter?" their mother asked Giffie. He kept turning to look out at the kitchen.

"No, Aunt Nan," he said. "Should I have?" That flustered her for a moment. Didn't Giffie hobnob in Hollywood and New York?

"He's the most intelligent man I know," she said evenly. "I love the way he says, 'And that's the way it is.' He's so right. That is the way it is, isn't it, Jinks honey?" She squeezed his leg just above the knee until he flinched.

"Damn right," he said, staring at Giffie. "Walter's common as snot for a famous man." That was what his mother wanted him to say, wasn't it? Yes, Walter might get frogs in front of millions, but he was brought up close, right over in St.Joe, and that made him common enough to cough away from the camera. He didn't visit his mother for no damn three hours on Christmas Eve after dropping out of the sky on Frontier. Walter's good manners showed the world what a good job his mother had done on him, bringing him up.

"Don't curse around Auntie Gracie," whispered their mother loud enough for Giffie to hear. "She's not strong enough." Then, "Are you all right, sister?" she yodeled happily. "Come out here and suffer. We can't hear you out there." Giffie smiled at her sickly.

"I'm just fine," Aunt Grace had shouted, "now that Gifford's home."

Their mother looked at Giffie with her most summoned pity. It said, Happy even for three hours on Christmas Eve with her only son! Then Giffie got up and went to the kitchen. The Nossamunds watched. through the doorway as Aunt Grace embraced him and smoothed his hair and carried on as though he'd returned forever. Then Jinks noticed the commotion going on beside him. He turned from the kitchen to catch his mother slapping Norbet's hands. As usual, his brother was picking over a scab.

"Aren't you two excited?" Aunt Grace was saying now.

"Is she as famous as they say?" Norbet asked. "Veronica?" asked Aunt Grace.

Jinks turned on hearing the actress' name. Veronica. It was one thing to read it in The Trib. It was something else to hear your Aunt say it.

"Oh, you'll like her Nor," Aunt Grace said.

"Have you met her, then?" Jinks shot in. He knew she hadn't

"Well, no, Jinks, but--"

"You talked to her on the phone, then."

"Gifford has described her to me quite clearly. I showed you the letter, honey, announcing the engagement."

"I remember," Jinks said. "She's wonderful. She's beautiful. She's this. She's that. I remember."

"I'm sure we'll love her, won't we, honey?" Aunt Grace waited for Jinks to answer.

"Yeah, I guess so," he said for his Aunt's sake.

"I never heard of her, but they say she's famous," Norbet repeated. "The Trib says--"

"She's been in a number of movies and a TV special. No Westerns yet, I don't imagine, but then--"

"Seems like Giffie could've come down for more'n a day, don't you?" Jinks seemed to be calculating. "All this"--his arm swept over the room--"you done for him, Aunt Grace. Seems like he could've done something for you a little more."

"He's getting married at home, honey. That's more than I ever hoped for. When you two get married, see if your mother doesn't--"

"It's not like it's his first or nothing, Aunt Grace!"

"Jinks, that's spiteful!"

"Now Aunt Grace, I didn't mean anything by it."

"I hope not, Jinks. You're too good a boy to be trashing kin."

"All I mean is it's strange to me why he'd come back here to marry--a third time. Those other two were fast elopements, weren't they? Giffie didn't ask you the time of day when he jumped in on those two. His own mother--"

"Jinks," Norbet suddenly butted in.

Aunt Grace sat down in a folding chair. Norbet came over and put his paw on her shoulder. He was hopeless, Jinks thought as he moved to the other side of the room. Three years ago at Christmas after Giffie had gone, Norbet had softened up around Aunt Grace and said he started feeling sorry for his cousin. Their mother wouldn't talk to him for a whole week for that betrayal. He was sorry for Giffie, he said, because their cousin seemed lonely for something. Lonely! Jinks had exploded. Lonely! Hell, the bastard stayed for three hours on Christmas Eve. What was the point? Norbet said three hours or three days was all the same. They should have got on better, but they didn't. And after all these years, too, he said. It didn't make sense anymore. Life goes on. Jinks was so amazed with him, he couldn't answer him. Norbet didn't have a memory, that was his trouble. He never remembered the things he should, like how Giffie treated their Aunt. Giffie hates our guts, he finally told Norbet. Wait and see if he don't. He hates our guts because we're better sons to Aunt Grace than he was. Didn't they still see her at least twice a week? Norbet shrugged. He wouldn't deny that.

It was just fine with Jinks if Giffie wanted to keep getting married abroad. Abroad was out of state. But suddenly using Newson as a third-time charm seemed to be taking advantage of them all. What purpose could there be in wanting to come home now to get married when he certainly hadn't wanted to twice before? Everyone knew he couldn't hold a woman who wasn't from a place as small as Newson. Both his other wives were big-city girls. They must have seen in him what he was. But that didn't stop him, did it? Going after a famous actress now and seeing if he could make it work this time on his home ground. Aunt

Grace, of course, seemed to think a new day had arrived. She always did. He's coming home to get married, she said, because after all these years he still wants his family. Shii-- What he wanted was to lord over them because they'd stayed put and loved his mother more than he did.

"Well, I never seen one up close before," Norbet was telling Aunt Grace.

"A wedding, honey?" she asked, brightening.

"No, Aunt Grace. An actress. A famous actress."

"Oh, she's beautiful, Gifford says. Long dark hair and almond eyes. And talented. She's so talented. He met her at a screening. That's where--"

"We ain't hicks, Aunt Grace. We heard of screenings out here, too," Jinks said.

"I just thought--"

"So Giffie's coming home again," Jinks continued. "Well. well.... Bringing a famous actress home to little old Newson to marry."

"I refused to believe in fate, honey, but isn't it strange?"

"What's that?" Norbet asked. "Marrying here? I sort of like it, you know. Puts some life in things, again." He smiled over at Jinks.

"Thank you, honey. So do I. So will you, Jinks--you'll see."

"What was it you were saying was so strange about it?" Jinks asked.

"Oh! Well, Gifford's daddy--"

"Uncle Newell?" They hardly ever spoke about him.

"Your Uncle Newell before he died always talked about traveling in the war with his artillery regiment and meeting the famous French kickline backstage after one of their shows. Then they went back to the front, he said, and won the war."

She looked blank, then smiled brightly. Jinks snickered.

"Do you remember his saying that Jinks? You were awful young then."

"No, not that I recall, Aunt Grace. He was always half-baked on the war, anyhow, wasn't he?"

Jinks was turned away, so Aunt Grace looked over at Norbet, appealing to him to help her understand what was bothering his brother tonight.

"Jinks is still remembering that movie, Aunt Grace," Norbet spoke up without hesitation. "I already forgot it once."

Jinks came around and stared at his brother. Norbet was running off again.

"A movie ain't the end of the world to me," Norbet went on cheerfully. "Take'um or leave'um. You got any food tonight, Aunt Grace?"

"She continued to watch Jinks. Norbet shrugged and wandered into the kitchen.

"Your uncle never forgot that kickline, Jinks. He came home after all that excitement of the war. Just another old farmboy, but he never forgot it."

"So what?" Jinks said.

"Well, maybe there's something in it. Maybe that line impressed him so much that it marked Gifford in some way, put a little bit of the glitter in his eyes. After all that excitement to come back here...." She spoke slowly as if she had accepted the truth of some things against all her hopes.

"Now his son marrying an actress. Life can be funny that way."

"Then what was those other two, Aunt Grace? Was Uncle Newell responsible for them, too? Hell, Giffie don't know the word loyalty."

She remained quiet, barely breathing, Jinks thought. He was sorry, sorrier than he'd ever been. Why couldn't he go over to her? It wasn't her he hated, but Giffie, Uncle Newell's silly kickline boy.

Then she said tiredly, "Are you two hungry? Did you have anything to eat?"

"No," shouted Norbet from the kitchen. His mouth was full, and the light from the open refrigerator cast a wide beam across the floor.

"There's some chocolate cream pie, honey, and a little pear salad left-over." She loves Norbet more than me now, Jinks thought sadly. He eats her scraps and shows her no trouble.

"What's under the tin foil, Aunt Grace?"

"It's all for the wedding tomorrow, Norbet. Don't touch it!" She got up quickly from the chair, as if suddenly remembering something and moved around the room, frantically fussing with the ribbons and bows and loose chairs.

"See the news night before last?" Jinks spoke solemnly. He was holding the front curtain apart a little ways and was staring at Aunt Grace's moonstruck lawn.

"The news," Aunt Grace said absently.

"Country's going down the toilet. In a muck and getting mean."

"Is it?"

"I don't see how we're gonna pull out of it. Sometimes you get to feeling like putting your fist through something--"

Aunt Grace came up behind Jinks and began stroking his hair. He had a little bald spot on his crown. His hair was so sandy light, not like Nor's or Gifford's. When they were boys, she remembered, Gifford had called his nephew Sandy for a while. Then he didn't.

"Is it that bad, honey?" she asked him softly.

He laughed. "Bad, hell--" He whirled around to her. His face felt flushed and uneven.

"Well, whatever's wrong, it can be fixed. There's always hope, honey. Tell Aunt Grace--"

"Hope--" He said it like a wheeze.

"Not the end of the world." She laughed suddenly, then restrained herself.

"Another damn dig at us is all."

"What is, Jinks? The news? You can't change everything. . . that's happened."

He didn't want to giggle at Aunt Grace, but he did. Then Jinks said, "She's pretty, huh?"

"Pretty?--Oh, yes, she's beautiful, honey. Wait till you see her. Just beautiful. And so talented." She said beautiful in a way that almost convinced him, Jinks realized. Almost convinced her. They wanted to be convinced, didn't they? But she was talking up for her Giffie again, he knew.

"Norbet, get your face out here!" he bellowed into Aunt Grace's eyes. She jerked back. "Get out here! We gotta go!"

"Was the picture show good?" she asked meekly. "Someone told me it was a Western. Was it? I do love them."

"Jinks told you that, Aunt Grace," Norbet said, snuffling at something in his hand as he came through the kitchen door.

"It wasn't?" she pleaded.

"Had about as much desert as Greenland."

"Come on, Nor," Jinks grunted. "Get your beam light and let's go."

"You don't have to go yet, do you?" Aunt Grace appealed to Norbet. "We could talk some--"

"He don't talk when he's wrong," Norbet giggled, jerking his head over at Jinks. "He tol' me it was a Western, too, Aunt Grace. I'll be damned if it was."

"Shut up, pig-face! Let's go!"

"See?" Norbet said calmly. He kissed Aunt Grace on the cheek.

"Ma's got things for us to do," Jinks mumbled at the door.

"Tell her she's a peach for helping out tomorrow," Aunt Grace said. "Gifford will be so grateful." Hell, thought Jinks, no other woman could dole out wedding cake at other children's weddings like their mother.

"She's good at helping out at these things," Jinks said flatly.

Now Aunt Grace came over to him, then carefully touched his cheek. "Gifford wants you to come tomorrow. He really does. This wedding's for you, too. For both of you. It's for his family. All three of you together again, like boys--"

"Get your damn light, Norbet. You got something smeared all over your face, you know that? Here--" He took his brother's face in his hands roughly and rubbed Norbet's cheek with his palm. Norbet stood there dumbly, letting himself be cleaned.

"Pear salad," Norbet said.

"He loves you both," Aunt Grace said. "He told me."

"He told you," Jinks said.

"He does."

Jinks opened the door. The moonlight hit him full in the face.

"He throwed away some perfectly good curls tonight," Norbet whispered to her as he went out. He was shaking his head and swinging his light as he followed Jinks down the porch steps.

IV

The morning of the wedding, Saturday, The Trib reported that Gifford Pelham of Hollywood, California, son of Mrs. Grace

Pelham of Newson, had donated a "sizeable" contribution to the Merkley Festival Committee for "the continuation of the Flint Hills celebration in hopes of renewing a spirit of community among all peoples." He was in Newson this week, the paper said, for his own wedding to Veronica Malloy, actress, lately appearing in the new Paramount release Pride of Dracula, in which she plays the noted bloodsucker's boyhood governess.

The brothers ate their breakfast in silence. So this was Giffie's way of showing the world what he thought of his hometown. They would die of shame, Jinks thought. There was a world of difference between Merkley and Newson, a world. Why didn't Giffie just cut the pretense and say it outright he didn't want a simple ceremony at his mother's house; he wanted to spread a contagion over them, over his memories, over Newson. Walter was exactly right--the world was in a fix, even in a little nowhere place like the Flints.

They went over to Aunt Grace's house a little before noon. Already a crowd was forming on the street, strangers wanting a glimpse of a famous person. They probably put the actress on their Merkley Days tour. The brothers hung back in the shadows of the side yard by the primrose trellis. The air conditioner was roaring hot air beside them. Everyone standing immobile in the heat, everyone ticking off the seconds before it began. Then old Miss Culley, the town's official pianist, struck the showdown chords inside the house and a line formed down the walk. The Nossamunds wedged themselves behind a few smiling, decrepit neighbors and shuffled up the porch steps and through the front doorway. The smell of Aunt Grace's house hadn't changed since they were boys--a kind of lilac-scented pall that belonged more to ancient commodes and washbasins than anything Aunt Grace gave off, Jinks thought. She was a hoot, but they never thought of her as the old maid type, the sickly loner their mother saw. She might have been different if the brothers gave in to their mother. But they didn't. They believed she had a right to a family like anyone. She had Giffie, but a son like that wasn't enough.

Someone had formed the folding chairs on two sides, making a narrow aisle between. The sofa was scrunched down with presents. Norbet laid theirs on the top, then thinking it might fall off, carefully wedged it down between two cushions. They had gone in on a two-foot long teak cutting board. They didn't know it was Filipino until they got it home from the department store and saw the little stick stamp--made in Spic land--on the bottom. Hell, actresses eat strictly yogurt and Chink food, anyway, Jinks said. Giffie'd toss it out first thing. That didn't keep Norbet from waxing and polishing it for an hour. He wanted it to blaze when they took it out of the box.

They expected to see a bunch of Hollywood types at the wedding-- sawed-off wimps in scarf wraps and silk pajamas--but there weren't any. They knew everyone, including old Pablo from The Talking Cow. They would try to keep him away from their mother. Even their Daddy was present, sitting in the front row and holding Aunt Grace's hand. He came over from Junction City where he put together battery innards. The boys hadn't seen him

for a year at least. He looked about the same, vaguely messy and ill-sorted, never their mother's sort. Aunt Grace was the only one to get along with him. She overlooked his faults, which enraged their mother. How can two so different women as their mother and aunt be hatched from the same egg? their father wanted to know. They ain't twins, Daddy, Jinks would say. No, Daddy said, twins have better reasons for their envy. You loved her once, Norbet said to him, stating more of a question than a fact. Being the youngest son, Jinks thought, Norbet held the dream of their reunion the longest. But they had reached a point in their relationship with their parents where they talked about them like strangers. Love, their Daddy tried to plead with Norbet, love--then he looked back and forth as though the puzzle could be figured if it only had two sides. He went off like a Pelham, said their mother bitterly, without a thought for his babies. It was kind of frightening, Jinks thought when he was a young man, to have a family break up that way out of cruelty and spite, because the hatreds never disappear in time, only remain less clear. Families, anyway, were more trouble than they were worth. Everyone knows that they just keep going because they're in the same town.

Norbet waved his arms over his head, but their Daddy didn't see them. He didn't turn around, anyway. They spotted their mother half-way back on the bride's side. No, thought Jinks, couldn't be the bride's side; everyone there knew only Giffie. They worked their way through a crowd and shuffled in beside her, one on each side. She immediately reached over and picked some lint off Norbet's suit coat and straightened his tie. He squirmed, then settled back until she finished with him. She was happy how. Giffie could get married as many times as he wished now. Some use up their chances right off; others have the sense to wait their turn.

The piano stopped playing love tunes and started in on the wedding march. Stragglers quickly found seats, and heads began coming around to catch a first glimpse of Giffie's actress bride. Jinks refused to look, even as those faces around him began registering, first, dim surprise, then open-lipped recognition, and, finally, dumb disbelief. She'd been on TV, after all. TV didn't lie. As she descended the stairs--a high-heel slipper, Jinks thought, gorgeous calf, shiny dimpled knees--Giffie came in from Aunt Grace's kitchen and stood beside Reverend Lubble of the Divinity Baptist Christian Church. Giffie smiled--his Hollywood smile--then took the holy fainthead's elbow. His looks were going more peeked, Jinks thought. He had faint jowly crinkles near his mouth he didn't have three years ago. For the first time you could see what he would look like in twenty years, thirty years--a younger version of his Daddy Newell, like in the pictures of him with his regiment. Uncle Daddy Newell who saw the famous kickline, then came home to rot in Aunt Grace's hands. Now Giffie was giving that aged secret away to youth again, to an actress half his age. Just giving it away.

"Don't he look bad though?" his mother whispered. Jinks nodded numbly. "Looks like something the cat dragged in."

Yes, he does. He couldn't say it though. He was realizing suddenly that Giffie wasn't a part of him anymore; he was feeling like a man being cut from the fondest memories of himself, from all he was, then sitting there while it was all thrown back in his face. Either you took it as the insult it was, or you understood the terrible consequences of letting it go. What he knew, Jinks thought, was how much he wanted to be insulted, how much he had waited for it. Giffie didn't remind him of his past now. He looked like the ridiculous future, a silly old future.

Giffie was marrying a princess, Jinks told himself, seeing clearly for the first time without any help from his mother or Aunt Grace. All these years away from home, he'd been toiling in secret to get the princess. No one had known before what secrets Giffie held from them. Now they saw them, saw the actress coming down the stairs. You can hear the faces crack at such beauty, Jinks thought. His was beginning to crack too. He saw her from behind now going down the aisle, a horrible black-haired fate, a witch who can turn her looks to honey. She was going away from him to meet Giffie at a spot in the room where he and Norbet had once convinced their cousin that he should shape up or else. Poor Aunt Grace had seemed to them better than a mother... It wasn't fair that Giffie should have it all. He was so undeserving of her love that they didn't mind punishing him, punishing one of their own. And he never told on them.... Later they could laugh about it, call Aunt Grace a hoot in front of their mother, tease Giffie for the fun of it. But they knew what anger they always felt deep down, what pain moved in them. They knew.

The ceremony was mercifully short. It seemed over when the actress spoke for the first time and her unreality vanished. She had a human voice, soft and secret. Giffie was her prince.

"I Veronica take thee Gifford--" It was over with.

Afterwards the chairs were moved back for the reception. Pablo came over to the brothers and held his hands out to them, amigo-style.

"Congratulations, boys," he said, not a hint of wetback in his tune.

"Congratulations for what?" Jinks asked. His mother was standing beside them.

"Hell," Pablo said to her, but she just escaped, mumbling something about the cake. Pablo didn't notice anything wrong, never did.

"Families always share in the happiness, don't they say?" the old Mex said. He babbled as though his own son had just married.

"That's right," Norbet nodded quietly.

"And the sadness, don't they say?" Jinks smiled back.

"Still's sharing, I s'pect." He held both boys by the shoulders like a principal. His Crickets and Prairie Leaves were the oldest things going. They owed him for that, Jinks calculated slowly. Pablo in a blue serge still smelled of onions and peppers and deep fat. He carried the Talking Cow around with him. If they closed their eyes, they would be

standing in there now.

In the middle of Aunt Grace's living room, Pablo worked their shoulders with his fingers like a tortilla pie. Then their mother came over and pulled them away. "'Scuse us," she mumbled to Pablo, "but they's wanted over here."

"Who is that?" she gasped when she had them safely away. "Is he Hollywood? He looks foreign to me." Neither of her boys felt smart enough to tell her, Jinks thought. Foreign? Pablo wasn't foreign, was he? The very thought caught them by surprise. Well, he was and he wasn't. A Cricket is just a mixture between two breaded tenderloins, Texas-style. Always was. And his Prairie Leaves? Nothing like them in the world, nothing too strange after all these years, anyway.

Pablo was now over talking with Giffie and his bride, throwing his arms up and down and making Veronica laugh. Maybe she was part Mex, too. Her eyes could open so widely they seemed to roll or jump like a wild pony's. Jinks couldn't stop watching them. Pablo went on and on, no doubt telling this girl what a marvel of a regular she had landed in Giffie. Hell, that was twenty years ago, Jinks kept thinking to himself. He couldn't believe the way things were going now; the puny, ungrateful boy coming back to open arms. Even Norbet had been corralled by Aunt Grace while he was eating, and, the next thing he knew, found himself bowing and scraping stupidly to the bride like a hick. Giffie took his cousin's heaping plate so Norbet could offer a peck to his wife's cheek without spilling his baked beans down her front. Norbet couldn't eat a bite for five minutes after that.

Jinks went over to his brother and slapped him in the ribs. "What's this, stupid?" he said, taking Norbet's lapel and pulling it away from the big man.

Norbet tucked in his chin and eyed the crusty spot on his suit coat. "Marshmallow salad," he said. "It has coconut in it."

"Pig face," Jinks grumbled, scratching at the stain with his nail. "You having fun, pig face? She pretty good to kiss, huh? What's the matter with you--you enjoy putting your mother to shame? She's dying of shame over there right now. You don't believe me?"

Norbet said nothing. Ne knew the pawing would end soon, so he waited.

"Come on, stupid," Jinks said, pulling Norbet across the room by his stained lapel. Now they were standing beside Aunt Grace. She was posing the bride and groom behind the three-layer wedding cake. A photographer from The Trib snapped their picture. Then Giffie took Veronica's small hand in his, and they sliced the cake and fed each other.

"Thanks, Aunt Grace, for everything," Jinks said curtly. He avoided looking at Giffie. "We got to go."

Norbet pushed his brother's hand away from him.

"So soon?" Aunt Grace said, genuinely hurt. She took each nephew by the arm. "You don't have to go yet. Stay for Giffie's sake."

"He don't need us today," Jinks said sullenly, glancing over his shoulder now at the lovely pair, who were posing again. "We got to go, don't we?" He didn't feel that he had to get Norbet's permission for everything.

"But you haven't seen him in such a long time. You have so much to talk over."

"Jinks never kissed an actress, Aunt Grace," Norbet beamed suddenly. "I kissed her, brother. Kisses just like a girl, don't she, Aunt Grace?"

"There you are, Jinks honey," Aunt Grace smiled. "Nor's right. You have to stay to kiss the bride. She's such a sweet girl, really. I want you to meet her."

"I let Norbet kiss for both us," Jinks said darkly.

"You can't do that, honey, can he, Nor?" Aunt Grace said, squeezing Norbet's arm until he blushed. "It's an individual thing."

"Nope," said Norbet now. "I kissed her for myself, brother. Mmm, that cake looks good, Aunt Grace."

"Well, then, you go get yourself a piece, honey. That's what it's for."

"We are going, Norbet," warned Jinks. Norbet hesitated.

"Don't be silly, now," said Aunt Grace. She pushed at Norbet with both hands. "Go on now. Go over there and get your cake. Not every day we have a wedding in the family."

"Nor," Jinks said, his voice rising. But Norbet ignored him and got in line for cake.

"Jinks, look at me," Aunt Grace said. "Look at me, honey!" She took his chin and straightened him up. "Is there something wrong here? Is something troubling you? Last night and now today--"

"I don't want to hurt you, Aunt Grace."

"What is it, honey?"

"Him." Jinks barely nodded at Giffie. "He come waltzing in here after three years. Gonna marry an actress in Newson. Just like him to try us on for size when nothing else works."

"Jinks!"

"I don't want to hurt you. You're like a -- Well, anyway, I don't want to hurt you, Aunt Grace."

"Jinks sweetheart." Aunt Grace took his head in both her hands and brought it down next to hers. "You'll find a girl, honey," she whispered in his ear.

Jinks reared back, pulling apart her hands from him.

"Damn you!" he hissed. "Damn you!"

"Jinks honey. Jinks honey," Aunt Grace was imploring him.

"I ain't your damn honey, you old hoot!"

The room had opened up, leaving the two alone like tango dancers.

"Jinks? Mother?" Giffie came around from behind the cake with his bride and approached the two.

"He's leaving," Aunt Grace said flatly. "He needs to go right now, don't you, Jinks?"

"I told you I did, didn't I?"

Giffie looked carefully from his mother to Jinks. "Is everything all right?"

"What could be wrong?" Jinks asked. "Say"--Jinks suddenly rubbed his hands together--"I get to kiss that pretty bride of yours, or what?"

Aunt Grace was shaking her head like a palsy.

"Jinks--" Giffie took his cousin's arm. His tone was serious.

"What?" Jinks said brightly. "Come on now"--he clapped his hands-- "when's the fun s'pos'd to start around here?"

Aunt Grace stopped shaking, but Giffie couldn't read her face.

"Let's you and me and Nor talk over old times." Giffie sounded silly; he knew he did. He knew he couldn't say what he meant after all these years without speaking falsely. Jinks caught the whiff of a lie immediately

"Why, nothing to talk over, cuz," Jinks said. "Old times start now."

"That's right, Jinks, they do," Giffie said slowly, more determined than puzzled. He brought his wife to him closely. "I wanted to be with the family. You know, Jinks? I wanted--us." He swallowed hard.

"Well, how is it cuz? Like you wanted? Me and Nor is still here. Nothing's changed, or everything."

"Everything," Giffie said. He brought Veronica and Jinks together in the middle of Aunt Grace's living room. His mother brought her fist to her mouth. He won't back down, Jinks thought of himself. She's beautiful, but he won't back down.

"Jinks Nossamund, meet Veronica Pelham," Giffie intoned.

Jinks looked into the actress' eyes. They were as big as a calf's. They bore into him--why?--and showed him back to himself, he imagined. His face glistened like a brightly-oiled, golden foil. He had no smile, then, although he thought he might have been smiling, smiling in her eyes. Now he did smile. He could see the difference there. His face was a mask, a shiny mask. He came forward--growing large as the moon, two moons because she had both eyes open, both seeing what she was getting--came forward until she disappeared. He disappeared too. Her eyes were closed, then they jumped open like a wild pony, a boxed pony. Then two great pools with flattened, quivering wind surfaces, like rabbit twitches at the end. He was in all that, too, the faces of a masked boy--no, a boy's mask on an older fella--somebody like a person who'd been through his share, a homeless-type guy, the kind you see on a dirt road walking or in a stuckaway cafe, a wiry, resourceful sort but no dogass put-upon, the kind of fella Walter might have been thinking had disappeared from the face of the earth. Hell, no, he hadn't. Shii--he was right here kissing the bride, wasn't he, kissing a famous Hollywood actress.

He felt hands pulling him back by the shoulders. Then Aunt Grace was standing up close and staring right into him.

"Hey, Aunt Grace," he said, grinning despite himself. "I--"

She slapped him hard. He was always surprised by how strong she was. Now, he thought calmly, everybody has hit me at least once in my life. Aunt Grace stepped back in tears, and he

saw Veronica's huge eyes again. They were different, her face was different. He wasn't understanding a thing until Giffie took her in his arms. There had been no Giffie, he thought, when he kissed her. It felt so slow. Now, with Giffie holding her, he saw her plain. Her face was smeared with lipstick and her black hair was down in her eyes. An actress in make-up, he thought. Where was his brother now, Norbet his brother, that old fat boy? They couldn't stick around now. The Nossamund boys had kicked up some more trouble. He loved that reputation: more trouble.

Then he felt that familiar, huge hand on his shoulder, the principal's hand. He was going to get a lecture, wasn't he? Somebody was always telling you how to act right.

"Let's go, amigo. I"ll take you home." Pablo.

Yes, he could hear the Crickets crackling, the Prairie Leaves spitting on the griddle. Of course, he told himself, The Talking Cow had always been like his second home.

V

In the evening after the bride and groom left for Salina and the tables were cleared of left-overs and the Zenith was put back under the window where it belonged, Norbet and his mother went out on Aunt Grace's front porch for a breather. Everyone else had gone home. Aunt Grace was doing dishes.

To the northwest the first shadowy outline of hills appeared. The great horizon sky filled with its big, pink summer glaze. They always waited for the evening blow, the steady flat motion of a hot wind, like an awakening fever. Overhead circled a skitter of finely-thrown swallows like little bits of gravel.

"You're sticky," his mother said quietly. She held him by the arm, so he didn't move. She was thinking of Jinks his brother, Norbet knew. It didn't bother him anymore. He hardly ever squirmed in her grasp now, but had learned to wait until the fingers loosened like a cinch rope. Even then he did not move, hoping to disguise his muscles, his nerves, into a gesture of total submission, almost as though he wasn't there anymore. It didn't matter to his mother that he was gone now. All she wanted was to convince herself that he couldn't move. That was all. It wasn't much.

The moon was in full-face and as white as a ghost. He had known he would be feeling sick, but he couldn't stop eating. He had to eat until he was sick. Six pieces of wedding cake... and no one had stopped him. It wasn't anybody's fault. Where was his car, his Cordoba? Damn, Jinks had it. Pablo took him home, then he came back and got the car. Now he would have to go home with his mother. He would have to sit beside her in her Impala, holding his beautiful beam light on his lap, and tell her how much it cost. She would pick until she found out. If he had his car, he could drive around in the fresh air, then go over to the Sonic for a burger and shake.

"She ain't so much," his mother said. "I expected something out of this world, 'nother Marilyn Monroe. Shoot, her toes turn in."

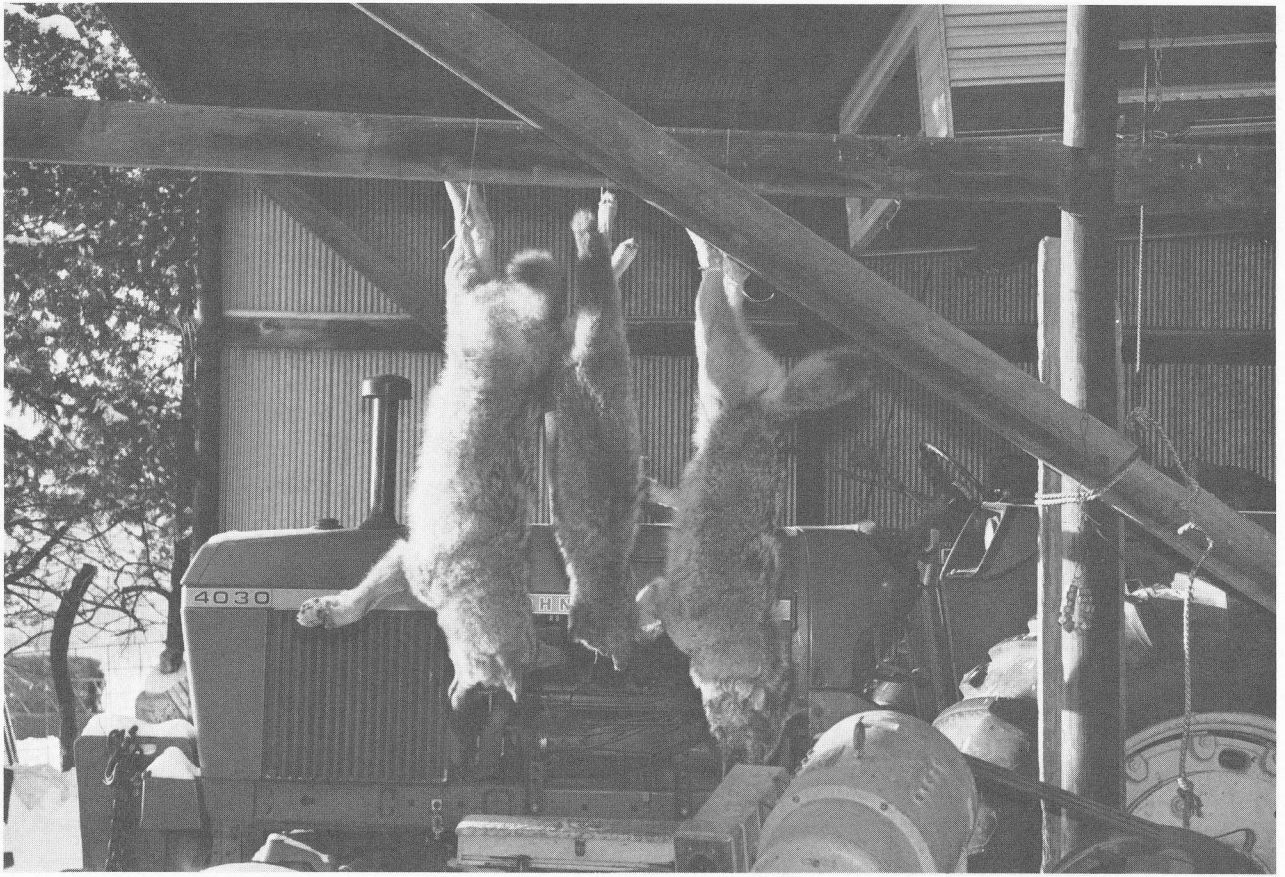
"They say she's famous though," he said too quickly. She looked over at her son, then back to the hills.

"Giffie does," she said with a laugh. "Tell you the truth, I never heard of her."

He wasn't going to say it, but he did. "Me neither," he whispered. He touched his lips with a finger. She had the softest face. Like velvet.

His mother looked at him. "You getting sick? You eat like there's no tomorrow."

Inside, Aunt Grace dispatched a finger of curdled milk from a small China pitcher. Her wedding dishes. Someone forgot to properly introduce Gifford's bride to everyone, she thought vaguely. She had forgot... Jinks had pushed things too far for polite talk. Veronica--it wasn't her fault she was so beautiful today, so beyond the likes of Newson. Hadn't Newell brought back the kickline till she thought she would scream? No, it wasn't her fault. Families went deeper sometimes than any one could imagine who just came aboard. She would understand, maybe, if Giffie could keep her long enough. Anyway, it was a pity. She wouldn't remember from Adam who gave what when she came to write her thankyous.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Philip H. Schneider

LOSING GROUND

It started again, somewhere up on the high slopes where they were doing the work--up near the Indian land.

Tabor raised his head an inch from the pillow and listened to the sudden burst from Petersen's Shepherd, clear and short and hard in the late dark. It would be the Valik's Redbone next, he thought-- on the other side of his own land and to the east--and then Nickols', Churchill's, Harms', each dog joining in turn with the rest until the whole length of the hollow sounded to the night, a chain of howl and pule and yarp and bay that built from one place to the next until whatever it was that moved in the night, and that skirted each of the farms from west to east across the land, had gone by and away from each, and one by one the dogs would break off, stop, and the night would close again.

It would have been his own dog now, Tabor thought--had he still had one--adding the link between Petersen's Shepherd and the Valik's still-quiet Redbone to the east. He listened to the singular sound of the Shepherd and he thougnt that whatever it was that moved in the night must be traveling his own south boundary now, moving along the high south ridges through the big pines.

"What is it, Orrin?" Mary murmured softly beside him in the dark.

"It's nothing, Mother," he said. "It's just the dogs." He eased his head back down to the pillow.

"It's a wolf, that's what," Leo Harms had said at the dock of the GLF on the Monday past as he'd hoisted the final bag of mash into the bed of his pickup and slammed the gate into the locks. "Only thing'll set'em off like that."

"Ain't been a wolf around here in fifty years," Harms' wife said quietly from where she leaned, eating a yellow pear against the cab.

"Don't mean there ain't one now," Harms said to the men on the dock. He looked from one to the next as though it had been one of them and not his wife who had shown the doubt.

Tabor tilted his face a little more into the fall sun and let the sweet smell of the mash ride into his lungs. It wasn't a wolf, he thought.

Petersen stepped across the dock to the Pepsi cooler and lifted the lid.

"Could be..." he said as he studied the bottle caps, "..that wolverine."

"What wolverine is that?" Harms said, frowning, his hand poised in the air above the handle to the driver's door.

"One you took a shot at--four years back?" Petersen lifted a bottle of cream soda from the water in the cooler and dropped the lid. "Black one with the big tail and the white stripe? Stunk so bad?" Petersen opened the bottle on the front of the

machine.

"Don't mean I'm wrong now, " Harms muttered as he pulled open the door. He got in and waited for the woman on the opposite side of the truck to take one last bite of the pear and to toss the core into the weeds next to the building.

Petersen sipped the soda and stood gazing after the pickup as it raised two furrows of dust on its way out to the highway.

"What do you think, Orrin?" he said without turning around.

Tabor watched the pigeons whirl in a group near the top of the feed loft, then he brought his gaze back down to where old man Bender half-carried, half-dragged a bag of starter from out of the whorls of grain dust that shifted and rose and fell in the dark interior of the storage.

"It's the Mohawk," Bender said without expression as he set the bag against the corrugated wall of the building and nodded to Petersen to indicate that it was his, then he turned and walked back into the dust.

They didn't ask him what he meant.

Petersen spit carefully from the dock to the dust of the drive and turned and looked for a time into the dark of the storage, then he dropped the empty bottle into the rack next to the machine and hoisted the bag of starter to his shoulder and started down the wooden steps.

"What do you think, Orrin?" he said again when he got to the bottom.

Tabor watched the pigeons for a moment more, building higher into the sky in their circle about the loft.

"I don't think it's a wolf."

Petersen had nodded then, spit once more, and walked to his truck.

Tabor sat up in the bed now, his gaze accustomed to the dark. Mary shifted comfortably in her place along his side and he reached down and drew the blanket up around her shoulders. She patted his thigh and left her hand there and he listened to her breathing become slow and even again. She wanted to spend the time in sleep, he thought, but she did not want to offend.

The Valik's, and then the Nickol's Redbones, twins at birth and twins still in their bell, picked up the chain, and then the Churchill's Collie--a short high burst, then another, and a third. Petersen's Shepherd broke off. Tabor eased back down.

Whatever it was, it wouldn't stop the work, he thought.

They said that the work would go on year round now, no matter what, because they had to make up the time they'd lost. When they'd finally begun the work, in the late spring, Tabor had sometimes heard in the evenings when the windows were open to the cool air, the distant sounds of heavy machinery working into the growing dark, and on each of the Monday mornings when he drove out of the high north end of the hollow to pick up the things that Mary and the farm needed in Charlottesville, he saw the jagged steel of reinforcing rods and scaffolding and girders and huge beams growing into the sky.

"Gonna be livin' right under it, eh?" Bender had said on one of the Mondays during the late summer when they'd sat in the sun of the dock.

Tabor had nodded, kept his eyes closed.

"Some still talking about stoppin' it," Bender said. "Makin' em put it somewhere else."

"There is nowhere else," Tabor said quietly.

"Gonna mess up your water, up there in the creek. Mohawk won't like that."

Tabor opened his eyes and gazed sideways to where Bender sat. The old man rested with his head back against the corrugated wall, his face tilted upward, his eyes closed.

"They say it won't do anything to the creek. Be dry in the west branch for a couple months in the fall, that's all."

"That's what they say," Bender said. "Say they won't need no more land either."

"Make the water a little warmer maybe, when it starts to run again," Tabor said, ignoring the rest.

"That's what they say," Bender said.

There had been some who had wanted to stop it. Tabor had gone to the meetings in Charlottesville, had listened to what was said by the company men who were going to build it--that it was safe, that it was not a bomb, that it would be good for the community--and by those who said that they didn't want it--that it was not safe, that it was a bomb, that it would not be good for the community--and after a year and a half of listening, he stopped going, because it was clear to him by then that it was only a matter of time.

Lower on the southeast slopes now, the Harms' dogs began, each one joining the next until all four of them overwhelmed in unison the voices of the others that came higher from the west. Tabor raised his head and slid slowly backward, propped himself against the rails of the head board and gazed out through the window next to the bed. It was very dark. He could see nothing beyond the glass.

Someone (Tabor didn't remember who) had made the mistake, on one of the Mondays, of speaking the point when Bender had mentioned the Mohawk.

"All of that was a long time ago, got nothin' to do with now," that someone had said.

"Seventy-one years, the first of March," Bender answered matter-of-factly as the rest of the men on the dock looked narrowly and silently at the someone who had spoken and had opened the door.

And then Bender went on, as he always did, to reach all of the way back to his thirteenth year, and to tell once again the story of the Mohawk, Charlie Buck, last sachem of his mother's line and holder of all of the high land to the west end of the hollow, reduced near the end of his years to renting it out, burial ground and sacred trust--all of it the same--to the Vermont transplant, Elwin Payne, who in his turn had somehow gotten the agreement, the final one, and whose only real concession for it was to bury Buck, in the manner that the Mohawk would have it, seventy-one years ago, come March.

And wasn't it the same Elwin Payne, who, after burying Buck, somehow had title to the land and got rich on that, and who after selling off half of the timber and after leasing out

half of the land to other men, decided that the future was not in the milking of cattle but in the milk and the meat of the goat--which was, after all, more suited to the terrain and to the weather--and wasn't it the same Payne who, on another first day of March, ten years to the day after he had buried the Mohawk and had put the grass over the grave to keep off the sun and had put the oak board there too to keep away the rain, and had brought in the Toggenburgs and the strange Markhoors to breed (and they had done so), wasn't it the same Payne who dressed himself--without leaving any word or clue (Nobody would know for a year or more after about his debts, that he was going to lose it all) as to why--in his long-departed wife's Sunday morning black, right down to corset and the dark silk stockings, and then struggled out--carrying the whole way a diningroom chair and a rope--to the maple under which he had made the Mohawk's grave, and hanged himself in the dim of the morning, not to be found for more that a month--and then by a hunter from the lower part of the State who half-thought that it was all some kind of joke, the body being the way it was and hardly a body at all anymore, damned fool? (Tabor never was able to tell whether Bender meant the hunter or Payne.) And shouldn't Orrin Tabor, sitting right there (Bender pointed but did not look at Orrin), shouldn't he know better than anybody how the Mohawk must feel (by now the Mohawk, who he had seen only once in his life, was alive and real in Bender's head), losing the seventy-two acres on his northwest line (Tabor had sold them after three years of saying no, a month after Petersen had sold out completely with only the promise that he could stay on the land for another year), and now living right under the thing? And wasn't it on the very spot,--the spot where Payne had put the Mohawk down--that they had started the work, gouged a hole into the land as big as a lake and deeper than most? And did they have any idea at all, or did they care, that there was one or ten or a hundred or a thousand redskins, going who-knows- how-far-back, buried up there?

No.

And when they finally started kicking over bones and couldn't hide the fact anymore, all they did was gather them up and send them down to the university in a sack just so they could find out that they were old enough so they wouldn't have to bury them again.

"Otis," a voice said then from inside the open window of the office above the dock, "that storage all straight is it?"

Bender took the question for what it was.

"Well," he said without expression or emphasis, and then he pulled his moccasins back under his weight and got up and shuffled back into the dark of the storage.

There was some truth to what the old man had to say, Tabor thought now as he gazed at the dark beyond the bedroom glass. It had occurred to him when he'd sold the acreage along the northwest line that probably a third or more of it should have been in question. His own grandfather and the man Elwin Payne had decided on the line of fence in their own way, and there had always been since then only that line of fence to mark one side

from the other. Fences fell and were built again, Tabor thought, and changed, moved, from stone to post to wire over the years, and they never moved toward the building, standing on his own side.

The Harms' dogs broke off to the east, the chain collapsing into silence. Whatever it was had circled north again, Tabor thought, had made it to Lyra Baines' flat and rockless acres at the east end of the hollow, somewhere near the new bridge where the new road--wider for the heavy trucks--wound down into the hollow in the track of the old. He did not know why it would want to go there, or how sometime later in the night--and without waking any of the dogs--it would get back up to the high ground, where it had begun.

The sun was halfway to the zenith by the time Tabor reached the lower of the two ridges that ran parallel to one another along the new northwest boundary to his land. The air was cold, but there was no wind. First snow was only days away now, he thought as he paused to take his breath. Mary had not wanted him to walk.

". . . climbing up there," she'd said, frowning, scrubbing furiously at dish after breakfast dish. "A man..." and she stopped short of saying, "your age."

It was something he was used to, not a concern with his health, the knee, more to do with dignity. It had come up for the first time ten years earlier, when he was forty-one. He didn't remember much about it--being cut off in traffic, in Charlottesville, two pickups next to one another, gestures (angry and fast), and himself and what looked to be only a boy stepping into the street between the trucks--most of all, Mary's voice.

"Orrin. He's half your age." and the tone of it, stopping him, stealing his anger; she did not want him hurt; she assumed he would be.

He hurried his pace toward the higher ground, but when he topped the second ridge, he was surprised--brought up short--by the fence. His first thought was that it was in the wrong place, although he knew that it was not. Where the north and the west lines had always met in a clean right angle to one another, and where the point of that angle had always directed his gaze to the place where the waters of the west branch sprang--far back in the trees--from the rocks of the high ground, there was nothing at all that he could see now--no trace of the oak posts or the strands. Instead, twenty feet in front of him, and running from the point where the east line of the Indian land--the Payne land--had jagged away to the north, directly across to where Petersen's line had always run west along the Payne south border, a new line, gleaming in the sun, ran diagonnally north to west along the top of the ridge.

"Hypotenuse," Tabor said softly, his mind jarred for the instant all the way back to his first college year," . . . this side opposite."

And it was not an ordinary fence, not wooden posts, not stone, not a stretched line of barbs. It was chain link,

polished and new and shining, and it was eight feet high, strung on pole after gleaming pole along the ridge. At the top of each of the poles was a brace, angled outward, ready for the three strands of wire that would have once meant a fence in themselves--only an extra precaution here.

Tabor walked slowly to the fence and wrapped his fingers into the link. It was cold. And permanent, he thought. But then he saw how easily the clips that held the link to the poles could be removed, how quickly the great machine that had set them could raise the poles again, how simple it would be to roll the chain link into itself, take it up, move it east again--one hundred, two hundred feet, a thousand, a mile--if it became necessary.

It was cold to his touch. Woven steel. Steel that said: this is mine. I have paid more than I should have, could have--looked the fool--for this; I did not argue, but there is no question now. The line is here now.

It was a fence that looked as though it belonged to some larger thing--some city, Tabor thought, or to a country of its own.

He knew as he gazed along the fence to the west why he had not wanted to see it earlier, why he had not come up to watch them put it up, during the summer, before the west branch went quickly dry in October--as they had said it would--and before the trucks began to rumble all day long up the widened road; before whatever it was had begun to set off the dogs.

He turned west along the fence, walked for a time, then stopped and studied the place where Petersen's line had bordered, on the south, the Payne Land. The chain link did not stop there, did not cut away to the west. Instead, it swung south along the land that was no longer Petersen's and up and over the far ridge.

"Like livin' in a damned lock-up," Petersen had said on the Monday after they'd finished it. He'd gripped a cream soda as he'd stood on the dock, his knuckles whitening around the glass. "Oughta stop it, Orrin, all the way around. Big god-damned gate, end of my drive; temporary, they say. Like sayin' 'when you get the hell out, we won't have to mess with that.' All the way around. Must be ten, fifteen miles of it."

"I'll take a look," Tabor had said, but he hadn't; had more important things to do, he said to Mary.

He turned now and started back to the east, back toward the place where the west branch had run, until three weeks earlier, down from the Payne land to his own.

"All that time with nobody up there," Mary had said when the indications of change had begun to come out in the company letters. "Now they have to dig it all up, even way out here."

It seemed to her to be something they did in the city, Tabor thought, or around a place that was marked by tall stacks and black smoke, but the company had guaranteed that there would be none of that.

"Won't even know we're here," the company representatives were fond of saying, "after the initial effort."

Tabor had read the letter about the west branch many times. There was an underground river, it said, that ran under the entire north ridge line, that gave rise to both the east and the west branches of the creek. The work would not disturb the east branch, the letter said, but it would be necessary, for two months, to do what had to be done to insure the plant water supply, and that meant that there would be no flow in the two miles of west branch for that period of time. It was, however, the letter said, the company's intention to compensate each landowner for the trouble.

The drilling truck had appeared on the first Wednesday in October, along with three men, the biggest and youngest of which came to Tabor's door.

"Where you want it?" the young man said.

"Want what?" Tabor said, looking to the truck.

"The well," the young man said, not looking at Tabor, looking instead toward the out-buildings. "North of the barn looks good."

Another truck arrived on the following day, and three different young men put in the tank and the pump.

"Who's going to pay for that power?" Tabor asked as he looked at the new pole and the box and the high tension lines.

"Company will," the leader of the three said flatly. "Till that stream is up again. Then it's up to you."

"They going to take all this back out?"

The young man had looked at him curiously, then at the tank and pump.

"Not worth it," he'd said, flatly again. "It's all yours." And then he had smiled.

Tabor had no trouble finding the place where the branch had run under the wire. On the company side, looking as though it had fallen by mistake from the sky, was a concrete cylinder--twenty feet long, twelve across--a cover of steel wire-mesh blocking each of its open ends. At the fence itself were four wooden pegs, each one with a small red flag at the top, each one marking an extreme where the back-hoe would stop, where the hole under the wire would begin and would end.

"But what about the things that live in it?" Mary had asked after the company had put in the tank and the pump. She'd stood next to Tabor on the north side of the house, looking down to where the branch had already shrunk to a series of pools. "What about them?"

"Fish will go down to the east branch," Tabor had said without conviction. "Muskrat will just have to wait."

She had looked at him, frowned, and had gone back into the house.

Tabor stopped when he reached the place where the water had flowed and squatted slowly down in the dry hard bed of the branch and looked at the tracks. The boot tracks were the oldest, he thought--deep, vague outlines--made when the bottom had still been soft, when they had put up the pegs. Two sets of smaller prints; boys, he thought, come up to look at the fence. And deer, more recent, one of them bigger than the rest. One set, human--he could barely make them out--only a soft set of

impressions on the hardened mud.

It came by here, he thought, each night. Whatever it was that set off the dogs came down along the fence from the north slopes, travelled the entire line to the southwest, south along Petersen's, south to the higher slopes, and finally east. Maybe the deer, he thought.

"Maybe the Mohawk," he said, then he smiled into the silence around him; he could not imagine why Charley Buck would have any trouble with an eight-foot fence.

"Well, I, for one, am gonna find out," Harms had said on the Monday past to the men on the dock, "come first snow."

"We better go along," Petersen had said, looking at Tabor after Harms had taken his mash and gone. "See that Leo doesn't blow his foot off."

"He'll forget," Tabor had said. He'd watched Bender shuffle noiselessly back into the storage.

"Why can't you just leave it alone?" Mary said as she watched Tabor pull on the boots. "Three grown men, going out in the middle of the night." She shook her head.

Tabor looked past her shoulder through the window above the sink. First snow had begun to fall in the late morning, big slow flakes that dropped straight to the ground through the still air. By four, the snow had stopped and the afternoon sun broke through on a two-inch layer of white, unmarked and sparkling, Then Harms had called, said that he would be by at ten, after chores, that he thought they ought to start from Tabor's.

"Now, Leo," Tabor had begun, "what's the sense..."

"I'm goin'," Harms had said, not waiting for Tabor to finish, then he'd hung up.

"Leo Harms never did have a brain in his head," Mary said now as she stood at the sink and picked one dish after another from the soak. "You and Warren ought to know better."

Tabor nodded and began to lace the boots.

"Warren doesn't like living inside that fence," he said.

"What's that got to do with it?" She propped the meat platter in the drainer. "Warren Petersen has always been living inside one fence or another. So have we."

"Now, mother," Tabor asid as he stood and tried the boots. She did not turn from the sink and she shook her head once more.

"Three grown men," she said again, but that was all.

Tabor heard the pickup turn into the drive and he waited at the kitchen door for Petersen to come to the house. Petersen wore his heavy mackinaw, the old 32-20 on his hip.

"Leo?" Petersen said as he scrubbed the snow from his boots on the entrance rug.

"Not yet," Tabor said.

Mary set two cups on the table and without a word poured each of them full. She nodded to Petersen and put the coffee pot back on the stove and went back to the sink.

Petersen sat down across from Tabor and wrapped his fingers around his cup. He rolled his glance once in the direction of Mary at the sink, then looked to Tabor in question. Tabor

frowned and looked away, dropped his own glance to the coffee and to the fine hard grain of the maple. He did not look up again until they heard the sound of Harms' truck in the yard.

"Jesus, look at that," Petersen said as they stood by the kitchen door and watched Harms get out to the cab. "He thinks it's a damned elephant."

Harms wore the .45 he'd brought home from the second war strapped around his waist, still on its drab ammunition belt. He lifted the 12-gauge from its rack in the back window of the cab and cradled it in his arms as he came toward the house.

"You sure you got enough to handle it, Leo?" Petersen shouted while Harms was still fifty feet from the door.

Harms ignored him.

"You boys ready?" he said when he reached the steps.

Tabor took the goosedown coat from one of the pegs next to the door, pulled the watchcap from one pocket and the leather gloves from the other before he put it on, then he took the four-cell flashlight down from the shelf above the rack and tried it.

Mary stiffened slightly when he moved to her side at the sink and put one arm around her waist.

"You be careful," she said softly. Her glance shifted quickly to Harms, then back to Tabor's face.

Tabor nodded and took his arm away and walked to where Petersen and Harms waited at the door.

"Aren't you takin' anything?" Harms aaid, tapping the shotgun.

Tabor looked at the 12-gauge, then at the .45 that hung at Harms' waist.

"What for?"

He pulled the door closed behind them.

"Good light," Petersen said as they started up the roll of the land toward the northwest.

Tabor looked over his shoulder at the moon, almost full now in the high east. The air was colder than it had been during the day, but there was no wind. He watched his breath hang in the air beside him as he turned his glance back in the direction of their walk. Whatever it was would be moving now, he thought, coming from the trees of the high north slopes, eyeing however-it-did the moon, standing however-it-stood in the dark to contemplate its night.

Petersen moved a step ahead of Harms; Tabor dropped into the track behind.

Perhaps it had already heard them, he thought, and it already knew that its night was changed. Perhaps it was turning on that moment back into the trees, melting into the darkness there, patient, without a sound, It had not occurred to him that he might not want to know what it was. It occurred to him now, suddenly as he walked step by step toward the fence and into the shadow that the moon made of his shape on the snow. He thought for a moment that he would tell Petersen and Harms to go on ahead, that he would catch up, and that after they had gone he would walk back down to the house instead, think of a reason for it later, tell them when they got back, but Petersen's

Shepherd, off to the west, broke the quiet of the night and of his thought with one--then another--short hard burst. "Probably us," Petersen said with a grunt.

Harms worked the slide of the shotgun and slammed a shell into the chamber. Petersen stopped with the sound and waited for Harms to pass, then fell in beside Tabor.

"Come on, what's the hold-up?" Harms said, turning, walking backward, not stopping.

"Safer back here, Leo," Petersen said.

Harms spat into the snow at his feet, then turned back again in the direction of his walk.

When they topped the ridge, Harms paused and said that they ought to veer more to the west, to head it off. Petersen's Shepherd was barking fully now.

"Let's take a look at the tracks," Tabor said quietly. "See what it is."

"Yeah, Leo, remember that wolverine."

Harms spat again and started once more to the northwest.

"You boys coulda stayed to home, you know," he said.

And when they reached the crest of the second ridge, it was Harms who found the track.

There was no missing it, a line of prints, down from the north, lining away to the south, following the ridge line, each hole in the snow twelve inches from the last.

Petersen stooped where Harms had come to a halt and brushed the snow away from the edges of the print.

"Deer," he said flatly. "Good size."

Walking, Tabor thought as he gazed along the line of the track, not even in a hurry.

"Let's go," Harms said, moving toward the fence, ready to turn south along the chain link.

"What for?" Petersen called after him. "Won't be season for another two weeks, Leo."

Then Harms was stopped again, staring down at the snow at the foot of the fence.

"Jesus," he said, "look at this."

Tabor saw them then as he walked to where Harms stood, another set of prints, following the line of the fence, close to it, hidden by the shadows of the chain link beyond.

"Moccasins," Harms said in a whisper. "Jesus."

Petersen chuckled.

"What do you think, Leo? Old Charlie Buck?"

Harms stared at him, his eyes widening a little in the moonlight.

"Oh come on, Leo," Petersen said then. He cocked his head to one side and frowned, moved a step closer to Harms. "Probably some kid, come up here same as us."

The Valik's Redbone opened suddenly to the southeast, its bell ringing up to them from the floor of the hollow. Harms jerked the barrel of the 12-gauge out in the direction of the sound.

"I gotta go," he said suddenly. He turned back in the direction they had come, his step already quick under him.

"Come on, Leo," Petersen called after him. "Wait up now. What the...?"

"Gotta go," Harms said again, then he disappeared over the crest of the ridge. They watched until he came into sight on the land below.

"Hell's the matter with him?" Petersen said.

Tabor didn't answer. He watched Harms disappear again over the crest of the lower ridge, and he thought suddenly about the first day that the heavy trucks had begun to rumble one after another down the new road and past the barn. He had stopped what he was doing--he could not remember now what it was--and he had gone back to the house and closed the windows on the summer day, and sat at the kitchen table, looking down into the grain of the maple until it grew dark and the noise of the trucks had stopped.

The Nichols' Redbone joined Valik's to the east, both of the bells rising in unison. Tabor turned and started along the track to the south. He heard Petersen fall in behind.

The men who had built the bridge had spent weeks mounding the earth higher and wider and steeper on both sides of the place where the east and the west branches ran together and flowed as one to the east, then north, spreading finally into the swamp and the big pines. It was because of the high water in the spring, they said, so they would not have to worry about the flooding. It stood higher than everything around it now, even above the tops of the big oaks and maples that grew thick down near the water. Even from where Tabor stopped--Petersen beside him--a half mile from it and almost that far from the dry bed of the west branch where the track seemed to point through the first of the trees, they could see the thick railless span, dull in the moonlight.

Only one of Harms' dogs still hung to its pule, back to the west.

"I'll cut across," Tabor said as he looked to the bridge.

"Might be more to the east," Petersen said. He gazed along the direction of the prints, both sets in a single track now.

"You take the light." Tabor held out the flash and Petersen took it and tucked it under his arm. "I'll be at the pool."

Peterson nodded and started along the trail, his own steps in those that had gone before. Tabor watched until Petersen reached the tree line. He saw the beam of the flashlight break into the shadows of the oaks, then he turned away from the track toward the bridge.

He saw as he crossed the quarter-mile of flat bottom land that there was no light at the dim outline of Lyra Baines' small house. He heard no sound from there as he climbed quietly over the wire that separated the soft rockless fields from the big trees and the bridge--Baines kept no dogs. He was into the darkness of the trees and on the long downslope to the water when the last of Harms' dogs broke off.

He stopped and listened in the silence, heard nothing, not even the small sounds of the water ahead, then he began to move forward once more, more slowly, putting one foot before the

other quietly down to the snow, but because he paid care to each of his steps, he reached the edge of the shadow of the trees before he expected to, the slow spread of the pool--wide and gleaming in the moonlight--suddenly before him--and Bender, standing at its edge.

The old man stood motionless at the lip of the pool, his moccasins spread like stones in the snow, the small span of his back stiffened and straight, his arms outstretched.

Tabor eased his final step to a solid support under him and drew his breath slowly as he looked out over the water in front of Bender and along the opposite bank--its earth still turned and rough at the base of the bridge.

Then Bender moved, slightly, his arms rising a little in front of him, his face tilting upward toward the girders and the span.

Tabor saw it then, its forequarters braced hard and motionless on the steep new concrete of the buttress. It was as big as a pony in its age, its horns augering steeply up from its brow, the tip of one broken-away and flat. It faced Bender fully from the smooth concrete, its eyes wide and yellow in the edge of light that cut across the buttress from the moon, its wild, hard, fierce Markhoor head strange, almost misplaced, on the thick Toggenburg of its other parts. It explained the tracks, Tabor thought, why there had been no brakes, no kicks and landings of a deer moving fast, only the flat steady pace of one hoof before the next.

He heard the step behind him, the soft sound of the steel clearing the leather. He caught the barrel of the revolver, curling his fingers quickly over the cold metal as it slid into his view on the right.

"Hold it," he whispered as he turned his head to Petersen. "It's Bender."

But Petersen was not looking at the old man. He had followed Bender's glance also, up to the place on the incline just under the bed of the bridge.

"What the hell is that?" he said softly.

Tabor turned his gaze back to the smooth support.

"It's a goat."

"A goat?"

"Come to drink," Tabor whispered.

"Harms will shit," Petersen said, whispering also, then he chuckled.

A few more weeks--days--Tabor thought. A little more time and it would not come all the way to here; it would stop where the west branch flowed again under the wire, drink, go back to the north slopes outside the fence, find a place, live a little longer on what it had left.

He heard the soft squeak of the leather again and watched as Petersen slid the revolver back into the holster, and when he looked back up to the place where the light angled across the incline, he saw that the face had moved, that the yellow eyes looked directly into his own now, quietly, without blinking. It was very old, he thought, descendant, some uncaught final piece of Payne's experiment on the Indian land, this quiet fearless

private thing that moved each night to here, that looked without expression, without loss, down into him.

Then it was gone, all of it at once, into the shadow of the span and then away, and Tabor heard Petersen's breath come out, just as he did his own.

"Harms will shit," Petersen said again, half-grinning, but then he looked once more to where the goat had been, and back to Tabor again. "I guess not," he said.

Tabor shook his head.

"Deer, I'd say," Petersen said.

Tabor nodded, looked back to the pool. Bender had turned from the water now and was looking toward them, his head cocked to one side.

"Lo, Otis," Tabor said as he stepped from the shadow to the trees.

"Did you see 'im?" Bender said, without greeting. "It was him. It was Buck."

"We saw him," Tabor said. "Late for you to be out, Otis."

"It was him," Bender said again. "It was Buck. I told you he'd be..." and then the old man set his lips, looked from Tabor to Petersen and back, then began again the tones familiar from the dock, but not now about Buck or even about Payne, who had followed the Sachem to the ground, but about--instead--the quick cold flow of waters held back, building somewhere higher up--nearer, closer to home--and wasn't it right here, right now, that water newer than all the steel and concrete that had been hurried over some other flow--old now and long run away-- wasn't it here that the course, when they had to cut it loose again, would always move again into the black pines? And there it was, wasn't it--Tabor and Petersen and he himself, Bender, all come now into that pact that Buck and Payne had signed and sealed without paper all that time and land ago--higher up? Wouldn't the bones, down there displaced behind glass that was the State's, wouldn't they take their weight again-- loving and seeking themselves company as such things do--take it right now, reaching to right now?

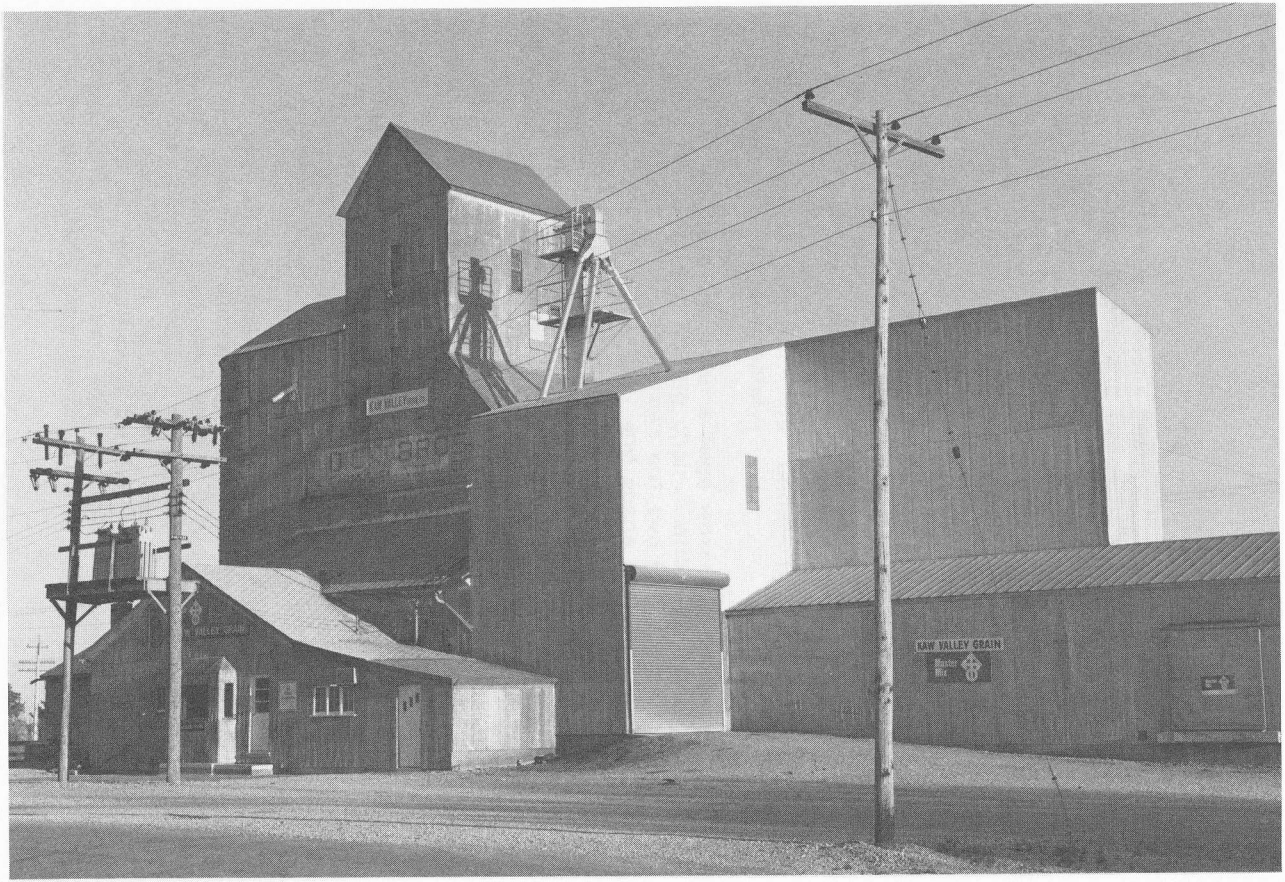
"Where'd you leave your truck, Otis?" Petersen said.

The old man nodded to the north.

"We'll walk you back," Tabor said.

He looked once more across the pool, as they started the climb to the road, to the place where the smooth incline of the blocks rose from the water, then up to the thick steel beams that jutted from the concrete to the bed of the span, the whole of it rising above them in the moonlight, rising away from them.

For one moment he again saw the hard, fierce head, the forequarters braced and set, the animal standing--as it must have stood a hundred years ago, he thought, a thousand miles away--on a mountain of its own.


KAW VALLEY GRAIN

Chester L. Sullivan

A PASTORAL

The powder-blue Cessna banks right, over the bridge. Tilting, it chops power and hangs in the clear, bright afternoon, pausing so that the people in it can enjoy the vista--traffic on the bridge, the water dropping over the dam and plunging into white froth and foam, the sandbars, the lesser birds circling the islands, and the fishermen. Seen from the air, everyone on the ground seems trivial. The groundlings' activities are slow, purposeless, unappealing. In the Cessna there is the feeling of motion. There is sound. There is the pleasant smell of someone's cologne. The pilot touches left rudder, cracks in a bit of power, brings the stick back slightly, and the scene is encompassed. The Cessna straightens, climbs, and finds new things to look at: the river winding north, curving silver railroad tracks, a file of grain elevators, houses, cars, all flow under the wings steadily, without purpose, dispassionately.

Martin walks to the water's edge where he chooses a spot to drop his ice chest and folding chair. With a practiced, melancholy rhythm he baits and throws out two lines, wipes traces of dough bait from his fingertips, and opens himself a beer. He is a biology grad student, and he is in love with Joanie, a freshman. Martin loves Joanie for her white teeth. And he loves her for her exotic beauty resulting from the fact that her father was black.

While Martin sips beer he sags in the chair and runs his misery through his mind. Of course it is self pity. He and Joanie have been living together since spring break. It is now mid-summer and hot. Life has been good for them. She takes pride that she's found a grad student boyfriend. He likes knowing about her secret blood, and he takes pride in having taught her to fish. And he likes swinging her around his apartment singing, Summertime is the time/ for the wine/ when it's fine--

But that all happened before Joanie's mother arrived. A week ago Joanie's mother moved into the Airport Motel, and Joanie left Martin's apartment to live in the dorm. Since then Martin has been miserable. He shudders when he thinks that he isn't even married, yet he already has a mother-in-law. By Joanie's account her mother is a drunk, a menace to pedestrians, a miscegenist, a fornicator, and now she's coming down hard on Joanie because she's caught Joanie living with a grad student.

Martin thumbs his tight lines, wishing that Joanie were with him. He looks at the flecks of foam. Then a black man of about his own age appears at the edge of his vision. The man

wears a green hospital orderly's rhumba shirt and a round-brimmed cloth army slouch hat and double-knit slacks of a hound's-tooth pattern, white on blue shot through with shadings of red. The slacks are rolled up to his knees, and he is barefoot. His wet shins glisten. "Any luck?" he asks.

"I just got here," Martin replies.

The black man seems inclined to linger, so Martin says, "Sit down. Help yourself to a beer. Tell me your troubles."

"I have none," the man says moving close to Martin's cooler. Then he takes himself a beer, pops the ring tab, and studies Martin's lines. Finally he says, "Why did you give me a beer? Is it some love-hate thing?"

"Yeah. It's love-hate, my friend. I love-hate you."

"You want to be black like me, huh? Have a big crowbar and take all the honey out of the hive, huh? Be cool and jive, Huh? Be lazy?"

"No."

One of the lines snaps taut and cuts the water in pulsing slices. Martin grips the line and pulls it hand-under-hand, horsing a silver fish across the wet edge of sand. He uses the leg of his chair to kill the fish before unhooking it. Then he points, catches the black man's eye, says, "Cyperinus Carpo, carp. External nares, operculum, lateral line, spinous dorsal fin, soft dorsal fin, caudal fin, anal fin, pelvic fin, and numerous scales covered by mucus."

"I'm impressed."

"You damned well should be. I didn't learn this on TV.

"Yeah, yeah," the black man says, "I saw some shit in Viet Nam. I was a medic. Look. I'm just walking down by the river trying to get back to my roots. I don't need a lecture from you on fish parts. I was merely inquiring why you decided to befriend me."

Martin nods, fearing that this man will give him a hard time. He looks at the man's smooth brown face, flared nostrils, and thin gold neck chain. Stitched above his pocket is Lawrence Memorial Hospital. Martin thinks of Joanie's one-time black father and Joanie's mother whom he's never met and Joanie with her starkly white teeth and smooth, dark cheeks and tasty lips.

The black man says, "I'll bet you're a biology major. That's okay. I'm an orderly. I wheel them into surgery." He puts out his hand. "Shake? Abbott Wilson is the name."

They shake on it, and Abbott sits on the cooler. Martin says, "Then you know a friend of mine, Jack Overstreet?"

"Old Jack. Yes, I know old Jack."

After a few minutes' silence Martin begins talking, telling Abbott his problem. He says that his girlfiend is a mulatto. He also says that he likes to sit on the river with a collector's license in his pocket and pretend to be an ordinary fisherman, knowing that if a game warden comes he's covered, safe. And he says he likes taking his girl to dinner at the Country Club knowing that she's half black. It thrills him to do so. But now his mother-in-law has come to town and spoiled everthing.

After listening to the story the black man looks at Martin and says, "Something about me provokes strange reactions in people. What makes you tell me all these personal things?"

"I don't know."

"Uh huh. To tell you the truth, Martin, you don't sound like a very nice person to me. You're white, college educated, good career future--but that's not enough. On top of that you want to possess a black woman. But you don't have the guts to get yourself a real black woman-- black, thick lips, kinky hair. And you're hung up on being something that you aren't."

Martin said, "I don't know why I told you all this. It's not true, not really true. Some of it's just weak little ideas that play around the edges of my imagination. I glanced up and saw you there and thought you might have the answer to my problem."

"Your problem? Your problem? Okay, hit me with it one more time. What exactly is your problem?"

"My girlfriend's mother has come to town and she's giving me fits. That's my problem. That's the only problem I have."

"Oh," Abbott lowered his voice to a rich, confidential tone laced with irony. "That's your problem. She's giving you so much trouble, then why don't you do the reasonable thing and kill her?"

Martin looks hard at the curve of his lip and then he looks down at the fish. He says, "Why not?" He slaps his knee. "Why not!"

They both feel the beer buzz, and they open fresh ones. Martin explains that he's never actually seen his new mother-in-law but he knows about her from what Joanie has told him. The woman knew Joanie's father eighteen years ago. She was scared to be seen out with him. Long before Joanie was born she married a high school teacher, a white man. They stayed together five years. Her name is Philomena. She is a drunk. She shoplifts. Her utilities are habitually shut off. She pulls into traffic without looking. She honks at people in the street but refuses to slow for them. All her life she has led a lewd, uninhibited, bawdy existence. She is a tramp.

Martin and his new friend Abbott engage in the outrageous fantasies of matricide, homicide, faked suicide, all directed at the person of Philomena. As they become drunker their schemes grow wilder. But always one question returns: what to do with the body?

Then Abbott remarks that his baby sister is dead, and he never saw her body. The fun is gone out of it and he becomes sad telling about it. About how his sister married a Jamaican and went down to the island with him and then the Jamaican cut her throat. It grows dark.

Martin takes in his lines and folds his chair. He puts the empty cans into the cooler, picks up the fish, and says, "Come on home with me. We'll fry this thing and do some serious drinking."

"Where do you live?"

"Oread slums. But I've got a kitchen to cook in."

"I'll come with you." Abbott carries the cooler. They stop on the way to buy a quart of Early Times.

As Martin parks in front of his downstairs apartment he sees a woman sitting on his porch. The front edge of his porch is lighted by the street light. She has short dark hair. She wears a blue hippie-ish dress and leather sandals. She is delicate and exquisitely beautiful in the face. She has her legs crossed and is bobbing one sandaled foot gently up and down in time with a distant, eternal rhythm. "Some mistake," he thinks, "that woman doesn't belong on my porch." He guesses her age at thirty, and she watches while he approaches carrying the fish. Abbott follows.

Then Martin is at the steps and she blocks his way. She says, "Are you Martin?"

"Yes," he says, holding the fish away from his leg so that it won't drip on him.

She stands. She says, "You dirty son of a bitch! I see Joanie's spread on your bed and her throw rug on the floor! Open this dump and give them to me and hope to hell I don't file statutory rape on you, you wimp bastard!" Then she launches a roundhouse swing at his head but he blocks it with his fish hand, which she takes as an insult. "Don't you sling at me with your filthy goddamned fish! I'll have your ass under the jail!"

"Now, now," Abbott says stepping between them, "now, cool down, Lady. Now look here. Come on up on the porch out of everybody's eyesight and be calm. Now Martin, go on in the house and get this woman's things. And don't wipe fish slime on them, either. Now lady," he turns her gracefully onto the porch, "now let's sit and talk. I've got half interest in this bottle of Early Times. If you'll promise to wait right here I'll go inside and get us some glasses."

He sits her down and goes inside. He takes Martin to the kitchen sink. "Now here, my Man, put that fish in the sink, wash your hands, and fold her bedspread up nicely. Then clean this thing and put it on to cook! She is your girl's mother. Be nice to her."

"I caught that," Martin says. "I knew she was Joanie's mother."

"Then fry the fish! Fry the fish! Where do you keep your glasses?"

After supper the three sit on the porch. Abbott and Philomena sit on the steps and Martin is behind them in the shadows. The Early Times is half empty, resting on the steps between Abbott's feet. He says, "I spent awhile down on the river with Martin. There isn't an ounce of meaness anywhere in him." When he says that Philomena turns and looks at the forlorn shape in the shadows. She says, "But what's he good for?" That question ensures a long silence. Finally Abbott says, "He is the Longinus of fishes. He can name all the parts for you. He doesn't hold any malice in his heart. And he's in love with your daughter. He can catch you a fish, and he can buy you a

bottle, and he can cook the fish, and he can keep his mouth shut. Hell, there are lots of things he's good for."

Then Joanie comes down the sidewalk. Unable to find her mother, she's drawn to Martin's apartment. Before she is in the light where they can see her, however, she sees Philomena and Abbott. She stops. Her heart hammers at her ribcage. Here is the image that she's always had. From childhood when Philomena told her about her father, she's held the image of Philomena with a black man. This is the first time she's ever seen it.

Joanie backs away from the light and slowly circles to the left of the porch, to the dark side of the house. She knows the territory. Carefully, softly, she pulls herself between the banister and the post. None of them knows she is there.

Then Martin says, "Abbott was down on the river planning ways to kill you, Philomena."

"Shush, Man," Abbott says.

"Oh?" Her tone indicates her amusement. "What did you think was the best way?"

Abbott lowers his voice. He says, "Get you drunk and put you in a car with a leaky tailpipe and let you breathe carbon monoxide for an hour. Hand me the bottle."

Philomena takes it from between his feet and hands it to him. He unscrews the plastic cap, skips it across the street, and purses his lips taking a practiced, popping swig.

Martin likes the looks of his mother-in-law sitting on his front porch beside the man in the slouch hat. Then he says to Abbott, "Tell us about your sister?"

Abbott exhales long and audibly. He says, "We're on the crust of my Mama's banana pudding. The pan she cooks her pudding in is fifty miles wide, and we're piss ants on the crumbly crust and any minute now we're apt to flake off and slide in."

There is an even longer silence. Finally he says, "She was a college girl. She feel in love with a funny-talking dude from Jamaica and went down there to live with him. One night he got mad at her and killed her. They sent her home to be buried. But at the funeral we opened the casket and that girl in there wasn't her. We buried her anyway, but all the family knew it wasn't her."

"Then maybe your sister is still alive," Martin says.

"No. The Jamaican killed her. So many girls get killed in Jamaica they don't try to keep them straight. They just send you one."

Philomena shifts her folded bedspread and crosses her hands on his knee. He is crying. She takes off his slouch hat and wipes his eyes with her fingertips and then with the hem of her long skirt. Joanie watches, her heart pounding. She hears Philomena say, "Go ahead and cry, Baby. We're friends."

"Pass the bottle," Martin says.

"You're a thirsty pup," Philomena says, "I was right about you. You drink too much."

"Uh huh."

"Yeah," Abbott says. He retrieves his hat and puts it on. "I might not be but a nigger hospital orderly, but I know that. He drinks too much."

"Don't say 'nigger' in my presence! My daughter's father was a black man. I've looked the world over and I've yet to see a nigger."

"What happened to your husband?" Abbott says.

Eagerly, wanting to say it, Philomena says, "Stares ran him off. He was good, and he loved me, but stares ran him off. I stare at everybody now, can't help it. It's like a curse. When I see anybody, I stare at them. I'm about the meanest woman you'll ever meet."

Abbott says, "Maybe so. But what about my man here, the Longinus of fishes. And what about your daughter, lonely and hurt somewhere. Why are you mean to them?"

"Because they aren't married. I believe in marriage."

"And that's it?"

"That's it. A daughter of mine doesn't just pick up and move in with some guy. I don't buy it."

Abbott feels that he's done a good thing. He peers around at the shape of Martin in the darkness. He says, "I've got a membership in the Sanctuary. Let's go there. I'll change clothes."

"No," Philomena says, "I've got to find Joanie and make up with her. Poor kid. I love her to death, but I can't help fighting her every inch."

"Awh," Abbott says, "Martin has radar for Joanie. Let him find her and bring her to the Sanctuary." Then he stands and offers Philomena his hand. She takes his hand, stands, and they leave. When they are out of the light he turns and says, "Longinus. Pick up your girlfriend and meet us at the Sanctuary." Then he doffs his hat. Holding it high he wags it like the slow, dinging signal arm of a railroad crossing.

When Philomena and Abbott have disappeared in the darkness Martin moves to the lip of the porch where he can put his feet on the steps and be comfortable. Joanie circles back to the street and pretends to arrive. Martin looks at her face in the flourescent light. Her coloring is dark, beautiful, like the faded olive drab color of Abbott's hat. He says, "Philomena was here. She seems young to be your mother."

"She is young. She was young when I was born."

"And she's not half as bad as you make her out to be--"

"She's bad, all right. You try living with her."

"I think she's nice. Let's go meet them for a drink."

"You like her, do you? You like her!" She is angry and her eyes tighten in the artificial light. "I heard you! I've been standing in the shadows half an hour!" She turns her profile to the street light giving him the outline of her small, sharp breasts.

"Come on inside," he says, "I want to change clothes."

"No," she says, "Choose one of us. You can't have us both. He's got a head start with her, anyway."

Martin almost says, "I don't want either of you." But he doesn't. He goes into the kitchen and straightens up the dinner mess. Ten minutes later he returns to the front porch. She is gone. He latches the screen and goes into the bedroom wishing the apartment had a shower. He undresses, throws his clothes in a corner, and starts water in the claw-footed tub. While the water runs he stands on the scales, pats his twenty-seven-year-old hairy paunch, and then trims his toenails. He tests the water, cuts down the flow of the hot, and then after a minute turns off both valves.

He sits in the warm water wishing he had a cigar to smoke--like those old cowboys in the movies. Then he thinks about Philomena. She definitely outshines her daughter. Then he thinks about Joanie. He knows Joanie well. He could map her neck and shoulders and backbone as she lay face down on his bed. He wonders how long he will be able to see the memory of her naked back before it fades. He hasn't seen much of Philomena because of the long dress and the dim light. But he can work back to her through Joanie, dreaming up an image of her lying face down on his bed. Whiter skin, softer flesh, the shadows fall short on her white, full arms. Then he is certain that he will go to the Sanctuary and have a drink with Philomena and Abbott.

While he is dressing he hears a knock and rattle at the screen. He has his trousers on, and he buttons his shirt while going to the door. There stands Joanie.

"Can I come in?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want the hassle."

"Please?"

He unhooks the latch. She comes in, taking stock of his new trousers and clean shirt.

"I changed my mind." she says, "I want to go with you to the Sanctuary."

"No," he says. "None of us thought of it, but you're under age."

"I have something you don't know about. A fake ID."

"No," he says, realizing that he has the hassle.

She grabs his wrists with a passion he's never seen in her. "Please," she says, "I got scared thinking about it. I was walking in the dark, and the air felt clammy on my face. And I realized--He's going to kill her!"

"Aw--"

"Yes! That man is one of my father's friends come here to punish her."

Martin says, "No. I met him on the river, fishing. He's an orderly at the hospital. By chance he came here and your mother was here and he met her."

"Oh you silly man! Anybody could have found out I was living with you. Anybody could have gone down to the river and found you. It was certain you'd lead him to Philomena. He's

come here from K.C. to get revenge."

Martin feels pity for her. He's never seen any enotion in her other than petulance or the unmasked pride that she takes in her own lovemaking. He pulls down the phone directory and finds the hospital number. He calls it and asks for Jack Overstreet. Jack is off duty. He asks for Abbott Wilson. The operator says that Abbott is also off duty.

Martin gives Joanie a steady look and says, "Abbott Wilson works there. He's off duty. You're worried. Okay, let's go to the Sanctuary and I'll show you everything is okay."

While he puts on and laces his shoes Joanie goes to the sink and gets his Swedish fillet knife. She turns her back to Martin, rolls the knife in a cup towel, and puts it down her blouse.

"You have an ID?"

"Yeah. Kansas driver's license says I'm just barely twenty-one. But my name on it is Alice, so don't call me Joanie."

"Okay, Alice. Let's go."

Martin gives a five dollar tip to get them into the Sanctuary. The bouncer winks at Joanie's altered ID. When they are clear of the entrance Joanie says, "Thanks for the fin."

"What?"

"The fiver, the five-spot, the fin. You know, Abraham Lincoln, whiskers on his chin, he freed the slaves, and his picture's on the fin."

"Oh--"

"Now, " she says, "look for them!"

They find Philomena and Abbott in a booth upstairs.

Abbott grins and waves Martin and Joanie to the booth.

Martin and Joanie sit opposite them. The waitress hovers, awaiting their order.

"Four Buds with Black Jack back," Martin says. She nods and goes. Joanie sits rigid, staring at Abbott. Martin hopes that with a shot of black label bourbon and a beer chaser she'll be okay. He looks at Philomena who is cramped between Abbott and the wall. She smiles warmly at Martin. He likes the trim curve of her chin and the translucent shadow alongside the left edge of her throat. He sees that she's put on a few strokes of blue-green eyeshadow and some eyeliner. She has red lipstick, and her tongue darts mischievously to the corner of her mouth.

The waitress brings their drinks and sets them down with precision. When she takes up her shot of bourbon, by way of making a mock toast, Philomena mouths silently to Martin, "Save me!"

He looks across the table at Abbott. Then he drinks down his shot and follows it with a mouthful of beer. He stares at Joanie. She gives him a weak smile. Then she tosses off the Black Jack and chases it. She seems to be in control. Abbott says something to her that Martin can't hear. She leans across the table toward Abbott and he says it again. She sits back and nods, again smiling the weak smile. She shows Martin her empty

shot glass.

Martin signals the waitress. Then he leans to Abbott and says, "I'm cutting in. Take Joanie and dance. C'mon now, don't argue."

They both give him cold looks, but eventually they get up to dance. They have to go downstairs to the dancefloor. Then he says to Philomena, "Save you-- I will. I've got a thing about you. I want you. Are you okay? I mean are you in danger with him?"

She laughs a silly, tinkling fresh laugh, fresher than anything Joanie had ever uttered. She says, "No. I'm bored stiff with him. I'm at room fourteen Airport Motel. Meet me there later. I've got a thing about you. I want you."

A recorded woman's voice comes loud singing, Look, Look around-- For me-ee. But it is interrupted by a woman's scream.

When Martin and Philomena get to the stairs they see Abbott lying halfway down them, the fillet knife in his chest. Joanie stands over him.

Martin goes to him. Abbott stares up. People try to come up the stairs but not too close. Abbott says, "Martin! Be cool! The handle moves every time my heart beats. It's so close. Please don't let anybody touch it."

Martin kneels beside him. A hand reaches for the knife. Abbott pushes it away saying, "No. Sonofabitch. Get me an ambulance."

Then a bouncer arrives. "Who did this?" The bouncer asks.

"A white man," Abbott says. "He followed me down the stairs, shoved me to the wall, and stabbed me. Call an ambulance."

Martin stands over him and looks down. His vision fails. He realizes that he's drunk. Through the fog he manages to guard Abbott and the delicate knife and supervise putting Abbott on the stretcher. He goes beside Abbott in the ambulance.

The duty doctor in Emergency knows Abbott. He examines the knife carefully, waiting for the X-rays. Then, after studying the X-rays he carefully pulls it out. "It was close, Abbott," he says. "It was very close. It was in the one exact spot where it wouldn't kill you."

Abbott says, "Thanks, Doc. I might live to be a hundred, but I'll never know why she put it there."

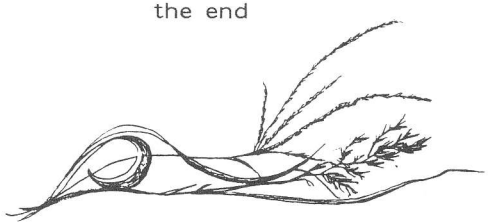
When Martin leaves the hospital the midsummer crickets are singing. He looks up at the sky full of stars. He goes to the Sanctuary and looks for Joanie and Philomena. They aren't there. Then he goes to his apartment. No sign of them. As dawn breaks he is driving past Teepee Junction to the Airport Motel. He parks on the gravel near the shabby cabins. There are only twelve cabins. Philomena told him to meet her in number fourteen. He turns off the engine and rolls down his window, looking east at the golden glow beyond the horizon. It's as if Kansas City were burning just behind the next line of

trees. To his left, across the highway, a large, flat cornfield stirs in the soft breeze. The corn is head tall and tasseling. The rows are precise, and every cornstalk is identical to every other. Across the flat field, in the distance, he sees the airport lights. Then a commuter plane lifts from the runway and comes toward him, rising, angling off to the left. It has a single light in the center of its head like a copepod Cyclops. Then as its sound fades Martin hears the clear, flutelike song of a meadowlark.

He gets out of his car, stretches, wipes his sore eyes, and crosses the highway. He enters the cornfield and walks in the furrow between two rows until his shirt is soaked with the heavy dew. The dew refreshes him. He touches the young ears tucked gracefully in side cornleaves. The ears have soft, fresh silks. The meadowlark sings again, and Martin says, "Why? Why is it that I loved Joanie and along came Philomena, and then I met Abbott and then Joanie stuck my fillet knife up to its hilt in his chest, but did him no serious injury, and he said that a white man passed him on the stairs and stabbed him? Isn't that too much to happen in one day and one night of a person's life? Why did she do it? What does it mean? Does it mean anything? Anything more than the song that bird is singing? Anything more than the pollen falling from these myriad tassels onto the silken tubes of the ears? Each silken tube running down to its individual kernel. Seed. Yes. It means something, but I don't know what."

Another commuter plane takes off from the runway, rising easily in the morning light. There is traffic on the highway, and the day has begun.

the end



Theodora Todd

GARDENS

Marie broke the soil between her fingers until it was a fine powder, decided that it was perfect, then ran her fingers through it, sifting it again. Better than perfect. She took one of the seeds from the packet, and pushed the seed down to an inch below the surface of the soil, covered it, and packed the surface down firm. The sunflowers would grow quickly; in a month their heads would be standing above her own, and their faces would move with the sun all day, watch it rise, climb toward the zenith, and set--the garden's timepiece.

"Phone call," Jeff bellowed from the house, "Long distance. Ballet West. Hurry."

The sound of traffic became louder. It was five o'clock, she thought. She stood up, and looked quickly at each row of the garden. The cabbage and cauliflower already had their leaves tied over their heads, as if in hiding from her. The peas were growing fat. And the tomatoes, V.I.P.'s of the garden, had set. 75 days to maturity. Pole beans, 60 days. Bibb lettuce, a scant 55 days, corn, 90 days. Human being, 7 months, 210 days. She smiled at her little joke, and went to the house.

It seemed as though she had known for weeks, maybe from when it had happened, but it was only just now, while she was putting the sunflower seeds one by one into the row, that she began to think seriously about it; maybe, she told herself, she should find out.

It was Joyce Bennington, the manager of Ballet West, on the telephone. She invited Marie to audition for the company, and Marie said that of course, she would. Marie slowly returned the phone to its place and gazed out the picture window. All my children, she told herself, would be dancers. She would perform, and all her years of work would be rewarded. She felt that it was really a dream so fragile that it would shatter like glass if she smiled, or announced it to Jeff, or really believed too much that it would happen.

Outside the window in the failing light--the trees black against a pink sky--the old man and his dog were returning from the Safeway store a block away. As he always did, he was pushing his grocery cart full of food down "E" street, headed for home. Marie liked to imagine that he lived in one of the shabby wood-frame houses two blocks over, one that had been converted into so many apartments the size of closets that they barely provided shelter. Like holes under rocks, or in hollowed logs. The man walked in the street itself, with an uncertain shuffle two-step, between the traffic and the parked cars. After each one of his steps, the dog would take two in front of him, then wait for the man to catch up. The drivers of the cars, returning home from work as usual and accustomed to the pair, avoided them gracefully. Marie wondered how the old man

could afford so many groceries, how he could manage to eat so much. He was very fat, his legs swollen, and his nose was brown and tuberous, like a potato.

If Jeff was following his routine, he would be at the window in the next room quickly sketching the figure of the man and his dog in orange conte crayon. This was all the work he would do, had done, for days. His canvas, stretched weeks ago, stood in the corner, so white it seemed hot.

After Jeff sketched for about an hour they walked downtown, celebrated the invitation with Chateaubriand at La Parisian. Two bottles of Rothschild Medoc. She talked about stage fright, her weight, her tendon. Jeff told her that she was talented. She smiled. She wanted to believe him, but she didn't dare. When they got home, they made love, passionately recklessly--because of the wine.

They met early the next afternoon in the university cafeteria, after Jeff's workshop, and before her afternoon and evening of warmup workout, and classes: repertory, pas de deux, and pointe. She ate a hot roast beef sandwich, gravy, mashed potatoes, salad, and cake. Jeff noticed, but he said nothing.

She had spent the entire morning at the university hospital outpatient clinic. She had taken Sayers' Busman's Honeymoon to read again; it was usually a long wait. The other women, who were all waiting--no one was ever called in, it seemed--were all pregnant, or carried their recent deliveries with them. The women who were pregnant were far along, shaped like butternut squash, their abdomens the size of watermelons. One woman slapped her three-year-old, Marie couldn't tell for what, and the child cried so much that reading was impossible.

The only other young woman there with no children was a beautiful Persian student, with too much black on her eyelids, who looked only at the hands in her lap. She wore no wedding ring. Marie though about how tough it would be for her if she turned out to be pregnant.

Pregnant. And now she had to tell Jeff. Marie toyed with the frosting on her cake, making criss-crossmarks with the fork.

"You're anxious," he said, "I can tell."

"That's right."

"You have nothing to worry about. An invite is almost like being hired. Have you told Judy?"

"I haven't been to the studio yet."

"Oh." Jeff drank his coffee.

"I've been to the clinic."

"Oh? Your tendon again?"

"No, not that clinic. OB-GYN," she said, pronouncing each letter clearly.

"Alright, who is he?"

"What?"

"You've got the clap. Who is he?"

"You're obnoxious. I'm pregnant."

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha."

It was difficult for her to speak. She looked at her plate.

"It's not a joke," she said finally. She pulled on her jacket, zipped up her dance bag, got up and walked through the maze of tables toward the door.

Jeff followed her. He stopped her. Classes had just gotten out, and people streamed around them, avoiding them deftly. He took her face in his hands.

"Really?" he asked softly.

"Really." She felt choked, and a tear fell down her cheek.

"Ssssh. Don't cry. We'll talk about it later. Anything you want to do, we'll do it. Everything will be o.k."

He walked her to the door of the building, kissed her, saying the same thing again and again. She smiled for him. In the Geology building on the way to the studio, she went into the women's restroom, stuck a finger down her throat, and vomited. Lunch was almost as good coming up as it was going down.

The rest of the world, as usual, disappeared at the barre. The routine was a comfort to her. Sometimes the French echoed in her mind, like a top 40 song: plie, tendu, degage, frappe, rond de jamb au terre, rond de jamb en l'air, grand battement. Thinking these terms, she would suddenly imagine herself a grande mademoiselle in the court of King Louis XIV, all courtesy and style. And then, at the end of the day when her body needed sugar, she'd imagine the legs of her classmates to be carrots, or cucumbers; in these ways she'd manage to maintain a gentle smile when all the others wore masks of painful desperation.

It was easy to be careless, she knew, to forget to pull up out of the waist, to keep stomach in, buttocks tight and under, knees straight; after so many years, she could do these things without thinking, but she had decided never to relax too much, and she checked her alignment again and again. Weight on the ball of the foot, throw the leg up, point, she chanted to herself, point like my toes are guns shooting beams of light around the room, up to my head, torso straight, lean slightly back, neck and shoulders easy, arms rounded, head proud. Control the leg back down, easy, easy, toe touches ground first, through the ball of the foot into a tight fifth. Perfect.

But today, slowly, without being quite aware of it, her concentration began to center on a place an inch below her navel, where there was, she thought, a slight weight, like a ball bearing. For the adagio, this ballast made her more stable, but later, it seemed to grow to the size of a tomato, then to the size of a pumpkin, and when they were working on a sequence from Stars & Stripes, she couldn't seem to get into the air at all.

No one will know, she thought. Everyone had bad days.

After class, Judy, the ballet mistress, winked at her. "Got a secret?" she asked with a smile.

"What?" Marie said. She felt her face growing hot. Do I show already? she thought. Was I that bad?

"Well, congratulations," Judy said, "an invitation means you're in, so don't panic. But you know all that."

They talked about salaries, repertory, the dancers. Judy offered advice for surviving the audition, and invited her to tea sometime after the audition, to gossip and plan.

"Thanks, mom," Marie said.

Judy smiled.

It seemed as if the news had traveled through the wires well. When she arrived early at the Westside Dance Studio where she went for an additional pointe class and chatted with the other dancers while the little girls were in class, she discovered that even Janet, who taught there, knew the tale. The story had wrinkled somewhat by then, however. It was rumored that she had already auditioned, and was awaiting only the routine acceptance before beginning her new job. That would make Janet happy, Marie thought ironically. Janet had always been jealous, even scandalously so, of Marie's extension, speed and control, or at least that was what she had been told.

Janet does have a way with the little ones, Marie had to admit. Their little round bellies, under their little black leotards, seemed to her like tiny green tomatoes, just popped out of the flowers. Later their bodies would thin to the adolescent shape of a ballerina, and they would spend their lives dieting to stay that way. She noted that only one of the girls was overweight; all could move rhythmically across the floor. Coordination now, strength later. The children were obedient, impressed by their teacher and by the romantic music. They all wanted to be sugar plum fairies, she could see that; they smiled, and they worked hard.

Marie wondered when she'd teach a class of her own. Not for awhile, she hoped, though, at that moment, teaching seemed noble. It was a good way to spend your life, after you could no longer perform. She adjusted her suspenders.

Later that night she couldn't eat because of the nausea, so she stuffed soda crackers into her mouth and waited for the queasiness to go away. Jeff ate a huge bowl of ravioli while he looked at the color glossies of oriental rugs in an oversized library book. He'd started dealing in antique rugs a year before and had taught himself the mysteries of those rare and exotic commodities. He had an ad in the paper. Ripping off little old ladies, he called it, but she knew he was fair in his dealings. It satisfied his aesthetic sense, spent the excess energy that she knew he built up when he couldn't paint, and it brought some money in as well. A new rug was half unrolled in the living room.

"New deal?" she asked.

"A lady answered my ad. I had to tell her what she had. See that color? Vegetable dyes. And the pile isn't low at all, just some damage on the fringe. Yep. It's magnificent."

Marie dug her toes into the red pile. "Wish we could keep it. Did you call Ben?"

Ben was their rug connection. He bought the rugs from Jeff, and sold them in Europe for real money.

"Yes. He wants it. I bought it."

"With your own money?"

"She would've sold it somewhere else if I hadn't. She called that bimbo at the Persian Bazaar, and he was going to see her."

"How much?"
"Three."
"Three hundred. That is a deal!"
"Three thousand."
"Oh."
"Ben will pay me right back, plus a thou for us."
"I hope so."
"He's always been good for it. It shouldn't take long. And we need the money. How are you?"
"Fine."
"Do you know what you want to do?"
She shrugged. She was tired.
"What do you think?"
"I think you should make up your mind. You're the one having the baby."
"Well, it's not as if I did it all by myself."
"It's your career."
"Yours too. It's our life."
He just looked at her, then shook his head. "I just think you should make your own decisions."
She watched him absently sop up sauce with a piece of garlic bread. Earlier, in the garden, she had noticed that the green shoots of the sunflowers, almost too small to be seen, had broken the sod, their heads still curled under. Marie thought that she might like to have this baby, to watch it grow. She could make decisions, she thought, but now was not the time.
"I wish I knew what I thought," she said, and she brushed the cracker crumbs from the sofa.
The next day in class she was exhausted halfway through barre. It's like a tapeworm, she thought. She felt its coils growing inside her, and she was depressed. She imagined suddenly that there was no more room inside her body, that she could no longer feed the worm. It crept up her throat, out of her mouth; class went on as usual, nothing ever disrupts class, not even her death by worm-strangulation.
"Serves me right," was the new number-one-song on the top-forty-echo in her brain.
That refrain seemed to fit each Musak version of the top forty hits that played in the Safeway as they shopped for diet soda and beer that evening. Jeff picked up a jar of pickles, grinned, and offered them to her.
"Cliche," she said scornfully. She was tired. How could he goof around? He put the jar back on the shelf.
"Jeff?" she pleaded, "I can't dance like this. It's like a parasite." She struggled with her words. "It's not special, it's just biological. Like a vegetable." She checked the tomatoes. If I couldn't grow better tomatoes than these, she thought, I wouldn't try. "To hell with a litter of ballerinas." she said.
"O.K. You want to make the arrangements, or should I?"
"I will." She put a bag of carrots in the shopping cart.
That night she struggled to wake from a dream about her garden, but the dream refused to let her go, as if hands were holding her under water and she had no air. She struggled to

break away from their grasp, and to swim to the surface so far away, the surface that seemed like plastic, to break it and breathe before her lungs broke. She woke sitting up in bed. The darkness of the room seemed to be inside her, throbbing. Only at sunrise did she fall asleep again.

Two days passed like lead. Every movement she made hurt. In class she imagined pounding her head into the studio mirror, the cracks spreading like fingers through her body.

They went to the hospital on Tuesday for another exam. Jeff sat in the waiting room reading Newsweek. The exam seemed to go on forever, partially because there were student doctors assisting, each attempting tp feel the shape of her growing womb. She signed the release form, took all responsibility for hemorrhage, septicemia, perforation, her possible death. She could get in next Friday.

Marie wanted to go right over to the business office and pay the $500 in advance. Jeff informed her that the money was not there, but would be coming Monday.

Marie wished that he would paint.

Instead, they went across the street to a restaurant where Marie had tea and toast in an attempt to stifle the nausea.

On Monday the money was not there. She knew it without asking Jeff, who sat staring past the evening news, biting his fingernails. The old man shuffled by the window, but Jeff didn't notice.

"You know what the checker told me about that old guy and his dog, when I was at the store?"

"No."

"She said he carted away all the old meat and bones, all the stale bread and garbage. Isn't that weird?"

"Yeah?" She could tell he was interested. "That's weird all right," he said. It was as if she could see the synapses fire in his brain. But then she saw something heavier immediately take over, as if from within. When she was a kid, she'd turn the swings on the playground around and around, twisting the ropes until the twists rolled over and knotted on themselves. For a moment he had loosened, but just as quickly he had twisted again and knotted tight.

"Did you call Ben?" she asked.

"Five times. The answering service keeps taking my number, but he doesn't call back."

"That bastard. $4000 is nothing to him. Does it give him pleasure to make you sweat?"

"Crawl, you mean."

"Maybe we should hire a hit man."

Jeff smiled. "We can't afford it."

"I'll have the baby. We'll raise it like a police dog. Ben will think we forgot, but twenty years from now, Baby Jeff will smash his Iranian ass."

Jeff rolled his eyes back. "No babies!"

"Well, I'm glad you finally have an opinion."

The Channel 12 happy news team laughed at nothing and signed off.

"We could put it off," she offered.

"What?"

"The abortion. I've got a couple of weeks to spare before three months is up."

"When do you audition?"

"Next Wednesday."

"Could you do it pregnant?"

"I could." She didn't want to.

"She could see that he was thinking it over. "No, I don't want you to wait," he said finally. "You're sick all the time."

He looked at her for a minute, but she said nothing. He grabbed his coat, said he would get the groceries, and left.

She drew herself a steaming bath and eased her body into it, as in a dream. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead. She closed her eyes.

She must have dozed, because when Jeff walked into the bathroom and sat on the closed toilet seat, she jumped. He watched her with glistening eyes.

"I took the long way," he said.

"The long way?"

"Yes. I walked around the block and down the corner of, I guess, 2nd and F street, the old man. . ."

Marie ran more hot water.

"He was feeding hundreds of sea gulls. I mean literally hundreds." He was talking fast now. "They were lined up on the telephone wires, on the tops of buildings, like gargoyles. The grass was almost white with them. A few cats sat nearby and let the birds eat--peaceable kingdom, you know? He was feeding them loaves and loaves of stale bread and garbage."

"Is that what he does with all that food? My god!"

"I guess the gulls wait for hours before he gets there. They wait while he takes all that time to walk three blocks--I guess he won't feed them before he gets to 2nd and F."

"He's got thousands of trained sea gulls." She laughed.

"Exactly. It's amazing. And on 3rd and F he feeds the dogs and the cats. He spends his life doing it."

"The St. Francis of F Street," she said.

"You want a beer?" he asked.

She nodded. He got up to leave, then stopped in the open door. "Don't worry about the money, sweetie, it's in the bank,"

"It is? Did Ben's wire come through?" But he was gone. "Well, it's in the bank," she said to the bathroom wall.

They arrived at the hospital--she with an empty stomach--on time, Friday morning, six a.m. The aides and the nurses, everyone, seemed sleepy and disoriented; they looked at her as though she were a hallucination, then they wheeled the hallucination to a room. Jeff walked behind. Other women, pale, breathing through their mouths, slept heavily in the beds across from hers. The aide closed the curtains. She undressed, crawled into bed. They waited. No one came, for hours. They whispered. Jeff went down and bought a deck of cards when the gift shop opened.

She felt calm, so she told Jeff about her dream. She was in the garden, the soil powdery and perfect beheath her bare

feet. She had dug her toes into it. But something was wrong with her cabbages and cauliflowers. They struggled under the strings that held their leaves over their heads. As they wiggled, they looked more and more like stunted, deformed men. Then the entire garden swarmed with body parts. Tomatoes were crucified midgets, pole beans the arms of prisoners shaking cell bars. The sunflowers were fingers stretching up out of the earth. She looked down and was shocked to see her own hands pulling the fingers up. She stopped, and she pinched her breasts until they blistered.

Jeff took her in his arms. "That's just a dumb dream," he said. "Why should you feel guilty? What have you done wrong? Tell me."

She couldn't.

"We were careful," he said, "anyone can make a mistake."

They kissed.

"Did Ben really call?" she asked.

"No, he didn't," He looked at her a few minutes. "I'm painting a picture based on the old man. St. Francis. I started last night while you slept."

"Wonderful! But the money?"

"I found the money."

"Found?"

"The credit union. The rug's too beautiful to let go," he said. She smiled.

When they came to get her, it was almost one. Pre-op was cold. A young man lying on the cart next to hers told her about his motorcycle accident two months before, his numerous surgeries.

They opened a vein in her arm, poured cold sugar water into her. When she was well-chilled, they took her into the operating room, eased her onto the table, and plugged a bottle of something even colder, and she imagined as she drifted off, silver, into her vein. She could hear the doctors joking.

"Jocular doctors," she said, liking the sound of the words. Then, very fast, dreamless sleep. In which she did not exist. Like death.

When she awoke, it was because she realized she had vomited. She was immediately aware of pain. Her arm. The I.V. had slipped. She cried. The third time the nurse came to her, she was able to convince her that something was really wrong.

The clock above her on the wall said 3:15.

She was taken back to the hospital bed, and the waiting Jeff, finally. There she alternately dozed and watched soap operas. She told Jeff bit by bit what had happened to her, how impersonal and frightening it had been, how she wanted to go home to her own bed.

Hospitals were awful, he agreed, and he found a doctor to sign a release to let her go.

"I'm supposed to feel depressed after this. Because of the baby," she told Jeff.

Blessed calm.

The tapeworm was gone. She had the weekend to rest. She would begin a serious workout on Monday, but tomorrow she would arise early, eat a light breakfast, go out to her garden. She would thin the sunflowers so the remaining plants would grow tall and strong. Already she felt lighter, as if she could fly across the room in one long perfect leap.

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

THOMAS F. AVERILL (720 Green, Topeka, KS 66616) teaches creative writing and Kansas Literature at Washburn University of Topeka.

JON BLUMB (433 Ohio, Lawrence KS 66044) is COTTONWOOD REVIEW's photography editor and staff photographer for Spencer Art Museum. He has an MFA from KU.

ANDY BROWN (#503 1000 South Woodlawn, Wichita KS 67218) is a writer of poetry and film criticism. He has been published in AMERICA, GAZEBO, and THE SUNFLOWER.

GARY BROWN (1421 New Jersey, Lawrence KS 66044) is working on a creative writing MA at KU. His fiction has appeared in NEW MEXICO HUMANITIES R. and SHINOLA.

CHARLES CAGLE (Pittsburgh State Univ. English Dept, Pittsburgh KS 66762) has an MFA from Iowa's Writer's Workshop and teaches fiction writing at PSU. He has written TV dramas, over 80 paperback novels, and is the author of Creative Writing: Fiction (Univ. of Kansas).

JAMES B. CAROTHERS (1635 Alabama, Lawrence KS 66044) is a professor at the Univ. of Kansas, and has read manuscripts for COTTONWOOD R. for over a decade. "Friends of the Library" recently won KANSAS QUARTERLY's Seaton Fourth Award.

W. D. CLEMENTS (Journalism Dept., Emporia State Univ., Emporia, KS 66801) is the director of the ESU Journalism program He has taught journalism at several colleges and worked as a reporter on three newspapers. "After the Flood" is an excerpt from a nearly-completed novel, Sneaky Shoes.

VICTOR CONTOSKI (Dept. of English, Kansas University, Lawrence KS 66045) is well known as a poet, having published several books of poetry, most recently Names, and translations. TELLUS and COTTONWOOD REVIEW PRESS are jointly publishing a new volume of his poetry, Prairie Wind.

PATRICIA CULLEN (Rt. 1 Box 15, Peabody KS 66866) held a fiction fellowship at WSU last year. Originally from Massachusetts and New York, she has had stories published in YANKEE magazine.

KEITH DENNISTON (English Dept., Emporia State Univ., Emporia KS 66801) has taught creative writing at ESU for years. He is presently working on a long poem in jazz rhythms and a TV script, "The Window Shoppers," which is being taped in Kansas City, Mo.

BRAD DENTON (830 Kentucky #4, Lawrence KS 66044) is working toward an MA in creative writing at KU, where he teaches com-

position and literature. "Flag Zone" won first place in KU's 1981-82 Edgar Wolfe Fiction Contest.

GEORGE H. GURLEY, JR. (817 Mississippi, Lawrence KS 66044) published a book of poetry with BookMark Press, Fugues in the Plumbing. He is in the real estate business and teaches at Washburn and the Univ. of Missouri at Kansas City. His play, Cures, won first place in the Missouri Arts Council's playwrighting contest in 1978.

ED MOSES (48 Winona, Lawrence KS 66044) teaches English at the Univ. of Kansas. His recent novel, One Smart Kid, was published by Macmillan in 1982.

SUSAN NELSON (155 N. Roosevelt, Wichita KS 67208) teaches at WSU. She has a forthcoming story in PRAIRIE SCHOONER, a poem in PACIFIC R., and a translation of a Spanish play in INTERNATIONAL DRAMA.

MELISSA NOLTE (1112 Connecticut, Lawrence KS 66044) has had stories published in SHINOLA, TELLUS, and KANSAS WOMEN WRITERS. She is former editor of PRAIRIE TAPROOT and WINNERS MAGAZINE and is currently working on an anthology of Lawrence stories.

MICHAEL PAUL NOVAK (St. Mary's College, Leavenworth KS) has published poetry in such journals as POETRY NOW, THE HUDSON R., SENECA R., and two chapbooks from BookMark Press. He has taught English at St. Mary College for 19 years, and will be Senior Mellon Fellow at KU for Spring 1983.

TOM RUSSELL (Olathe, KS) has published in COTTONWOOD R. previously and has his PH.D. from KU.

PHILIP H. SCHNEIDER (3618 Mossman, Wichita KS 67208) has published fiction in NANTUCKET R., BEST AMERICAN SHORT STORIES, NIMROD, and elsewhere. He has taught in the WSU creative writing program for fifteen years.

CHESTER SULLIVAN (1709 Learnard, Lawrence KS 66044) teaches creative writing at KU and has published a novel, Alligator Gar, a folk-history, Sullivan's Hollow, and short stories in MISSISSIPPI R., ARIEL, ARK RIVER R., and others. He recently completed a play to be read by KU's Theatre Department.

THEODORA TODD has published in THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL, HANGING LOOSE, THE MIDWEST QUARTERLY, and KANSAS QUARTERLY. This is her first published fiction.

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