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BUS RIDE TO EDEN

The old man got on at Hardrock, hoisting himself up the steps with the help of the handrail. He shuffled to the rear of the long bus and took a seat across from Ken Hodges, who stopped reading the morning *Express* long enough to look out at the bus station — a reconverted gas station, painted a noncommittal white — and the handful of passengers boarding. Except for the old man and two younger men with the tawed faces and slouch hats of ranch hands, the incoming passengers could have been from anywhere. Los Angeles, Prairie Junction — or New York.

"Like it back here over the wheels. You get a little bounce for your money," the old man mumbled, easing himself into his seat.

Was he being sociable; or talking to himself? Ken nodded out of courtesy and went back to his paper. Revolutions, rapes, rummies, roistering, traffic jams. This is news? Twelfth-century Paris had its traffic jams; the Greeks had Eros and Dionysius. Rockets to the moon? Commonplace now, too, worth no more than a skimming of the headlines. A weary satiety settled over him. Folding his paper he looked out at the countryside. Ranch country mostly. Red, scrubby hills separated by narrow, flat valleys. Red cattle mostly, red cattle with white faces. Here and there, in the valleys, in the flats along the dry creek beds, farmland: Rusty, rocky soil, bare here, stubbled there, for it was early December, well past the harvest. Ken knew the countryside. Two Junes ago, when it was green and inviting, he had brought his boy up here to a summer camp on the Llano River. Now, stripped, the land was drab and sullen.

"Like to read the paper? I'm through with it."

The old man shook his head. Ruddy and craggy like the land, he wore a stained Stetson with two fisted dents in the crown, the brim curled up cowboy-style. Behind thick lenses were watery blue eyes with crinkles at the edges which gave his face a kind of amused look as if he had long ago decided that this was the proper set to turn toward the world and nothing — neither hell or high water — was going to change it. "Can't read print no more," he said. "But don't make no difference. When I wanta know what's going on, I just git in this lil old wagon and ride down to Eden. That's where my daughter lives. Between here and there's everything I wanta know."

His words ran together mushily, while his tongue bobbed like a fishing cork between toothless red gums, and when he was through speaking his mouth sagged inwardly into an ugly pouch. Gaffer? Senile? Pitiful. Too bad he didn't have sense or money enough to get himself some teeth. Ken looked away, out the window. Red, lumpy hills. Puffy clouds drifting lazily across the bright blue sky. Windmills; tall, gaunt, still.

"Do you see that black brush out there?"

Ken looked and thought he saw what the old man was talking about.

"Thirty years ago that was all shin oak and mesquite. Government paid the ranchers to bulldoze it; said they'd have better pastures. They didn't figure on that ol' black brush. It was like some suckers I know, hiding out o' sight, just waiting for a chance to grab hold o' things. Thorny as all get-out too. You can't get a cow within ten feet of it. Good for nothin' but goats."

For the first time Ken noticed the goats. Not many. Only a scattering. Blurred streaks flashing by. White, woolly things standing up on their hind legs to nibble at the top twigs, dancing around the mulberry bush like satyrs. He laughed. The old man didn't. Though he still had that droll look on his face, maybe if he was a cowman he didn't think it was funny. Ken stopped laughing.

It was old country. Remnants of old stone fences and old stone buildings. Like Roman ruins except there were no arches or curves. Only straight lines and squares. Like forts. Like that two-story house over there, the roof and windows and steps long gone, only the thick rectangular walls still standing. Behind those stolid walls Ken could see a family in homespun firing long rifles at Comanches or Apaches or somebody. It probably never happened that way; but it might have; if not, it should have.

The bus was slowing down now for construction crews warned by a sign "15 Miles an Hour, New Interstate 25, Federal Contribution $100,000,000, State $5,000,000, County $40,000." Bulldozers were clearing new right-of-way at the side of the old road, pinching off trees like toothpicks. Long-necked cranes bobbed their heads up and down like feeding dinosaurs, clawing, biting, swallowing big mouthfuls of flinty earth. Farther along steamrollers crunched over freshly-laid white gravel. Stirred by all the activity, Ken pulled a road map from the pocket of the seat in front of him, found some dotted lines designating the new highway and did some figuring. . . . Two

miles probably between Benson and Fort Hicks. Four between. . . .

For 105,040,000 dollars, at least forty miles and forty minutes! He'd tell the old man about it, that when the new four-lane speedway was completed between Hardrock and Eden, eliminating all the curves and rolls and crossroads, it was going to be. . . . Growling, the bus was forced to detour down a dusty, bumpy side road behind a lengthening line of slow-moving cars; the impatient driver gunned the motor over and over again. . . . No, what was the point of it? Maybe he wouldn't want to know. Besides, with that gear box grinding under him, he wouldn't be able to hear anyway.

They came to a stretch where an old stone fence, tumbling in spots but still largely intact, perfectly bisected the median between the old road and the new one a-building, as if it had been put there for that very purpose, to divide right from left, wrong from right, those heading northward to Eden from those heading southward to perdition. Ken stared in amazement.

Now, what d'ya think o' that?" the old man mumped, turning to him.

Ken wondered whether he was asking a question or making a statement. "That's something," he replied.

"Those old rock fences didn't rot, and they didn't rust. They took a lot of work — but in those days work wasn't nothing."

"Do you think they'll let it stand?"

"Prob'ly not. But if you want me to, I'll talk to the guv'nor about it." Chuckling, he chewed the air with his thin red gums.

Yes, somebody *should* talk to the governor about it, about that old fence which was just as wonderful in its own way as the new highway that was going to fly by both sides of it. Those thousands upon thousands of stones, fat ones, flat ones, formless ones, gathered haphazardly from the fields, going nowhere, doing nothing except sitting one upon another precariously, forever. . . . Though he knew that he would never send it, Ken mentally composed a letter to the governor. "Your Excellency: On new Interstate Highway 25, between the towns of So-and-so and So-and-so, there is an old stone fence which should be preserved as part of our heritage. It is a thing of beauty, of enduring and noble purpose, a monument, a reminder. . . . The men of old, the old men, the men who built this state, are dead, they are dying every day; nothing can save them. But if we act in time, we can still save this work of their hands. . . ."

The bus was speeding by the outhouses of a town — those

miserable shacks, junkyards, gas stations and motels that fray the edges of every modern town. Circling the square, and the inevitable courthouse, it came to a stop at a dingy, dirty terminal scrunched between a drug store and Ida's Cafe.

"New Deal," the driver called out, amid static, over his loud-speaking system. "We'll stop here six minutes."

There was a rush for the door, one line streaming into the terminal, the other breaking up into atoms around the bus.

"Don't understand it," the old man said. "Them jumping in and out of the bus every time it stops, when it's gonna start right up again. Reminds me o' grasshoppers."

"Like a cigarette? Or a cigar?" Ken asked.

"Maybe a cigar," the old man replied. Taking it, he sucked it like a candy barber pole and then chomped down on the end. A surprised look came over his face. "By golly; by golly," he exclaimed. "Now you know what I did? Left my teeth at home. Had oatmeal for breakfast and didn't need to put 'em in. Then I went off and forgot 'em."

So that was it. Ken smiled.

"It's funny to you and me," the old man said, "but it won't be to my daughter. She's always worrying about me getting old and forgetful, living by myself. My wife died three years ago." His jaw twitched. "Particularly with me using gas stoves that hafta be turned off at night. She thinks some night I'm gonna forget and I'm either gonna burn up or wake up 'sphixiated." Pulling a pocket-knife out of his pants he cut the end off the cigar and lit it. "Like that," he said, blowing out a cloud of heavy, pungent smoke.

Enjoyment radiated from the old man with the smoke as he puffed away. Intermittently he took to coughing and wheezing, and Ken wondered whether he had some kind of lung trouble and maybe shouldn't be smoking. If so it sure wasn't stopping him.

Just before the town of Mesquite, where the hills were giving way to rolling country and the soil was fading off from red to pink and gray, the old man pointed with the butt end of the stogey off to the left. "There used to be a cotton gin there, right there where that old black cow is standing. . . . And right there is where I saw my first yoke of oxen." He paused, his eyes glowing like the end of his cigar. "My father had told me about oxen, about how he used to plow with 'em and how they used to pull freight wagons up from the coast. But by the time I was old enough to know anything we were plowing with mules, so I'd never seen any." Smoke drifted about his head like a

dream. "But that summer — I musta been 'bout nine or ten — we brought some cotton to gin and it got to raining and raining, until you'da thought somebody had tipped the kettle up there. Had to stay at the gin for a couple o' days." The cigar was nearing its end; he took a rueful, measured look at it. "If it'd be raining like that right now, and if the roads were like they used to be, we'd be a-waiting too, and not a-going."

The butt went into the ashtray on the arm of the seat. "Well, anyway, the gin needed wood, lots of it, and mules sure couldn't pull through that mud. But there was this farmer the other side of Mesquite who still had some oxen and he brought in a whole wagon-load o' wood with those oxen. Musta been ten thousand pounds or more on that wagon; wheels went right down to the hubs; nothing coulda budged it except those oxen. There were four yoke o' them, and they didn't move very fast, just kinda plodded along, but when they pulled,that wagon went. Most o' the time the wheels didn't turn at all — it was sunk that deep into the mud. Wagon just slid over the mud, like a sled." He shook his head, as if he couldn't believe it himself. "By golly, that was a sight!"

A little farther up the highway he pointed excitedly over to the right. "There; there, where that stump is. That's where our home was when I was a boy." His jaw twitched again.

"How long ago was that?" Ken had guessed the man's age at eighty, and he wanted to see how close he had come to it.

"Too long ago to make any difference." Pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket, he coughed and spat into it. Ken thought a little more of him for using the handkerchief. "We raised cotton mostly, but it was a poor living cause we only made a crop when the Good Lord saw fit to send us rain, and that wasn't very often, no matter how hard we prayed. . . . *There*, right there at that fence, I saw my first automobile. I was picking cotton when all of a sudden I heard a clatter and a knocking, and when I looked up there it was, by golly, coming down the road; bumping and bouncing, cause that road was a wagon road, full o' ruts, deep ruts. They yelled to me, 'Hurry up 'n pick that cotton.' But I didn't say anything. I just stood there and looked." His handkerchief went up to his mouth again. "It was a holy sight to me — that buggy going down the road, without horses or mules."

Ken didn't like the way the old man was wheezing. Probably shouldn't have given him the cigar, but how the hell was he to know the old fellow had bad lungs? The bus slowed and turned into a side

roadway leading to a cluster of red brick buildings. It stopped in front of the largest one, marked with a plaque, "State Hospital — Main Office." Jumping out, the driver hurriedly opened the bin under the center of the vehicle and took out a large cardboard box marked "Blood" which he handed to an attendant at the door. Then he jumped back into the bus and it was off again. At every town the bus had left off and picked up things besides passengers — packets of newspapers, canvas mailbags, packages wrapped in stiff brown paper — but this was the first time it had made a non-scheduled stop to leave something. A little farther on down the road it stopped at a grain store to pick up three hundred-pound bags of cotton seed.

"It wasn't the cigar, was it?" Ken asked.

The old man gave him a disdainful look. "Hell no. If you'd a-swallowed as much dust in your time as I have, you'd be coughin' too. Hell no, it wasn't the cigar. I like a good cigar now and then." His tongue flicked out to capture a bit of tobacco left on his lip. "In about four or five years I won't be able to take these bus trips anymore — I figure I'll be blind as a bat by that time — but sure as I'm sitting here I'm still gonna smoke me a good cigar now and then. Nothing like a good cigar."

Right. Ken's mouth was itching for one but he was afraid to light up, because of the old man. He didn't even want to light a cigarette, though several people in the rear were smoking and dusty, curly haze was drifting through the bus.

"Listen," the old man said between a paroxysm of coughing. "You remember that cap rock back ten miles or so — where we came down outa the hills. That used to be the prettiest country I ever saw. Big live oak trees that had trunks three men couldn't put their arms around. Musta been two or three hundred years old. Well, we had a drought that lasted eight years, eight years by God, and before it was over with every one o' those live oaks was dead. Sorriest sight I ever saw in my life, those big trees standing there naked against the sky, their limbs a-pointing to the ground."

The spectacle flashed before Ken's eyes, and he winced.

"Things got so bad," the old man was saying; then his face contorted as if he had had a sudden pain in his chest. Ken was startled. But the look faded as quickly as it had appeared and the fellow picked up where he had left off, ". . . that I had to go to work for the government. Delivering mail."

The bus left the main highway again, this time down a side road

that in about a mile or so ended in a little town. Or rather it looked like a little town because there was a main street with a lot of old buildings and homes on it, but the windows and doors were all boarded up or missing and the only building with any life in it was a newly-painted white frame house in front of which the bus stopped. A lone passenger got off, a short, stout, simply but neatly dressed woman whose weight seemed such a burden that she had to be helped down the steps by the driver. As she picked up her brightly-polished brown leather suitcase and started to waddle toward the white house, Ken was struck with wonderment: Who was she? What kept her in this old ghost town? What had happened to it? What would happen to her when the bus shot straight as a stripe down the new highway?

Maybe the old man would know. During the interlude he had been wheezing again, but now he seemed to regain his breath.

"Do you know her, the fat lady who just got off?" Ken asked.

The old man didn't seem to hear. "Delivered mail right down this very road," he mumbled, as if he were talking to himself, "in a hack drawn by mules." That amused look turned into a chuckle. "By golly, there was an old German living on this road — about three miles farther up — named Benjamin Schlegel. Benjamin Sssch-le-gal. Had a head harder'n some o' the rocks on his place. Wouldn't put his name on his mailbox, no matter how many times I asked him to. He kept saying, 'You know vat my name iss, fhy should I put it on the mailbox?' Well, I quit delivering him mail" — the old man winked at Ken — "and he come stomping into the postoffice, bellering like a Jersey bull and wanting to know 'vat's da matter mit da mail service?' I told him vat's da matter but he still wouldn't put his name on his mailbox. Wrote to Washington about it. But that didn't do him no good, cause they just sent his letter back to us. Finally, he put his name on the box but every time he saw me he'd get red in the face and sputter, 'You knew damn vell vat my name vas.' He was a good farmer but by golly he *vas* hardheaded." Again the old man opened his mouth wide and bit the air gleefully with his gums.

"The fat lady — her name wasn't Schlegel, was it?" Ken asked.

"No. Schlegel's wife died years ago and after that he picked up and moved away. Somewhere west, I heard."

Ken let it go at that.

At Crowell, where a large sign announced proudly, "Fastest Growing Little Town in the U. S.," the bumps left the land and it became completely level, so level you could scrape it with a ruler and

not get a crumb. New land, yellow as gold dust, rich-enough looking to buy the world, yet in every direction, as far as the eye could see, lying utterly bare and exposed, like one vast wasteland. The houses, where they stopped the eye here and there, were generally larger and finer built than those back down the road, yet there was something forbidding about them too. Anything set in that vast emptiness, even a castle, would probably have seemed stark and alien, and these homes, some veritable castles, were no exceptions: Moats of mottled grass and scraggly trees surrounded a few of them but for the most part the bare soil (and at other times of the year undoubtedly the crops) marched right up to the doorsills as if no frills were allowed on this land; none except maybe the big, pretentious homes themselves.

The towns were coming faster now, Sweetwater, Hope, Morganville, and they, too, like the homes along the highway, showed prosperity of a kind. Newer buildings, more glitter on the storefronts, more cars parked around. And on the outskirts of every town, coming and going, were racks upon racks of irrigation pipes looking like piled-up spaghetti, rows of long silver tanks marked "Ammonia," new red tactors, disc plows, harrows, reapers, mechanical cotton pickers with their long arm-like suction tubes. And going into every town there were the same signs, "First Baptist Church Welcomes You," followed by "More-Gro Fertilizer" and right behind that, "Crop and Hail Insurance, Phone 1234."

Though the old man was wheezing again, he wasn't missing a thing. His head spun from his window to Ken's and back again, his face shone like a child's. "It may look like gold but it ain't," he said at one point. "The yellower the soil the poorer it is. We farmed this land, my daddy and me and my brothers, for four years and couldn't raise jackrabbits. That's why we moved on up into the hills. But underneath that yellow stuff was real gold and we didn't know it."

Ken knew what he meant. He knew what the real gold was in this part of the country.

"Yeah, all that praying and there it was, right under our feet. Only we were too ignorant to know it. . . . Still, I guess you couldn't blame us too much. What'd we know about anything? School didn't start until December, cause we were all off picking cotton, and no sooner we got started, half a dozen kids would start a-whooping, so they'd have to close up school until spring time and by then we all had to help with spring planting." He grunted. "By golly, right under our feet and we didn't know it. But the kids now. . . . They keep 'em in school

until they polish up their heads like brass. No wonder they get three crops a year."

Ken wished the old fellow would take it easy, it was still a stretch to Eden. Maybe if he went back to reading the newspaper the old boy would stop. If he didn't he was going to blow a gasket or something. That wheezing sounded awful. And Ken still had the uneasy feeling that the cigar had set things off. He walked up to the front of the bus to ask the driver how far it was to Eden.

"'Bout twenty miles," the driver grunted out of the corner of his mouth, keeping his foot pressed to the pedal.

When Ken got back to his seat and looked out of the window, he could see a big whirlpool of dust blowing over against the horizon, dimming the outlines of a house and making it look in the distance like a shimmering, hazy desert mirage. A ball of tumbleweeds was bouncing across the yellow field. Though he couldn't feel the wind in the insulated bus he could almost taste the dust in his mouth. It wasn't a pleasant taste. They must lose a lot of top soil between plantings, he thought. It was a frightening sight, so much land laid bare and blowing away.

"My dad was so tight he'd skin a gnat for the taller," the old man said.

His mind on the dust, Ken wasn't sure he had heard right. "Taller?"

"Yeah, you know what taller is, don't you?"

Now it came to him. Tallow. He smiled.

"Yeah, my dad'd skin a gnat for the taller, but it wasn't cause he was stingy. It was the money that was tight. You had to work damn hard for a dollar. Course, they didn't call it hard work in those days, but they knew it was work. . . . And when you didn't know what the Good Lord was going to send you tomorrow or the next day, you'd better squirrel some of it away."

"Eden 5 Mi.," the sign said, and Ken breathed easier even if the old man didn't.

"Things are a lot looser now, a lot looser. If you want to plow, all you gotta do is dump in the gasoline. If you want a drink o' water, you just turn on the faucet. And if you get sick, penicillin and the government'll take care o' you."

Silver buildings, huge as cathedrals, with dozens of red-slatted wagons clustered around them and the ground all about white as snow with bits of cotton that had escaped the ginning, loomed up on both sides of the road. Then oblong concrete silos tall as skyscrapers

and heaped to the top (though you couldn't see it) with grain, like Pharaoh's granaries which Joseph filled to overflowing during the seven fat years.

"Gals are prettier too" — the old man winked at Ken — "and it ain't no sin anymore to look at 'em." Another spell of coughing followed, so hacking that Ken thought the old man was goint to split himself wide open.

Eden!

Turning off the highway, the bus careened into a side street and then was at the station, a brand new one painted a spanking shiny white. "Eden," the driver barked with redundancy into his microphone. "Ten minute stop." Passengers got up to disembark.

But the old man wasn't moving. His face looked white and pinched, he slumped in his seat.

"You okay?" Ken asked anxiously.

No answer. The old man's hands seemed to be wrestling with his legs. Finally he said, "I can't get up. Can you lend me a hand?"

Ken jumped up and tried to heft him by the arm. But no sooner he was on his legs they buckled under him and he fell back. A woman, fiftyish, with the same pointed nose as the old man, appeared in the doorway of the bus and hurried through it to his seat. Concern was on her face.

"Nothing's wrong," the old man assured her. "My legs just went to sleep. All I need to do is shake 'em a bit." Reaching down with trembling, horny hands, he rubbed the legs and moved them back and forth. "Guess I shoulda been a-moving when I was a-sitting. But, doggone, couple o' years ago I couda sat all the way to New York without even getting up to go to the toilet."

With Ken's help he stood up and stayed standing. "Well, I'm on my own now," he said, shuffling slowly and determinedly forward. "And if my daughter's cooking is all right, maybe I'll stay here a couple o' weeks 'r more. Don't reckon anybody's gonna whittle down those hills while I'm away." At the door he turned and waved. "So long, young feller."

New passengers got on, four of them giggling teen-agers. One of the girls took an empty seat in the front of the bus, one took a seat next to Ken and the other two took the double seat where the old man had been sitting, In between their giggles they munched on candy bars. "Blast off!" the one in the front seat screeched as the bus started. From nowhere the girl next to Ken produced a tiny transistor radio.

Incredible, how something so small could outdo a tractor! "I no love ya no more. Nyet, nyet, nyet." The drums beat, the electric guitars twanged. "I no love ya no more. Nyet, nyet, nyet." Up, down, down, up, the girls were in their seats and jumping out of them, now in the front of the bus, now in the rear, laughing, giggling, wiggling, making strange signals with their fingers which Ken, of an older generation, could only guess at.

The clamor was getting on his nerves. He looked up front. No hope. The driver had his ears pointed forward, he was jamming the accelerator hell-bent for Amarillo.

He guessed he was getting old too. Too bad, just when the girls were growing prettier (he had to admit it!) and it wasn't a sin any more to look at 'em. . . . Thank God he still had his teeth. He pulled out another cigar, bit the end off, lit up, and blowing out a cloud of smoke, dreamed he was a boy again . . . seeing his first yoke of oxen . . . an automobile for the first time . . . in a beautiful garden, looking auburn-haired Jewel O'Connor in the eyes for the first time (what courage it had taken!). His eyes half open, half closed, he watched them bounce from seat to seat like rubber balls. Jewel was the prettiest girl he had ever seen (up until that time) but she couldn't have bounced like that if she had tried. He wondered what year it was (it certainly wasn't in the newspapers; had the Pope or somebody like that proclaimed it in secret?) that it had stopped being a sin.