Crazy in Heaven

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The University of Montana

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CRAZY IN HEAVEN

By

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B.A., University of Montana, 1969

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I remember the morning Uncle Moss Reed was buried and how Papa kicked me that same day and dislodged my right kneecap. The knee has caused me pain for well over half a century now, since it didn't ever set right, but I never once blamed Papa for it.

The Nebraska Reeds, like Mama and Uncle Moss, were stout people with leathery skin and hard features. Even on the few occasions when they left their small farms--mainly for weddings and funerals--chunks of land went with them under coarse fingernails and on boot heels. Mama said the only tender part of a Reed was his heart, and I thought she was surely right as we stood around the mud hole that became Moss Reed's grave.

I was not at all comfortable during the brief graveside service. A stiff downpour relaxed to a patient drizzle only as the last shrouds of mud fell with dull sloshing thuds over Uncle Moss. Rain seeped through my coat and shirt and made my back itch. My nose dripped from the piercing wind and I knew Mama wouldn't approve if I used the sleeve of my borrowed
white shirt, so I sniffed louder than most. But what
distressed me more than my physical discomfort, and confused
me too, was the way everyone was carrying on. Mama had told
me, after prayers, as she tucked a quilt under my chin the
night before, that it was sometimes a blessing when folks die.
I thought I understood what she meant then, for it eased my
own sorrow, but I could see no reason for the way even she
cried over this particular blessing. Everyone knew Uncle Moss
was crazy as a kootie--senile was the word Papa preferred--and
that is how he came to kick my kneecap loose.

While we were out laying Uncle Moss to rest, Aunt Littie,
who suffered severe rheumatism in wet weather, spent the
morning frying mounds of chicken and fixing green beans and
corn and potatoes with pan gravy for the family dinner after
the funeral. I took my place across the big oak table from
Papa, scarcely knowing how I would save room for Mama's ginger
cookies. While Papa was saying grace, thanking the Lord for
all our bountiful blessings, I got to thinking on what Mama
had told me; and before the last "Amen" was uttered, I
blurted out, "Papa, will Uncle Moss be crazy in heaven like
he was here?" Papa frowned and I felt his boot dig into my
knee. I knew he didn't intend it to be such a hard blow and
even when I felt my knee swelling like a mad Tom cat, I didn't
say a word about it to anybody. I never would have either,
except I couldn't get up from my chair after dinner. I
decided then I had more to learn about the nature of blessings, and left it at that.
It was one of those hot pepper Texas afternoons when I first saw Doc Tate. I sat on a bench in the shade of the north wing, listening to the metered creaking of the old wicker rocker against Julien's bulk. Julien dozed feverishly and the creaking stopped. I could smell liniment from my knee.

In the distance I saw a taxi rounding the long drive towards the main entrance of the Manor. Clouds of red dust swirled over the pavement in its wake. When it stopped, dust settled on the taxi, reflecting a rusty rainbow in scorching heat.

Julien's head bounced from his chest and the rocker squeaked again. "Mon Dieu--is hot one today," he muttered.

"It's warm," I agreed.

The rocker fell silent.

The driver got out of the cab first. He lifted his cap and wiped his forehead with one sweeping motion, then opened the back door for Doc, who rose slowly from the seat and stood for a moment squinting his eyes against the bright sun; while
a smiling attendant hurried down the walk to receive him into our "family."

What impressed me most about Doc then was a certain dignity in his manner. Perhaps it was just the way he held his head, but I knew this was a proud man and I could see he was not pleased with the attendant who grasped his arm and began leading him up the walk like a stray puppy.

As they passed closer to where I sat, I noticed the frown on Doc's face was not in harmony with the deep lines embedded there. The creases about his mouth seemed to have been formed by years of smiling, and his deep set eyes were clear and alert. I understood his disgust, for I have seen such expressions many times on new arrivals at the Manor. I must have appeared much the same myself when I came up that walk the first time. We all left many things. We came there with a multitude of memories and few expectations.

Doc's grey suit was wrinkled too, but not from long wear. A neatness in his dress let you know those creases only came with the hot taxi ride. He was not a heavy man, but he filled his suit with a frame suggesting great strength in younger days. It was his silver goatee that made me think of him then as an old southern gentleman, perhaps a colonel like you see in moving pictures, a stately fellow who might at one time have owned a genuine manor like Leisure Highlands imitates.

I did not know then what brought Doc to Leisure Highlands, but I noticed that even after several weeks he had not
established any kind of routine which most of us followed quite passively, if not comfortably. I often saw him in the garden where he chatted with other residents or sat alone writing notes on long yellow legal pads. I suspected he was jotting his memoirs; for old age is a contemplative time, a time to philosophize, and perhaps even to write books.

Doc was friendly and drew attention naturally when he entered a conversation. His sense of humor and wit allowed him to dominate any circle, and invariably led to stories told with enough bait of truth to lead us to believe he certainly had experienced them himself. Yet, he remained personally aloof, as guarded of details of his life as those notes he kept, and most folks eventually gave up trying to enlist his friendship. But I recognized a vitality that seemed bound within him, like a fine old timepiece only needing to be wound to revive its tenacity. I was even intrigued by that distant vitality and sought him out frequently. I had little idea then what fire smouldered in him until Julien LeBlanc, my former roommate, died in F-Wing late in May, and the Manor's director, Mr. Preston, suggested that I might share my apartment with Doc.
Of course, I was sorry to see Julien LeBlanc go, but I guess he wanted it that way. Fourteen years "in cold storage," as he put it, finally numbed the old Frenchman's will to live. He put up one last struggle, though I wish now that I might have done more to discourage it.

Julien's one interest in life was food. He had been a chef in several fine restaurants and spoke fondly of his special "veal chops superlative;" or "eggplant parmigiana," with extra mozzarella and only a hint of oregano. He talked of writing a book of his best recipes, though I don't believe he ever started it, and he severely criticized the food at the Manor while eating it ravenously.

Julien was slight of build, but could devour more at one sitting than any two working men I have ever known. He might have seemed a glutton, though he ate slowly and even savored each bite of food. Often he managed to procure a second, third or fourth dessert in return for small favors or in payment of poker debts.
One morning a notice appeared on the cafeteria wall concerning nutrition. It warned of cholesterol, high blood pressure, and too many sweets; and a note at the bottom prohibited "seconds" and further "exchanging or donating food portions among residents." Julien read the sign and his face contorted. He was fuming as I helped him up the stairs to Mr. Preston's office, and even during the hour's wait in the receptionist's room, his ire did not recede.

Mr. Preston allowed Julien to vent his anger, while nodding and smiling patiently from behind the huge polished mahogany desk. "Sure I understand your feelings, Mr. LeBlanc," he said after Julien's tirade had apparently ended. "We've noticed your hearty appetite and naturally we will continue every effort to maintain quality meals. But we have to consider the nutritional needs of our family as much as housing, medical and social aspects. You can understand that can't you?" He smiled expectantly at Julien and me.

I nodded and glanced at Julien who sat stiffly against the high backed wooden chair. Julien frowned and wiped his smooth head. "I understand this, a man must eat to live," he said.

"Certainly," Mr. Preston agreed. "But what a man eats is very important." He chuckled and added, "You know what they say, You are what you eat."
I smiled, a bit embarrassed by the imposition we might have been making on Mr. Preston's time. I thought it reasonable that diets be scrutinized, even at the risk of some dissatisfaction. Still, I knew what little pleasure remained in life for Julien centered around his meals. I hoped some exception might be made and I was glad Mr. Preston was willing to discuss the matter. He drew several papers from a desk drawer then leaned forward in his cushioned leather chair and held one of the papers for us to read; a chart entitled, "How to Meet Your Protein Needs." I tried to follow his brief explanation of amino acid patterns as he pointed to the various columns. I knew Julien wasn't following, for he couldn't read a word without his bifocals, and they remained in his vest pocket.

Mr. Preston continued his explanation with a second paper. I read the bold print of the first paragraph, "Reduce Your Risk of Heart Attack," while he talked of saturated fat and cholesterol. Then Julien interrupted, "I am ninety-two years now, Monsieur Preston. Two times your age. I know the cuisine. I never forget. Maybe, if I have the weight problem like you, I am more concerned."

Mr. Preston's smile dwindled and I noticed his effort to tighten his protruding stomach. He took a cigarette from a pack on the desk, lit it and leaned back in his chair. He drew heavily on the cigarette and smoke trailed each word he spoke. "Mr. LeBlanc, let's keep in mind that it's not my
health we're discussing. I have a job to do here and I do it to the best of my ability." He paused and his indignant tone shifted to the paced, cheerful loud voice in which he generally conversed with us. "I have recently hired a fine dietitian, at no small cost to our operation I might add, since your well-being is utmost in my mind. Reasonably, we must expect to..."

"Zut! Monsieur, send your dietitian to the park. He knows only how to feed birds!"

Mr. Preston puffed on his cigarette then smashed it in a crystal ashtray. He stood and planted his hands on the desk top. Grinning tauntly, he said, "I believe Mrs. Livingston has another appointment scheduled, Gentlemen, if you'll pardon me. But please keep in mind that we all give up a bit of our independence in order to get along in community. Our family here must have certain rules, as any other family, and we must expect to abide by them."

Julien was already shuffling toward the door. I nodded at Mr. Preston and followed Julien out of the office.

Now the one thing Julien LeBlanc wouldn't allow in his life was a reduction in the quantity of his food, though he had reluctantly made concessions on quality. After our conversation with Mr. Preston, a plan came to Julien's mind for coping with the new situation; and he pursued it in spite of Manor rules against cooking in individual apartments. After
a few trips to town, he had a stock of delicacies planted about our apartment that would tingle the palate of any gourmet. Next he brought in a hotplate; then two large shiny pans, which, he explained with some pride in a muted voice, he had procured from under the very noses of two kitchen aides. I was apprehensive. Julien was determined.

One day he returned to the apartment with a package wrapped in butcher paper. Final preparations were intact and his eyes beamed with excitement. At dinner that evening, Julien complained, but ate vigorously as usual. We hurried back to the apartment.

I sat at our corner desk and watched as old Julien moved nimbly about the room, flinging open drawers to produce onions, flour and parsley. From the bureau cupboard came rice, tomatoes and cooking oil. Julien removed his coat and vest, rolled up his sleeves, then paused with dignity at our little table. It might have been a great wooden counter of a fine kitchen, transformed by his very presence. "Monsieur," he said with pomp, "I shall prepare Liver A La Creole. A simple entree, but under the circumstances...you understand. Tomorrow, maybe I do better."

It was a delight to see Julien work. Each ingredient became special even as he sliced and poured with elegant flair. Oil sizzled in a pan. "First I saute the onions," he said, "but lightly." A sharp aroma filtered through the room.
In the other he poured rice in boiling water. After a few minutes he stirred flour into the onions, added dashes of salt and pepper, slices of tomato, and vinegar. I watched his quick, deliberate movements and noted he too was transformed, from the tired, cranky glutton to a culinary master. Life boiled in him.

"Julien," I asked as the thought suddenly came, "have you ever considered volunteering your help in the kitchen?"

He laughed but his eyes didn't shift from the pan. His arm moved in smooth circular rhythm while he stirred. "Oui, oui. Many years ago I had such a notion. But of course, Monsieur Preston would not hear of it."

"But why? I think you could do wonders there."

"That is no doubt," he scoffed, "it would not require much."

"Well, I've a mind to suggest it to Mr. Preston myself."

He glanced at me, his brow furrowed. The stirring ceased for a moment, then his arm worked its rhythm again. "I do not wish to discuss a matter with Monsieur Preston ever again."

"But it seems like such a waste, a talent like yours."

"Mon Dieu, who is not wasting while living here? Have I not seen garments Madame Redmond has created? And was not Monsieur Davis a cabinet maker extrodinaire? They are lost, such craftsmen."
"That's just it. It would be a fine thing for those people to contribute; you could be most useful here, I should think, all of you."

"And have you volunteered your services, mon ami?"

"Well, no I haven't. But I'm not talented like you and Paul Davis. I'm afraid there's not a creative niche in me."

"Un moment, Monsieur. You have managed the grand business store. You know the buying of products, the way to handle much money."

"Of course, but..."

"But you could not help here, even with the orders of soap for our rooms!" The spoon scraped against a pan. "We are ancients, too old to be of service, even to ourselves. Besides, others are well paid to do what we no longer do for ourselves. But of course, you know that Mrs. Livingston in the office is sister-in-law to Monsieur Preston."

I said, "No. I didn't know that."

"Ah oui. And this man who manages in the kitchen, one who I think never prepared a meal in his whole life. A friend to Mr. Preston in the university--Maurice told me. You ask him yourself. Maurice hears their talk while he is washing the dishes."

"Well, I suppose it's not unnatural to hire people you know. Sometimes that is good business if they can do the job."

"Oui, oui, if they know the work. These people--what do they know?" Julien waved the spoon as he spoke. "This
dietitian—a cousin perhaps, another friend. The roast beef tonight, you think I cannot taste its age?"

I considered what Julien told me, but complaints were commonplace with him and I had learned to regard them with skepticism.

He sampled the rice. "Bon, now I must begin the liver." He opened the brown package, then carefully placed slices of liver in the sauce. "It must cook gently."

Pungent odors filled the room. Julien turned to the small sink near the window to wash.

I said, "Julien, you resent being here, don't you."

He shook his knotted hands. Water dripped into the basin. "No more. Once I do, but no more."

"Why didn't you leave?"

"This is my home," he said wistfully, reaching for a towel. "They have all died, my family, my friends. I am too old, I know. When I begin to faint, sometimes I wish I will not wake up again. But always I wake and they have brought me to my bed. I would be very much afraid if I did not wake up in my bed." Julien draped the towel over his shoulder and moved toward the steaming pans. His hands glided into motion again. "But let us speak of more pleasant things. The table must be ready. Such cuisine will not hold for a lazy waiter." He snapped his fingers in mock command. "Garson!"
Just then the door flew open and Cynthia, our night attendant on D-Wing, charged into the room with a fire extinguisher poised for action.

"What's burning!" she shouted.

Julien stepped to conceal his makeshift kitchen. "Nothing burns," he said indignantly.

But it was too late. Cynthia shoved him aside frantically and aimed. Foam gushed into pans and sizzled over the hotplate until I could see nothing of the whole table top. Bellowing mounds of brown suds flowed to the floor.

I was stunned. Everywhere Cynthia turned foam spewed in her wake.

"Help me shut this damn thing off!" she screamed.

"Squeeze the hose!" I shouted, "squeeze the hose!"

Brown blotches clung about the ceiling and walls and still the lather spurted.

Julien backed into a corner, dancing from foot to foot to avoid the sudsing barrage. I started for the extinguisher but my feet slid over the oozing floor. My whole body rattled as I landed square on my sitter. Frenzied Cynthia clung to the extinguisher with one hand and flailed at the nozzle with the other. I scrambled to my feet again and made a dive for the hose. Cynthia turned, backed over a chair and sent a geyser to the ceiling. While she floundered to regain her balance, I ducked one round of surging froth. The next one
caught me in the face. I struggled to clear my eyes while Cynthia swore and sprayed stifling foam in every direction.

At last the storm ceased. I groped to the sink and splashed cold water over my face and wiped my eyes. All about us foam melted to brown puddles. It dripped from the ceiling and slid down walls like molasses. Curtains hung in matted clumps. Furniture lay shambled in the mire.

Cynthia slid her fingers over her snarled, drenched hair. Her uniform hung limp and stained. She glared at us and planted her hands on her wide hips. Julien leaned against the bureau with one fist gripping the coiled neck of the extinguisher hose. No one spoke, and only the hotplate burners hissed at the silence.

Then I saw Julien's knees starting to buckle. His face drained as it always did when he was about to faint. "Mon Dieu," he said weakly. His eyelids dropped. Cynthia grabbed the hose and the metal extinguisher clanked against the floor as she stomped from the room. I caught Julien before he hit the floor and dragged him to his bed.

I expected a visit from Mr. Preston shortly and waited in anticipation. Attendants came. They scoured our apartment, replaced furniture and curtains; confiscated food, pans and hotplate, and left.

"Do you think there will be trouble?" I asked Julien, who awakened from the faint in seemingly good health. "We'll offer to pay for the damages, of course."
There was no visit from Mr. Preston that evening.

The following morning Julien slept late. I looked in on him several times and he seemed to be resting comfortably. I was anxious to talk to Mr. Preston first, to apologize for the incident and explain how it had come about. I was also hoping we might do something for Julien, for I knew his pride had suffered.

Mrs. Livingston peered at me over her glasses when I walked into the office. She ushered me directly to the inner office where Mr. Preston greeted me cheerfully.

"I rather expected you," he said as I took a chair near the big mahogany desk. "Cynthia tells me you had quite a little party last evening."

"I have been to better ones," I said.

He laughed and slid open a drawer in the desk. He drew out a bottle of Scotch and two glasses. "You will have a drink?"

"Oh, no thank you, Mr. Preston. It's a bit early for me."
"Well, I usually just keep this on hand for visitors, but I think I'll have a small one anyway." He filled a glass, took a drink and leaned back in his chair.

I said, "I am sorry for the trouble. It is against Manor policy to cook, but..."

"But Mr. LeBlanc was angry and decided he couldn't get by on just three full meals a day."

"Well, yes, but that's the problem. You know how Julien feels about food. It is really his only interest. If you could have just seen him working—it was a joy to watch, Mr. Preston, a real joy."

He sighed and took another drink. "I know Mr. LeBlanc. He's been with our family a long time. This isn't the first problem we've had with him, you understand, and you saw what happens when I try to reason with him." He set the glass on the desk, lit a cigarette, puffed once then dropped it to the ashtray. "My job is to serve the needs of everyone here at the Manor. I certainly don't wish to make things difficult by depriving anyone of their particular pleasures."

"No, I didn't mean to insinuate that."

"However," he continued, "there are times when personal interests conflict with group interests. I have to look at the total program. That may not mean a great deal to you, but keep in mind that you are probably only seeing one side of the picture."
"Yes," I agreed, "I suppose I am. And I realize you have many personalities to consider. But I had thought that it would help Julien if he had more to do. Perhaps he could help out around the kitchen once in a while. I think it would do him a world of good."

"Out of the question," Mr. Preston said flatly. "It would be a danger to his health and dangerous to others on the staff. You know how his fainting spells come on."

"Couldn't he just advise maybe--suggest recipes or something."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't work out. Really, I know how you feel, but I have hired the best help I can gather. How do you think they would take to someone looking over their shoulders, especially someone with Mr. LeBlanc's temperment."

"I just wish we could do something."

"There is something you can do. You're his friend. Maybe you can make him understand the importance of balanced eating. And please, don't let him carry out another cooking spree. He might really have started a fire you know. There was enough damage as it was."

I shifted in my chair. "I was going to speak to you about that. I'll be happy to pay damages, certainly. It was partly my fault."

He smiled. "Yes, thank you. I was sure you'd be reasonable, but it will be taken care of."
"Insurance?"

"Not exactly," he said. He got up, went to a large window and drew the heavy red drapes aside. Sunlight beamed through the office and I had to turn as its glare met my eyes. He continued, "Several years ago a policy was established to cover such problems. It's no reflection on you, of course, but there have been times when residents have not been willing to meet some rather costly infractions. It's a formality really. The finance office will simply handle your social security checks, temporarily you understand, until the repayment has been made. That seems fair enough, doesn't it?"

I was not pleased with the arrangement, not that I wouldn't have gladly paid for all damages, as I said. It occurred to me that it was, in fact, Cynthia who wielded the weapon of destruction. Nevertheless, we were in the wrong, and years of business training had taught me the necessity of procedure.

I said, "I imagine that will be alright, if it's policy."

"Good. Then it's all settled. I do appreciate your concern and cooperation."

I returned to the apartment Julien was out. I waited, for I wished to talk with him before going out for my morning walk. A few minutes later he shuffled into the room, went directly to his bed and lay down. He didn't respond to my greeting.
"How are you feeling this morning, Julien?" I asked again.

He did not answer.

"Julien?"

"Do not worry, mon ami," he said quietly. "I am not sick."

I slid a chair beside the bed and sat down. His color seemed good, but his withered face was drawn. I realized he hadn't put in his false teeth and I was alarmed, for it was well past the breakfast hour, and I had never known Julien to miss a meal.

I asked, "Where have you been?"

Again there was no response. I nudged him.

"Mon ami," he said and his thin lips smacked, "I am going to die."

"You are sick. I'll get a doctor."

His hand grasped my arm. "No. No doctor, please. I want to tell you..." His voice was dry, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. He hesitated, then continued. "Last night I don't sleep. I think--Julien, you have a good life, but too long. Too long." He turned his head to look at me. "Please, do not let me trouble you, mon ami. It is better this way. I am not dying now. It will take a few days, perhaps longer."

"Julien, listen to me..."

"No. Julien will not listen any more. I am no good here. I will be more happy soon. You are good to me, mon ami."
Julien's eyes fixed on the ceiling again. He loosed his grip on my arm and his hand slid to his side. His breathing seemed steady but he neither moved nor spoke. I got up and rushed out the door where I met Mr. Preston coming down the hall.

"Julien is sick," I said. "Call a doctor. Hurry!"
"I'd better have a look," he said.
"Yes, you stay with him--I'll get help."
Mr. Preston tugged at my sleeve. "Just hold on now. Let's check on him first."

Reluctantly I followed him back into the apartment. Julien didn't move but to breathe and blink his eyes. Mr. Preston felt Julien's pulse, then motioned me toward the hall. He closed the door behind us.

"Did you talk to him before I came?" he asked.
"Yes," I said anxiously. "We talked for a few minutes."
"Then he told you."
"Told me what?"
"About coming to my office."
"No. He didn't mention it."
Mr. Preston nodded. "I see."

"Look, Mr. Preston, I don't know what this is all about but I'm going to get a doctor now." I turned and started down the hall, but he held me back.

"Hold on just a minute. I don't think your friend is sick at all. I was just on my way here to talk to him."
"You saw him," I argued.

"Yes. He looks quite healthy. Breathing normal, pulse good. But we do have a problem...I was trying to tell you that he came to my office right after you left. He was all in a huff--said he wasn't going to eat any more. He left his teeth."

"He what?" I said in astonishment.

"He left them...on my desk."

All the day I sat by Julien's bed. I coaxed him, I begged him, to give up his resolution, but he scarcely acknowledged my presence. That evening he was wheeled off to F-Wing for special care, and I waited in anguish but a week for the inevitable news that Julien had passed on.

I was appalled by the whole affair and angered by it, yet somehow a feeling of guilt hung over me like a fog. I could not decide whether to blame Julien's foolishness, Mr. Preston's stubbornness, or my own inability to console a friend. I was deeply grieved.

After the funeral I put Julien from my mind as best I could and determined to do better by my new roommate, Doc Tate.
Now the grounds of the Leisure Highlands Senior Citizen's Manor are spacious and dotted with lovely gardens. The structure is attractive. The facilities are modern. All that is true, as the brochure says.

I remember looking over one brochure with my own daughters and thinking how it seemed like quite as good a place as any to go to die, while I tried to let on that I was even eager to find peace in my latter years among others my age. I believe they might have felt the sadness too, but I knew I was a burden to their husbands and as I was shuffled between households, I felt their subtle anxiety and the rebuked embarrassment of my grandchildren. Finally, I convinced myself that if life was finished with me, I might as well go out gracefully in the luxury of Leisure Highlands, with a minimum of inconvenience to my children.

Those first weeks at the Manor were difficult for me. I took long walks in the garden. I learned to play shuffleboard and I pitched horse shoes. But it all seemed like such a
blamed waste of time; and I had to keep reminding myself that wasting time, was indeed, the object of the whole business. I took only one cigar in the lobby after dinner, as Dr. Jameson recommended, and I tried my damndest to be drousy by nine-thirty. I even let Cynthia coddle me and tried to appreciate it.

I was determined to adjust, for I know old age is not easy for anyone. One day it is upon us--when a man retires, after a woman's husband dies- I only counted my blessings that my health was good and that my finances allowed me at least a place of comfort where I could find some company in the lonely hours.

And while most of us felt somewhat contented at the Manor, Doc Tate did not share that attitude. He seemed capable enough of existing in this environment, though he would not accept the finality of it. He was always restless and I knew even then that at least his mind would never be trapped by physical confines. But I enjoyed his feisty nature and before a month had passed, I felt Doc and I had become friends.

Still, I had learned little about him, for he rarely talked of personal matters. Rumors blossom quickly at the Manor, and because Doc remained apart and did nothing to refute them, rumors of him mushroomed. Subtle suggestions which create an aura of mystery purported easily to near legend from those irrefutable sources, "They say." What they said
most often because it seemed general knowledge, was that he had been a successful surgeon in Sacramento, I don't know why. Another assumed he had accrued some wealth, probably because he could afford the sixty dollars a day to be in our company at the Manor. And he had said in introduction, "You can just call me Doc." No family had come to visit him during his tenure at the Manor. But the most mysterious matter they said, had to do with his forced retirement and some business involving the death of his own wife. Relayed details scaled from pathetic to sordid.

Other stories grew about Doc but I put little stock in them. I had no reason to pry into his affairs, considering they may have been more painful to him than my own were to me. I'll admit I was curious, but Doc had never given me cause to believe anything but the best of him. My own spirits rarely fell during the weeks I roomed with him, for he was easy with light conversation and I enjoyed his ready wit for story telling.

Now I will not maintain that I am adept at sizing up another person. I only try to learn what I can from others and leave judgment to the Good Lord, as He wills it. My first wife, Jennifer, the mother of my daughters, taught me that lesson, as she taught me so much else.

We knew hard years on our Nebraska farm, though I remember them with deep fondness. Papa could neither read nor
write, and he determined that his only son would have an education. I loved the farm, but considered it a privilege to take my studies, so I threw myself into the labors of both with diligence. When I finished high school, Papa hired Jennifer to tutor me two evenings a week so I could continue my education and still help in the fields. She was but three years my senior, a lovely lass with healthy rose cheeks and a broad smile. We took naturally to exploring more than literature on those warm summer evenings and after fall harvest, we married.

Now Jennifer had some money saved and preferred town life in Kearney to our rustic farm. I left home with a lump in my throat; that place and those close knit folks had been all my life. Tears welled in Mama's eyes, Aunt Littie kissed me and cuffed my ear as she always did to show affection, and Papa gripped my hand firmly. His lips trembled, but when he winked at me I felt I had his blessing--it even occurred to me that he might have planned it all, right from the start when he hired Jennifer as my tutor.

That was when I became the proprietor of the Kearney Mercantile. Unfortunately, I learned the realities of business the hard way. I was too free with credit and unskilled at ordering merchandise. I hired a young helper named Albert Findley who convinced me he knew the trade. As it turned out, Albert's brother made a grand haul on an assortment of
worthless hardware we purchased over the months, and Albert made his own haul from my safe one night and I never saw him again. I could not meet my mortgage and was forced to give over the business. We lost everything, a loss Jennifer took in stride, however. She encouraged me to seek employment with the Pennworth Co., a retail clothing firm where I began, with some shock to my pride, as a stockboy. That position, I realize now, was somewhat better suited to my business sense at the time. But Jennifer would not allow me to begrudge Albert Findley. "His just reward will come at the hands of his maker," she said, and I believed her. Indeed, it was her savings I had lost while she maintained complete confidence in me. A year into marriage, we owned less than we had started with and our first child was on the way.

Jennifer's infinite patience always amazed me though. During that summer she gave me lessons, I often picked bouquets of daisies for her. Sometimes I gave her roses when I could save enough to buy them. I didn't learn until our wedding night of her allergies. She had red spots the width of her back, merely from holding her bridal bouquet those few minutes. I cannot put a flower on Jennifer's grave to this day, though she has been gone over forty years.

But such reminiscence, though a comfort to my old mind, is perhaps too distant from my purpose. I should tell you how it came about that Doc and I set off on our adventure.
Cynthia finally ceased her senseless chatter and shut the door behind her after evening rounds. Doc flung his bed covers aside and fairly dove to the bureau where he always kept a pint of good bourbon stashed. Liquor was forbidden except in the south lounge, but Doc paid little heed to such matters. He never took more than a small glass in the evening. "Good for the circulation," he said. I generally took a nip with him, figuring my own system could use the help.

I shuffled our playing cards hoping a diversion might ease the wild moodiness that had been about Doc the whole day. "Double solitaire?" I asked.

"Why not," he muttered.

I dealt the cards while he brought glasses and set them on the table along with the bottle. "Pour me a healthy shot," he said, "I'm going to let some air in here. Such a muggy night."

He pulled the curtains aside and opened the window. Breathing heavily, he stared across the dimly lit, manicured
grounds. After a long silence he spoke, as much to the night as to me, "Good corn growing weather. Night rain and hot days. 'Knee high by the fourth of July,' my uncle would say, Ten to one she'll make it this year."

I was caught up in his reverie as crisp fresh air filtered through the room and I listened to the rhythmic beat of rain collecting on the roof and dripping sporadically from the eaves. I thought of Papa's corn patch and the taste of ripe corn with salt and butter melting down my arm. I thought of good beet greens, tender in early July, with a touch of vinegar like Mama fixed them. Doc had a way of reminding me of things like that, good memories, but they hurt. I took a drink and felt the bourbon hot in my throat. I said, "I didn't know you were a country boy."

He laughed. "Sure enough. A country boy. Practically a neighbor of yours."

"No kidding. Nebraska?"

"South Dakota. I lived with my aunt and uncle near Sioux Falls after the fire."

It was the first time I had heard Doc speak of his own past. Always he had shifted a conversation that turned to reminiscence, as so many conversations did at the Manor. I prompted him, "Prairie fire?"

"No," he said quietly, gazing out the window. "The house caught one night, probably a spark from the fireplace."
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Took the whole family except me, six of them. I was in the outhouse with a fierce case of diarrhea--Mother always warned us about too many green apples." He paused, as if to reconsider the irony of his words, then went on. "I heard screams and I ran to the house, but the old frame building was already blazing. They were all upstairs--some of them probably never even woke up. I always hoped they never woke. I made it part way into the kitchen but smoke blinded me. There was a churning hot wind in there and I crawled back outside, nearly choked. A wall crashed down, then, the roof. I watched until there was nothing but a burning heap--hoping one of them, at least, would somehow make it out. They didn't have a chance, I guess. That was a long time ago."

"I'm sorry, Doc. It must have been horrible. How old were you?"

"Seven."

When he looked at me his dark brows knitted over damp eyes; his lips flattened into a grim thin line. I was sorry I had pushed him to remember, but I know one can never forget such times no matter how far in the past, and sometimes talking helps.

He continued, "Finally I ran to the barn and rode my pony the twenty miles to Uncle Hank's place. I never went back."

"Then your uncle raised you?"
"I guess you could say that. They tried, he and Aunt Molly, but I was bitter. Kept to myself most of the time. I must have given them an awful run. They didn't have any kids of their own--gave me everything I wanted, and more--felt sorry for me I guess. I raised hell in school, when I went. I ran off a few times, but they always took me back. They were good people, always there when I needed them. And I guess I got along okay after a time."

"But you went on to school."

"Oh yes. That's the one thing Uncle Hank was set on. I imagine he figured he owed it to my folks. He saved every extra dime for my schooling. He wanted me to be a doctor; even convinced me I'd be good at it, the way I took to caring for animals and all. Animals were my only real friends for a long time, farm stock, and the ones I brought in from the woods. I always had a lame pet of one kind or another, even had a little skunk once that had one leg chewed off." Doc grinned. "I never could figure what kind of beast would be foolish enough to get so close to a skunk he could bite his leg off."

"I bet your aunt wondered why you got close enough to doctor it," I said.

"That was a challenge for sure. I used a wooden clothes pin and heavy gloves."

"You didn't de-scent it?"
"Oh no. It never would have survived in the woods again if I'd have done that. Uncle Hank taught me that I had to let the animals go as soon as they could take care of themselves. And I thought that made sense, except with Honker."

"A goose?"

"No, a duck. A big mallard. I found the egg down by a pond and couldn't find a nest anywhere near. I slipped it in on an old sittin' hen and it hatched. I carried Honker around in my shirt pocket for a while and he took a real liking to me. When he got bigger he used to follow me around the farm like a pup. Uncle Hank warned me not to get too attached. We both knew what would happen when Honker figured out he was a duck. I saw it coming after a while and took to clipping his wings, just enough to keep him from flying without Uncle Hank noticing. One day I couldn't find Honker anywhere. Uncle Hank was gone, and when he came home I understood by his look that he had taken Honker off and turned him loose. I guess I knew I couldn't clip the natural instincts out of Honker—but I ran off for three days anyway."

"Did you ever consider becoming a veterinarian?"

Doc laughed. "I gave it some thought," he said. "But you know, Jackson, there's not much difference between animals and people, except sometimes I think animals make more sense."

Doc still stood by the window, watching the rain and taking in air as though it could be stored for another time.
I tapped the cards and said, "I feel lucky tonight. Might even go a full two bits a game."

He didn't answer.

"I could get out a book," I suggested.

Doc turned and stared at me. He had a strange smile on his face. His lips pursed tight, but his eyes sparkled under thick brows. Then suddenly he shouted, "Get your clothes on, Jackson, we're going to have us a holiday."

Now I put up a mild protest just to see if Doc was serious or teasing me, as he often did, but he was already buttoning his pants with one hand and throwing clothes in a suitcase with the other. He was dead serious allright, about having some sort of holiday, but his disposition had changed like a colt feeling the first tender rays of April sun. He rattled about mountains where streams trickle so cold your ankles would turn blue wading in them, and he described wheat rolling across prairies in billows gold as St. Peter's own gate. And all the while he grinned, as Papa's favored expression had it. "like a skunk eatin' manure."

His enthusiasm was contagious. I was almost dressed before I knew what I was doing and I finally got Doc to stand still long enough to ask him just what in hell he had in mind.

"Anything," he chortled, "besides Leisure Highlands."

"Mr. Preston won't be happy about waking him to check out."
"Who said anything about waking up Preston?"
"Well...we can't just go...can we?"
"This isn't a prison, at least not quite."
"I should at least have word left for my daughters. They'll be worrying."

He hesitated and turned to the open window. He knew it hurt me that neither of my daughters had visited or even written me since we roomed together. Doc is a sensitive man. Finally he said, "We'll send them a new address as soon as we have one. Do you have any money, Jackson?"

"A little," I said. "Not right with me."

"Well, we've sure got no reason to be caught saving for a rainy day. Are you about ready?"

I was ready indeed. That spark in Doc had kindled and it set my tired blood to churning, too. Doc and I were both talking so fast and gathering our few belongings together that neither paid the other much attention. Somehow though, a few minutes later when we stood with bags in hand, we had both agreed that Montana would be a good place to be in June.

I was headed for the door when Doc's big hand grabbed my shoulder and nearly pulled me over. He said, "I have no intention of giving Cynthia the pleasure of trying to talk us out of our foolishness."

I stood by dumbly while he tore the bedding apart and began tying sheets together, end-to-end.
"You aren't serious," I protested. "It's two floors down!"

He worked nimbly and scarcely glanced up as he mused, "Reminds me of the night years ago when I went courting Elsie May Walker against the wishes of her father. He was a nasty codger but I had a plan which Elsie May reluctantly agreed to." Doc peered at me and smiled. "Of course, my intent was to climb up that night. It would have worked too, if there'd been any kind of moon out at all. Blacker than sin it was. I slipped about halfway up the wall and stuck my foot right through the old goat's bedroom window. Never did get a chance to apologize to Elsie May." He gave each knot a firm tug. "That ought to do just fine."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Doc."

"Of course it's a good idea."

"But...you're not as young as you used to be."

Doc shook his head. "Nor am I getting any younger standing here jawing with you. How old are you, Jackson?"

"Seventy-one years, last September the second."

"Well, I have a year and two months on you. Now you will show some respect to your elder by letting me go down first."

He loosened the screen from the window, tied the sheet-rope firmly to the radiator, and sent the other end
trailing to the ground. "You can let the suitcase down after me and don't forget the pint," he added.

I poured the bourbon from the glasses back into the bottle and put it in my coat pocket. Doc does not take to wasting good liquor.

He was waiting on the ground by the time I got to the window.
I have seen regions, even recently, where majestic snow covered peaks and craggy ridges are worthily titled highlands. Many such splendors are craved indelibly in my memory and have since caused me to speculate upon the suitability of the Manor's own name.

I should not dwell on such trifles, but as the poet keeps his pen in motion toward the one for a thousand lines, so must I occasionally jog my placid mind to activity. Now my complaint is that there is nothing even remotely high about the lands upon which Leisure Highlands Manor is constructed, and the whole terrain is but limestone prairie. Even traveling the miles on into Dallas, one notices only a few flat-topped hills breaking the Texas horizon, and I wager none of them cap sea level by a thousand feet.

On the night of our departure from the Manor, however, I was grateful to be afoot on a land which offers a man little resistance, for my own leisurely existence had scarcely conditioned me for any sort of hike. In fact, I considered
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myself some likely candidate for a coronary occlusion all the while I grappled down that sheet-rope, yet I made it. A man does many things which surprise him, if he needs to or wants to badly enough. Doc has mentioned that he knew of one man who lifted the front end of an automobile to free a hound trapped under it. He also maintains that if there had been a fire in our apartment I might have descended even faster with less bellyaching about my arthritis, and I believe he is right.

We crossed the expanse of lawn bordering the Manor at a pace that would do justice to a footrace, then came to a wide clay flat where water slid to rivulets and occasional pools. My leather shoes sloshed like sponges while I muttered curses to that barren patch of earth and then to the whole state of Texas, where I should not have been but for the unfavorable circumstances concerning my mercantile business in Kearney. Had that been more profitable, I would never have gone to work for the Pennworth Company in the first place; and then especially I lamented having settled finally in Dallas to earn my living.

Perhaps greater men, when thrust into the elements of an adventure by choice or chance, are able to exchange comfort for ambition's promise. But as rain washed my bare head and trickled from my chin, I remember only small thoughts occurred to me, as how I could have been so foolish to pack my
hat in the excitement and how Doc is fortunate to have remaining a full head of silver hair. And I thought of my warm apartment bed and my favored overstuffed chair in the north lobby, where I idled away countless evening hours chatting or dozing to the television's muted drone.

We walked perhaps four miles further with little conversation. Doc maintained a slow but steady stride. My legs wearied and the suitcase strained my arm muscles, but I determined to match his pace. Sometimes Doc hummed, sometimes his full baritone voice rolled like thunder over a full chorus. When I tired of cursing the land and dark, overcast sky, I was slightly cheered by Doc's mood. I was glad to see him so much changed from the depression he had been in that day.

Still, my arms and legs numbed and I began to feel some trepidation, for it was a distance back to the Manor, and I knew it was much further even to the outskirts of Dallas. I wanted to express my concern to Doc more than once, but each time his robust voice nudged me on.

Then suddenly I was on my knees. My hands flailed the mud to keep from piling flat on my face. I shouted and almost instantly Doc pulled me to my feet again; while I cursed the dwarf cactus mound on which I had tripped.

I was righted with no injury discernible to my person, but the night's fantasy was shattered. Muddy and soaked, I glared at Doc. My early enthusiasm had dwindled to appre-
hension and now to panic as I considered our position. I did not want to continue this madness, yet the blows my dignity would suffer upon returning to the Manor were intolerable to my imagination. There would have to be the ringing of a doorbell to gain night admittance. There would be questions. Surely Mr. Preston would be notified and my daughters in turn. Then Cynthia, trying to be helpful, would undoubtedly see the rope of bed sheets dangling from the window, if it hadn't been discovered already. I shuttered then, thinking that perhaps it had come; that which I feared above all physical deterioration. I supposed it would come slower, cell-by-cell over the years; not all at once should I, too, be a product for F-Wing. Doc's jovial attitude only incensed me then.

I said, "I think we should go back now, Doc."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. It's not that. I just think it would be best if we went back to the Manor."

"You're sure you're allright?"

There was still concern in his voice so I picked up my suitcase and took a few steps to relieve his worry. My right knee ached more than usual but I tried not to favor it.

Doc called, "Jackson, wait! What about our holiday? Back there we could both die within the month from pure boredom."

I turned. The truth was I didn't want to go either direction. I was frustrated and I blamed Doc with his
curious notions. I replied, "out here we could die tonight from exposure."

"Come on, Jackson, it's wet but warm enough. I don't think we've met our limitations yet." Then he added jokingly, "As your doctor, I prescribe a bit more walking. Good for the circulation you know."

Perhaps I had reached a limit, in my own mind, and I thought back to the speculations I had overheard at the Manor concerning Doc. I replied with some suspicion, "Well, Doctor, it's a fine mess you've gotten us into."

As we stared at one another, the silence was broken by pattering rain against rock and clay. I began to think more clearly, for I saw in Doc's eyes what I had noted there from the first, the compassionate strength of a man who must have survived the gamut of many lives, and of one who gained wisdom in the venture.

"Take it easy, Jackson," he said. He motioned toward a flattened knoll several yards in the distance and a hollow beside it where rugged oak bunched to a tight thicket. "Look, we can rest there; get out of this blame rain for a while. You'll feel better. Come on, what do you say?"

I was disappointed at my weakness, and the thought of resting did greatly appeal to my aching body. I said, "I'm sorry, Doc. I didn't mean anything. I could use a rest."
"That's my Jackson. And don't think another minute on it."

We trudged on, making our way along the edge of the knoll where oak silhouetted like solid shadows below us. I sighed and followed Doc into their black folds.
Now as you have followed my account, you have noticed that I was precariously well out on a limb which was rapidly being severed from the trunk. Little thought and no planning had gone forth on my part of this adventure. I was captivated in a curious but irrevocable manner by Doc's direction and counting solely on him to pick me up whenever a fall came. And the fact was, I knew scarcely more about my traveling companion then that you do now.

The oak thicket spread a great canopy above us. I could barely make my way in the dark, but soon enough Doc and I came to a dry patch of ground under a massive tree with a score of overlapping limbs. I dropped my case and slid to the ground, resting against the solid trunk. I could hear Doc beside me, but could only distinguish his form as my eyes adjusted slightly to the more intense night.

The relief was welcomed, but lasted only a few moments. I have long since ceased fearing darkness, nor am I generally one, like Jennifer was, who casually scans the sheets to
prevent nocturnal contact with friendly spiders before climbing into bed. Nonetheless, it occurred to me that a myriad of creatures in the thin ground foliage might well be seeking the same dry shelter. That thought sent chilled twinges up my spine, like fingernails scraping a chalkboard will, and I quickly slid the case under me for a bench. I pulled off my shoes and socks and held my wet overcoat about me as a blanket. I felt comfortable at last.

I thought perhaps the concerns I had fostered during our journey might be relieved if I simply mentioned them to Doc. Still, rumors remain a matter of caution with me. Finally I said, "You know, in spite of all the armchair generals at the Manor, you are one of the few credited with actual heroism in both wars."

"No kidding." He chuckled as if he had just finished telling one of his own stories; which everyone only half believed until later when they must have thought it could be true, of Doc. "Well, I did get some training as a medic in the army. Most of the action I went looking for was in the nurses' quarters though. Say, you didn't lose our bottle when you fell I hope."

I reached into the pocket of my overcoat and found the pint intact. "Here it is," I said.

"Good. Have a shot. It'll do you good."
I felt the bourbon warm in me at once, and I never before thought it tasted so good.

Several minutes passed while we listened to the light breeze teasing leaves overhead. We exchanged the bottle in turn and I felt little compulsion to disturb the peace.

He said, "It's real peaceful here, isn't it. God must smile when he turns loose a good night shower like this, knowing what we'll be able to see when the sun comes up tomorrow. We've been pent up too long, Jackson." I could hear him breathing, full and deep. "Yes sir, I've always liked Texas. It's special, real special." He paused, then asked, "Have you ever been to Maine?"

"No, I never have."

"Oh there's some beautiful country. Shades of green you've never imagined. And in the fall, why you just can't describe a New England fall." Doc's voice took on a new excitement. "But you just wait until we get to Montana. We've got a real treat coming up, a real treat for sure."

He returned the bottle and I took another drink. I felt the liquor sharp in my throat but it mellowed to the pit of my stomach. I said, "You've traveled a good deal I guess."

"I sure have. And you know, there isn't one spot in this whole country I wouldn't want to visit again."

"I never cared much for Texas myself."
Doc laughed. "A lot of folks think that way, especially looking at that dusty land between here and Fort Worth. You might think the devil himself made the Panhandle when you see nothing but those wind-torn scorched flats. But there's space there. You can look a star right in the eye at night. And think of all the pretty sights in Texas; the orchards and green land by the Rio Grande and the way a low morning fog moves in cool and easy over Waco."

"I've spent most of the last few years right here around Dallas," I said. "My work was too demanding of my time I suppose."

"Saving for a rainy day?"
I laughed. "Sure, Doc. Or a rainy night."

"Hey, are you polishing off that bourbon?"

"Not quite."

I gave Doc the bottle and shifted against the hard oak at my back. Water slid from a branch and splashed to a puddle near me.

I knew Doc was right. Those many years of saving for retirement were behind me, and the taste of retirement itself was bitter. The peace and contentment I had imagined certainly eluded me. Yet, I realized the vitality of that place, listening to the simple lilt of the rain and brushing leaves. Doc only reminded me of what I had forgotten over the years. I had felt harmony with the land, following Papa down long field
furrows as he sweated and cussed old Boss, who never paid much attention to him or anyone else. It was a ritual with them; Boss plodding along, stopping every once in a while for no particular reason; Papa shouting and nudging the wooden plow, screwing up his black eyes to the barren sky; for his hopes were hitched to the thin line of clouds on the horizon as surely as Boss was snubbed in the leather harness. They loved working the fields, and I loved the feel of cool loose earth around my bare feet."

The rain began to let up and the wind quieted until it barely rustled the high branches. Doc must have noticed the calm settling around us. He spoke softly.

"You know what's so special about Texas? It's more than the land. It's what's happened here, and what's happening. Sometimes I think you could take the pulse of all America right here. Explorers. Settlers. You know, right along the Trinity less than a century ago, there was only a river settlement and a few farms and cattle. I like to imagine what it was like then, before the fences and cotton."

I said, "That is hard to do when you look at Dallas today."

"Sure. But life flows here, today's life. You have to respect that too. Bowl games and rodeos, traffic--all of it. One thing just replaces another. You don't see many longhorns--that's all the past. But the future is here too.
It's exciting I think, like the whole nervecenter of the country, even the world, right in Houston. The old frontier and the new frontier focus here."

"I never thought about it quite that way."

"You know, Jackson, I don't think Americans have quit making legends yet. Not yet. Americans are like this land, rugged sometimes, tender too, but independent. We've held on to that. That's what we've built this country on and that's what we'll survive and progress on."

"I guess you're right, Doc."

"You bet. And that's what we can't loose either, Jackson, you and me. You know that, don't you."

At once I realized what Doc must have understood all along. A picture of Julien LeBlanc's pallid face flashed in my mind, the last glimpse if caught as they wheeled him from our apartment; a toothless, placid breathing corpse, stripped of all that had made him a man.

There must have been a long silence before Doc asked, "You awake, Jackson?"

"Yes. I'd like a drink."

"What are you thinking?"

"Oh...about fighting back I guess."

Doc must have sensed my tension for his voice came loud and cheerful. "You know, that reminds me of a story my uncle used to tell about the old Baptist preacher who was getting ready for a trip through Apache country. You hear that one?"
"I don't think so."

"Well, in the early days of the Texas Republic this preacher was setting off on a trip through tough Indian country. A friend passed him at the edge of town and asked, 'Hey, Preacher, I've heard you talk about predestination. Why are you taking that rifle along? Why if you meet Indians and you are predestined to die, then you're goin' to die anyway. Ain't that right?"

"'That's right,' the old preacher says.

"'So why are you takin' that gun along?'

"'Well,' says the preacher, 'it just might be the Indian's time.'"

Doc laughed and I laughed too. I thought it was a good story and I was finally feeling the giddiness that liquor brings to a tired mind and empty stomach. Then I remembered a story which I told Doc, about a dude who went into a Texas bar and began making small talk by commenting on the possibility of rain. An old nester at the bar informed him that only two kinds of people prophesy on Texas weather, newcomers and damn fools. But after buying the nester a drink, the young gentleman replied, "You are right. Those are the only two kinds of people in Texas."

And we exchanged stories well into the night, long after I sipped the last drops of bourbon from the pint. When at last I heard Doc snoring, I shifted drowsily against the oak
and breathed heavily of the cool washed air. Then I dozed peacefully.

As I think back on it now, that was one of the very enjoyable nights of my life. Though much else of our conversation has since eluded me, it seems that knot which binds together by particular circumstances had been subtly tied.

I remember stirring once, making my way in the dark from tree to tree toward the edge of the grove to relieve myself. I recall the thought that came and lingered with me then. I thought how close I felt, even to the hard Texas earth, as I had felt close to the Nebraska soil in my youth. As I listened to my own water being sucked into that earth to be cleansed and purified, I sensed the flow of vital forces within myself that I thought long since drained. Then I realized how lucky I was to have Doc for a friend. I would have walked all the way to Montana if he had suggested it right then.

Back at the oak I bundled my coat tight against my neck. I must have awakened Doc. He muttered, "Can't you sleep?"

"Just went to water the bushes. Say, Doc, I've been wondering--are we really going to Montana?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. Maybe not. We're just going, right?"
"That's right."

"Like Honker."

His voice came stronger. "Yes sir, like ol' Honker."

I thought for a moment. "I would like to see Montana," I said.

"Then by God, Jackson, that's where we'll go."
I am not sure what woke me that morning though it might have been the perfect calm. The air was mild and sweet, purged by the night's shower. Purple shadows stretched among the oaks, occasionally giving way to vertical jabs of pale light.

I stood slowly and stretched my aching muscles. I massaged my stiff knee, my constant bane; then worked a knot from my neck. My mouth tasted of decayed muskrat.

I saw Doc standing outside the thicket.

"Rheumatism is surely a great price to pay for the wisdom of age," I said, dropping my suitcase beside him.

"And what else would you find to complain about on a morning like this?" he said.

We watched the sun break over the flat hills to the east, an overture sliding full and smooth to the symphony that would be dawn. From the precipitous ridge beside us to a low slope a hundred yards away, bluebonnets and paintbrushes spread hues of lavender and stark red. Across the ridge,
more wind-stunted oak rose to meet the thin light. Where clay flats cut the foliage, mesquite clung to delicate flowers still damp and drowsy.

I heartedly agreed when Doc suggested that we find a cafe where we could get a good breakfast.

What had taken place under the oaks the night before only confirmed my initial trust in Doc. Knowing him was enough, for I felt alive again and there was a purpose to the morning. I was not bothered that I had learned little more about him than I had known before. His past was still a mystery. Only one real curiosity still nagged me, and that was why a man like Doc would come to the Manor in the first place. But I felt sure Doc would tell me in his own time, for that was part of what we had left behind. We were fighting back, like Doc said; fighting for the independence that had been eroded by the cancer of the Manor.

I was not bothered by the walk that morning either. The early sun felt warm on my face and dried my clothes. I fell easily into stride with Doc, and joined in as he sang:

I'll eat when I'm hungry, I'll drink when I'm dry; If the hard times don't kill me, I'll live till I die. Rye whiskey, rye whiskey, rye whiskey, I cry..."

We came to a graveled road and followed it for an hour or so. A few cars churned past, stirring dust in their wakes, but none slowed though Doc held out his thumb. Perhaps the drivers were too sleepy to notice two old men
lumbering along; or too pressed by thought of industry trade or banking that set Dallas bustling every weekday.

Finally the gravel road merged to highway pavement ahead of us. Traffic slid in rows down the wide ribbon surface. Nearby, service stations hummed with activity as attendants pumped gas and washed windshields; a dozen shopowners pulled window shades and threw open doors to the first curious tourists; and a hundred signs signaled civilization again.

Doc squinted his eyes toward the maze of fluorescent paint and neon. "How about the Rose Ridge Kitchen?"

"Where there's a kitchen, there's food," I said. "Let's go."

The Rose Ridge Kitchen resembled a stranded boxcar. There were no booths inside. Only a long formica counter with a cash register at one end separated the stools from the grill. Above the register, a score of postcards had been tacked to the grey wall. At one end of the counter, two men in light business suits hunched over newspapers. Two stools from them, another man cradled a steaming jug and stared pointedly at the piles of cereal beside a milk dispenser. Behind the counter a hefty cook in a pink uniform leaned against a wooden table drinking coffee. She nodded as we sat down. A dark-skinned waitress worked toward us, wiping the counter with her rag.

"Coffee?"
"Black," Doc said. "And I think I'll have pancakes, a couple of eggs looking at me, and bacon."

"I'll have the same," I said.

She took two mugs from under the counter and set them in front of us, then turned toward the coffee pot, shouting as she went, "Two specials, over easy."

The cook's hands were already working methodically over the sizzling grill.

The waitress poured our coffee then went back to the cereal man. "Why don't you just have the bran?"

"No, Maria, today I want something different. I think I'll try...the Fruity Pops."

"You should stick with the bran," she said.

We ate ravenously. When I scooped the last drops of maple syrup from the platter I decided I had not tasted a better breakfast in years. Maria refilled our mugs while I headed for the washroom to clean up and brush away the dried mud that still clung to my shoes and pants. Doc inquired where we might find a good car lot in the vicinity.

"Hey, you in luck," I heard Maria say. "My brother, Tony, he will give you good deal. Two blocks down the highway--you tell Tony Maria send you."

When I returned to my stool a few minutes later, Maria still stood in front of Doc leaning her elbows on the counter. She spoke softly in Spanish and her hands kept time with the rhythm of her words. I was surprised when Doc answered in
Spanish nearly as fluent as hers. Maria shrieked with laughter and her perfect teeth flashed white. She moved on down the counter chuckling to herself and raking crumbs to the floor with her rag.

"That must have been a good one," I said.

Doc just grinned.

"I didn't know you spoke Spanish."

"My wife, Carla, was Mexican. I learned from her. Say, do you know anything about cars, Jackson?"

"Just where to put the gas and the key," I admitted.

Doc dropped two quarters beside his plate and stepped from the stool. "Well why don't you just wait here--no sense carrying those suitcases any further than we have to. Maria tells me we can get a pretty good deal on a car down the road a ways. I'll go kick a few tires and see what I can come up with. Oh, you did say you were buying didn't you?"

"The car?"

He laughed. "No, the breakfast."

"Oh sure, I'll get it. But what about the car? I could make arrangements but I doubt if any banks are open yet."

"Don't worry," Doc said. "I think my credit is good. We'll even up later."

The two men in suits got up and followed Doc out the door. I went to get the stack of newspapers left scattered on the counter.
"You're right," the cereal man was saying to Maria, "I should stick with bran."
Little more than half an hour passed before I heard loud honking from the small parking lot in front of the Rose Ridge Kitchen. I spun on my stool, and through the smudged window-pane I could see Doc waving from a sporty bright green convertible. I went to the cash register where Maria stood scrawling on the pad in her hand. Her lips moved as she added the figures.

"Two dollars and eighty cents," she said, "coffee comes with the specials."

I reached for my billfold and glanced at the grey wall where the postcards hung in crooked rows. "How much are the cards?" I asked.

"Three for a quarter."

"I just need two--for my daughters."

"Ten cents each."

I handed her three dollar bills and pointed to a card depicting two lanky cowboys holding their hats; and a longhorn, with ruffled fur and his rump to the wind, rolling his eyes
back at the cowboys. The white letters at the bottom said, "Home on the range." I said, "I'll take two of those."

"You and your friend come again," she said handing me the cards. "It looks like Tony he fix your friend with nice car."

I nodded and maneuvered the bulky suitcases through the door.

Doc sat behind the steering wheel smiling like a kid with a new bicycle. "What do you think, Jackson?"

"Nice. I don't believe I've ever ridden in a convertible."

"Get those bags in and we'll see what she can do."

I tossed my case on the back seat and hoisted Doc's beside it. It was easily twice the weight of my own. "What have you got in here anyway? It weighs a ton."

"Oh, just a few papers I've collected. Come on--hop in."

The motor roared. Doc honked again and I saw Maria wave. We spun into the flow of traffic in a flurry of gravel and dust.

I admired the plush seats and examined knobs and dials on the wood-paneled dash. "The interior looks good anyway. Very sporty--what kind is it?"

"Ford Mustang."

"Really. First automobile I ever owned was a '32 Ford. I thought I had the world by the tail when I bought that one."
Doc grinned. "Yes sir. I knew the minute I saw her this little Mustang was just what we'd need to take us up the trail to Montana. Runs great. She's a little rusty outside but a good paint job could take care of that. Hey, that's what we'll call her, Old Paint." His voice boomed out even above the traffic surrounding us:

We ride an old paint, and we lead an old dam,
We're going to Montana for to throw the houlihan.."

Drivers glanced our direction and I realized Doc's voice was carrying some distance, for most windows had been rolled down to receive the fresh morning air.

Two young girls driving in the next lane paced beside us. The driver turned her plump white face and pointed. A blond riding with her stared and I heard them giggle. Doc seemed oblivious to anything but the nasal notes he wailed. I slouched in the seat.

The traffic light ahead flashed yellow and the girls sped on through. Doc pressed the brakes:

Git along, you little dogies, git along there slow,
For the fiery and the snuffy are a-r'aring to go...

From behind the girls a sleek, late-model sedan lurched to a halt beside us, I glanced sideways, then followed the line of chrome from the front of the car down the streamlined fender to the driver's window. I was intrigued by the proud profile of the lady driving alone in the car. Her gaze was rapt on Doc. She looked to be in her late 50's, though her
immaculate appearance might have hidden several years. Her dark hair, touched with glints of silver on tight curls, framed sharp and pleasant features. Her peach colored skin, but brushed by age, looked soft and delicate. I thought I could sense a hint of lilac perfume in the exhaust ridden air. The lady's rose lips began to move perceptively in time with Doc's voice, then she began to sing along.

Doc revived the motor and suddenly she noticed me staring. I winked. She smiled curtly and pulled away as the light turned green.

"eereeh haw!" Doc yelled. "Did you notice that little filly, Jackson? Makes even an old goat like me want to trot out and romp in the pasture."

"I know what you mean, Doc. Could be a few wild oats I haven't sowed yet after all."

Doc's jovial mood brought on a spurt of rapid talk as he maneuvered through the congested traffic. He handled the car with ease and hardly seemed concerned about the bustling madness that surrounded us. "You know, I'm beginning to really get on to this idea of yours about going to Montana," he said.

"My idea...I thought we both agreed."

"Oh we have. We're on our way aren't we?"

"I wouldn't mind some open ranges and big sky after all this."
Doc sighed. "Yes sir. I sure would have liked being in this country in the early days. It must have been something, really going on a trail drive. Too bad they fenced the ranges before we got around to being born." He chuckled. "We'd have made a couple of tough cowpokes, Jackson."

"Just like in the movies."

"Oh boy, did I used to love those old western movies. Took me a long time to figure out why the wheels turned backwards on the stagecoaches though. Did that ever bother you?"

"I noticed it."

"An illusion of course. But a lot of those movies were mainly illusion when you stop to think about it. Real trail driving cowboys had a tough dirty job to do and there wasn't much glory in it. Our heroes in white were a myth, but sometimes I think that's part of a very real movie, too--a movie we're all in. And I'll have to admit, I still love a good western picture."

"There have been some good ones," I agreed.

"Sure enough. And you know, there's still a sunset every day on God's earth for a man to ride into. Maybe there's no call to separate the real from the myth except in history books. I think the white hat is about as real as the dust and beans. When you come right down to it, one is only a symbol of the other. Like I said last night, it's
all aprt of what is in us deep down. There's a little bit of cowboy in all of us. You know what else?"

"What?"

"You look like some dude all dressed up in that suit. I think we ought to get us some more suitable duds. Did you ever own a pair of western boots?"

"I sure did. I got a pair for my birthday one time, brown ones with stars on the sides. I think I wore those boots until they didn't have any soles left."

"Well," Doc said, "it's high time you tried on a new pair."

"I could use some more casual clothes. I've hardly bought any new clothes at all since I retired. Say, shouldn't we be heading north?"

"Oh, I forgot to mention, I do have one bit of business to take care of--it won't take long. There's a dry goods store near the office where we can pick up some clothes."

"Office?"

"We're nearly there now."

Doc turned a corner and parked in front of Western Village, one of the hundreds of new shops that must thrive with the rapid growth of Dallas. Doc got out and dug in his pocket to find change for the parking meter. I shut the door behind me and noticed a woman hurrying toward us. She seemed to have recognized Doc. He twisted a coin into the meter and turned as the woman stopped behind him.
Even discounting the high bundle of flaming red hair, the woman stood a full head taller than Doc. She was dressed in a white pant suit with a turtle neck collar, and white sandals with no heels. I noticed several sets of diamond rings shimmering on her wrinkled fingers, and it was only then that I realized she was quite old, for the lines in her hard face barely showed through a thick coating of creams.

"Doc, how nice to see you," she said in a deep whiskey voice as she looked down at Doc and shook his hand briskly. "We didn't expect you today. How are things at the Highlands?"

Doc glanced at me. "Oh, I took a little unexpected vacation today. I was just on my way to see you." He turned. "Minnie, I'd like you to meet Jackson Crane--Minnie Langford."

"Pleased," she rasped, cranking my arm.

Doc said, "Jackson's a friend of mine from the Manor."

"Oh," she said flatly. Her eyes pinched to slits. "Are you familiar with Gold Age Services?"

"I don't believe so." I said. "Insurance?"

Doc interrupted, "A kind of insurance. Jackson, why don't you go on in to Western Wear and see what you can find. I'll take care of my business with Minnie here and be right with you."

"Sure. You go right along. No hurry."

I walked to the entrance of the store and held the heavy glass door for a package laden woman with a little freckled
girl tugging at her dress. Amid screams and sobs, the girl wailed "Gum--gum" and pointed to the colored marble gum ball machine beside us.

"Not now," the harried lady scolded. "Hurry on now."

But the child persisted and the tug-of-war continued in the doorway. I fumbled in my pocket with my free hand, found a penny and tripped the machine. A green gum ball rolled out. I handed it to the teary-eyed child who only screamed all the louder.

"Thanks awfully," the woman said apologetically, "but she always insists on working the machine herself."

I searched for another penny but the woman forged away, dragging the whining child behind her. Across the street, I noticed Doc walking beside Minnie. He had his suitcase propped under one arm. I popped the gum ball into my mouth and wondered how he had managed to carry that heavy case all the distance we had walked.

It was almost an hour later when Doc came into the store. I had selected quite an assortment of western clothes and sported a Levi outfit which I thought suited our venture quite nicely; complete with a pair of $40 Acme boots.

"Did you finish your business?" I asked as I saw Doc's reflection behind me in the mirror.

"Everything's taken care of for now. Looks like you're doing all right yourself."
"Oh I'm having fun being just the kind of customer that used to drive me crazy when I was a clerk--like an old lady buying shoes. What do you think?" I modeled the two hats I had been trying to decide between. One soft textured black Stetson with a tooled silver band around its creased crown had caught my eye, but the wide-brimmed straw seemed like it might afford cool protection in the open car.

"Might as well take them both," Doc suggested with a grin, "one for everyday and the other for wearing out on Saturday nights."

We spent another half hour outfitting Doc and emerged from the store satisfied that we could do justice to any rodeo Texas or Montana had to offer.

Doc laughed when I stopped by the door to churn out another penny gum, this time a red one. I said, "They're very tasty, really. Try one." I handed him a penny. "You have to buy your own though. I understand they don't taste good at all unless you work the machine yourself."

Doc looked puzzled. He shrugged, then took the coin and dropped it in the slot.
Finally we were on the road, gliding north over the frying asphalt of Interstate Highway 35. Doc had plotted our course on a map he acquired at a service station outside Dallas. He figured we could cross Oklahoma and make Wichita, Kansas, by nightfall, a distance which appeared to be some 400 miles of good road. Then we would bend west through Kansas and on into Colorado, where we would wind north through Wyoming to Montana. It certainly wasn't the shortest route we might take, but Doc seemed pleased as he charted possible segments of our journey on the map with a blue pen. I was relieved just to be away from the teeming traffic of Dallas.

I took my turn at the wheel first and tried to maintain a steady 50 miles an hour, a rate quite fast enough in my opinion. Truckers bore down on our trail and roared by, breaking gusts of diesel wind over us. But I didn't let them or the others who passed bother me; traveling salesmen in air-conditioned cars, whose minds must have mulled over accounts; tourists anxious to relax in a motel somewhere in
the distance. It only irritated me when one of those little beetle Volkswagons cruised beside us, then forged on ahead. Somehow I couldn't hold the energy that throbbed under the hood of our Mustang whenever I spotted a VW approaching, and contrary to my better judgment, my foot felt obligated to press the accelerator a bit every time I noticed one ahead. I pondered the implications of that particular driving quirk for some time as the miles flowed.

And there was a flow to our movement. The steel blue pavement shimmered under a bronze sun and washed beneath us with the sticky hum of rubber on tar. My senses were sharp and alive as they hadn't been in years and I felt a holiday spirit in me—perhaps more the spirit of adventure—and I knew that Doc was right. There was a bit of cowboy in me too. There was a bit of that spirit of adventure that tamed the rugged land we were traveling, that tamed a whole land for better and for worse. Even two old fools speeding along in a Mustang convertible could know it, heading away from the safety and the pain of civilization, on to a new place.

Above the windshield's chrome trim I could see an endless parade of thin cloudlets, the kind that conjure up continual hope and frustration to the farmer longing for rain. And that was all in the whole expanse, but for one vulture tacking in the hot vacuum overhead. I followed his graceful sweeps, and even that misshapen bird seemed beautiful in his
solitude. I thought I must have felt the same excitement he knew then. For a long while as I drove, I glanced occasionally to find him, as though suspended in an animated frame above us.

We had traveled perhaps 70 miles and were nearing Gainsville according to the roadside signs. Doc rested quietly in the bucket seat with his wide-brimmed hat cocked against the late morning sun. I wondered at the self-assurance he always seemed to know, at the assurance I felt just being in his company. I decided to put a question to him that had been lingering in the back of my mind the whole morning.

I said, "Do you think they'll be after us, Doc?"

He sat up with one arm draped over the door. Wind whipped the sleeve of his trim cut shirt. "Who?" he asked.

"I don't know. Mr. Preston, my daughters--won't somebody be wondering where you've gone?"

Doc laughed. "Hey, what would an adventure be without a good chase. We should have stolen Ol' Paint here, or maybe rustled one of those little Mavericks like I saw back at the lot--get a sheriff on our tracks."

"No, I'm serious. I mean, they must be wondering by now. We didn't exactly sign out in the regular way."

"Are you worried?"

"Yes...I suppose I am a little worried."

"Rest home escapees apprehended in daring get-away..."

"Come on, Doc."
"I'm sorry, Jackson. I shouldn't tease. But we could have done worse than to leave that place you know, even if we did go out the back way."

"Well, what about Mr. Preston. He's responsible for us in a way."

"Responsible!" Doc scoffed. "Preston's responsible for a lot of things all right--but I'm not one of them. Listen, Jackson, you know how he operates, you must have realized what was going on there."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Doc lifted his hat to let the wind tossle his thick hair, then patted the brim tightly in place again. "Oh, I hate to even talk about it now, it's such a beautiful morning--but if it will ease your mind some--let's take your Social Security check for instance."

"What about it?"

"Preston confiscated the allotment for personal spending, didn't he?"

I glanced at Doc in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Didn't you tell me?"

I was sure I hadn't told anyone about the Manor finance office handling my check to cover Cynthia's escapade with the fire extinguisher, not even Doc. The fact was it had disgusted me when I thought about it later, for it seemed to me that I was being treated in a childish way. I had meant to discuss
it again with Mr. Preston, but with the upsetting circumstances surrounding Julien's death, it had completely slipped my mind until Doc mentioned it. "I was a little offended by that deal to tell you the truth, even if it was a petty matter. But it would have embarrassed me to tell anyone else."

"Well, the point is, thirty dollars a month isn't a petty matter to a lot of folks less fortunate than we are."

"But it was only temporary. There were a lot of damages."

"Temporary," Doc said angrily. "Did Julien ever tell you how long it had been since his check was temporarily taken?"

I was puzzled. "Well...no, but I assumed if things had turned out differently...we would have shared the damage costs."

"Jackson, let me tell you something--I probably couldn't prove it now, of course--Julien hadn't received a single one of his checks in years. He told me it was temporarily taken away for some infraction he couldn't even remember the details of, at least six years ago. He wasn't the only one."

"But...I don't understand..."

"That's your responsible Mr. Preston," Doc interrupted. "There were others?"

"Several others. Thirty dollars a month multiplied a few times makes a nice fat sum out of petty matters."

I thought for a moment about what Doc had said. I believed him, but I was shocked to think anyone, even
Mr. Preston, whom I had come to dislike though I hadn't admitted it even to myself, could take advantage of someone in such a condition as Julien. Then I wondered who the others Doc had mentioned might be. I realized if I had been duped, how easily Fay Bloomington could be deceived. Poor Mrs. Bloomington, never quite right after the blow to her head years ago--knocked unconscious for three weeks by a wooden swing as she pushed her granddaughter on a school playground. Or Wilbur Baynes, whom I had only seen twice, buckled in a wheelchair, a vegetable, though he appeared no older than myself. I thought of a dozen others like them--and many more who at least had good account of their faculties. The very suggestion made my blood boil.

I said, "Are you sure about this, Doc? You know this for a fact?"

"Reasonably certain, yes. I've talked with several people."

"Well that makes me mad. Damn mad. I've a good mind to turn around and go have a chat with Mr. Preston."

I searched the highway and noticed a turnout a short distance ahead. I took my foot from the gas pedal and pressed the brake. Doc nearly jumped from his seat and grabbed for the steering wheel.

"Now hold on, Jackson! Don't go getting all worked up."
A horn blasted behind us as we swerved past the turnout. I heard the squeal of brakes and tires, and I glanced in the rear view mirror in time to see a fist gesturing violently from the driver's window. I pressed the accelerator again as the big car swooped around us. A woman with a floppy red hat and a face to match glared through the front passenger window. I didn't try to make out the words her big lips mouthed through the tinted pane.

As we regained momentum, Doc fell back in his seat. I could hear him chuckling.

"What's so blamed funny?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry, Jackson. It's not funny at all. I just...well, I knew you would react this way, that's why I didn't mention it sooner. You really better be more cautious you know, that Caddy nearly kissed our bumper. Ol' Paint here would have had a few more spots on her."

I glared at Doc. "I don't see how you can take all this so lightly. I don't like to see people stepped on--helpless people. I don't like being stepped on myself, if what you say is true."

His brow drew to a grim line. "It's true all right, and I know exactly how you feel. You're wrong though, I don't take it lightly any more than you can--but it's a touchy business and there are ways to handle it better than storming back to the Manor. Preston is a clever man, I'll give him
credit for that. You know, he made that check handling play on me too."

"No."

"Oh yes. Just the week before I moved in with you. It came quite by accident I think. Bruno was in cleaning my room--you know Bruno?"

"Bruno Heppner?"

"Yes. The poor kid, I feel sorry for him. Bet he never made it to high school if he went that far. His wife isn't much better off."

"I didn't know he was married."

"Married with two children. Can you imagine trying to support a family on $1.80 an hour?"

"Is that all he earns?"

"That's it, and with all those folks in B-Wing to tend to. But who else would take the job at that pay."

"I see what you mean. Cynthia is certainly no prize winner when it comes to intellect. I get so furious when I think about her storming into our room with that damn foam."

Doc nodded then continued, "Bruno was cleaning my room--doing a good job too, he was always thorough. He wanted to sweep behind the bookcase so I offered to help him move it. It tipped over, shattered the glass and ripped a hole in my sofa. Bruno was stunned. When I could finally get him to talk, he told me he knew he would have to pay for the damages,
and he only shook his head, muttering about how he could never pay his own rent if that happened. I finally convinced him it was all my fault, that my back had given out and I let go of the shelf. Then I went to see Preston. He was very polite about the whole thing, even offered me a drink, then he told me about the Manor policy concerning damages."

"Never mind," I said, "I think I know the rest. But somehow, Doc, I can't imagine you..."

"Oh I had no choice, of course. At least for the time. I felt sorry for Bruno. Two hundred dollars to him is an awful lot of money." Doc paused. "My check would be due any day now."

I considered Doc's story for a time. A VW bus honked and swerved to pass. The sound jarred me. I glanced at the speedometer, the needle pointed to 45. I let the bus chug around and fade in front of us before accelerating.

"Doc, I was just thinking, you don't suppose that maybe Mr. Preston would go so far as to put them up to it?"

"Who?"

"Cynthia and Bruno."

"Oh no." Doc asserted. "I'm pretty sure he just took advantage of the situations as they came along. It's probably even legal. Bruno is a good boy--slow--but I think he's okay. Besides, I doubt if Preston would take a chance on involving too many others."
"You're probably right. You know, I wish Julien could have somehow held on...could have come along with us."

"He was a fine man," Doc said. "A real gentleman."

I watched the broken highway lines slipping beneath us. Then a speck high in the distance caught my eye. I watched it grow into the familiar hovering form I hadn't seen since we passed Gainesville. "Say, Doc, have you noticed that vulture? Seems like he's been trailing us--it's almost eerie."

Doc buttoned his eyes to the bright sky where I pointed, and nodded. "I've noticed them all along. It's not uncommon along here. They seem to stick close to the highways, probably doing us a service cleaning up run-over lizards. But that's not the same bird. Last one I noticed was a Texas vulture, this here one is from Oklahoma."

"How do you know that?"

"Different color dust in his ears."

"I suppose I asked for that one," I said. "Where are we anyway?"

"You getting tired?"

"Oh, my knee is acting up a bit."

Doc unfolded the map on his lap and held it tight while the breeze snapped the corners. "Looks like we ought to be coming to Marietta any time now. I could take kindly to some lunch. How about you?"
"Anytime."

The traffic was beginning to gather; as an earthworm, stretched to cover a distance, compresses before sliding ahead once more. I scanned the highway signs for an exit.

I said, "It still bothers me, Doc. We shouldn't be running away."

"A while ago you were worried about being tracked down, now you're still thinking about turning back."

"We should do something about the others, too," I argued.

"You're right. Something should be done. And I'm going to let you in on a little secret, Jackson, something is being done, right now. But there are legal implications and it all takes time. Look, I probably shouldn't have told you as much as I have. For now they may only be assertions and that's about as good as trying to carry water in a screen cup. Anyway, my bet is that Preston is just as happy to be rid of us for a while. He has two less mouths to feed and a month's board paid in advance."

"Well, if you say so," I muttered.

Somehow Doc had done it again, had convinced me I should do as he suggested--and I felt it was right. I can tell you to this day I have never lost trust in Doc. I accepted his judgment, as vague as his reasons seemed. But I did put in another word then, perhaps just in defiance of what Doc knew and hadn't told me.
"One thing I'll have to give Mr. Preston credit for, he got rid of that sonofabitch dietitian after Julien died."

Doc started to speak then seemed to swallow his words. Finally he said, "We both need a vacation from all that, Jackson."

I followed an exit arrow that directed us quickly to a red and white striped cafe somewhere in the vicinity of Marietta, Oklahoma.
As we waited for a seat in the busy cafe, Doc tapped my arm and pointed to a sign hanging over the cash register. The hand-scrawled black letters on a glossy knotted board read: 'Don't kick about our coffee--you may be old and weak yourself someday.'

"One thing about the folks in Oklahoma," Doc said, "they keep a sense of humor."

The inside walls of the cafe were the same bright red and white as the exterior and the stripes must have been freshly applied, for the odor of paint lingered heavily over scents of fried hamburger and onion. Pans clattered behind swinging kitchen doors. Waitresses scurried out with rows of steaming platters piled the length of their arms, and back with mounds of empty cups and saucers and silverware. Conversations buzzed over the line of tables along the front wall and blended with the hum of metal arms stirring chocolate and strawberry milkshakes in frosty tumblers. From a high shelf in one corner, a wheezing air-conditioner inhaled and
exhaled simultaneously, blowing gusts of chilled air about the room.

A couple got up to leave and we took the vacated stools near the end of the long counter. I sat beside a little white-haired man who leaned with one elbow on the counter. He wore an apron, snowy as his hair, bibbed to his neck and draped over the tops of his thick rubber soled shoes that dangled just above the floor. He appeared to be the proprietor of the cafe, for his keen eyes darted constantly about, scarcely missing a detail. His mouth pursed if a salt shaker turned empty, and curved to a grin at a customer's satisfied yawn. A large glass of ice water, moist with crystal droplets, rested in a pool in the counter before him.

We ordered lunch and Doc sat quietly, contemplating the rose design he traced over and over with his thumb on his coffee cup.

"You headed for the lake?"

The question came from beside me. I turned to the white-faced little man on the stool, but his eyes flitted over the row of tables. I looked around to see if he might be talking to anyone else before I answered.

"We're planning to make Wichita tonight," I said.

A sun tanned waitress hurried toward the kitchen with a stack of platters and crumpled napkins. "Oh Katie," the man
said; the platters swung to a stop in front of us. "Number three needs catsup."

"Yes, Mr. Mitchell," Katie said as she disappeared through the swinging doors.

"Looks like business is hopping," I said.

"Oh yes, yes. Busy all the time now. Everyone heads for the lake." His eyes scanned the counter. "Can't blame them, hot as it is. Nice thing they did building these lakes. I remember when even the frogs around here didn't know how to swim."

His mouth curved and his eyes skimmed over my water glass. I took a drink just as the waitress at the counter moved toward me with a pitcher.

"Good, Mary Beth," he said. "You expect tips for tuition this fall, you keep the glasses full. Fellow with the plaid shirt needs coffee."

"I'll get it right away," Mary Beth said.

I asked, "Have you lived here long?"

"A long time. Oh yes, a long time." His words bounced with the syncopated motion of his eyes. "Had a cabin once, right here. Used to have a farm till it blewed away. Didn't get the dust out of my eyes soon enough to get in on the oil boom. Good crop now though."

"Oh?"

"Tourists."
"I see."

"They come in droves—like the grasshoppers. Always hungry as hoppers too. That's what gave me the idea for the cafe."

"The grasshoppers?"

"Tourists. They all head for the lake. Nice thing they did building these lakes. You're heading for the lake you say?"

"We're going north."

"Oh yes. I remember when the gulls came."

It was difficult conversing at the sporadic pace and the old man's equally sporadic eyes never seemed to meet mine.

"Sea gulls came?" I asked.

"Yes, the gulls."

I said, "I wouldn't have expected gulls out here."

"Who would till they built the lakes. Nice thing they did. Good crop of tourists now. They taught the crows to dive for fish."

"Who?"

"The gulls."

I decided to finish my coffee. I turned to the counter and noticed Doc chuckling to himself. He must have been eavesdropping. Mary Beth came to refill my coffee cup.

"My friend needs more coffee, Mary Beth," the man said. "Keep the cups full if you're going back to college."
"Sure, Mr. Mitchell."

Mary Beth smiled and filled my cup. "Your orders should be here right away," she said.

The old man sipped water from his glass. "Smart girl, Mary Beth. Going to be a lawyer. May be a politician some day. We could use some honest politicians. I had to shoot my cows when the dust came."

I said, "You mean in the 30's?"

"Oh yes. Dust clogged their lungs. I had to. We've got the lakes now. Then the crows taught the gulls to dig worms in the fields."

"In return for teaching them to dive for fish."

His eyes danced and fixed briefly on mine. I smiled properly.

He said, "It's not true of course. That's a joke around these parts, the gulls and the crows."

"Well," I said, "this must be quite the resort area with the artificial lakes."

"Lots of tourists, yes. I remember when the dust came Blowed away everything but me. Can't farm with no water."

"I'm glad to see you have a good crop now."

"Yes. Always hungry as hoppers." He slid from the stool and steadied himself against the counter. "Must get back to the dishes now. Lots of dishes to wash."
"You wash the dishes yourself?"

"Oh yes. Forty years now. Had the idea to build this cafe myself. No money after the fields cracked. I had to shoot my cows. I had an idea they would make good money. Lots of tourists."

"It's been nice talking with you, Mr. Mitchell."

"Oh yes. You fellows have a nice time at the lake."

"Thanks, Mr. Mitchell."

The old man shuffled toward the swinging doors, kicking his apron as he went. Mary Beth passed him with our orders.

"I hope he didn't bother you," she said apologetically as she set a plate in front of me.

"Not at all. I enjoyed talking to him."

"Some people put him off, but he's a wonderful man really. We couldn't get along without him. More coffee?"

"Thank you," I said. "That's good coffee."
The chilly conditioned air of the cafe intensified the heat as we stepped outside. It was after noon. The brassy sun angled slightly to the west and rays bounced like rippling vapor from the shiny hoods of parked cars. I was glad to have the big straw hat protecting my vulnerable smooth head.

"You want me to drive?" Doc asked.

"No. I feel fine now. I'll take it on to Oklahoma City."

"Maybe I can catch a few winks then."

We climbed back in our Mustang. I turned the key and revved the motor, then shifted the arrow on the steering column to drive. Interstate 35 had given out to Highway 77 just before we came to Marietta, so I decided it would be well to match the 55 mile speed limit, hoping to deter other drivers from imprudent passing. We seemed to flow with the traffic and I relaxed to the motor's drone and the flat whistle of the breeze over the windshield.

Doc began to whistle too, and I knew he would break into a tune before long. He sat straight in the seat and nudged
his hat back on his head. "How does that one go, Jackson?"

"What one?"

He whistled a few bars of a familiar tune and I tried to match it with words. "Isn't that Tumbleweeds?"

"Yeah--but I can't remember the verses. Cares of the past are behind..." He twirled his hand as if the gesture might produce more words.

"Something with wind or wind," I suggested.

"No, that's not it. Oh hell, let's hit it on the chorus anyway."

We sang with fine harmony, at least with no small amount of gusto:

I'll keep rolling along,
Deep in my heart is a song,
Here on the trail I belong;
Drifting along with a tumbling tumbleweed.

"Hey, we make a great team, don't we, Jackson."

"The Sons of the Pioneers never did that song so well."

"How about 'Home on the Range...'?"

"How about we see if the radio works."

I clicked the knob and the radio crackled, then hissed a stream of static as I wound the needle over the course of the dial. I turned it off.

Doc said, "That ought to teach you to appreciate fine music when you have the chance. I think I'll have that snooze now." He pulled his hat over his eyes and slumped down in the seat. In a few moments his head rocked easily against his chest.
The land stretched brown and green all around us, patched like a grandmother's quilt. Whole pastures of tender grass swayed in unison with the wind and brushed the bellies of white-faced Herefords. Stands of oak, black walnut, and cottonwoods cast light shadows where rolling prairies gave way to rows of corn. And, as if to signal the riches beneath the soil as well, derricks towered above the corn, and great metal arms teetered in robot rhythm near oil field pumping stations.

In the midst of such wealth, it was hard to imagine those lean years; season upon season of wind and dust that choked the horses huddled in corrals, choked the corn until it shriveled into the ground again, and finally burned even into the minds of men like Mr. Mitchell. Perhaps that is why even as a young boy trailing Papa behind the plow, I could sense the urgency when he would stop and rest his big hand on my head, then turn his eyes to watch the sky.

And in the shade of our wide front porch, where I sat on the steps and whittled away countless hot Nebraska Sunday afternoons, I would listen to Papa and Uncle Moss Reed talk. Always it was crops and market prices they discussed, and always their conversations ended with their heads bent on heaven while they predicted the probability of rain.

While Doc dozed and the wheels churned over the miles of grey pavement, memories filled my mind; memories of Uncle
Moss Reed, whom I had scarcely thought of in years until I met Doc. Not that there was much physical likeness between the two—a similarity of voice perhaps—but no more. It was something deeper I noted, trenchant in the manifold natures of the two men themselves. I could only sense when their magnetism prevailed over me, and I could never quite comprehend it.

Hulking, broad-shouldered Uncle Moss—Mama's brother and her senior by 18 years—who seemed a giant to me then, with tufts of grey hair shaggy over his ears and over the proud ridge of his forehead. I remember how the tops of his high black boots nearly met my waist on those Sundays when he came to our house with aunt Abby for dinner. The whole room would resound with his deep voice and echo when he laughed. And only when we "menfolk" were shuttled out the door after supper, would his voice grow mellow and somber for the more serious talk.

How proud I was, secretly measuring off against those old black boots until one day I was eye level, then shoulder level, with his wide strap belt. And one of those days he came to dinner alone.

"Abigail's dead," he said. "Buried her Tuesday by the willow."

What happened to Uncle Moss after that was beyond a young boy's understanding. I only knew Mama's sad glances to Papa when Uncle Moss would forget to come for Sunday dinner.
And in the next months, when they thought their hushed voices were out of my range, I would hear how his north pasture had gone to seed, or how his dishes went unwashed until he stopped bothering with them altogether.

I was overjoyed the day I learned that Uncle Moss was coming to live with us, even though it meant moving out of my little built-on room, back to the cot in the kitchen corner by the old wood range. Papa promised to build on another room for me as soon as harvest was finished that fall. He didn't get around to it that year, nor the next, but Uncle Moss died and I had the old room back before it ever occurred to me that I needed a place to call my own.

The emaciated Moss Reed who moved in with us seemed like a different man to me. The laughter that had almost shaken our walls only months before was jaded and spiritless. He would sit for hours on the front porch, but Papa couldn't interest him with talk of crops or stock, and if he turned his eyes to the sky, it was only because he seemed tired of looking the other way. Sometimes his glassy stare would break and his dark blue eyes would dance again as he told stories in the familiar ringing voice to delight us all. And sometimes his mind would wander even in the middle of one of those stories. He would stop for a while to gaze out the window, then he might continue that story, or end another one. It never mattered to me, for I made a game of it; putting
Smith

pieces of his stories together like a puzzle. And if his memories went too far back, if he started on a story about the days before any of us knew him, Mama was quick to change the subject. I figured Uncle Moss hadn't always been a strict Methodist.

I suppose I simply accepted Uncle Moss into our household with all his idiosyncrasies, and soon forgot that he had ever been any different. Then when he took to wandering off himself, I would help Mama and Papa search for him. We nearly always found him in an hour or two, asleep against a cottonwood or sitting patiently in a neighboring field.

One time we didn't find Uncle Moss for two days. We scoured the woods and the corn patches; combed all the fields in the area, and still could not find him. The next day I went with Papa to the Wheeler place, for we thought Uncle Moss might be napping in their hay loft. But Mrs. Wheeler told us she had seen him heading in the direction of Kearney the day before. She neglected to tell us he wasn't walking. We took the wagon on in to Kearney and while Papa drove the streets, I checked in the stores, in the barber shop, even the jail; but we couldn't find a sign of Uncle Moss.

Now the reason we didn't find Uncle Moss in Kearney is because we only looked around the places where we expected to find him. The whole Reed clan was devoutly Methodist and only rarely had I seen any of them, or Papa either, taking a
drink of liquor. After a good crop was in; sometimes on the fourth of July, if it didn't fall on a Sunday; only then might a cordial glass of spirits be in order. It hadn't occurred to us to check in any of the saloons in Kearney, which I suspect with some reason, is where he had been a good part of the time.

It wasn't until the next morning Papa noticed that Moss' old mare, the one he called Pearl, was missing too. That news sent Mama into a tizzy so we spent the whole day bouncing over every road on the country side hollering for Uncle Moss, to no avail. We were all worried sick. I felt a knot growing in my stomach, for I missed the old man, and I was afraid for him. That evening after supper, I decided to walk again over the road that went to Kearney. I thought perhaps Uncle Moss had fallen asleep in the brush beside the road somewhere beyond the Wheeler place, and we had missed him. I just wanted to get out of the house too, where Mama fretted and paced.

I vividly remember the rest of that evening. The country lane was so quiet and peaceful after the hubbub in the house. Wild roses bloomed along the road and filled the air with a clean, sweet scent. The clover smelled sweet too, and tasted of sugar when I chewed the stems. Larks and sparrows bantered across a meadow and an orange sun balanced on the ridge behind them, waiting patiently for the argument to end.
before rolling on down for the night. I had only walked half a mile or so when I heard singing. It was faint at first, thick words chewed into a vague tune, but I knew it was Uncle Moss.

I spotted them rounding a bend. The broad-beamed old mare swaggered along the dirt trail with her nose nearly plowing a path in front of her. Uncle Moss hunkered on Pearl with his legs dangling to her tired gait. His head dawdled and his arms hung limp, but one fist clung to a wooden pail that still sloshed with corn whiskey; whiskey he must have even shared with thirsty Pearl somewhere along the dusty road, for when I took hold of the thin rope on her neck, her eyes lolled and her breath was stale with fodder and liquor.

Uncle Moss shifted when Pearl stopped. His head bounced and he rolled his eyes until they focused on me.

"By gawd," he drawled, "if it ain't my boy Hat."

Uncle Moss always called me Hat. I never knew why and neither did anybody else, but it didn't matter. He had pet names for everyone; everyone, Mama said, except folks he didn't especially take to. He always called Mama, Barney, though her Christian name was Alice. He called Papa, Thunder.

"Howdy, Uncle Moss," I said. "Looks like you an' Pearl have been down to Kearney."
"We have at that...yep." His eyes drifted to the pail and then turned sluggishly back on me, like two coulee pools. "Uh...Hat...you ever had yerself a taste'a corn whiskey yet?"

"Oh, no sir. Mama wouldn't like that."

"No...don't reckon she would." He took a swig from the pail, steadying himself with his other arm on Pearl's stout neck. He swallowed deep then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You wan't a taste?"

"Sure."

I took the pail and raised it to my mouth. Whiskey spilled down my chin when I tried to drink. I choked down a swallow and coughed the rest over my shirt. I dropped the pail and saw it roll to the edge of the road, leaving a narrow mud trail behind it. I blinked back the tears in my eyes.

Uncle Moss roared with laughter and nearly slid from Pearl's back. Finally he said, "Terrible stuff ain't it."

"Mama's gonna be mad."

"Yep. Tell ya what, Hat...you an' me better make us a bargain. You won't tell- I won't tell. Fair 'nuff?"

"We better be gettin' on home, Uncle Moss. They've been awful worried about you." I tugged the rope and Pearl lifted her drowsy head, then plodded along beside me.
"Yep," Uncle Moss said. "Me an' Pearl here did up the town. We shore did. I ever tell you why I call this ol' nag Pearl?"

I could just tell by the way he said it that he was working into one of those stories Mama wouldn't want me to hear. I pulled at the rope and tried to hurry the mare along, figuring I had committed one sin enough to account for that night.

I said, "I reckon it's because her eyes are like big pearls."

"Nope. That ain't it at all. Yer right about her eyes though. They remind me of a Pearl I ran into in Saint Louie one time, 'fore I ever come out here. Pearlie's what she called herself--Pearlie Gates. Spirited little fillie...just like this one was in her time. What yer aunt would call one 'a them loose women. Yep...shore 'nuff though I'd bought my way t' heaven that night. Course I learned later that ain't exactly the way to go about it. You know what'a loose woman is, Hat?"

"No sir." I could see our house ahead and I nearly broke the rope trying to drag the old mare.

"Well I reckon you'll be findin' out soon enough. Some things a man hasta learn on his own."

I saw Mama jump up from the porch when she spotted us. I heard her call to Papa, then they both ran to meet us.
I was relieved by the fuss they made over Uncle Moss, and I took advantage of the situation. I hid my damp shirt and climbed under the quilt on my cot. I fell asleep before Mama came to tuck me in, but I said prayers for both Uncle Moss and myself; and I couldn't keep from wondering if my friend Billy Lee had ever heard about loose women.
Doc slept until I pulled into a truckstop at Pauls Valley for coffee. Then we continued on Highway 77 which became Interstate 35 again about 50 miles from Oklahoma City. When we got to the City, Doc took the wheel and it was my turn to nap, but first we made a brief detour in order to see the famous state capitol, where a row of derricks stand like great sentinels before the columns of the domeless capitol; and the building itself seems a virtual Fort Knox for the black gold in its natural vaults.

Even with another stop for dinner, we made Wichita before dark. I was pleased to learn that Doc didn't intend for us to spend another night sleeping out of doors. We found a clean and comfortable motel, but I scarcely noticed the furnishings. It had been quite a venture, I thought, certainly a change of pace from the Manor routine I knew only 24 hours before. But I was tired. After a warm shower, sleep came quickly.

We both slept late the next morning. We had decided to make an easy day of it, perhaps traveling only the 150 miles
or so to Dodge City. When I finally convinced myself to get up, I pulled the drapes and sunlight smashed into the room, blinding me momentarily.

I looked at my watch to find it was almost noon. Sleep hadn't held me so long, nor so soundly, in years. I went into the bathroom and splashed cold water in my face, cleaned up, then dressed in one of my new western outfits; green pants and a figured green and white shirt to match. I doffed my straw hat as I glanced in the mirror, feeling quite handsome.

I turned to the desk where I had hastily emptied my pockets the evening before, and saw the two postcards I purchased back at the Rose Ridge Kitchen. I sat down to write, filling out first the addresses of my daughters on the cards. Then I stared at the message spaces. I could not decide what I should write. Finally I put them back in my pocket, packed my suitcase and went to Doc's room.

"Morning, partner," Doc said as he opened the door. "I guess I don't need to ask how you slept."

"I slept fine."

"Good. I'll be with you in a minute." He threw a shirt in his suitcase and snapped it shut, then glanced at his watch. "Shall we have breakfast or lunch?"

"Whatever suits your pleasure, partner?"

We ate lunch.
It was nearly two o'clock before we turned west on Highway 54. The sun was high but glared off the hood in front of us. I was glad Doc had volunteered to drive.

"You seem quiet this morning," Doc said. "Still tired?"
"Oh no. I was just thinking I guess."
"I've got a penny."
"For my thoughts? You'd better off to keep it."
"Something bothering you?" he asked.
"I tried to write cards to my girls this morning, but I couldn't think of anything to say."
"Where are your daughters?"
"One is in Memphis."
"Oh?"
"Yes, her husband is a public accountant. Three children, one boy in high school already. It's hard to imagine where the time gets to."
"And the other?"
"She lives right in Dallas, the oldest, Jennifer Ann."
"Married too?"
"Oh yes, they have two boys. Good kids, all of them. I was glad to be with them after Lillian died. It was hard losing her. Just as it was when I lost Jennifer. I don't know how I would have managed those months without the children. Do you have children Doc?"
He stared at the highway and shook his head slowly. "No, we always hoped, but...I guess that brought Carla and I as close as a child might have. We had each other." He paused and then asked, "What made you decide to come to the Manor?"

"Oh, I didn't want to live alone, and...I always felt in the way I lived with the girls. They were busy with their own lives, the grandchildren too. I just couldn't see prolonging the intrusion. I don't know. It's hard, isn't it, when it seems like everything is just downhill. You seem to get along so well, Doc. How do you manage?"

Doc smiled. "I'm no different, Jackson."

"But you always seem so...sure. I try to convince myself it's the way things are, growing old--the natural cycle in life--but I can't help feeling a little sorry for myself sometimes. I can't. Even though I may be more fortunate than most older folks. At least I have the means to provide more than adequately for myself."

"Well, I don't know," Doc said. "Maybe I learned young, after the fire when my family was gone. I was down for a long time--several years I guess. I'm not even sure what snapped in me--or why--but one day I just decided there was no point in living with a chip on my shoulder. Since then I've just kept looking for new hills. So far I seem to keep finding them. I don't think it has to be all downhill, Jackson,
even at our age. I hope it won't ever be. It's like we talked about before, about fighting back. But you're right, it's hard sometimes. God knows it's hard sometimes."

For a while I sat watching the country as we passed. There were a few small farms dotted along the rolling prairie, but I noticed many of the old farm houses were run down or abandoned altogether, standing tattered and lonely in huge fields--sprawling fields of tall corn and wheat bending in the sun, tended by giant tractors with air-conditioned cabs. A new style of farming, nearly as alien to me as it would have been to Papa.

I said, "While you were sleeping yesterday, Doc, I was thinking about how it was when I was a kid. I was thinking about an uncle who moved in with us after my aunt died. My Uncle Moss. He got so that he wouldn't take care of himself and we just took him in. We loved him and respected him too--even though he must have been a terrible nuisance to my folks with the crazy things he did. It's a different kind of life now. Families move so often, get involved in so many activities. It's just harder for old folks to fit in now."

"That's probably true in most cases," Doc said. "Age has lost a bit of its polish lately. Everybody seems to want to look younger and think younger."

"That's it exactly. Who attaches wisdom to age any more? They just seem to put up with us."
'Oh, I think the basic respect is still there--and the love too. But as you say, times are different. We just have to learn to adjust, as every society has. Look at the Eskimos and Indians. They did what they had to do to survive, agonizing as it must have been, leaving a weak mother or father behind to starve or freeze when the tribe had to move on. It's never been easy. It's not only in America either, I've read...'

Doc's words trailed off as he peered at a figure beside the road ahead. I looked to see a young Indian with his thumb extended.

"Looks like that fellow could use a lift," Doc said. He pressed the brake and we stopped a few yards ahead of the man, who grabbed an orange shoulder pack from beside him and ran toward the car. We turned to greet him.

He was a tall, lean young man, with broad shoulders and practically no hips, in levi jeans, high-heeled boots and a tee-shirt that rippled against tight muscles when he moved. He looked to be in his early twenties. His black hair hung shoulder length and framed the prominent high cheek bones and ridge of his nose. He appeared stern at first, for a long scar creased his left cheek from the corner of his right eye almost to his mouth, but he had a wide, friendly smile and his eyes were clear and black, deep set in his brown face.

"Howdy," he said, tossing the pack in the back seat.
"Afternoon," Doc said.
I opened the door and pulled the front seat up. The hitchhiker climbed in beside the pack.
I said, "There's not much leg room back there."
"Hey really, this is allright. Thanks for stopping."
"Been waiting long?" Doc asked.
"No. Caught a ride with a farmer out of Wichita--dropped me off a few minutes ago." He must have noticed we were dressed for such an occasion for he added, "You going out to the rodeo?"

Doc smiled at me then turned the car out onto the highway. I pulled my hat brim lower to shade my eyes from the bright sun. "What rodeo is that?" I asked.
"Up by Cimarron."
"We hadn't planned on it."
Doc asked, "What's your name son?"
"Stash Lone Tree."
I turned and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, Stash--Jackson Crane. This is Doc Tate."
Doc nodded. "You're going to the rodeo, Stash?"
"I thought I'd take in a day or two."
"You're traveling then?"
"Yeah."
"Just seeing the country?"
"Right. And getting away from the books for awhile."
"Where do you go to school?" I asked.
"University of Montana, in Missoula."
"We're going to Montana."
"Really."
"Yes. Missoula must be a nice place."
"Yeah, it's alright I guess."
"What are you studying?"
"I want to be a teacher."

"Well that's fine. We need good teachers. What's your subject area?"

"I'm majoring in history."

There was a mild manner about Stash. His voice was deep and his brief responses came in a soft yet firm tone. As he spoke, his eyes met mine only momentarily, then he would look down, perhaps out of shyness, or maybe that was a habit of his quiet nature.

I opened a box of Ritz crackers I had bought for snacking and offered them to Stash and Doc, who each took a handful.

"Hey thanks," Stash said. "I really appreciate the ride."
"We're glad to have your company," Doc said. "I bet you're getting a good education just traveling like this, it's a good way to learn."

"It's fun."

I said, "Doc and I were just talking about how folks are on the move today. You young people certainly have a lot of opportunities nowadays."
Stash only nodded. He ate the crackers, popping them in his mouth two at a time. When he had finished the handful, I offered the box to him again. "No, thanks," he said.

"Are you from Missoula, Stash?" Doc said.

"No, I'm from Browning."

"Browning...I was through there once, on the way to Glacier Park. Browning is just east of there isn't it?"

"About 15 miles."

"You're a Blackfoot?"

"Blackfeet. My mother was fullblood. My father was a mixture of a lot of things I guess."

"That's a beautiful park--Glacier. My wife and I stayed at Swift Current Lodge for several days one summer. We loved it."

"It's nice country," Stash said.

"As I remember, Browning is on the plains. It must get cold there in the winter."

"Cold for sure, and windy. My stepfather lost 17 head of cattle in one blizzard last winter. Dropped hay when they could from the air but couldn't get to all of them."

"I remember that drive from Browning to East Glacier," Doc said. "The contrast just hits you in the eyes. I really remember those mountains--like they were cut out of cardboard--so flat and rugged."

The wind began to blow harder; the gold wheat rioted in the fields. It was difficult to hear in the open car as wind
whipped around us, so we drove without conversation for a while. Doc hummed to himself. I glanced at Stash as I looked back over the prairie and he stared intently at the land. I wondered about the rigid scar on his cheek, and I wondered what it was like to grow up Indian in a land where it was no longer possible to live according to the old Indian ways. They had lived with the land before the white man came to tame it, and they had known the independence Doc and I had talked about—but they struggled to find it again, in a new way. It was a brutal thing to do, putting them on reservations. It seemed to me society has a way of backing misfits into a corner—until they finally lay down and die, like Julien LeBlanc—or fight until they find their rightful place. I wished then that I knew Stash LoneTree better. I was curious about many things that I thought I shouldn't ask, even little things I had wondered about before—like, who did he root for in those western movies when he was a kid?

The sun dropped lower in front of us and the wind died down a little by the time we reached the junction at Greenburg. Doc said, "You know, Stash, Jackson and I tried our hand at hitchhiking yesterday, near Dallas, before we bought this car."

"Really?"

"Sure."

I was embarrassed when Doc went on to tell Stash how we had left the Manor. Stash seemed amused.
"So I guess that makes us rebels," Doc continued, "if you could call two old fogies taking a powder from a nursing home rebels. But rebels with a cause," he mused, "'cause we were tired of being handled like antiques in a dusty attic."

Stash grinned. "I guess there's all kinds of rebels."

I glanced at Doc and he was smiling. I knew he had taken a liking to Stash, or he wouldn't have shared those details of our adventure with him. And even with but that brief exchange, it seemed we both felt the curious bond linking us with our quiet passenger.
We rode into Dodge amid heavy five o'clock traffic.

"Hey, thanks again for the ride," Stash said. "Could I buy you guys a cup of coffee or a beer?"

Doc looked at me. "How about it, Jackson? A beer sounds pretty good to me right now."

"I could sure go for one myself," I said.

Doc pulled up to the wooden posts in front of a tavern called the Hanging Tree Saloon. A sign in front advertised over a thousand silver dollars inside. They must have all been there too, though I didn't count them, in glass frames that hung over a long speckled mirror behind the bar.

It was cool as we stepped inside, smokey and too dark to see at first. It smelled of beer and sawdust, and when I walked, I realized a layer of sawdust cushioned my steps. There were several small round tables scattered about the room. Three men in business suits sat at one table near the door, joking with the young barmaid. One man had his hand around her waist and another stared intently at her shapely thighs as her short skirt hiked over the tops of her black
mesh stockings. She reached to tighten a ribbon in her cinnamon hair, then gave her head a quick toss so the hair fluttered and settled in loose swirls over one shoulder.

The only others in the room, besides the roundfaced bartender, were two young men in cowboy attire who must have been there for some time. They leaned on cues, on the pool table at the end of the room, or on each other; whooping and hollering as each missed a pocket--or made one by sheer accident. One lamp hung low over the pool table and the rest of the long room was only dimly lit by colored neon beer signs along the walls, and a row of small bulbs that shone on the bottles behind the bar. In a corner in back of the pool table, a jukebox cranked out a country song to the inattentive audience.

We sat at the bar on high wooden stools. The roundfaced bartender set his cigarette on the edge of the bar and bounced toward us.

"What'll it be gents." His red bow tie might have been clipped to the loose skin on his neck; they jiggled in unison as he spoke.

"Three schooners," Stash said. He opened his wallet and laid a five dollar bill on the bar.

The bartender returned with two schooners, then another, and laid three dollar bills and a fifty cent piece in front
of Stash. He went to retrieve his cigarette, but it had already burned another brown wedge in the polished wood.

"Here's to you," Doc said, raising his glass to Stash. We all took a drink. "So you're going to the rodeo tomorrow."

Stash said, "Yeah, I enjoy them. I used to race a lot, even rode bulls a couple of times. Spent last summer on crutches though and I decided to be a spectator from now on. Hey, why don't you guys come with me?"

"Oh, I don't think so," I said. "Thanks."

Doc was shaking his head, "We're kind of anxious to keep moving."

In the mirror across from us, I could see the three men at the table. They were ribbing each other and snickering as they watched the bar maid strut across the room with another pitcher of beer for the two cowboys at the pool table. She sat the pitcher beside another half full one at a small table, reached for a cigarette in a pack that lay there, and lit it. "Mind if I have one of your smokes, Mulley?" she asked.

The taller of the two cowboys looked up. He was stretching over the pool table with the cue poised. "Help yourself."

The cue snapped and balls cracked together on the table. The other cowboy, who wore a straw hat similar to my own, whooped with joy.

"Piss," Mulley said, slamming his cue against the green felt.
"Easy on the furniture!" the bartender shouted.

The girl moved slowly to the table and leaned against it. She drew heavily on the cigarette and blew smoke rings to the hanging lamp. "You losing again, Mulley? You'll owe me for another pitcher."

"Hell no," Mulley said. I'm three up. Rip couldn't hit a mule in the ass with that stick."

Rip cocked his hat and aimed.

The jukebox had stopped playing and the new quiet made the dark room seem somber. Stash took the fifty cent piece from the bar and walked over to the girl. He handed her the coin and nodded toward the jukebox. "You have any favorites?"

"Sure. honey," she said. "Thanks."

Mulley stood with his hands on his hips. His eyes were hard on Stash. "Hold on there, Buck," he said. "The lady wants to hear a song--she knows who to ask."

Stash shrugged. The barmaid turned flippantly, dropped the coin in the jukebox and punched several buttons on the lighted panel.

"Guess you can get the next run," Stash said.

Mulley was moving around the table and Rip stood leaning on his cue. Mulley said, "You injuns getting too damned big for your breechcloths."

I saw Stash's shoulders grow taunt. His feet were spread, planted firmly in the sawdust, and his arms hung rigid at his
sides. He reminded me of one of the dark iron derricks I had seen in Oklahoma. Then he turned and his black eyes were fierce, but he took a step toward us.

The three men at the table had stopped laughing. They were all watching Stash who seemed to be fighting an impulse deep within himself. He sucked in a long breath and took another step. Mulley moved to the end of the pool table.

"Hey, Rip," he said, taunting for all of us to hear, "Here's your chance. Let's see if you can hit a mule in the ass with that stick."

Stash whirled like the lightning that had flashed in his eyes. I heard his big hand smack against the side of Mulley's face. Mulley slammed against the table and dropped on his knees to the floor. Stash turned to Rip, but not in time to avoid a blow from the butt end of the cue that glanced off his shoulder and scuffed the top of his head. He grabbed the cue and jerked it from Rip's hands, then his fist hooked with a dull thud in Rip's stomach. Rip groaned, but the sick sound was cut short as Stash's fingers locked into a solid knot, then shot up like a club catching Rip under the chin with a force that sent him toppling backwards onto the pool table.

I saw Mulley on his feet again, coming at Stash from behind. I stood up, but Doc's hand grabbed my shirt sleeve. "Let him do it," Doc said.
Stash pivoted just as Mulley swung. The blow sent him sprawling under the table where the pitchers sat. He shook his head, then his arm flung the table aside and the pitchers went sailing, splashing beer in a trail across the sawdust. He was on his feet as Mulley rushed him, but the bulk of Mulley's weight met his and they both hit the floor, wrestling as they rolled over each other. Mulley wrenched loose and jumped up, lashing at Stash's head with his boot, but Stash blocked the blows with one arm and latched onto the leg. He twisted his weight against it and Mulley buckled to the floor. Stash was up first this time and he brought Mulley with him, clutching the front of Mulley's shirt tight around his neck with one hand. The punch came up solid, and I could see Mulley's wide eyes for an instant before the blow sent him plunging against the bar. A stool shattered beneath him; he winced, then slumped in the wreckage, heaving for breath. Stash stood over him; poised, waiting. There was no sign of emotion on his face. His fist still clutched what had been the front of Mulley's shirt. Mulley made no effort to get up.

I glanced to see if Rip was up again, but he lay sprawled on the pool table, his head soaking in a puddle of his own vomit. Stash dropped the wad of shirt material to the floor and walked over to his stool beside us. He sat for a while, his lungs working hard to regain lost breath, his head down, and one arm steadying himself against the bar.
The girl leaned casually against the wailing machine. She took a last drag from the cigarette, let it fall from her fingers, then twisted the butt into the sawdust with her pointed shoe. She blew a cloud of smoke and her limpid eyes followed as it drifted toward the lamp.

The three men talked in hushed voices.

"Do you want to go?" I asked.

Stash shook his head. "I haven't finished my beer."

His lower lip bled and I could see a spot of matter hair where the cue must have glanced.

The bartender's chins bounced in front of us and jiggled his tie. "Don't worry," he said. "I saw it all. They'll pay for everything. You boys want another beer?"

One man at the table unfolded a bill and waved it over his head. He shouted, "Good fight, Buck. Give'em another round, Charlie. Give 'em all another round."

"Damn," Stash muttered. He gulped his beer and bolted for the door.
The next morning was almost cloudy, hazy clouds that strained the sun but didn't dampen the intense heat, and they held no rain, at least not for the sunburnt prairie we traveled. We had talked Stash into staying the night in Dodge and he rode with us as far as Cimarron that morning, excited by the prospects of a good time at the rodeo. I drove on to Syracuse, on the Arkansas River nearing the Colorado border. The thin clouds had melted and the temperature was nearly 100 degrees according to the service station thermometer when we stopped there for gas. It wasn't yet noon.

Doc leaned against the door frame while I went inside to find a drinking fountain. "I don't know," he said, dabbing beads of perspiration from his forehead with a hankiechief, "we're going to have to start getting up earlier or else get us a car with an airconditioner."

"Ours is about as air-conditioned as you can get," I said.

"Sure, but you could bake a cake in this air."
"We should be getting to the mountains pretty soon shouldn't we?"

"We'll see them alright, but we won't be climbing much until we get to Colorado Springs."

"How far is that?"

"Oh, I'd say a good five or six hour drive from here."

"Wheew."

"Yeah," Doc said. "It'll be a scorcher too."

I found a fountain and took a drink, then thinking of the drive ahead, I drank my fill of the cold water. Doc was standing behind me, waiting for a turn.

"What do you say we lay off this afternoon, Jackson, maybe find a good spot somewhere around here to rest and then head for Colorado Springs after dinner."

"Sounds good to me. Any ideas where to go?"

"I'll ask the attendant."

A short while later we were sitting in the shade in a small park the attendant had directed us to. We had stopped at a drive-in on the way for hamburgers and milkshakes to take with us. It was pleasant there, a good place for a picnic I thought; two city blocks of tree shaded lawns and flowers—but it was noisy, for nearby a hundred small children ran this way and that; splashing, kicking, running through a shallow wading pool that spurted dark green water from the mouth of a giant cement turtle in the middle; and they squealed
and shouted, "Watch me, Mama--Mommie, look at me!" to the surrounding ring of young mothers who lay in the sun reading paperback books; or to those who sat under umbrellas with curlers in their hair, watching babies, eating potato chips, and drinking pop from cans. Near the pool, a harried young man was doing a land-office business selling sno-cones and ice cream bars from the box cooler built over the back of a motor bike.

I opened the white sack and set out our milkshakes, then took out the wrapped burgers and handed one to Doc. He laid it on the grass beside him and leaned back against a huge maple tree; intent on the activity at the pool.

"Aren't you hungry, Doc?"

"What?" he asked absently, still watching.

"The heat kill your appetite?"

"Oh...no." He looked at the hamburger beside him as if he had just noticed it was there.

As I bit into my hamburger my top dentures slid and mustard squirted over my chin. "Fiddlesticks!" I exclaimed, reaching for a napkin.

"What?"

"I said fiddlesticks."

"Oh."

I wiped my chin. "Doc, did I miss something over there?" I scanned the ring of shapely tanned figures about the pool,
and there were several worthy of attention, but it didn't seem proper for both of us to stare, a notion confirmed by a hefty gal who frowned at me from under her rollers and pulled a beach towel over her rotund middle.

"I'm sorry," Doc said. "I was looking at the water."

He stuck a straw through the plastic cover on his milkshake and unwrapped his hamburger.

"Looking at the water..." I said skeptically.

"The color--or chlorine--whatever they've got in it that makes it so green. It reminded me of the beach below Santa Barbara where I met Carla."

"Your wife."

"Yes."

I sipped my milkshake. Doc was eating his hamburger, taking small bites and chewing slowly, his eyes fixed on the ground. He seemed bound to his memories, and that was unusual for Doc.

When he finished eating I said, "You haven't talked about Carla very much."

His eyes flickered and his mouth curled up a little at the corners. His voice was mellow and distant as he began to speak. "I loved her very much. I didn't think I could ever live without her...didn't think I would want to." He paused and went on, "I was twenty when I got out of the service--set out for California to work a summer before going to school."
I ended up in Santa Barbara two weeks later, nearly broke—Uncle Hank was holding the money he'd saved for me to go to school on. So I worked around the fishing boats; scrubbing oil, mending nets, unloading sardines until I saw silver flashes and smelled the stink even in my dreams. I went down to the beach one afternoon I had free—it was sunny, warm but cooled by the ocean breeze. I had a favorite cove for swimming—usually wasn't anyone else there. But that afternoon I heard them laughing as I walked the path toward the bank—and I watched them for a minute before I slid down to the beach. Three girls; Mexicans. They chattered in Spanish I couldn't understand. I remember how their dark eyes flashed and long black hair clung to their brown faces when their heads bobbed out of the water: Carla was the oldest of the three, not quite seventeen then."

Doc took a drink of his milkshake and continued, "I sat on the beach for a long time. They didn't seem to pay any attention to me and finally they swam down the beach a ways and left. Two days later I went back to swim, I liked to just float in the shallow pools, mainly to watch the starfish and hermit crabs, and I'd look for shells that caught my eye—it was a whole beautiful world in those pools, different from anything I had ever seen. The ocean fascinated me, always has. Then I turned around once and Carla was there, alone this time, sitting on the beach watching me. I must have
looked surprised--she was laughing. I motioned for her to come in since I wasn't sure if she spoke English. We waded around for a while, picking up shells and rocks, showing them to each other. Then she asked my name in broken English.

Several times Doc's head turned and he would pause to look at the pool, as if the vision in his mind reflected from the green water. He went on, "We sat on the beach and talked for a while. I gave her a mussel shell, a little shell with bright blue and red ridges--I thought it looked like the skirts of a Spanish dancer--I thought she would like it."

He glanced at me and smiled, but his lower lip quivered and his eyes were wet. He turned to look at the pool, pulling the handkerchief from his pocket to dry his eyes. "I went back every day that week, almost lost my job too. She was always there and finally she told me why--they had run away. The other two girls were cousins, but they went back to their family after that first night--migrant workers up from Ensenada to pick lemons. Carla would not go back, she swore she would never go back. She came to live with me then. We wanted to get married but she was afraid they would sent her back to Ensenada. We had a scuffle with the authorities, finally got her citizenship and then we were married. Married 46 years...46 good years. While I was in college she took courses--she was sharp, learned quickly. She got her high school diploma and took a job--helped me get through law school."
"Law school?" I couldn't help but show my surprise.
"Yes."
"But I thought...they said you were a doctor."
"Who?" Doc asked.
"At the Manor...and you told me your uncle..."
"Uncle Hank? Oh he wanted me to be a doctor. I was working toward that for a while, but I got bogged down in chemistry my junior year--hated it with a passion. I got interested in law after the scuffle over Carla's citizenship--a lot of people like her were getting pretty raw deals, that's why I went back to California to practice."
"Well," I said, "that's sure news to me. Here I thought you were a doctor all along. I guess I just assumed...and then you never did say you weren't."
Doc smiled. "A man doesn't usually go around telling folks what he isn't, now does he."
"I guess not."
Doc took off his hat and laid it on the ground before him, smoothed back his silver hair, then leaned his head back against the tree and sighed. "Oh those years were good, Jackson, such good years. You know, I found that shell later, that same little blue and red mussel I gave Carla the day we met. I didn't know she kept it all that time. She even took it with her to the home. I found it in a little box after she died--in a little silver box wrapped in cotton."
I looked at Doc. His eyes were nearly shut, a smile creased his lips.

"You say Carla died in a home?" I asked.

Doc's head jerked up. His jaw tightened. "Yes," he said gravely, "Carla died in a nursing home--supposedly the best to be found. She had a weak heart. Got along fine with the medication for several years, but her health dwindled until she couldn't care for herself. I hired a nurse to live with us but finally Carla grew weaker and I was afraid. I decided she needed closer attention...and I thought she would have it. A month later she was dead, carelessly given an overdose of Lanoxin--the medication she took to even her pulse--it speeded up her heart and exhausted it."

"I'm sorry, Doc."

He nodded and looked towards the pool, but I could see a scowl crossing his face. I watched Doc for a long time and his expression didn't change. I could tell he was tense, like I had only seen him once before--the day we left the Manor. I thought over Doc's account of Carla's death and wondered why he hadn't ever talked about his law practice in the weeks we had roomed together. Then suddenly I remembered seeing him, chatting in the garden at the Manor; and later, making the tedious notes on the yellow legal pads I assumed were memoirs. And I remembered his suitcase, the heavy case he carried all
the way to Dallas, and took with him to the office when he met with Minnie Langford.

My knee was stiff from sitting on the ground. I thought I might take a walk, but I was curious and bothered too; so I lay on my side, resting my head against my arm.

"Doc..."

"Yes, Jackson."

"Have you ever thought about writing a book, your life's story maybe?"

He looked puzzled, "I hadn't thought of it, no--haven't really had time I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I don't mean to pry into your personal affairs... but...are you after Mr. Preston?"

"After Preston?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Doc said. "I've told you action is being taken--but I'm really not free to discuss that now."

"That's not exactly what I mean."

Doc sat up. "Well what exactly do you mean?"

"I wouldn't even mention it if we weren't friends, Doc, I probably shouldn't anyway...but what you said about Carla--dying in a nursing home--is that why you're...taking action."

"Oh, I see," he said, smiling. "I see what's bothering you."
"Like I said, I don't mean to pry--it just doesn't seem like you, that's all."

"Thank you, Jackson. You know you're a good friend, you really are. And I'm not out to get Preston--not for revenge because of what happened to Carla anyway. Oh, I was angry--very angry and upset for a while--anyone would be. But I haven't set any targets, not for that reason. You see, it's complicated, frustrating too. Sometimes you couldn't pinpoint a target if you wanted to. Carla died in a private nursing home in California; maybe it was really nobody's fault...and at the same time, everybody's fault. The home was improperly staffed. Oh, they were careful to point out the professionals when I went to inquire about taking Carla there. The fact was, the professionals could have been counted on your hand. As I learned later, it was usually the unskilled attendants who were in charge of actual patient care. The real tragedy is that there are hundreds of homes like that, and worse. You must have read about them in the papers--patients living in filth, being misfed or starved, homes that are virtual fire-traps--even direct abuse of patients to keep them from reporting incidents to authorities."

"I've heard of those things. It's hard to believe a person could do that--take advantage of another person's sickness or suffering. It's horrible to think of, isn't it."

"Yes it is. Terrible. Disgusting. Of course, there are a lot of fine nursing homes too, really good homes where
patients are well cared for and as happy as they can be made to be, like it should be. We need those kinds of homes—I needed one for Carla. I'm sorry I wasn't more careful."

There was a long pause. Finally I said, "Well, I could use a walk to shake down that hamburger. How about you?"

"Sure," Doc said. He got up and looked around. "Didn't I lay my hat down somewhere?"

I glanced to the big tree. "I thought you set it right there beside you."

"I did...I think."

"I don't think the wind could have carried it."

Doc walked around the tree and I searched the area. Then I saw it coming towards us, atop a little boy whose whole head fit neatly inside. Doc saw him too, and was chuckling aloud. As the boy approached, he pushed the hat up over his forehead. I noticed his eyes nearly matched the bright blue swimsuit he wore. He looked to be about four years old. He stopped a few feet away and stared up at us, grinning shyly.

"Howdy, sport," Doc said.

"My name's Tod."

"Well then howdy, Tod."

"Howdy. Are you a cowboy?"

Doc laughed. "I might be—if I had a hat."

"Where's your horse."
"Tod!" The voice came from near the pool. We glanced up and saw a young woman looking our way, shading her eyes with a newspaper.

"That's my Mama," Tod said. "I'm supposed to give you back your hat. She said I'm sorry." He handed the hat to Doc who took it, set it on his head, and patted it neatly in place.

"Thank you, Tod," Doc said. "I tell you what, why don't we go over and ask your Mama if it would be okay for me to buy you an ice-cream."

We walked with Tod to where his mother sat, introduced ourselves, and chatted while Tod went to the ice cream wagon. A few minutes later he returned with chocolate already sliding off his chin to his bare belly. Doc sat down near the pool and the boy sat beside him. I excused myself, for my knee was still nagging and I needed a walk to loosen it up. I could hear Doc and the boy talking as I walked away.

"Now then, Tod, I was going to tell you about a horse I had one time named Fig."

"Fig ain't no horse name."

"Well, Fig wasn't just a regular horse..."

I walked for fifteen or twenty minutes and when I returned, Doc was still sitting by the pool. Several giggling children crowded around him and a number of their mothers had moved closer to where he sat. I went back to the maple tree and
leaned against it, listening to Doc. I was happy to see him, telling stories as he loved to do, and always did so well. A few minutes later I dozed off.

When I woke, Doc was sleeping against the other side of the tree. I looked at my watch and it was after three o'clock. A few minutes later Doc sat up and looked at me with groggy eyes. I said, "I guess we ought to move along before we get arrested for vagrancy."

Doc stretched. "I suppose so. Maybe we could go have a cup of coffee and kind of work our way into dinner. We should get on the road before it gets too late."

I stood up and brushed the dust from the back of my pants. "There's something I've been wondering, Doc."

"What now?"

"Is your real name Doc?"

"No, it's Matthew, my uncle Hank tagged me Doc when I was a kid--because I used to doctor the animals and such."

"My uncle-Uncle Moss--he was a great one for nicknames too. He used to call me Hat."

"That's a strange name," Doc said.

"I know. One other thing I wanted to ask you." "Yes."

"I fell asleep before I heard the end of the story about Freddie."

"Freddie, my pet rattlesnake?"
"That's it."

"Well, Freddie used to put his tail in his mouth so he could sneak up on people without rattling all over the place--'course he had to roll then, he couldn't slither along with his tail in his mouth."

"I heard that part, but what finally happened to him?"

"Oh, well, my cousin Oliver saw him rollin' along one day and thought he'd make a fine wheel for his covered wagon."

"Yes..."

"And Freddie drowned a week later while Oliver was fording a river out in Washington. We named the river after him."

"The Freddie River? I've never heard of it."

"No, Jackson, the Snake River."
It wasn't much cooler driving that evening. A hot wind whimpered over the prairie and kindled the sun to burnt orange. It seemed we would drive right into that sun, lured like moths to the flame of a candle. More than once I thought I saw the mountains rise behind the flat farmland of eastern Colorado, but then they would dance crazily, like colored vapors from a sorcerer's vial, only to appear again in another variation, in another place. Mirages. Optical illusions distorting your sensibilities—you know the hen house in the distance couldn't be bigger than the red barn; you're not sure about illusory clumps of trees: but you know there are supposed to be mountains in Colorado.

It was nearly dusk when we finally saw them. The hunkering purple shadows settled, and shaggy snow-capped peaks towered, still a hundred miles in the distance. We drove on toward Pueblo, where huge steel mill furnaces glowed red against the dark sky. Then we turned north once more to the smooth Interstate Highway 35. An hour later, the great plains gave way to the base of the Rockies; we were in Colorado.
Springs, looking forward to a good night's rest breathing cool, mile-high air. I thought I would like the trail-driving business much better from there on. Those magnificent Rocky Mountains well suited my vision of what would be in store for us in Montana.

That next morning still burns in my memory. It was the morning I met Loretta Heatherton: "Ms. Heatherton," as she said it, with a whole mouthful of z's on the Ms."

Doc and I had an early breakfast of steak and eggs in a fine old restaurant called the Cripple Creek Inn, and set out north from Colorado Springs to enjoy the glorious scenery in the cool of the day. We hoped to make it to Sheridan, Wyoming, by nightfall; almost to Montana. It must have been the new atmosphere, or perhaps some curious intuition of what was to come, that made me don my black Stetson hat with the tooled silver band for the first time since I'd purchased it in Dallas. And I wore a new outfit too, blue slacks with a slight flare to fit over my boots, and a light blue shirt with lone stars stitched in each side of the collar. Doc wore a light western-cut suit, and a string tie knotted by a large turquoise stone. I think we would have been readily admitted to any Hollywood movie lot that day.

Doc took the first shift behind the wheel. He said he just felt like driving, but I suspected he noticed how the mountains captivated my attention, and feared we might glide
down the side of one hill while I gazed up another instead of watching the highway.

We were cruising comfortably, a few miles past Castle Rock, when I saw steam rolling out from under a new red Thunderbird stalled on the shoulder of the highway. At first I thought it was on fire when the steam billowed in white puffs resembling clouds of smoke. A lady, beautifully disgusted, was kicking the front tire of the car. I was sympathetic with her plight at once, for that is exactly how I handled such situations with the long string of automobiles I have owned over the years. Beyond a bit of basic terminology that one naturally picks up while paying for gas, my knowledge of the workings of the combustion engine could be inscribed in bold ink print on the palm of your hand. Of course, I would never admit that to a lady in distress.

Doc jerked the Mustang to a quick stop behind the car. We hopped out and I went to calm the distraught lady while Doc moved cautiously toward the hood of the angry Thunderbird.

The lady was lovely in her frustration. Her violet eyes flickered under long nervous lashes, enhanced by light violet eye shadow. Her nose was almost too large for her delicate face, but her square mouth, with but a splash of light lipstick around the fine white teeth, seemed to compensate for that one structural flaw. Her facial skin had loosened with her years, but the years had been kind, and the soft lines only added to
her pleasant mature appearance. Her black hair, garnished with frosty streaks, was short and jutted in crisp lines across her tanned forehead. She was tall and slender, dressed in an expensive looking suit, exactly violet like her eyes. Her legs and ankles tapered neatly into leather heeled shoes, slightly scuffed on the toes where they had met the dusty front tire of her car. I wouldn't have believed then that she could be the grandmother of two college-aged boys.

She moved toward me with a distressed smile creasing her lips. I could smell the light scent of her lilac perfume. "Oh," she huffed, "of all the times for that automobile to act up."

I said, "Now don't worry ma'm. We'll take care of it." I took her arm and hugged her toward the rear of the car, wanting no part of a possible explosion. I took off my hat. "My name's Jackson Crane."

"How do you do, Mr. Crane," she said, touching my hand lightly. "I'm Ms. Heatherton."

"Pleased to meet you Mrs. Heatherton."

"Ms. Heatherton," she corrected.

"Ms. Heatherton," I repeated.

"I do appreciate you stopping. I hope it's no inconvenience."

"Not at all. We're glad to help out."
She glanced to the car. Doc had raised the hood and was leaning over the fender. Steam drifted in light puffs, fading quickly in the air.

"Do you think it's anything serious?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing. You probably just have a little crack in the carburetor--could even be a bubble in the water pump. We'll have a look, you wait right here."

I went to the front of the car and peered in to see what Doc was doing. "What did you find?" I asked.

"There's a little leak in the radiator, water's still dripping out."

I moved closer to look.

"Don't touch that cap!" Doc warned. "It's boiling."

"Can we fix it?"

"We'll have to get some water. I think we can plug up the leak enough so she can get in to a station. You don't happen to have any chewing gum?"

"Very funny, Doc. Just wait until your teeth go."

"I just need something to temporarily plug the leak."

"Oh."

I stood up and called, "Just as I thought Mrs. -Ms. Heatherton, your water."

She came over and stood by me, smiling politely at Doc. I said, "Ms. Heatherton, this is Doc Tate."

"How do you do, Doctor."
"Doc," he said. "Happy to meet you."

"I do thank you both for stopping."

"Not at all," Doc said. "We're going to have to get some water. We could drive back to Castle Rock."

"But my things...if you wouldn't mind terribly, I'd rather wait."

"Certainly," I said, "no trouble. Doc can just go on in and I'll keep you company here."

"How nice, thank you Mr. Crane. I don't really like being out here alone--you just never know these days."

"A busy highway is no place for an attractive lady to be stranded," I said.

Doc scowled at me. He said, "I think we have a container in the trunk. Grab the keys will you, Jackson."

Doc opened our trunk and chuckled out loud. "From a distance, Jackson, I would say you have--how did Shakespeare put it--a lean and hungry look. I noticed she isn't wearing a ring."

My face felt flush. "Never mind," I said, "Oh, don't be in any big hurry. I'm almost positive there were no stations closer than Castle Rock."

Doc took a plastic container from the trunk and slammed the lid. "It's incredible what this mountain air will do for you."

Ms. Heatherton turned, "I beg your pardon?"
Doc said, "I was just mentioning to Jackson how fresh the air seems this morning."

"Oh yes," she said, "it's marvelous isn't it--so invigorating." Her eyes scaled the mountains.

Doc threw the container on the seat and got in the car. He winked at me. "I'll probably have to drive clear back to Castle Rock," he shouted deliberately.

I waved as he turned the car and drove off, then I walked back to the Thunderbird. "Well, Mrs... I mean Ms. Heatherton."

"Please, call me Loretta," she interrupted. "I can't really get used to that Ms. nonsense either--it's my daughter's idea. She thinks it's distinctive. I guess I'm not up to par with you men today anyway, at least not when it comes to fixing cars." She smiled sweetly.

"Well, Loretta, you just need a little technical knowhow. They're complicated machines. I even have trouble myself sometimes."

"You gentlemen certainly came along at the right time." She was still smiling as she walked to the front of the car. I felt awkward, standing there beside the highway.

"Would you want to get out of the sun?" I suggested, motioning to the car.

"I wouldn't want people to keep stopping. Why don't you close this hood and we can just sort of relax here, like we were looking at the scenery."
"Fine, good idea."

I pulled the hood shut then sat on the railing at the edge of the highway. She leaned against a fender, gazing up at the mountains. I looked at her long slender legs.

"They are lovely, aren't they," she said.

"Oh yes...very nice."

Suddenly I felt embarrassed to be staring at her. I glanced up, relieved to find that she hadn't noticed.

"You're from Texas," she said.

I laughed. "Did my hat give me away so easily?"

"No--your car license. You're vacationing?"

"We're going to Montana."

"That's quite a trip."

"It's been fun. And you?"

She turned and leaned with her back to the car, looking at me. The sun sparkled silver in her hair and beamed from the pale rose tint on her cheeks. I was even surprised at myself, that I could be so infatuated by this woman I scarcely knew. I felt a slight twinge in my stomach, a giddiness—but I had almost come to expect those old feelings to come creeping back too, like so many others had since we left the Manor. I had felt the vital juices seeping back into my veins from those deep ponds, dormant, but not drained. Only the knee reminded me of my convalescence, but that nuisance had nagged me most of my life. I felt happy then. I almost
wished a flat tire on Doc, even good old Doc, the best friend a man could have.

She said, "I'm driving to Denver." She glanced down at the dainty gold watch on her wrist. "Oh dear, I'm going to be terribly late. I was to meet Harold by ten. I'll have to stop and call as soon as I get to a phone. He gets so upset with me when I'm late."


She might have noted my disappointment, for the answer came quickly, "My son-in-law, Harold Taber. They're in Denver for a bar convention; he and my daughter Christina. They're both attorneys, partners--Taber and Taber. I live with them in Colorado Springs."

"How nice."

"Yes, they're very generous with me."

"I mean it's nice they're partners like that, a man and wife team."

She smiled. "They work very well together. I'm proud of them both."

"You have a right to be."

She looked down at her watch again and rubbed her hands together, then she paced for a moment beside the car, glancing up occasionally as though she were making some weighty decision which somehow could involve me. Suddenly she stopped and
opened the case. She took out a long cigarette and placed it awkwardly between her lips, then hovered over the bag again until she found a book of matches. She struck a match and held it to the cigarette, but the wind snuffed the flame. She tried again, and again the flame expired too soon.

It was amusing to watch, for she appeared as clumsy as a child behind some deserted shed, trying a hand at tobacco for the first time. I started to get up, to offer my assistance, but almost by accident she had cupped her hand as she struck a third match and the white tip glowed briefly in the flame and receded from a ring of grey tobacco. She puffed once and sent a thin trail of smoke between her lips. She glanced at me again. "Oh, I beg your pardon," she said, as though she had made yet another flaw in the process. "Do you smoke?"

"No thanks--unless you have a cigar stowed in there somewhere."

She grinned. "I'm afraid not."

She shut the door and returned to her place across from me, leaning against the hood of the car. For a minute, she nursed the cigarette, but it seemed foreign with her, like a medicine rather than a pacifier. Then before a third of it had burned, she dropped it to the road, pressed it with her shoe, and kicked a bit of gravel over it. Like a cat in a litter box, the whole ritual had seemed painstakingly necessary but undignified: to be accomplished quickly, then concealed.
Her eyes shifted to the highway. "Do you think he'll be back soon."

"Sure," I said, "but he hasn't been gone very long."
She grinned. "Of course. You must think I'm being childish, fretting like this."

"Not at all."

"Well I am, I suppose. Sometimes I even feel like a child. They're so...protective."

"Your children?"

"Yes. It was all I could do to convince them I could drive up myself this morning instead of going with them yesterday. I guess they think I'm not capable. And now this..." Her eyelids dropped.

I reached for her hand. It was soft, a little wrinkled. I had been wanting to touch her. "Come on," I said, "sit down over here."

She sat beside me and folded her hands in her lap. "Well," she said apologetically, "here I am telling you my troubles and I hardly know you. It's silly isn't it, and your being so kind."

"It's not silly at all. I don't mind."

She clapped her hands as if to signal her intent to change the subject. She looked up at the mountains again. "I've always wanted to climb up there some time," she said. "Three years I've lived here in Colorado and I've never been up there.
It must be as beautiful looking down. I've heard you can see all the way to Kansas. I miss the prairie. Sometimes these mountains seem to close in...do you ever feel that way?"

"I don't know, I imagine I might if I lived here all the time."

"Maybe it's the same feeling some people have in elevators."

"Are you from Kansas originally?"

"We had a ranch by Augusta, near Wichita. My husband died four years ago. I couldn't keep up with the ranch so I sold everything but the house. I finally sold that too, when the kids talked me into coming to live with them."

"They must be very concerned about you."

"Oh yes. They have a lovely home--even a maid. Can you imagine that, with me there all day doing nothing. They hardly let me lift a finger."

"It sounds like you're a lucky woman."

"They're very good to me. I think they're happy to have me now that the boys are in college, my two grandsons. I'm going to spend the weekend with Christina and Harold in Denver. They'll be busy, of course, but at least it's a change. I do love to shop there." She pushed her hair back from her forehead but it fell in place again, perfectly. "And you're on your way to Montana."
"Yes, we sure are," I said. "We're in no hurry though, just kind of taking it easy. In fact, we came up through Wichita a couple of days ago. It's been a nice drive, hot though."

"I can well imagine."

"Say, we'll probably be in Denver for a while. Why don't you have lunch with us this afternoon?"

She looked disappointed. "I'm afraid I can't today. There's a luncheon at the hotel, I told Christina I'd go with them."

"Well, how about tomorrow?"

"Why yes, thank you Mr. Crane. I'd be delighted."

Another half hour passed before Doc returned. Loretta had glanced at her watch a dozen times and I was even getting a bit concerned myself. When Doc drove up I hurried to meet him.

"I said take your time, Doc, but I didn't mean you had to go clear back to Colorado Springs. Couldn't you find a station?"

"Sure," he said in a hushed voice, "one back about half a mile." He grinned slyly. "They had awful slow running water. I won a cup of coffee playing cribbage with the attendant while I waited."

"I appreciate that. But after all, I'm just old, not dead. I haven't lost the ol' touch."
"Then I assume we are to lunch with her in Denver this afternoon," he said.

"Not exactly."

Doc looked surprised. "She turned you down?"

"She already had an engagement for lunch with her daughter and son-in-law."

"That's too bad, but cheer up, Jackson. Like they say, there are more fish in the sea."

"We're having lunch with her tomorrow."

"But...why not dinner tonight then?"

"I didn't think of that."

Doc shook his head.

I said, "I know, we were going to Sheridan today. Let's talk about it later. Right now we'd better see if we can get that car running. The lady has an appointment to keep."
"Jove around the roses—she's prettier than a speckled pullet's behind."

Doc looked at me and shook his head. "Get in the car, Jackson, before you trip over your own feet and hurt yourself."

Loretta waved and pulled out on the highway. I watched her car vanish ahead, then reached for the empty water container, thinking that Papa's old expression certainly was appropriate, even if Doc didn't think so. I got in the car and Doc started it. We were off again—but now our destination was Denver, little more than a half hour's drive ahead. I looked at Doc apprehensively. "You're not angry, are you?"

He laughed his full hearty laugh. "Angry about having to go to lunch with a pretty woman? I can think of worse fates, believe me."

"But it is going to interrupt our plans—set us back a day."

"Oh that doesn't matter, there's plenty to do in Denver for a while. I've always wanted to visit the mint for one thing."
"Say, that reminds me, Doc, I'm nearly out of cash again. We'd better stop at another bank somewhere so I can get a check cashed."

Doc nodded. We turned out to the highway and soon were close behind Loretta.

I said, "She is pretty, isn't she."

"A good looking woman, Jackson."

"Nice too. She seems like a wonderful person. You'll like her."

"I thought she seemed pleasant," Doc said.

"Can you imagine her with two grandsons in college--she looks so young to me. Maybe it's just that I'm getting so old they all look good."

"Well, she's no spring chicken--but then she's pretty well preserved, I'll admit that."

"You think that radiator will hold until she gets to Denver?"

"I'm sure it will. We'll be right behind her anyway."

"I appreciate what you did, Doc."

"What did I do--play a little cribbage--it was a short drive."

"Sure, and you fixed that leak while I stood around like a star-struck schoolboy."

Doc shrugged. "That's what friends are for, Jackson."
The highway widened to Interstate 25 and it seemed there were only more vehicles to fill the extra lanes; cars, trucks with campers, trailers of every shape and variety. It wasn't hard to imagine that tourism meant big business to a lot of folks in Colorado.

I said, "You know, Doc, it's funny how your perspective changes over the years."

"How's that?"

"Oh, I was just remembering how I used to look at anyone over 50 and think they were really ancient. Now I've passed that by a score and I don't feel as old as those folks looked to me then. A few weeks ago I felt old, now I just don't anymore. Does that make any sense?"

"It sure does."

"I'm glad I came along with you, Doc. I really think I was looking for an excuse to leave the Manor all along. I guess you knew that before I did."

Doc smiled. "It didn't take too much coaxing to get you out of there--even out the window."

"I guess not. It's funny how people are different. You take Lucas Riley. I think he feels right at home there. I used to play horseshoes with him almost every morning, then he'd be off to work on that little newspaper or organizing some kind of songfest or one of his club meetings. He loved to organize and I guess it's a perfect place for that. Those things bored me really. I don't know, when I think about it
I realize I'm just not the kind of person who can enjoy being with other old people. Like meeting Stash--do you know he's the first young person I've even talked to for a long time. It just doesn't seem right to be closed off like we were at the Manor, at least for me it doesn't seem right--maybe others are different."

"I think you're right, Jackson. Some folks seem to get along fine there--of course others don't have much choice, like Tillie and Wanda Winters."

"They can't care for themselves. It's just that there must be others, like I was, who convince themselves they need to be there. How can you keep up with the world. I think back now about the ladies with their quilts and covered bottles and paper flowers--always a bazaar to help come crippled childrens' hospital or to buy a kidney machine or whatever. They know why those bazaars are organized so regularly--they know who the real benefactors are. Maybe Papa had the right idea."

"What's that?" Doc asked.

"After Mama died he stayed in Kearney. Lillian and I tried to get him to come and live with us but he wouldn't--stayed right on the farm and worked it until the day he died. I worried about him, working so hard, but finally I decided that's what he wanted to do. He was lucky in a way, not ever having to retire like I did. What really struck me though,
when I'd go back to visit him, was that he never did hang around with the other older fellows who'd get together in Kearney, even the ones he'd known for years. He made new friends with the new neighbors as they came along. He used to say the only thing worse than an old woman is an old man. He never did seem like an old man to me either."

"I guess he wouldn't have lasted long at the Manor."

"That's for certain," I said. "I wonder if he would think Loretta is an old woman."

Doc laughed. "She seems to be pretty much on your mind."

I nodded in agreement.

"Did you happen to notice what she had in her car?" Doc asked.

"No, what?"

"I didn't see anything." Doc pushed back in the seat, stretching his arms against the steering wheel. "It just seemed strange that she was so reluctant to leave her car."

I thought for a moment. "I don't know. She wouldn't have told a couple of strangers anyway."

"I guess you're right," Doc said. "You did find out where she's staying?"

"The Kingsford Hotel. I've got the address written down. But we probably won't be able to stay there. There's a bar convention and she thought it would be full. She gave me the name of a motel there--unless you have a preference."
"I'm just going along for the ride," Doc said.

I could see Loretta's eyes in her rear view mirror. Her arm raised, as though to straighten her hair, until she noticed my reflection. She waved. I tipped the brim of my hat. She's prettier than a speckled pullet's behind alright, I thought.
I figured Doc was making an excuse when he said the Mustang needed servicing. He suggested I have Loretta pick me up for lunch while he took our car to a garage, and finally I agreed, for there's not much point in arguing with Doc once he makes up his mind.

As I stood on the walk in front of our motel, I was sorry that I had caused this hitch in our plans, but my remorse was short-lived, for I saw the Thunderbird approaching. My tired heart pounded a double time rhythm when Loretta pulled the car to the curb and smiled up at me through the open window.

"Howdy, stranger," she said.

"Ma'am."

"You know anybody around here who might consider taking an old lady to lunch?"

"Nope," I said. "But I'd sure be pleased to have lunch with you."

She laughed and slid over on the seat. "Do you mind driving? I hate to admit it, but city traffic makes me nervous."
"Sure." I opened the door and sat behind the wheel.

"Where's Mr. Tate?" she asked.

"Oh, he had business to take care of, it seems our car needed some adjustments."

"What a shame."

"Yes- looks like you got that radiator fixed."

"Harold took care of it for me."

"Good." I started the car. "Where should we go?"

"I'm not fussy, Mr. Crane."

"Call me Jackson."

"You pick a place, Jackson."

"I'm afraid I don't know any. You mentioned you had some shopping to do, maybe there's a restaurant nearby?"

"Oh--well I just window shop really. I wouldn't bore you with that. It's such a lovely day, why don't we just drive until we find a place that looks good."

Twenty minutes later Loretta spotted a small Italian restaurant and we agreed to give it a try. It was cool inside, dark, with thick floor carpet and black iron grill work accenting the plush decor. A glass enclosed candle flickered steadily and it's red glow played against the shadows on our table. Music hummed softly from speakers hidden in the high open-beamed ceiling. A waiter, with a heavy black mustache, took our order and hurried past the other deserted tables to the kitchen. Loretta sat quietly
sipping ice tea from a tall moist glass. Each time she raised the glass to her lips, ice cubes jingled a hollow tune.

She reached into her purse and took out a cigarette. I shuffled in my pocket for a match and struck one just as she struck her own. She glanced at me, giggled nervously, flicked her match to the ash tray, then leaned toward my flame. She drew lightly and blew a little puff of smoke.

"I haven't mastered the social graces of smoking," she said. "It's a disgusting habit isn't it."

I nodded.

"I haven't been at it long," she admitted with a sly grin. "Christina would have a fit if she knew. Isn't that ridiculous, hiding it from my own children?"

"Maybe not."

"Yes it is, really. None of them know, except Bobby--my oldest grandson. He caught me stealing one from his pack one afternoon a couple of years ago. I thought I'd die right on the spot."

She laughed and I couldn't help but chuckle myself when a picture of that scene formed in my mind.

"That's how I got started," she went on. "I was just bored I guess. After that Bobby used to buy them for me, and sometimes he would come to my room and we'd smoke up a storm, always careful to only have one going at a time, so
he could take mine if anyone should come in. It all seemed terribly evil and I did feel a little guilty—but Bobby had smoked for years so I decided any harm done was to myself."

"Do you really think they'd mind so much?"

"Oh yes. I'd never hear the end of it. They're a very modern couple, Christina and Harold—health nuts really! Natural foods, meditation, they even jog every morning before they go to the office. Besides, I lectured Christina enough on the evils of tobacco. Somehow I just can't face up to it. You see how silly I can be."

She puffed again on the cigarette and tapped ashes gently into a glass tray.

I said, "I can see how it might be a problem."

"It is. When Bobby went off to school I had to buy a fan for my room. I'm forever spraying myself with perfume and eating breath mints."

"Maybe it would be easier to quit."

"It would I know. But somehow I just can't make myself give it up. It's sort of—I don't know—like the one thing I have that's my secret...my private sin. And I only share that with Bobby." She looked at me sternly. "It's an awful way to form a bond I suppose, but I suspect Bobby and I might never have gotten to know each other like we have otherwise—I'm sure of it. He tells me everything—about his school, his girlfriends—it just let down all the barriers between
us. It's such a joy for me when he comes home now. I'm afraid to lose that I suppose."

"Well, I promise not to tell."

"Oh, I didn't mean for this to sound like a confession, though I guess it is."

"I could probably come up with one or two myself," I said.

She tossed her head back slightly. "That won't be necessary, Jackson. Anyway, I know you're a perfect gentleman. I've been around long enough to notice that in a man."

"Thank you," I said humbly.

The waiter returned with a large tray and placed bowls of green salad and two plates heaped with lasagna in front of us. Four other customers had just been seated and he hurried off to serve them.

"It almost seems like wine would be appropriate," I suggested.

"None for me, thanks," Loretta said. "It makes me giddy--but go ahead if you like."

"I'll just settle for tea."

She snuffed out the cigarette in the ashtray and smiled. "On second thought, wine would be nice."

I motioned to the water.

While we ate, I thought about Loretta's confession and I recalled how tense she had been the day before when her
car stalled. She seemed so full of life, so pleasant. And yet, as we talked it became more obvious that a wall had been built around her. She had allowed herself to be sealed off by the good intentions of her own children. How ironic it seemed when I thought of the problems I had with my daughters. But I felt flattered too, that she had so readily let me in on her secrets.

"Loretta."

"Yes." She held a flat noodle on her fork to cool.

"You really are a very attractive woman."

Her lashes fluttered a bit, then she tilted her head shyly. "Oh, I'm just an old lady and you know it." Her eyes rolled up and she grinned, "But you can tell me anyway."

"I meant that as a compliment...but I wonder too..."

"About what?"

"How you've managed to let yourself be so pent up."

She raised the fork to her mouth, then chewed slowly. Finally she said, "Maybe I've recently begun to wonder that myself. I resigned myself to being old, widowed--the adjustment I felt I had to make. Just lately I've started to feel that maybe there is something more for me. I did surprise the children by insisting on driving up here myself."

"That's good."

"I think so. But it's difficult. My life was secure for so many years; I'm grateful that I have security now,
even if it means giving up some of the things I enjoyed. I don't get out often, it's true."

"You should."

"Perhaps. But I left most of my friends in Kansas. I'm just not used to going places by myself, even if the children would allow it. I was used to baking, caring for our home, working in my garden. I'd have coffee in my kitchen with friends in the afternoon, and I'd have supper ready when Richard came in from the fields. I'm not one for bridge games or dancing parties at the senior citizens center." She sipped from the crystal wine glass then went on, "I'd rather be home alone than do those things. I've let my pride get in the way, I know."

"And I understand."

"You've been married, Jackson?"

"Twice."

"You could understand."

We finished eating and sat for a while to let the heavy meal settle. Loretta drew another cigarette from her purse and paused for me to light it. I had the waiter bring me a cigar, the first I'd even thought to smoke in several days. Loretta seemed lost in serious thought.

"I hope I haven't meddled in your affairs," I said.

"Oh no, on the contrary. It's been a lovely lunch. I was just thinking you must wonder about me. Here you are,
traveling across the country having a free and wonderful time."

"I have Doc to thank for that. He kind of prods me along when I get down."

"That's just what I was afraid you thought. I'm not down really. I don't just sit around smoking cigarettes and pouting. I keep myself busy, with my painting mainly."

"Painting?"

"I've dabbled with oils for years. Recently, of course, I've had plenty of time to work at it...and I shouldn't say it myself, but some of them are good I think."

"That's wonderful, Loretta. I wish I could see them."

"You can if you like. They're in my car. I've had the notion I might be able to find a gallery here in Denver that might show them; that's mainly why I wanted to make this trip."

"Have you tried selling them in Colorado Springs?"

"Oh no. This is something I wanted to do on my own...to prove a point perhaps. The children know so many people in Colorado Springs, I'm afraid they might be too helpful. They even insisted on paying me outrageous prices for the paintings I did for their office. Here the paintings will have to stand on their own merit--that is, if I can find a place to take them."

"Now I'm really curious," I said. "Would you care for dessert?"
"I couldn't eat another bite."
"Then let's go have a look."
I paid the check and we went out to the car.
"They're in the trunk," Loretta said, "wrapped in blankets. But I can't very well display them here for you."
"Why don't we see if we can find a gallery now? I'd love to help you, really."
"That would be fun." There was excitement in her voice. Then she glanced at her watch and her face shifted to a disappointed frown. "Oh dear, it's almost two already. Christina is skipping an afternoon session to shop with me. I promised to meet her at the hotel at three."
"Well maybe this evening," I suggested.
"We had planned to go out to Red Rocks Park to take in a symphony." She looked up at me and touched my arm with her hand. "But why don't you and Mr. Tate come too. You could meet Christina and Harold. I'm sure we could get tickets."
"I don't know."
"Have you ever been out there?"
"No."
"Oh, it's a lovely open-air amphitheater. We've gone several times in the summer. You'd enjoy it, I know."

I thought about Doc sitting back at the motel and I was certain he would be anxious to get on at least to Wyoming by evening. Suddenly I felt like a compass needle teetering
between two poles. I knew Doc would understand. Yet, he had already done so much for me, I couldn't disappoint him. But as I looked down at Loretta's smile, at her clear violet eyes, and felt the light touch of her soft hand on my arm, I knew I simply couldn't let her slip away so soon.

I said, "I'm not much for classical music."

Her smile dissolved.

"But it does sound like a good time," I added. "I'll have to check with Doc. Can I call you?"

"Yes, of course. I should be back at the hotel by five-thirty. I'll wait for your call. Maybe you can help me with the paintings tomorrow. You are staying in Denver for a while, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "Like I said, we're just taking our time."
Doc wasn't in his room when I got back to our motel. The Mustang was gone too, and I decided perhaps it really had needed servicing after all. I went to my room and kicked off my boots, then lay on the bed trying to sort out my feelings, sleepy from the latent effect of the good red wine. I knew I was standing at a fork in the trail; each equally enticing in its own way, each offering an alternative which certainly seemed better for me than the one I had known at the Manor. I thought back to my time at the Manor—and I thought of Julien. I knew, at least, that I would never be able to go back there to live; to wait like a calf trapped in a quicksand bog, painfully tired of the struggle, resigned to the inevitable. I would never give in to those restrictions, make those compromises again in the name of security. Julien's corpse lingered in that mire, and it infuriated me to wonder if the leaches still grew fat.

Yet, how near to that same struggle was Loretta Heatherton, spared separation from her family only to meet the compromises under a different guise. I realized then, it was not the end
I had feared, and it was giving in to waiting for that end that now disgusted me. Perhaps I had not yet realized what Doc seemed to know. I rememberd that first night of our journey as we huddlde under the Texas oaks; how he had said it didn't matter where we were going, only that we were going. What would there be in Montana after all? What had made it seem so important to us--to me? Then I decided Doc would not be upset at all if I wanted to spend another day or two in Denver, after all. Loretta was only to be in Denver a few days herself. Maybe the time would come when I would have to choose between moving on with Doc or staying with Loretta. That couldn't be the question now. I would have a little more time to get to know her. I dozed off comfortably.

A knock at the door woke me and I sat up with a start and looked at my watch. It was after five o'clock. I rubbed my eyes and groped for the door. Doc came in and sat in one of the two swivel chairs separated by a small round table near the window of my room. I sat in the other chair and tried to shake the gogginess that follows a long afternoon nap.

Doc tapped his fingers on the tabletop. "Well," he said.

"Well what?"

"How was your lunch?"

"Good. We had lasagna."
He shook his head. "Is that all?"
"A little wine."
"No, I mean..."
"Oh, we had a nice time."
"Good."

There was a long pause. Doc continued the steady tapping of his fingers. I avoided his stare, feigning interest in the passersby outside the window. I had hoped I might sense his disposition before suggesting an evening of symphony, but he seemed strangely quiet. Finally he said, "Did you find her so striking today?"
"Even prettier."
"And..."
"What's wrong with you, Doc? You sound like somebody's mother. I don't think she'll get pregnant if that's what you're wondering."

He laughed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to quiz you. I was just wondering how you two got along today, that's all."
"We got along fine. Where have you been?"
"I went down and had the oil changed--filled the car with gas."
"Did that take all afternoon?"
"No. I had a few things to check on."

I glanced at him apprehensively. "I imagine you're set to get on then."
He got up and went to the sink without answering. He tore the protecting paper cover from one of the glasses, filled it with water and took a drink. It seemed he was waiting for me to make the decision so I said, "There's a symphony in some park this evening, she wants to go. I thought we might take it in if it's alright with you. I told Loretta I'd call about five-thirty, it's a good thing you woke me. You're invited too."

He set the glass beside the sink. "She must be talking about Red Rocks Park."

"That's the place. Have you been there?"
"Years ago. You'll enjoy it."
"Won't you come too?"
He grinned. "Three's a crowd, you know."
"No, Doc, I insist. Loretta's daughter and son-in-law are going anyway."

"Thanks, Jackson. But I've got a call to make myself in a few minutes." He pulled the Mustang keys from his pocket. "Here, you'll probably need these. By the way, did you find out what she had in that car, or was I just imagining things."

"She has paintings," I said.
"Valuable?"
"Maybe--to her anyway. They're her own. She's trying to find a gallery to show them. She's hoping to sell some."

"A painter. That's good. Tell her I wish her luck. Oh, you might as well take her to dinner if you want to. I
had a sandwich on the way back here. I wasn't sure how long you'd be."

"Doc."

"Yes."

"You don't mind the delay?"

He sat down again. He seemed calm, the nervousness that he had shown earlier was gone. His voice was sincere when he spoke. "I think we know each other pretty well by now, Jackson. And I don't think either of us intends to spend the rest of our lives rambling around in a Mustang. I don't anyway. It's been a good trip so far, but I guess we're both in a position to take things as they come, isn't that right?"

"It's been a great trip, Doc. I thought you'd feel that way."

"Sure," he said. "Montana isn't going anywhere. It'll be there tomorrow and a long time after that. Your friend Loretta may not be quite so stationary. It's my recommendation that you go to Red Rocks with her tonight."

I felt relieved. Doc had taken the worry out of my dilemma in his ever patient way. I didn't hesitate to add, "Loretta wants me to help her with the paintings tomorrow."

"Fine."

"I just wish you'd come with us."

Doc smiled. "Now look who's acting like the concerned mother. Why don't you go ahead and call her. I'm going down to buy a paper, I'll stop back in a minute."
I called Loretta and she seemed pleased that I had decided to join them for the evening. She suggested dinner before I did, mentioning her children were anxious to meet me. Doc returned just as I hung up the phone. He had a newspaper rolled up under one arm.

"I've got a problem, Doc," I said.

"What's that."

"The closest thing I have to a suit is this." I held up a light blue western jacket and matching pants I'd bought in Dallas.

"That's fine. You won't be at all out of place."

"You mean I can go with my boots on."

He grinned. "Sure enough, partner. Go with your boots on. Are you having dinner with her?"

"In half an hour."

He went to the door and turned. "Well, I'll see you later, Jackson."

"Right, Doc. See you later."

I showered and dressed hurriedly, then drove to the hotel. I felt like a teenager on a first date, for I did want to make a good impression on Loretta's children. I think my voice even cracked a little when I shook hands with Harold.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Taber," I said.

He gripped my hand firmly. "My pleasure."

Harold Taber was a tall man with a full round face and a prominent chin. He had serious eyes, but there was humor
in them, as well as self-confidence. The grey hair at his temples was made even more apparent in contrast to his dark skin and otherwise intense black hair. I was relieved to see he wore casual clothes. He released my hand. "We've heard a lot about you. Mother tells us you're quite a mechanic."

I shrugged. "Hardly," I said. "I'm sure she would have made out fine without us, we just happened along at the right time."

Loretta smiled and her eyes shined. I thought she looked prettier than ever in the bright print dress that hung in loose folds from her shoulders and small waist. She wore a thin gold necklace and tiny earrings to match.

"Christina should be down in a minute," Harold said. "She wanted to lie down for a while. I'm afraid Mother nearly wore her out shopping this afternoon. You know these women, I'm always waiting on one or the other of them."

"We've got plenty of time," I said. "I hope your meetings have been interesting."

"Dull as a matter of fact. Nothing worse than a pack of lawyers trying to come to any decisions. I understand you're vacationing."

"Kind of. I'm retired. I was in the retail business in Dallas."
Loretta motioned toward an elevator. "There's Christina now."

I turned as the metal doors slid shut behind a group that had just occupied the elevator. I picked Christina out at once, for she resembled Loretta so closely they might have been sisters. But only a few wrinkles creased the corners of her eyes and mouth, and she wore her hair long over her shoulders, combed straight. She wore no make-up that I could see except for a clear shiny gloss on her wide lips. Her eyes had that same mild violet glow as Loretta's. She walked toward us with long strides, her short dress flowing in rhythm with her hair. Several thin ring bracelets swung about one wrist and a row of gigantic stone rings ornamented her fingers, but none larger than the diamond wedding ring on her left hand.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," she said, taking Loretta's arm.

Loretta said, "Christina, I'd like you to meet Mr. Crane--Jackson Crane."

"How do you do."

"Hi," she said crisply. "Well, let's go."

"We might as well take my car," Harold said.

While I accompanied the ladies to the door, Harold went ahead to get the car. I pushed open the heavy glass door and held it, but Christina turned aside for a moment. "See you later, Phil," she said. "We won't be long."
I looked around, puzzled because no one else was near. Loretta followed her out. "She talks to plants," Loretta said, pointing to the huge plant by the door, the philodendron."

Christina laughed. "I feel sorry for Phil, nobody seems to pay any attention to him here. Do you talk to plants, Mr. Crane?"

I used to swear at the weeds when I had a garden.

"There you go," Loretta said. "I can see a point to that."

Christina shook her head and rolled her eyes at me. "I keep trying to convince Mother that plants are as sensitive as people. The experts will tell you, they have feelings, too. You try it, Mr. Crane, see if your plants don't shape right up."

Harold brought the car to the covered front driveway, a solid white Chrysler with tinted window glass. I started to open the front door for Christina, but she reached the handle before I did and slid in, close beside Harold. I pushed that door shut and opened the rear door for Loretta, then got in beside her. It was chilly in the car, like climbing into a refrigerator. Harold had the airconditioner going full tilt.

Christina leaned back and rested her arm on Harold's shoulder. "We thought we might go to Mario's for dinner," she suggested. "It's right on the way."
I said, "Anywhere is fine with me."
"I hope it's not one of your soybean and wheat germ places," Loretta said. "I'm hungry."
"Oh Mother, you remember Mario's, that little Greek restaurant out on Longstaff."
"Eggplant--I remember now."
Christina laughed. "But you did like it."
"I thought they were mushrooms."
"We never should have told her, should we Harold."
"I was on the ranch too long," Loretta explained. "I'm just a basic beef and potatoes girl I guess."
"Yes, but they were your own beef and potatoes." Christina countered. "Heaven knows what you're eating when you sit down to a meal these days; chemicals, sprays, additives. Besides, at your age you should be more careful about your diet."
Harold interrupted, "Let's not get into that now. I'm sure anything Mother and Mr. Crane want to order will be fine. Have you ever been out to Red Rocks Park, Mr. Crane?"
"No, I haven't."
"Maybe we'll have time to show you around--some of the nicest parks here that you'll see anywhere in the country."
I found the food at Mario's excellent, though I was disappointed that the service was slow and we only had time to go directly to the amphitheater after dinner. It was indeed an enjoyable performance, as Loretta had promised,
in colorful surroundings. The red sandstone amphitheater was impressive itself, and I sat back, watching the sky as the blue gave way first to small bunched clouds that cut the evening sun to long ribbon streaks. And then as if enticed by the crescendoes of each musical movement, the clouds grew tall and round and their thick edges became scarlet. A few stars appeared directly above us, but they were soon blotted out by the darkening overcast. That particular dull smell, the premonition of rain, lofted in the breeze; but it would be a short storm I judged, for the clouds had only a short time to prepare. The music finished just in time, and the first drops drummed lightly against the car roof as we drove back to town.

I stopped by Doc's room when I returned to the motel. I listened at the door for a moment, not wanting to disturb him if he was asleep. I could hear a television playing so I rapped and waited. There were shuffling noises inside and in a short while the door cracked slightly. I could see part of a woman's face and one suspicious eye peering out at me.

"Yeah," she said.

"Oh, excuse me...I...is Doc in there?"

"Sorry."

The door slammed shut. I glanced at the number again--number 12--I was sure I hadn't confused it. Inside I could hear the woman's voice over the television. "...A guy in a cowboy suit...wanted a doctor...yeah, some pervert probably..."
I hurried down to the lobby. The night clerk, a young man with hair that brushed the shoulders of his white suit, hunched over the counter thumbing pages of a worn magazine.

"Excuse me."

"Yes sir," he said, slapping the magazine shut. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Mr. Crane, Room 27. I wanted to check on another fellow registered here..."

"Mr. Crane," he interrupted. "I have a message for you." He shuffled through a stack of papers under the counter and produced an envelope with the motel's seal on the corner. He handed it to me. My name, in ink across the front, I recognized to be in Doc's careful handwriting.

"Did Mr. Tate change rooms?" I asked.

"No sir. He checked out this evening, about seven o'clock."

"Checked out?"

"Yes sir."

"Where did he go?"

"I think he was heading for the airport. He left in a taxi--asked me to give you that message."

"Thanks."

I sat in a chair in the lobby, ripped open the envelope and unfolded the paper inside. I read the brief note:
Jackson,

Sorry to part company on such short notice. I would have called, but wasn't sure where to reach you. I called Dallas shortly after you left, and as I feared, business is pressing there and I must return. Please don't assume this has anything to do with you and Loretta- I suspected it was coming before yesterday. Will explain everything when I see you again. No need to hurry, you will be able to reach me anytime at the Manor. Maybe we'll have a go at Montana another time--

Doc

P.S.

Do as you wish with Ol' Paint. Necessary papers are in the glove compartment.

I sat back in the soft chair and read the note again. I wondered what it was that could be so pressing, that could come up so suddenly? Perhaps that explained Doc's nervousness earlier--but he would have told me if he had intended to leave then, I was sure of it. And what would ever take Doc back to the Manor? It could only be one thing I knew of, something to do with Mr. Preston. I looked at my watch and it was nearly midnight. Doc would probably already be in Dallas. I wanted to call him right then, but decided against it. What if I reached Mr. Preston? I wouldn't know what to say to him, and I certainly wouldn't want to interfere with whatever it was Doc was doing there.

I got up and went to my room. I felt strangely depressed and alone. In only a few days I had shared what seemed years of adventure with Doc. Surely it would not be the same traveling without him, I knew I could not continue the trip
to Montana without him. Maybe he knew all along that we couldn't make it, not this time anyway, and maybe that's what he had tried to tell me from the first--Montana was only our destination, not an end. And I knew Doc had leveled with me, told me what he could of that mysterious business. It wasn't Loretta that had interfered with our plans, I was assured of that; and I was cheered by the realization that I would see her again the next day.

I cranked open a small window to let in the cool washed air. I threw my clothes in a pile on a chair and climbed into bed. Outside I could hear the storm winding down, only light drops whispered to the cement below the window.
The next morning I woke early. The storm had passed, and the sun filtered through the light curtains spraying blocks of light across my bed. I called Loretta, and a little while later she came by for me, excited with anticipation of the day's project.

We stopped at a coffee shop for breakfast. Loretta sat across from me in the booth and leaned forward with her arms folded, looking at a menu. A cup of coffee steamed on the table in front of her.

"I'm not very hungry," she said.

A pallid faced waitress stood by the table, gazing out the window as if she longed to be out in the morning sun.

Loretta looked up at the girl. "I'd like a doughnut, please--sugar coated."

I said, "That sounds good. I'll have a couple of plain ones."

The girl sauntered behind the counter and dipped a fork into a large fish-bowl jar, selecting from the variety of doughnuts it contained. She returned with the doughnuts then
went back to the counter and leaned against it, sleepily filling salt shakers with mechanical movements.

"You say Mr. Tate had to return to Dallas?" Loretta asked. "I had assumed he was retired."

"Oh, he still has a few irons in the fire."

"Will you be going on to Montana alone?"

"No. No, I don't think so. In fact, I was just wondering about that. I'll probably fly back to Dallas myself. Maybe tonight."

"It would be a long drive alone. It's a shame your vacation has to be interrupted."

"It doesn't matter. I've got lots of vacation time now."

She took a bite of the doughnut and lightly brushed sugar from her fingers. "We'll be leaving this evening, right after their banquet. Harold insisted on following me this time."

"Well then, we'd better get down to some serious art dealing, hadn't we. I'm anxious to see your work."

She smiled. "I'm almost afraid, now that I've really put myself up to it. I don't even know where to go."

"We could look in the phone book."

"Oh I know several gallerys. I've snooped around in them many times. It's just hard to decide which one might even consider my paintings. It's difficult for me to compare my own work."

"I'll bet you're just underestimating your talent. There's one sure way to find out."
Loretta finally decided to first try a gallery called the Paint Spot. As we drove, I tried to imagine what her paintings might look like. She would tend toward realism, I decided, probably Kansas landscapes, tumbling ranch buildings and Colorado mountains. I couldn't have been more mistaken.

The Paint Spot was a modest looking shop from the outside; a white stucco front building with two large windows cluttered by oils and water colors displayed on easels. Inside, it appeared to me like a segment from somebody's fantastic dream. Brilliant color splotches, angles, circles, smacked my eyes from the lighted canvases that covered nearly every inch of the walls, and some parts of the ceiling. I wondered if Loretta had made a wise decision going there first.

The proprietor, a little man with disheveled hair and a grizzled beard, bent over a stool tying the laces of his white tennis shoes. He peered over his wire-rimmed glasses at us as we entered.

"Ah, Mrs. Heatherton," he said. "Nice to see you again." He pulled the bow firmly in place and stood upright. "Can I help you today? I've got a great buy on a coupled of frames back in the shop--real beauties."

"Not today, Walter," Loretta said. I noticed her voice faltered slightly. "Today I've got a proposition for you--maybe."

"You finally brought some paintings," he said, clasping his hands together.
"Yes I did."

"Good. Let's bring them in."

We went back to the car. I opened the trunk and found six large bundles, securely wrapped and tied. We carried each one separately inside.

Loretta untied the twine from one bundle and carefully unwrapped the blanket, producing a large framed canvas. She set it against the counter and we all stood back. She kneaded her hands as Walter scrutinized the painting. There was a long silence.

I looked over the canvas. On a multi-shaded blue background were eight rectangular figures in brilliant orange. Each figure had a series of black parallel lines on the left side. I studied the picture and it did strike me as pleasing. I liked it, but I couldn't for the life of me decide what it represented.

I glanced at Loretta; she was watching Walter. He stood expressionless, then suddenly breathed deeply.

"Magnificent!" he said.

Loretta's eyes danced.

"Magnificent, Mrs. Heatherton."

"I call it, 'Nine Birds'," she said.

"Excellent composition."

I counted the rectangular objects again. There were eight. Loretta looked expectantly at me.
"I like it," I said. "Striking color."
"Thank you," she said modestly.
Walter stepped a few paces back. "Fine perspective," he said.
"You really do like it?" Loretta asked me.
"Yes. It's pleasing. I'm not much of a critic though... and I only count eight...birds."
"In the mind!" Waster shouted, rapping his forehead with his knuckles. He walked to the canvas and gestured to a light blue area near the center of the painting. He looked at me, "There is your ninth bird, in the plane--there and in your mind. Perfect. I will have this for my own, Mrs. Heatherton, if you will allow me to make an offer."
"Why, I'm flattered," Loretta said. "But I only wanted to show them."
"Perhaps we should talk business later," Walter said.
"Let's have a look at the others."
One by one Loretta unveiled the paintings. Walter seemed impressed by each, but the first remained his favorite. I was happy for Loretta who fairly beamed; and I picked up what I could from Walter's enthusiastic commentary. I think my appreciation of modern art increased significantly, but more because of the painter than the paintings. My own favorite was a pyramid effect done in hues of green, which Loretta simply called, "Woodpile."
Walter sat on the stool intently studying "Nine Birds."
"What are you asking for that one?"
Loretta looked puzzled. "I haven't considered prices."
"I can offer $800."
"Oh my."
"We could probably get more--but as a favor to me..."
"That seems awfully high." Loretta sighed. "Please I'll give it to you. Maybe some of the others will sell if you'll show them."
"I can't," Walter said.
"You can't show them?" she asked disappointedly.
"Of course I'll be happy too. I mean I couldn't just take that painting."
"But $800...that's too much...isn't it?"
"Oh no, Mrs. Heatherton. It would be a bargain in my judgment." His voice was firm. "And," he added, "my judgment is generally accepted as being quite sound."
"I know it is, Walter...if you really want it, fine."
"Good. I'll write you a check."
We spent another hour in the Paint Spot, discussing the paintings and settling on prices. When we went back to the car, Loretta sat quietly for a while then suddenly she became ecstatic.
"Why...I had no idea...I can't believe it."
"You see, you just underestimated yourself."
"But..."

"But what?"

She laughed. "But what? I don't know what. Oh, I'm so thrilled, Jackson." She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you for your help. You must have brought me good luck."

I felt my cheeks flush. "Oh now," I said. "You can't blame anyone but yourself."

"Oh my!"

"Now what's wrong?" I asked.

She looked at me and chuckled, then laughed out loud.

"What's wrong?" I repeated.

"I don't think I'll be able to paint anymore. My mind will be blank, I just know it."

She took a cigarette from her purse and lit it. Her hands trembled. "You know what I'd like now--I'd like to take that drive we missed last night."

I started the car. "I think it can be arranged."

"And I'd like some lunch--my treat this time. We'll celebrate. What do you say?"

"Great."

"How about a picnic? We could stop and pick up a lunch. I know a beautiful lake less than an hour from here."

"That sounds like fun, but I'd better check on making flight reservations first."
I stopped at a phone booth and booked a flight to Dallas for 10:15 the next morning. I decided to sell the Mustang for the first reasonable offer I could get, though I knew I wouldn't be able to get nearly what it was worth, simply selling it to a used car lot. Anyway, I would have all evening to worry about that, for Loretta would be attending the banquet with Harold and Christina, and then driving back to Colorado Springs. The afternoon, a clear sunny one, lay ahead of us.
I sat in the warm sand, leaning against the smooth surface of a water worn log, licking sticky chicken from my fingers. I dug in the cardboard bucket beside me for the last crisp brown ends of french fries. I was full and sleepy. Loretta's white sandals lay a few feet in front of me, toes stuck in the sand where she had kicked them off. Waves lapped over larger stones and driftwood on the shore. The sun shimmered and splashed intense rays from the clear water. I raised a hand to shade my eyes.

Loretta waded a hundred feet down the shore, ankle deep, she stopped frequently to examine rocks or pieces of driftwood. Beyond her, I could see the billowed white triangular sails of sleek boats that glided silently against the light breeze. And further, pale greens of the hillsides banked close to the ruddy blue mountains under a yellow sky.

I thought, that is what a painter sees—a thousand hues and shadows, splashes of color, shape upon shapes. That is what he studies, categorizes, and finally in desperation, limits in pitiful simplicity on a poor stretched canvas. I
could appreciate Loretta's artistic efforts, empathize with her impossible task. She tried, and Walter recognized it. I warranted them both a lot of credit for the ninth bird.

Loretta ambled back toward me and motioned with her arm. "Come on," she said. "Let's go for a walk before you fall asleep."

I stood up. "I was just resting my eyes."

I took a few steps before she said, "Ah, Ah--this is a restricted beach, shoes and socks are strictly prohibited."

I looked down at my boots and then back at her. "You're making that up."

She laughed. "Of course. But it should be the rule."

"And a good one," I agreed. I pulled off my boots and socks and rolled up my pants legs. The sand was warm under my feet and sent that same surge of a dozen good childhood spring days when the ground teased my feet clear through the worn soles of outgrown shoes; and I knew that wonderful sense of freedom, of bursting life, when I could suddenly shed yet another winter's thick skin and run for hours on end without restriction--with only the promise of yet warmer days to come.

Loretta waded in the water and I stepped gingerly along beside her, carefully avoiding sticks and all but the smoothest rocks. I had become a genuine tenderfoot in my old age.

"Tell me about your family," Loretta said. "Do you have any children?"
Two daughters, by my first wife. Both married. I have five grandchildren."

"That's wonderful. Aren't they special--the grandkids."

"Yes, yes they certainly are."

I remembered the postcards I'd bought back in Dallas, yet unmailed. I had forgotten them in the pouch of my suitcase. I wondered if my family had discovered that I left the manor.

"Tell me more about them," Loretta prodded.

I was pleased that she was interested in learning more about me. I said, "I met my first wife, Jennifer, in Nebraska while I still lived on the farm with my folks. Papa hired her to tutor me. We were married and the girls came along within a year of each other. Jennifer died of pneumonia when the girls were young, only three and four. They needed a mother, and I was fortunate to find Lillian. She had been widowed three years earlier--a truly fine person. She had no children of her own, and she loved the girls. She was a good mother to them."

"I admire a woman who can step into that position."

Loretta said, "It must be difficult."

"I'm afraid it was, very difficult. She tried so hard, but the girls never quite accepted her, even when they were older; and she felt it."

"That's too bad."
"Yes. We were happy though. We had a lot of good years together. I'm sure it was her hearing that kept the girls apart from her, at first anyway. She was deaf in one ear and hard of hearing in the other. Many times when she wouldn't be able to hear the girls, they seemed to think she was ignoring them. I explained over and over...they were too little to understand. Lillian died in an accident six years ago, driving home from grocery shopping. She drove in front of a train. The engineer said he saw her hearing the crossing—he couldn't stop in time. She didn't hear the whistle I guess."

"I'm sorry."

"We both know that loss."

Loretta nodded. A few moments later she asked, "And what about you? Do you live alone now?"

"Doc and I shared an apartment at a Manor in Dallas. We're kind of in the process of leaving there."

"A senior citizens manor?"

"A nursing home."

"You weren't happy there."

I shrugged. "I got by."

We walked for a while without talking. Only the soft washing of the water broke the silence, but for an occasional bird calling overhead. Suddenly Loretta stopped and bent down to pick up a twisted waterlogged root. "Look," she said, holding it for me to examine. "What do you see?"
"A cat?"

"Exactly. Very good."

She reached down again, and this time produced a large piece of driftwood.

"Dinosaur," I suggested.

"That's close. It's a horse."

I jokingly protested. "But the tail is much too long. I'm positive it's a dinosaur--Brontosaurus, I suspect. Jurassic Period."

"Look here," she said, pointing to two small knots, "have you ever seen a dinosaur with ears like that?"

"Not recently," I admitted.

"I rest my case."

From far down the lake we heard the drone of a motorboat. A moment later it appeared and then speeded by us, towing a skier who leaped the white crests of the bubbling foam in the boat's wake.

"Doesn't that look like fun," Loretta said.

"It does. But I don't quite feel up to it--not this afternoon anyway. Maybe if they tied that rope to a pontoon rocking chair..."

"Oh, now. You've just had too much lunch."

"...and they'd have to tie me in the chair," I added.

We watched the boat circle toward the middle of the lake and fade in the distance.
Loretta said, "Sometimes I've wished I had been born thirty years later—to be able to water-ski, or ski in the snow way up in those mountains like they do now. And I'd like to be able to see what's going to come of the space explorations too." She looked up at the azure sky. "There must be other beings out there, don't you think so?"

"I think so. I really do."

"So do I. I'd just love to meet someone from...I don't know, from another galaxy or whatever they call them."

"That would be fascinating," I agreed. "Maybe we'll live to see it happen yet. Things happen so quickly nowadays."

"Don't they? Goodness knows I'd hate to be in school now. There must be an awesome amount of information to try to learn. I'm proud of my grandsons for doing as well as they are at the university."

"Well, I think the approach is a little different now than it was when we went to school. Kids have to learn to think on their own more. It seems to me they must have to learn how to deal with all that information, not just memorize it."

"Just the same," Loretta said, "when you come right down to it, I'm glad I'm just me. I wouldn't want to be any different. I've had a good life."

"And look what's to come. Here you are on the threshold of becoming a famous artist."
She laughed and buried her toes in the wet sand. "Well, I don't know about that. I'm excited about the paintings—but it's only a hobby with me. And now I guess I'll be able to prove my silly little notion to Christina and Harold, that I can do things on my own."

"That's not a silly notion. It's very important, I think."

"It is. You know, I'd have been just as thrilled if Walter had offered me $80 for that painting instead of $800."

She smiled. "Anyway, I'm having such a good time this trip. I've got you to thank for that."

"It's my pleasure, Loretta."

By the time we got back to our picnic spot, we each carried an assortment of knotted driftwood figures, each properly classified by species. We sat on the log and dropped them in the sand in front of us. Loretta traced a circle around them with her foot.

"There," she said. "A fence to keep them from running loose on the beach again."

"That seems unfair."

"You're right." She scraped a large opening in the circle. "A gate," she announced. "Now they can come and go as they please."

She studied our creation for a moment, then looked up at me. "You still think I'm like that, don't you? Pent up, as you said."
"Not so much. I think...maybe you have a lot more to offer that you keep inside. Your talents...emotions."

"We both do, Jackson. Everyone does. That's a pretty general analysis."

"I didn't mean to analyze you," I said. "I didn't mean it to sound that way. I do like you very much--I like being with you."

She looked down at her hands. "I like you too," she said.

There was a long pause. I stared over the lake, calm in the heat of the afternoon. There was a thin green rim of light colored water near the opposite shore, and the darker greens of foliage where the shore joined the low hills. One side of a small hill had dropped away, exposing tree roots and the layers of limestone below an overhanging cliff. Barely visible, the grey-white specks of birds circled, and I knew there would be a hundred tiny holes in that cliff wall, and in them, the nests of as many bird families.

"What are you thinking?" Loretta said finally.

I looked at her eyes. They were shiny and warm, calm like the lake beside us. I could have shifted my weight and touched her hand. I could have stretched and let my arm rest gently around her shoulders. But the old subtleties and maneuvers of my younger years would have seemed even more awkward now than then. I said, "I'd like to kiss you."
Her eyelids dropped. She leaned toward me and her lips parted slightly.
The afternoon had passed quickly. Heavy traffic delayed us as we drove back to town, but Loretta only chuckled this time, knowing that poor Harold would once again be impatiently waiting on her.

I parked her car in front of the hotel and walked her to the door. She squeezed my hand gently. "You will call me now, when you get to Dallas. If you lose the number just call information for Harold."

"I won't lose it," I said.

"Well, thank you for everything. I hope you have a nice trip."

"You too. Good-bye."

She turned as Harold pulled the heavy glass door open. I waved, then set off walking the short distance to the motel.

That evening I drove ol' paint for the last time; and as I left the used car lot where I sold her, it was like turning my back on a good friend. I could clearly remember nearly every single mile we had traveled in our rusty little Mustang,
and those memories passed through my mind until I finally dropped off to sleep very late that night.

The next morning I jumped at the shrill ring of the telephone on the bed stand beside me and reached for the receiver.

"Good morning, Mr. Crane," came the dried voice of the desk clerk. "It's eight o'clock."

"Thank you--oh, would you call a cab for me please. I'll be leaving in half an hour."

"Certainly, Mr. Crane."

I hung up the phone and went into the bathroom, then dressed and gathered my clothes together. By the time I got down to the lobby, the cab driver was waiting; a petite, ebony skinned young lady with a cap cocked high atop the spirals of her afro-styled hair. She took my suitcase to the taxi, opened the door for me, then hurried around to the other door and climbed behind the wheel. She slid the key in the ignition, stretched to push in the clutch, then pushed the gear shift to low. She turned the key and the motor churned.

"I'm going to the airport," I said.

"Which one?"

"Quebec. Frontier Airlines."

The taxi lurched ahead. She revved the motor and shifted to second gear.

"You have an unusual occupation for a girl," I said.
"Lots of women drive cabs."
"I haven't seen many."
"It's fun. I've only been at it a week--a summer job."
"You're going to school?" I asked.
"Oh no." I thought I should advise her on the advantages of a good education but she went on, "I've been teaching school for three years now."
"You don't look old enough."
"Thanks."
"I'd imagine you're ready for a change after the school year."
"Yeah. I love it, but I'm always burned out after nine months. It's draining--mentally draining. This is a good change of pace."
"What do you teach?"
"High school." She chuckled. "I'm the terror of the Thornton High math department."

As she maneuvered the big yellow car, I watched the sprawling developments of pastel suburban homes and acres of manicured lawns and flower beds.

"I won't be able to take the usual route to the airport," she said. "But I won't charge you any extra for the detour. There was an accident near the Quebec St. Exit. I passed there a little while ago."
"Not serious I hope."
"Nobody injured. Bubbles didn't look very good though."
"Bubbles?"

"A trained dolphin. They had her in a big tank at a shopping center for a promotional gimmick--'Dolphin days.' All the clerks dressed like sailors or mermaids."

I knew the routine. I mimicked, "Don't miss the boat, our crew is waiting to introduce you to a whale of a buy--drop your anchor and help us raise our sales."

"Were you out there?"

"I used to work in a store."

My years in the retail business had not allowed me to escape the horrors of promotional schemes. I vividly remember the day the top layer of "the world's largest cake" slid to a chocolatey pile in the children's ready to wear department. And I will never forget the time old Mr. Pennworth himself sent the memo congratulating me on being selected to represent the region in the flagpole sitting contest for a store opening in Phoenix. I worried for days over how one would go about taking a leak on the top of a flagpole.

"They were hauling Bubbles from the center in a tank truck," she continued. "The driver swerved to miss a little boy on a bike. The tanker jacknifed and wrapped around a telephone pole--Bubbles floated out on somebody's lawn--drydocked."

"What did they do?"

"Sprayed her with garden hoses until they found a swimming pool in the neighborhood. I guess she's still there."
I passed by just after it happened. Did you know dolphins change color when they're out of water? They get brighter, at least Bubbles did. Maybe she was just angry."

"That's true. I've read about them," I said. They can communicate with one another I understand, and with men too. They have some sort of beeping signals. They have larger brains than man too. Makes you wonder, doesn't it...who knows, maybe one day the dolphins will be our friends."

She looked at me and grinned, then her mouth opened to a full white smile in stark contrast to her rich dark skin. "Well," she mused, "There goes the neighborhood. The Dolphins have moved into the pool next door."

I laughed. It was refreshing to meet this young lady with such a vibrant personality, and it gave me a warm feeling to realize we had progressed a ways in communicating ourselves. We could meet even our most serious problems with some degree of openness, and with a sense of humor.

"Maybe that wouldn't be so bad," I said.

"I wouldn't mind really," she said. "Only I wouldn't want my daughter to marry one."

I caught my plane in plenty of time in spite of the short detour and had a pleasant flight to Dallas. And as I ate lunch at the airport, I couldn't help but wonder at the miracle of flying. I have flown many times, yet it never ceases to amaze me that such distances can be traversed so rapidly.
I took my time eating for I had no real appetite. I was apprehensive about going back to the Manor, but Doc had said he would be there and I was anxious to see him. I decided I would find him as quickly as possible, avoiding anyone else until I had a chance to see what he was doing, that is, anyone else but Mr. Preston, whom I would probably have to confront anyway to learn of Doc's whereabouts. That would be the simplest and most direct way to deal with the situation I decided. For after learning what I had from Doc about Mr. Preston, I suspected one might best deal with him as you would a rattlesnake--proceed with caution when you know exactly where the poison lies.

As my taxi rounded the long drive, the Manor loomed awesome before me like a great white simmering monument in the afternoon heat. At that moment I even felt a little pain deep in my stomach and perspiration beaded on my forehead, for I had been encased in the bowels of that structure for too long. And what if they thought I had lost control of my facilities? I hadn't made a conventional exit from there to be sure. It occurred to me that not everyone had been wheeled down the stern halls of F-Wing as passively as Julien LeBlanc, I paid the driver and hurried up the walk to the front door, looking straight ahead for fear of meeting the stare of a curious friend or attendant. I moved on swiftly through the main lobby, avoiding all but the briefest greetings, and
went directly to the stairway that led to Mr. Preston's office. I paused at the top of the stairway to catch my breath, took another deep breath to bolster my courage, and entered the office where I expected to find Mrs. Livingston.

But it was not Mrs. Livingston who sat at the receptionist's desk. As soon as I saw the bundle of flaming red hair, I recognized Minnie Langford, whom Doc had met with in Dallas the day we started our trip.

"Can I help you?" she rasped in that deep whiskey voice.
I sighed with relief. "I'm Jackson Crane."
"Of course, we met the other day. What can I do for you, Mr. Crane?"
"I came to see Mr. Preston...but I'm really looking for Doc. You don't happen to know where I can find him?"
She looked at me curiously, then gestured toward the door of Mr. Preston's office. "Why don't you go right on in, Mr. Crane."
I walked into the inner office and gasped. There sat Doc, behind the big mahogany desk, shuffling through stacks of papers and files strewn before him.

"Doc!" I shouted.

He looked up and grinned. "Howdy, Jackson."

I rushed over and shook his hand. "Am I glad to see you," I said. "I thought I was due for a run-in with Mr. Preston. What's going on around here?"

"Sit down, Jackson. You look tired. I didn't expect you back so soon."

I sat in a chair across the desk from Doc. "What are you doing here...where's Mr. Preston?"

"He resigned, along with Mrs. Livingston. Minnie and I are kind of filling in until the board of owners can hire a new director. Have you had lunch yet?"

"Just finished. I ate at the airport. But why did Mr. Preston resign?"

Doc sat back in the leather chair and folded his hands. His heavy brow knitted to a straight line over his clear sharp
yes, but his mouth turned at the corners, like the deep lines in his forehead. I knew that look of determination, for that was typical of Doc's aspect, and so was it even more typical when combined with that look of impish humor. "We didn't leave him much choice," he said. "I'm certain Preston's lawyer will have his work cut out for him."

"Then your evidence was enough?"

Doc smiled. "I thought you'd guess what I was up to."

"Well there were all those papers you delivered to Minnie Langford, I pretty much suspected they had something to do with it. And then when I found out you're a lawyer...it added up. But just exactly what is that Gold Age Services place...and what happened to Mrs. Livingston?"

"I'd better start back at the beginning." Doc said, "but first I want to thank you, Jackson, for trusting me. And you know I trust you too--it's just that until we actually confronted Preston with legal action...you understand."

"Sure, Doc. Professional ethics."

"Professional ethics, yes. Something Henry Preston doesn't understand."

"Henry..."

"He does have a first name other than mister. You wouldn't have known it around here, would you?" Doc stood up and walked over to the window, thrust his hands into his coat pockets and began to pace the length of the office. "Remember the other day when we were talking about nursing homes?"
"You mean about the terrible conditions in some of them?"

"Yes. Patients living in filth, shot full of tranquilizers to keep them docile, inadequate care--it's all part of a rather complicated problem inherent in nursing homes. It stems from our modern society I believe, living pace, increased mobility with families, emphasis of youth--whatever the reason, sometimes it's necessary, sometimes it's just convenient to tuck old folks away. You know about that."

I nodded.

"Now where they tuck old people is another matter," Doc continued. "Poor conditions in nursing homes are sometimes due to inadequate financing--usually in state institutions. But an interesting thing has occurred with private homes, like the Manor here, especially since back in 1966 when Uncle Sam decided to see if he couldn't help out through Medicaid. Suddenly after that, a lot of big hearted people saw a golden opportunity...no pun intended...and several new nursing homes were opened for business. Many more in the years since then. Most of them are reputable establishments and provide the needed services." Doc stopped pacing and turned to look at me. His jaw was set firm and his eyes narrowed. I could well imagine him as a courtroom lawyer then, the pacing an old habit perhaps. I wouldn't want to be pitted against those piercing eyes, against his quick mind. "But let's face it," he continued, "there are just a damn lot of leaches like
Preston who'll suck blood anywhere they can find it. That's the real tragedy as I see it. And it's easy to see what draws them"

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Well look, Jackson. Medicaid pays an amount for each patient each day, say $50. The home operator has a choice. He can use that money as it is intended, or he can cut a few corners, like paying rock-bottom wages for help, scrimping on food--they've found lots of options, believe me."

"But I paid over $60 a day to live here myself."

"Oh yes, we were the fortunate ones, we could afford to pay through the nose for the luxuries here. But Preston was salaried too, and he found some pretty lucrative ways to bolster his salary on the side."

"I guess I just never paid much attention before. Who actually owns this place?"

"It was expensive to build, as you can imagine. There are five owners actually, businessmen. Preston was directly responsible to them financially, but he had a free reign as far as the actual operations went. Believe me, they're plenty upset about this situation with Preston. They've been cooperative. I think their hearts are in the right places, of course after looking over the financial picture here, it doesn't seem like their pocketbooks have suffered any either. I do hold them partially responsible for the poor quality of help here. You can understand how a scatterbrain like Cynthia
would end up responsible for a whole wing. $1.80 an hour isn't going to attract your best help. But it was legal, and the real professionals, like Dr. Jameson, were paid well enough. The owners are busy men. As long as things seemed to be functioning adequately, and as long as they were turning a profit, they were content to leave the rest up to Preston. That's why they hired him."

"Well what was Preston doing," I asked, "to supplement his income as you say?"

"Let me pinpoint a few of the allegations we've made. You already know about that matter of the social security checks. Again, that doesn't seem to be entirely illegal--a little shady--but it's a common practice in nursing homes for administrators to cash social security checks for senile patients."

I snapped around to look at Doc who was pacing again. "I don't quite consider myself senile. I could speak to that."

"That reminds me, we may need you to testify."

"You can count on me, Doc."

"Good. I knew we could."

"But isn't there anything specifically illegal that you have on Mr. Preston?" I asked.

"I was just coming to that. First there is that matter of Mary Freshour."
"Who?"

"The dietition."

I felt angry at the mention of the person whom I blamed for Julien's final blow. "I would be more than willing to speak to that too, Doc."

"But you may be mistaken," he said.

"I was damn glad when she was fired."

"I know. But Mary was a perfectly capable and sincere person. I think she tried to do a good job here. It appears that Preston hired her originally to meet staffing requirements. He exploited the information he gathered from her as a ready means to cut down food costs--and he was only too happy to fire her after the inspection. I've checked back, and that seems to have been a pattern over the years. Preston satisfied the inspectors, and then he satisfied us by firing Mary after Julien's death. It worked out especially nice for him this year."

I felt my pulse quicken. "That vulture! I'd like to have a few mintues with him!"

"Easy, Jackson. I know how you feel. I only wish we could have acted more quickly and saved Julien. But a man is innocent until proven otherwise--that's basic to our system of law. Unfortunately the courts are backlogged. It's going to be a while yet until we can pin down Henry Preston, but we have enough evidence. We'll get him."
"Then Julien was probably right about Mrs. Livingstone."
"What's that," Doc asked.
"He mentioned to me once that she was Mr. Preston's sister-in-law."

Doc walked around the desk and sat down again, leaning toward me. "That's right. A nice little family affair. Our auditors uncovered some interesting expense items in the books they both prepared. Among other things, we've found a number of phony medical claims. I'm sure that was convenient when one or the other of them wanted a new television or a vacation. And there's more. Kick-backs. We're certain Preston had a deal with the Greenwood Downs Funeral Home—all in the line of duty, assisting bereaved families of deceased patients."

"That's disgusting."

"That's greed, Jackson. Pure and simple greed. I don't think I need to go on do I?"

"No. I've heard enough. But why isn't something being done—why aren't there laws?"

"Action has begun in most states—unannounced inspections, fines for violations of standards—some homes have been closed down. Congress is working too, but the problems are a long way from being solved. Licenses to operate nursing homes are considered property rights by the courts. That means they can't be removed without due process, and that's where we come in."
"Gold Age Services?" I asked.

"Right. But we're only a small group, a group of old fogies making waves, I guess."

"It looks like you're going to make plenty of waves here."

"We'll see when we get Preston to court."

He nodded. "There's something else I should explain. I caused you an awful lot of trouble I'm afraid. I'm thankful it worked out."

"What do you mean."

"Well, Preston is a shrewd operator. Maybe even more dangerous than I thought at first. He caught on to me--and to tell you the truth, I wanted out of here. I didn't want to fight him on his level--and he had ways of dealing with troublemakers."

"F-Wing."

"Exactly. The day we left, he called me to his office, demanded to know why I had been questioning the other patients. I didn't tell him anything, of course. Then he threatened me. The whole conversation was very polite and businesslike, but we understood each other, and I was sure he suspected you were in on some sort of plot with me."

"Me?"

"I didn't want to take any chances. That's why I figured we'd better take the back exit."

"Then he might have been after us after all."

Doc nodded. "One reason why I thought a vacation might be in order, and why I wasn't anxious to be in Dallas that night--just in case."

I sat back in my chair, thinking over what Doc had told me.

Doc said, "I didn't mean to involve you, Jackson. I'm sorry for your trouble."

I shrugged. "I didn't even know there was any trouble. I was having a great time."

Doc laughed. "So was I, Jackson. So was I. You know, after we left Dallas I really put the whole business out of my mind. I haven't had more fun in years. I only called back to check with Minnie to see how the paper work was coming along. Gold Age Services is so confounded efficient they'd already got Preston's resignation. They needed someone to fill in temporarily, and since I knew this operation--I felt I had to do it. I hated to desert you on the spot like that, but it seemed best. I didn't want you to feel obligated to come back with me." He grinned, "Besides, you seemed to be enjoying yourself. By the way, how was your evening?"

"Just great," I said, "and we found a gallery to take Loretta's paintings yesterday. She sold one already--eight hundred smackers."

"Hey. She must be good."

"I think so."
"Well," Doc said, "I'm hungry. How about going to lunch with me. I might even buy you a cup of coffee."

"Sure, but one more thing that just came to mind, if you thought Mr. Preston might even be after us, why did we waste all that time buying clothes here. We could have done that later."

"Oh, I wasn't worried about him after I got to a phone that morning. I called him when I went to buy the car--told him exactly who I was and explained that he'd be dealing with Gold Age Services. He was pretty shook. He knew it was too late to stop us then."

"Then we never were in any real danger, not after we got to the Rose Ridge kitchen anyway."

"They hadn't even discovered we were gone. If Cynthia did see those sheets hanging out our window, she must have figured we were doing our laundry."

"Or maybe she knew we were three sheets to the wind."

Doc stood and shook his head. "Just for that, you can buy the coffee."
The evening was waning. The sun slid down behind the rose bushes and the sun painted the rose petals with transparent yellow light. Along the front of the Manor, ivy clung to the cracks of overlapping white boards; brown stems, bold and thickly tangled beneath pointed leaves. In the tall lawn grass, a cricket buffed his forewings, then another joined in the chirping, and another, like a miniature syncopated symphony of fat men in black tails with violins on their backs.

Doc and I sat on the wide front steps of the Manor. He chewed on the tender white end of a grass stem and itbobbed as he spoke. "Why don't you apply for the job as director here? I could give you a good recommendation to the board."

I knew he was teasing. I said, "Oh, I don't think so. I'm too young to understand the problems of these old people. Somebody more...mature could handle it better, like you."

He cuffed me on the shoulder. "Put up your dukes, buddy-we'll see who's mature."

I laughed. "If it weren't for this bum knee and my arthritis..."
"Some excuse."
I said, "How long will you stay on here, Doc?"
"Only until another director is hired."
"And then?"
"There's a home we've heard about down in Houston..."
"Judas Priest!" I interrupted. "You're not going through this all over again...you're not going to live in another home."
"Sure."
"But Doc..."
"Look, Jackson, somebody has to draw them out. I do a pretty fair job on the preliminary work."
"You do it all the time? Just go from home to home?"
Doc grinned, "This is number three already this year. We're getting it down to a science. They call me the Sherlock Holmes of Gold Age Services."
"Well I'll be..."
"You'll be late for your plane if that taxi doesn't get here pretty quick," he said.
I looked at my watch. "I've got plenty of time."
"So you think you might head on for Montana again."
"Eventually. I had hoped to convince you to come with me."

His eyes beamed from under thick pointed brows. "But there would be a slight delay in Colorado Springs."
"That seems like a possibility."

Doc slapped his knee. His eyes danced as he chanted, "Grape vine warp, Fence rail fillin', I'll marry you if your ma and pa are willin'."

"What?"

"A little courting verse my grandpa used to say."

"Oh."

Just then old Mrs. Cramer wheeled her chair across the lawn in front of us and the cricket symphony silenced. Her arms worked hard against the spoked tires, but she had good strong arms and the chair rolled smoothly, leaving parallel lines of bent grass behind her. Mrs. Cramer stopped the chair beside the rose garden and leaned sideways until her dried-apple nose brushed a yellow petal. Then she reached down and twisted the thorny stem and broke it and she lay the rose on her lap. Nobody scolded Mrs. Cramer.

When the taxi came I stood up and clutched my suitcase. Doc extended his hand and firmly gripped mine. "Well, Partner, take care."

"You too, Doc. Take care."

A few moments later I looked back through the rear window and through the crimson clouds of dust churned frantic by the cab. For a while Doc stood on the step with his hands in his pockets. Then he turned and went into the Manor.