1997

Bright, common nails: a collection of stories

William Mark Poteet

Bright, Common Nails:
A Collection of Stories

Thesis submitted to
The Graduate School of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts
In English

by

William Mark Poteet

Marshall University

Huntington, West Virginia

May 1997

This thesis was accepted on April 9, 1997
Month Day Year

as meeting the research requirements for the master's degree.

Advisor _____
Department of English

_____
Dean of the Graduate School

Dedications

For Jenny, Libby, Amy, Matthew, Leroy, Danny, Sam, and Will

For my mother, Helen Poteet, who taught me how to live.

For my father, William Gilbert Poteet, who reminded me to look back up at the everlasting hills. Sometimes I still see him there.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to the members of my thesis committee -- Professor John Van Kirk, Dr. Nancy Lang, and Dr. Kellie Bean -- for their help and encouragement while I worked on this collection. These people are my teachers; that word speaks volumes.

And I would like to sincerely thank my friends for each individual way that they have helped me and made my life better. To each of you, I owe a lifetime of thanks: Jad, Staci, Todd, Tabithia, Scott, Michael, Donna, Brian, John, Barbara, Sandee, Debra, Val, Jay, and David.

Tim, how can I thank Tim? *"L'amitie est l'amour sans ailes."*

Sheenagh deserves a most special thanks. One day we will get stars in our crowns, Sheenagh. Yours will be blinding.

Finally, I must thank Jeffrey DeMeo; you were always there, DeMeo.

Cleecey, Kentucky 1966

THE NOTEBOOK

(A story about the past)

Harold Smartwell heard the car coming up the road a long time before he saw it. He could hear its rubber tires popping the loose gravel that served to pave the road. Taking a long drink from the Coca Cola bottle he was holding, he squinted down the road toward the setting sun. Maybe somebody he knew was heading toward home, maybe a ride into Cleecey. Harold had promised his mother that he would make it home from the movies before dark, but in early July, dark didn't come until late. Even if he didn't get home before nightfall, he knew he wouldn't get into trouble.

Harold's momma was spending the night with his Granny Smartwell over in Dixon, so they could get up early the next morning and start canning apples. Fred Starnes had given them three bushels of those big golden delicious that grew back behind his place. Harold could picture them now, sitting at Granny's big kitchen table, knives spiraling down the fat apples, hands flying free from thought and leaving a long, unbroken strip of golden skin. They would chat as they cut half way into the peeled fruit, then smartly twist their knife blades until the apples burst in two. From his earliest

memory, he heard their voices catching up on family news, gossiping, and talking about how good an apple pie would taste in deep December. He'd spent his life watching the two women work at putting up everything from blackberries to homemade sausage, but just this year he'd felt the urge to leave the summer kitchens behind.

A three mile walk to Afton put him in a town with a movie theater and a drug store with a soda fountain worked by a pretty high school girl. Just last week she had joked with him about what a good looking young man he was growing into, and he noticed that she always put more nuts on his butterscotch sundae than she did for the other boys. No, nobody would notice the difference if he didn't get home before dark. But he had promised.

He remembered his momma telling him, " Now that you're thirteen, I reckon I can trust you not to burn down the house or have a bunch of men in here playing cards and smoking cigars." She had tried to look serious when she said it, but Harold could see the smile playing at the sides of her lips. With a momma like that, you just couldn't let her down.

The car finally drove out of the glare and came to a stop beside the lone gas pump in front of Maxfield's Store. A brand new 1966 Cadillac. Harold knew it wasn't his ride home. Mr. Maxfield called to him through the screen door, "Smartwell, get out there and pump that gentleman some gas." Mr. Maxfield always talked hateful to kids, but Harold knew if he pumped the gas he'd probably get a free candy bar or something for his efforts. As he walked past the front of the car toward the driver's side, he saw that the dusty license plate said New York.

The man in the car rolled down the window and gazed out at Harold for a moment. "Are you the attendant of this service station, young man?" he asked. The man looked about seventy years old, and even though Harold could feel the artificial cool breeze of the air conditioner seeping out through the window, he saw that the

man was sweating.

"No sir, but I can pump you as much gas as you need," Harold told him.

"Then fill it up," the man said. "And while we are waiting, maybe you can give me some information. I'm trying to find the Smallwood house. I know it's located around here somewhere, but the roads have been changed since I was here last."

Harold laughed. "I know a Smallwood house, mister. But I don't reckon it's the one you're talking about, for two reasons. The house I know burned down a long time ago, and the roads haven't been changed around here ever."

"Don't you tell that man he don't know what he's talkin' about," Mr. Maxfield called out. He'd been standing at the screen door listening. "The main road has been changed; the county rerouted it right after World War Two. And the Smallwood house didn't burn till 'round 1951."

"Then I can sure tell you how to find the Smallwood house," Harold said to the man in the car. "But it would be easier if I showed you. It's pretty hard to find from here." Not exactly the truth, but Harold knew if he showed the man the way to the old house, he'd get a ride about three-quarters of the way home. "Your gas comes to five dollars and fifty cents." The old man paid Harold the money, and he stepped up on the store porch and gave it to Mr.. Maxfield.

"Go on in there and get you an oatmeal cake," Mr. Maxfield said. When Harold walked back out on the porch, he saw that the man had gotten out of the car and was standing beside it talking to Mr. Maxfield. He just heard Mr. Maxfield say, "The boy can show you to the house." The store keeper turned to Harold and said, "Smartwell, take this gentleman to the old Smallwood place. And don't you take no money from him for doin' it. Your ma would skin you if she thought you was out fleecing respectable strangers."

The man said, "get in," and Harold opened the door and sat down in the big,

shiny car. The man got in, started the car, and pulled out into the road. Inside, the car kept the promise of the cool Harold had felt through the opened window. He looked down on the plush seat and saw a notebook resting between him and the man. From its old, faded cover, it looked as if it had been read a thousand times. A worn leather case crowded his feet on the floor. Below its handle, a little brass plate read *Dr. Benjamin Stein.*

"We'll have to go by your home first and ask your parent's permission for you to take me to the house. They might not like you going off with strangers," the man said.

"My momma's visiting with my Granny," Harold told the man. "Besides, she won't care."

"Then we'll ask your father," the stranger told him.

"I don't have a father; he got killed in a mine fall over at Dixon before I was even born." The man simply nodded his head as if he'd heard the story before. "You're a doctor, right?" Harold asked to change the subject.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because only a doctor could afford a car like this."

The man smiled. "Yes, I'm a doctor, but not like you think. Not a medical doctor, but a doctor of linguistics."

"I guess that means you don't give people shots," Harold said.

"No, I teach them about words and how they are said and used," the man told him. "I work at a university in New York City called Columbia. Have you ever heard of it?"

"No sir," Harold replied, "but it sounds awfully important." The stranger threw back his head and laughed a laugh that sounded much younger than his years. "Why do you want to go to the old Smallwood house?" Harold asked him.

"Have you ever heard of the Depression," the man said.

"Yes sir, I've heard my momma and my Granny talk about it. Hard times for folks in these parts."

"Hard times for people everywhere," the man said, "New York city too. I had just graduated from college in 1936 and I couldn't find a job anywhere. President Roosevelt had just started something called the Works Project Administration, and part of it called the Federal Writers Project gave me a job. They sent me here, Cleecey Kentucky, to record the way the people talked. I lived here an entire year, and I boarded with the Smallwoods." Just as the man said the name, Harold saw the turn-off for the old house.

"Turn here," he said. They drove about a quarter of a mile up a dirt road, over grown with weeds that slapped down the sides of the fancy car. Finally, the skeleton of the house came into view. Harold knew the place well. The woods around Cleecey hid many abandoned and burned out farm houses, but of all of those, only the Smallwood house kept its family name. The others had all rotted away or fire had eaten them to the ground. The Smallwood house still stood, in a way. The heavy oak timbers used to frame out its two stories had survived the flames that destroyed the rest of the house. Rain and sun had weathered the charred columns to a gray that matched the limestone foundation. Like puzzle pieces, someone had fitted together hundreds of odd shaped rocks to form the walls of the structure's base. Only the stones used to build the downstairs fireplace and its soaring chimney had been mortared. From the car, the house looked as if a child had drawn it against its green tree background, a crudely penciled sketch, an outline of a home.

The man stopped the car, and they both got out. "Why did you want to come back here and see it?" Harold asked.

"Because soon I'll be a very old man, and then I wouldn't be able to make the trip. I wanted to see this place where I heard all of the words that I wrote down."

Harold noticed that the man had the old notebook in his hand. "This looks like a fine place to sit for a while," he said to Harold. They both walked over and sat down on one of the long, rectangular rocks that had served as a step up to a long vanished front porch. The stranger opened the notebook and carefully turned the yellowed pages of what looked, to Harold, like everyday Bluehorse notebook paper. But what filled the pages didn't look like words. Instead of letters, strange symbols were strung together and decorated with funny little marks over their tops and down their sides. It looked like a code that only a cereal box ring could set right again. As Harold looked more closely at the pages, he realized that he could read some of the words; names, ages, and dates along with perfectly clear English sentences separated the blocks of writing.

"What do all of those squiggly marks mean?" Harold asked.

"The words are written phonetically. That means like they sounded."

"You just wrote down things people said?"

"Yes," the stranger answered. He had begun to look very old in the dying sunlight.

"Not many people around here," Harold said. "Can I look at the book and see if I know any of the names. I promise to handle it easy."

"Of course you can," the man told him. He sounded as if his thoughts had traveled a long way away.

Harold read through the notebook and found many names that he knew. Funny someone now called Old Man Stapleton could ever be thirty years old, he thought. His smile stopped. There on the page he saw a name, *Maurice Smartwell*. The note after it said *fourteen years old*. "Sir, this is my father's name," he pointed at the writing with a finger rough and worn from a boy's summer. "If he said that, please tell me what it means."

The stranger took the notebook and read out loud, *"That log comin-ah-hair*

rollin' over my foot." Harold could read the sentence that followed the words, not that it made much sense. *Regional variant of common Elizabethan phrase "to come within a hair's breadth" i.e. within close proximity. Note abbreviated form by total elimination of the word breadth. Found in Shakespeare: "Of hair-breadth 'scapes i' the imminent deadly breach." Othello I, iii, 134.* Harold knew the man wasn't lying about being a teacher; Shakespeare always meant school.

Still looking at the notebook, Harold heard the man try to say something; but his voice broke a little. After a moment he said, " Your father spoke beautiful words. I'm glad that I wrote them down for you."

"And I'm glad that you found what you were trying to find, mister" Harold replied. "It's getting late, and I promised to be home before dark."

"I think I'll sit here a spell," the man said. "Can you find your way home without any problems?"

"Sure," Harold said. A light breeze blew through the house's skeleton, and the notebook's pages flapped. Harold glanced down to see where the pages stopped. The words written there belonged to some man whose name he didn't recognize, a Mr. Sexton. At some long since closed hardware store a lifetime ago, Mr. Sexton asked for a pound of bright, common nails.

Harold left the stranger sitting there with the notebook opened on his knee.

Cleecey, Kentucky 1969

BACK THROUGH THE DELICIOUS

(A story about water)

When somebody knocks on a door after eleven o'clock at night, it can only mean bad news, Harold thought. He knew his mother was thinking the same thought when he heard her call from her bedroom down the hall. "Harold, go see who's knocking at the door. I don't reckon robbers would try to beat it off the hinges at four in the morning."

Harold didn't even take time to put on his robe. In his undershorts, he went to the front door and pulled back the curtain a crack to see who was there. From the moonlight, he could just make out the shape of a woman carrying something. Seeing no threat, he turned on the porch light and looked again. There stood Alma Starnes, and what she carried was her baby, Pinch. Harold opened the door. "Oh Harold, I'm sorry," Alma said, "I know I probably scared the dickens out of you, but I need to talk to Flora." Harold stepped aside, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, and let her come into the room. His mother, still half asleep and surprised, was already standing there in her

robe.

"Alma honey, what are you doing out in the middle of the night with that baby?" Harold's mother asked.

"I've come to say goodbye," Alma said. "Harold, I left my valise out on the front porch. Would you bring it in."

Harold went to the front porch and picked up the beaten and battered cardboard suitcase. From its weight, he figured Alma had stuffed everything she owned into it. He put it beside the front door and walked to the kitchen where the women had gone. Harold watched as his mother carefully spooned coffee into her big, blue coffee pot. "Funny time to leave on a trip," she said to Alma. "And not exactly the time to be saying your goodbyes."

Alma held out the sleepy-eyed baby and spoke to Harold. "Harold, take Pinch back to bed with you and see if he can't get a nap. What with me packing and getting ready to leave all night, the little feller hasn't had any sleep." She handed the baby to Harold. "I'll come in and get him after me and your mother have had our coffee. And be careful; I didn't name that baby Pinch for no reason."

Harold gently took the baby into the crook of his arm and carried it to his bedroom. He closed the thin door and knew if he listened closely, he could hear everything said in the kitchen. Laying the baby on his soft, white feather tick, Harold pulled the sheet up around it. Though it was May, he worried that the night breeze blowing in through his opened window might chill it. Climbing in beside the tiny boy, he watched it kick and twist in the dark. But the baby didn't cry. It seemed to fall asleep as soon as it worked its way into a comfortable position. Harold knew he couldn't fall asleep, no matter how comfortable he got, with the smell of coffee meaning morning and the sounds coming from the kitchen. And the mystery of Alma's trip. He heard his mother set the heavy mugs on the table and pour what he knew was

her usual good, strong coffee. Then he heard Alma talking.

"I'm leaving in the middle of the night because I didn't want to walk through town, in broad daylight, with a baby in one arm and a suitcase in the other," Alma said. "It would just give everybody an excuse to start talking about my sad, old story again." Harold heard her laugh at that. He knew her story, just like everybody in Cleecey. He figured it was old and sad, but it made him glad to hear she could laugh about it. A genuine laugh.

In her short twenty years, Alma Starnes had gone through a lot of life. When Alma was only ten years old, her mother had died of pneumonia, and left her father alone to raise her. Since Alma was an only child, Fred Starnes decided he could do it without marrying again. He hired a woman from over on Caney Ridge to watch her in the evenings while he worked at the mines.

Harold had always liked Alma; living in a town as small as Cleecey meant you usually became friends with everybody near your own age. And only four years separated them. She had grown up without a mother, and he had grown up without a father. Harold's father, Maurice Smartwell, had been killed in a roof-fall in the mines before Harold's birth. "Half orphans," Alma used to say when they were kids. "Half happy too, though," Harold always reminded her.

So Harold knew before anyone else, heard it from Alma's own mouth and not through town gossip, when the Ike Fields trouble had started a few years back. Ike and Alma, high school sweethearts for years, had planned on getting married after they finished school, but Ike just couldn't wait for a marriage bed. Instead of telling her father or Ike about the baby, Alma waited until they could tell for themselves. Harold remembered that in what seemed like a day she changed from her regular blue-jean shorts to a summer dress. And even he noticed the slight swell that changed her thin outline. She told Harold that she figured she and Ike would get married a little earlier

than planned. It would make her Daddy plenty mad, but he'd get over it.

Ike figured differently. When Alma's condition became clear to him, Ike managed to avoid her and Fred for as long as it took him to join the Army and leave town. And it didn't take long to join the Army in 1967. Fred told everybody in Cleecey that he thought Ike would rather try risking his neck with the North Vietnamese instead of him.

After Pinch's birth, Fred Starnes became much the same man he had been when he was left to rear Alma alone. The gossip and the mean-mouthing soon died down, and Fred became a grandfather just like any other in town.

Some people still talked. Harold looked over at the baby asleep on his pillow and noticed that it wore a romper that his Grandmother Smartwell had made for it. She always sewed one for every new baby in town. The handmade present had his Granny's trademark little ducks embroidered on its front. Harold had walked his Granny to town the day she bought the material for the little romper at Johnson's Store. Mr. Johnson had asked her what she was making with the cloth, and when she told him, he said, "I didn't think a good Christian woman like you would be sewing for a bastard."

Granny Smartwell didn't even look up. Digging for some change in the bottom of her big, black purse, she said, "Seems to me like I sewed some shirts for you just last month." Then she laid the money on the counter, turned around, and left the store. Harold always enjoyed walking his Granny to town.

Not long after that, Alma awoke one morning to realize that her father hadn't come home from work. She waited a few days before she told anyone what had happened. She had come and told Flora in the same kitchen she sat in now, drinking black coffee and saying her goodbyes. And Harold sat at the table with them, drank coffee and listened.

Alma had waited long enough to be worried about her father, then called the mines. The man at the office said that he hadn't shown up for work that evening, and that everyone was concerned. Fred Starnes never missed work. Alma felt the truth, she'd said, before she walked into his bedroom and looked. All of his clothes were gone. The only explanation he left, an envelope on his dresser, contained eight hundred dollars in fifty dollar bills, not even a note. And now Alma had to tell another story, had to try to explain her life again. It seemed to Harold that the baby had put into motion stories, tales piling up as fast as the Arabian Nights.

Straining to hear the women talk, Harold barely felt the baby snuggle to his bare chest and grab at his arm with its little hand. From the kitchen, Harold heard Alma say, "I'm going looking for him, Flora."

"Good Lord, Alma, you going to go tramping through those Asian jungles carrying that baby on your hip," Harold heard his mother ask.

"You thought I meant Ike Fields?" Alma asked and laughed. "That jungle can have him. Just swallow him up for all I care. I'm going looking for Daddy."

"He's been gone for almost six months," Flora said, "don't you think if he wanted to be found, he'd have gotten in touch with you. He hasn't even sent you a picture postcard. Your daddy made his choice; now leave him alone."

"At first I thought the same thing," Alma said, "but I've had a sign. It told me I can't stay here anymore."

"What do you mean, a sign?" Flora asked.

"The well back through the delicious ran dry."

Harold, still listening from his room, couldn't remember hearing anything in town about the Starnes's well running dry. Everyone in Cleecey knew about the well, because most everyone believed that it healed. "It doesn't cure people," Harold's Granny once told him when she sent him there to get some of the water for her. "It

heals them; there's a difference." People went there and carried the water home in Mason jars. They drank it for everything from the toothache to things you didn't talk about, like cancer. Granny Smartwell swore by it for her arthritis.

The natural well worked its way up to the ground and into a circle of rocks underneath a giant golden delicious apple tree. According to every old man that sat on the bench in front of the court house, the apple tree alone was over a hundred and fifty years old. God only knew how long the well had been there. The tree's lush limbs grew almost down to the ground, and you had to lift them up to get back to the well, not an easy task in early summer when golden fruit the size of softballs weighted the branches. Harold had seen the apples grow so large that they split wide open and dripped their sweet juice on the ground.

"The water's had sand and mud in it for about a month now," Alma said. "Then yesterday I went out for a drink, and the well was empty. Dry as east Egypt. Daddy used to say it would never go dry. Hadn't in all the years that our family has lived there, and with Pinch that makes six generations. When I was a little girl, Daddy used to tell me that it was a million years old and reached right down into the middle of the world. An artesian well."

"Alma, I don't think you could call it a sign from the Lord just because that old well went dry," Harold heard his mother say.

"I didn't say from the Lord, Flora. I just said a sign. When I found out I was going to have Pinch," Alma told her, "I'd go out every day and get a pitcher of that water and stand there under the tree and drink it down. When the weather got cold, I even had to break the ice to get to it. I craved that water. After I started showing and Daddy knew, he said he figured out then why I'd been drinking all that well water. He thought I was drinking it to make the baby go away. Just shrink up in my body and dry away to dust, that's how he put it. But he was wrong. I wanted that baby, and I wanted

him fat and healthy, just like I got him. Then Daddy left, and I swear that well started going bad the same day. I remember because the very day he left, somebody--I can't remember who--came by to get a jar of water, and it scared me to think they might ask about Daddy. But all they did was knock on the door and ask me when the water had turned brackish. I remember now, old Mr. Peters, and he held the jar up to the sunlight and the water looked dark. Always before it had been as clear as window glass."

"Alma, go back home," Harold's mother said. "And tomorrow we'll talk about this in the daylight."

"No, Flora," Alma said, "I've decided, and I can't turn back. I left a letter with Mr. Deskins down at the bank about renting the house and the land. Told him I'd call when I get settled."

"Get settled where?" Harold heard his mother ask.

"I'm going to walk down to the bus stop and catch the first bus that leaves for Detroit." Alma told her. "I know he went there."

"How do you know that?" Flora asked the girl.

"He has a cousin up there. Daddy used to say that Cleecey, Kentucky was no place to live and die a whole life. He thought he could get a job in one of those big car factories."

"What if you can't find him?" Flora asked.

"Then I'll just keep looking. Daddy didn't really leave; he just got confused. He never would talk about it, what happened with me and Ike; he just pretended it didn't happen like it did. Like he was trying to raise me by himself all over again. When he understands, we'll come back."

"Alma, honey, you're acting without thinking," Harold heard his mother say, but he knew, just as well as his mother did, that Alma had thought out the plan. That made it even sadder. "Can't I talk you out of it?" Flora asked.

"You knew you couldn't when you first saw me standing in that doorway with my baby and a suitcase. I wanted to tell you so you wouldn't worry about what had happened to me, and so you could tell the few other people in this town who care anything about me. It's the Starnes in me, leaving by the dark of night just like Momma and Daddy both did. I used to think I could find her too, but I know now that Daddy's the only person I can find. I'll go get Pinch; we have to get going and catch that bus."

Before Alma could get to the bedroom, Harold reached over and stroked the little boy's downy head. He had always hoped that maybe he'd be the one to teach Pinch how to throw a baseball, or climb a tree, or how to act like you were paying attention in church when you really weren't. Teach him the kind of things that Harold's Uncle Drew had had to teach him. Not lessons on being a man, nobody could teach that, just lessons on being a person.

When he heard Alma's hand on the doorknob, Harold closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. He didn't want Alma to know that he had listened to her troubles being laid out on his mother's kitchen table. Alma opened the door and turned on the overhead light. She walked to the bed and gently shook Harold's arm. "Harold, look what you've let this baby do to you in your sleep." Harold looked down at the sleeping child and saw that it had managed to catch the skin of his arm between its little fingers. With tender, constant pressure that Harold hadn't even felt, it had pinched a tiny bruise on his arm.

"I warned you," Alma said as she smiled down at him. "Harold, let me tell you something to remember when you have a baby of your own. They do little things like that to you. But you can't ever get mad at them for it. They don't mean no hurt; they just don't know any better." She picked up the sleeping baby and broke the grip it had on Harold's arm. "Harold, I need you to do me a favor," Alma said. "I'm leaving town for a little while, and I don't have time to do it myself. That old well back in the apple

tree ran dry on me. Nobody can get any help from an empty hole in the ground. Go over to my house tomorrow and fill it in with rocks and dirt. You can use the shovel and wheel-barrow in the shed out back of the house. Take this for your trouble," and she pressed a dollar bill in his hand.

"Alma, I don't mind to do it for you, but I can't take your money. You might need it."

"Yes, Harold, you take that money. Now come on out here and say a proper goodbye to me and Pinch. And put your robe on; you've gone and turned into a man on me."

Harold and Flora went with her to the front porch. They said their proper goodbyes and watched her as she walked down the road, into the edge-light of morning, toward town "Let's go in and get some sleep," Harold's mother said. "We've lost Alma. Never see her again. I started to tell her to write me or call if she found Fred, but I could see in her eyes that she didn't even want me to say it. I could see in her eyes that she thought the best thing to do was leave. I feel sorry for her, but I couldn't stop her. Come here a minute." She motioned Harold the few steps toward her. She untied the belt of his terry cloth robe and ran her hands around until they joined on the naked skin of his back. Pulling him close, she held him tightly for a moment. "You're not a man just yet, Harold Smartwell, don't care what nobody else says. You'll know when soon enough."

"How's that, Mom?" he asked.

"'Cause I'll tell you when, that's how. Now go back to bed, and this time you can really go to sleep."

Harold slept late that day, so the sun was already high in the sky when he arrived at Alma's house to fill in the well. He got the wheel-barrow and the shovel from the shed and went back to a little copse of woods where the towering delicious tree

stood. When he reached the tree, he pulled back the dense limbs and made his way through the leafy tunnel, pushing aside the early golden apples. Thick, green moss carpeted the floor beneath the tree, and shade-loving flowers, may-apple and blood-root mostly, surrounded the rock rim of the well. The place had the sweet, dark smell of old, pleasant secrets. An ancient, wooden and brass fitted lid capped the well's mouth, to keep out twigs and leaves. When Harold grabbed the handle of the cover to lift it, he heard an unexpected sound. He lifted up the lid and peered down to see the bright water bubbling up as clear and cold as it had for a million years.

Cleecey, Kentucky 1967

THE TOOTHPICK STAR

(A story about love)

Harold Smartwell could see his Uncle Drew through the thick glass of the classroom window. Harold centered him in a single pane and watched awhile. He stood underneath an oak tree, leaning against it with his arms crossed over his chest. Framed in the window he looked just like a photograph someone had snapped and trapped in a five-and-dime store frame and hung there on the wall. Drew had been standing there about ten minutes, probably waiting for the sound of the same bell that would free Harold into the sunny September afternoon. Suddenly, Harold realized a simple truth; he had never seen Drew stand still before.

The longed for bell finally roused Harold from his daydream, so he gathered his books and left the room. As soon as he stepped out the front door of the school, Drew saw him and waved him over. "Why aren't you working?" Harold asked him.

"Figured the fishin' today was too good for me to be sitting in the seat of that old truck," Drew replied. Since he had graduated from high school that spring, Drew had

been driving a delivery truck for Harmon Dry Cleaners. "Women over on Palmer Street probably been waitin' all day for me to carry in their clean, white sheets. Hate to let them down 'cause most of them act like they'd like for me to help them wrinkle up all those fresh pressed sheets." Drew grinned like a big cat and pushed back a lock of his coal black hair. Harold laughed, but he knew there was probably some truth to Drew's joke. Even though Drew was his uncle, there were only four years between them. Drew was his mother's baby brother. "The real truth is, a machine's broken and there wasn't any cleaning to deliver today. Mr. Harmon gave me the day off, so I decided I'd take my nephew fishing. How about it?" he asked.

Harold noticed two fishing poles propped against the tree. "Sure," he replied, "but I'll have to go home and tell Momma where I'm going."

"I already went by and told Flora I was kidnapping you for the afternoon," Drew said. "Only thing she said was for me not to get you into any meanness, and to have you home by ten o'clock. Looks to me like a young man of fourteen years could stay out past ten on a Friday night."

"Oh, I can," Harold said. "She just doesn't want me out any later than that with you." They both laughed. Drew was Harold's only male kin. Harold's father had been killed in a roof-fall in the mines. He had died exactly one month before Harold was born. He often thought that his mother wished Drew were older, to take up some of the slack of not having a father. But the only place Drew filled, in Harold's life anyway, was that of an older brother, constantly dangling temptation in front of him.

"I haven't been fishing since I went up to the lake with you and Sam last year," Harold said. He saw a dark look cross Drew's face. Sam Carter was Drew's best friend. Harold knew they had started school together when they were six years old.

Sam and Drew--everybody had always said it that way--in the same breath, not being able to separate one from the other. They even looked a little alike except for

their hair; Drew's was a shiny black and Sam's a coppery gold. One day, while waiting outside the principal's office, Harold accidentally overheard one of the teachers, Miss Hall, tell the school secretary that she thought Drew and Sam were "The most beautiful damned bookends God ever made. Too bad though," she added, and both of the women laughed.

"Well, I ain't Sam Carter," Drew said and snapped Harold back to the present. "And my daddy don't own a fancy cabin on the lake or a brand new boat. So if you want to go fishin' with me, Mr. Smartwell, you'll just have to walk down to the river like common folk." Harold picked up one of the poles, and carrying his school books, he headed toward the river with Drew.

As they walked toward the river, Drew talked the whole time--he talked about the weather; he talked about baseball; he talked about the dry cleaning business. He also threw rocks at selected trees, and even made a fool of himself by whistling at a big black Cadillac full of old women-- doing thirty miles an hour-- on their way to where ever it was that old women went. Harold got the feeling that he was trying to make up for those few odd minutes he had stood motionless under the tree.

They finally reached the river and found a good place to fish. Fishing had never been one of Harold's favorite things to do, but he pretended to enjoy himself. Drew's glowing company was enough to make him feel good, even if the glow was strangely turned down a few notches.

They both busied themselves baiting hooks from the can of worms Drew had brought along and making cast after cast into the clear water of the little river. Harold tried to ease Drew into talking about whatever it was that was bothering him, but each time he tried Drew hushed him. "No wonder we ain't catchin' anything," he whispered to Harold. "You talk so much every fish in the river can hear you."

After an hour without a bite, they decided to move on down-stream for better

luck. But after another hour the best either of them had done was a hand-long bass Harold caught and threw back in.

The sunny autumn afternoon had begun to darken, and the evening air was cool and crisp, even for early fall. Drew finally spoke, "I'm gettin' cold, and I only know of one more place where we'll be sure to catch a fish this late," he said. "You ever been to Big Ed's?" he asked Harold.

"Not exactly," Harold answered.

Drew laughed. "You've either been there or you haven't, Harold, which is it?"

"Last summer me and Tommy Jackson sneaked out there one night. We didn't go in. We just sorta stood off the road there and listened to the music and watched people come and go."

"I doubt Miss Betty would've let you in even if you'd tried," Drew said. "She just started letting me and Sam in last year."

Harold clearly remembered the summer night he and Tommy Jackson had stood outside of Big Ed's Cafe. It was a restaurant for colored people, but occasionally white people went there for the food and the beer. Harold had watched as men came out with girls on their arms--long-legged black girls, some the color of chocolate, some the color of cinnamon. He could still hear the drunken laughter and hear the juke box inside wailing out black music that you couldn't find on any radio station. His mother would have killed him if she had known he even stood outside. He didn't want to think of what would happen if she found out he had actually gone inside. "It's getting dark. Let's just go on home," he said to Drew.

"For God's sake Harold, I can keep you out till ten. You think I'm gonna take you home drunk and tell Flora I had you in a juke joint. Anyway, it ain't nearly what you think it is."

Before Harold could say yes or no, Drew had already climbed the river bank

and was heading down the river road toward Big Ed's Cafe. Harold caught up with him and said, "I'll go in, but only if I can drink a beer--a whole one, all to myself."

"See," Drew said, "I knew behind that good little boy there was a hellion somewhere. Figured it'd take more than just a beer to get him to come out though."

They had walked about a mile when they heard the music pouring out into the night air. As they rounded a bend in the dirt road, the building came into sight. The cafe was little more than a big shack. Even in the dark, Harold noticed that it pitched wildly to one side, defying gravity. It simply looked as if it would fall over at any minute. "You sure it's safe to go in there?" he asked Drew.

"I know it's louder than a church meetin'," Drew said, "but I promise not to let anything get you."

"That's not what I meant , Drew. It looks like the least breeze or one drop of rain water would bring the whole place over."

Drew laughed. "Been standing there long as I can remember in pretty much the same shape. It's had plenty of chances to fall. Don't see why it would choose tonight. It might look bad from the outside, but I'll tell you one thing, Harold, this place will sure take you in."

Over the door was a hand-lettered sign that read "BIG ED'S CAFE" and a neon sign in the window blinked "SCHLITZ BEER." When they entered, the first thing Harold noticed was the smell. Not just one smell, but what seemed like a hundred all at once. The smell of hot lard, cigars, beer, sweat, and perfume. A fat colored woman walked up to them and froze Drew in her stare. "Drew Thomas, whata you mean bringin' this snip of a boy in here? The police come in here they put you, me, Big Ed all in the jail."

"Miss Betty, this is my nephew, young master Harold Smartwell," Drew said with a glint in his eye. "We're just here to eat some fish and drink some beer. I, myself, won't be gettin' rowdy, but I can't promise anything about young Harold."

Miss Betty studied them for a moment and then sighed a sigh that made her huge breasts heave up and down. "Drew, if you wasn't the prettiest white boy I ever laid eyes on I wouldn't let you get away with half the stuff you get away with in here." She slowly cut her eyes toward Harold and wagged a thick finger at him. "And young master Harold Smartwell here better be ready to haul his ass out the back door the minute I say scat, understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, Miss Betty," Drew replied, "we'll just find us a table in the back. Why don't you bring us some of that bass I smell frying, some hot-water cornbread, cole slaw, and two glasses of beer."

They made their way through the crowded room and walked toward the back. Harold thought everyone would stare at them, but no one even seemed to notice except a few people who said "hello" to Drew as they passed the tables. When they got to their table, Harold realized he had brought his school books in with him. He sat them in an empty chair beside Drew. Drew reached over and picked up the library book on top. "You read this yet?" he asked. Harold shook his head no. It was John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* ; he had to read it over the next couple of weeks for a school report. "It's a good book," Drew said. "I remember reading it." And he carefully laid it back down on the stack of books. Just then Miss Betty stepped up to the table with their beer.

"Your fish'll be out here after while," Miss Betty said. "How's Sam gettin' along at that big college?" she asked Drew.

"Don't really know, Miss Betty," Drew replied. "He sent me one letter, but it didn't say much."

"I sure do miss him comin' in here. Ain't right you comin' in here by yourself all the time," Miss Betty said. "But you know white folks with a little money, always wantin' to go farther and fair better. He ever come back this way you send him out here to see

Miss Betty."

"I wouldn't waste my time lookin' for him," Drew said. "I know I sure-the-hell won't." Miss Betty glanced at Drew with a question in her eyes, thought better about it, and left the tall glasses of beer on the table.

"You didn't tell me Sam wrote you a letter," Harold said.

Drew picked up the cold beer and took a sip. "I just got it the other day. It was on this fancy paper that said 'The University of Kentucky' across the top with this big seal and all. He's joined one of those fraternities, the same one his daddy was in. He kept saying things like you'll have to meet my brother Jack or my brother Rob. Soon as all those college boys find out how much money his daddy has they'll be just like real family. Borrow him dry."

Harold knew how much money the Carters had. All you had to do was look at that big house at the end of Palmer Street, or know that Sam's father was the president of the biggest coal company around Cleecey, Kentucky. And there were a lot of coal companies around Cleecey.

"Most of them are just there for draft deferments anyway," Drew said. "I'll bet 1967 has been a banner year for the young men of our country to seek higher education."

Miss Betty returned with a platter and placed their food on the table. Harold was quiet while they ate. He didn't want to bring up Sam's name anymore. It seemed like just the mention of it put a mean look on Drew's face. Drew finished eating before Harold and ordered another beer; Harold was still nursing his first one. It wasn't the first beer he had ever drunk, but it was the first one he hadn't had to share with somebody behind a shed or in a basement.

By the time Harold had finished eating, Drew had put away two more beers. He wasn't drunk yet--but well on his way.

"Harold, if I tell you something would you promise not to tell anyone?" Drew asked.

"Sure, Drew," Harold replied, "you know I can keep a secret."

"I don't know why, but I just gotta tell somebody this, and that somebody's you," he said.

Harold saw that his face was flushed from the beer and a little line of sweat had formed on his brow. The unruly lock of hair had fallen back down, but this time he didn't brush it back with his hand. Harold thought, if a stranger was looking at him, he'd look almost dangerous. But it was just Drew, and to Harold he looked sad.

"Back last July I got a phone call from Mr. Carter. He asked me if I'd come over to the house. Sam was already up in Lexington. He had to go up to the school for a week of orientation. Now here's the part you can't tell anybody," Drew took another long drink of beer. "I'd been waiting for Mr. Carter to call. See, I thought all along that he wanted me to go away to school with Sam. Don't ask me why; I don't know. But you know that I practically grew up in that house. People always said that Sam and me were just like brothers, but they were wrong. It's hard to explain, Harold. There was always something that tied me and Sam together, bound us closer than brothers. Maybe someday you'll understand what I'm talking about. All you need to know now is that there wasn't anything wrong about it. Not that I could see anyway.

"So when Mr. Carter called, I was over to that house in a flash. It wasn't that I wanted a handout from Sam Sr. I thought he'd tell me I could borrow the money and pay him back when I finished school. I was excited. Can you believe it, excited." Drew's voice faltered a little. "Be back in a second," he said. He got up and crossed the room to a cigarette machine. He sat back down and lit one of the Camels.

"When I got to the house, Sam Sr. was waiting for me on the porch. He had a couple of cardboard boxes. He pointed at them and said 'We had to get Sam all new

clothes for school. His mother and I thought you might like some of his old things. I'm sure you're about the same size.' He wanted to give me Sam's hand-me-downs."

"Did you tell him to go straight to hell," Harold asked, seeing now why Drew had been so hurt.

"That's the funny thing," Drew said. "I took the clothes. Didn't even open the boxes. Just took them home and pushed them under my bed.

Then he started sayin' how it was all for the best, Sam going away. How we were both men now and had more important things to do than tag along after each other all the time." Drew paused to take a pull on the cigarette. He exhaled a cloud of smoke that rose and quickly mingled with the hazy air of the cafe. "Then he said that Sam and me were a little too close. And that he saw no need for Sam to know we had had 'our little talk.' That's when I told him to go straight to hell."

"You didn't tell Sam what he said?" Harold asked.

"I didn't even think I could face him," Drew said with a laugh. "I could always look Sam in the face and tell him anything easy as lookin' at myself in the mirror. After he got back from Lexington, I knew he was only goin' to be home for about a month. It's like I wanted to talk to him , but I also did everything I could to avoid him. Then one day I came home from work, and I heard him laughin' as I came up on the porch. Sure enough, he was sittin' on the couch with Momma, and she was laughin' at one of his jokes. He'd brought her a box of bourbon balls from Lexington. And I hate to tell you this son, but your Granny's Baptist beliefs don't extend to candy."

The juke box in the corner had been silent while Drew talked. Just then a tall, skinny black man dressed in a greasy apron walked over to the big Wurlitzer and dropped some coins into it. As the music seeped out, he turned around and grabbed Miss Betty as she was on her way back to the kitchen. He twirled and danced the big woman between the tables as if he were threading a needle. The man on the juke box

was singing about a satin doll. "Big Ed, you are one dancin' fool," Miss Betty said between girlish titters. Big Ed spun Miss Betty toward the tables in the back and came to a stop right in front of Drew. "Miss Betty, looks like Drew here's had one too many beers and two too many blue days. You go on home, Drew," Big Ed said with a smile.

"I'm goin' pretty soon Ed. Got a curfew on me tonight," Drew said and nodded his head toward Harold. And they danced on back toward the front of the cafe.

"What did Sam want?" Harold quickly asked, hoping Drew hadn't forgotten the thread of his story.

"He said that his mother had accidentally packed his favorite sweater with the clothes that his father gave me. I asked him to tell me which one it was, and I'd run back to my room and get it. 'You well know which one it is,' he said. 'I can't believe you're trying to keep my old navy sweater with the patches on the elbows.' I almost laughed at him like I always used to before. That sweater was mine. He had picked it up one day and put it on, and from then on the only place I saw it was on his back. Sam had a way like that. It was like anything he touched just became his, and you didn't mind. I never grudged him anything our whole life."

Drew paused for a minute and studied Harold's face. Harold realized that Drew was giving him a chance to stop the story, say it was late--time to go home. "Go on," Harold said.

"I went back to my room to get the sweater, hopin' he wouldn't follow me. I was down on my knees, lookin' for the boxes under my bed, when I heard the door close. He was standin' with his back to it like I was goin' to try to run. Sam looked right at me and said, 'You can't hide from me in Cleecey, Drew. It's just too small.'

Lexington's a pretty big town, I told him. You think you can hide from me there? He had me down on my knees, Harold, right in front of him. And then he said what I dreaded hearing. He just started talking, and I couldn't get away. He said, 'We have

to talk about it, Drew. You know damned well that we do. I won't go if you don't want me to. I'll turn around, walk out of here, and Monday morning you'll find me sitting at a desk over at my father's place. All you have to do is say it Drew; I've already said it. It's just a few words.' But you know, Harold, all I could do was look up at him, and even doing that about killed me. I haven't seen him since then, just that letter the other day."

Harold wished he hadn't drunk the beer; maybe it was the alcohol that made his thoughts reel around Drew's story. He wanted to ask what Drew could have said to keep his friend from going, though he felt Drew didn't want to tell him. Somehow Drew had made that clear. Harold thought he knew, though the answer confused him. But he wanted to take away the hurt he saw in Drew's dark eyes, do him that favor if he could. "What did Sam want you to say, Drew?" he asked, not able to hide the worry in his voice. "Tell me, please; I want to know."

"Look here, I'll show you something that'll cheer you right up," Drew said. He reached over and picked up a shot glass full of toothpicks. Carefully counting out five of the long, flat slivers of wood, he took each one between his thumbs and bent it until it broke--but not apart. The tiny fibers of the wood held together. Finally, he had them all bent like arrow heads. Then he pulled back the corner of the old checked table cloth and began arranging them on the smooth, flat surface of the table. He placed all of their points together so the arms radiated from the center likes spokes in a wheel, like an asterisk that had risen off a page and taken on dimension. Then Drew slowly stuck his finger in the glass of beer and lifted it up. One single, golden drop of the liquid hung from his finger tip like a tear. He steadied his finger above the center of the toothpicks and lowered it until the drop of beer touched the heart of his little construction. "Now watch," he said. Harold watched as the moisture began to swell the wood and the arms began to push against one another with equal pressure. It was

as if a problem in a science class had come to life -- when the force of two objects meet, the only direction they have left to move is apart. The toothpicks spread until they reached their limit. They formed a perfect five point star.

Harold heard the voice of Miss Betty, who had been watching silently behind them. "I thought after Sam Carter left these parts I'd never have to watch crazy white boys mess up my tables again." She spoke to Harold, "He used to do that for Drew all the time--always make Drew laugh. But it is right pretty, ain't it." She took the beer glasses from the table and started to leave.

"Do you know the time, please?" Harold asked her. She reached down and looked at an old Timex she had safety-pinned to her dress. "Goin' on ten," she said. "You boys better be gettin' on home now."

Harold gathered his school books from the chair and went outside while Drew paid the tab. He found the fishing poles by the door where they had left them. Drew came out. "Damn, it got cold on us," he said.

"Good," Harold told him, "maybe it'll sober you up by the time I get you home. Thought you were supposed to be looking after me."

"I reckon I'm not so drunk I can't get home," Drew said with a smile. "Anyway, I promised Flora I'd have you home by ten."

"I better be the one doing the taking home," Harold said. "Granny will probably kill us both."

"No, she'll be in bed asleep," Drew said. "She gets lonely if I'm not there and goes to bed early."

The cold night air hurried them the mile or so to Drew's house. When they got there, Drew quietly opened the front door, and they went straight to his bedroom. He was still a little drunk, and Harold wanted to make sure he made it to his bed. He didn't want his Granny to find Drew sprawled on the couch in the morning.

When Harold turned on the light, he saw there were some clothes laid out on Drew's bed. Old things that had been carefully folded--a sweat shirt, some old cords, a faded blue sweater with rough cowhide patches on the elbows. Then he saw an opened cardboard box on the floor beside the bed. Drew was behind him, undressing for the night. Harold started to move the clothes from the bed, but Drew reached out and gently grabbed his wrist to stop him. "I'm a big boy now," he said. "I can put myself to bed. Just turn out the light as you leave."

Harold walked to the door and turned out the light. Then he heard Drew's voice, just a whisper, "Harold, don't leave just yet." Harold waited a full solid minute, standing there in the dark. Then he heard Drew say, "Thanks for listening to what I had to say tonight. Head on home now. Be careful." And Harold quietly left the house.

He only had a short walk home so he didn't hurry.

BLACK BOTTOM BREW

My mother took the gospel to the Mountain Haven Rest Home every Thursday. Not that she thumped the Bible or anything like that, but she held a membership, in good standing, with the Baptist Woman's Home Missions. All of the ladies had their own mission works, and mother often said she felt the old and infirm in the rest home profited most by her Christian duty. I always thought she visited there because it was only about a half-mile from our house. And since mother didn't drive a car, she could walk. Also, the rest home only had six rooms, so she didn't have to minister to an over abundance of souls. You couldn't call mother lazy; she just believed in a kind of religious economy.

During the warm weather months, when school let out, she made me go with her. This might sound like punishment for a boy who had so many other things to do on a summer day, but I really didn't mind. I'd help her carry things like a plate of fudge she'd made for the residents or a paper sack of the little tracts she gave out.

Those tracts made pretty good reading if you couldn't find any comic books around. They had titles like "The Devil's Plan for Your Life," and "Don't Play Hide and

Seek With Jesus." And, just like comic books, they had a fair amount of pictures to help the story along. The drawings usually showed a man who thought he was in pretty good shape life-wise, but the devil was just waiting around the corner to tempt him with liquor or lust. And I mean really waiting around the corner, hiding there with a bottle of eternal damnation to offer the poor guy. You knew it was eternal damnation because it said so right on the label. Whoever drew the pictures never actually depicted lust, which I felt a real shame. It all seemed to me a long way to go to make a point, especially at the Mountain Haven Rest Home. Everybody in the place looked about ninety years old, and I didn't feel that lust or booze either one presented a big problem for any of them.

It also helped that I knew somebody who worked there. Wendell Johnson, who was in my same grade at school, swept and mopped at the rest home because his mother worked there as the cook. I'd usually look him up while mother did her mission visiting. The home, really just a big frame house, had been bought by some people named Merriweather so they could go into the old folks business. Wendell usually didn't have that much to do, so he'd show me around.

He knew all of the residents by name and had introduced me to almost all of them. One of the old women, Miss Bertha Bascom, had two fingers that had grown together. She would show you if you asked. I never asked, but Wendell did. The first time he took me into her room, he looked right at her and said, " Miss Bertha, show Petey here your finger." He said it just that casual, whereas it would have scared me to death to ask a person to show something that awful. But from where she was lying in her bed, she shot up her hand just like she was blessing the congregation. And sure enough, the two middle fingers on her left hand were joined right down the center.

Miss. Bertha looked me square in the eye and said, "Mark this well boy, nature

can be meaner than a black snake." Then she threw back her head and laughed like she'd said the funniest thing in the world.

I got along pretty well with the rest of the residents, but none of them had anything as interesting as that one big double finger.

The only resident in the home that Wendell had never introduced me to lived in room three. "His name is Mr. Light, and he don't like visitors," Wendell told me one day. From the way he said it, and the fact that the door to room three always stayed closed, I could tell I shouldn't ask for details.

One August day, on our walk to the rest home, the weather had turned so hot that mother's fudge began to melt and run together. As soon as we got there, she asked me to take the candy to the kitchen and ask Mrs. Johnson to put it in the refrigerator till it hardened up.

I smelled my way to the kitchen where Mrs. Johnson was frying chickens right and left. She had two big stoves going at the same time, covered with more pots and pans than most people own in a lifetime. She took one sad look at mother's runny fudge and stuck it in the refrigerator. See, mother's candy didn't have much of a reputation around town even when it held together in one solid lump. Melted, it lost what little charm it had.

Well, Mrs. Johnson grabbed a plate and started piling food on it. "Wendell couldn't come today," she said. "He's helping his daddy clean out the basement. Could you please take Mr. Light's lunch up to him, Petey?"

I didn't want to do it, but Mrs. Johnson looked all hot and tired from working in that kitchen where the temperature could have popped hell's hinges. She handed me a tray and filled the plate with some of that chicken she'd been frying, mashed potatoes and gravy, snap peas, and a tall glass of ice tea. It all looked good, but my attention was drawn mainly to a big old piece of coconut cream pie topped by about

four fingers of meringue.

"You take this to room three," Mrs. Johnson said. But just as I was walking away, she reached out and snatched the piece of pie from the tray. "Land's sake," she mumbled to herself, "Mr. Light can't have that."

I didn't know what he'd done to have his pie taken away, but thought it pretty mean minded to punish old people. Even if they didn't like visitors.

Balancing the heavy tray all the way down a long hall, I finally came to room three's closed door. I put the tray on the floor and knocked kind of gentle. "What!" came a real hateful voice through the wall. "I brought your lunch," I hollered back. "Do you want it?"

"Of course I want it, you damned fool," the voice from the other side of the door boomed. "Bring it in."

I eased open the door, picked up the tray, and walked into room three. There, propped up with pillows, in an old iron bed lay Mr. Light. Well, half of Mr. Light anyway. I could tell from the way that the bed sheet sunk down flat beneath his waist that he didn't have any legs. He looked like he'd done seen the good side of eighty. And though he still had all of his hair, it had refused to turn white like most old people's. Instead, it had taken on a yellow cast like the keys of an old piano. It also hung down a little too long for a man his age. The only thing about him that didn't look old, his eyes, followed me into the room like two bright blue lights.

"You're not Wendell," he said. "Where's Wendell?"

"He couldn't come today, so I'm helping out," I told him.

"You stealing his job?" Mr. Light asked.

"No, sir," I answered. "I'm just here visiting with my mother."

"Who's she visiting?"

I felt like I was getting that third degree that you see in a lot of movies.

"Everybody," I told him. "She belongs to the Baptist Woman's Home Missions."

"She don't visit me," he said. "I done told them; I got no use for Christians, especially Baptist." He said it real mean like which made me mad.

"Shame on you, she's doing the Lord's work," I said right back to him, but I didn't put a lot of conviction in it. I just wanted to make him feel bad.

Those blue eyes of his started dancing like an idea had just come to him. "You interested in doing the Lord's work?" Mr. Light asked me. Then he added, "You got a name, boy?"

"Yes, sir, Petey Collins," I replied.

"Come here, Petey. Let me tell you something." He motioned me toward the bed.

I put down his tray on the bedside table and carefully stepped over to where he lay, because he had one of those big old fashioned fans setting on the table and aimed right at him. It didn't have a cage of any kind around its metal blades so they just whirled away like a buzzsaw. I almost said a body could lose a hand to that thing, but caught myself. I figured it would be in real bad taste to talk about losing limbs, all things considered.

Mr. Light crooked his finger to pull me in closer, and he spoke so quietly that I could barely hear him above that noisy fan.

"You mentioned the Lord's work; do you want to do a little work for me?" he asked.

"That all depends," I answered, "what would I have to do?"

"I worked for fifty years in the coal mines. Did you know that?" he said.

It didn't surprise me because just about everybody in town worked in the mines, including my father.

"My legs, along with the rest of me that was good for anything, belonged to

Crawford Coal and Coke for fifty years. Seems like all those legs ever did was work for Crawford. Then, just when I got them back to be all mine again, I lost them."

Without taking time to work up the courage, I asked him, "Did you have an accident?"

"No sir, I got that sugar diabetes. It got so bad about three years ago that the doctor had to cut of my legs. Cut one off on one Friday, and the other one off on the next Friday. I only got to spend one solid week as a one legged man."

"Nature can be meaner than a black snake," I said, and he looked at me as if I were wise beyond my years.

"Anyway, I got no family left," he continued his story. "Out lived them all . . . wife, children . . . the whole lot. And I doubt that one single lady in the Baptist Home Missions would be willing to do the kind of work I need done."

He was purposefully trying to get me curious; I could tell. And it was working. If the Baptist women didn't want to do his task for him, then it must have been something wrong or dangerous or sinful. If I was lucky, all three.

"How old are you, boy?" he asked.

It was getting better every minute. "Thirteen," I replied, adding a year just to be safe.

"A woman who lives in this town makes something I need," Mr. Light told me. "She makes home brew beer; you know what that is?"

"Yes, sir," I lied. I knew about beer but didn't know anybody could make it at home.

"You afraid to go to the Black Bottom?" he questioned me.

"No, sir," I lied again. Nobody I knew went over to the Black Bottom for any reason. As far as I could tell, they didn't particularly care for any white people coming over there and messing in their business.

"A woman lives over there name of Hot Tamale," Mr. Light said. "You just ask for her; somebody will show you to her house."

I was starting to wonder what I'd gotten myself into.

Mr. Light kind of worked himself up with his arms. "I ain't had any brew since they put me in here," he told me. "I don't have much time left in this world, and I want just one more taste of it before I pass. Besides, it might help this pain in my legs."

I started to say something, but Mr. Light stopped me. "I know you think I'm talking crazy, but them damned legs are somewhere. And wherever they are, they hurt like hell. The pain always comes right back to this god-forsaken room. Will you do it, boy?"

"Yes sir," I told the truth this time, though I knew that I was probably breaking every rule set down in "The Devil's Plan For Your Life."

"Good boy," he said, and his eyes lit up brighter. "Just one more thing, you'll need some money. It cost a dollar for a quart jar."

"Reckon the price hasn't gone up in the three years you been in here?" I asked.

"No, it's just a dollar." he said without hesitation. "The home keeps my pension check every month, every penny of it. But I've been saving, putting back here and there. I've got just enough." He opened his night table drawer and handed me a wadded up tissue. I unfolded it to reveal an old Franklin fifty-cent piece, a regular quarter, two Mercury dimes, and a big circle of aluminum foil.

"Just one more thing, boy," he whispered and motioned me closer to the bed. "I got that nickel there in the Christmas grab bag last year. It's got atomic fall-out all over it, just like that bomb we dropped back during the big war. I wrapped it in that aluminum foil so's it would be safe to handle. All you have to do is prize it out of that little blue plastic thing before you pay. And don't even tell Hot Tamale; she'll never know the difference. Now off with you, and don't be gone too long," he said, and he

chased me out of the room.

I went and found mother in Mrs. Bertha Bascom's room where they were discussing how to crochet gloves. Lying doesn't come naturally to me, but then I remembered that Wendell was cleaning out his basement, so I told mother I wanted to go and help him. It didn't hurt the story any when I reminded her what good stuff you were liable to find in a junked up basement. After all the usual warnings about snakes and broken glass, she said I could go as long as I got home before dinner. I had been thinking about becoming an astronaut, but I could just picture me getting on a rocket ship and having to hand a note to Wernher von Braun that read, "Petey has my permission to go to the moon as long as he watches out for snakes and broken glass." Daddy always says that mother means well; whereas, I feel she goes a little too far.

So I left the Mountain Haven Rest Home on what had started out as a day of good works and Christian charity. Now I had lied to my mother and was on my way to the most forbidden part of town to buy boot-leg beer with a radioactive nickel. "Nature can be meaner than a black snake," I said to myself over and over again as I walked toward Black Bottom.

In a town as small as Afton, no place is far away. I had only walked for about twenty minutes before I came to the rickety bridge that crossed the river over into the Bottom. I had been fingering that dangerous nickel in my pocket for the whole trip, so I decided to peel off the foil and have a look at it. Somebody had pressed a real nickel into a blue plastic disk, and around it were printed the words, "Souvenir of Oak Ridge, Tennessee." The nickel had those atomic swirls drawn around it, just like on Atom Man's costume in the comic books. I figured if they gave them away as souvenirs that they couldn't pose that much of a threat, so I popped the nickel loose and headed over

the bridge.

I had walked down this road, passed this same bridge, about a million times in my life, and never really looked across the river or tried to see through the trees. Why bother to look when everybody in town knew about Black Bottom or Shack Town or whatever else they chose to call it.

Once across the bridge, I made my way down a path that ran through the trees and stepped right into the middle of Black Bottom . . . I could have been walking through any neighborhood in town. Twenty or so little one-story houses lined both sides of a packed dirt street, and you could tell that at one time they had all looked the same. But apparently, over the years, folks had added on rooms and porches and even a few garages. Most of the houses had what my mother called a postage stamp front yard because that's about how big they were, but most of them were growing something, geraniums and those little pink flowers, elephant ears, or a couple of tomato plants staked up. It didn't seem too dangerous.

I needed to find this Hot Tamale's house, but I decided to have a look around first. Folks were doing the kind of stuff you see people doing on a Summer afternoon. Women were hanging out their wash or sitting on the porch, drinking pop and laughing. Two or three men and some boys were wrenching on a beat up Ford coupe. And nobody was paying much attention to me, I thought.

I went up to where the men were working on the car and asked if any of them knew where Hot Tamale lived. One of the boys, who looked to be about my age, pointed up the road and told me, "Last one on the left. I think she's sitting out on the porch." He said it just as civil as could be.

Heading up the road toward my destination, I could see people kind of peeking at me from their yards or porches. It kind of puts you off when everybody looks at you real suspicious just because you're somewhere where you don't belong. I know this

black man name of Hubert Washington who does yard work for a woman who lives on our street. And every time he walks through our neighborhood, people do that very same thing, glance over their shoulder as he passes by, crack open a curtain just an inch. I know, I do it to. Right then, I decided that the next time I saw Hubert walking down our street, if I looked at him at all, it was going to be right in the eye and then to say hello.

When I finally got to the last house in the row, I accidentally scattered a flock of chickens that had been rolling in the road. A big old cloud of dust went up and chickens flew every which way. One of them headed right toward the porch, and all at once, I saw two hands reach out and catch it. When the dust cleared, a woman was sitting there in a rocking chair and holding the chicken on her lap. "Fattest Domiknicker hen I own," she said. "Give me a reason to eat it."

She caught me off guard, so all I could think to say was, "You mean like a holiday or something?"

"No, I mean like I ate the last one for pecking down all my Sweet Williams."

I had never much thought, when eating a drum stick, that I might be punishing the chicken for something it did. "That one jumped you," I answered. It seemed as good a reason as pecking down some flowers.

"Not good enough," she said, and tossed the chicken back out into the yard. "But I got my eye on that one," she added. "It'll mess up one of these days."

The woman looked about grandmother age, which experience has taught me could be anywhere from sixty to about a hundred and ten. She was just sitting there in that rocking chair and fanning herself with one of those cardboard church fans on a wooden stick. The front of that fan had a big picture of Jesus on it, but instead of blue eyes and light brown hair, this Jesus looked like a black man. She was fanning at her head so fast that every other second it looked like Jesus' face traded places with hers.

Just like one of those gum ball machine rings that you flick back and forth and the American flag changes into President Kennedy. The fanning slowed to a stop, and across the bottom of the fan it said, "Talbot's Funeral Home, Detroit Michigan."

"What you want, boy?" she asked me.

"I came to buy some brew," I answered.

"Buy some what?" she said. She gave me one of those smiles that adults tend to give children, the ones that you have no idea what they mean.

"Feller down there said Miss Hot Tamale lives here, and I been told she sells home brew."

She got up from the rocking chair and walked to the edge of the porch where I stood. "What's your name, boy?" she asked. "You got a look about you."

I started to make up a name, considering I was a willing participant in all of this illegal activity, but I discovered something. If you think you'll ever need a fake name, make one up before hand and keep it in the back of your head. Most people expect you to say your name just as soon as they ask you it. If not prepared, you might just blurt out something stupid like Ed Sullivan or something.

Hot Tamale kept right on studying my face and waiting for an answer. "I know," she said, "you got the look of those Clark sisters over on Beaumont Street."

She had me cold. At first, it just bothered me that Hot Tamale recognized me, then I got to worrying about looking that much like my mother's sisters.

"Why, I knew your grand daddy, child. But just in the business sense of course."

Considering that my grand daddy Clark had operated a saw mill two counties over, I found this fact very unlikely.

"How do I know you're not the law," she added. "Come down here asking to buy brew and all."

"No ma'am," I assured her. "I just come to buy it for Mr. Light over at the

Mountain Haven Rest Home."

"Um huh," she mumbled matter of factly. "You got the money?"

"A dollar, that what it cost?" I asked.

"He knows it just cost ninety-five cents if you bring back the jar," she replied.

"He didn't have a jar," I told her. "He hasn't bought any in three years, and he just wants one last drink of it before he dies."

"Um huh," she said again, "them last drinks, without a jar, still cost a dollar. You come on in the house. I don't conduct business out on the front porch."

She opened the screen door and motioned for me to follow her. A good part of the tiny front room was taken up by a big Warm Morning coal stove surrounded by mismatched chairs and an old console radio. Hot Tamale pulled back a curtain, hanging in place of a door, and went into one of the back rooms. I took the opportunity to look around her living room because she had some pretty unusual stuff. Whatnots, or what my father called chalk dogs, sat on every surface big enough to hold them. Shelves, windowsills, and tables held cowboys and cowgirls, fancy teams of horses, swans with their necks crooked, and way too cute kittens in every position you could imagine. After I had worked my way over to the far comer, I saw some pictures thumb tacked to the wall. Somebody had drawn them on notebook paper and done a real good job of it.

"You like my pictures?" Hot Tamale asked. I hadn't heard her walk back into the room.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied. "Somebody sure knows how to draw."

"Stanley drew every one of them for me." She pointed to one and said, "That there is Miss Mary McLeod Bethune. President Roosevelt gave her a big, important job in the government. And you know President Roosevelt."

I thought the man in the other picture looked familiar, but he didn't look anything

like he does on a dime. Instead, this Stanley had drawn him with little glasses and a long cigarette holder between his teeth.

"Stanley drew those right out of an old Life Magazine I kept put back," Hot Tamale told me.

"Who's this pretty girl," I asked about one of the pictures she hadn't mentioned.

"Wait a minute," Hot Tamale said. She went back into the curtained off room and returned with a frame. The drawing of the girl had been done from a high school graduation picture. But whoever this Stanley was, he had left out that funny looking square hat with a tassel. Instead he had just drawn the girl's hair. And though he hadn't changed anything else about her face, in the picture the girl looked a lot more alive. I can't explain it any other way. "Who is she?" I asked.

"Betty, my grand niece. She lives up in Detroit, Michigan. Come September she's going to be studying at college to become a school teacher." Hot Tamale sounded real proud about her niece, but I wondered why such a pretty girl would want to become a school teacher.

Hot Tamale hadn't said anything about the picture that interested me the most. In it, a black man dressed in armor and a helmet sat astride an elephant.

"Don't ask me about that one," Hot Tamale said, when she saw me looking at it, "because I never can remember who it is." Then, without warning, she did something that liked to scared me to death. At the top of her lungs, she screamed "Stanley!"

In about three seconds, a boy was standing there in the room with us. I mention how long it took him to get there because he'd been one of the people working on that old Ford way back down the road.

"Tell this young man who you drew in this picture," Hot Tamale commanded, as she pointed to the man on the elephant.

"Miss Hot Tamale, I done told you about a hundred times. That's Hannibal

crossing the Alp Mountains." The boy looked at me and rolled his eyes, which I've learned is the universal sign of disbelief at just how slow grown-ups can act.

"How come he's riding that elephant," I asked.

"'Cause he's going to war with the Romans. Don't they teach history at your school?" this Stanley asked me. Everyone knew that the black kids all went to their own school over in Jackson.

"Yes they do," I answered. "And they've just about wore me out on the French and Indian and the Revolution, but Miss Long never told us anything about somebody riding an elephant." I tried to picture George Washington sitting on an elephant's back, but it just wouldn't work. "You sure this really happened?" I asked.

Hot Tamale seemed to be in agreement with me. "My daddy fought in The Spanish American War, and he never said one thing about riding any elephant," she said.

I could tell Stanley didn't want to laugh. "This all happened a long time ago," he told us. "Mr. Smithers over at school let me borrow a history book of his to copy this picture out of."

"What grade you in?" I asked Stanley.

"Going into the sixth this coming Fall," he said. "How about you."

"Going into the seventh," I hated to admit that even though I was a grade ahead of him, he had one-uped me on this elephant thing.

Hot Tamale took her grand niece's picture back into the room through the curtain, which gave me and Stanley a chance to talk. He was asking about what kind of books we had in our school library, and did I reckon they'd let him borrow some to draw pictures from. Their school had a library, but they didn't have that many books, especially with pictures. I told him I'd ask, but I didn't tell him that I had a feeling it wouldn't do much good.

Hot Tamale came back into the front room carrying a brown paper bag. "Get on back out there, Stanley," she said, and run him right off. He didn't look like he minded though. I figured he wanted to get back to working on that car.

After Stanley got out the door, Hot Tamale handed me the bag and said, "Here's Mr. Light's last drink." And then she started laughing like she couldn't help it. I didn't care too much for Mr. Light myself, but at least I was trying to have a little respect for a dying man's last wish.

I pulled the tissue from my pocket and unwrapped the change Mr. Light had given me. Considering she had treated me like a guest in her home, I wondered if I ought to tell her about that atomic nickel. But then she might not give me the home brew, I thought. I handed her the coins. "You better keep an eye on that nickel," I told her. I hate it when people look at me like they think I'm a nut.

"Why? It do stuff other nickels can't do," she asked.

I couldn't lie; I told her the whole truth about that nickel. But instead of running me off and pitching it out the window after me, Hot Tamale asked if I still had the plastic disk I had worked the deadly five cent piece out of. I reached in my pocket and gave it to her. She popped that nickel right back in its nuclear swirls and scotch taped it to the wall beside a calender advertising something called Royal Crown Hair Pomade. I was developing a real fondness for her. "Miss Hot Tamale, you ever read a little book called 'Don't Play Hide and Seek With Jesus'" I asked her.

"Can't say as I have," she replied. "Does it read good?"

"Yes, ma'am, I think you'd profit by it." Though I liked her, I also figured she needed it more than Miss Bertha Bascom back at the rest home. "Can I bring you a copy of it?" I asked.

"If it don't cost nothing, bring it on along the next time you come down here," she told me. "Boy your age ought to be doing the Lord's work instead of Mr. Light's."

I wished her a good day and headed back to take Mr. Light his beer. When I passed that old car, Stanley waved at me and didn't seem to care or notice that I'd come out of Hot Tamale's house totting a paper sack.

Once across the bridge, I opened up the bag and pulled out the mason jar. The home brew didn't look like the beer you see people drinking in the movies. It had the same sticky, brown color of sorghum. And when I held the jar up to the sun, the light wouldn't even shine through it. I wondered what it smelled like but didn't want to unscrew the lid right there on a public street. I stuck it back in the bag and hurried back to the rest home.

When I got back to The Mountain Haven Rest Home, I went straight to room three and found the door standing opened. Across the room, Mr. Light eyed me from his nest of pillows; and without as much as a "hello how you doing" said, "Didja get it?"

I produced the paper bag I'd been holding behind my back. I shut the door and walked over to his bed. He grabbed the bag out of my hand and didn't even say thank you. In less time than it takes to tell about it, Mr. Light had twisted off that lid and tipped up the jar. I swear, he downed about half of it in one gulp. And even though I had a curiosity about how the home brew tasted, I'd as soon as tried to take a corn cob away from one of those chickens back in the Black Bottom.

"Get out," Mr. Light said. I felt sorry for him being old and not having any legs and all, but that didn't excuse bad manners. Looking back on it, I think he didn't want me to see him drink that quart jar of beer in about two minutes. I had started out of the room when he called out after me, "Remember, Petey Collins, boys who tell get what they deserve."

I doubted the Christian merits of the whole situation.

About a week later, I was strolling across the bridge that led over into The Bottom. I had that tract for Miss Hot Tamale and a book from the public library that I had checked out for Stanley. Not that I wanted a favor for doing it, but I was hoping he might draw a picture for me. The book had a lot of illustrations of that stuff he had been telling me about. Mostly dead Greeks and Romans. I particularly liked this picture of a king pouring water out of a gold helmet.

Just as I reached the other side of the bridge, I saw Wendell Johnson walking along carrying a paper sack. "What business you got over here, Petey," he asked me real suspicious like.

"Just visiting some friends," I replied, not wanting him to know what I'd done the week before.

"I had to come over here and get Mr. Light's brew," he said, holding up the paper bag. "He didn't get any last week 'cause I was home cleaning out the basement, and he gets cranky as hell if he goes a week without this stuff."

I told him "bye," and headed on up the road toward Hot Tamale's house. She knew Mr. Light had snookered me, but I didn't care. She had a business to think of. That whole week long I'd been mad at Mr. Light for the way he treated me. But after talking to Wendell, I just felt sorry for him. Mr. Light thought himself a devil hiding behind a wall, when all along he was just an old man who couldn't even get out of bed by himself.

Besides, I thought, if Mr. Light hadn't of fooled me I might never have walked across that bridge.

VANCE IN REPOSE

I saw Vance today. I was delivering an order and decided to take the shortcut down by the graveyard. I saw him as I stepped out of the woods so I paused a minute just to watch him. He was stretched out full-length on Bascom Newberry's gravestone. Probably every kid in town had lain on Bascom Newberry's grave. The stone was a huge block of limestone about six feet long and three feet wide. I didn't know Bascom's story, but somebody must have loved him an awful lot. I guess it took a team of mules and a sled to drag his marker to the river bottom cemetery. You could tell it hadn't been cut, but found that way. Some long-dead Newberry had searched the big rocky fields around Cleecey, Kentucky until he found Bascom's monument. And then he'd figured out some way to haul it there, like it was the last stone in some dead Egyptian king's tomb. The only way you could tell that a man had ever laid a hand to it was by the words carved on it: "Bascom Newberry 1882-1898 His light shone on us for a while."

All Vance had on was an old pair of cut-off dungarees. At first I thought he was asleep, but then he stretched like a big gold alley cat and cut his eyes toward the river. I followed his gaze and saw the twins, his little brothers, splashing around in the water.

He had brought the boys swimming and was sunning himself on the rock. Their mother had been dead a month today.

I walked up quietly so I wouldn't frighten him. His thoughts were still on the river, and I was within two feet of him before he heard me and turned around.

"Go down there and let Tim and Tom baptize you," he said to me with a smile. "They've saved my soul so many times this morning that I think I'm waterlogged with the holy ghost."

I looked to the water and, sure enough, one of the boys had the other one leaned back and was dunking him church-style. He was saying something, but he was too far away for me to understand.

"They sneaked and watched some hard-shell Baptist down here last Sunday," Vance said. "I decided to bring them down and let them get right with the Lord." He turned his head back to the water to check on the twins. They were his charge now.

With his head turned I noticed he had let his hair grow. During school he kept it cut short, but come summer he always let it grow wild. It was always a different color in summer, not just its reddish-brown of fall and winter. The hot July sun lit it up like a fire of gold and copper and bronze. With length it curled and looked more like a lion's mane than a boy's hair. He was three months older than me which meant he was already seventeen.

"Sorry I haven't been out to see you," I said. "I just got back a few days ago."

"How are your grandparents?" he asked.

"Fine, Granny wanted me to tell you how sorry she was," I told him. "I tried to get out of going, Vance, but I didn't want to hurt their feelings." For the past three weeks I'd been down in Virginia visiting my momma's family. Vance usually went with me on my annual summer trip. They had a big farm with horses, and he loved to ride. "As soon as I got back I had to start work at the drug store. I just haven't had a chance to get out

for a visit." My father had gotten me a summer job at Maxwell's Pharmacy. "You working for Butch again?" I asked Vance.

"Yeah, for now anyway," he answered. Vance had been sacking groceries at Butch's Market every summer since he was twelve years old.

Vance was my best friend. I met him on the very first day of school when we were both six years old. The teacher chose the two of us to beat the erasers at the end of the day. This was a job of honor, and we also got out of class ten minutes early. We'd go out by the playground and pound the felt blocks together until we had raised a cloud of chalk white smoke. I was chosen because my father was the company doctor at Monroe Mining, the same reason I'd be chosen for a thousand other little things at school. Not because of my merit, but because of my daddy's occupation. Then I didn't know why Vance had been chosen, but now I do.

It was his looks. He looked like an angel.

I didn't notice it then, but as we grew older I began to see him in the same way adults did. He wasn't pretty like a girl, he was all-boy. But there was something about him that made you want to look at him. I'd seen people in the street turn and stare after he'd walked by. His eyes were as green as bottle glass and shot through with little flecks of gold. When he laughed, which was often, the skin crinkled up around them; and his eyes laughed as much as his mouth.

It wasn't just his looks that drew people to him. He did so well in school that he'd pulled me through geometry and our first year of Latin. We both played football and baseball. He was even good at sports and put a lot of time into football hoping that maybe he'd get a college scholarship. We had decided years ago that we were going to college together. He'd been saving his money that he made at the market, and I knew that he had right around eight hundred dollars. Every year my daddy gave him twenty dollars for his birthday with orders that it go straight to his college fund.

Vance didn't live in town like most of the kids in school. He lived up in a holler called Stickly Creek. It wasn't his fault that he lived so bad. When he was only two years old his daddy had been killed in the Korean War. His mother didn't have any family and had to get along as best she could. She rented an old shack up on the Creek and started doing sewing for people. She did a pretty good business, but a lot of people in town wouldn't go to her because she also sewed for colored women over in the Black Bottom.

When we were little kids, I'd go up to his house and visit. It was just two rooms, a kitchen and living room together, and a bedroom. Vance slept on an old couch in the front room. The privy was out back.

His mother was a nice lady then. She'd sit at her old treadle Singer and sew while Vance and I looked at his comic books. She'd even make sure there was some candy when I came for a visit. But it all changed when Vance was ten years old. His mother married some worthless drunk named Bill Marcum. Vance begged her not to, but she said she was tired of not having a husband. Within a year she'd had the twins, Tim and Tom, and it did something to her health. Vance didn't have to tell me that Bill Marcum beat his mother. He came to school more than once with a bruise on his fine cheek or a black eye from where he'd stepped in.

Once, when he slept over at my house, my father got a look at him after one of his run-ins with his stepdaddy. The next day, my father made a special trip out to Stickly Creek and had a talk with Bill Marcum. He never told me what he said to him, but I know Vance never came to school beat up again.

Not long after that, when Vance was about twelve, his stepdaddy just up and left in the night, left as quick and easy as he came. And he left things worse than how he found them. With two extra mouths to feed, Vance's mother started taking in wash along with all the sewing she did. Vance got the job at the market, but she wouldn't let

him give her any of his money. I think the only thing bright in her life was the fact that he was going to college.

I started visiting Vance at his house again. There wasn't candy anymore when I came to visit. Vance's mother looked tired all the time, and she never smiled like she used to. Now when she sat and sewed her knuckles would bleed from all the washing she did. I finally asked Vance what was wrong with her.

"She just got sad one day," he said. "I think it'll be a long time before she's happy again."

She never did really get happy again, not even till the day she died which was back in June. Vance came by our house that evening and knocked on the back door. Mother answered the door, and instead of just busting in like he usually did he stayed out on the stoop and talked to her. When I heard his voice I walked over to the door and heard him say, " . . . then she just fell over, right there in the yard. She was dead by the time I got to her."

I looked through the screen door at his big green eyes and expected to see tears in them, but he looked more tired than anything else, like when she died all that tired and sad she'd carried around fell right on him.

Daddy called a man at the funeral home to bring an ambulance to pick him up and take him to Stickly Creek. We went out front to wait, and that's when I saw Tim and Tom. They were sitting in momma's glider out in the front yard. They didn't look anything like Vance. They were both dark haired and dark eyed, and they usually jabbered to each other all the time like two little blackbirds. But now they were sitting there real quiet, waiting for Vance to tell them what to do.

Daddy got back later that night and told Vance that his mother had died of a heart attack. Vance thanked him for his help and went to the kitchen to get the twins. Mother had taken them in there and made fudge. She was letting them sop the pot when

Vance and I walked in. "Come on you two, we're going home," Vance said.

"You'll do no such thing," my mother replied. "We've got plenty of room. You'll all stay here tonight. Isn't that right, Tom," she said and ruffled one of the boys' hair.

"Tim," he said, not looking up from the candy pot.

At one time our house had been the company hospital. Now all the patients went over to the new county hospital. We only lived on the first floor where daddy had his office. The other two floors had about ten rooms. Vance didn't want the twins sleeping in a room by themselves so he helped me carry one of the old hospital beds into my room.

Mother gave each of the twins one of my tee shirts to sleep in and tucked them in. They were starting to talk and laugh again like nothing had ever happened.

Vance slept with me in my bed. The lights had been out for an hour but I couldn't sleep. "At least Vance can sleep," I thought. It was hot and he had pulled down the sheet. The moonlight through the opened window let me see that he had turned his broad back to me. I wondered what he was dreaming. Just as I was about to fall asleep he slowly rolled over and faced me. I heard him sob; he was crying. "I'm so scared, Kirk," he said into the dark. I didn't know what to say so I just reached over and pulled his head to my shoulder. I ran my fingers up into his hair. Funny, I thought, he'd been my best friend all these years, and I'd never touched his hair. Even though it shined like metal, it felt as soft as corn silk. I know a boy isn't supposed to hug another boy like that, but I didn't care. I'd have done it if the whole football team had been standing in the room.

"Go ahead and cry," I said under my breath, "I'll take care of you."

"I'm afraid the twins will hear me," Vance replied. "Jesus, Kirk, they don't know bad it is."

But it was too late. Right about then, I heard a tiny voice come from across the

room. "Can we get in with you and Kirk, Vance?" it asked.

"Come on fellas," Vance whispered to them. I heard scurrying across the room and they both jumped into bed with us. They got between us and curled up into little balls. Just like Vance, they'd been crying and their faces were damp. It was like sleeping with two wet puppy dogs. We all fell asleep that way and woke up in the morning to get ready for a funeral.

The next day, after the funeral, I heard daddy ask Vance what he was going to do about himself and the twins. I heard Vance lie and say that one of his aunts was going to come over from Jenkins and take care of them until things were settled. He looked up at me, and I knew he meant for me to keep it a secret till he figured out what to do. And I did.

That was a month ago. Then I found him stretched out on that tombstone like he didn't have a care in the world.

"I'm not going back to school in the fall," he said to me.

I couldn't believe it. It was our last year. We'd both be graduating. I started to speak.

"Before you start in on me let me tell you what I'm planning on doing," he said. "I'm going to work for the Robbins brothers."

I knew the place. It was an old two-brothers-and-a-mule coal mine up above Stickly Creek. With no union and no safety regulations, they hired who they wanted. "Jesus Christ, Vance, that's low coal," I told him what he already knew. Low coal was a tunnel about thirty inches high with usually two inches of water standing on the floor.

"That's why I'm out here soaking up this sun," he replied. "I probably won't get to see it for a while."

"It's too dangerous," was all I said.

"Dammit, Kirk," he screamed at me, "Monroe won't hire me till I'm eighteen. Me and

the twins can't live on bag boy tips. It's just a year. What could happen in a year?"

I remembered a couple of years back when some men had brought in a body from one of those death-trap mines. Daddy looked at it and said, "My God, what happened, a roof fall?"

"Yes sir," one of the miners replied, "just one, single rock came down on him, and it was the size of a grown man's casket."

"What about the twins?" I asked. "Who's going to watch them while you're at work."

"I've already taken care of that," he said. "A colored woman momma used to sew for is going to take care of them for me. Nobody cares what us people up on Stickly Creek do."

"You been spending your college money to take care of them?" I asked, knowing full well that he had.

"Yeah, like I'm going to go to college," he replied with a smirk. "I might even find some girl to marry me. Then I wouldn't have to pay that woman to take care of the boys."

"You're crazy," I said.

The sound of his voice changed. "Don't be jealous," he told me. I waited for him to laugh, but when I looked into his eyes I could tell he meant something I didn't exactly understand. "I'd just be marrying the boys a mother. That's all."

"I could talk to daddy, Vance."

"No," he said, and it sounded so final that I knew better than to try and reason with him. I just turned and walked away.

"Don't do anything stupid, Kirk," he called after me. But for some reason, it didn't sound as final as that "No."

I left him there, sprawled out on that big rock the size of a grown man's casket. He needed to soak up the sunlight into his hair.

UNDER THE WELSH FUSILIER

I go back to the Welsh Fusilier sometimes, but not to the dining room of the County Court House Inn where the painting hangs. I go to the picture itself, the place where it hangs in my mind, and peer around the young man holding the musket; once he filled my thoughts. Once I considered him the subject of the work. Now I look behind him at the battle raging on in the background. My mind must search through the branches of the tree that frames the soldier's strong and healthy body; for in the gaps of the leaves, blood is being spilled. Men are killing one another in that lush English country side. I used to think that they fought for the normal reasons any schoolboy knows; the Crown, the Roundheads, the Tories. Age has given me an advantage, because I now know that men fight their wars for themselves. I tried to understand this sooner in my life, but the Welsh Fusilier always stood guard for me, his flintlock forming a horizontal line from corner to corner of the canvas, his gray eyes warning me away from the truth.

He stands there life-size, yet truncated at his knees; and he wears a scarlet tunic decorated with brass buttons and gold braid. The expression on his face betrays his youth. The firm resolve of his mouth and the rakish angle of his head can't hide the

fact that he has probably seen only sixteen or seventeen summers, including the one that sets the painting in time, in season. His face, framed by the curls of his thick boy's hair, still reflects his innocence. The looming battle has not yet reached him at his guard post in the foreground; but by the way his ear is cocked, he knows it is approaching. The painting's gilt frame is all that keeps it from looking as if someone has opened a window there in the wall. That, and the artist's signature in the lower right corner, a small, blockish script that reads M. S. Rudder.

I always met Jack at the table under the Welsh Fusilier because I thought it romantic and dashing, the painting and the idea. He met me there because I told him to. Jack and I would meet every Tuesday at the Courthouse Inn. That was the night that the kitchen sent out pork chops; not those grocery story things, but big, thick slabs of seared pork dripping fat all over the heavy, old mismatched china that the Inn used to serve everything from ice cream to collard greens. And the chops were served with steaming fried apples and slices of fresh baked bread. The pork came from the Mullins farm over by the river and the apples from Beverly's orchard.

The dining room was decorated in a riot of periods and pieces. The Stewart family had owned the Inn since the day it was built, something like a hundred and seventy years; and each new generation of Stewarts had added their own touch. Three massive chandeliers, made of multicolored Venetian glass, hung from the high coffered ceiling. My grandfather once told me that he remembered the day he walked in for lunch and discovered that the long tapers that had illuminated the green and red and blue glass prisms had been replaced with electric bulbs. The walls were papered with French flocked fleur-de-lis, most of which were hidden by a clutter of paintings. Everything from English landscapes to portraits of long dead Governors hung at wildly varying levels as if each had been placed there to satisfy every individual eye level in the room. Many of the oils showed delicate nineteenth century ladies with their dogs

curled on their laps or sitting at their sides. I always found that funny -- never their children, never their husbands, just those spaniels.

We'd meet at our table, Jack Fletcher and I. I'd give a slight salute up to the Fusilier, and then we'd order and catch up on the week's news while we waited for dinner to arrive. I talked about the horse business, and he talked about the cattle business. That was how we got to know one another.

One day, we found ourselves standing in a line over at the courthouse with all of the other gentlemen farmer's sons who came to the county seat once a week to do business for their fathers. There were always tax forms to be filled out, papers to be registered with the Farm Bureau, statistical reports for county extension agents. The tasks of dutiful children. We belonged to a class, Jack and I. We were the heirs, the esquires in training to take the reins of one of the big family farms that dotted our rural Virginia county. Most of us were members of families that had lived there since Sir Christopher Gist, a young surveyor named George Washington at his side, showed us the way by mapping out the valleys and meadows of the Blueridge for the Crown. And what we had done for all those long years was use that land. Corn. Wheat. Hogs. Cattle. Horses. Tobacco. We went away to school at The University of Virginia, or William and Mary, or Washington and Lee, but we always came back to the land. We married each other and sired shiny children to step into our places, just as our fathers and mothers had done.

The fathers taught the sons how to make the land serve the family; the daughters married and wove the bloodlines together; and the mothers sat with their dogs for their portraits. That was our life, and everything grew strong and flourished for us.

Of course Jack and I had known one another long before that day we stood together in the line at the courthouse. Our age difference, I was six years older, meant

that we had never been friends; but I remembered him from the days before I left town to go to school in Williamsburg. We'd even been at school together for one year at Gladeville College Academy, but I didn't remember him from then because I was eighteen to his twelve. I had also attended the yearly barbecues at his family's farm, Cherry Alley, over in the east end of the county. His sister Cassandra and I were the same age, so I was invited to the yearly event to celebrate how many head of cattle the Fletcher's had sold that year.

The only words we'd ever passed, before those dinners at the Inn, happened at the barbecue one year. I remember it was the summer after I'd graduated from college, so I must have been twenty-one. Jack would've been fifteen. Cherry Alley was called that because of the long drive up to the house. Fourteen yellow cherry trees stood evenly spaced, seven on each side of the pea graveled driveway. Even in the fertile, black dirt of Stewart County, Virginia, fruit trees usually don't grow that big. They looked more like hundred year maples than cherry trees. And the Fletchers, abiding by old folk tales or just following tradition, kept the trees white-washed about four feet up their trunks. I find it difficult to describe them now that those trees are all dead. It is as if they were only meant to exist there, leading up to that house, and not in memory. I recall driving up the road, the day I first met Jack, and realizing that the trees had just been freshly painted for the barbecue. The chalk-white wash still had the gleam of wetness about it.

As I pulled up to the big, Federal farm house, one of the servants dressed in livery motioned me around back of one of the barns. I carefully picked my way through the glut of cars that were parked there until I realized that not a single space was left. Unlike most everyone else at the party, I wasn't driving a Cadillac or a Mercedes. I headed my Jeep down through an opened field and drove behind another of the barns that seemed to spring up every hundred feet around the main house. As soon as I

rounded the corner, I saw him. At first, I couldn't tell exactly what I was looking at, but a second's thought made me know. A statue as white as if it were carved from pure Italian marble stood in front of me. Instead of holding the customary discus or lance, this sculpture posed with a green water hose held above its head, the nozzle pointed down. Then it came to life.

"Just you in that car?" it called to me. "I can hardly see through all this damned white-wash."

"Just me," I answered back.

"Good," the statue replied, "I wouldn't want to shock any ladies." With that, it pulled the trigger on the hose and a cascade of water showered down over the figure.

I stared through the windshield of the Jeep, the whole scene taking place about ten feet in front of me. In just a few minutes, my statue was gone, and in its place stood a teenage boy, beads of water still dripping from his naked skin.

"I know you," he said. "You're Bennett Smallwood."

I stepped out of the Jeep and walked over to him. He offered me his hand and a grin. The ground around his feet was wet with the milky white water that had rinsed his body. "You just white-wash those cherry trees?" I asked, knowing no other reason why he'd have been in such a state.

"Yeah, Daddy wanted them to look good today, and everybody else was too busy getting ready for the party. It got boring after awhile, and then folks started showing up. I decided to have a little fun." He reached over to a nail on the side of the barn and grabbed a pair of cut-off shorts that were already drying stiff with white wash. As he pulled them on, he continued. "Thought I'd paint myself, give everybody something to look at. Somebody must have told momma cause she hollered down the driveway for me to stop acting a fool and get cleaned up for the party. Then she wouldn't let me in the house. Didn't expect any company back here though."

He slicked back his wet, black hair from his forehead and smiled at me again. This time it looked like a smile of memory. "I remember you from Gladeville; you played ball, right? I used to come watch all the games. I play now, but not anything all great like shortstop. They got me stuck way out in left field."

"Well, sorry to say I never got to see you play," I told him. "I've been away mostly for the past four years."

"William and Mary -- I know I heard that somewhere, probably from Cassandra. Daddy has his heart set on me going to Hampden-Sydney just because him and about a million other Fletchers did. Don't you ever get sick of all this grandfather, great-grandfather stuff?" he asked, but he didn't wait for a reply. "Want to see the star of the day before everybody else?" Without giving me time to answer and with a boy's impatience, he ran and opened a door on the back of the barn and motioned for me to follow him inside.

I watched as he padded barefoot ahead of me on the sawdust floor. We stopped in front of a stall. "The Jewel of The Raj," Jack said, pointing between the boards. "What do you think?" And though I knew horses better, I also knew cattle. There in the stall stood a mammoth Brahma bull. I'd seen them before, but always at a distance standing in a field. Up close two things became apparent, the bull's incredible size and his pure white color.

Jack casually opened the stall door, stood behind it, and let the animal plod into the aisle of the barn. He smiled at me again to see if I would be frightened. The bull slowly walked up to me and stopped. My face was only inches from the high crested hump on the back of his neck. Jack climbed up the slats of the opened stall door and perched on top of it. "Daddy gets mad cause I won't call it The Raj," he said. "According to my father, you pay twenty-one thousand dollars for a bull, you ought to call him by his expensive name. I call him Moby Dick." He jumped down easily from

the door, walked over to me and the bull, and slapped the huge beast on the rump. "After everybody gets here and fills up on barbecue and liquor, I'm supposed to bring old Moby, excuse me The Raj, here right up to the main house and show him off. Daddy thinks we'll probably get fifty breeding deals today." I could just see the hungry looks in the eyes of all the cattle breeders when they saw this specimen, its definition and size, its breeding, its blinding white hide.

"I'll show you his selling points," Jack said. "Come around back here." He handed me the bull's tail to hold up out of the way; I knew full well what he was going to do. I'd grown up around horse breeding. He stuck his hands between the Brahma's back legs and hefted up its scrotum. "Never see a set like that on a stallion, I promise you." He rolled the balls in their loose sack. "Things may as well be made out of pure gold," he said. "This boy was born to breed." He smiled at me again, but this time I had no idea what it meant. "Listen, Bennett, I'd better get up to the house and get dressed."

We left the barn by the front door and crossed the field toward the party that was already starting to pick up. Outside a yellow and white striped tent, I saw Cassandra talking to some of my buddies from school. She waved me over, but before Jack and I parted, he patted me on the back. "Now that you're back in town, don't be a stranger, Mr. Smallwood." He grinned one last time and dashed toward the house just as I heard his mother's voice call at him from somewhere, "Jackson Stewart Fletcher, get in that house and get decent this minute!"

That evening, after I got home from the party, I went to my room to change clothes. There, on the back of my black polo shirt just between my shoulder blades, I found a faint, white hand print. The white-wash had dried to the point that I could make out the lines and whorls and creases of Jack's hand. I didn't see him again until six years later, and then only because we stood in a line together at the county clerk's

office.

I really didn't start getting to know Jack because I wanted to seduce him. Business took me to places such as Lexington, Kentucky and Aiken, South Carolina; and those towns not only understood the horse trade. They also understood men like me. Unlike big cities where entree into the world of male flesh meant you only had to know the name of a certain street, there you had to know, to be a part of two worlds -- horses and men. The horse part I was born into; men I learned.

After my first year at school in Williamsburg, I started making the hour and a half drive to Norfolk where sex was as common and simple as the next sailor or soldier in a bar. It was ridiculously trite and easy. Norfolk tempered me and taught me. I learned a man's body like a field, its plains and valleys. I worked hard, just as my father had taught me with the land, to use and cherish -- for a moment anyway -- something that nature had wrought for me. Wrought out of skin and bone, muscle and sweat, semen and blood. That was my life.

After I returned home to my family's farm in Stewart County, I used that knowledge to satisfy my cravings. I knew where and when to pursue men for my bed, and home was off limits. So after the first couple of months that Jack Fletcher and I had been having our weekly get-togethers for dinner, it surprised me that I began to feel myself drawn to him. Of course my animal instinct, my breed lust, drew me to him immediately. He moved and lived like some beautiful young beast always in rut. But then again, so did every one of us farm boys. Our natures were built on the need to create and produce, so our fine, young bodies followed suit. We were all, the girls included, bred for beauty and to procreate the land and ourselves. I didn't want to share my life, a corruption of what we'd been taught, with Jackson. Besides, he had

troubles of his own.

At our very first dinner, he started talking about Gina, Gina Salvatore, a girl he'd met at school. "You'd love her, Ben," he told me, "she's beautiful and funny, and she doesn't know a godamned thing about farms or growing things."

"How serious are you about her?" I asked, hearing trouble coming.

"Enough that I'm going to ask her to marry me. I hate that I finished school a year before her."

"You talk to your folks about this," I asked.

"Yea, when they found out that she's a scholarship student and that her father works in a steel mill in Allentown, Pennsylvania, let's just say it didn't make them happy. They want me to marry Pru Gilbert because I dated her at Gladeville, and Father thinks that Gilbert Meadows would be a good addition to the family. You know Pru?" he asked.

I laughed. Pru and I were first cousins, and Gilbert Meadows, one of the biggest spreads in the county, bordered our farm. "Marry Pru and you and me would be kin and neighbors," I said.

"See, that's just what I mean," I could tell that Jack was serious about the scholarship girl. "Why do I have to marry somebody from home?
I've tried to explain it all to her, but you know how outsiders are. They just can't understand. Know what she said? She said it all sounded feudal."

"You ask her to marry you?"

"Not yet," Jack replied. "But I do love her. Funny thing is, mother hasn't even met Gina, but she already has an opinion of her based on the fact that her surname ends in a vowel. Guess what she asked me, my own mother."

"What." I could guess about fifty things that Jack's mother would probably ask about the girl.

"She asked me if I just wanted to marry Gina because I was sleeping with her. Like she was some kind of fucking Italian siren who'd lured me out on a rock. I told mother, not that it was any of her business, the truth. Gina and I haven't even slept together yet. We've been seeing each other for two years, and I respect her wishes on that. Nice Catholic girl, wants to go to her marriage bed a virgin."

"Must be hard on a man, two years, unless you've been taking care of matters in other ways." With those words, I knew I wanted him; and I also knew I could have him. He brought me a problem, something he wanted to talk about and figure out, and all I could see was an opening.

We met at the Inn for dinner that next Tuesday, and I told Jack that I'd taken a room for the night because I wanted to drink and shouldn't drive the forty miles home. "Sarah out at the front desk told me that they just got in all of the Nouveau Beaujolaises. What say we order a bottle of each and see how they did this year?"

So we sat at the table for hours, drinking wine and laughing. He told school stories, and so did I. We talked about people we knew in common. I talked about my mares who were ready to foal, and he told me about all of the spring calves that the cows had dropped already. He talked about Gina and how he had plans to visit her the next week. I watched as the wine poured high color into his cheeks. "You know you can't drive home," I said. "I have a room up there; you can stay tonight if you want." I grabbed the last bottle of wine and headed into the lobby, and Jack followed me.

"I'll call the folks and tell them I'm staying over because it got late on me," he said.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor. "Funny," Jack told me, "I've been in this place a thousand times, all my life, but I've never stayed here."

"Well, tonight you'll be sleeping in room 212, Mr. Fletcher," I replied. Just as I

said it, we reached the door. The room was decorated like the rest of the Inn, a hodgepodge of furniture in styles from every period of its existence. I always stayed in 212 because of the big Duncan Phyfe bed. Jack noticed the single bed right away.

"Guess we'll be sharing," he said, as he picked up the phone to call home.

I went into the bathroom and got a couple of glasses for the wine. When I came back into the room, Jack was off the phone and sprawled on the bed. I poured us each a tumbler of the dark red Beaujolais. "So, you're really going to ask this girl to marry you?"

"Yeah, Bennett, you keep saying that like you don't approve. Not for any stupid reason like my parents, just like marriage doesn't sound like a good idea to you."

"Hasn't since I was fourteen years old," I replied.

"You decided then?" he asked. "How come?"

"A haircut."

"A haircut?" Jackson laughed, and I noticed that the wine made his skin glow. "You'd better explain that one."

"Okay, I will. You know Doc Stratton?"

"The vet? Sure, everybody knows him."

"You know his wife, Florence?" I asked.

"Know her too," Jack said. "Nice lady."

"When I was fourteen, my father dropped me off at the Gentleman's Choice Barber Shop for my monthly haircut. I was sitting there waiting my turn when Doc Stratton walked in and sat down beside me. He sat there for a few minutes looking at an old Reader's Digest, and I swear to God, Jack, he broke down into sobs."

"Right in the barber shop?" Jack asked.

"In front of me and about ten other people. One of the barbers walked over to him and said, 'It's okay, Doc. I remember from the last time.' Then he asked if we

minded if Doc got his hair cut before us. Doc sat in that barber's chair with that white sheet over his shoulders and shook. The rest of us all acted like we weren't paying attention, but we couldn't help it. After his haircut was finished, Doc paid and left. Then the barber turned to everybody in the shop and started laughing real loud."

"What's all this have to do with marriage?" Jack asked.

The barber told us why Doc was so shook up, announced it to everybody. Seems every time Doc went for a haircut, Florence combed his hair the way she wanted it cut. The wind was really blowing that day, and by the time he got to the shop, all of Florence's plan was gone. He was afraid that the barber wouldn't cut his hair to please his wife. And the same thing had happened before. The barber said that Florence once paid him a visit to explain just why Doc's haircut didn't look right, and tell him what a bad job he'd done. Know what the barber told us?" I asked Jack.

"What?"

He said, "if I was married to that bitch, I wouldn't have to worry about getting my haircut. I'd pull it all out with both hands."

"That turned you against marriage," Jack asked me.

"That and the fact that I'm queer."

Jack gazed at me over the bathroom glass of wine. "You are, aren't you," he said. "I guess I've always know. Tell me something, Ben. Is that why I'm in this room and drunk?"

"Yes," I replied.

I took him that easily. The next morning, he got up and left me asleep in a bed full of tossed sheets that reeked of what we'd done through the night. I didn't see him again for three months.

At first, I called his house and left messages, but I soon gave up on that. If he had a problem with what his body could do, it was just that, his problem. But I did miss our dinners together. Then one day, out of nowhere, he called. "Meet me at the Inn this evening," was all he said, and then he hung up.

When I got there, he was waiting at our table underneath the painting; and he had a half-full highball glass of something sitting in front of him. "Well, Bennett, glad you could make it," he said. What he'd already drunk was half a glass of scotch.

I sat down and motioned for a waiter.

"Let's not eat, Bennett; let's just talk."

His eyes searched my face as if he thought he could find some kind of answer there.

"Things have sure happened since our last time together here. Remember our last time together here, Bennett? You do have a memory don't you?"

"I remember."

"Then you might also remember that I went up to visit Gina that next week. Guess what I did when I got there, Bennett? I begged her to make love to me. I got down on my godamned knees and pleaded with her." He turned up the glass and took another long swallow.

"She cried, but she did it anyway. And you know something? I rode her just like you did me. I hurt her, Bennett. And God forgive me, the whole time I was over her, I kept seeing you over me. I know why you enjoyed it."

I got up to leave, but he reached out and clutched my arm. His fingers bit into my skin.

"You will listen to me. This is your story as much as it's mine."

The other people in he dining room began to look, so I sat back down.

"Go ahead and tell it. You're drunk," I said.

"Damned right I am. See, after I did it, after I humped her like she was a brood mare in season, I told her why. I told her what you did to me upstairs in that room."

I just sat there and let him spew it all out on me.

"She forgave me, Bennett. You believe that? She said she loved me anyway. Anyway!"

"Are you finished?" I asked. I wanted to leave.

"Almost. See, I left her there at school. Truth is, I couldn't stand to look at her. I didn't want her forgiveness. I wanted her to hate me, but she called me last week. Said she had something to tell me. Something she wanted to tell me right here because she'd always wanted to see Stewart county, Cherry Alley." He downed the rest of the scotch.

"I didn't want her to come, but she told me she'd already reserved a room right here at the Inn. She called me two days later to meet her here. When I walked in she was sitting right here, under your godamned Fusilier, waiting for me. I asked her to change tables, but she said she liked the painting."

I looked up at the soldier standing guard over the table.

"Know what she told me, Bennett? She told me that I got her pregnant. That one time, that only time. She kept saying that the nuns said it could happen the first time, and that they were always right."

I tried to remember what he looked like all those years ago, that day he rinsed the white-wash from his skin.

"I told her that if she was going to have my baby, that we'd have to go to Cherry Alley and talk with my parents, make arrangements. And she just started laughing. She didn't say she was going to have my baby; she said I got her pregnant."

"Meaning?" I asked.

"Meaning that she'd gone to a clinic in Richmond and let them pump a warm

quart of salt water into her. Know where my baby is, Bennett? I said, do you know where my godamned baby is? It's in a sewer under Broad Street. Since it's there, I like to think of you as its father."

I live in a city now; I have for years. I only know what happened to Jackson because he married my cousin Pru Gilbert. He's the master of Cherry Alley and Gilbert Meadows now. Not long after they married, Jack's father died, and a fire blight killed the fourteen trees that lined the drive to his family home. He and Pru don't have any children. They travel most of the year.

I returned home recently. Stewart County, Virginia never fully lets you go. I had family business at the courthouse, so I decided to eat lunch at the Inn. I didn't wait to be seated. I walked right over and took the table under the Welsh Fusilier. In my long years absence, the painting had been cleaned. Years of kitchen grease, coal soot, and cigarette smoke had been stripped from its surface. The Fusilier, if anything, looked younger and healthier. His cheeks even had a rose glow that I had never seen before. I also noticed something else that the cleaning had revealed. Right in front of my eyes, surely it had always been there, the tree parted to reveal another scene. M. S. Rudder must have used a brush with a single sable hair to paint such a tiny tableau. Two soldiers, in the same scarlet tunic and gold braid as the Fusilier, fought a private battle. They seemed to be taking advantage of the war in the background to fight their own battle. They had their flintlocks aimed at one another, and there was no confusion. They could see one another clearly. I studied their pose. It passed the time.

THE EDGE OF THE GLOW

Picture a stage where six brothers stand, and listen. The hammer dulcimer comes in first, softly. Jaybird strikes the strings with two wooden hammers whose handles have worn to fit his hands. The music begins as a high tinging melody, the dulcimer sounding like a cross between a music box and a harp. After four bars, you know the song. "I'll Fly Away." You've sung it in church a thousand times. Then, on the up-beat, Troy steps forward and starts picking out the melody on his twelve-string. Just as your ear begins to miss the harmony, you feel the one-two-three-four thud of the bass fiddle; feel it thump in your breast bone as Bryce plucks at the four taut strings, and the vibration travels through the resting pin and into the very boards of the old stage. As the tempo and the volume increase, Byron scratches at the banjo with picks on his fingers and thumb. The harder he scratches, the more music pours into the song. Troy walks over to Byron and they turn backs to one another and lean in. Each can feel the other's muscles as they unconsciously reach for the music, a sound they've been reaching for since they could walk and talk. With the banjo and the guitar turned toward opposite wings of the stage, their sounds drift outwards; and Rooney places himself at a point directly between his brothers to battle the mandolin. Rooney fights with the little high-pitched string instrument every time he picks it up, and he

always wins. Rooney and the mandolin know each other's weaknesses and strengths. The boy doesn't coax music from the thing; he drags it out by brute, main force. And when the mandolin's whipped, it obeys its master.

Now the stage is alive with a sound that if one beat drops, one finger strays, becomes nothing but noise. The complex rhythms astound you. Harmony and melody overlap and weave together. And then you realize, only brothers could conjoin to pull this crazy cacophony of sounds into music. Maybe something in the genes makes the fingers work in family unison.

"One glad morning when this life is over, I'll fly away," Jaybird begins to sing. The audience can't hear. The brothers sing most of the songs as they play, but not this one. "To a home on God's celestial shore," Troy and Byron, their backs still pressing, join their little brother,"I'll fly away." The audience can't see the faint movement of lips, and the brothers can barely hear each other. But they know; they sing this one for themselves. "I'll fly away, O glory. I'll fly away, in the morning." Rooney and Bryce eye each other and smile. "When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away."

Bluegrass. Gospel. Hillbilly Mountain. The brothers call it the music. The Morgan Brothers. Jaybird on the hammer dulcimer. The twins, Bryce and Byron, on the bass fiddle and the banjo, respectively. Troy on the twelve-string guitar and the Dobro. Rooney on the mandolin.

Now the old hymn reaches a crescendo; and you feel something new coming, sense it in the air around you. Another brother has been standing in the background all this time, in the shadows; you can always find shadows on a stage. He steps to the forefront, near the footlights where he belongs, into the edge of the glow. Cradling the fiddle under his chin, his great grand daddy Tuck's fiddle, he beats time with his brothers by bouncing the bow against his leg. He has been told to treat the fiddle like a woman and heard all of the jokes about its hourglass shape. But he's never loved a

woman, never loved anybody, like he loves the fiddle. He raises the bow and draws it across the catgut strings. "I'll fly away." Look at his face; maybe you've seen that look before. Think of a lover on a hot August morning laboring over your pleasure. Sweat beads his forehead, his eyes close in a way he couldn't describe in a lifetime, and his head sways with the pulsing rhythm. And the fiddle lives.

Tucker Morgan only plays the music for two, though. Tucker plays for himself, and Tucker plays for God or Buddha or the living trees or whatever it is that's bigger than the rest of us. And whatever that may be, listens. Listens and loves.

"I'll fly away."

Elsie Turner woke up at 5:00 a.m., just as she had every morning for eighty-four years. She had slept with her bedroom window opened, and the cool morning air filled the room. Even in June the hollow that surrounded her little house held the green mountain air close to the ground. For the past two or three years, getting out of bed in the morning had become a new chore for her, and she looked forward to summer when the warmth helped her rise. But up high in the Blue Ridge, summer starts in the afternoon. Sometimes, in the morning, a body has trouble telling June from October, but the screens always go in on the first day of June.

As the chill helped her mind catch up with her opened eyes, she realized it was Sunday, the one day of the week she couldn't laze in bed for an extra ten minutes. Saying a short prayer, "Lord, don't let the ache be too bad today," she lifted the quilts and rose to the side of the bed. The arthritic throb usually woke up about a minute after she did. Most mornings now days she wished it would take up her bad habit and decide to sleep in late for awhile, but it chose to rise early too and get its daily business started. Some glad mornings it didn't wake at all, but today wasn't going to

be one of those days. The pain began in her shoulders and quickly found its way to her legs. She knew that by the time she made it to the bathroom medicine cabinet, she'd decide to take three aspirins instead of two.

Before making the bed Elsie turned and patted Monroe's place, empty for twenty-eight years. She had decided, after his death, that she could sleep anywhere she wanted in the big, iron bed; but, try as she might, the left side still belonged to him. On cool mornings, like this one, she sometimes found herself reaching for the warmth of his broad back to only find air and sheets.

The bed made, she headed toward the bathroom to take those aspirin when she noticed the closet door open. Funny, she never left that door open unless . . . She rounded the door and there, hanging on a hook, was her new dress. Then it came to her what day this was, the second Sunday in June. How could she have forgotten after spending last night cooking and cleaning and laying out all of her new clothes? The only Sunday morning of the year that church was called off at the Harden Hollow Primitive Baptist Church, her church. The only Sunday morning of the year when she had a hundred tasks to do before leaving the house. The only Sunday morning of the year that she had to walk to get where she was going. The Singing Convention.

For the past seventy-four years, people from all over gathered on the second Sunday of June to praise the Lord in song. They came together at the old Camp Meeting Ground that all of the churches in Harden Hollow shared. The first few years only the churches in the Hollow participated, but when other congregations up and down The Ridge heard about what a blessing the singing brought, they soon began to attend. Each year the singing convention grew; more people played music and sang, and more people came to listen. Even during World War II, when only old men and women performed on the stage and filled the grandstand, no one ever thought of canceling the singing convention. And for all of those seventy-four years, God had let

the people of the Hollow know how much he enjoyed the singing; not one second Sunday in June had it ever rained in Harden Hollow.

Through the years, Elsie had watched as the television and newspaper people came to the hollow with all of their trucks and wires. She reckoned that folks everywhere enjoyed a good gospel song. This year's convention marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of an event that started with a few hundred souls and now usually drew five thousand. And to everyone's recollection, only two people had never missed a single year, Albert Johnson and Elsie Turner. But this year only one would have that honor. Albert would have to listen to the singing with the rest of the saints.

Elsie hurried into the kitchen to fix her breakfast. The singing began at 10:00 a.m. which meant she'd have to leave the house at 8:00 a.m. to get to the campground. Friends and neighbors had long since given up the notion of driving her there. Not only had she attended all seventy-five years; she had also walked. She had walked with her mother and father from their house over on Caney Creek, a good five miles from the campground. But after she married Monroe, and they bought the house, she had walked with him. Back in those days everybody walked, a steady stream of people from up in the hollows and along the creeks. And though it was surely vanity, most of the women wore new dresses and hats and carried the family Bibles. Not the every Sunday Bible mark you, the family Bible. The husbands usually lugged along the kids, or a fiddle case, or a hamper full of dinner. Nobody walked anymore; everybody had forgotten about the walking, everybody but Elsie. Thank God, Monroe had had enough sense to buy a house only about a mile and a half from the campground.

Elsie finished her cornbread and milk and went into the bedroom to dress. Two sisters from the church, Beulah Smith and Glessie Daniels, had taken her to the Wal-Mart in Big Stone Gap last week to shop. Elsie didn't hold much with new things, but

the Wal-Mart was a wonder. She didn't get to shop there often, but when she did, she always left with a shopping buggy full. Not clothes, mind you, but sensible things like wash powders and paper towels. And though most of the new and improved world didn't impress her, she had to admit that who ever came up with paper towels had a pretty good idea. But the clothes there, that's what caught your eye. Long, endless rows of dresses in every size, color, and print imaginable. Sister Glessie had told Elsie to take her time choosing, but she had walked straight to the rack that held her size and pulled out a pretty, blue Jersey. She'd made up her mind for that very color of blue the minute she'd seen the hat. Marked down for an after Easter sale, the hat was perched on the head of a mannequin that she had passed earlier. It reminded her of a hat she'd worn when she first got married. Monroe called it her pretty hat. Blue felt with silk periwinkles around the crown, it also had a nice wide brim that would shade her face from the sun.

After putting on her dress, Elsie sat at the vanity and twisted her long, gray hair into a tight bun. Eighty-four years didn't look bad on her, she thought. The past year the arthritis had stooped her some; and she eyed the ugly thing in the corner, standing there, on its own accord, like a metal bird claw. It supported itself on four little feet, each tipped with a rubber shoe. She'd liked her old wooden cane much better, but the doctor said she needed the new one. Something about a fall at her age and hips and hospitals, so to shut him up, she promised to get the new aluminum one. It had cost dearly, and she hoped it was worth it. Besides, the Shriners had stopped selling the wooden canes years ago.

Elsie opened the vanity drawer and reached way in the back for a cigar box. She opened its lid and looked at her meager treasures. Grandma Smith's pearl and gold brooch would look nice on the blue dress, and she needed one of her mother's hat pins. She only had four of them, their ends stuck into a cork. She chose the one

with a blue cut stone and speared the hat to her bun. Eight o'clock was catching up to her quickly, and she'd have to get on the road if she wanted to make it in time for the first singing. She grabbed the ugly cane and headed for the kitchen.

She didn't mind carrying the potato salad she'd made the night before. Her new plastic bowl from the Wal-Mart had a handle on it just like a basket. She checked her pocket book and made sure she had a ten dollar bill in her change purse. They sold those funnel cakes at the campground, and Elsie liked them so much she could usually eat two.

Elsie opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. The second she closed the door behind her, she realized she'd forgotten something. At first she thought she had just forgotten to lock the door, but she'd lost the key ten years back. And they didn't sell them at the drug store anymore like they used to. What was it? What was it? she asked herself over and over. Then she remembered what she'd forgotten; she went to the porch swing and sat down. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes. Elsie cried for her vanity over the new dress and hat, and she cried for the little pocket of pride she carried, God help her, over out-living Albert Johnson. But mostly she cried for what she had forgotten. Rising from the swing, she opened the door and stepped back into the little house. She went to the mantle and lifted a vase to reveal a tiny tin key. The secretary stood in the dining room. Fitting the key into the lock, she slowly raised the roll-top.

A thin layer of dust had settled onto her family Bible. These days, when Elsie house cleaned, she only dusted what people could see. She was the last of the Smith family, and the Bible had come down to her after her father died. The first marriage listed in it, her great-great grandparents', was dated 1832. Inserted between the Old Testament and the New, her family record filled twenty faded pages. She thumbed through the pages, remembering long dead family she'd only heard stories about. All

of the last entries belonged to her, and always would. She slowly read her brief history; her birth, her marriage to Monroe in 1930, the long row of clean, blank spaces for births under her name, Monroe's death in 1968. She closed the Bible, took a tissue from her pocket book, and carefully wiped off the film of dust. The black cowhide was cracked like white veins through dark marble, but the gold lettering proclaiming Holy Bible still managed to shine a little. She went to the kitchen and found one of those plastic pokes they give you at the Piggly Wiggly and put the Bible in it. Now she'd have to walk carrying the bag, her potato salad, her pocket book, and that ugly cane. Not that much of a load, really; she remembered days when she could carry three times that much and never stop to rest.

Leaving the house once again, she thanked God for such a grand day for her trip. The cool was creeping back up into the high mountains, and the patches of sky she could pick out through the trees in her yard, showed blue and cloudless. Most of the people coming for the singing would use the main road that entered the campground from the front. Few families still lived up the hollow, and this road wasn't traveled much. The sweet peas and honeysuckles were blooming, and the air had a high, sweet smell to it. Yes indeed, a wonderful day to walk. After the first ten feet she realized that the doctor was right; the ugly cane did work better. She'd still tell him she liked the wooden one best. Her trip begun, Elsie decided she'd sing. Just an old hymn to put herself in the spirit.

"I'll fly away."

Rooney woke up to the sound of a car horn blaring. Who in the name of God would be blowing a horn at . . . He reached over his shoulder and groped on the

bedside table. By the time he'd pulled the wrist watch to his face, he knew it wasn't his. The damned thing must have weighed a pound, and he could never tell the time on it. The face of the watch was paved with diamonds, and the gold hands almost disappeared into them. Not the kind of Rolex that a lawyer made payments on, it was the kind that somebody with a hell of a lot of money walked into a jewelry store and said, "I'll take that one." He had just managed to figure out that it was ten after eight, when he remembered what finding his brother Tucker's watch on the table meant. He rolled over and stared at the opposite side of the tiny compartment. Sure enough, Tucker's bed was still made, or as made as Tucker's bed ever was. "Damn," he whispered under his breath. Sound carried through the bus in spite of its size.

Tucker always left the gaudy watch behind when he went out. "Wouldn't want people to think I was the wrong kind of boy," he'd joke to Rooney, as he removed the watch. Also, he probably didn't want to have it stolen. Rooney knew what kind of places Tucker frequented these days. And Rooney had made it a point to find out how much the watch cost; he'd seen one just like it at a shopping mall in Atlanta for only eleven thousand dollars.

"What kind of boy gets a watch like that, Tucker?" Rooney had asked once.

"Apparently a pretty good one," Tucker had answered with a smile. Tucker had had the watch for about a year, and to this day neither Rooney or anybody else in the family knew where he'd gotten it. Tucker had told Grandpa Tuck that it was a fake, bought it from a man on the street in New York for fifty bucks. But the brothers all knew it was genuine. Especially Rooney who'd been with Tucker when he'd pawned it four months ago, hocked it to lend Rooney the money.

Rooney sat up in bed and searched his mind to remember just where he was. He needed to know so he could gauge how much he'd have to worry about Tucker not being back yet. Different places had whole different sets of worries. In the cities, like

Nashville and Charlotte, Rooney knew that the night clubs and bars were home to people who'd just as soon slit your throat in the alley as look at you. He'd sweated for three days the last time they played Atlanta because a buddy had told him that the new night-life trend there was to slip some kind of horse tranquilizer into a person's drink. It didn't knock you out; just made you, what was the word his buddy had used, willing? In the small towns, Rooney was more concerned about red-necks. As far as Rooney could tell, good old boys didn't care much for Tucker's tastes. And it was a small town that had given Rooney his biggest scare.

Just last month, in Greenville, Tennessee at a bluegrass festival, Tucker had awakened Rooney at five o'clock in the morning when he opened the outside door to their private compartment in the back of the bus and dropped on his bed with a thud. After turning on the lights, the first thing Rooney saw was the dried blood splattered on the front of Tucker's white shirt. "Jesus Christ, what happened Tucker?" Rooney remembered asking with panic in his voice.

"I fell," Tucker mumbled. With just those few words, Rooney could hear and smell the liquor in his voice. Another bad sign, he usually didn't drink. Tucker rolled his head over and grinned at his brother. His bottom lip, swollen and cut, was already turning purple. First things first, Rooney thought. He'd chew him out in the morning. At twenty, Rooney was two years younger than Tucker; but he still had to play at being the oldest, taking care of everybody else.

"You okay, Tucker?"

"Jeez, Rooney, it's just a split lip," Tucker replied, as if everybody stumbled in drunk at five in the morning with their face pounded. "I'm not going to die or anything, if that's what you mean. And yeah, I'll be able to play tomorrow or today or whenever the hell it is."

Rooney never asked "tell me what happened," partly because he didn't really

want to know. He just remembered being glad that Tucker hadn't been hurt bad. "Hey Tucker," he'd asked across the beds, "ain't you going to say that thing about how the other guy looked?"

"Yeah Rooney," Tucker said quietly. "He looked like he wasn't going to hit me. Now shut up and go to sleep."

Tucker hadn't stayed out all night since then, especially since they'd been playing a string of little towns through Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia. The outside summer festival season had just begun. Rooney pried opened the blinds and gazed out of the bus, trying to figure out which place they were in today. He expected to see the same farmer's field or county fair grounds that they usually parked the bus in the night before, but instead he saw a solid metal wall about ten feet away. Somebody had parked a bus right beside them in the middle of the night. Painted on its side, a music staff twisted into cursive that read The God's Way Messengers. Rooney recognized the name of one of the old gospel singing groups. Then the night before flooded back instantly. They were in some back holler in the mountains of Virginia for that yearly gospel singing convention.

Grandpa Tuck insisted that they play the singing convention every year, even though they didn't get paid. Grand daddy remembered playing the music here himself as a boy. Ten years ago, when they'd first started performing, the old man had ushered the boys up onto the stage and introduced them, proudly, as his grandsons, The Morgan Brothers. Jaybird didn't play with them then; he'd been too young, not even five years old yet. Now they hardly played the gospel circuit since every town in the South seemed to have its own bluegrass festival of one kind or another. And new country music night clubs were springing up everywhere. Their last year's schedule had taken them as far north as New York state.

One good thing about Tucker's recent night time traipsing, Grandpa Tuck didn't

sleep on the tour bus. He'd follow behind in his car; and he and Ernie, the bus driver, would sleep at a motel or hotel somewhere. Last night, to save time, they'd dropped Ernie off at a little motel in town which meant Bryce got to drive the bus out to the campground. Even back when they traveled in cars, pulling a trailer with all of their equipment in it, Bryce had had an uncanny sense of direction. He never forgot the back roads and short-cuts to any of the hundreds of little towns that they played in. He could thread the big converted bus through country lanes barely wide enough to accommodate two passing cars, much less a bus the size of a tractor-trailer rig.

Though they'd lived most of their lives at Grandpa Tuck's house back in Athens, Tennessee, the brothers felt most at home with constant movement. Not just moving from one town to another to play dates, but at home with real motion. The floor beneath their feet never stood still for long. Grandpa Tuck had decided two things after the boys' mother had died; they would learn how to play the music, and they would never sit still. Time to think meant time to be sad, or worse yet, angry. None of the boys had even seen the inside of a school room for the past ten years, and Jaybird had never attended school at all. Grandpa's buddy Ernie, a retired high school teacher, not only drove the bus but had schooled all six of the brothers through home study courses. The twins had just finished the program and received their GEDs, but Jaybird had four more years left. That meant four more years of three hour layovers in truck stop or shopping mall parking lots while Ernie hammered geometry and history into Jay's head. A head which at that minute stuck itself through the door.

"Get your lazy ass out of bed, Rooney," Jaybird said as his eyes scanned the little compartment. "Troy's got breakfast ready." Rooney followed his little brother's gaze to Tucker's unslept-in bed. Jaybird smiled; he thought his oldest brother's exploits dashing and just exactly what a twenty-three year old man who looked and walked like Tucker Morgan ought to be doing with his nights. "Looks like somebody's eating

breakfast somewhere else," Jaybird said. "Tell me something Rooney. Ain't I ever going to walk in here some morning and find your bunk empty?"

"I've got a better question, Jaybird," Rooney said, and threw his pillow in the general direction of Jay's head." When are you going to learn to knock on a door?" Rooney wondered what Jay would think of his brother if he knew where Tucker probably was right now. He'd known about Tucker, truly known from Tucker's own lips, for two years now; but he still worried about what the others would think if they knew.

"Some guy from the singing convention came by a few minutes ago," Jay told him. "One of us needs to go do a sound check. You do it, but come eat first. Troy's burning eggs."

Rooney climbed out of his bunk in his undershorts and followed Jay down the hall toward the front of the bus. Stacked sleeping berths lined the cramped passageway, three on both sides. The privacy curtains were pulled on the twins' berths, but Jaybird's and Troy's stood open, revealing tiny bedrooms complete with televisions, VCRs, and cell phones. Rooney still had trouble believing that they'd been able to afford the tour bus. Business had been good the past couple of years, especially since they had signed the contract with Paragon. But a bus like this usually came with the big times; civic coliseums, *The Music City News*, videos on The Nashville Network. It seemed as if Grandpa Tuck still knew all of the important people in Nashville, even though he hadn't lived there for over thirty years. When one of the big timers had decided to step up his tour accommodations to a Grumman Gulfstream III jet, he'd called Grandpa Tuck and offered him the bus at a bargain price. After all, Grandpa Tuck had written one of the songs that had made the singer a big star. One thing about people in the business, they didn't forget.

Rooney reached the dining area and sat down at the table. The sight of Troy

cooking always made him laugh. Most times, breakfast either came from a fast food place or wasn't eaten at all. Bluegrass festivals started in the afternoon, but these gospel people tended to get out of bed early. When the brothers had to cook for themselves, the task usually fell to Troy. Not because he could cook, but because none of the others would do it. This morning he stood at the stove, dressed only in a pair of bright orange athletic shorts with the University of Tennessee printed on the leg.

"Fried or scrambled?" he mumbled to Rooney over his shoulder.

"I've already had mine," Jaybird said. "Ask him what they were, and then go for the opposite."

"You have to do a sound check," Troy said, as he broke an egg into the skillet and danced back away from the splattering grease.

Rooney wished they'd both shut up about the damned sound check. He knew exactly what he'd find. A portable stage underneath a canvas canopy would be standing in the middle of the field. Some local gospel group's sound system would be set up on the stage for all of the day's performers to use. The Morgans wouldn't even unpack their elaborate Peavy system. Some guy from one of the churches would be sitting at a sound board and looking at it like it was a Chinese puzzle. Maybe he could balance the bass and treble without Rooney having to prompt him from the stage, but probably not. They'd sing a four song set, all traditional gospel hymns. The other brothers wouldn't even know what they'd be playing until Rooney told the audience. The first songs they'd learned how to play, the gospel music didn't take practice anymore, only feeling. And the Morgan Brothers could feel a song in a cow pasture or on the stage at the Grand Old Opry.

"I take it brother Tucker won't be dining with us this fine Virginia morning," Troy said as he placed the eggs in front of Rooney. "Didn't he go AWOL here last year too?"

"Jaybird develop ESP all of the sudden?" Rooney asked him.

"Nah, I heard him leave after we got settled in," Troy replied. "Must've been about midnight. Wouldn't think you'd find any night-life this far back in the hills. At least not the kind that Tucker likes."

"Didn't you see that place we passed coming in last night," Jay said. He had lounged back on one of the couches and was picking at Troy's old practice guitar. He plucked a few chords of a popular song, the kind Grandpa Tuck called "that boot scootin' garbage." "The Silver Buckle or The Silver Spur or something like that. Parking lot looked like the pick-up truck section at a Ford dealership. Saturday night probably empties out every holler for thirty miles."

"Grandpa and Ernie ought to be here by ten," Rooney said to the boys. He hadn't had to explain one of Tucker's mysterious disappearances to the old man yet, and he believed his grandfather didn't even realize. "If Tucker isn't back by then, stall them; and I'll find him."

Since the first year they had started playing together, Rooney had always watched the way that Grandpa Tuck looked at Tucker when they were on stage. The old man's eyes would shine, but he didn't smile as if he were happy. A solemn look would come over his face, a look of concern. At eleven years old, Rooney didn't understand the look, and as a grown man he still had trouble with it. As far as Rooney could tell, Grandpa Tuck saw or heard something in Tucker that made the music different, better maybe. And Grandpa looked as if he didn't exactly trust what had a hold of Tucker.

Rooney finished his eggs and headed back to his room to dress. Troy followed and watched as he dug around behind his bed for a pair of jeans and a clean t-shirt. "You remember The Dan Hall Singers?" he asked his brother.

"I remember the one you're talking about," Rooney replied. "Wendy or Cindy or

something like that."

"Mindy," Troy said. "Listen Rooney, seriously, you think a girl who looks like that could go a whole year and not have latched on to a boyfriend somewhere."

"Nah, Troy, I think she's spent the whole year just waiting to see your handsome face again at the Harden Hollow Singing Convention. Probably the only thing that keeps her going."

"I've been talking to her for the past three years. Even write her a letter every once in awhile," Troy told him. Rooney could see that his brother wasn't joking. "She only tours in the summer. The rest of the year she goes to regular school. This fall she's starting at UT."

"You still thinking about school," Rooney asked him.

Troy stepped farther into the compartment and closed the door. He slipped his hand into the waistband of the orange shorts, pulled out a folded letter, and handed it to Rooney. "Read it," he said in a whisper.

Rooney saw the return address from the office of admissions at the University of Tennessee and knew what the letter said without even reading it. Troy had burdened him with his plan since he'd slipped away to the community college in Athens last fall and taken his SAT tests. The letter was postmarked April 22, which meant that Troy had held on to it for almost two months before sharing it with his brother. Rooney pulled out the letter and read it. Not only had Troy been accepted, he'd also received a full scholarship from the music department, already had a dorm room, and knew the date he was supposed to arrive. "August tenth doesn't leave you much time to tell Grandpa," Rooney said. "When you going to do it, Troy?"

Troy dropped his head and stared at the cluttered floor. "Right after you talk to him?" he said to Rooney, with pleading in his voice.

"No sir, Troy, you tell him yourself. You made your choice; now you're going to

have to deal with it."

Troy raised his head and looked at his brother. "I have a good idea, Rooney. Why don't you tell him I'm going to college right after you tell him you're leaving too."

"What?" Rooney asked with disbelief. Nobody knew about his plans but Tucker, and Tucker would never tell. Troy's words sounded defiant; but when Rooney looked at him, he could see that his brother was more scared than anything.

"Plenty of people on the circuit know about it, Rooney. A new band, crossover stuff. I keep hearing a lot of different names, but I always hear yours."

Rooney knew people in the business were already buzzing about the band, but he figured most of the talk was in Nashville. And the Morgans hadn't played Nashville in half a year. "I don't have time to talk about this now, Troy. Think you can keep your mouth shut till we get back to Athens." After Harden Hollow they had one more booking in Bristol, Virginia, then the brothers were heading back home for a couple of days.

"He has to know soon," Troy said, "and the rest of them too. We owe them a little time at least."

"We owe them all a lot more than time, Troy. But we owe ourselves something too. Try not to worry too much. I'll handle it, but right now I have this technically complex sound check to do."

Troy laughed, and the dread left his face. "You go ahead," he told Rooney, "and I'll look out for Tucker. He'll come drag-assin' in any minute. You think Tucker will ever leave, Rooney?"

"Seems to me like he's been leaving a little bit at a time for a while now," Rooney replied as he pulled on his sneakers. He opened the back door of the bus and stepped out into the world he'd known for the past ten years.

Buses and motor-homes stood parked at the far end of a wide meadow making

it look like a modern camp of nomads or gypsies. Groups of people were already milling about, visiting and gossiping. From the artificial valleys between each bus, Rooney could hear guitar or mandolin music, his ear separating the chords and picking out each song. He'd forgotten how cool summer mornings could be this high up in the mountains. Even at nine o'clock, the sun had trouble burning the mist out of the trees.

A humming caught his ear as he rounded the bus, one of the old songs. Mrs. Eva Lloyd, mother to three generations of The God's Way Messengers, stood before a long folding table laid with a big country breakfast; ham, biscuits, red-eye gravy, home fries, and jars and pots of homemade preserves. She looked up at him and stopped humming. "Got time for breakfast, Morgan?"

"Thanks, done eat," he replied, "and Miz Eva, I'm Rooney." He knew the old lady couldn't tell him and his brothers apart.

Miz Eva hummed a few more bars of the tune Rooney had heard. "The Lord put that song on my heart this morning," she said as she buttered a biscuit before it cooled. "The Lord ever put anything on your heart, Rooney Morgan?"

"Miz Eva, if the Lord puts anything else on it, it's liable to burst," Rooney said.

He heard her finally add the words to her humming as he walked away, toward the stage in the middle of the field. "Just a few more weary days and then . . ."

I'll fly away.

Tucker had wrestled with the angel all night long. On a rough plain strewn with rust colored rocks, they had tried to whip each other in a battle that brought red blood. Tucker's blood anyway. The angel bled in waves of shining colors like running oil

spots on the road after a rain. Tucker could see each cut and scrape on its glowing hide, not difficult considering that the angel fought as mother-naked as Tucker himself. They had started the fight in the pitch black dark, and Tucker had only known he was struggling with an angel after trying to get a decent hold, and feeling . . . what? Wings? "No fair if I can't see," he said. And suddenly the darkness began to melt away from a mad, white light cast by the flames of a thousand burning trees and bushes that surrounded the rocky battleground. Tucker stumbled to his feet and saw that he wore no clothes. "This is shameful," he muttered to himself.

"WHAT SHAME?" a voice boomed out through the night, a voice so loud that Tucker covered his ears with his hands to keep it from splitting his skull. He thought about not answering; he hadn't asked for any of this.

"What shame?" the voice repeated, but this time it sounded sweet, not demanding . And Tucker, being a gentleman, decided to reply politely.

"Excuse me, I'm naked," he told the burning sky.

"And how do you know you're naked?" the voice asked, with concern that sounded a little too eager to Tucker's ears.

"Well good lord, just look at me," he said. He held his arms straight out from his sides and turned his palms and eyes upward to show his bare flesh to the curious voice. "See," he said. Just then he caught the angel out of the corner of his eye. It faced him and mocked his pose. Tucker felt a trickle at his lips, pulled in his upturned hand, and wiped his mouth with the back of it. The blood left a long, crimson stain.

Mimicking the move, the angel dragged its golden hand through the flowing hues that dripped from its lips; and Tucker noticed that it wasn't completely naked. On its wrists, it wore cuffs of rough hammered gold set with precious gems, cut blue stones and diamonds. It smiled at Tucker and flashed its chrome colored eyes. It was then that Tucker saw that the angel was a copy of him. This recognition pleased the angel;

it bowed slightly to Tucker, then resumed its mocking pose.

Tucker studied its body and his. First he compared the battle wounds. A scrape the size of a man's hand on their ribcage. Their knee embedded with grit and pebbles from the rugged ground. A long, lightening-bolt gash on their inner thigh. Then, through all the hurts, he saw their everyday body. The angel wore Tucker's fine, corded muscles like a suit of armor. The angel flexed; and Tucker's own body pleased him, from his square jaw to the downy hairs that crept down his belly toward the fork of his legs. Tucker could feel the angel feeding on their pride; that's when he made his move. He hurled his body forward and hit the angel hard in its gut. It landed on its back, feathery wings outstretched against the barren dirt. Tucker locked his elbow around its neck and gently squeezed until the angel moaned a sound like a church chord organ.

"Bless me," he told the angel.

The angel opened its mouth and the notes streamed out. Like a perfect song, its voice was built of music. "What blessing?" it sung, as if it didn't understand Tucker's command.

"Listen, old son, you owe me a blessing," Tucker said, and tightened his hold. "I know how to play this game. I've read the rule book."

"Your name?" the angel asked in flowing strains.

"You know my name, and I know yours. Now bless me," Tucker ordered.

"Name what blessing," the angel sang out, defeated.

And Tucker couldn't think of one single blessing. He knew he wanted something, but he couldn't form his need into a word. He loosed his grip, and the angel sprang to its feet. It glanced at Tucker with a scared and pitiful look in its eyes, and then turned them toward the sky.

"FLY AWAY," the booming voice called to the angel, and it did. Beating its

wings, it streaked upward into the dark, trailing a scream of harmony.

Tucker was watching its glow shrink to a pinpoint of light when the music roused him from his sleep.

Buck had forgotten that Tucker set the clock-radio to alarm at nine. He'd been watching Tucker sleep for the past hour. For someone who usually slept like a crowbar, Tucker had fretted and tossed all night long. Buck had come close to waking him a couple of times; but knew he needed to sleep, considering how busy he'd be at the singing convention all day. Buck decided instead of bothering the boy, he'd just watch over him. A task he'd tried to make his main goal for the past year now.

Buck liked Tucker here best; in his bed, in his house at the mouth of Harden Hollow. Especially on this morning that marked an anniversary of sorts. One year ago last night, Buck had stepped into the middle of a fist fight and Tucker Morgan's life.

Buck remembered walking into the Silver Buckle that night with nothing more on his mind than drinking a few beers and getting laid. The beer part was easy, and the other part used to be, back in his bachelor days. Only four years out of practice shouldn't have made a man too rusty. Besides, according to Sheila's famous letter, garage mechanics couldn't expect too much out of life. Not the better things anyway. Sheila had gone looking for those better things in the arms, and new condo, of a Certified Public Account over in Kingsport. Buck had even waited a respectable two months, after she left, to go searching for his own better things. One of which he'd hoped to find sitting on a bar stool at the Silver Buckle that night.

Everybody in town was going to the new Silver Buckle, one of those country and western line dancing places that had started life as the U-Bag-Em Supermarket. The owner had covered the outside of the metal building with rough sawed boards

and put up a row of fake hitching posts. Buck didn't care much for dancing, line or otherwise; but he figured if he wanted to jump-start his social life, this was as good a place as any.

He made his way inside and headed for the bar. The place was decorated like somebody's idea of an old West saloon, with spittoons in the corners and a big, stuffed black bear standing beside the door. Wagon wheel chandeliers hung from the ceiling over a dance floor that faced a bank of TV screens, each showing the same country music video. The couples, many of them dressed to match in cowboy hats and discount store boots, formed rigid lines and nodded their heads to keep time with the music. Though Buck didn't dance, all of that counting and sticking your butt out in unison looked pretty silly to him. He also remembered that some women like a guy who just sits at the bar and sips a beer.

The long bar, complete with brass rail, was Saturday-night packed. Buck spotted an empty stool way down at the end, and started shouldering through the crowd to reach it. That's when he caught the boy. The kid had come staggering backwards and landed square on Buck's chest -- hard. Buck looked up and saw the reason he was holding about a hundred and eighty pounds of slack human being. Chopper Daniels was rubbing his fist and gritting his teeth and doing all of that other stuff that Chopper Daniels did when he was in the middle of kicking somebody's ass.

"Hold him for me, Deckard," Chopper said. Chopper had been stupid and mean in high school, and Buck figured that he probably hadn't improved much with time.

The boy's weight was becoming too much for Buck to support, so he eased him down to the floor. He looked up at Buck with that goofy look people get after they've been cracked good on the jaw, and smiled. Buck's daddy had once told him to never mess with a man who smiles during a fight.

"Listen Chopper," Buck said, "Looks like you've done damn-near half killed

him."

"It's that other half I was counting on," Chopper said as he moved in closer to Buck and the boy. "You think I'm goin' to let some pretty boy come in here and make eyes at my woman?"

Buck had already picked out Chopper's woman. Dressed in a silver tube-top and a mini-skirt that resembled a shiny ace bandage, the girl looked barely old enough to be in the place. And if one smile bothered him more than the punched out kid's, it was the girl's. She beamed over the scene she'd just caused, tossing a head of frizzy blond hair and glancing around the bar to see if everyone had noticed what heroic pains men would go through to love her. A cowboy-hatted girl beside her whispered quickly into her ear, and the blond burst out in giggles.

Buck lifted up the boy and sat him on the empty bar stool. He decided to defuse Chopper pretty damned quick. Without one hint, he spun around landed a right directly on Chopper's chin. The big man shook his head, took a few steps back, and glared at Buck. "You sucker punched me, you son-of-a-bitch," he growled.

"Okay, Chopper, you win," Buck told the fuming man. "You're bigger and badder than me and this boy here put together. We're whipped; we know when to go home. Ain't that right boy?" he asked over his shoulder toward the bar stool. The boy finally spoke.

"I don't know, bud," the kid said. "I don't really think he's bigger than both of us put together." Even addled, his rich, baritone voice sounded all wrong for the bar; and Buck realized that it wasn't the kind of place where the boy belonged.

"Jesus Christ, ain't there a bouncer in here," Buck called out.

"Chopper is the bouncer," a tiny voice answered from somewhere down the bar.

Buck grabbed the boy's arm, swung it over his shoulder, and pulled him to his feet. "We're leaving now folks," he said to the crowd that had gathered. "Everybody

have a good night." He figured if he could get the kid out into the parking lot, they might both have a chance of getting home in one piece. Just as they got to the door, Chopper's girlfriend appeared out of nowhere. Still smiling, she said to Buck, "I knew somebody would be takin' that one home tonight. Hope Chopper didn't mess him up too bad for you."

Buck ignored the girl and dragged the kid out the door. He propped him up against one of the hitching posts and thought about what to do. The fresh air began to work on the boy and bring him to his senses. He looked at Buck and smiled the same smile he had in the bar; but now, instead of punch-drunk, he simply looked amused.

"Don't see what's so damned funny. You nearly got killed in there."

"Yeah, I know," the kid shrugged, as if this type of thing happened to him every other night. "And you saved me, so tell me your name so I can thank you."

"Buck Deckard, and I don't want you to thank me. I just want you to get your butt home. You drive?"

No sir, hitched," the kid said, "and thanks anyway." He stepped out into the parking lot and and started for the road.

Buck didn't want to offer the kid a ride. He didn't recognize him; and from the way he talked, Buck figured the boy didn't even live nearby. But he also didn't want to see the kid stagger out to route six and get picked up by the first deputy sheriff cruiser that came by. "Where'd you hitch from, junior?" he hollered without looking at the boy.

"A cow pasture somewhere," the kid's voice answered.

Buck looked out at him, and the kid was jerking his thumb over his left shoulder in a that-a-way motion.

"You live in a cow pasture?" Buck asked, and he finally laughed for the first time since he'd left the house that night.

"Damned right," the boy replied. He raised his foot and stomped the asphalt.

"Cow pastures, parking lots, that's where I live."

"Hard to help a man home with directions like that."

"I'll show you the way, if you take me home," the boy called, as he leaned up against a car to steady himself.

Buck walked toward his pick-up and motioned for the boy to follow him. The two climbed into the truck, and Buck pulled out to the road. "Which way?" he asked.

"Turn left and go about a mile, then turn left again onto a dirt road."

"You sure about that?" Buck asked, recognizing the directions to his own house. Only three houses still stood at the mouth of Harden Hollow, and the dirt road petered out at the camp grounds. "Not much down that way, just a few old houses and the camp grounds."

"Told you I lived in a pasture," the boy said with a laugh.

"If you're staying at the camp grounds, you're going to have plenty of company," Buck told him. "Second Sunday in June tomorrow. That big holy-roller singing thing draws a hell of a crowd." It suddenly dawned on Buck where the boy had come from. "You here for the singing convention?"

"I'm one of the singing holy-rollers," the kid said.

Buck glanced at the young man's profile in the glow of the dash lights. What was he? Nineteen or twenty? And though he didn't know much about gospel music, Buck didn't think that the people who sang it hung out in places like the Silver Buckle. "You got a name," he asked.

"Tucker Morgan, one of the singing Morgan Brothers. Stars of cow pastures and parking lots all across the country."

"Do the rest of the singing Morgan Brothers sit in dives and flirt with another man's girl. I'm just thinking, if they do, there probably ain't many of you left."

"I can guarantee you one thing, bud," Tucker said. "I never flirted with that ugly

son-of-a-bitch's girlfriend. She wanted me to, but we had a little difference of opinion. And as far as hanging out in dives, you were sure in there."

"I ain't going to be standing on a stage tomorrow singing praises to the Lord."

Tucker laughed, and Buck heard the same musical quality of his speaking voice. Some unfamiliar wish made him want to make the boy laugh again.

"The Lord don't care what I do on a Saturday night," Tucker said. "Long as I can sing and play on Sunday morning."

"That might be the Lord's opinion," Buck told him. "But I'm guessing your daddy ain't as tolerant as the almighty." Like everybody else in Harden Hollow, he'd been to the singing convention plenty of times. And he'd seen the family gospel groups sing. The father and mother usually sang the lead parts, backed up by stair-step children, aunts, brothers-in-law, and cousins. He could just picture some Bible-thumping, psalms-singing daddy sitting in a lawn chair in front of a rusty, old motor-home parked at the campgrounds. Sitting there tapping his foot, waiting for the boy to show up. Buck decided he'd drop the kid off a quarter mile or so out.

"Wouldn't know. I'm just a poor orphan," Tucker said. "I'd tell you the whole story, but Grandpa only lets Jaybird do that."

"Jaybird?"

"My little brother; he's fourteen. Grandpa makes him do all the press interviews. Newspapers. Television. If they ask about our parents, Jay can get this real pitiful look on his face. Usually shuts 'em right up."

"Why do they need shut up?" Buck asked, surprised to hear that the boy sang with a group that generated publicity.

"Cause the real story don't make good copy," Tucker said as he rolled down the truck window and let a blast of night air rush in.

Buck wanted to hear the kid talk. Something about his voice. "If this Jaybird

was telling the story, how would it go?" he asked Tucker.

"Our daddy died of cancer thirteen years ago. And the good Lord, in his mysterious way, decided to call our momma home two years later. She died in a car wreck." Tucker spoke the lines with mock melodrama.

"And if you told the story, how would it go?" Buck asked.

"They were in a race to see which one could drink them self to death first. Daddy won, but momma came in a close second." The dramatics had leaked out of Tucker's voice.

"Who lost?" Buck asked.

"Six boys and one old man."

Buck had already heard a grandfather mentioned, and had a pretty good idea of the situation. He wanted to hear the kid happy again. The short story had seemed to drain the lilt from his voice. The red reflectors that helped him find his driveway at night, flashed in the distance. "It's just eleven o'clock," he said to the boy. "You in any hurry to get back to the campgrounds."

Tucker laughed again; and once more, Buck heard the music. "Don't think we're welcomed at the town's only establishment anymore, bud."

"Well, you're welcomed at my house," Buck said, as he cut the truck tires and headed up the long drive to his house. The act confused him; the boy hadn't even agreed. He marked it up to just wanting to have another warm body to drink a cold beer with.

Buck pulled into the yard and parked in front of the porch. He'd bought the little house a year before he and Sheila got married, and had spent the past five years mending and painting and adding on. Just when he had managed to turn it into a home, Sheila left. Now, the isolation that had drawn him to the house in the first place had turned into plain old loneliness.

"You got a beer in there?' Tucker asked him.

"Son, I got a whole refrigerator full out back in the shed," Buck replied. "When you live this far out in the country, you learn to stock up." They got out of the truck and headed into Buck's house.

Buck hadn't had company since Sheila left; and though he considered himself a good housekeeper, the lack of furniture embarrassed him a little. The living room stood bare with the exception of a second-hand couch, a television set sitting on the floor, and a row of trophies lined against the wall.

"Damn, you live lean," Tucker said, and smiled as he gazed around the room. "Better stop stocking up on beer and invest something in a chair."

"It hasn't always looked like this," Buck said. He thought for a second about whether to tell Tucker anything about his recent life. "My ex-wife didn't need all the furniture; she just took it to spite me." Buck went to the kitchen and brought back a couple of bottles of beer. He tossed one to Tucker on the couch and sat on the floor, his back to the wall.

"Ex-wife?"

"Yeah, and I can make my story as short as yours," Bucked answered. "We got married. No kids. She wasn't happy, so she left. She's just been gone two months. Hell, we ain't even divorced yet."

"So we were both in that bar looking for the same thing," Tucker said.

"You tell me."

"Something to ease the pain," Tucker replied. Buck looked at his face for a smile and listened for the singing laugh, but the boy sat with his eyes closed, his face expressionless.

"Not that much to have in common. I'll bet everybody in that place tonight wanted the same thing."

"No sir," Tucker opened his eyes as he spoke. "Most of them were just looking to rut. Pain easin' takes some skill."

"Let me tell you something you'll learn by the time you're an old man like me, kid. For all the pain that it eases, it ends up causing a hell of a lot more."

"Old man?" Tucker said, and Buck saw the smile he'd been looking for earlier. "You're not four or five years older than me."

"Turned thirty my last birthday. Out here by myself, living in the woods, that's old enough to be a hermit."

"At least you have your bowling to keep you company," Tucker said, as he got up and crossed the room.

"Bowling?" Buck asked from where he sat on the floor.

Tucker walked to the wall and picked up one of the trophies. A little gold car like a boy's toy crowned a base of wood and marble and columns. He read the engraved plaque aloud: "Best of show. You show cars?"

"Been showing them since I was sixteen," Buck replied. "I won that one just this past March. The car's parked out back in the garage."

"Show me," Tucker said. Not waiting for Buck, he disappeared through the kitchen door and headed out back.

Buck followed and hit the light switch by the door, illuminating the back yard. Tucker already stood at the garage door trying to lift it up. "I keep it locked, junior. I got more money in that car than I do in the bank." He fitted a key into the lock and yanked up the door in one motion. The outside light struck the car, and it seemed to absorb the glow and throw it back in waves of red.

"What year?" Tucker asked. "Sixty-seven? Sixty-eight?"

"Sixty-six, the same year I was born. Lee Iacocca might not have run Chrysler worth a damn, but he sure the hell knew how to build a car for Ford." The Mustang

looked fast even parked in the garage. Buck turned on the interior light, grabbed a chamois from a hook on the wall, and pitched it to Tucker.

"I'm afraid to touch it," Tucker said. "It looks wet."

"It should after fourteen coats of hand-rubbed candy-apple lacquer. I ought to know; I rubbed everyone of them myself." The car's hood looked as if you fell and tried to catch yourself on it, you'd sink in up to your elbows. Buck had spent the better part of the past two years balancing his time between knowing that Sheila was going to leave and restoring the Mustang. No matter how much he tried, Sheila would have left anyway. But the car respected and responded to the work of his hands. The day Sheila packed, he stopped tinkering with the Mustang; he'd finished restoring it down to the last detail.

Buck watched as Tucker polished the fender with wide swipes, the chamois cloth pulling the gloss up closer to the light. The boy looked at Buck with the same look that every man who saw the car eventually got in his eyes. But nobody drove Buck's car. Nobody. He only drove it himself to shows, and that was because he couldn't afford a trailer. "Want to drive it?" he asked Tucker.

"Oh yeah," the kid replied.

"Some rules first," Buck told him. "Only on the dirt road out here in front of the house. You got about three miles down to the campgrounds." The hard-packed road had broad, grassy shoulders and usually no traffic, especially this late at night. "And you grind one gear and I set you out. Understood?"

Tucker raised up his palm and opened it. "Pitch me the keys," he said.

Taking his keys from his pocket, Bucked walked around back of the car and handed them to Tucker. He'd learned years ago never to hand, much less throw, anything over the hood of a show car.

Once inside the car, Tucker turned over the engine; and Buck listened to the

throaty growl that all of his work had coaxed out of the chrome manifold pipes. Tucker flicked on the headlights and carefully pulled out of the garage.

Tucker turned onto the dirt road and pressed the gas pedal out toward the night. The county had long since stopped caring for the old road, and the branches of trees from both sides met overhead to form a tunnel of green. As Tucker accelerated, Buck watched his hand on the stick-shift knob. "Check the tach," he warned, and Tucker heard the concern in his voice.

"Don't worry, Buck" Tucker said, his eyes intent on the country lane. "It's just like playing the fiddle; I can feel how and when it needs to be touched." His fingers played lightly over the knob as he shifted smoothly to fourth gear. And the Mustang did what it did best; it flew.

"That's what you do, play the fiddle," Buck said as he watched the speedometer creep up to eighty-five.

"Yes sir, used to think that's what I did best, until I drove this car."

Tucker didn't handle the car as well as Buck, but he did seem to have a natural feel for it. Most men drove a car hard, pounding out the rpms; but Tucker only made gentle, relaxed moves.

Buck looked ahead through the dark and saw faint lights where they shouldn't be. Then he remembered the buses and motor-homes that would be parked in the fields around the camp grounds. The once a year glut of people in a place that hardly saw a soul the rest of the time.

Without warning, Tucker reached for the dash and turned off the headlights. He then dropped down the gear-shift and slowed the Mustang to a crawl. Buck started to ask why, but then decided not to. His concern over the car was melting away, only to be replaced by a new concern forming somewhere in the back of his mind. A worry that grew a little more every time the boy looked at him and laughed.

Tucker eased the car to a stop and killed the motor. "Watch," he said. The black air surrounding them instantly burst into

glittering light. Tucker had turned on the car's headlights, high-beam, and what they struck shot arcs and rays out toward the night. Thirty feet away stood a long, custom-built bus. It took Buck a minute to understand why the light wouldn't hold still. On the bus's stainless-steel skin, in bold block letters three feet tall, THE MORGAN BROTHERS glimmered in some sort of laser-cut iridescence. Below the fiery banner, in smaller letters, he read the list of names, beginning with *Tucker* and ending with *Jay*. Buck glanced over and saw that the windshield played a trick with the reflections. Colors danced on Tucker's rapt face. He turned to Buck, opened his mouth to speak, and blues and whites and pinks seemed to stray out with his words. "I've seen your house. Now you've seen mine. What do you think?" he asked.

"I think they're going to call the cops if you don't turn off those lights," Buck answered.

"Nah, people pull in all night long. You get used to it."

Buck turned his face and caught Tucker's image mirrored in his side window. "You going to get out now?" he asked the window, not knowing what he wanted it to answer. He watched as Tucker reached for the ignition and turned the key. The Mustang rumbled to life as Tucker put it into reverse and slowly backed away from where he'd parked. Buck turned to face the windshield and saw that the bus stayed trapped in the car's beams, its light show fading with each new foot backwards.

Tucker swung the car around and aimed it back up the road toward Buck's house. "Once we get to your place, I'll walk back," he said as he put the car in first and pulled away from the camp grounds. Neither talked as Tucker barreled back the way they'd come.

Remembering the reflectors, Tucker braked to a stop where Buck's driveway

turned from the road. "Let's see," he said, counting his fingers with his thumb. "Thanks for dragging me out of that place. Thanks for the beer. And thanks for letting me drive this honey."

"I'll probably have a bruise in the morning," Buck said. He placed his hand on the front of his shirt. "I'm already sore."

"What do you mean?" Tucker asked.

"Where we met," Buck replied, patting his chest. "Courtesy of Chopper Daniels. You hit me like a shot."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, and you don't have to walk back. I have that couch up at the house." Buck looked at the boy and smiled. "I'll even let you drive the car back to the camp grounds in the morning. What do you say?"

"Yes sir, sounds like a good idea to me," Tucker said, returning his smile.

"You head on up to the house while I put the car in the garage," Buck told him. "I left the door unlocked."

Tucker hopped out of the car and climbed through the yard up to Buck's porch.

Once Buck had the Mustang back in the garage, habit made him give it a quick inspection for damage. Ripples of road dust coated the fenders and door panels, and he also saw a couple of fresh nicks in the paint. He reached for the chamois to rub off the dust but changed his mind. Kneeling beside the car, he took his finger and wrote BUCK DECKARD on the dusty door. He thought about names to list under his. He hardly saw his parents since they had moved to Florida, and he had no brothers or sisters. He no longer had the right to add Sheila's name to the list. "List hell," he said to himself. You had to have something to make a list. He paused for a moment and lightly traced a T in the dust, the same way you write a secret on the dew of a window knowing full well that the swipe of your hand will cleanse all traces.

"You get lost out there?" he heard Tucker call out from the house. He closed the garage door and turned to find the boy sitting on the back steps, a bottle of beer in each hand. "Didn't have to turn on the outside light with that moon," he said, nodding upward. The high clouds had parted, bathing the backyard in a blue night shine. "Looks like a headlight up there, doesn't it?" Tucker asked.

Buck walked over and took his beer from the boy. "A hunter's moon," he said, "you sure you want to stay tonight?"

"You running me off. I can walk back down to the camp grounds." Tucker tipped up the beer and guzzled a long drink. "Or I can go in there, crawl on that couch, and sleep like a bear. And I don't much feel like walking."

Back in the house, Buck went into the bedroom and grabbed a spare sheet and one of the pillows from his bed. By the time he'd gotten back to the living room, Tucker had stripped down to a pair of baggy, checked boxer shorts. "The john's down the hall," Buck told him. "I'll leave the light on for you. And if you need anything, just holler." Buck turned off the light and started for his bedroom.

"Hey bud," Tucker said from the couch. "Thanks."

In his room, Buck drew back the curtains and opened the window. After undressing and climbing into bed, he propped up the pillows against the head board and reached for the bedside table. Sheila had made him stop smoking before they were married. Now, he smoked only three cigarettes a day; one in the morning, one at lunch, and one before he went to bed at night. He doubted even a doctor would complain. The one at night gave him the best feeling of guilt. Nobody around to fuss about how stupid it was to smoke in bed.

He reviewed the night, remembering how excited he felt driving to the bar. Wondering what the woman would look like, how she would move in his arms. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture her there in his bed, but another face and body

pushed their way into his mind. He knew when he opened his eyes, Tucker would be standing in the doorway. He'd heard the little sounds of the boy moving through the dark house, and let his ear trace the destination. "Tucker?"

"Buck."

"You need something?"

"Show me where I hurt you," Tucker replied.

The hunter's moon cast the room in light, and Tucker stepped into the pool that surrounded the bed. Buck took his finger and traced a slow circle on the center of his chest. He closed his eyes, and the weight of Tucker's broad palm filled the outline on his naked skin. "Tell me to leave," Tucker said in a husky whisper, neither a question nor a command.

In answer, Buck pushed back against the boy's strong hand. "Will I live?" he asked.

"You'll live just fine, Buck. I can tell."

Buck opened his eyes and pressed his hand over the back of Tucker's. The wild, hot thumping of his heart pierced through the boy's flesh and beat back into his own body. "Like driving my car or playing your fiddle," Buck said. "You told me you could tell how and when they needed to be touched."

"Just like that," Tucker said. "Need . . . Want . . . Touch. . ." He repeated the three words as he lowered himself into the bed.

In the calendar year that had passed since that first night, Buck had spent a fair amount of time trying to figure it out -- him and Tucker. He'd never found another man attractive, hadn't even considered it. The first couple of weeks after he and Tucker had

made love, he made a point of studying the guys who came into his garage. Buck knew most of them, played high school football and skinny-dipped in the Cliff Pond with them while he was growing up. He also realized, in that way all men do but won't admit to, that many of his old friends had grown into good, handsome men. But try as he might, he couldn't imagine any of them in his bed. He'd also taken to standing in a certain line at the grocery store; the one with the little blonde, blue-eyed checker named Noreen. She'd always flirted with him, even when he was still married. And the flirting still worked on his animal body. Noreen would tease him about what big, strong hands he had as he put his groceries on the counter, or ask him if he didn't get lonely all by himself out there in the country. And that same old stirring he'd felt since he was thirteen years old would creep through Buck, making him drop his eyes and wonder if a woman could tell what hidden, high-voltage lust crackled against his insides.

But what Tucker roused in him went beyond hot sweat and fumbling hands. He'd wondered, after that first time, if he and the boy had both just taken advantage of each other's bodies, just craved skin as a cure for loneliness. But the comfort that came with Tucker's touch lasted past the night, lasted through the days. Buck couldn't name what he felt for Tucker; he only knew that the tight choke of familiarity had loosened from his life. And though Tucker had freed him, Buck couldn't make the boy stand still long enough to thank him. And thanks, to Buck, meant some form of together.

They had managed to see each other through the year. Any time the brothers stopped back home in Athens, Buck had driven to Tennessee and spent a couple of secret nights with Tucker in the tour bus which, when not in use, stayed safely locked away in a big barn on the back acres of the grandfather's farm. The old man always gave the older boys a three week vacation in August, and Tucker had conspired with a

few friends to make his family think he was spending a week at Myrtle Beach. But the week belonged to Buck back in Harden Hollow. He had closed the garage, bought steaks for the grill, and filled up the refrigerator with beer. They only left Buck's house at night when Tucker wanted to burn the back county roads in the Mustang.

During that week, Buck first heard Tucker sing. Tucker had volunteered to wash the car, so Buck parked it in the backyard and showed him where to find the water hose. While the kid soaped and sprayed, Buck went back in the house to start dinner. He watched from the kitchen sink as Tucker made a general mess of everything, flinging suds and water on the car, on the ground, and on Tucker. Before rinsing the Mustang, the boy lowered his head and showered his hair with the icy water pulled up from the well. Even in the August heat, Buck saw a shiver run up Tucker's spine before he fiercely shook his head to toss the drops of moisture from his curls.

Most people, when they sing to themselves, start out softly, low. The suddenness of Tucker's voice surprised Buck. He supposed that Tucker had been trained, since childhood, to make his voice heard; but he had explained to Buck before that he didn't sing very often on stage with his brothers, revealing a truth that Buck had never noticed. Fiddlers usually don't sing because of their cramped chin position when they play.

Buck recognized the song -- something about a land where joys shall never end -- but the words didn't matter as much as the sound As Tucker absently sprayed at the car, the clear song filled the backyard. And though he had a deep speaking voice, the words that Tucker sang had a high clarity to them. Not a man's voice and not a boy's, but somewhere in between the two. His tone was only equaled by the ease, the effortlessness, with which the song flowed from his mouth. Buck quietly walked out into the backyard to listen. He'd only been there a few seconds when Tucker turned and saw him. The singing stopped.

"Don't quit on my account," Buck remembered saying. "I'm enjoying it."

"Shouldn't sing on vacation. Too much like work," Tucker said, as he continued to hose down the car.

"Doesn't sound like bad work," Buck replied.

"You try it sometimes. Try looking at some old man sitting in the front row, staring at you like the song you're singing has his key to heaven waiting at the end of it. Glad I don't have to sing much on stage; Rooney can handle all of that salvation stuff a lot better than me." Tucker spoke often of his brothers, but Buck had yet to meet any of them.

"Well, nobody around here needs saved," Buck lied. "Start singing again if you want your supper."

Tucker had grinned and started singing again.

Buck remembered the song Tucker sang that day while he washed the car; he recalled it because the same song now blared from the clock radio in his bedroom. Buck kept it set on a rock station, but early Sunday mornings they played gospel; and it sat on the other side of the room to force him awake to turn it off. He reached across the bed and shook the boy's broad shoulder. "Come on Tucker, wake up." Before they fell asleep, he had reminded Buck to make sure he was up by nine. He needed to get to the camp grounds before his grandfather showed up.

Tucker stretched lazily and rolled over toward Buck. "Morning, what time is it?" he asked with a yawn.

"When are you going to break down and buy a wrist watch, Morgan?"

"Don't fuss. Just make me get out of bed and take a shower," Tucker said.

Buck took his foot and pushed the boy to the edge of the bed. "Get up the easy

way, or get up the hard way."

"You wouldn't," Tucker dared.

With one quick shove, Buck pushed him over the side of the bed. He heard a question from somewhere down on the floor, "You think that was necessary?" Tucker climbed to his feet and sauntered naked toward the bathroom. "Oh God, not this early in the morning," he said, as he passed the clock radio and smacked at the snooze button to kill the music. And the music died just before the refrain. So Buck finished the words, under his voice so Tucker wouldn't hear his sorry attempt at singing. "I'll fly away, O glory . . ."

"Change," Cornel Tucker growled. "Old men don't like change, Ernie; too bad they find it everywhere they turn."

Ernie Hampton bent and picked up a quarter that sparkled on the newly poured asphalt. "You'd kill a week's worth of burying if they let you drive that damned big Lincoln through here," Ernie replied. He balanced the quarter in the cradle of his thumb and forefinger and flipped it in a spinning arc toward Cornel. With the timing of a trick that friends have performed a thousand times, Cornel released the head of his walking stick; and, perfectly balanced, it stood on its own, as if its brass tip had been driven into the walkway. His hand caught the coin, tucked it into his breast pocket, and smoothly grabbed the ornate knob of the stick. The thoughtless few seconds hardly even broke their pace.

"Next year they'll be charging admission," Cornel said. He gazed at the ugly chain-link fence that surrounded the front entrance of the Harden Hollow Camp Grounds.

"I told you we should've come in around back where the boys parked the bus," Ernie said. The new sidewalks cut a crazy pattern through the freshly mowed grass; smooth veins of blacktop spread from the central walkway, each one ending at a vendor's booth. "Wonder who's selling soup beans and cornbread this year," Ernie said, as he gazed at the white trailers that dotted the field, their fronts propped open to create a serving counter. They passed one with a sign proclaiming Stuart's Chapel Full Gospel Church in Jesus's Name, and Ernie's nose made a note to remember it. The unmistakable smell of ham hocks and pinto beans wafted from a huge iron kettle that hung from a tripod over an open fire.

As they neared the bandstand, the food vendors gave way to the music. "Lord, Lord, Ernie, money lenders in the temple," Cornel said with a laugh. Almost every one of the bands and singing groups that would perform today had set up a booth to sell their songs. Family members manned everything from card tables with a stack of cheap cassette tapes recorded on an eight-track machine in somebody's garage, to fancy portable displays with large screen televisions that showed gospel videos. Cornel walked up to one of the high-tech booths and picked up a compact disc. "How much?" he asked, showing it to the teenage girl sitting behind a little cash register.

"Sixteen dollars and ninety five cents," the girl replied. "You know sir, that's a CD. You have to have a special machine to play that."

Cornel looked at the girl and smiled. "Pay the young lady," he said to Ernie. As Ernie pulled a twenty from his wallet, he watched Cornel examine his purchase. He sliced the plastic shrink wrap with his fingernail and popped open the jewel box. Inside, the CD caught the morning sun and spun it around the micro-etched laser tracks. "You know Ernie," Cornel said as he pried out the silver circle, "my grand daddy had two wax cylinders and a little machine that played them. He used to turn the handle and let me listen to them. I only remember one of the songs; Rose McNeely

singing *Moonlight on the Lake* . Daddy and Mommy had one of those old Edison gramophones with the big morning glory trumpet on it. The things are common as sin; every record company CEO in Nashville has one in his office. Well, Mommy owned all of the records that Caruso ever made, and me and her would sit on the front porch on summer evenings and play them. She'd swing in the glider and drink lemonade, while I'd crank old Enrico through *Vesti la giubba* about ten times. Builds better arm muscles than swinging an ax." As he talked, Cornel turned and started walking toward the bandstand.

"Me and you had those big glass seventy-eights. Damned things weighed a ton and an afterthought scratched them; but, Lord, the music. Everything from Kay Kaiser to the Royal Philharmonic. Eight-track tapes, cassettes, and now this," he said, turning the CD in his hand. "Pete Dennison at Paragon Records tells me that these things will only be around for about five more years. Something new coming called a sound card, about the size of a credit card. Pete says each card will be able to hold over a hundred full-length songs. You play them on a machine about the size of a pack of cigarettes, but the fidelity is supposed to make a CD player sound like one of grand daddy's old wax cylinders."

As they neared the bandstand, Ernie saw Rooney talking to some men seated around a mixing board. He waved to the boy and let Cornel go on talking.

"That fiddle Tucker plays, my Daddy paid a man in Banner Elk, North Carolina, fifty dollars to make it for him in 1901. It took a whole year; every piece of wood had to be seasoned until it dried past warping. Cherry, oak, maple, hickory. The fellow would only string his bows with white hairs taken from the tail of a Palomino mare that he'd raised from a foal. Said they drew the best music out of the wood. I bought Tucker a new bow for the fiddle. Those horse hairs in the old one have worn away to almost a memory."

Cornel thought back to the day when he first heard Tucker play that fiddle. A week after his daughter Sarah had killed herself over that drunk, dead fool Wes Morgan, Cornel's house in Athens, a house he'd built for his retirement, a house that had never known children, found its old-man comfortable rooms rattled by a slew of boys. Wes Morgan's only living kin, a sister somewhere in Ohio, told Cornel that she had the heart but not the money to rear six more children. Cornel didn't want to tell her that he had plenty of money, but his heart was geared toward winding down. So he threw open his house, geared up his heart, and got an idea.

His wife Annie had done the major part of raising their daughter, while he traveled the circuit and played the music with The Bluegrass Ramblers. But Annie had died from a slow-eating cancer the year Sarah graduated from college, and what little Cornel knew about child-rearing seemed to have died with her. He also had the boys' grieving to think of. Even the younger ones had learned about death after losing their father, but Sarah's dying had left all six of them more numbed than sad. He had just started to hire someone to come in and take care of his grandsons when he remembered something his grand daddy told him about Cherokee medicine. When an Indian had a sore come up on him that he couldn't heal, he burned it with a white-hot stick because he could medicine a burn. Children Cornel couldn't handle, musicians he could.

After thirty years of playing studio music, performing, and song writing, Cornel had mastered every instrument, wooden and strung, that a body could pluck a note out of. And after the first couple of weeks, he was pleased to find that the boys all had the Tucker family talent for feeling the music, finding it in their heads and sending it through their fingers. All except Tucker. Cornel had watched while the numbness in the boys wore away to be replaced by excitement in the realization that something deep within them already knew the music. All except Tucker.

Since Tucker was the oldest, maybe even a little old to learn, Cornel had decided to teach him how to play the fiddle. Six string and twelve string guitar players usually commanded the stage, but any bluegrass picker knew that a fiddler pulled in the audience, made them listen. The high, controlled whine of the instrument had a way of separating itself and complementing a song at the same time. But the more Tucker sawed at Cornel's expensive, store-bought Zeta fiddle, the worse the sound got. Just when Cornel was going to give the fiddle to Rooney and listen to what Tucker could do with the guitar, something happened that Cornel still couldn't understand.

Through all of his years in the music business, Cornel had never played his grand daddy's fiddle on stage. He'd made his name with the guitar, and what few occasions he did fiddle weren't worth the risk. Many the time he'd seen a clumsy stage hand step through an instrument carelessly left on the floor, and he'd also had more than one guitar stolen while on the road. The fiddle had stayed safely tucked away in a closet in every house he had ever lived in until he built the house in Athens. There he had a room for all his small treasures; gold records, Grammys, signed pictures of him with presidents on the stage of the Grand Old Opry. And he'd also had a special glass case constructed to display his grand daddy's home-made fiddle.

One night, long after lessons were over and the boys were in bed, Cornel passed the door to his trophy room and heard a sound that his ear didn't want to accept. He quietly opened the door and there stood Tucker, the heirloom violin caught in the crook of his neck. With his eyes closed, the boy played the bow across the cat-gut strings; and the etude he had butchered for weeks, spilled out like gold honey.

Cornel remained quiet until Tucker finished and opened his eyes. "I didn't think you'd mind," he said. "This one feels better than the other one." Tucker knew damned well that he'd mind; the boys weren't even allowed in the room.

For the first time, Cornel had seen how much the boy was beginning to look like

his father, and for a second he felt as if Wes Morgan had reached into his home again and pulled out something else precious that didn't belong to him.

"It feels like it knows me better than the other fiddle. Let me play this one, grandpa," Tucker asked.

The next day, when the brothers gathered to practice, Tucker played his great-grandfather's fiddle. In two months he could play "The Rakes of Mallow." In less than a year they were performing at county fairs and local bluegrass festivals. Cornel looked around the Harden Hollow Camp Grounds as he walked toward the bandstand with Ernie and recalled that first year that the Morgan Brothers played here, their first big crowd. He remembered standing under a tree with Jaybird perched on his shoulders so the four-year old could see over the throng. And while the audience stared at the stage, Cornel had studied their hundred faces.

"Why today, Cornel?" Ernie asked as they neared the bandstand. "I still say this could all wait until we get back to Athens next week."

"Oh, I've thought this out well, Ernie. Back in Athens they'd have too much time to ponder, and you know my rule about keeping the boys on their toes. They'd come to the same decision, of course. Maybe this way, with the pressure of time urging them, they'll feel like they made the choice themselves. That's the way I want it. And besides, in a way, it all started here. We'll be able to close a circle, now that they're making their own loops."

"Dammit, Cornel, ten years to old men like us, it seems like I go to bed and wake up and ten years have passed. But to the boys . . ."

"To the boys a season has passed; that's all, Ernie. You worry too much."

"One of us has to."

"You know, Ernie," Cornel said, as he spotted Rooney up on the stage talking to a sound man, "musicians won't care for those little sound cards. They won't have

enough room on them for a decent picture of the band." As he talked, he pitched the compact disc he'd just purchased into a galvanized trash can meant to catch soda bottles and paper plates.

"Don't you even want to listen to it?" Ernie asked.

"Why? I've heard it all before. Let's go find the rest of my boys."

"Hurry up, Buck," Tucker called from the driveway. He figured he had plenty of time to get to the camp grounds before the old man arrived, but poor Rooney was probably already in a state of high panic. And now he had to wait for Buck. It surprised him that Buck had decided to go to the singing convention; he'd never heard Tucker perform before. Not that Tucker minded; Buck would blend right in and vanish with the thousands of other people cramped around the bandstand.

In the past, men who knew Tucker usually made a point of showing up, unexpected, at a concert or club date. Even the ones who didn't care for Bluegrass, would sit at a table or stand near the stage and watch him with a kind of dare in their eyes. They seemed to want to see him on display, to taunt their shared secret over the power Tucker held on the stage. Maybe the lovers came just to watch a crowd desire for something that they had already possessed. At first it made Tucker nervous wondering if his brothers could tell, but he learned to let the music hide him. He found a way to let the notes clothe him, cover up his bare soul on stage. But soon he found it impossible to only hide from the knowing eyes.

For the past few years, every time he stood in front of the footlights, the audience disappeared. In his mind, he played to empty buildings and bare, green

fields. Rooney knew why, and so did the old man.

He honked the horn to hurry Buck along. The front door flew open, and Buck raced out on the front porch. With a piece of toast held between his teeth, he sat down on the front steps and quickly worked his foot into the remaining cowboy boot he had carried out under his arm. "I forgot how to get dressed for a Sunday morning,' he called to Tucker.

Tucker watched as Buck stood and brushed the crumbs from the front of a faded denim shirt that he had insisted upon ironing before they left. He had slicked back his hair, still damp from the shower. He walked to the car and jumped in the passenger seat. "I didn't want to look like a grease monkey. Do I look okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, but your collar is all twisted in the back. Turn around and let me straighten it." Tucker bent across the seat to smooth the collar and stole the scent of the man's wet hair. He'd noticed it that first night in bed. It absorbed water and gave back a vital smell of wood and skin and metal.

"We need to talk on the way," Buck said to him.

Tucker patted the back of his neck. "Sounds serious."

"Not serious, just important. I'm afraid we won't get a chance to talk today with all of those people around; and remember, you're leaving this evening."

"You could drive down to Bristol tomorrow."

"I might not have to," Buck said, "let's go."

Tucker pulled the car down to the dirt road and turned toward the camp ground. The silence roared louder than the Mustang's motor. "What did that mean back there? I might not have to?" he asked.

"Something is going to have to give, Tucker."

"What?"

"You . . . me . . . the way we've been living. I can't handle it anymore; I'm just not

built that way."

"It didn't seem to trouble you much last night," Tucker hadn't expected this, hadn't wanted it.

"Good God, Tucker, you know what I'm talking about goes way beyond that."

"Just which part of what we have do you want changed, Buck?" Tucker asked.

"No others, only me."

Tucker had told Buck all about his life on the road, and had never tried to mislead him about the bars and the hotel rooms. Tucker knew he didn't like to hear it, but he also knew better than to lie to Buck. "You sound like a man with a list," he said. "Don't stop now."

"Okay, either I sell the garage and move to Athens, or you move in here with me. We can work out the details."

"Details, you forgetting I might have a career to think about."

"Stop the car," Buck shouted.

Tucker stomped on the brake pedal, and the car screeched to a halt in the middle of the dirt road.

"I'm trying to help you, Tucker. For this whole past year you've acted like a man who needs something, and I don't think it's your brothers or your grandfather or even the music."

Tucker stared straight ahead, down the empty country road. "I haven't ask you for anymore than what you give me," he said.

"No, but I'm offering," Buck replied. "And I can tell you a fact right now; I won't beg."

Tucker turned his head toward the driver's window so he wouldn't have to face Buck's eyes. Not three feet away, a form slowly walked past the stopped car. He hadn't noticed passing anyone, but then again his mind had been focused on Buck's

words, not this deserted stretch of dirt. Tucker watched as an old lady, her hands weighted with plastic bags, shuffled right by the car as if it didn't exist. He'd played too much gospel music not to recognize a church sister decked out in her Sunday best. She stooped over an aluminum cane that wouldn't seem to follow her instructions. On one step it came down to her left, on the other, a little farther to the left.

"Looks like we got us a weary pilgrim," he said to Buck. "What say we give her a ride." He started the Mustang and gently pushed the gas pedal. The car crept up even with the woman, and Tucker rolled down his window.

"Morning, Buck," she said without breaking her clumsy pace or turning toward the car. "Didn't know you got out this early on a Sunday."

"Morning, ma'am," Tucker returned.

The unexpected voice made her angle her head and look. "What have you done with Buck?" she asked.

"Oh, he's safe right here," Tucker called from the window and flashed her his smile. He leaned back as far as the seat would allow; and, at the same time, Buck bent forward.

"Morning, Miz. Elsie," Buck hollered. "She lives in that little house we just passed, the one right down from mine." Buck said under his breath so only Tucker could hear.

The woman refused to stop, so Tucker slowed to her speed. The Mustang's speedometer didn't even register.

"Those weeds out back of my house are growing awfully high, Buck."

"She lives by herself; I cut weeds and mow her grass," he whispered to Tucker. "I'll come over there tomorrow evening and cut 'em, Miz Elsie."

"You still just charge five dollars?" she asked toward the open window.

Tucker snickered.

"I swear to god, she makes me take it," Buck said.

"Ma'am, we're heading to the singing convention. I'll make Mr. Deckard here get in the back seat, and we'll give you a ride," Tucker told her.

"No thank you, I'll walk the rest of the way."

"I could have told you that if you'd asked," Buck said to Tucker, still keeping his voice down. "She walks every year."

Tucker rolled his eyes and asked again. "You've still got a good mile left, ma'am. Why don't you let us drive you down?"

"You don't have to tell me how long this road is, young man," she said, and kept right on walking.

The woman's persistence amused Tucker. "At least we could take some of those bags, lighten your load a little bit," he said out the window. "Mr. Deckard could hunt you up and give them to you when you get to the campgrounds."

She finally halted, and Tucker pulled his foot from the accelerator. Bowing down so she could see Buck in the passenger seat, she said, "I could carry them the rest of the way easy, but if it'll make you boys feel better, I'll let you tote them." She released the cane, and Tucker watched as she struggled to free a gnarled hand from the bags' plastic loops. He took the packages from her and passed them over to Buck. "You treat those careful, Buck," she said into the car. " Till the music starts, I'll be sitting over with the women's auxiliary. Remember now, the Primitive Baptist. Don't you go trying to find me with the Foot Washing or the Hardshells."

"No, ma'am," Buck promised, "I won't forget."

"Nice meeting you, Miz Elsie," Tucker said, but when he started to pull away she spoke.

"I hope you'll sing today. You don't always sing."

Recognition had long since stopped surprising Tucker. "Why yes, ma'am, I'll

sing today if you want me too. You got a request?"

Miz Elsie lifted up her eyes toward the rim of emerald mountains that cupped Harden Hollow in its hands. "The Lord's put a song in the air today," she said. At first Tucker thought she was gazing at the sky for inspiration, one of those showy gestures church women add at the mention of God's name. But soon natural curiosity made him want to see what held her attention upward. He craned his neck out the car window and followed the line of her eyes. Low, maybe fifty feet straight above, Tucker could barely pick out a white shape moving against the pale blue sky. While he watched, the shape spiraled quickly down and assumed its true form as it lit on a fence post at the edge of the road.

"Look at that," he heard Buck whisper.

"What is it?" Tucker asked. He'd meant the question for Buck, but Miz Elsie answered.

"Just a big, old hawk," she said, "but they usually don't come down this far."

The bird froze like a statue on its pedestal, but Tucker could feel its living eyes studying at the car. The thing must have stood two feet tall. "I never heard tale of a white hawk, " Tucker said.

"Just its under-belly and wings," Buck replied. "That way it can swoop down on innocent little bunnies, and they never even see what hit them. But damned if I've ever seen one that big."

"Shoo!" Miz Elsie called at the bird. "Get back up in them high mountains where you belong . . . fly away!" And the hawk took wing, but instead of climbing back up toward the heights, it soared down the road.

"We've got to get moving, Tucker," Buck said.

"We're running late, Miz Elsie. I'll make sure Buck gets your bags to you," Tucker told her, and he set the Mustang in motion. "Poor old thing forgot to tell me

what song she wanted me to sing," he said, as they left her standing beside the road.

"Reckon you'd know it?"

Tucker laughed. "Son, I can sing a Broadman Hymnal from cover to cover by memory."

Buck reached into one of Miz Elsie's bags and pulled out a plastic bowl. "Look, Baptist potato salad."

"Banana pudding," Tucker countered.

"I'll bet you."

"You're on. That five dollar paycheck Miz Elsie's going to pay you tomorrow."

Buck popped the lid on the bowl and smiled. "You owe me," he said.

The back parking lot of the camp ground appeared in the windshield. Tucker slowed down the Mustang as he tried to decide where to park. Beside him, Buck opened the other plastic bag and peered inside it. "More food?" Tucker asked.

"Just for the soul," Buck replied. He reached into the sack and pulled out an old, worn Bible. "Miz. Elsie's copy of the Word. From the looks of it, I'm betting it's a first edition."

Tucker glanced over at the book in Buck's hand. "Flip it open and read First Samuel, Chapter Eighteen. Just the first few verses."

"Don't have time," Buck said, "we're here."

Tucker killed the engine, then looked up and realized that he had parked the Mustang right beside his family's bus. His first thought was to move the car so his brothers wouldn't see him with Buck; but as he reached for the key, Buck opened the door and got out. Tucker watched as Buck walked over to the bus and stopped in front of its long row of tinted windows. He stood there a second, turned, and walked back to the car. Tucker reached over and rolled down the passenger side window. Buck knelt down and faced him in the car. "I'll find you before we sing," Tucker said.

"What we were talking about back there when we first left the house, Tucker, it's not over."

"Course it's not, Buck." And, with the plastic sacks slung over his shoulder, Buck disappeared among all of the parked buses. "It never is," Tucker said to the empty air of the car.

"You think we could donate these people some of our old sound equipment," Rooney said to his Grand daddy Tuck. "Whatever we've got in the garage at home works better than this stuff." He'd spent the past fifteen minutes using a borrowed guitar and his ear, not a digital equalizer, to try and balance the sound. He hadn't even had time to worry about finding Tucker. With all of these sound problems to take care of, his missing brother had slipped his mind -- until he saw his grandfather and Ernie walking toward the little stage.

"They used to try to keep it simple here," his grandfather told him. "I remember when folks stood around, under the trees, and listened to church quartets sing."

"Yes sir, but today some folks will be standing about two hundred feet back," Rooney said. He wondered how long he could keep his grandfather away from the bus. "I saw some friends of yours over there," Rooney motioned with his head in the opposite direction of the parking area.

"Friends can wait. I need to talk to you boys before things pick up here. You hurry. Ernie and I will head on back to the bus."

"I'll go with you," Rooney tried to hide the panic in his voice. Troy and Jay knew enough to lie, and the twins probably hadn't even crawled out of their bunks. But if

Tucker hadn't returned yet, Rooney knew he could spin the best tale to explain his brother's absence.

As they made their way through the camp grounds, Rooney still found it hard to believe how many people knew his Grand daddy Tuck. Walking through a crowd with him usually took forever. Strangers would stop to shake the old man's hand and tell him stories. "I remember listening to you and The Bluegrass Ramblers on the radio when I was just a little boy." "Remember that time you and Roy Acuff played at the Arkansas Hayride when it was down in Chattanooga, I sat right in front of the stage." "Remember that first year your boys played here at the Singing Convention; I told you they'd go places." All of those *remembers* , Rooney thought. He often wonder what it felt like to live a life built of memories. And not just your own, but other people's also. Never rude, the old man always did what he was doing now. Stopped . . . welcomed each offered hand . . . yes, he did remember . . . remembered it all . . . remembered it well. A showman's charm, and a gentleman's pride.

"A friend of yours, Rooney?" Ernie ask while they waited.

Rooney followed Ernie's suspicious gaze over to a tree.

"He's been staring at you since Cornel stopped to shake hands," Ernie said.

The man beneath the tree quickly averted his eyes as if he realized he'd been spotted. "Never seen him before in my life." Rooney found it a little annoying that now, even as a grown man, Ernie still thought it necessary to look out for him. What fame the brothers had achieved did tend to produce a few nuts; people who followed you around at open air festivals, tried to get in the dressing rooms at clubs and concert halls. Last year a couple of girls had even sneaked onto the bus while the boys were playing at a club in Memphis. But you developed a sense of who might truly present trouble. And though the guy under the tree was definitely watching him, Rooney didn't feel any threat. "Oh yeah, I know that guy. Didn't recognize him at first," Rooney lied to

Ernie. And for some reason, maybe to kill more time for Tucker, Rooney walked over to the tree.

"Do I know you," Rooney asked the man. He had been leaning against the tree, but when Rooney spoke, the stranger straightened up.

"No sir, we've never met," the man said. "But I did make a particular trip here today just to hear you boys sing."

"You a fan?"

"You might say that."

Rooney could tell that the man was studying his face as if he were trying to find something familiar in it. He seemed to discover whatever he looked for, and a broad smile erased any feelings of unease Rooney might have had. "You've heard us play before?" he asked the man.

"Look, I'd like to talk," the stranger said, "but I have to find somebody. Tell me one thing before I go. That brother of yours who plays the fiddle . . ."

"Tucker, his name's Tucker," Rooney told the man.

"Yeah, Tucker," he said, as he grabbed two plastic grocery bags that were hanging on a broken limb sticking out from the tree trunk. He backed away from Rooney, the odd smile still on his face. "Listen, that question, forget about it."

And Rooney watched the stranger as he turned away and walked in the direction of the bandstand.

Buck figured the forty-five minutes or so he'd spent propping up a tree should have given Miz Elsie plenty of time to make it to the campgrounds. As he searched the

concession stands for the Primitive Baptist Ladies' Auxiliary, he thought about what had just happened. Simply crowd watching, at first he hadn't paid much attention to the three men who walked by his tree, but when the old gentleman with the walking stick and the expensive suit started to draw a crowd, Buck knew. Though Tucker spoke little of his family, Buck had gleaned enough to recognize his grandfather and brother. He had only wanted to watch them for awhile, see who peopled Tucker's real, normal life; but then the boy had caught his eye.

The boy favored Tucker from a distance, and when he approached the tree, Buck saw all of the same lines and planes of Tucker's face. The only difference, the boy had Tucker's heavy, golden brows; but on him they were drawn tightly together in a knot of worry. Rooney, the next one down in age from Tucker. Buck knew he should have walked away without speaking, but for one split second he had wanted to ask Rooney a question. *"Tucker, his name's Tucker." Yeah, Tucker . . . tell me something about your brother, Rooney. Does this life -- growing up on the road, living on a bus, never staying in the same place for more than two days -- does this life make Tucker happy? Hell , Rooney, does it make you happy. Somebody needs to tell you boys that grown men choose their own lives.* But Buck knew he couldn't really ask the question; he couldn't even put it to Tucker, much less his little brother.

When he finally found Miz Elsie, she was sitting in a lawn chair with a golf umbrella duct-taped to its side to keep away the midday sun. The Primitive Baptist Ladies' Auxiliary had hung up a sign at their concession booth that read: "We Take Great Pride In Mrs. Elsie Turner. Our Sister In Christ And The Only Person To Attend Every Harden Hollow Annual Singing Convention For All Seventy-five Years. Congratulations Elsie." Buck had forgotten that fact. The local newspapers usually ran a story about Miz Elsie and the singing convention every year. It angered Buck a little to see the old soul put on display until he watched for a while and realized that

she appeared to be enjoying all of the attention. The Baptist women scurried around her, bringing her ice water and straightening her hat.

"Here comes my potato salad, girls," she said to the women when she spotted Buck.

He handed the bag with the bowl to one of the ladies at the booth and walked over to where Miz Elsie sat. "Reckon you'll need this today," he told her. Pulling the old Bible from the sack, he placed it carefully on her lap.

"Well, Buck Deckard," a voice said to him from behind his back, "it sure pleases my soul to see you out here today." Buck turned to see Beulah Smith and a whole gaggle of the good church sisterhood gathering behind him. "Just last week I was talking to my niece Betty over in Derby," Beulah told him, as she put a big glass of ice tea in his hand. "And she was having no end of trouble finding somebody to work on her car."

Most every good church-going widow in Harden Hollow knew Buck, considering he kept most of their cars running for a decent price. But he had recently noticed, about a month back, that now whenever any of them brought their cars to the garage, he had to listen to more than pings in a motor or holes in a muffler. Each one of them seemed to have a niece Betty or a granddaughter or a next-door neighbor girl who could cook. Buck had a pretty good hunch that Betty, or the rest of the women, had no idea that their culinary skills were being advertised.

"I told Betty you could fix anything with four wheels and an engine," Beulah said. "Did I ever tell you what a good cook she is?"

For reinforcement, Buck reckoned, the army of ladies supporting Beulah's rear stood with arms crossed and eyes fixed on him. They recognized a single man who needed fed, like it or not. "I remember that fruit cake you brought me for Christmas last year, Beulah. You plumb ruined me for good cooking," Buck told her.

"Something sure ruined you for it," Beulah didn't show signs of giving up that easy. "Noreen down at the Piggly Wiggly says that you live on beer and that microwave trash."

"Could you move this chair over there under that shade tree for me, Buck," he heard Miz Elsie say. Always one to recognize help, he hurried over and gave Miz Elsie his hand. After he had her situated under the big maple, she said, "They don't mean no harm, Buck. It's just that it hurts some women down to the bone to see a good man living by himself."

"Does it hurt you?" Buck asked, smiling at the old lady's candor.

"I think the more important question is, does it hurt you?"

"I go to work . . . I come home. It's okay."

"And that makes you happy?"

Buck remembered the question he wanted to ask Rooney, how easily one person could question another's happiness. He'd wondered if Rooney or Tucker either one could answer, so he decided to see how it felt to try. "No ma'am, Miz Elsie, that doesn't make me happy; but I think I know what could."

"You make it sound like something out of your reach, son."

"Maybe it is," Buck replied. He looked down at the worn Bible still in her lap. "You know this thing pretty good?" he asked, and he thumped the cover of the book with his finger.

Miz Elsie laughed. "Not like a Methodist preacher, but I know a fair bit of it."

"Then tell me what this part says," for a moment Buck searched his memory for the book and the chapter. He remembered. "Samuel, chapter eighteen, just the first part."

"First Samuel or Second Samuel?" Miz Elsie asked, as she thumbed through the front of the book.

"I'm forgetting my Sunday school," Buck said. "The first one."

Miz Elsie licked her finger and gently turned the brittle, yellowed pages until she reached the place. "Well now, this tells how Jonathan stripped off his robe and gave it to David."

"Read me some, please." Buck needed to hear what it said.

"And Saul took him that day, and would let him go no more home to his father's house. Then Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul."

Buck smiled.

"Those verses mean something special to you," Miz Elsie asked.

"They do now," Buck replied.

Miz Elsie closed the Bible and smoothed her hands over its binding. "I'm sure looking forward to hearing some good music today. How about you, Buck?"

"You know, Miz Elsie, I haven't come down here for the singing convention since I was a kid, back when mom and dad used to drag me."

"Well then, you'll be receiving a true blessing today."

Buck looked around at all of the people bustling about the camp grounds. How many had come to receive a blessing, no, a true blessing, he thought. Wondering if anybody else yearned for what he did, Buck closed his eyes and named the blessing he wanted. He remembered being taught as a child that blessings were earned, not given. Maybe God would understand his claim.

"Did you lose your friend, Buck?" Miz Elsie hadn't even noticed his quick prayer.

"No ma'am, I left him back with his brothers to get ready."

"You know, I've watched that boy grow up right there on that stage," Miz Elsie said. "One day out of every year. He don't sing much, not even harmony. Why, I bet I can recollect every song he's sung . . . The Great Speckled Bird . . . The Unclouded

Day . . . but I don't have to tell you; you've heard him sing."

"No ma'am, can't say as how I have," Buck told her.

"Then listen."

The high, drawn-out pitch of a fiddle filled the air around the bus with "Brennan on the Moor." From a distance, Rooney felt relieved when he heard the sound. But as he, his grandfather, and Ernie got closer, the relief changed to dread that Tucker still hadn't returned.

"Not like Tucker to practice before a performance," Ernie said, as they reached the bus door.

"You surprise me, Ernie," Cornel said. "After all these years you can't tell the difference in Tucker playing and Jay doing a pretty good imitation of him."

Rooney could. He opened the door and bound up the three steps that lead to the front room. There stood Jaybird, his back to Rooney, with Tucker's fiddle on his shoulder. Jay turned at the sound of Rooney walking in, and Rooney saw Tucker sprawled on the couch in front of the boy. With his hands locked behind his head and his legs crossed at the ankles, Tucker looked as if he'd passed the morning lying there. "Thought I'd give Jaybird some lessons," Tucker said, right before he yawned like a lion. "Never know when you boys might need a new fiddle player."

Rooney glared at Tucker as his grandfather and Ernie stepped up into the living room. Tucker simply smiled back at him.

"Front and center," Cornel called out loudly through the bus. The bathroom door swung open, and Troy came out toweling his hair. "The twins?" Cornel asked.

Jay put the fiddle back in its opened case and disappeared back into the hall of

sleeping berths. "They say come back in about an hour, Grand daddy," his voice hollered from out of sight. "They ought to be awake by then."

"Bryce, Byron, get in here," Rooney shouted. And Jay, laughing, walked back into the room with the sleep rumpled twins in tow.

"Everyone take a seat," Cornel told the assembled brothers. "We have some important matters to discuss this morning, gentlemen."

Bryce poured himself a cup of coffee while Byron pushed at Tucker's outstretched legs, forcing him to make room on the couch.

"Would any of you care to venture a guess as to who will be sitting out in that audience when you play today," Cornel started.

"Elvis?" Bryce asked from the kitchen table.

"Yeah, I'm voting for Elvis too," Byron agreed with him from the couch.

Everybody laughed but Tucker, who was busy studying his grandfather's face. He wanted to see just how the old man was going to pull this off.

"Sadly, no, Mr. Presley couldn't be here today," Cornel replied. "Instead, your new manager, a Mr. Dwight Austin from Paragon Records, will fill his seat."

Tucker scanned the room for reactions. He could plainly see that his brothers, even Rooney, had no idea this was coming. Tucker had figured out about four different ways that his grand father could handle the situation, and this was one of them.

"I don't remember us getting together and firing you," Rooney said, with high color in his cheeks.

"Oh, make no mistake boys, I made this decision."

"Why, please?" Rooney asked. Tucker wanted to catch Rooney's eye and ease his mind; it hurt him to see his brother get so worked up. But he also wanted to sit back and watch his grand father's plan unfold, help if he could.

"Look at me, Rooney, I'm way too old for all of this," Cornel said. "I retired from this business, the first time, twenty years ago for the same reason. Ernie feels the same way."

Ernie turned his head and gazed out the window.

"Seems like you boys owe us both a gold watch, right Ernie?" Cornel asked.

"The two of you could arm wrestle for Tucker's," Jay said.

Rooney jumped up from his chair. "Dammit, Jay, shut up," he shouted at his little brother. "You don't have any idea what this means."

"Good God, Rooney, calm down," Jay replied. It frightened him a little to see Rooney's face screwed up with enough worry for everybody on the bus. "It ain't that big a jump to make. Instead of Grand daddy, some man name of Mr. Dwight Austin is going to be following us around in a car and bitching at us and signing papers. Big deal. You're not going to disappear off the face of the planet or anything like that, are you Grand daddy?' Jay asked.

"No Jaybird, I'll be right back in Athens enjoying my time. I might even take up a hobby, something like wood-working."

Tucker laughed out loud; he didn't mean to, but he found that line funnier than the Elvis one. He decided the time had come to help the old man along. "Explain what all of this means exactly," he said.

"Tucker has a point," Cornel replied, "you boys do have some options. Since Jay's still a minor, as were the twins when I signed the contract with Paragon, my lawyers were able to work in a clause that gives me certain controls if I ever cease managing you, for any reason."

"What controls?" Rooney asked.

" They all come down to dissolution."

"Come on, grandpa," Troy said. "Stop talking like a lawyer and just tell us what

the hell you're talking about."

Tucker rose and walked to the front of the room where his grandfather sat. He turned and said to his brothers, " I think he's trying to tell us that we only have two choices, take on this new guy as manager or quit. Right, Grand daddy?"

"Quit as The Morgan Brothers," Cornel replied. "You couldn't tour, perform, or record as a group for the two years remaining on the contract. Individually, it doesn't have any power over you."

Tucker watched as the realization spread over Rooney's face, and Troy started to fidget in his chair.

"One consideration to keep in mind, boys," Cornel said as he got up and headed to the front of the bus. "Regardless of what you decide, remember, you have tour dates to honor up through August. I believe Ernie and I can hold on for that long. Right now we both have old friends to visit with, and Ernie has developed a fear that all of the soup beans and cornbread will get sold before lunch. I'll see you all at the bandstand at performance time."

As the bus door closed behind the two men, Byron said, "You guys believe this. He finally lets us make a big business decision on our very own." He pulled open an end table drawer and rummaged around until he found a secreted pack of cigarettes. Sticking two between his lips, Byron lit both and handed the other one to Bryce. "So, somebody tell me . . . this choice . . . hard or easy?"

"Easy for some," Jay piped in. "They have plans."

"Can't a man keep a secret around here," Rooney cried.

"We live on a bus; you figure it out, Rooney. I've deliberated about this whole situation long and hard," Jay continued. He got up, grabbed the front of his shirt, and started pacing the floor of the bus like a television lawyer. So many factors to consider . . . country and western stardom . . . college." Tucker couldn't help but smile at the kid,

even when Jay walked up to him and said, " bright red Mustangs."

"And what determinations have you reached, Mr. Morgan?" Tucker asked him.

"That my ass is headed for high school at the speed of sound."

"How do you feel about that, Jay?" Tucker questioned his little brother.

"I have some buddies back in Athens," Jay replied. "They talk about school all the time; it doesn't sound so bad. I've already asked Ernie how he thought I'd do, in a real school and all. And he says I ought to do just fine on account of my being a child prodigy."

Tucker had no worries about Jay; he'd fare just fine.

"Hey, Jaybird, spell prodigy," Bryce said from the couch. "And by the way," Byron added, "what the hell is everybody talking about."

"If you two didn't sleep all the time, you'd know what was going on," Troy said to the twins. "Rooney has an offer to play with a new band, big time stuff, in Nashville."

"More than just an offer," Rooney said. "I've already sunk money into it."

"What about our contract," Bryce asked. "Didn't you think about that?"

Rooney hated having to explain his plan. In his head it made perfect sense; spoken out loud, to his brothers, it sounded cold. "Didn't you hear what Grand daddy just said," he told them. "The contract is for The Morgan Brothers. It doesn't matter who plays the mandolin; you could hire anybody you wanted to replace me."

"Kind of blows the hell out of that Brother part, doesn't it Rooney," Bryce was starting to understand. "A rank stranger up there on the stage in your place."

"While we're filling places with strangers," Troy said, "you might as well go ahead and fill mine."

The cramped room burst into a riot of voices asking questions, stabbing at answers, and shouting. "Everybody just hush!" Tucker screamed to be heard over the din. "I'll give you all the short and sweet version of how things stand. Rooney has the

best chance he's ever going to get to make it in Nashville. Troy's already been accepted up at UT, and he got a full scholarship. I don't know about the rest of you, but it makes me proud of both of them. And Jay has a chance to lead a half-way normal life."

Byron got up from the couch and walked over to where Tucker stood. He pushed his face in an inch from Tucker's and said, "Call me crazy, brother, but me and Bryce consider this our job. We like getting a paycheck once a month." Only Jay still got an allowance; the rest of the brothers received a small salary. "Sounds like everybody's big, secret plans are going to turn me and Bryce into burger flippers at the Tastee-Freeze back home. Is that going to be our half-way normal life, Tucker?"

Tucker had known all along how hard the news would effect the twins. "Things are changing, Byron. Did you think we'd be playing the music for the rest of our lives."

"Yeah, Tucker, you know what? I did." A tear pooled in the corner of Byron's eye; he didn't try to brush it away.

And, from a lifetime of doing it, Tucker glanced across the room at Bryce, knowing he'd see the same tear rolling down his cheek. "You can forget about flipping burgers," Tucker said to Byron. "The old man hasn't told you boys everything. We each have a trust fund; insurance money from momma and daddy, money he's invested for us, a goodly part of what we've made over the past ten years. And I can tell you something right now, he manages money just as good as he manages a band."

"How come you know all this?" Troy asked.

"Because I had to borrow some cash from him a couple of months back," Tucker looked over at Rooney. "He explained it all to me then."

Even Rooney had no idea about the trust funds. "Why didn't he tell us before?" he asked Tucker.

"I believe he counted on today coming eventually."

"The money doesn't make it better, Tucker," Byron said, as he joined Bryce on the couch. "We can still hold out, me and Bryce."

"Byron, for God's sake, just quit," Tucker told him. "It's over; let it die. We didn't get together and make plans against you two."

"Then how did it happen?" Bryce asked. He sounded whipped.

"Life just started passing out choices we hadn't had before," Tucker replied. "I'll go find Grand daddy and tell him he can send Mr. Dwight Austin back to Nashville. I don't know about you all, but I don't even want to lay eyes on him. The rest of you go ahead and get dressed. We have to be on stage in a couple of hours." As Tucker turned to leave, he motioned Rooney toward the front of the bus. "I need to talk to you alone," he said quietly to Rooney. "Let's go outside." But before they left, Tucker turned back to the boys in the room and said, "Remember, we're still The Morgan Brothers for the rest of the summer."

Jaybird started laughing. "What a stupid thing to say, Tucker. We'll always be the Morgan brothers."

Byron waited until he heard the bus door close behind Tucker and Rooney before he said, "Did the rest of you notice that Tucker didn't say a word about what he planned to do?"

Musicians and singers from all of the other buses milled around the parking lot when Tucker and Rooney stepped out. Most were already dressed for their performances; the men in everything from jeans and western shirts to undertaker-style black suits and ties. Many of the women from the family groups wore matching

dresses cut to a modest length and the traditional bouffant hairdos. Gospel music folks remembered that the Lord said a woman's hair was her crowning beauty, and many of the ladies must have spent hours trying to tease and spray theirs up into one of those crowns. Musicians stood in groups and practiced bluegrass runs, while singers huddled together and harmonized. The place had a feel of two hundred people all trying to get ready at the same time.

The brothers picked their way through the busy performers, saying "hi" when they saw a familiar face. Tucker looked at the stirring crowd and said to Rooney, "I know a place where we can talk." With Rooney following, Tucker headed behind the parked buses until he reached Buck's car.

The metal-flake, fancy paint on the Mustang sparkled in the midday sun like a thousand tiny scarlet stars. "Nice car, Tucker," Rooney said. "Mind if I ask where you got it."

"It belongs to a buddy," Tucker answered without explaining. He unlocked his door and got in. Reaching across the seat, he opened the passenger door. "Hop in," he told Rooney.

"You saw all of this coming, didn't you?" Rooney asked.

"Maybe not this very way, but yeah, Rooney, I knew something had to give. He needed to figure out a way to make it seem like our decision though. I'll give you one thing, the old man sure knows how to work out a plan. He ought to, he knows everything."

"Why didn't you tell me, Tucker? I need to know more than anybody."

"I didn't even want to admit it to myself until I heard him say the words to start it in motion. Hell, Rooney, you realize what this does. You and Troy already know what you'll be doing. I hated to see the twins get so upset, but I can promise you that Grand daddy has something figured out for them. And Jay, who worries about Jay."

"So you're only concerned about Tucker. Is that what you're trying to say?" Rooney asked. After he said it, he turned his head away and looked out the car window.

Tucker reached over and gently took his brother's chin in his hand; he turned Rooney's head until their eyes met. "You know, Rooney, I used to think the reason I turned out queer was because I only had you five to love. I don't have to tell you . . . traveling all the time . . . not going to school . . . never really making any friends. Just us. Just us and the music and the old man and poor old Ernie."

"You said Grand daddy knows everything. You think he knows about that?"

"That I'm gay," Tucker replied. "Sure he knows; he knows me like he knows the music. He hears me, Rooney. Think about it, what ever we are, we're his. He made us, took us when we didn't have another soul in the world to help us. I don't blame him none, getting six roughed up kids dropped on his door step. He probably did the best job he could, but I think after today he's going to leave the rest of it up to us. He got us through a season; the next one's ours."

"I don't want to lose you, Tucker. It scares me to think that when we all go our separate ways that you'll end up in Atlanta or Charlotte or somewhere like that."

Tucker smiled. "What would you say if I told you that about as far away as I plan on going is only three miles or so down that dirt road over there."

"Come on, Tucker." Rooney thought his brother was joking. "Harden Hollow, what's here?" And then he remembered the car he was sitting in.

"A garage mechanic that I'm fairly sure loves me." He knew this kind of talk made his brother nervous. "Sorry, Rooney, I shouldn't say anymore about it."

"You always do that, Tucker. You just go ahead and assume you know everything about everybody. You got a big streak of Grand daddy in you, you know that? You think I have any trouble figuring out why somebody could love you, man or

woman."

"Okay then," Tucker replied. "I've known him for about a year. His name's Buck Deckard, and he owns a clean, dry house. He wants me to move into it with him."

"You love him?"

"Nah, I just love his car," Tucker flashed his prize winning grin at Rooney and patted the dash of the Mustang. "I don't know, I think so. He treats me good, and he doesn't know a damned thing about music. Yeah, I love him."

"So if he's already asked you to move in, he knows about today." It hurt Rooney to think that Tucker would have shared his suspicions with someone else.

"Hell no," Tucker replied. "Tell me something, Rooney. You scared about going to Nashville, playing with the new band?"

"Yeah, sure. Scared. Excited."

"I feel the same way about me and Buck. I couldn't tell him that everything was coming to an end because then I would have had to give him an answer."

"He here today?" Rooney asked.

"Yeah," Tucker nodded toward the bandstand. "He's walking around out there somewhere carrying a bowl of potato salad and a Bible." He gave Rooney one of those it's-a-long-story looks.

"Then you'd better go and find him, Tucker. You have something to tell him."

They got out of the car, and Rooney started back to the bus to get dressed for the show. Tucker headed out into the crowd to find Buck, but a feeling made him turn and look back. Rooney had paused. Tucker knew what had caught his mind. He walked back over to where Rooney stood and looked up at THE MORGAN BROTHERS painted on the side of the bus with its roll call of names underneath. Tucker reached out and placed his palm on Rooney's name. "You remember that first week after momma died," he said to Rooney. Rooney kept right on staring at the

words. "Grand daddy had driven up to Knoxville and put us all in his car and taken us back to that big, old house in Athens. That very first night I sneaked out, and you came looking for me. You found me sitting on the front porch swing crying. I had done decided to walk back to Knoxville. You know why I was crying, Rooney?" Rooney shook his head no. "I was crying because I looked out at that road, and I didn't know which way home was. Remember what you told me, Rooney?"

"I remember, Tucker."

"You said not to worry and not to cry, and I asked you why. And you said 'cause I'm your brother, and I love you."

Buck had wandered off too far, even though he knew Tucker would come looking for him. He'd found an old picnic table, its benches long since broken and gone, to sit on over near the edge of the camp ground. He liked sitting there with his back to the wild woods and his face to the distant crowd. The music from the bandstand had already started; but by the time it spread out over the pasture and reached his ears, the songs sounded like echoes. Tucker would have to find him the best way he could. Let him search; let him work.

Buck thought about what he'd asked of Tucker; leave his family, leave his work, leave his home. A lot to ask from a man. But it didn't matter. He had to ask. He remembered the long stretches over the past year when he hadn't been able to see Tucker. Trying to name how he felt during those lonesome days, Buck could only think of a word -- want. One of Tucker's words that first night.

"You trying to hide from me?"

The voice startled Buck. He turned, and there stood Tucker behind him. He

had come up the back way. Not what Buck had expected.

"I don't hide, Tucker, I never hide. I just backed away from the crowd."

"I looked all over the place," Tucker said. "I thought I'd never find you." Tucker walked around to the front of the table and put his hands in his pockets. "I need a job."

Buck studied his face for a second. "Well, you came to the right man; I need some help. Own my own business, but I've been running it by myself for a long time. I could use a hand. You got any experience?"

"I learn quick," Tucker replied. "And I try to be on time."

"Something happened," Buck said. "Did you tell them?"

"About us, no, but I will when the time's right. They all have too much on their minds today. I'll tell you the whole story later. But after August, I'm free. Hell, we're all free. Think you can wait that long?"

"Yeah, it'll give me time to buy some furniture," Buck replied. He reached out and pulled Tucker's hand out of his pocket. Looking at the boy's strong fingers, he said, "You're going to bust 'em all up. You know that don't you?"

"I don't care."

"You might a year from now," Buck said.

"You kidding, by then I plan on handling a wrench as good as I do a bow," Tucker told him.

"Speaking of bows, shouldn't you go get dressed." Buck glanced at his watch. "Unless you want to get up on that stage in a pair of jeans and one of my old tee shirts, you only have about thirty minutes."

"You going to come down close where you can hear?" Tucker asked.

"Wouldn't miss it," Buck replied. And with that, Tucker waved and broke into an easy trot back toward the crowd. Buck watched until the boy was out of sight; he waited until then to say "thank you."

As he reached the people congregated around the bandstand, Tucker decided to take a short cut. Skirting the stage, he headed down toward a thicket of mountain laurel that flourished along the edge of a little brook. He remembered that the trail he followed led straight back to where the bus was parked.

In his rush down the path, Tucker almost ran past his grandfather. The old man stood on a flat rock that stuck out into the splashing water of the creek. He had stuck his walking stick into the sandy bank beside him. "Slow down a minute, boy," he said.

Tucker walked over to the edge of the water. "Room enough for one more out there?" he asked, as he carefully stepped out on the stone shelf. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his brow.

"I don't know much about geology," the old man said, "but I believe this stream has spent about the last million years carving out this valley." He pulled the walking stick from the ground and pointed up toward the high mountains. "It must start way up there somewhere. Wonder where it ends up."

"I reckon the ocean," Tucker answered.

"How did it go back there, on the bus?" the old man asked.

"Like you wanted it," Tucker replied.

"You mean like you wanted it, and Rooney, and Troy."

"You sorry?" Tucker needed to know.

"Sorry, no. Sad though. But everything ends, Tucker. Remember that, some poor souls never even learn it."

"You need to tell Bryce and Byron that," Tucker said.

"Don't worry about the twins or Jay," his grandfather replied, and smiled at him.

"I plan on indulging them shamelessly. I'll let Bryce and Byron spend some time watching how Rooney fares in Nashville and Troy at school. Then they can make their own choice." He stuck the tip of his walking stick into the water to rinse the sand from it. "And as for Jaybird, we have an understanding. He understands that he can make me do anything he wants. An old man needs somebody like that in his life."

"You think Rooney will make it in Nashville?" Tucker asked, knowing that his grandfather would tell him the truth.

"Twenty years ago I'd have said yes in a minute, but today I don't know. Talent doesn't count like it used to. I take it you still haven't told Rooney your story."

"No sir, nobody knows about that but you."

"You disappointed the powers that be, Tucker. They don't like that. When they court someone for stardom, they expect at least a peck on the cheek in return."

"Yeah, well I didn't want the life they were planning for me. I didn't care about any of it , the money, or anything else they promised me. I never told you this. I even sent that damned wrist watch back to the record company. A week later, some Federal Express guy handed it back to me in Memphis. I can't seem to get rid of it. I pawned it in Atlanta to lend Rooney the up-front money he needed for this new band."

"Is that why you borrowed the money from your trust?" the old man asked.

"Yes sir, I don't know why I wanted it back. I guess I missed it more than I thought I would." Talking about the watch made Tucker remember how little time he had to get ready to play. "I have to get going, Grand daddy," he said. "You know how jumpy Rooney gets if anybody's late."

"Just one more thing, Tucker. I take it, come August, you won't be back in Athens."

"No sir," Tucker replied. "I've decided to start a life."

His grandfather jabbed the walking stick back into the ground. "I've told you my

plans for your brothers, but I don't know what to give you. I don't know what you need."

Tucker knelt down and plunged his hand into the water; even in June, it felt icy. He wrung out his handkerchief and with the cold it held, dabbed at his forehead. Looking up at his grandfather standing over him, he said, "I need a blessing. Please sir."

The old man reached out and ran his fingers through Tucker's damp, living hair. "Granted," he said that simply.

"Thank you, sir. Now can I go?"

"Go," he motioned back toward the camp ground. "Hurry."

Tucker rose and stepped back on the trail when he remembered something. Without turning, he called back, "Can I keep it, Grandfather?"

"Of course you can."

They both knew he meant the fiddle. So Tucker left the old man, standing on the rock, looking up at the everlasting hills.

When Tucker finally got to the bus, it was locked up tight. He fumbled in his pocket for his keys, unlocked the door, and darted for the back compartment where Rooney had already laid out his dove gray suit. Stooping down on the floor, he unlocked the long drawer underneath his bed and pulled it out. Wedged in back, behind his fiddle case,Tucker found what he was looking for. He popped open one of the caps that sealed the end of the sturdy mailing tube and drew out the antique bow. The old man had bought him a new one years ago, when he first started playing his great-grandfather's fiddle. But Tucker always kept the original bow with him. It only seemed right that the fiddle and bow stay near one another, considering that they

were carved and stained, shellacked and strung to come together as one. A few times, he had taken out the old bow and played it across the strings of the fiddle. The notes that they made when joined, sounded sweet and resonant. A tone that the new bow just couldn't earn. But Tucker also understood why he couldn't play with the original bow. Its tautly drawn horse hair threads had yellowed and become brittle with the years. Maybe a third of the threads still held; and on those odd times that Tucker had used it, a few more of the dry strands had snapped. He could have easily had the bow restrung. In his time he had broken enough fiddle strings to bale a field of hay. But each one of the bow hairs that broke was lost forever, as lost and gone as that old Palomino horse back in the hills of North Carolina.

Tucker opened up his fiddle case and found a sticky little bar. He always rosined up his bow before he played. Sliding the bow back in its tube, he quickly stripped off his tee shirt and jeans. When he turned to get his suit, he caught his image in a mirror on the back of the closet door. Though never one for rapt gazing at his own reflection, the naked body seemed to demand a moment. "Tucker Wesley Morgan," he said to the mirror.

Dressed in a second, he knotted his tie and grabbed the Rolex from the bedside table. As he fastened its heavy bracelet band, Tucker saw that he had about five minutes before he had to be on stage and ready to play.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the Morgan Brothers," the announcer's voice boomed out from the speakers. Tucker watched as Rooney stepped up to his microphone to cue the first song. The brothers never used a play list for gospel performances, never knew beforehand what they'd be playing on stage.

Rooney always made that decision because he could feel the crowd, sense what they wanted to hear. Each number that the brothers played had an old, familiar introduction, a snatch of refrain that triggered a song in their minds. Once Rooney started plucking the mandolin strings, each brother's fingers instantly recollected a thousand movements.

Rooney shot a gaze out over the audience and read the one face of five thousand people, the face of the crowd. And in a second, Rooney's mandolin told Tucker, and Troy, and Bryce, and Byron, and Jay to play one of the old hymns -- "I'll Fly Away." And the music began.

Tucker stood back; the first verse of the hymn belonged to Jay's dulcimer and Troy's guitar. The brothers usually didn't sing this song on stage, because its complex runs and rhythms allowed each one of them to show just what his instrument could do. But as Jay and Troy finished playing the refrain and the twins picked up the second verse, Tucker leaned in close to his vocal mike and began to sing the words in his high baritone, "One glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away. . ." He didn't know why he sang. He only knew he wanted to. ". . .To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away. . ." Tucker thought he sang by himself until he heard Rooney's voice beside him echo the harmony, ". . . I'll fly away, in the morning. . ." Soon Tucker could hear all of his brothers' voices blending in the background. ". . . When I die, Hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away."

And then, as he'd done since a boy of twelve, Tucker Morgan walked up to the edge of the stage and offered up himself. No more voices. No more singing. Only Tucker and the fiddle. He cradled it between chin and shoulder and raised the old bow. Shutting his eyes, Tucker felt the bow pull at the quarter notes, at the eighth notes, as his hand searched the fiddle's fingerboard, adding pressure to some strings and releasing it from others. He briefly opened his eyes to see what he knew would

happen. The delicate threads of the bow had already begun to give way, the loose ones swinging from its tip like the flicking tail of a horse.

Tucker looked out at the audience and watched as they faded away. The faces and forms vanished until only the green floor of the hollow remained. He played for the field and the clear air alone. But then he noticed a trinity that had resisted his mind's eye. Back beneath a tree, the old woman from the road that morning, Miz Elsie, sat holding her Bible. On the next draw of the bow , he felt a few more of the threads release. Over by the laurels, he could see his Grandfather Tucker still standing on the rock. But the old man no longer searched the mountains for the source of the stream. Instead, he faced the stage. Tucker played toward the end of the song, hoping he could finish in time. In the very middle of the field, Buck stood like a point, like a center. He had his thumbs hooked through his belt loops and his eyes fixed on Tucker. And then, just as the final bars of the hymn drained from the fiddle, Tucker saw it. Against the backdrop of the ridge that surrounded the valley, the big hawk flapped its wings with a slow, steady beat that drew it closer and closer to the stage. As Tucker reached for the last note of the song, the hawk swept down level with his eyes as if it meant to meet him. And then, though Tucker knew that it couldn't, the bird flew straight up toward the vault of the sky. He was watching it climb when the last few threads broke.