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Burl Hardwick's Revenge

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One time a man called Burl Hardwick sat and waited and listened for the clouds that would rumble up behind the dark woods stretching out along Mauvaisterre Creek. He'd sat in the slickworn leather arm chair every night now for nearly fifty, maybe fifty-two years and brooded over the things that happened to him once, the lynching of Ed Garvey after the Great War in France, when his brother Emory moved to town the next day and the waiting began, sitting there through years he'd almost forgotten with his wife Sarah, until he and the boy Willie buried her without fanfare up behind the house fourteen — yes, it was that long, fourteen — years ago one morning after a blizzard, just like his family'd always done and he'd found small comfort in the destroyed leather chair when his son Bill packed up on a Thursday afternoon with that woman named Linda he'd married and five hundred dollars cash money, said they were quits, going to Los Angeles, someplace like that maybe, someplace without doubt far from Exeter, Illinois, and leaving the boy Willie with him and Sarah to raise up, just like he was their own, like they was starting out back in the days when many of the stories he'd later tell the boy were made, far back when his shoulder didn't hurt, before he'd lost the left eye burning down Dave Kinison's house after the lynching and Kinison's suicide. As far back as those days Burl Hardwick had been waiting in this chair after work every day on the farm and they all knew he was crazy, maybe dangerous, lurking way out there around the old house, keeping a tight hold on them all because of what he knew and refused to forget, refused to let slip away into earth like all things must, keeping even the dead alive, always right there in plain sight of the house where a man could look up over his breakfast and watch the grass move while he diced his eggs and the two or sometimes as many as three goats wander among the stones and crop what of the grass they could, always failing to stop the jimsons and lamb's quarter, mullen and poppies that would not let things rest ever.

So Burl Hardwick sat and waited one Monday night for Willie to get home from town and for a rain storm that was about to happen.

It was easy. He let his one eye enclose the room like a worn-out glove and felt the house quake slightly every now and again with the
thunder, knowing they were out there, the clouds like black elephants, and he knew by heart the trail they'd take across the flatlands heading this way from town, then stumbling helter-skelter down through the hills and the creek, so that soon the rain would run in gray slabs off the corrugated roof of the barn, beating a trench in the dirt and weeds along the foundations of all the buildings, barn, smokehouse, tool shed, the home itself, built in the first century of this country by Giles Hardwick, who ran away from Kentucky and someplace else before that, and he knew as well that the few cattle would stand shocked and stupid, their butts turned to the wind and despairing rain. If he still owned horses, they'd panic and wheel from one edge of the pasture to the other, lightning caught in their bugged-out eyes. But Burl Hardwick didn't own anymore horses. They were gone now too, like his son Bill and there was a picture of Bill from the second war, no medals and the cheeks that dried-out rose color the way they tinted them in those days a long time ago, the way he remembered the horses, and Bill still near that same age today for all the old man knew, or maybe dead someplace, the rose color come finally true under a mortician's hand, kind of like this room, its tarnished brass lamps, unstrung doilies had come finally true under his hand with Sarah gone, same as that creek, the Mauvaisterre come finally true when he walked alone to Kinison's and burned the place up lock, stock and barrel and went home to mend until he met his wife one day when her automobile broke down not far from the house on Pulling's Bridge and he got it fixed and they talked there, both knowing it was sheerest accident the engine backfired and flooded on that incline, greater accident he'd heard the noise and nothing short of blessed Goddamned miracle he went to see what happened. That was how it was, alright, and he'd been walking in a big wide circle around those days ever since, trying to figure out the why of something couldn't even be looked at full in the face. Or so he figured now, waiting with what passed for alone in a house full of dead people going back almost a hundred and thirty years.

"Get on home," Burl Hardwick said to the clock, "Get on home," to the ashtray Willie used, as though Willie sat there with a live ash poised above the glass lip, "Get on home," wondering what happened on the long nights alone when the boy came back, usually sober but maybe drunk, his arm hooked around the door jamb while he glared about the room and mumbled, then stomped off upstairs. "I expect he'll get back soon," Burl Hardwick said finally and closed his eyes,
feeling the weight of the glass one droop down against his cheek, listening to the thick breeze tugging at the mysterious woods that enclosed the Mauvaisterre like green skin and dampened the glow of streetlights from Exeter, where six men hunched over one end of a long, polished bar. The men were all turned away from Willie Hardwick, all looking up at the TV mounted in the corner and Willie remembered how a few years back Millard Dunson draped his saloon in dark bunting when the ancient oval black and white set passed on and all the regulars hoisted champagne to their old pal, who'd brought them fantastic tales of baseball and the South Pacific, where the gray seas plunged into rich blue somewhere, and somewhere the sloe-eyed girls would bring you drinks filled with chunks of fruit swimming in rum, then wrap their brown arms around your bare chest as you watched out over the lagoon. There was the sound of men talking and horses running. Coral-colored light played on the glassware. Behind him, the room was dark and quiet. Willie didn't have to turn to know the room was empty. You just get a feeling for things like that, like knowing what night a calf will drop without counting days or calling a vet. The man at the far end of the bar, the man nearest the TV, moved his right hand back to his hip and rested it on the white pearl handle of a gun.

"I hear this might be the last year for Gunsmoke," Sally Quinlin said, "so don't any of you guys even think about football. Football's a game for sissies."

The other men in the Exeter Hotel bar laughed. They were about Quinlin's age, late forties, early fifties, and knew from other nights, other heroes, that sometimes a man needs solitude. Anyway, Sally Quinlin had tried too many times to get Willie in jail and Willie kept out of his way. Once, nearly ten years ago, when they were still in high school, Willie told Darrall Crawford what it was like to be the local trash and Darrall said, "Yes," clattering his crutches like the frail wooden bones of dead birds, "Yes, the Lord will get you."

"Another?"

Now, Darrall was dead too, flown away on the wings of his own promise.

"Another?"

Willie looked up at Millard Dunson and said, "Someday I'm going to get me one of those Hamm's Beer bears and turn him loose in here. Right in the middle of Gunsmoke."

"What's with you, Digger?" Millard leaned against the liquor
cabinet and rested his white sleeves on a full plaid vest. "Am I going to get trouble from you again?"

"Not if you lay off with that 'Digger' business," Willie said. He set his glass on the bar and slowly ran a finger around the rim. "You know, they say real crystal will kind of sing when you do it like this." He dipped his finger in the beer and again circled the lip of the silent glass. "This is a long way from crystal, Millard."

Dunson laughed and shock waves rippled along the vest. "Any bears there ever were around here are a long time killed off." Millard was like a huge bag of skin stuffed with wet sand and topped off with curly blond hair that followed closely after the bears. "And you wouldn't know crystal from your granddad's glass eye," he said from somewhere behind his blank face, "Digger."

"Millard, it's a commercial and we're dry down here." As you would expect, the shout came from Sally Quinlin.

"Coming, Sal." Millard composed his bartender's face, paused for an instant in front of Willie, then turned away and ambled toward the men. "Me and Digger was having a talk."

"Don't waste time on him," Quinlin said. He leaned far back on the stool and looked down at Willie. "He'll be gone in the blink of an eye. Vanished. Busting rocks at Vandallia or someplace." Quinlin squared his shoulders toward Willie and the badge sparkled.

"Why don't we just pair off and get it done with?' Willie said.

"You know, it ain't fair," Herbert Watson said. He sat beside Quinlin and threw his arms in the air.

"Shut up, Herb," Quinlin said. Then, to Willie, "If there was any justice you and that old man would've been put away years ago." Quinlin eased his legs from under the bar and started to stand, but Watson reached up and held his shoulders.

"I'm telling you it ain't fair," Watson said again.

"I know that," Quinlin said patiently. "And I'm going to shut him up."

"Who?"

"Hardwick."

"I don't mean him," Herbert Watson said. "Who cares about him? I'm talking about my cousin from Pittsfield. He's an actor and he got on Gunsmoke once. I saw it."

"What's unfair about that?" Millard Dunson said.

"It ain't fair that you've got to be a success just to get a two-bit part on Gunsmoke and have Matt Dillon whip your ass . . . that's what
ain't fair."

"You feel better?" Quinlin asked.
Herbert Watson nodded.
Sally Quinlin sat down and turned back to the TV. "Please," he said over his shoulder, "please, Digger, give me a reason."
Willie looked at himself in the long mirror behind the bar. Your name Digger doesn't make sense with the straight, clipped hair and blurred features.

"Look at me," Herbert Watson was saying. "I'm a meatcutter."
She may have been your grandmother, but she was Burl's wife and it was him, Burl, that decided on just sticking her in the ground like that, and you can't even remember for sure what happened. Watson's voice kept getting louder and Willie turned to listen.

"Been a meatcutter all my life and spent most of that time trying to keep people from calling me a butcher."

"Settle down, Herb," Dunson said.
"I'll never be a success," Watson said.

Now, Burl stays out on that farm like he always did and everything for you has been wadded up into a nickname, Digger, and even if somebody uses it only out of habit, you still remember flashes of how the spade bit your hands in the cold. With only a couple of thousand people in Exeter, it wasn't easy to keep a secret, especially that one.

"Sometimes my wife even calls me a butcher," Watson said. "I can't sleep nights."

Willie swallowed the last of his beer. As he was getting ready to leave, he turned and saw the door open and a man slip inside. Willie could tell from the mushroom shape that it was Bucket Hawkins, though his face was invisible in the darkness at the far side of the room. Willie shook his head. With Bucket, it could turn into a long night.

"Glad I caught you," Bucket said. "I was afraid I'd have to stand up to Millard alone."

"Lots of company," Willie said, waving his hand at the men.
Millard padded toward them, carrying two fresh beers.
"Millard the Miracle," Bucket said. "My life is complete with you. Anymore, I feel just like one of the boys."

"Thanks," Millard said. "And you restore my faith."
Bucket raised his glass to Willie. "May the bird of Paradise fly up your nose."

“Was it that long ago? Eleven years. I’m old, I’m old. Someday I’ll come up with a line you can’t place.” Bucket scratched his nose. “‘Fools rush in where wise men fear to tread.’”

“Down with all wise men,” Willie said, hoisting his glass. “And I think you blew the line. But it’s no better than wise men deserve.”

“Shame on you,” Bucket said. “I’ve been trying to grow this moustache so I’ll look like a wise man.” He traced his finger along the smooth chestnut line under his nose.

“It won’t work,” Willie told him. “By the time that thing gets big enough to see at all, your cheeks will be so fat they’ll cover it up.”

“What the hell. Wise men all have fat cheeks too. Look at all those old Chinese guys. They’re the wisest men in the world and they all got fat pink cheeks.” Bucket pulled at the thin lip hairs. “And skinny moustaches, too. Long and skinny. Length before strength. That’s right. You can always trust those Chinese oldtimers.”

“And to hell with Chinese oldtimers, too,” Willie said.

Bucket shook his head and put his hand on Willie’s back. “My friend, you have no faith in history. Them Chinese have been around for thousands of years, so they must have an in on something. Personally, I think it’s moustaches.” He shrugged and sipped beer, then wiped his mouth on the cuff of his shirt. “Now look at Millard down there. Don’t he look Chinese?”

“You really are dumb,” Willie said. “Are you doing this to me on purpose?”

“No, no. He thinks like a Chinaman. How else could he keep the peace in here? One Saturday night in this joint has got to equal at least a hundred years of Chinese History.” Bucket stroked his chin thoughtfully. “That makes Millard at least sixty-five thousand years old — in relative historical terms.”

Briefly, the streetlight again flashed into the tavern as the door opened for another customer. Willie didn’t bother to look around. Bucket was rolling now and he’d have to work hard just to keep up.


“Smart, maybe,” Bucket said, “but never wise. Look at how scrawny and scraggy they are. Believe me, a Wise Man knows how to get a good meal.”

“You’re full of crap.”

“The first true sign of wisdom,” Bucket said soberly. “Who’s the young lady?” He pointed into the mirror, then abruptly stood and
walked to the newly occupied table.

Willie slid off the stool and followed. As he got closer, he could see that it was Kristen Goreman. She sat with her head lowered, face partially hidden behind a dark-colored scarf. Her foot jiggled nervously on the floor. She seemed impatient. Willie hadn't seen her here before. They always start out impatient, always expecting something to happen just because they're around. His head spun slightly as he approached the table, and Willie balanced himself against a chair. Bucket sat down next to her without saying a word.

"You are in the presence of a Wise Man," Willie said.

Bucket tipped his head, acknowledging the introduction. Kristen pulled off the scarf and ran the fingers of both hands along the back of her neck and up through her hair, flipping it out along the sides of her face. She couldn't have been over nineteen or twenty, but you knew she was one of those who hadn't needed time to grow up. In a small town like Exeter, Kristen Goreman could walk around wearing nothing but her name and still have more self-assurance than most people could muster in a new suit of clothes. She motioned for Willie to sit.

"Which one of you is going to say it?" Kristen asked, looking from side to side at both men.

"Say what, my dear?" Bucket said.

"I don't know. Something about nice girls and shifty places like this."

Bucket picked up her hand from the table and said, "But that assumes you're a nice girl. As a Wise Man, I would never jump to a conclusion like that."

"Bucket thinks he's on the trail of the Chinese secret to long life," Willie said. "You and I know he's a fool. But it makes him feel better to call his nonsense wisdom."

Kristen pulled her hand away and looked at Willie, her eyes coming closer together, focusing on him. There was gunfire and shouting from behind the bar. Matt Dillon's voice cut through the jumble of noise and Willie turned away from Kristen to watch. Sally Quinlin was shouting encouragement and pounding his fist on the bar. Millard was placid, his great red girth floating steadily before him as he breathed.

"This place is a drag," Kristen said.

"Sure it is," Bucket said. "That's why we come here. You see, there is a fine principle of logic involved. First, we know that the Exeter
Hotel bar is boring Monday through Thursday nights. But, since we know it is boring, that means that we must not be boring people, because boring people cannot possibly know that they are boring.” Bucket leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands confidently behind his head.

“I've heard stories about him,” Kristen said to Willie.

“He has the weight of Chinese History on his side,” Willie said. “That's why he's trying to grow that stupid moustache.”

“I see,” Kristen said. “I see everything but the moustache.”

“Now you've hurt my feelings,” Bucket said. “Someday you'll be sorry for that. You'll be proud to tell your grandchildren you knew the legendary Bucket Hawkins, Wise Man.”

“He's just trying to pick you up,” Willie said. He leaned closer, drawn by the damp heat Kristen still carried from the cloudy September night.

“Don't worry about it, Willie,” Bucket said. “A Wise Man never gets a woman.”

“What's he raving about now?” Kristen said.

“You see, she's already hung up on you.”

“What's he talking about?”

“Sweetheart,” Bucket said, pulling at her sleeve, “it's another piece of simple logic. A woman can spot a Wise Man a mile off. And, because she knows he's a Wise Man, she knows for certain what he's after.” He stroked her arm.

“That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard,” Kristen said, reaching for her scarf.

“You don't have to get hostile about it,” Bucket said. “A young girl doesn't come wandering in here alone off the street without a pretty good idea of what she's getting into.”

Willie watched Kristen knot the scarf under her chin. She seemed offended, but there was something about the sureness of her hands that said otherwise. Her fingers worked deliberately, as though they had made the same motion in the same circumstances many times. He knew the Exeter gossip well enough to be fairly certain she was soaring in new territory, but the steadiness was there, just the same.

“Only a fool can get a woman,” Bucket said. “A fool doesn't let on what he's after, since he's too stupid to know. The woman thinks it was all her idea and it makes her feel better, like she wasn't tricked, or she's doing some poor dummy a favor. Fools are lucky people. I've had to learn to be satisfied with being a Wise Man.”
Kristen was standing now, holding her arms tightly under her breasts. "Will you take me home?" she said to Willie. Just like that, she said it. "Will you take me home?" It was too wild and easy to pass on. You could chase ladies for years, come up empty, and this one said it all straight out: "Take me home."

Bucket followed them out into the street. "I guess I'll go back to the house and watch my moustache grow," he said.

"Why don't you," Kristen said. It was almost ten o'clock and the street was quiet and dark under the clouds. Her voice echoed off the brick walls and was absorbed by the low trees and humidity. In another time, the two young men and the woman could have been the Hart brothers and Miss Edna McLaughlin, who shot one between the eyes with a .22 caliber pistol and sent the other running for a doctor in fear of his life. But that was in the last century, and in front of the Baptist Church.

"Ease up some, Bucket," Willie said. He watched the slow smile spread across Bucket's pudgy face.

"Yeah," Bucket said. "I guess I'll go home alone. Again. You know, though, you prove my point about the great Fools and Women case." The smile turned into a kind of sweet glaze. "Have a nice drive."

Willie had taken a step toward him when the tavern door opened and Sally Quinlin fell outside.

"By God," Quinlin said, "we got 'em tonight." Quinlin hitched up his pants and rocked on his heels. "Me and old Dillon showed them sonsofbitches this week. There's no stopping us." He leaned against the bricks and massaged his teeth with the corner of a match book. "It ain't easy being Chief of Police and the whole force all by yourself."

"You should take some of Bucket Hawkins's Wise Man lessons," Kristen said. She was standing behind Quinlin and when he turned to her, Kristen put her hand over her mouth.

"Your daddy know you're here?" Quinlin said.

Kristen shrugged and her arm dropped to her side.

"These bums'll get you in big trouble," Quinlin pointed his thumb at Willie and Bucket Hawkins.

Willie scraped the cement with his heel. Things had turned sour with Bucket and now Quinlin was getting in the way. And what made it worse was that he knew Quinlin was right. You hate to admit that about Sally Quinlin, but Samuel Goreman's daughter is more trouble than you need. A car moved up the street behind Kristen, outlining the shadow of graceful legs through her cotton skirt.
“Sally,” Bucket said, “I think you should get Hardwick here off the streets. He’s a menace.”

Quinlin stuck the matchbook in his shirt pocket and sucked at a tooth. He pushed himself off the side of the building and started pacing back and forth on the sidewalk between Willie and Kristen.

Bucket Hawkins folded his arms and said, “Matt Dillon would run the likes of Harwick out of town and blow his brains out if he didn’t move fast enough.”

“What are you talking about?” Willie said. “I live here.”

“Now Sally, you know that’s right,” Bucket said.

“He’s just sore because he made a fool out of himself,” Willie said. “Why don’t you beat it, Sally. You’re wasting your time.”

“She’s out of your class, Digger,” Bucket said.

Willie’s teeth were chattering and as soon as he saw the slick smile return to Bucket’s face, he grabbed his shirt and pushed him into a parked car. Out of the corner of his eye, Willie saw Quinlin tottering on the sidewalk, pistol in hand. Jesus, he thought, oh Jesus!

“Hold it right there!” Quinlin shouted.

Willie and Bucket stopped and stood very still, looking at Quinlin.

“I said hold it right there!” Quinlin screamed again.

“We’re holding, we’re holding, for Christ’s sake,” Bucket said. “Put the damned gun away.”

Now, Quinlin was having real trouble with his legs. His baggy blue pants jiggled, as though full of small, quick animals. “Hold it right there!” Sally heaved the gun into the air and fired a shot.

Willie heard a sharp tick through the blast and the severed ends of a thick telephone cable dropped into the street.

“My God, he’s killed the phone company,” Bucket said.

Quinlin was maneuvering his gun hand again, when his head snapped forward and he slumped to the sidewalk. Kristen held a long board in both hands. “Poor Sally,” she said.

By the time Kristen had thrown the board back into the alley, the men were all out of the tavern. They stood in a tight huddle around Sally Quinlin and muttered about the shot and the phone line and the general injustice of living in a world full of people who made loud noises in the middle of the night.

“I was on the phone to my wife,” Dave Parker said.

“You don’t like her anyway,” Millard Dunson said. He turned to Willie. “What happened here?”

After Willie had gone over the story, Millard Dunson directed the
men as they carried Sally Quinlin back inside the tavern.

“You’d better get home,” Millard said from the door. “For years and years Sally Quinlin has watched *Gunsmoke* on my television, then gone out and made his rounds. Most people know enough to stay out of his way.”

“He was the one got in our way,” Willie said.

“Doesn’t matter. You know what it’ll be like when he wakes up.” Bucket Hawkins was already in his car and backing away from the curb.

“Shouldn’t we wait for the police?” Kristen asked.

“Good Lord,” Millard said. “I’d think you’d done enough of that already. Sally’s the one in trouble with the law. You’ve got trouble with your daddy. Both of you.” Millard stepped back and the door swung shut.

“Looks like we’re partners,” Kristen said.

Willie turned and walked toward the old Pontiac and Kristen kept pace with him. When he got to the car, Willie climbed up and sat down on the hood and laughed. He leaned his back against the windshield and Kristen was beside him, laughing too. He put his arm under her shoulders and pulled her closer, feeling the scarf slide off and her hair clean and soft against his cheek. Above them, the trees jumped and their branches began to creak as the thick wind ripped around the edges of the buildings. Then, it started to rain and they got in the car.

II.

“General Pemberton is having a bitter time of it tonight,” Kristen said, pointing at the statue of the man who lost Vicksburg.

“I’ll never understand,” Willie said, “how Lieutenant General John Clifford Pemberton ended up a statue in Illinois.” The car slowed and he looked out at the great bronze man who stood atop a block of gray marble and brandished his bronze sword at the rain. “He probably surrendered on a night like this,” Willie said.

Kristen moved closer to him. “I feel cold,” she said. “I know it’s not cold, but I feel cold.”

“It’s the rain.”

“I guess so. It sounds cold, so I feel cold.”

“This old car will get us through,” he said. “I’ve got faith in this car. She’s driven me home on worse nights than this.” He squinted along
the hood at the chrome Indian. "I'm telling you, this car's got instinct," Willie said. Instinct.

"I walked to the hotel," Kristen said. "Didn't think it would rain."

"Maybe you just didn't figure on walking home. Those things happen." He gave her a sidelong glance, then looked back at the Indian.

"Do you know where I live," Kristen said.

Willie nodded. "How do you figure I could live here all my life and not know a thing like that?" he said.

"Do you think Sally has come to yet?"

"Do horses have wings?"

"Only if they're flying horses," she said. "And stop being nasty."

"No, I don't think Sally has come to yet," Willie said. "You really put one on him." He laughed and rested his arm in her lap. "I'm not like Bucket Hawkins. I counted you for a nice girl."

"Thank you."

"What I can't understand is how you got so handy with a two-by-four. You swung that thing like a sailor."

"Yo-ho-ho," she said.

At the northeast corner of the square, Willie drove straight down Hastings, then turned right on Highway 110. All the lights were out at Estel Cowper's Texaco station, except for the Bardol sign Estel kept on for thieves, and the street seemed ordinary. Everybody by-pased Exeter on the new Federal highway, but 110 was still different because it could take you out of town. Poor Estel's nearly dead from lost business, always hunched over a flat tire or busted car when you stop in, crying about the lousy Feds and the lousy Goddamned freeway and nobody buys gas and him with three lousy kids to raise up on change from cigarettes and Pepsi-Cola. After two blocks, they passed a squat tarpaper building. Smoke, beaten down by rain, hung about the roof and walls like a dark fist.

"Emory's working tonight," Willie said. The two small windows were filled with an orange glow and steam leaked through one of the broken sections of glass. Emory Hardwick was the last living blacksmith in Exeter, Illinois.

"When I was little," Kristen said, "my friends and I would sneak over here and peek through the windows. We pretended there was a monster inside. Probably because of all the fire and sparks we saw."

"He's my uncle," Willie said.

"Oh ... I'm sorry. For calling him a monster, I mean."
“It’s OK,” Willie said. “You could be right.”
“You can’t mean that. Not about family.” She turned her head, keeping her eyes fastened on the blacksmith shop as he drove past.
“Let’s stop,” Kristen said. “I want to stop and go inside.”
“See the monster first hand?”
“Like looking under the bridge for trolls,” Kristen said. She faced Willie and her smooth forehead seemed to glow, as if her skin had absorbed the orange heat of the forge simply by turning toward it on a dismal night.
“No.”
“Why not? It’s a perfectly natural thing to do. He’s your uncle. Why shouldn’t you stop in to say hello on your way home?”
“No.” What else was there to say? It seemed impossible that she could not know about his grandfather and his brother Emory. Everybody in town knew they hadn’t spoken for nearly fifty years. Her family had been involved, maybe even partly responsible. Ed Garvey was hanged and buried all these years now and you still might sit in Fletcher’s or the Hotel and the old men would bend their faces low over coffee or drinks and look at each other through their brows and shake their heads, the way men do when bad things come up out of nowhere, come up sudden, like when an ice cube thaws and a pocket of frozen air squeezes out into bourbon and water and the sound surprises you because it’s unexpected. Rotten dreams don’t need an invitation and Kristen had to know that any contact he might have with Emory couldn’t be as easy as just walking in to pay your respects on the way home.
“Listen,” she said, “I sort of bailed you out back at the Hotel. Don’t you think you owe me one?”
“If you’re going to play it like that, then the hell with you,” Willie said. He pulled the car to the curb in front of the abandoned grade school. “I never asked for a damned thing from you.” Rain fell like buckshot on the car.
“So what? If I hadn’t done it, they might have carried you off, or worse.”
And what do you say to that? You try to avoid debts, but sometimes they’re made for you. Willie studied the girl’s face and he knew from the way her thinly parted lips stretched across her teeth that she would be one who would always collect.
“I want to go back,” she said, smiling now, erasing that one quick, poisonous look.
Willie put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb. He circled around behind the school playground that was now filled with small shiny houses, and pulled into the dirt lot behind Emory Hardwick's shop.

Kristen was the first out of the car and her foot slipped as soon as it touched the ground. She fell back through the door and Willie reached over and caught her head.

"Watch out," he said. "You've got to be careful. It's the rain and all the old oil that's been leaked out around here." He got out and stepped quickly on the balls of his feet toward the door. "Get's like glass whenever there's water on it."

There was a close path through the towering heaps of junk. All around them the jagged parts of discarded machinery jutted up into the rain. Running to catch Willie, Kristen barked her shin on an old wagon axle which had long ago been placed carefully over two oil drums and since mounded over on one end with worn out pumps and engine blocks and indecipherable scraps of rusted sheet steel. The path was thick with chain links that were trampled into the rich, oily dirt, as though the survivors of a million ruined farms, ten million dried out wells and countless trips to and from town on crummy roads, the casualties of lives nobody could remember, sat in the rain and bled small square chain links onto the path, the one remaining sliver of clear real estate. The rain collected in small pools around the chain links and as they approached the open door, Willie could see Emory's forge burning in those cool puddles of rain.

Inside, Willie looked through the smoke and steam and saw his uncle standing at the forge, his back to the door. Emory held a large hammer poised above his head, then smashed it down on a piece of hot metal.

Willie wiped the rain from his face. "What are you working on tonight, old man?" he said.

"Steel," Emory said, without turning. "Nothing but steel. Good for the constitution."

The shop was even more crowded than the ground outside, with scrap reaching from floor to ceiling, so that if the tarpaper walls someday disappeared, it was unlikely that anybody inside would ever mark their passing. There was less rust inside, though, and you had to wonder what kind of strange system Emory had that determined what should be kept out of the weather and what could be consigned
to the elements.

"Do you remember me?" Kristen said. "I'm the little girl who used to throw rocks through the window and splash you with water from that big tank."

"Ah, missy, missy," Emory sighed, still close at his work. "You could be anybody in a skirt if that's all you got to remember you."

"I sometimes wore jeans."

"What a shame," Emory said, turning now to study her from under the turned up bill of his machinist's cap. "I'm a fair great blacksmith," he said to Willie, laughing, "but there's some things I can't fix, like pretty girls what wears pants. There's nothing I knew for a thing like that."

Emory dropped his hammer onto the dirt floor and tossed his thick, high-cuffed leather gloves onto the small greasy cot stashed behind a partition constructed of stacked tire rims.

"Kristen wanted to know what the inside of a real live blacksmith shop was like," Willie said.

"But it's home, just home," Emory said. "How do you like it?"

"It's very cozy," Kristen said, shifting her eyes from wall to wall.

"Very cozy."

"I haven't done the cleaning yet today," Emory said sadly. The silver flecks in his heavy black pants and shirt sparkled in the firelight. "If I'd of known there was guests in tonight's prophecy, then I'd of straightened up a bit. What's your name, dear?"

"Kristen Goreman."

"Goreman, ah, Goreman," Emory said, rubbing his hands on a faded red shop towel.

"She belongs to Samuel Goreman," Willie said. "His daughter."

"I see, I see," Emory said. "Well, you're really out and about tonight, aren't you, missy."

"You should see the way she handles a club," Willie said.

"If she's Samuel Goreman's daughter, then there's no surprise in that one," Emory said.

"You must get lonesome," Kristen said, "all shut up in here by yourself."

Emory laughed again and wiped the shop towel under his nose. "Used to be lots of people come by," he said. "Never got lonesome then. Just the other way around. Course, later, when I started this business with the gold, I discouraged them and it soon stopped."

"Gold," Kristen said.
Emory nodded. "Thirty, forty years ago, I got started trying to extract gold from scrap metal. That's how come there to be so much junk around here. I collected up all the stuff I could and now I got more junk than I can mine. Never found a lick of gold yet, though. Not a lick."

Willie walked to the forge and poked at the coals. "You remember," he said, "that time I sneaked down here out of school and we tried to melt down all those old combine parts and skim off any shiny stuff that came to the top?"

"Sure, sure. Looking for gold. That's all it was. I never told you. You got to watch out people finding things out about you. What'd everybody think if they knew I was running a gold mine in this place? I'd be in big trouble."

"People might think you were a little . . . odd," Kristen said.

"Odd, hell. Why, they'd be all over me like flies. Clean me out over night. You know how people is when things is tangled up with gold. Now, you two keep this quiet, hear?" Emory looked uneasily from Kristen to Willie. "Hear?"

"She won't talk," Willie said. "I'll see to it."

Willie stood beside the forge and scratched little designs in the caked floor with a poker. You could see that Emory was a man of business and that business didn't include young girls that came around late at night just to satisfy a whim. The light started to fade and Emory looked around at the fire and began worrying the red towel in his hands. When Willie was a boy, he had seen wonderous things take shape at the hands of Emory Hardwick, secret things that were drawn from the fire and wrought from steel, then turning slowly orange amid the sparks and the piercing ring of Emory's tools, then a dull silver-gray, the same color as the steam given off when you plunge them into cool water. He wanted to put his fingers on the old man's arm and ask him to make him something, make him a toy shovel or a knife and hold it always in the big pincers just above the fire, never hot enough to melt back into dumb, stupid metal, always with that faint orange glow that made the thing special, frozen at the very edge of being finished and new. Willie discovered Kristen's arm around his waist, shaking him.

"You OK?" Emory said.

"Sure. Fine."

"You looked a little funny there for a minute," Emory said.

"I was just thinking how close I come to getting shot tonight,"
Willie said, lowering his head and flexing his back. "It was pretty close, wasn't it," he said to Kristen.

"We'd better go," she said.

"Curiosity satisfied?" Emory said.

Kristen smiled and touched the old man's shirt. "Curiosity satisfied," she said. "I'm sorry we bothered you."

"What's the bother?" Emory said. "Pretty girl's never a bother." He stuck the towel into his hip pocket and guided them to the door. A cold draft whipped Kristen's skirt and the rain was blown level with the junk outside. Wind swirled in the doorway and they were touched for a moment by a fine mist. "Goodbye," Emory said.

Inside the car, Willie switched on the ignition and ground the engine, but nothing happened. The cylinders cranked and whined and refused to catch. "Come on, Chief," Willie said, first looking ahead at the chrome Indian, then tapping his forehead on the steering wheel. "Come on, I don't need trouble from you."

"Some car," Kristen said.

Willie stopped, looked at her for an instant, and tried the ignition again. Nothing.

"I think your car has finally come home to rest," Kristen said, waving her arms at the junkyard.

"The problem is I want to go home and rest," Willie said. "Just leave it. You can walk me home and I'll get a car and drive you."

"I'm afraid if I leave it here, Emory'll have it stripped down for gold by morning," Willie said.

"No," she said. "Anybody can see there's no gold in this car." Kristen got out and started walking.

Together, they left Emory's place and struck out through the rain for Kristen's house. "I feel like a commando," Willie said. He looked back at the shop and saw Emory standing at the window, laughing, his arms braced on the sill above his head, as though he might be concealing a hammer, a huge dull sledge that had to be lifted with both hands and in a flash Emory's shoulders and back would double over and hammer the rain, seal off the way back to the car and the shop, the warm dry fire.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" Kristen asked, struggling against the wind.

"We just talked to one," Willie said.
"I think there are ghosts all around us," Kristen said. "See them? There, in those bushes. It's a big ghost in a black coat. He's smoking a cigarette in the rain and not getting wet. You see him?"

"Walk faster."

"I like the rain. I'm not cold anymore."

"Faster."

"There's another one. There, on the Janson's porch swing. This time it's a woman. She's wearing a long white dress and holding one of those big fans. Look! It's made out of pink ostrich feathers and now she's hiding her face behind it."

Soon, they were running, their feet clattering on the wet cement. The late summer trees bent low under the storm and when the rain eased up, there was only the sound of water dripping from leaf to leaf. When they reached Kristen's house, Willie would stand with her on the step. Maybe he would kiss her, or maybe just shake his head, say goodnight and leave. He didn't want her to drive him home. She'd given him enough already. A ride home was a little thing, compared with the rest, but you have to stop sooner or later. The wind was cold now, following after the rain, and Willie's clothes clung to him like slabs of mud.

"You never saw the ghosts, did you?" Kristen asked.

"Yes. I saw them."

"I wonder who they were."

"It doesn't matter. Once you're dead, it doesn't matter who you were. You can sit on a porch or smoke a dry cigarette in the rain and it doesn't make any difference at all who you are."

III.

It took a long time to walk six miles and even though the rain had stopped, the air hung about Willie's shoulders in a cold, sticky film. There were occasional gusts of wind that shredded the clouds, exposing the countryside to moonlight. Everything smelled cold and new, like fresh meat.

*You just as well laugh as cry*, Emory used to say and that seemed a reasonable way to look at things. Willie hadn't walked home since he was in school, one day after Miss Brunei told him about French influence in this part of Illinois, sitting saucily on the edge of her desk, speaking in that saucy little voice about Marquette, LaSalle, Joliet, seventeenth century explorers.

"I heard of Joliet," Skid Johnson said that day. "That's where the
Robert Sims Reid

state pen's at." Everybody laughed and Miss Brunel placed her right hand on the desk, locked the elbow and leaned on it. Willie's eyes traced the fine blue veins up toward her shoulder and when she reached across with the other hand and gently touched herself on the inside of her arm, Willie rubbed a thumb over his own calloused fingers and tried to imagine skin that soft, skin that ready to move.

"You can also see the French influence in one of the place names around Exeter," Miss Brunel said. "It's the creek. Mauvaisterre Creek." She pronounced it Movay-tare, saying the r real funny, like something struck in the back of her throat.

"I told her star," Willie said now, Movis-star, sounding out the name like he'd always heard it spoken. He smelled of dirt and sweat that afternoon in Miss Brunel's class, recognized his own smell against the sweet air filtering through the tulip tree alongside the window.

"When translated," Miss Brunel said. "Mauvaisterre means bad earth, or sick ground. I can't imagine why, though. Everything around here is so lush. I'm really taken by your beautiful farms and woods and everything. Maybe the English knew something when they corrupted the word into star."

Saucy St. Louis woman, she didn't know anything. Willie walked faster, drawing near the Crawford place. The moonlight was steady now and ahead he could see where the country dropped off and began to roll down toward the creek. White heavy mist gathered in the hollows and you couldn't know from here how rough the land was. The mist gleamed like a white carpet and it looked as though the level ground went on forever and you could walk all night and never find that muddy ditch called Mauvaisterre. You might hear the water spill over an occasional stone, but it would be far below you as you stepped easily atop the clean mist.

Walking past the dark Crawford house, Willie again heard Darrall's crutches complain as he climbed to his feet that afternoon with Miss Brunel. Willie was at her desk. "I didn't mean to be smart," he said.

"It doesn't matter what your intentions were," voice the only cool thing in the room.

"I want to learn, but there's things I know about already, like that creek. Things I've got to get out."

"Not at my expense."

"Come on, Willie," Darrall said from the door. "You can walk it
maybe, but I can't." He thumped the rubber tip of a crutch on the floor. "Let's go. We'll miss the bus."

"You're from the city," Willie told her. And here he was, all grown up now and still talking to a saucy St. Louis woman on a dark road. The Crawford house seemed to groan at the moon as he went by. Old Lady Crawford stood one morning years ago on the porch, wailing Darrall's two wooden crutches at him, screaming, you git, Digger Hardwick, git, Darrall's gone for good now and you never come back, never if your life depended on it set foot on this property, we'll bury our own. We don't need you. And through the rain-streaked sky, Willie could still see the big white Buick that Marlene, Darrall's mother, had driven down from Chicago. The Buick was blotched with dust and sat under a tree, looking rich and sad, out of place on that good, level farm.

Well, Miss Brunel had run off with some stringer on the stockcar racing circuit and Marlene went back to Chicago and Willie had his own saucy woman now. God knows what you do with a woman like that, Kristen wasn't the kind you could ignore. The mist was closer now and the road began to drop off slightly. He should have taken the ride she offered, suddenly finding himself hip-deep in mist, each step submerging him more into the white darkness. He could barely make out the savage oaks along the road, and not at all the thickets. Nothing sounded alive, no animals darted through the brush, and soon the iron bones of Pulling's Bridge surprised him out of the bright fog. His steps boomed on the thick, warped planks. Burl waited on the other side, waited alone in the old house, probably dreaming up some new scheme to give Willie another pain in the butt. Not that he needed anything new for that. Willie stopped, and in the stillness, he heard the creek.

Willie couldn't count the times he'd seen the water under this bridge. He sat and dangled his feet over the edge of the planks and looked down. A giant, white pit opened below him and the water could have been a few inches or miles away. Nobody could find you in weather like this. Bucket Hawkins couldn't find you and drive you crazy. The ghost of Darrall Crawford couldn't find you. Sally Quinlin couldn't put you in jail or pull a gun on you. And Burl couldn't eat away at you with anymore of those stories. You could rest here for centuries and get rock solid drunk on the weather and the sound of water unseen, unviolated as it slipped past under the white sheet of fog.
Gone.
The white sheet tipped it. That was one of the old man’s stories and as Willie sat on the bridge, it was as though the creek recited it back to him.

*  *  *

It was terrible dry ten years ago and Willie had been walking in the dust along the road and his stomach still churned from the trouble with Miss Brunel. Willie rounded the last curve and sat down at the end of the row of spirea bushes and put his shoes and socks back on. He watched Burl moving in and out of the barn. He watched the house, two stories of clapboard, long front room on the ground floor made of logs, old, veneered over, hill steepening toward the barn. The old man worked in and out of the barn that pitched awkwardly toward the Mauvaisterre and, depending on how you looked at it, the ridge dropped more under the weight of the barn, or the barn conformed to the shape of the land. The old man was latching up the long sliding door on the barn and that was good. Willie didn’t like chores, though he had learned to bear them, learned that you put your mind to something else, pretend it’s a famous cowboy stumbling against the bulk of hay bales, and you’re not stumbling at all, you’re swaggering. You make the hogs an invading army and pick them off one by one with grenades, ears of corn. The old man couldn’t know the rules of pretend. A woman might understand how the rules worked, but there hadn’t been a woman at the house for a long time now. Sometimes you worry about no woman and how things got that way. And you worry that fourteen is too old for games, anyhow.

The poppies were matted on the ground this time of year and Willie could see the stones, some an off-white, some nearly brown, splashed across the hill. The stones weren’t organized in any particular way. It was as though the graveyard started by accident, by surprise, like the Hardwicks had carried their dead up the hill until they got tired, set the coffin down and dug a hole on the spot. That was how he and Burl buried Sarah, his grandmother, at least as far as he could remember. He often set little traps for the details of that lost time, as if they could be captured like a fox and, once captured, killed and mounted and studied, maybe never understood, but at least brought to earth and touched. Things like that, though, you have to close on from downwind and sometimes it took a long time and sometimes it didn’t
work out at all. Willie got up and trotted down to meet the old man. “Sorry I'm late,” Willie said.

“No you're not. No sense adding a lie to it.” Burl didn't look at him. A frog croaked from the mud along the creek and Burl pulled off his yellow cotton gloves and stuck them inside his shirt. He rolled down his sleeves over white, stringy arms and walked away, swinging red bony hands loosely at the ends of his plaid shirt, his pants cuffs dragging the ground.

“Missed the bus,” Willie said.

“You're all the help I got,” Burl said. “If you can't hold up to that, it's OK by me.”

Willie shook his head. That's the way he works you. Makes like he doesn't care a damn. Sneaks up on you like that.

Burl stopped halfway to the house and sat on the well-top. He pulled off his cap and worked the pump handle a long time until he got water. Then, he stuck his white, bald head under the spigot and let the water spill over him. And, as he pumped with one hand, he rubbed the other against his face, blowing loudly to keep the water out of his nose. The old, loose skin bunched up at the leading edge of his hand. Finally, he stopped and sat up and looked at the boy. Water trickled from his stubbled chin in a lean, gray thread and splattered on his shirt front.

“They was this fella once,” Burl Hardwick said. “This was way back after the Great War in France, back when Emory was still to home.” Burl slumped back against the cast iron pump. That's always the answer. You tell a story. If this man, this old man with bad teeth that never smile, old fool too closed off from everybody even to be labeled criminal, when the crime had been not alone against his dead wife, but against a boy who still had to be around other people, if this old man had been Noah, the whole world would have sunk then and there because he took time out to tell the animals a story about another rain storm he'd seen years earlier. Emory, he'd said. The name sounded hollow and dry rolling off his grandfather's tongue.

“They was this fella,” Burl Hardwick said again. He cocked his head, as though listening for something far off. “Dave Kinison hired him off the road to work around the place.”

Willie crouched in the dust. He could run away and hide out in the brush until after dark, when the old man would maybe be too tired or have forgotten. He could draw figures with his fingers in the yellow dust, make up a game in his head. He could do anything. Willie sat in
the dust and watched the old man's mouth move. Emory. That was the barb on the hook.

Dave Kinison's family'd been around here almost as long as ours and they lived out on the flat about halfway between Old Lady Crawford's and town. Dave had a sister that married and moved away and him and the wife and daughter lived alone on the place. Cora, the wife, always seemed a cold woman, but she was a few years older than me and I never knew her more than to wave when I went by. The little girl was named Beatrice, about fourteen or fifteen, and not at all like her mother.

This fella was named Ed Garvey and nobody thought much about it when Kinison hired him on. Garvey was around town off and on for a couple of years and never got much except shoveling coal at the railway yards and sweeping out stores for whiskey money. It was Prohibition then, but Garvey always managed to turn a drink, as most of us did.

Dave Kinison finally took him on at wheat cutting time and I guess Garvey thought he'd at least get fed good, even if the work was harder than he was used to at the yards and everybody knew Kinison'd never allow him to lay up drunk on whiskey, which Garvey was prone to do. Seemed he had it pretty good as it was, so the town never understood why he'd want to move out to Kinison's, even for meals. She couldn't of been that good at the stove and like I said, there wasn't much else in her.

This happened in 1921 and those had been in France were of course home, but everybody was still kind of edgy having them around. I mean, we were glad they was back, and they were glad, too, but there was something different about them even then, like they'd been made a different shape and wouldn't quite fit back into the way the rest of us was. And, of course, some didn't come back, which made for a strain with their folks. We all understood — but what can you do? — so we kept up with being glad the war was over. And, I suppose most of us was.

Anyhow, Dave Kinison had this Garvey working for him that summer and one Friday I was down to the courthouse about the taxes or something and Kinison comes in dragging Garvey by his shirt collar and carrying two jars of bootleg whiskey under his arm. Kinison hauls his load into the Sheriff's Office and says, I've caught
this man drinking in my barn and I want him in jail.

Henry Evans was Sheriff during that time and he says, Well, Dave, I'll do that, but it'd help if we knew where the whiskey come from.

Kinison says he don't know and don't care, all he wants is Ed Garvey behind bars and out of his hair. That's what Henry Evans does and Kinison takes off for home like there was a wild animal after him.

This was in July and the jail then was a cell in the Sheriff's Office in the basement of the courthouse, like it is now still. Henry Evans locks old Garvey up and says, Well, looks like there'll have to be a trial and I'm sorry for it. I still take a drink myself just like most men, except I suppose Dave Kinison. Then, he locks them two jars of whiskey up in the safe for evidence.

What we ought to do, I says, is drink that whiskey and to hell with Dave Kinison.

Henry Evans laughs and says, That's right, and then Garvey laughs too and says, You know, that man found me in a whorehouse up in Peoria three years ago and told me he'd pay me a thousand dollars to go in the army for him.

All of a sudden me and Henry Evans wasn't laughing anymore and Garvey just hung there from the inside of the bars, shaking his head like he can't either believe what he's just told us, then laughing like a man who's just fired his last bullet at a wolf on a dark night. I told him, Garvey says, that's a lot of money, but he don't care, he tells me, because he's got a farm he's getting rich off of from the war and a little girl and he can't afford to take off for no Goddamned army and would I go for a thousand dollars.

I ask him if he went.

Sure I went, Garvey says, spent part of the money for another turn that very same night. Garvey laughs again, then says, You know, I still would like to get used to brocade walls and gentle ladies. But that Cora Kinison's a hard woman and I run out of money before I ever got to France. That's how come me to be here in Exeter. He winks, then says, You know, Kinison don't like having me around a little bit. Garvey scratches his head and goes and sits on the bunk.

Well, Garvey cools his heels in jail that weekend and when Henry Evans opens the safe on Monday morning, there's nothing left of the evidence but pieces of broken glass. I figure that whiskey was a little green and it got so hot in that safe it blew up before Ed Garvey or me or Henry Evans got a chance to try and kill ourselves with it. There
was nothing left but to turn Garvey out and that's exactly what Henry Evans did.

Garvey went back to work for Kinison and it weren't a week before Kinison's little girl was found violated and drowned in a stock tank. Garvey was the one discovered little Beatrice and he was in big trouble from the start.

Me and Emory went to town as soon as we heard and there was a big crowd of men at the jail. Kinison and his wife were staying over at the Hotel, people said because they were too broke up to handle going back to their farm for a few days, and Henry Evans had plenty on his hands trying to keep everybody calm down to the jail. You could of lit a match just holding it up to the air.

James G. Goreman, who was a lawyer and Samuel Goreman's father, was there, dressed in a light tweed suit with a vest and a heavy gold watch chain and fob that shimmered and caught the light and the heat as he stood on the basement step of the courthouse and held up his arms at the crowd.

Men, James G. Goreman says, I know there has been a terrible outrage and we all want justice for that little girl who met with such a terrible end. Many of us here were told as children about popular justice at the hands of those who settled this town. Men, I know we want that kind of justice, but that was before the law. That time is past.

Goreman took off his hat and held it behind his back. Men, he says, we all live under the law and the law is a patient thing. The man inside this jail will get no less than his kind deserve if only we are patient with the law.

Now, Goreman and Kinison were pals and this kind of talk coming from Goreman took a strong hold of people. If Goreman could wait out the law in the course of justice for his friend's daughter, then I guess most of the men at the jail felt they could too, because they settled down. Some even went home. Me and Emory stayed and waited to see what else might happen. Goreman left, too, and when he walked by us, Emory stands up and tells him that was a good speech.

Thank you, James G. Goreman says.

Yes sir, Emory says, a real fine speech.

Thank you, Goreman says again, then, Please excuse me. I must go to the hotel and see how the Kinisons are bearing up. This has been a terrible tragedy for them.

It surely has, Emory says and sits down again.
I was keeping track of time by the clock on top of the courthouse and about seven that evening some of the wives brought baskets of food down to their men and the men shared it with those of us didn't have any. We sat there on the grass and ate and smoked and talked and now and again there'd be a car go by making a lot of noise and some of the men would stand up and shout something about what had happened, what was going on there at the jail, or maybe calling out to ask if the folks had heard any news of the Kinisons from the hotel. When that happened, Henry Evans's face would show up inside the jailhouse window, checking to make sure nothing was getting stirred up. I expect poor Henry was pretty shaky in them hours, with all of us outside and him in there with a man supposed to be a killer, a man me and Henry'd almost shared a drink with right there in the jail just a few days before all of this.

Later on it got dusk and me and Emory was still sitting close-by the street, so I guess maybe we was the first ones heard it. At first I thought it was something funny with the sun going down, then I see this light flickering not like the sun at all along the side wall of the bank.

I stand up and so does Emory and then the cars, four of them, swing out of the alley and I see they're full of men and more men hanging on the fenders. They're all wearing sheets and hoods and that funny light's coming from torches.

We better clear out, I says to Emory.

No, he says and pulls a handkerchief out and mops away the sweat along the back of his neck. No. His voice has a kind of catch in it. We can't go now, he says and his feet sort of move around inside his tracks.

All four cars pulled over to the curb and the men climbed down. I'd heard talk they was working in the County and I should of been ready for them — but how can you? I remember there was a sticky breeze got up at sundown and the sheets clung to the fronts of the men when they walked through the crowd up to the jail and the torchlight played across everybody's faces.

Pretty quick everybody got loud and one of the covered-up things threw a torch inside the jail and I could see Henry Evans trying to put the fire out. That was when they broke down the door. I heard shouting from inside and shortly they come out with Garvey and start off on foot down Prairie Street toward the park, moving right past me, jostling me around. But I stayed put. I was the last living man.
there at the jail, for it turned out Henry Evans had got killed, got his head smashed on the bars when they busted through the door and somebody kicked him in the ribs and threw him out of the way. I saw it all.

There was never no public evidence against Garvey that I heard of. I remember looking over at the hotel while all this was going on and I see a shadow standing in one of the windows. And I remember one of them Kluxers brushing past me on tweed legs and black shoes about as shiny as that gold watch, so shiny you could count the torches in them.

I stand there awhile and the noise is carried back heavy on the wind and the close air. Pretty soon it gets too quiet and I know they’re done. I look down and there’s Emory’s sweat-stained handkerchief spread out all white there on the grass. The shadow’s gone from the window and a few days later Dave Kinison ups and shoots himself in the head. His wife moves off shortly after that and just leaves the farm for whoever wants it. But nobody does. Who would. You’ve seen it. Would you want that farm?

* * *

Shortly after the lynching somebody burned down the Kinison house and all the outbuildings. Willie sat swinging his feet over the edge of the bridge and stared off into the fog. The only thing left of the Kinison place was a grove of maples that sat now in the middle of a field and weeds grew thick around the trees so that you had to walk out into them before you could see the caved-in brick walls of the basement. And if you explored that ruined pit you might find warped pieces of metal, like a fork or a spoon, other utensils, or a shard of broken glass, maybe brass hardware that had the woodwork burned off.

The Hardwick place was about three hundred yards on past the bridge. Willie could cover that distance in a short time and when he went inside, the old man would be waiting under a single lamp, still sitting there in his work clothes, older than when he’d told the Ed Garvey story, harder, mouth pinched, expectant, his eyes less patient these days. His fingers would be laced in rough ridges across his stomach, looking tough, scarred, like a field you’ve planted when the ground’s too wet and you know the seed will rot, crop turn out bad,
but still a crop. Burl would turn when he heard the door and this time the mouth would smile in a funny way as he asked, "Where you been?" and smile wider still when Willie is unable to answer.

_from Mauvaisterre_