Five tales

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FIVE TALES

by

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Introduction
Of the myths rooted in America's historical past—among them those of the ante-bellum South, the road from the log cabin to the White House, and the perfect rectitude of our Revolutionary leaders—the one most firmly planted in the contemporary consciousness and there maintained by media of communication hitherto unparalleled is that of the cowboy.

The boyhood of most living Americans does not go back beyond the first movie cowpuncher, and these days a kid without a cowboy outfit is a second-class citizen anywhere in America. Uncle Sam still survives as our public symbol; but actually America has come to picture itself in chaps rather than striped pants. ¹

¹Leslie A. Fiedler, "Montana: or the End of Jean-Jacques Rousseau", in An End to Innocence (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), p.136
The reason for the cowboy's elevation to the position of our chief cultural symbol is, in part at least, one of historical necessity.

Since we are comparatively historyless and culturally dependent, our claim to moral supremacy rests upon a belief that a high civilization is at a maximum distance from goodness; the cowboy is more noble than the earl.

A people newly risen to world prominence must have, as part of their "claim to moral supremacy," a mythic source of national pride, embodied in a framework more popular and less subtle than the attempted national epics of Walt Whitman or even Stephen Vincent Benet can offer. Because of our "cultural dependence" upon foreign literary traditions and forms, and our undeniable lack of national concern with serious literature as a cultural force, it is extremely doubtful that America will ever possess a formal nationalististic apophasis, such as those created by Virgil and Camaens. But the popular mind, from which all myth ultimately derives, has not been idle. The increasingly urbanized masses of the American populace have given their romanticized longings and aspirations to a figure from the past, a lonely wanderer on horseback. The cowboy, whether he takes the shape of Shanes or the Lone Ranger, has become a kind of secularized Everyman.

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2 Fiedler, p. 137.
However, behind the embroidered shirts and silver-mounted guns of the matinee cowboy-hero, behind the Wonder Horse, the guitar, the comic sidekick and the colossal feats of riding, shooting, roping, and brawling, there lurks an historical reality which will not quite down; which, although softened and glamorized by forgetfulness and the whole distorting process of myth-making, remains disconcertingly alive.

The cowboy's true world, the frontier of fact, the fallen aspect of America's lost paradise, has been described as the place

...where the Dream (of man's goodness) has encountered the resistance of fact, where the Noble Savage has confronted Original Sin (the edge of hysteria of the twitching revivals, ritual drunkenness, "shooting up the town", of the rape of nature and the almost compulsive slaughter of beasts). 3

It is in the popular perversion of these facts that the essence of the myth of the American West lies. It is this distortion in the interests of national grandeur and pride which allows the rejuvenation of such dubious characters from our past as Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, Mike Fink, and Billy the Kid, 4 which permits the bungling Custer to be regarded as "the innocent victim, the symbolic figure of the whiteman betrayed

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3 Fiedler, p. 132.

4 For the most flagrant romanticization of this mad dog killer, see Walter Noble Burns, The Saga of Billy the Kid (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1926).
by crafty redskins;\textsuperscript{5} which transform Jesse James into a New World Robin Hood, combating authority and oppression in the name of the "little people";\textsuperscript{6} which presents "Buffalo Bill", the dream of Ned Buntline, as a powerful symbol of irresistible progress locked in mortal combat with benighted savagery;\textsuperscript{7} which conveniently forgets that Wild Bill Hickok was not averse to shooting unarmed or unsuspecting foes;\textsuperscript{8} and that Wyatt Earp was closely connected, during his career as a law officer, with the white slave trade.\textsuperscript{9}

It is, of course, a force that has assumed forms less reprehensible, such as the cults of William S. Hart, Charles M. Russell, and Will Rogers—natural man as, respectively, hero, artist and sage. But it is inevitably an approach toward the tremendous complexity of history which is at basis an emotional oversimplification. It also involves an abdication of

\textsuperscript{5}Fiedler, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{6}The only two reliable books on Jesse James and his associates, Robertus Love's The Rise and Fall of Jesse James (New York: P. Putnam's Sons, 1926) and Homer Croyn's Jesse James Was My Neighbor (New York: Duell, Sloane, and Pearce, 1949) both suffer from the tendency to idealize their subject.
\textsuperscript{7}For the detailed story of this interesting process of transformation, see Jay Monaghan's The Great Rascal: the Life and Adventures of Ned Buntline (Boston; Little, Brown, and Company, 1952).
\textsuperscript{8}Frank L. Wilstach, Wild Bill Hickok, the Prince of picturesque (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1928), pp. 71-75.
\textsuperscript{9}Walter Noble Burns, in his pro-Earp book, Tombstone, an Iliad of the Southwest (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1927), does not bother to conceal the fact that the law enforcement officers of Dodge City, who numbered in their ranks such contemporary heroes as Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson, were known, with reason, as "The Fighting Pimps".
intellectual and moral responsibility. The highly stylized nature of the typical TV western, the form through which the myth is today most widely disseminated, has been pinpointed by John Steinbeck in a celebrated essay:

"The story never varies and the conventions are savagely adhered to. The hero never kisses a girl. He loves his horse and he stands for right and justice. Any change in the story or conventions would be taken as an outrage...it is...as set in its form as the commedia dell'arte."

Steinbeck goes on to demonstrate how this static quality results in a complete absence of complexity or richness in the presentation of moral issues and relationships:

"Now wait", I said, "which one is the Good Guy?"
"The one with the white hat." (The speaker is Steinbeck's twelve-year-old son, Catbird.)
"Then the one with the black hat is the Bad Guy?"
"Anybody knows that", said Catbird.

Steinbeck is here dealing with the manifestation of the legend on television, but the same general characteristics of the myth are noticeable no matter in what form of communication it is found. Further on, Steinbeck gives a striking example of how this stylization affects even what relative complexity is admitted inside this rigid framework:

Now a new character began to emerge. He puzzled me because he wore a gray hat...."Catbird", I asked shyly, "what kind of guy is that, the one in the gray hat?"

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10John Steinbeck, "How to Tell Good Guys from Bad Guys." The Reporter XII (10 March 1955), 42-44
11Ibid, p. 43
"He's the In-Between Guy", Catbird explained kindly. "If he starts bad he ends good and if he starts good he ends bad."

"What's this one going to do?"
"See how he's sneering and needs a shave?" my son asked.
"Yes."
"Well, the picture's just started, so that guy is going to end good and help the Good Guy get Her father's ranch back."

It is superfluous to remark that such an attitude on the part of an author toward the human problems implicit in his work absolves both himself and his public from any adult concern with the moral and intellectual issues of real life.

The "Western", as a representation of a meaningful reality, is as inaccurate, wildly romantic, and morally uninstructive as the pastoral romances of the 16th and 17th centuries. Such works may be read for relaxation or amusement, but they can have no serious claim to the attention of the thoughtful reader.

The critic, regarding the vast amount of "Western" literature which has been produced in America, stigmatizes it as being unworthy of any mature consideration. This blanket condemnation is almost totally just. The conventional "Western" has, by rendering itself subservient to the only interpretation of its donnee which is acceptable to the popular consciousness, so impoverished itself, and presented a view of life so obviously elementary and childish as to become

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12Ibid, p.43
incapable of even approaching the moral seriousness which is so great a concern of any intelligent life and which is an integral part of any piece of literature that can be called art. This is in itself a major cultural tragedy. The vast wealth of material offered us by the spectacle of the western movement has become the province of a multitude of essentially uninspired and insouciant writers who are content to repeat the worn, almost traditional patterns of action and character. Zane Grey, Max Brand, William McLeod Raine, Peter Dawson, and countless others have lent their prolific pens to the task of creating an immense and ultimately unimportant literature, which cannot be said to have any real bearing on the problems of our present existence, the first criterion of a work of art.

Fortunately, this is not the entire picture. There exists in the tradition of American letters a handful of writers who have refused to be drawn into the snare, whose concepts of life and art have been too earnest and too dedicated to be satisfied with the trite and trivial. Beginning with the pioneer efforts of Owen Wister (The Virginian) and continuing through such authors as Eugene Manlove Rhodes (of whose works Bernard de Voto once wrote, "They are the only fiction of the cattle kingdom that reaches a level which it is intelligent to call art"), Stephen Crane ("The Blue Hotel"), and Mari Sandoz,

whose understanding of the violence and significance of the pioneer (Old Jules), the outlaw (Slogum House), and the Indian wars (Crazy Horse, Cheyenne Autumn) has enabled her to create important works from the stuff of dime novels and legend, we come to such figures as A. B. Guthrie, Jr. (The Big Sky), who, in the tragedy of Boone Caudill, has given a kind of quietus to the myth of the Noble Savage; Walter V. T. Clark, who, in The Ox-Bow Incident, has succeeded in giving the authentic frontier and its inhabitants a deep ethical significance while refusing to conceal any of their brutality or crudity; Vardis Fisher, who treats this same frontier and its people with penetrating irony in City of Illusion; and Wallace Stegner, whose approach in The Big Rock Candy Mountain is marked by a deep tragic sense and an awareness of profound social and historical change. Through the efforts of such authors, American literature has accumulated a body of work of serious intent and aesthetic substance. It is in the spirit of this tradition that the following stories are based.

When an author who is a Westerner by birth and inheritance comes to deal, as an author, with the stories, memories, and recollections which the members of his family have, since his childhood, passed on to him, he soon discovers, in the violence, eccentricity, color, and tragedy inherent in such material, an opportunity to attempt some sort of serious comment not only upon the immediate situation with which he is dealing but, by implication, upon certain major moral problems and experiences
which are universal within our civilization. Thus, "A Birth" deals with an ethical and emotional awakening of a nature necessary for future spiritual growth, "A Death" with the character and effect of an isolation at once physical and moral, "Armageddon" with a problem of faith, and "The Suppliant" with the specifically Christian matter of revenge and forgiveness.

At first glance, the concluding tale, "Two Heroes", with its contemporary setting and terminology, may seem an anachronism. But, aside from any intrinsic merit it may possess, it is intended to serve a definite purpose in demonstrating the immediacy and importance of the past by giving a sense of the eternal recurrences of the human condition. Like the earlier tales, "Two Heroes" deals with a moral situation, but also with questions of faith and of Christianity in general, as do the stories preceding it. The great dilemmas of the past are also those of the present, and the position of the individual of faith, be it George Frior, Albert Brockmann, or Joan Schuster, to the person outside of it, such as the boy Acton or the youth Turk, is necessarily the same, since it is eternal.
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A BIRTH
I began to hate my uncle Will in the spring of the year that I was six and he twenty. It was morning, and I was standing in the yard; my feet carefully together so that I would not scuff my newly shined shoes, watching him grease the buggy axle in preparation for our trip into town. He squatted lightly on the still-damp earth, his thick fingers reaching slowly and carefully into the bucket of grease, as if he could somehow keep from getting his hands dirty that way. I heard him mutter something that I knew, without understanding it, to be cussing; this was what he called "nester's work," when Grandpa wasn't around to hear him.

This day was something new in my life; I was going to be ring-bearer at Lucy Haftner's wedding. Tom, Lucy's fellow, had
had asked me himself if I would like to, very seriously and
without smiling behind his great mustache, like one grown-up
asking another a big favor, and I had accepted eagerly. The
rehearsal had gone off perfectly the night before last, and I
had got to stay up late, with Tom giving me a cup of coffee
with cream and sugar in it when Grandma wasn't looking. I
wasn't even scared now at the thought of walking down that
long aisle with hundreds of people looking down and pressing
in upon me. I was going to be important.

The best thing of all, though, was of course the new coat.
Grandpa had taken me around to Barstow's the day after I had
told Tom I would, and let me pick it out. It was a beautiful
thing, a sailor's coat, with white stripes on the cuffs and
collar, and large shiny buttons, an eagle stamped on each.
And hanging on a loop of white braid fastened to the breast
of it was a little silver whistle that really blew. Grandpa
had told me not to blow it while I was in town. I wasn't
tired of it yet, and I stood rubbing it in my fingers as I
watched Will. He was almost under the buggy now, busy greasing.
Suddenly I remembered that he hadn't seen the coat yet or
heard the whistle, and that he probably didn't even know I was
there. I walked quickly and carefully over to the buggy, drew
in all my breath, and blew the whistle as loud as I could. It
made a lot of racket, a high shrill noise that hurt my ears.

Will straightened up sharply and knocked his head against
the bottom of the buggy. He cussed again and then peered out
at me. "Goddamn you, Acton," he said, and then he saw the new coat as I stood proudly before him, hands in pockets. His long handsome face wrinkled up in a nasty smile and he spit on the ground, still rubbing his head with his clean hand. "I'll be goddammed if it ain't Admiral Dewey come to visit."

That would have puffed me up any other time; I had chosen the coat because I thought it looked like the one Admiral Dewey had on in his picture over Barstow's counter. But Will meant it nasty, as if he were laughing at me. "You're cussing," I said. "I'm gonna tell Grandpa."

"Tattletale-tit," he mocked, and slid out from under the buggy to squat on his haunches facing me, his small blue eyes filled with a network of little red lines and his heavy cheeks covered with a thick black stubble. His face was suddenly mock serious, the smile quivering about his mouth, and I was angry because I knew he was going to treat me like a child; whereas he was nothing but one himself; I had seen Grandma treat him like one enough times to be convinced of that.

"You give a man a powerful knock on the head for a guy your size," he said. His breath smelt of a mixture of liquor and stale smoke that I was familiar with and that made me take a step back. "Course, I sort of had a headache before you came along," he added, seeing my revulsion and grinning again.

"You're drunk again," I said, trying to sound shocked.

"Nosir, not me, boy. I'se sober as a judge. Ain't had a drop for pert near -" he paused, holding up his grease coated
fingers and calculating on them - "pert near six hours now. Gotta be all nice and spruce for Miss Lucy, you know."

The association angered me. It was a deliberate tarnishing of the brilliant scene in which I was to be so important, "You ain't fit to go to any wedding," I said loudly.

"Well, Brother Van, do tell," Will sneered. His voice turned snivelly and nasal in parody of the minister's pulpit manner. "Us poor sinners just gonna have to wait outside the house of God."

I had turned quickly around to go, full of anger and disgust, but Will grabbed my arm and jerked me about to face him. "You gonna tell Papa how I been cussin' and carryin' on, huh?" He gave me a slight shake. "Are you?"

I was close to tears, but even so I could see the new expression that had come over his face. He was no longer mocking or laughing, but somehow apprehensive, afraid. It was that weakness that prompted me to hurt him if I could, and I shouted, "Yes! Yes, I am!"

His mouth drew tight shut. "I'll give you somethin' to really yell about then, goddamn it!" he said, and, as I was kicking at him and trying to pull away, he raised his greasy hand and drew it hard down the front of my coat.

By the time my grandmother came to the kitchen door, I had fallen down twice in my blind flight across the yard to the house, uttering a long continuous scream as I came. She seized me tightly as I blundered into her grasp and held me off at arm's
length, examining me closely for injuries. "Where are you hurt, Acton?" she kept repeating, "Where are you hurt?" I blubbered out Will's name, and she, noticing my ruined coat then, took me into the house without another word.

As she washed my face, and when I had stopped crying enough to pay some attention to her, she spoke rapidly and quietly. "It's alright," she kept repeating, despite my violent protests that everything was ruined. "You can wear your good Sunday coat, and I'll sew those jet buttons - you remember how much you liked them? - on your cuffs, so nobody can tell but what it's new." She paused to wring out the cloth, keeping her gaze on my still-distorted face. "And we won't tell Grandpa what Will did, because he didn't really mean to do it; and Grandpa'll feel bad, and you wouldn't want that to happen on Tom and Lucy's wedding day, would you? I'll make Will apologize, and it'll all be alright -"

I never knew what story she told Grandpa concerning the coat. By the time we were ready to leave for town, I had been lying in a sullen silence on my bed for an hour, realizing that now I couldn't betray Will to Grandpa, and plotting forlornedly against him. Grandma had come in and put me into the Sunday coat like a sack of potatoes, as she said, I remaining utterly limp, compliant, and unco-operative. After she left, I lay on my stomach, staring at the planes of the huge jet buttons and brooding. I prayed fervently for any calamity to happen, rather than be forced to go through the ceremony in
this coat. I thought idly of destroying it, but I felt too listless to do more than stare at the buttons on my cuff and magnify my hatred for Will.

They sent Grandpa to bring me down. I was unaware of his presence until he laid his hand lightly on my shoulder.

"Ready for the lion's mouth, Acton?" he asked, smiling.

"I suppose so," I said, and, getting up, marched down the stairs before him. I was afraid that he would say something about the coat, knowing I would probably bust out if he did, but Grandma had evidently warned him.

As Grandpa gathered up the reins, he peered about the yard and then asked, "Where's Will?"

"He's gone on ahead," my uncle John said, slouched over his saddlehorn as he fumbled with his stiff collar. "Said he had to see somebody afore the weddin'."

Grandpa paused. "I see," he said finally, and his shoulders rose and fell slightly in a kind of mild shrug. His mouth barely formed the words "As usual," and clucked to the horse.

The wedding was all shadows and confusion. I did my part perfectly, without a mistake, moving like an automaton through the ceremony. Tom let me kiss Lucy next after himself, before anyone else, holding me up to her in her great cloud of lace and fine netting. John was standing about, smiling broadly at everyone, but I did not see Will. I managed to sneak out of the reception before the speeches began, and sat in the sun on the back steps of the hotel. The whole affair, with its novelty
and emotion, was ridiculous to me. I sat staring at a frayed spot on the inside edge of my lapel.

When I looked up, I saw my cousin Oscar standing at the foot of the steps, eyeing me solemnly. He was a year younger than I, and fatter, with silky auburn hair which his mother made him wear long, and large round eyes the color of coal. His mother was my aunt Lizzie, Grandma's daughter by her first marriage.

I stared back at him, but he didn't say anything. I noticed he was wearing a big red rose in his button hole, from which the leaves were already beginning to drop off. "Where'd you steal that?" I asked.

"Didn't steal it. Mama gave it to me."
"I bet."
"She did." He never moved or raised his voice, just lowered his head and kept on looking at me. I didn't like to play with Oscar much; he was too quiet and slow and never got mad when you teased him.

"I thought you were gonna have a new coat," he said.
"I did," I answered, angry at once.
"No you don't."
"Yes I did."
"Where is it then?"
"It got ruined."
"How?"
"Accident."
"You never had no coat," he said, after a moment's reflection.

"You ain't really my cousin," I parried.

"Yes I am."

"You can't be, because your mother's only Will and John's half-sister."

Lizzie had left home at eighteen after she found out they had been telling around school that she wasn't their real sister, and married Jim Sloan, the conductor, three months later.

"Yes I am," he repeated, ignoring my accusation.

I only wanted him to go away. "You get," I said, "or I'll hit you."

He backed off a bit. "You better not."

"I will," I said. "Go away or I'll fix you for sure."

"Better not," he said, retreating. As he went around the corner of the building he yelled, "You don't have any coat, anyhow!"

I put my head down on my knees and thought how much I hated everyone.

I don't know how long it was before I heard them in the corral across the alley. But when I became aware of the loud talking and the horses' hooves on the packed earth and looked up, the first thing I saw was Will.

He was sitting astraddle the top rail of the corral, only half turned toward me, the neck of a bottle protruding from his coat pocket. His hat was thrust far back on his head,
and I could see, from where I sat, the stains of dried grease on the hand that clutched the rail.

I crouched frozen for a moment, waiting for him to turn around and yell a drunken sarcasm at me. But he was speaking to someone beyond him, leaning forward precariously as if he were intensely interested, and I saw then whom he was with. Indians.

There were maybe half a dozen of them, dressed in dirty, miscellaneous clothing - Levi's, buckskin, checkered workpants, run-down boots. One who stood by the fence near Will wore an elbowless Prince Albert that had been split across his broad shoulders. None of them wore braids or moccasins; their faces were brown, heavy, and lined. I had seen these, or others identical with them, before; they passed through the country about once a year, usually with a string of horses to swap or sell, and stole anything they could get their hands on. People said they came across the line from Canada.

Will fished out the bottle and gestured with it at the horses they were driving into the corral. "Bunch of Goddamn worthless crowbait," I heard him say. "This all the better you'n do up there?"

The Indian in the Prince Albert turned to him and said something; Will made a huge sweeping gesture with both arms and shook his head violently. I got up and began to move slowly and quietly around the corner of the building. As I went I heard Will saying, "Hell, that Goddamn army blanket
you got under that saddle there's worth any two of them horses.
Steal that from a Mountie?"

My grandparents found me asleep in the buggy that evening
and I rode home propped up between them. John, a little drunk,
rode alongside, whistling a sad tune that kept running through
my brain.

I got my revenge the next morning. After breakfast, at
which Will had not appeared, I went out to the barn to turn the
chickens loose and scatter grain for them, as I did every day.
The grain box was near the rear of the barn, beyond the stalls,
and as I walked past them, the tinean in my hand, I saw that
Belle, Will's mare, was not in her stall. Instead I saw hudd-
dled there a thin roan which even I could tell at a moment's
glance was worthless as a horse. It looked warily about at me
and moved uneasily, and I edged in closer for a better look.

There was dry sweat caked all over it in dark splotches,
and amongst these, which covered its sides, I could make out
streaks of blood and here and there a tear in the hide, in
about the area where a man's spurs would rake. The roan was
favoring one of its front legs, and I saw a long jagged tear
in it, as if it had been entangled in barbwire. The horse
rolled its eyes at me and jerked its head. I had never seen
anything as badly mistreated before, and the sight of it made
me feel sick, as anything did which I knew would make me dream
later on. I walked quickly to the grain box, trying not to
think about it.

The snoring began with a kind of muttering as I let the heavy lid drop back, and I remained rigid for a moment, listening. I knew at once who it was, but the thought that he might remain in the barn, after leaving there the horse he had mistreated, had never crossed my mind.

Will was lying on his face in a dark corner away from the box. All I could clearly see of him was one hand flung over his head, the fingers sunk into the straw, on which a thin bright ray of sunlight fell. The hand was dirty; I could still see the axle grease on it; beneath the layers of dirt.

I was feeding the chickens with slow careful sweeps of my arm when I saw Grandpa come out of the kitchen, knock his pipe out against the porch rail, and cross the yard toward me, small and straight in the still early light. The chickens scattered at his approach and instantly regrouped when I flung them another handful of grain. He stood beside me, smiling at them, "Looks something like the guests around the punch bowl yesterday, eh Acton?"

I let the next handful of grain trickle slowly through my fingers as I spoke. "There's a strange horse in Belle's stall, Grandpa."

"A strange horse,?"

"Yes'sir. Looks like he's been cut up some."

He went into the barn. I kept staring down at the chickens and absently kicked at one pecking near my feet. In a few
moments he came out and stood beside me again, without speaking at first. I was afraid to look at him.

"Have you seen Will this morning?" he asked, and there was a new sound to his voice that made it almost like that of a stranger.

"He's sleeping in the corner by the grain box," I said. I had planned to tell Grandpa that he was drunk, to boot, but now I was suddenly concerned that I had said too much.

I could hear the angry murmur of their voices echoing through the barn after a time; Will's starting low and then gradually building to a sullen vehemence, while Grandpa's remained level and insistent. I could understand nothing of what they said, although I strained to make it out. John had wandered out from the house and was about to go in the barn when I told him what was happening.

"Damn fool," he said. "Never could keep from swapping when he's drunk."

Will's voice was getting louder and clearer now: "Goddamn it, I'll go to Lizzie's; she knows how to treat her own kin, anyhow." Then I heard his boots suddenly close on the straw inside, and before I could move he came through the door, his saddle over his shoulder, a cavalry blanket on his arm.

"You'n keep the damn old nag," he yelled back into the barn. "Maybe you can use her for a plowhorse." He turned away angrily, and his eye lit on me. "You, Acton," he said slowly, and suddenly he had let the saddle and blanket drop and was shaking
me violently, a hand tight on each shoulder. "You couldn't keep your damn mouth shut, could you? Oh, no!" I burst into tears of fright and pain, and John managed to get between us. "For Christ's sakes, Will, leave the kid alone. You wanna kill him or somethin'? Papa's gonna be mad enough at you for a while as it is." Will gave me a final sharp shake and thrust me away against the barn wall. He stood watching me cry for a moment and then picked up the saddle and blanket. He shook the latter at John, "Goddamn red bastards forgot to steal this back from me. They threw it in with the crowbait." He laughed wryly. "Reckon that's what must've sold me." He hoisted the saddle back onto his shoulder and began to walk across the yard to the gate.

"Take my black, why don't'cha," John called after him. "It's a far piece to Liz's packin' that."

Will walked on in the warming light. He did not look back. John looked at me and then went back to the house. I hung around the barn for a while, waiting for Grandpa to come out. Once I peeked in and saw him dimly in the shadows by Belle's stall, standing silently tugging at his mustache. After a while I drifted off to the creek.

No one mentioned Will for about four days, and all of us were quiet around Grandpa. He spoke to us very little; he spent most of the time doctoring the roan and took to sitting up late again reading the Bible in the kitchen. Then Will turned up one morning after breakfast, finishing a job he had
left undone in the woodlot, and the old patterns were resumed without comment. We figured he had had a fight with Lizzie or he would probably have stayed away longer.

Will and I did not pay any attention to each other, as if by some mutual understanding. At the table we sat away from each other, our faces studiously averted, and John maneuvered the dishes between us. Nor did we speak, even when we happened to meet in doorways or at corners. We had sinned against each other.

About two weeks after Will returned, Grandma somehow learned that Oscar was sick with what Doc Miles told Liz was chicken-pox. Grandma waited for a day and then drove over to Lizzie's to see what she could do. She was gone all afternoon, and the four of us were sitting on the porch in the soft early dusk, Grandpa smoking, John trying to pick out a tune on the concertina, when Grandma drove up. She walked rather heavily across the yard and up the steps, and sat in a chair away from us, taking off her glasses and rubbing her eyes before she began to speak. I had never seen her look so tired.

"Now are things over there, Melissa?" Grandpa asked her. He always referred to Lizzie's as "over there", a sign of his disapproval of her marriage.

"Not good," Grandma said. She took a handkerchief from the reticule and wiped her forehead. "Doctor Miles should be shot. The old fool doesn't know enough to doctor a horse. Poor Lizzie."
"Liz ain't caught nothin', has she, Mama?" Will asked.
"No, not Liz," Grandma said wearily. "She didn't want to
let me in, of course, me just bein' her own mother. But
in I came, and the minute I got inside poor little Oscar's
bedroom, I just said out loud without thinkin', 'That's
the smallpox, I'd know that smell anywhere' - as I should;
I've nursed enough through it - and so it was."

We sat about the porch in silence, looking at Grandma
as if she had returned from the dead. I remembered the
stories she used to tell of the epidemics in Kansas when
she was a girl, of the families that died and rotted in
their cabins, and how it had taken three grown persons
to hold her, a young girl, down when she first saw her
face in a mirror after the eruptions had began. Grandpa
broke the silence.

"God help it's not," he said.

"It is," Grandma answered with decision. "Poor Lizzie,
and Jim worse than no help at all. I only hope she's
managed to keep it from the rest of the children."

Will spoke up suddenly. "How bad is he, Mama?"

"He's in the hands of God," Grandma said.

"I suppose Liz'll be needin' some help around the place
if Jim's goin' back on the road this week," Will said.
"I'll ride over tomorrow and take a look."

Grandma made a sharp, nervous gesture. "Maybe you'd
better not, Will. I think Lizzie can get along alright, and I'll be going over again tomorrow anyway."

"I mean give her a hand with any heavy stuff that needs doin'. Hell, Mama, it wouldn't look right not to, for my own sister."

"I don't think you should is all, Will. You've never had it."

Will got up slowly and moved toward Grandma. "Why don't Liz want me over there, Mama? What have I done?"

"Nothing, she's just all upset is all -"

"You tell me now, Mama."

Grandma sighed. "She says you're responsible for Oscar being sick."

"How'm I responsible?"

"Lizzie says you left a saddle blanket when you were there last time and Oscar was playing with it and got the smallpox off it. She made Jim burn it."

"Jesus," Will said. He looked about at the ground. "Them dirty red -" he sat heavily down on the top porch step. "I didn't mean nothin', Mama. It was all an accident." He stared over his shoulder at her as if for confirmation, and I saw on his face the same stricken look that had been there the day I betrayed him to Grandpa. The memory of it and the thought of the smallpox rotting you away while you were still alive were too much for my
six years imagination. I slipped into the kitchen, while Grandpa got up and went to sit by Will on the step.

It was Jim who told us. He drove over early one after-

a few days later when I was playing under the cottonwood in the yard and Grandpa was standing in the kitchen door, drinking his afterdinner coffee. I had never seen Jim before that I can remember, and I know I never saw him again because he left Lizzie and the kids a few months later and went off with a fat woman from town who told fortunes for a living. But I remember him with a strange clarity - a fat, sweating man of at least fifty, who, with his strands of black hair plastered across his naked skull and his carefully trained handlebar mustache, looked like a caricature of a bartender instead of a railway conductor. He was formally dressed in black broadcloth that was getting shiny at the knees and elbows, and wore a vest from which his heavy watch chain dangled like a badge of authority. He sat stiff and upright in the buggy after he brought it to a halt and said loudly and carefully to Grandpa, as if he were a herald announcing some important event, "Lizzie sent me over to tell you Oscar died this morning. We're going to bury him tomorrow around 10 o'clock. We'd take it kindly if you'd come." And the sweat streamed down his face and into the collar of his dirty white shirt. Maybe he was crying, too; his eyes were red.

The cup trembled in my grandfather's hand; despite his
experiences in The Rebellion, or maybe because of them, the idea of death always bothered him. He came down the steps and up to the buggy and laid a hand on Jim's arm.

"God bless you," he murmured. "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. But there's never any doubt in God's mind about a child."

Jim drew the back of a meaty hand across his streaming forehead. "It don't make any sense," he said. "You go to the trouble of bornin' 'em, you get fond of 'em, watch 'em grow and learn things, you hope they're gonna turn out better somehow than you did, you work and slave for 'em, you scrape and save and fight over pennies, and then it's all for what? It don't make no damn sense."

"You've got two others," Grandpa said. "You have them to work for."

"It ain't worth it. It just ain't worth it."

He drove away, the powdery dust settling down on the shoulders of his broadcloth coat like snow.

I sat under the tree and pondered. I had never seen a dead person; death had never before touched me. I thought of the times we had played together and fought; I pictured him as I had seen him last, at the wedding. Some power had come and despite his fine auburn hair and his red rose had done something awful to him. I wondered what Oscar looked like now, and whether he was in heaven yet, and if he wasn't, how long it would take him to get there. And finally
I cried, because he had been a child like me, and in his death I saw the threat of my own.

We all went to the funeral, even Will. I hadn't thought he would go; ever since he had heard of Oscar's sickness he had spent most of his time sitting down at the creek, rolling and smoking one cigarette after another. Grandpa tried to be nice to him, to make him think about other things, but Will never seemed to be listening to him.

It was a beautiful sunny morning, with a cool wind. The cemetery was the little one that the people from town used, out on the flats. The grass was tall and dry and stuck you through your pantslegs as you walked through it. The mountains showed close up and bluish-purple across the prairie; you could pick out every irregularity, dip, and rise along their skyline. I spent most of the funeral holding Grandpa's hand and looking over the splintering headboards and the little white stones with the lambs on top at the horses in a field beyond. And finally I cried again, because everyone else was and because I was afraid they would hurt Oscar by throwing dirt upon the coffin.

Will stood next to me. He was wearing his one suit, which he usually put on only when he was sparking some special girl, and his shiny dress boots. He kept turning his hat around and around in his hands, his fingers leaving streaks of sweat along the brim. I looked up at him, but he was staring off towards the mountains too and never shifted his gaze.
The worst part came when everyone filed past Lizzie to offer condolences. Jim wasn't there; maybe he was home caring for the children. Lizzie stood by the grave, tall and thin like Grandma, one hand clenching a handkerchief around which her long fingers kept twisting and untwisting. She wore a heavy veil, but she looked every person directly in the face as she took their hand, as if trying to memorize for her own satisfaction who was there and who was not. Will stood back as long as he could, and then he finally went quickly up to her, grabbed her hand and muttered something with his head down of which I could understand only "...sis...

Lizzie pulled away from him so hard she staggered. "You Goddamn dirty murderer!" she said, loud enough that people beginning to drive away stopped their buggies and stared around. Will backed away from her and dropped his hat into a clump of weeds. "Ah, Liz," he said, a kind of pleading in his voice:

"You come in my home and kill my children with your filthy diseases you pick up from God knows where -"

Grandma went to her and seized her by the arms, speaking low and angrily. Lizzie shook her head from side to side as if trying to avoid her words. "Dirty murderer!" she yelled at Will as he retrieved his hat. "Dirty murderer!"

Grandpa and Grandma pulled her away. She stumbled along between them, crying high and loud, and looking back at the new grave. People began to drive off again.
It was almost peaceful in the graveyard now. The wind came a little stronger and had a good fresh smell. Two horses were running at each other in the next meadow. I tried to think of Oscar being there in the ground, and then myself in his place under the loose packed earth that bore someone's shoeprint, and I shivered a little and moved my elbows and feet to do away with the sensation of lying in a narrow, low coffin.

It was when I turned to go that I saw Will crying. He stood clutching his hat, his head down, and cried silently, without motion, the tears running slow and large down his face, which was twisted like that of a young child with a hurt.

I would have been afraid of a grown-up crying at any other time. But it was perfectly right to me that Will should be doing so now. And whether I thought he wept only for Oscar, and so in a way for me, or simply because he was crying, a sudden urge touched me and I went up to him and tugged at his coat.

"Will," I said, "can I ride home with you?"

He looked strangely at me, as if I were an intruder, while he fished a handkerchief from his hip pocket and slowly dried his face. "I suppose so," he said then. "Come on." We walked apart through the dry grass to the road and as he took me up before him on the saddle, I felt within me the first stirrings of love.
A DEATH
There were many of them when I was a child. They would appear, dusty, shabby, exhausted, at the doors of farmhouses, or in the ramshackle huddled towns, or stop you upon the scarred roads or as you drove the plow through the rocky earth, struggling with a few unintelligible words of English, or perhaps only gestures, to beg food, rest, clothes, work. I early came to pity rather than fear them. They were like great children, gentle, and frightened, who had not yet learned to speak with assurance before grownups—for I soon grew to think of myself as a grownup in my dealings with them.

They came from the old country, my grandfather said, from places with unpronounceable names, in whose existence I only half believed. "They come to see the Promised Land, Acton". 
he replied in answer to my questions, "and it's hard for them to believe that it's not overflowing with their dreams."

We were plowing the south field that morning, and my grandfather had paused at the end of a furrow to light his pipe, when I saw the miniature figure climbing through the far fence and cried out.

"Another poor soul, I suppose", he said, "come to see the land of plenty despite the devil." He took up the reins again. "Guide the plow, Acton."

We were half way across the field when the man came up to us. I had been covertly watching his approach the whole length of the furrow, but the glare of the late morning sun was against me; and I could see only that he was tall, with a large pack hung upon his shoulders like a hump, and carried a stick stiffly away from his body. My grandfather stopped the horses and turned toward him.

I saw now with surprise that he was a man in late middle age— as old as my grandfather, and seeming more so, for his head, unprotected from the sun by any covering, was totally gray; and only a few dark strands remained in the sweeping beard that covered the upper part of his barrel-like chest. His hands were great masses of muscle, knotted and twisted almost to deformity, with the thickest fingers I had ever seen. His eyes, as I noted them for the first of many times, seemed to remain forever fixed upon some point in distant
space; the immediate and surrounding world could have no part in their cold darkness. And although his gaze was straight and unflinching when he spoke, the sound of his voice never ceased to come as a slight jarring shock, for you always seemed to feel instinctively that those eyes were oblivious and unseeing. Only in his dress was he like any of the others who had preceded him; his clothes were patched, ragged, and covered with a thick stain of dust and he wore heavy, broken boots.

He said to my grandfather, in surprisingly good English and with a hesitancy that seemed to spring more from a disuse of his voice than from any uncertainty regarding the language, "How far to the town?"

"That is the way?" And he pointed to the road beyond the gate of the field.

"Yes", said my grandfather. The stranger had scarcely waited for his reply; now he began to walk away with the heavy, slightly swaying stride that seemed as if it could take him onward forever. My grandfather said, "My place is right over the rise. The boy here'll show you. You can get something to eat and rest up a bit. It's a long ways in this sun—"

He stopped, because the stranger, without pausing or looking back, his chin sunk on his chest, was already halfway to the gate. We stood side by side and watched him until he had shrunk to a small, dust-trailed figure again. Then I turned to my grandfather, my mouth wide to speak, but he was looking
at the ground, a thoughtful, almost pained expression on his face, such as I sometimes saw there when one of my young uncles had gotten into a drunken scrape, a look as if some acute, more than personal hurt had been done him. He stood there then, in the violent sunlight, slowly turning the dead pipe around and around in his hand.

That was the first meeting. A few days later, Brother Van, the circuit rider, stopped at our place to pass the night and, as he sat at the cleared table in the kitchen, smilingly waiting for my grandfather to discover in the great broken-spined Bible the passage he had intended to use as fuel for one of their all-night discussions, he remarked, laughing, "But I've forgotten the most important bit of news of all! We have a new neighbor."

"On Spaakmann's place?" asked my grandfather. Spaakmann was a nester who had built a shack on a piece of land a few miles down the road from us; Long George Heilman had killed him in a gunfight four or five years before, and the claim had been deserted since.

"I seen that old bugger", my uncle Will said, "looking up from the rifle he was cleaning. "Looks like he just crawled outa the piney woods or somethin'. Pretty soon we're gonna have Hottentots settlin' around here; Gettin' so they won't even speak to you nowadays."

"He speaks English quite well", Brother Van said, "at least that's what they told me in town--I couldn't get a worl
out of him this evening when I passed by. Tevis Moody sold him a plow horse, cash on the barrel head, I hear, and he's in the market for some cattle too. Well, he'll need more than luck—"

"Is he about my age", asked my grandfather, "with a long beard—a big man, heavy built?"

"The same. And quite unfriendly. You've seen him?"

"Yes", said my grandfather simply. His finger rested on the sought-for text but now he paused. "I'll go see him tomorrow. He'll need some help getting that place in a fit condition to live in."

"I doubt if he'll have much trouble getting comfortable", Brother Van chuckled. "These foreigners seem to possess an affinity for dirt and disorder. Take those French people across—"

My grandfather drew him back to the text in question.

The next morning, after breakfast, my grandfather told me to saddle a couple of the horses, and we rode up the road to Speakmann's half a mile or so. The fence around the place had fallen down; the house, a sod shanty half sunk in the side of a rocky slope, stood in a miniature jungle of weeds and brush. The door of the half-finished barn was open and we could see the dark bulk of a plough horse inside. Two cows stood uneasily about in a freshly built makeshift corral. The new owner was nowhere in sight.

We dismounted and were standing looking about when he came
around a corner of the shanty. My grandfather made a gesture of greeting to him but he did not speak until he had come right up to us. In his hand he held a piece of rusted iron which I recognized as the blade of a plow; he had stripped off his shirt and his filthy underwear was already soaked with sweat.

He said abruptly to my grandfather: "You have sheep to sell?"

"No", said my grandfather, in hesitant surprise, "No, I don't run them." He looked about at the barren land. "Besides, you don't have much room to pasture them here... No, I just came to see if you could use any help cleaning the place up."

But as soon as he had answered the stranger's question, my grandfather had ceased to exist for him. He had turned away and begun to walk slowly among the tall weeds, peering intently at the ground, the slight wind lifting his heavy fall of beard, stooping quickly now and then to retrieve a fragment of iron lying half buried in the earth, loading them into his arms without so much as looking at them.

"If you want sheep", my grandfather ventured, "Joe Wilbur up on the bench runs them." The stranger paused a second, muttering the name over to himself and then moved away through the weeds, searching.

Thus he settled among us, and soon became known as the "crazy old foreigner on Sparrmann's place". He bought some sheep from Joe Wilbur, some chickens from Mrs. Deventry, and that was all. For it was soon noticed that he never came into
town to buy food or tools, after his few initial purchases, made at the same time he bought the plough horse of Levi Moody. We wondered how he kept his animals alive on the few sacks of feed and the sparse growth of his claim, much less himself, but they all seemed to thrive and soon we ceased to think about it. He himself was desperately active; passersby at 11 hours of the day and night would hear him hammering, building. He worked some on the barn, but the weeds surrounding the house remained and grew, nor did he ever seem to do a lick of work on the shanty itself. He rebuilt the fence, but brought it much closer to the house and barn.

He began to plow and sow, as well. A large patch near the house he put into vegetables; a larger section, a bit further away, was reserved, we discovered, for wheat. We marvelled at the fact that anything grew at all on the claim, for the nearest water was a spring nearly half a mile away from the house and the cultivated ground. One morning, as Will was passing by, he saw the stranger working his way carefully down the slope of a hill behind and beyond which lay the spring. In either hand, he carried a large wooden bucket. As Will watched, he walked with them to the vegetable plot, his gait as heavy and firm as ever, and began to pour their contents into the furrows he had dug between the rows of plants.

Gradually he became, like old Mrs. Treddinck, who had not ventured outside her own house in fifteen years, a staple yet casual topic of idle conversation, a figure of harmless lunacy.
In a relatively short time, he had settled so securely in his role of recluse that it was a major event when he one day, late in August, walked into town, leading the plough horse.

The staring people at doors and windows along the single street, the few children tentatively running after him, almost fearful to mock, made of course no visible impression upon him. I was in the store across from Ingram's carriage shop and saw him tie the horse to the hitching rack and go in, walking as irresistibly as Time. In a short while he reappeared and led the horse around back; soon the news spread that he had bought the old wagon that had stood behid Ingram's for years on end now and had often served me as a careening stagecoach during my visits to town.

Now, the great clumsy horse dragging the rickety wagon, he searched the junk heaps of the town—behind Ingram's, behind the store, behind the blacksmith's shop. I saw him myself behind the last, scrabbling in the rusty refuse, tossing it, in indiscriminate armloads, into the wagon. Finally he drove it, half full, out of town.

We started for home late in the afternoon. A mile or so from Spaakmann's place, we came across the wagon, half in the ditch, half on the road, its axle broken, its horse and driver gone, still filled with junk. And a little further on, we overtook him walking homeward, a great clanking sack over his shoulder. He looked, in the dimming light, as if no detail about him, however small, were changed from the time of his
appearance in the field. My grandfather offered him a ride, which he silently refused, never slowing his pace.

"Too bad about the wagon", my grandfather said, keeping up with him in the buggy. "Ingram's honest though; he'll see that it's fixed."

I can still remember the fear that moved in my child's heart at seeing the flicker of life which suddenly moved in the cold darkness of his eyes—a life that was but pure hatred, that seemed to encompass and engulf all things, as my grandfather had once told me was the property of divine love. He answered very slowly, and with an almost savoring smile, "No. No, it will stay there." And he walked on into the deepening twilight.

He kept his word. When I passed that way again a day or so later, the wagon, empty now, lay capsized in the ditch. It lay there unclaimed until after the first frost, when the nearest family on Black Creek cut it up for kindling wood.

I came down to breakfast, one morning about a week later, to find Will and John grinning over coffee at something that Grandma was, with a kind of mock severity, drawing out of them. I was mildly surprised to see them; they had ridden off toward town the evening before, and for them to do that in the middle of the week generally meant that they would be gone for two days or even three. John was chuckling as I entered, "It ain't nothing really bad this time, mamal. We uns just thought we'd wake things up a little around here."

Will said, smiling at his cup, "It's that old foreigner
down at Spaakmann's, mama. We figured that if he was runnin' from somebody, like he always acts, we'd let him think he was just about caught."

Grandma said, feigning anger, "And how much will it cost this time?"

"Shouldn't nothin' much", John said. "We went up to his place last night, right after his light went out, and livened him up a bit. Couple warwhoops and shot in the air a couple times. Old bugger never made a stir, so Will give him a yell about how's this was the first warning and we'd be back. Just like the Kluckers did the niggers over to the Falls that time. Then we roped a couple of his fenceposts and pulled 'em up and drug 'em down to the road. We didn't do no real damage. And he ain't goin' to be reportin' it to Harve very quick like. He just ain't the talkative type."

I was unaware of my grandfather's standing behind me until he pushed me lightly aside and stepped into the kitchen. John had started to laugh at his own account, and Grandma to make some acid witticism about their being easily amused. They both stopped dead. Will slowly lifted his gaze from his cup and stared at Grandpa, although not at his face. There was a kind of cold silence for a moment, and I wished I was brave enough to turn around and leave. Then Grandpa walked over to the table and took his customary place, Grandma quickly rising and going to the stove to fetch his breakfast. I crept to my seat and sat on the edge of the chair, staring at a chip that marred
the circle of painted roses around the edge of my plate. Grandpa's anger was so rare a thing that it constituted a kind of major upheaval whenever it occurred; and I had never seen him as angry as he was at this moment. He sat silent while Grandma heaped his plate. He did not pick up his knife and fork, but remained staring, as I thought, at the cream and sugar set in the middle of the table. Just as John twisted uneasily in his seat and thrust his hand out toward Grandpa, his mouth opening in defense, Grandpa spoke. His voice was very low and flat.

"Proud of yourselves, I suppose?"

Will took up his cup and drank, silent, but John began at once stumblingly. "It weren't nothing really bad, papa! There won't be no trouble; like I just said. It won't cost you nothin'—we were just raisin' a little—we were just havin' a little fun—" 

"And you?" Grandpa said, turning to Will.

Will had set his cup down and slouched back in his chair. He stroked his mustache lightly with a forefinger. "No need for you to get upset, Papa", he said calmly. "No damn old sneakin' foreigner's worth any trouble amongst us. If a man can't act white, there's no reason to treat him white." He looked unconcernedly away and raised the cup.

Grandpa leaned sharply toward him. "Listen to me when I talk to you", he said in a trembling voice and struck at the cup Will was about to drink from. The coffee splashed with a
heavy, ugly sound across the tablecloth, a few drops of it spilling on Will's shirt. He set down the half-empty cup and brushed at them for a moment. "There wasn't no call to do that, Papa," he said softly. He got up, in no special hurry, and went out into the yard without looking at anyone. I heard his feet in the dry leaves as he walked away.

Grandpa drew back into his chair, his hands limp on either side of his plate, and I knew that the anger was gone out of him and that he was defeated here; his violence had this time set him outside the right. John stumbled up, jarring the table, and following Will, and my grandmother moved in, accusing.

"There was no reason to do that, George. Do you want to set your own sons against you for the sake of some dirty old man?" And, when he did not answer, louder: "Can you blame them for doing these things? It's seldom enough they do anything but work. If you don't insist all the time on what's the right thing--"

"Melissa--" my grandfather said wearily.

"And let them go into town once in a while without preaching at them--"

My grandfather got up and went out, his boots swift on the porch steps. My grandmother went quickly to the door to look after him, and I took the opportunity of her turned back to sneak out of the kitchen. I was starting up the stairs to my room when she called, "Acton, go see what your grandfather's doing." I came slowly back and out into the autumn sun.
He had gotten his gray mare saddled by the time I reached the barn; relieved, I fell into the familiar routine and helped him silently with the bridle. As he was leading her out of her stall, not speaking, I asked him fearfully, "Grandpa, where are you going?"

"Do you want to come?" he replied, and I saw, in the bright light, how his hands shook as they held the reins. He looked away from me as he spoke and I was afraid to answer anything but yes. He mounted and took me up in front of him.

The mare was restive under her double load; that, and the dust of the road, and my own upset at what had happened at table, gave me such a sick headache that I was hardly aware of the direction we were taking until I saw the old man bent over, lifting one of the fence posts that Will and John had torn up.

Then he straightened; the log cradled in his short thick arms, the dirt on it streaking his huge hairy chest, and stared at us sitting reined in before him.

He said nothing. Grandpa said, hesitantly and stiffly, "Those were my sons who did this--" he gestured jerkily at the trampled field, the scattered fenceposts, the uprooted vegetables the hoofprints in the dry earth. "I don't hold with any of this--they had no right--whatever help I can give you--whatever I can pay--" I could not see his face, but I could hear his suddenly heavy breathing. He stopped shortly.

The old man's expression did not alter. He simply turned away and began to reset the post, his back to us. I watched
with interest the great supple bulk of his body as he worked the post back into the earth. I expected Grandpa to turn the horse about and ride away, but he did nothing of the kind. His breath still came labored.

The old man turned, about to pick up another post, and saw us still there; a kind of surprise came into his face. Then he smiled, as he had smiled that night on the road. "You want to see?" he asked gently. He grinned, and I saw with surprise that his teeth were large and perfect. "Sure you want to see? Come on--I show you."

He turned and began to walk away, turning now and again to look over his shoulder, still grinning, and to gesture us onward. "Come on, come on!" I half believed that he was luring us on to some destruction but clung desperately to the horse's mane as Grandpa edged her on in a slight trot, not daring to admit my fear. It was like the trolls in the stories that old Axel, our Swedish handyman, used to scare me with when he got drunk.

He stood awaiting us at the door of the shanty, and when we had reined in, pointed at a blanket that lay spread out on the ground.

On the blanket were laid, in a neat formation, a set of carpenter's tools--saw, hammers, an ax, planes, drills, and others with which I was unfamiliar. They had been well used and well cared for; a ray of sunlight struck from one and forced me to look away.
He was still pointing at them, as if they explained themselves. Then he chuckled and rubbed his hands against his thighs. "You see those?" he asked my grandfather. Without giving him a chance to answer, he went on, "You religious man? You got your God? You got money? I got these!" He turned toward them, jerking his head. "I don't need nothin' else. I got these." He shook his great hands out before him. "That's all I need. I don't need you, you sons, nobody!" He struck at the earth with the side of his foot and said something quick in German. Then he peered back at us. "You free, mister?" he said to my grandfather. "You free?"

"No one is free", my grandfather said simply.

He laughed. "Me, I am." He struck his broad chest with his hands. "They didn't need me, I don't need them, you, nobody. I do everything for myself." He looked down at the blanket and nudged one of the tools with the toe of his boot. "Go on, now", he said, without looking up. And then, grinning, "Go on away, slave man. You not worth to be free."

We rode home slowly. My grandfather was silent the whole way. I couldn't feel him behind me, head bowed. His hands, holding the reins loose, were clasped on the saddle horn, and it seemed as if the life and strength had gone, for the moment, from them and from his whole being.

The winter came early that year, and with it the second stranger. None of us saw him, but we heard of his coming and going soon enough. The day after the first heavy fall, while
I rollicked with the dogs in the yard and my grandfather sat on the rail of the porch in the dazzling chill of the morning sun, reading in the pocket testament the rebel guard had given him in the prison stokade, Harvey Jungers, the sheriff, rode up to return a hunting rifle he had borrowed from one of my uncles. All of us loved Harvey; he was bulky, blond man, turning bald, with a great tawny sweep of mustache and an unlimited fund of unbearably hilarious stories. My grandfather invited him in for a hot drink; a teetotler himself, he was nevertheless a strong believer in the law of hospitality. As Harvey stood warming himself before the stove in the sitting room, we proceeded to pump him for news; we had not been in town for nearly a week.

"Damnest thing happened yesterday", Harvey said, his small blue eyes blinking furiously. "Some furrin feller showed up in town. Looked like he had money--new suit, fancy waistit. Spoke American pretty good, too. Said he come in from the East and was looking for his brother. Seems this brother up and left his family or somethin' a while back and they had word he was come out to this neck of the woods. Wanted to know if there was anybody answerin' this description around here."

"Well, from what he told me and the way he described this feller, I figured for sure it was that crazy old guy out at Spakmann's. So I describes him to this feller and yep, it's him alright. But he won't go out to see him. I offered to go with him, show him the way, but no soap. Says it wouldn't
do any good for 'em to see each other, but would I give him this letter. And he gives me this big, beat-up envelope with not even any name on it. Then he thanks me, says he's gotta be leavin' on the 4:10, and out he goes."

"Well, damned if I knew what to do. I didn't like this feller's looks none-too smooth for a furriner--and he didn't even look like the feller out at Speakmann's. But I didn't figure could do no harm just givin' him a letter. And I had to ride out that way anyhow to see Jimmy Bowen about those beeses he lost, so I thought I'd drop her off and get a look at the place--see how he's got things fixed up."

"Just about dusk when I got there--snow was just beginnin' to come down. Cold as hell, too. Nothin' movin', no lights on. I sort of circled the shanty and all without gettin' off, lookin' things over, like. Then out of the barn he comes, carryin' an ax--a double-bitted one--and walks right up to me like he's gonna run me down, horse and all."

He took a sip of his drink and stroked his mustache absently. "By God--excuse me", he muttered but my grandfather sat seemingly oblivious, which flustered Harve even more. "Hell, you could smell him ten feet off. He's still wearin' the clothes he came here in. I didn't feel like gettin' too close to him and that ax, so I backed off a bit and started takin' out the letter. And then he yells at me, 'Get off! This is mine place--mine place!' Like he was gettin' German mixed up with English. I just said 'I got a letter for you,' and I give it to him."
Harve turned slightly to roast another flank of his big body.

"And what do you think he did? He just looked at the writin' on the envelope and said somethin' foreign that sounded like cussing and threw it on the ground and stomped on it. Then he stands there lookin' at me out of them eyes that look like they're not seein' you but you know they are. I was so damn shook I didn't even think of my gun. I just said like a damn fool, 'It's from your folks--they wanna hear from you'. What you think he said?"

- He finished his drink. "He says, 'They're dead. I'm dead. What can we say to each other?' Just like that, and then his mouth shut up like you always see it. I felt halfways like makin' some smart answer, but then I looked at him standin' there like the day of judgment, and I took off."

"Brave sheriff you are", said John laughing from his corner.

"Brave enough to take you on drunk or sober any day of the month", Harve answered grinning, and the talk turned.

It was three weeks later, weeks during which the snow had fallen every day, blowing in great waves over the land. At breakfast on the first day that the wind had laid, my grandfather said to me, "Bundle up good, Acton, We're going into town"; I bounded with joy at the prospect of leaving the house again, and my grandmother, half laughing, half disapprovingly, drew a vivid picture of our frozen bodies lying in some gully.

The road was blown almost clean in many places, in others
was almost impassable. Earth and sky were virtually indistiguishable, one grim and uniform grayish white; an absolute silence prevailed over all nature, the only sounds being those of our passage through this dead world. The same awe seemed to fill us both; we spoke but seldom.

My grandfather loudly hailed the scattered farmhouses as we passed, and held a brief shouted conversation with each. The most notable bit of news was that Mrs. Danforth had had her baby during the blizzard four days before. These intervals of loudness sounded forced and unnatural to me; I was silently thankful when each was over.

We came to a halt, as if by mutual consent, before Spaakmann's place and sat silently in our saddles, regarding the great drifts of snow which virtually hid the shanty. There was no smoke, no tracks; the barn was half buried in the consuming whiteness. Still without a word, my grandfather guided his horse carefully through the clogged yard, I closely followed.

The fence itself was almost sunk beneath drifts; we had some difficulty finding the gate. We stumbled over objects invisible in the short distance to the door from our place of dismounting; the snow here was waist deep and unbroken. A few vague hillocks here and there marked the heaped iron and rubbish he had taken from town in the wagon.

The doorsill was drowned in coldness; the door itself frozen shut. Our combined strength was not great, but we managed to shove it open a crack after our knockings brought no response,
and to slip into the house.

It was like night inside—an icy and foul smelling night, in which one could not move without stumbling or bumping, without tumbling down iron and wood. Somewhere, my grandfather's searching grasp found a crude candle, made (as he later told me) of sheep fat; in its sputtering dimness, we looked about us.

There was but one room in the lowroofed shanty, and it was almost completely filled with an unending mass of debris—pieces of wood ranging from kindling to two-by-fours, rusted tools, blades, bars, all in inextricable confusion. The stove was almost buried beneath the heap; it was icy to the touch. Half the frozen carcass of a sheep lay in a corner, and a handful of frozen vegetables in a wooden bucket. A crude loom, on which he had planned to weave the cloth for his clothes, stood half finished; near it I was the legs and bottom of a projected chair.

On a rickety table, the only other piece of furniture in the room, were strewn a wooden bowl and a knife, fork, and spoon, all also of wood. And intermingled with them were the carpenter's tools, with whose aid he had sought to help free himself from the world and all men. They lay still bright and newish in the feeble light, hammer, saw, chisel, adz, and Fill emblems of the freedom he had so desired.

He himself was sprawled fully clothed against a pile of wood, half sitting, half lying, scantily covered with an uncured
sheep's hide, the fingers of one great hand knotted in the filthy wool; his head flung back at an awful angle. His eyes were staring starkly upward; they seemed great empty pits and, with his fallen jaw, gave him the appearance of a bearded skull. I hung back as my grandfather bent over him.

"Did he starve?" I babbled in my fear and excitement.

"Or did he freeze?"

My grandfather had straightened up now, and his face was suddenly aged and worn. "He died from the lack of love," he said gently, and the simple words, so sadly and softly uttered, struck me as the most dreadful of condemnations.
The world was to end a week from Thursday, at 10:30 in the evening. My uncle John told me this, sitting easily in the saddle, leg flung over the pommel, a two-bit cigar dead in his laughing, drunken face. "Don't you go to sleep in church this Sunday now, Acton," he grinned, "Or you'll go to the hot place sure 'nuff. Old man Brockmann told me himself in town just now."

I sat out of the afternoon sun beneath a bush on the stream's bank, the fishing pole in sudden disuse in my hand. "The world ain't gonna come to an end", I said too loudly, my imagination already at work. "Besides, how does old Albert Brockmann know?"
He's got a revelation", John said. "Was reading his Bible yesterday and this voice comes to him," He spoke in deep hollow tones. "I am well pleased with you, Albert. Go spread the word to the sinners. Tell 'em I aim to wipe 'em out a week from Thursday at 10:30 P.M. Just like that!" He snapped his fingers. "So he is."

"He can't have a revelation", I persisted. "He ain't even a minister."

"Makes no difference", John said. "God Almighty can do whatever he wants, can't He? Just like He's gonna drop fire and brimstone on us in a couple days."

"You go on home", I said. "You go home and sleep it off in the barn before Grandpa sees you."

"I'm just celebratin'", John said mock-humbly. "Celebratin' all these here vile sinners like me gettin exterminated". He bit down on the cigar and thrust his foot into the stirrup. "We only got a week and a bi$. Might as well have fun while we can." He yanked the horse's head about and went off through the trees at a gallop. I could hear him singing "Rock of Ages" as he headed home.

I returned to my fishing. But, as I sat looking at the dark water under the trees, I began to wonder how it, and the colored rocks in the stream bed, and the cool grass on which I sat could be destroyed together, at once. It was beyond my knowledge, and yet somehow I feared it could
be so. For Boekmann had said it, and he wasn't like other people.

I remembered now the frightening day two years before when he caught me and two boys from town stealing apples from the stunted crabtree that grew in a corner of his weed choked yard. He had backed us into an angle of the fence, and stood towering over us, his long arms jerking against the afternoon sky, his tiny dark eyes quick and nervous while from the tangle of his forked black beard poured a torrent of incoherent words, of which I could understand only "fire", "hell", and "sin." Then, "pray!" he cried, "pray!" and fell on his knees before us, the gangling arms outstretched in frantic supplication. It was this that broke our frozen stance, and we scrambled over the fence, fleeing wildly down the street, stumbling in the ruts of dried mud and raking our hands bloody as we fell, pursued by that mournful raving. After a block, I dared to pause and look back; he was still kneeling within the unpainted fence, his hands grasping vainly in the air over his head.

Afterward, whether I saw him through the window of his shadowy store, where he sat bent all day without locking up, his beard twitching as he mumbled to himself; or on the street, where he would bow to my grandmother in a manner almost courtly, doffing his shapeless old hat and bring out his few words of greeting with painful care, he
was always a being apart. And now he had become a disturbing authority.

I tried to think of the details concerning Judgement Day that my grandfather and Brother Van used to argue over during their night-long arguments in our kitchen, the big Bible open before them. There was fire, I remembered, and the stars would fall. I wondered how big the stars would be when they landed on earth, and what size holes they would make. Then I tried to picture John in hell. Because he was going to hell for sure, acting this way, and so was Uncle Will, and even Grandma, maybe, if she didn't stop smiling when Grandpa and Brother Van argued. The thought of Grandma, tall and handsome and proud, screaming in the eternal fire terrified me. I jumped up and started back toward the farm to ask Grandpa about the Last Day.

The afternoon sun had soothe me by the time I got to the fence enclosing the south field. The sun couldn't turn black. It was like when the Bible said Methuselah lived 900 years—it said that, but meant something else. Grandpa had told me that himself, and he said that the Bible was the undoubted word.

A large speckled rock was imbedded in the earth by the roadside. I dug it out of the ground with my toe and rolled it about in the dust. It was real and hard and heavy; it couldn't be just destroyed. The bugs that scurried from
under it could be; all you had to do was step on them.
But not the rock. I was whistling when I came into the
dooryard.

My grandfather was sitting on the porch reading, as
he always did for a few minutes at this time of day. I
clattered up to the steps toward him, and he glanced up
and smiled at me absently, still involved in his reading.

"Grandpa", I said, "the world can't come to an end in
a week, can it?"

He moved slightly in the circular chair that seemed
to envelop his slight form, and passed his hand across the
great red mustache before answering. "Where did you hear
that?"

"John told me. But it can't, can it?"

"It's Albert Brockmann who's been saying this in town", my
grandfather said, closing the book. "He claims to have
had a revelation."

"But it can't be true", I denied hastily. "He's crazy!"

My grandfather got up slowly and gazed away from me,
out across the yard toward the empty road. "Albert's wrong", he
said. "It isn't time. Not here. Not now." But I could
look only once at the strange uncertainty in his face and
then stare away, waiting for him to reassure me. He said
nothing more.

My grandmother laughed at it over supper that night.
"The chances of anything good coming out of Deep Creek are much less than in the case of Nazareth", she said, pouring coffee. Will and John grinned, first looking covertly at Grandpa to see if he disapproved.

"Albert has always been a good man", my grandfather mused. "There's no faking here. However he came by this idea, he believes it."

"You don't, do you, papa?" Will asked.

There was a slight silence, protracted just too long for comfort. My grandfather tugged at an end of his mustache. Will stared back down at his plate in a kind of embarrassment; his hand pulled at the tablecloth. John, who still was not completely sober, opened his mouth, but Grandma cut in. "I don't care if Brockmann has become a prophet", she said, a bit sharply. "As long as the shoes he makes are still as comfortable, he can preach armageddon till kingdom come, for all I care."

I had nightmares all that night, and Grandpa finally had to sit up with me, the lamp burning on the bedside, while he sat staring out the window. Once, when I partially awoke, I thought I heard him murmuring something, but I slipped back into sleep at once and the words were lost.

My grandfather, Will, and myself went into town the next day. As we drew the buckboard up before the general store, we saw that Brockmann's shop, next door, was closed,
the torn green curtain pulled down over the familiar dusty window display. There was a sign on the door, printed in Brookmann's square strong hand: "The contents of this store to be auctioned off, Wed. The 11th. Household goods to be included." Someone had written in soap on the window: "Golden Slippers cheap. Get ready for Judgment Day."

Barstow, the owner of the emporium, was greatly amused by the revelation. "Always knew old Bert'd go over the edge, some day," he grinned as he went about filling our order. "I got nothing against religion", he added swiftly, looking at Grandpa. "I go to the church once in a while myself, with the wife. But too much of anything just ain't good. Now he thinks he's got the call from God Almighty Himself; he's sellin' all his stuff, even his furniture and dishes, because of somethin' it says in the Bible, and he's goin' around the town preachin' in the street." He shook his head with rueful humor. "He's sure gonna be surprised when next Friday rolls 'round. Somebody ought to buy up his goods so they can give 'em back to him afterwards."

We heard his voice now, long before we left the store, and the shouts of the people about him. He was standing on the corner as we came out, hatless and without his coat, waving a Bible at the small crowd half surrounding him at a distance. The wind lifted the solid mass of his beard by the edges as he shouted in reply to his hecklers. The doorways and windows along the street were filled with people; Edna's girls leaned
from the upper story of the Great Western Hotel, their flowered
dressing gowns bright in the sun against the dark brick facade.

"The blood floweth from the wine press!" Brockmann screamed
suddenly. He made as if to run at the crowd; a few people
pressed back from him. "You Sodomites! You're killing the
prophets!"

"Not a bad idea", Barstow said behind us, disgustedly.

"Do you know what Hell is like?" Brockmann seized a man,
Someone I didn't know, by the sleeve. He tried to pull away,
but Brockmann clung to him, jerking at him. "You will suffer!
You will burn!" He swept his free arm toward the crowd in an
all-embracing gesture. "Drunkards! Fornicators! You, Stokes!"
He pointed. "Every day from my shop, every day I see you stag-
ger in and out of these saloons. And Harris--where is he?"
He glanced about ferociously, the tiny eyes squinting. "He
goes to harlots and devours his living with them. Every day,
him too I see. All these years, all these years--"

A shrill woman's voice from the hotel's windows called, "You-
all doesn't want us to starve, does you, preacher? That'd be
mighty unchristianlike!" There was a burst of laughter.
Brockmann stumbled down a few steps toward the street, glaring
up at the hotel, the man on whom he had seized and whom he
still held gave him a sudden violent shove and broke away.
Brockmann fell backward onto the steps. "Crazy bastard!"
Someone said loudly.
My grandfather had been moving slowly towards Brockmann. Now, as he fell, he started quickly toward him. Will seized him by both shoulders and jerked him back.

"No, pal" he said. "You stay away from that."

"My grandfather struggled for a moment in his grasp; he seemed to be trying to turn around and look Will in the face. "I know my place, Will", he said lowly and angrily.

"Your place ain't with no damnfool Bibleback", Will said sharply, and I could see, by the way in which he immediately jerked his head downward like a small boy, that he knew he had said the wrong thing. Grandpa seemed to relax suddenly in his grasp, to lean heavily against him. Will set him down in a chair outside Barstow's door. He was still fully conscious, however; he sat staring away from the milling crowd, into which Mrs. Brockmann, great and shapeless in her perpetual faded green housedress, had sailed. She thrust herself over Brockmann, who was arising with some difficulty, and was yelling angrily at him in German. He did not answer her, but got shakily to his feet, and faced the crowd. He was still clutching the Bible.

"This is all I have to say", he began. "You have been warned. You have been given the word to hear and follow. God's wrath will descend upon us in little more than a week of our time. He will deny entrance into the Kingdom to none who repent. There is time yet!" He dragged the words out slowly.

"Your lives, what they have been so far does not matter! Put
on the new man". He turned his face in our direction for the first time. He was crying silently, the tears ludicrously streaming down into the flowing beard. "God does not want your deaths! He does not desire the death of a sinner!" The crowd had become very quiet, staring blandly at him. His wife shoved her face into his, speaking swiftly and insistently; he turned away. "Turn to Him!" he screamed suddenly, brokenly. "Give what you have to the poor. Put away the flesh. Humble yourselves before Him! Spread His truth, before it is too late!"

His wife struck at him then, ponderously aiming at the writhing mouth. The blow was slight, but it staggered him; he turned to stare at her for a moment and then began to walk swiftly away down the boardwalk toward us. Someone laughed, began to call out, and broke sharply off.

As Brockmann passed us, my grandfather made as if to rise and meet him. He stretched out a tentative hand, but both Will and Barstow pulled him gently back into the chair, and the prophet went on, unseeing.

When we got into the buckboard, the crowd as such had broken up. But knots of men stood in the street and about in doorways, talking. Here and there a person stood alone, moving his feet about aimlessly. As we turned a corner, we saw Ma Pleez, the soldiers' cook, who had scattered her multicolored bastards on the town for twenty years, leaning against a building. Her gaunt black body was twisting to and fro as she wept in a shrill, cracking scream. No one laughed. Brockmann's younger son, who was my playmate from time to time, stood by
the apple tree, his hands clenching the pickets of the weathered fence. I waved at him, but he did not reply.

Grandpa said nothing on the drive home. He sat slouched between Will and me, his hands working nervously at each other. I wanted desperately to speak to him, but I knew I should not. I hated Brockmann and hoped that no one but us had seen how he affected Grandpa. I tried hard not to be ashamed of him. Will drove on glumly.

We did not go into town again that week. Grandma was furious when she pried the whole story out of Will. She tried to talk to Grandpa, but he merely sat in his accustomed chair, answering her in brief, gentle, distanced words. Something vital had all at once gone from him, and I was unable to comprehend that which had taken its place. It was cold and alien, not Grandpa. I hated it, because I was afraid.

For a few days he moved about the farm as usual, doing his chores, finishing the plowing in the south field. But he was slower at his tasks, stopping now and again to stare at the sky, or at the upturned earth as if he had never seen them before, or never would again. And once I saw him stand for a long moment in the middle of a furrow, and lay his hand in a kind of loving wonder upon the damp flank of our great brown plowhorse.

That day he came in early from the field. He sat down in the porch with his Bible and began to read silently. No one dared come near him. When Grandma called hesitantly that supper was ready, he smiled gently at her and came to table
readily enough. As he sat there, moving a piece of bread
idly about the rim of his plate, John, in a kind of desper-
ation, asked him, "Is the field done, papa?"

My Grandfather looked past him and stroked down the ends
of his mustache. "The plowing was over a long time ago. It's
time to reap, now."

No one spoke again during the meal. Only he seemed perfectly
at ease, eating a mouthful of food now and again as if to
please us, and smiling occasionally at me as I sat cowering in
my chair.

The rest of the days until the last day he spent in quiet
reading, apart. Oddly enough, as I think now, I never saw him
pray—unless he was doing so at those times when the murmur
of his voice would come to me in my troubled play from where
he sat in porch or dooryard, the Bible open on his knees.

Grandma, after the anger and the momentary fear that fol-
lowed it, maintained a policy of waiting until it was over.
She had known Grandpa for more than thirty years and would
not admit defeat or mystification. "It'll pass", she kept
saying. "It'll pass."

Brother Van came to visit once, to prove that Brockmann was
a false prophet, as he said in a low voice to Grandpa. He sat
on the porch rail for half an hour talking with Grandpa; then
he and Grandma drew apart into the kitchen garden and stood
in close conference for a while. Brother Van, in his black
cost and hat, reminded me of the time the horse had rolled on
John and Grandma had taken Old Doc Marlowe aside and asked him point blank if there was a chance. Brother Van rode off, and Grandma went down into the barnyard. She did not come back for a long time.

Over and over again during the week I tried to pray. I would go into my cool bedroom during the long quiet afternoons, and kneel down, my elbows resting on the counterpane, and try to frame words of supplication.

I had always prayed before, but that had been to a different God, the one who loved and helped, who eventually would save us all, who didn't really care if Grandma smiled at the arguments or if John and Will got drunk and missed church or if I sometimes didn't read my daily chapter in the Bible. The new God had made Brockmann a prophet, changed Grandpa, made me afraid, and threatened us all with hell. I hated Him and could ask Him for nothing, not even mercy.

I didn't believe in Him most of the time, of course. Most of the time there was only Brockmann, and my hate was all for him. When I sat listening to Will and John talk about the change in Grandpa as they mended saddles or cleaned guns, or saw the cold knowing look on Grandpa's face as she watched Grandpa reading, or felt the sunshine warm on my shoulders and the earth unyielding beneath my feet, I had no thought for Him. It was each night that He came, reminding me that the End was another day closer,
that Brockmann stood between us and wrath, that the only sure path was there for us to take or shun. And I would lie awake for hours, staring into the dark.

John and Will fought Him continually. They kept bottles hidden in the barn and were back and forth between it and the shady parts of the yard most of the day. Sometimes they talked for hours in the barn, squatting in the hay, a bottle between them. A first they tried to behave as if all were the same, and talked amicably around Grandpa of everyday things, but they could not ignore the change and after a while became silent and sullen.

Once I gathered my resolve and asked Grandpa if we would be saved or go to hell. He looked calmly at me, his eyes seemingly larger and more piercing than I had known them, and said simply, "We won't be separated. I pray for nothing else." He might have said, "The earth is round." There were a thousand other things I wished to ask him, but the barrier between us was too great to bear thinking on. I went away unobserved and sat hugging Bobbie Lee, the collie.

On the afternoon of the last day, Will and John rode up to me in the orchard. I had been sitting there for hours, rubbing against the rough bark of the trees, digging my heels into the loamy earth, defying it all to vanish. They were both quite drunk. John was jovial and laughing, as he had been on the day he first told me of the revelation; Will angry and loud.
"How you feel, Acton?" John asked. He was carrying a bottle of gin in one hand, waving it wildly as he spoke. "Feel ready for Hell? I sure as Christ am, by God!"

"We're goin' into town", Will said. "We aim to fix that goddamn Dutchman good." His face was twisted in an absurd caricature of a small boy about to cry. "He's done hurt Mama and Papa plenty. You're gonna come and watch us do it. You hate the bastard as much as we do, don't you?"

"Yes", I said slowly. "Yes." I could never be sure.

Will reached down and dragged me up behind him. As we galloped through the trees, John yelled, "No figs fallin' from the skies tonight!" and I heard the empty bottle shatter far off.

Grandpa did not look up as we thundered past the house toward the road. Grandma ran toward us from the house, but we didn't stop.

It begun to rain when we pulled up at a roadhouse outside of town. There were half dozen fellows there that Will and John knew; I sat on the bar and listened to the talk building up around me.

"Just like Alder Gulch in the old days", the baldheaded bartender said. "Hell, when I was a kid in the diggings there, every week about you'd see some old bugger'd just struck it rich staggerin' up and down the street scatterin' gold dust for the kids and the Chinks. But I never figgered
I'd see anything like that again—and sure not with old
Brockmann doin' the throwin'! He shook his head. "After
this fellow from Butte had bought him out lock, stock, and
barrel, he took the money he got paid down and went out in
the street. His followers was with him, of course—Ma Plez
and old man Odrecourt and Mrs. Langley—her old man should
take a strap to her. And his kids was there too, of course;
the old lady's pulled stakes and left, somebody told me.
Well, anyway, there he was, with a fistful of greenbacks
and all those damnfool people crowdin' around him, like they
was expectin' a miracle or somethin'! And all of a sudden,
he throws a bunch of 'em at Ma Plez, and some more at
Odrecourt, and then he run out in the middle of the street
and threw the rest of 'em up in the air and stood there
yellin' somethin' about not layin' treasure up in the earth
to rust and rot. Funniest thing you ever saw. And all
the drunks and kids and bums were scrambling around in
the dirt grabbin' for the dough. Ma Plez must've really
made a killin'—there was four or five of her kids down
there pickin' 'em up. And old man Odrecourt I guess wanted
some more salvation, 'cause he took one dive for 'em and
just laid there. He was too damn drunk to get up again,
like always. Jesus Christ, though, you never saw nothin'
like it. Not since Alder Gulch, anyway."

"I hear he's goin' up to glory in style", Will said,
pouring another shot.
For the first time, I looked, with a sudden quick fear, to see if Will had on his gun. He didn't.

"Hell, Will", the bartender said, "He's just a nut. No use to pay no attention to him."

"So Langley's wife joined up with 'em?" somebody said.

"She always was a crazy damn woman", someone else said.

"God, I remember when she go saved she just about drove old Langley otta the house. Figured she'd got over it by now, though."

"Funnest damn thing", somebody else said. "I went through town today, and the damn old Jesus-jumper's got three old white plowhorses in his yard. Least ways, two of 'em's white, the other's a kind of dapple grey. What the hell's he want with horses if the world's comin' to an end?"

"Shit," said John, who was very drunk, "don't you know nothin'? That's in the book of Revolution or somethin'. In the Bible, anyhow. There's gotta be four horses at the end of the world."

"Yeah", the other persisted, "but he's only got three."

"Shut up, John", Will said. "You've had about enough for what we gotta do."

"What you gotta do, boy?" somebody asked, staggering up to Will. It was a Circle B cowboy named Lee who used to ride against John and Will in the races at Willow Bottom. The beer was slopping over the edge of the stein tilted
in his hand. "You gonna be out there wavin' to old Saint Pete when he comes afloatin' down?"

Will turned away from him and picked up his glass. Les dropped a hand heavily on his shoulder. "Heil, that's no way to carry on, boy. You oughta be real Christian these days. You come from a real hymn-singing family anyway--"

Will dropped the glass on the bar with a small clatter and came around quick and solid. I hardly saw his arm go out, and then I heard the thick sound as he hit Les square in the mouth. Les went backwards into somebody standing at the bar, who shoved him away toward Will, and Will hit him again, just as the bartender yelled, "Goddamn it, none of that stuff in here." Les rolled on his stomach half under a table. Will went and stood over him, but he didn't get up. His stein rolled across the floor, and clinked against the bar rail.

"Dirty bastard", Will said loudly. He looked around at everybody in the room, and then walked slowly out. I hopped off the bar after him and John stumbled along behind.

Will was already in the saddle by the time we two got outside. John did his best to get mounted quickly, but slipped and fell on his knees in the mud under the hitching rack. I had to help him into the saddle. "Ah, hell, I forgot my bottle. Aton, you go back in and get it."

"You don't need no more", Will said. "Come on, for Christ
sake. Acton, you ride with me."

"You shouldn't have hit him," I said, not moving.

"Why the hell not?" Will asked angrily. "I would've killed the bastard if I'd had a gun." He looked narrowly at me. "You ain't believin' this crap about Judgement Day, are you, Acton? 'Cause you can stay right here if you feel like it. We don't want no deadbeats with us tonight."

The rain was falling cold on my upturned face. I looked at Will's angry mouth. "No", I said, "I'm coming."

The rain had let up pretty much, and it was already getting dark. We had to ride slow because of John, and it was after 9:00 when we came into town.

Things were like they were nearly every night there. Joe Moreno was playing "Abdul the Bul-Bul Emir" on the piano in his place, and Barstow was sweeping off his steps. Old man O'deacourt was passed out on the bench in front of the hotel. A couple of the girls were sitting at the windows upstairs, and there were quick shadows on the green shades. The air had a fresh new smell, as it always does after a rain.

Will called to Barstow, "Whereabout's is the prophet?"

"Damn! if I know", Barstow said. "Ain't seen him all day." He drew his watch from his vest and squinted at it in the dim glow from the window behind him. "Us sinners only got up about an hour left. Care for a beer, Will? I ain't due home for a while yet."
"I'll meet you in Moreno's", Will said. "Take John up there with you, will you?"

The two of us went on together through the clean dark. Opposite Brockmann's house Will roined in. There was a light in the living room. "You watch the horses, Acton", he said to me.

"I want to go with you", I said. I was afraid now for him. Maybe there was only an hour left.

"Want to be in on the kill?" Will said. He laughed and spit in the street. "O.K., come on."

There were no horses in the yard. Will tramped up the front steps and banged loudly on the screen door. After a while, the inside door opened and Brockmann's daughter peered out. She was a short plump girl with skimpy blonde curls and a frightened face, whom we all used to make fun of at school. She was wearing a long shit shapeless robe that looked like a nightgown.

"Your father home?" Will asked.

"No sir," she said, shaking her head violently.

"He and Leon went up on the hill with the horses 'bout an hour ago. Papa said I couldn't come."

"Where's Henry, then?" Henry was the older son, about sixteen.

"He left with Mama the day before yesterday."

Will leaned toward her. "Your papa leave you here to face the wrath of God all by yourself?"

"No sir, he's comin' back for me before it happens."
Will and I went back ot where we had hitched the horses.

"What time you figure it is, Acton?"

"Twenty 'till, maybe."

"We'll hear him when he comes back. Let's go see how
John is."

John had his head on the table when we come into Moreno's.
Joe was exhibiting a skyrocket he said he was going to
shoot at Gabriel, and Harve Jungers, the sheriff, was
talking to Barstow and a couple of others.

"In town for the big deal, Will?" Harve asked.
I'm here to see the elephant," Will said.

"Here tell you went up to see the prophet just now."

"wanted to make sure I had a good seat on the glory
train."

"I don't want no trouble out of you tonight," Harve
said. He grimaced and stroked his square dark jaw ner-
vously. "There's gonna be enough as it is."

"Yu gonna stoke furnaces or dig coal, Harve?"
Moreno laughed.

"I don't wanna hear any more of that damn fool talk", someone at the end of the bar said. It was Langley, the
blacksmith. "My wife's full of that crap up to the ears,
and she's been tryin' to stuff me with it, besides."

"Good blacksnake's take that out of her", Will said,
facing him with his hands on his hips.
Langley shrugged, "If she ain't over it tonight, she
never will be."

I sat in a corner, listening to John's snoring and the talk of the others with half and ear. Moreno had a pretty little clock with a gaily painted face hung over the bar; I sat and watched the gaunt hands in their imperceptible movement. I exerted, over and over, my will toward it not happening. If I thought hard enough, I knew, the clock and John drunk and the star on Harve's dirt vest would all be there for good, despite anything. Those things, those bright real things in the sharp light of Moreno's coal-oil chandeliers couldn't not-be in a moment. I, who saw them, stood between them and destruction.

At about twenty after, the talk dropped off. Most of the customers didn't order refills; they sat with empty or half-filled glasses before them, smoking, staring into the mirror or up at the carving over it, away from each other. Someone made a joke about camp meeting but no one answered. John's arm slid off the table and dangled at his side. He hissed gently in his sleep.

Will was leaning near the door. We all heard the voices at the same time. It was a group of people singing "Oh God, Our Hope In Ages Past" offkey and loudly. There was the sound of running on the boardwalk outside as it drew closer; someone yelled into the saloon, "Here comes the circus!"

We all crowded out onto the porch. John woke up imm-
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edistely, rolled off his chair and fell against the bar, and then was wet with the rest of us, leaning on Barstow and somebody else. He couldn't talk yet.

The three horses came down the street at rest. Brockmann sat on the middle one, Leon and his sister on one, and Mrs. Langley and Ma Plez on the other, Ma Plez's kids tramping through the mud behind.

I could feel the release run like a live thing through the people about me. Somebody chuckled and I suddenly felt like shouting with laughter. It wasn't fearful anymore, not all these people wearing long white robes smeared with mud and riding huge old barrel-shaped plugs with immense clumsy hooves. Some of them carried burning pineknots, and the smoke was sharp and good to smell.

"It's pretty far north for the K K K", somebody across the street yelled, and a burst of laughter went up. I noticed then that both sides of the street were crowded with people, and the building lining it were nearly all alight at ever door and window.

The riders paid us no heed. Sparks leaped in the darkness. The huge horses set their hooves dully and solemnly down in the mud. "Wrong kind of weather for spring plowing", a voice called.

"It's 10:39!" yelled a boy's voice close at hand, and someone else shouted "Ye--e--e--e--ha!" at the top of his voice.

At that moment, we on the porch were enshrouded in a
strange green light. A great brightness burst in the sky directly overhead; white streaks arched downward toward the crowd. There was a dull explosion. I heard Will, at my side, mutter "God!" in a quick intake of breath and then laugh as suddenly. A woman screamed. "Look!" someone said awestruck; and then Joe Moreno roared with laughter.

Will was down in the street in a second, grasping the bridle of Brockmann's horse. Harve edged onto the steps, his hand inside his coat. The first rock was thrown then; it sent up a little spurt of mud at the bottom of the steps.

In the sudden silence, Will said, "You goddamn dirty fake, get down."

Brockmann sat erect in the saddle, looking straight ahead. He did not seem to have heard.

"I said, get down." Will grabbed him by the arm.

Brockmann's daughter screamed, "Don't you hurt my papal!" A voice called, "Ah leave the rummy alone. He's give us a good show." Harve walked through the mud and touched Will on the elbow.

Langley had dragged his wife from her seat behind Ma Plez and was shaking her, seemingly in a kind of boredom, rather than anger. Ma's kids had already scattered, and now she reined the dapple about and rode off, its great hooves squirming up jets of mud. A torch smoldered in the wet.
A rock hit Brockmann's horse and then one struck him. "Goddamn liar!" came a voice near me, filled with a kind of relief. A fistful of mud slopped across Brockmann's sleeve. He raised his hand and cried, "Rejoice t at God has shown you mercy. Did not God offer to spare Sodom for the sake of ten righteous men?"

Will was wrestling with Harve, who was slowly shoving him away from Brockmann, yelling, "Go home, go on home. The party's over." John was clutching at the wall of the building, vomiting helplessly. Will yelled over his shoulder toward me, "Get him, goddamn you! Acton, throw something at the bastard!"

The liquid mud was dripping from between my fingers and running over the tops of my shoes as my feet sank in it. A rock splashed water on me. I dodged around Harve and Will, still struggling, and up to the amn in the ridiculous muddy sheet. He looked dispassionately down at me; the mouth was still and there was a thin thread of blood running down one cheek. I flung the handful of mud at the mask-like face. "Dirty bastard!" I heard myself yell.

The mud clotted the beard and spattered across the across the wounded cheek. He made no effort to wipe it away, instead he looked at me--perhaps he had never taken his eyes away--and said, "For you, too, there is yet time."

I turned and ran, zig-zagging across the street. Someone grabbed at me; I struck at him and ran on. Harve found me later in the corner where I was crouched and took me
home with him for the night. Will and Joe's swamper, who had thrown a rock through a window, were in jail.

The three of us got home about noon the next day. John was still sick and very tired. Will cursed Harve at intervals for a false friend and fingered the bruise on his forehead. I saw nothing very clearly; I still felt like crying but refused to let myself.

My grandparents were eating dinner when we came into the kitchen. My grandfather's working clothes were dusty; he had evidently been in the fields as usual this morning. Grandma did not bawl us out as she would have under any other circumstances. I wondered idly why.

We three newcomers sat listlessly around the table. Nobody spoke. My grandfather finished his meal with deliberate, disinterested movements, as if completing a necessary and not especially irksome task. Then he got up and, without looking at us, buttoned his jacket and said to my uncles, "You boys can help finish the south field today, one of you." His voice was flat and absent.

"Yes, papa," Will said. My grandfather patted me lightly on the head and went. Grandma followed him onto the porch.

"Will!" I cried, grabbing his arm. "He's still not the same! There's still something wrong! What is it?"

"How the Christ should I know?" Will snarled. He laid his head down upon the table as if suddenly overcome by
weariness. I stood despondent. My grandmother came back into the kitchen. She looked at Will and shook her head.

"Grandma", I said, "what's wrong with Grandpa? It didn't happen."

"Yes", she answered, "I know. That's the reason."
She began gathering up the dishes. I hovered hesitantly about her, "You mean it should have?" I began incredulously.

She looked down at me almost angrily. "You don't understand", she said sharply, and then, more to herself than to me, "You'd think a man in sixty years could find something worthwhile in the world."

I wandered out into the sunshine and saw the far-off figure of my grandfather driving the team to the south field. I looked away from him at the sun until my eyes hurt and tried to think why Brockmann's face should be so constantly before me. But I did not understand.
THE SUPPLIANT
The congregation had just begun the second verse of "Shall We Gather By The River?" when the shadow moved across the tattered pages of my hymnal and Wherely's bony hand jerked at my arm. I looked up to see his dingy face wearing its air of polite abstraction as he squatted easily in the aisle alongside.

"You tell your grandmother to step out for a minute, Acton," he said in his hoarse whisper.

"Why?" I whispered, perverse and interested at once.

"Never you mind. You just tell her to step out now."

I got a whiff of his tobacco-saturated breath and turned quickly, to the interior of the pew. My grandmother had already closed her hymnal and was leaning toward me, asking quickly, "What is it, Acton? What have they done now?"
My grandfather was still singing intently, Grandmother, after a moment's pause at my and Wherly's silence, turned to him and said loudly, above the singing, "George, the boys are in trouble again."

He stopped singing immediately, although he kept on staring at the hymnal for a moment. Then he looked slowly around at my grandmother, the book dangling open in his hand, and asked, a flatness in his voice, "Are they hurt?"

"I don't know," she replied angrily. "Why don't you go see?" Slamming her hymnal into the rack, she grasped his arm with one hand and began to thrust me out of the pew with the other. People were looking around at us, and the singing was already beginning to break up and die out. Wherely stood respectfully aside, rolling the chew of tobacco about in his unshaven cheek and looking with mild interest at the staring and now almost completely silent congregation. As we headed up the aisle, Tom Potter peered around his father's arm and I was glad it was my uncles who probably had the town treed again (it was their word for it), who rode their horses into saloons for a drink and who had chased Old Man Odrescourt, the town drunk, across country for miles one night, trying to rope him.

We stood grouped about the straight, man-tall figure of my grandmother in the vestibule while she pulled on her shawl and demanded, and Grandpa hovered beside her, the hymnal still ridiculously clutched in his hand. I edged up
close to Wherely, looking at the torn place on his vest from which his tarnished badge hung. "How much damage have they done this time?" Grandma asked. She added briskly, "Whatever it is, it'll have to wait until we're done paying for their last escapade."

Wherely shifted about, nervously looking for a place to spit. It was the first time I had ever seen him worried about what to say. He glanced meaningfully at me and then at Grandma and back again.

"The boy can stay", Grandma said sharply. "He knows as much about their carrying-on as anybody."

Wherely put his thumbs in his belt and stared into a corner. "It's kind of more serious this time", he said.

"Are they hurt?" Grandpa repeated and he tugged feebly at my jacket, as if to draw me to him. I kept stiff and unmoving under his hand, my eyes on Wherely's mouth, with the tobacco stains in its corners.

"Naw, they ain't hurt. There was some trouble in the Headquarters a little while ago."

Grandma said angrily, "I've told them a thousand times never to go in that place since...." and broke off.

"The boys was playing cards and there was some talk about what the dealer's hand had been. The boys started cuffin' him around and saying they wanted their money back. Dutch came downstairs and tried to throw 'em out and Will shot him."
My grandmother took her breath in harshly, and I heard the singing begin again inside the church.

My grandfather moved quickly toward her, his hand jerking as he raised it toward her face, which suddenly seemed to me much younger and much uglier than I had ever seen it. Her lips moved, and I thought she was going to cry, but what came out was drowned by the singing as Brother Van opened the inner door of the vestibule and stuck his head in cautiously. "What is it, George?" he asked my grandfather. "Can I be of any help?" My grandfather tugged at a drooping end of his mustache and shook his head without looking up. Brother Van hesitated a moment, looking from one to another of us, and then drew back and closed the door.

"Is he dead for sure?" I asked Wherely eagerly. This was an iniquity greater than any other of the many I had heard laid to their charge before. Wherely looked at me curiously, his three days' beard rasping as he stroked his chin.

"Naw, not yet," he said slowly. "He's got three bullets in him though. One in the stomach." He gestured vaguely at his own protruding front.


Grandpa began to shake his head violently. "No, Melissa," he muttered, "no." I was filled with a kind of cold pain;
I was filled with a kind of cold pain; they were talking about a forbidden subject—my father, their oldest son, who had been killed in an accident before I was born—and his name on their lips was somehow a betrayal of the protection of silence they had reared about me. It was his lack, and not that of my mother, whom I visualized only as somehow identical with the ornate cards she sent me each Christmas from Denver, that had been the great painfulness of my life. The reminder of it had me on the verge of tears now; I looked up at Grandma to ask, but she had turned to Wherely.

"Where are they now?" she asked decisively.

"Harve's got 'em down at the jail. He was afraid some of the boys down at the Headquarters might start somethin', They was pretty upset."

"Bunch of barfilies", Grandma said, reaching for her coat.

I turned to Grandpa, the protest and question about to rush incoherently from my mouth. He had laid the palm of his hand against the wall, as if for support, and was staring down at the rough pine floor, at the mud and trails of water left there by the feet of the congregation. The military erectness I was accustomed to see had gone from his slender boy's body, and his scarcely sixty years seemed, now to press upon and narrow the shoulders in the wrinkled broadcloth coat. The singing had stopped, and I heard the light comfortable touch of the rain on the porch outside.
My only two sources of assurance were both suddenly, frighteningly gone. I was silent.

Heading for the door, Grandma shook him by the shoulder. "Don't you care what happens to your own sons? Will's paid back everything we've suffered; do you want them to treat him like a criminal?"

Without looking at her, Grandpa reached down his hat from its customary peg and walked stiffly out into the damp evening. Whereby, in an overflowing of courtesy, held the door open for my grandmother; then he looked down at me and pursed his tiny mouth in a silent whistle, shaking his head.

The night smelled fresh, of rain and the dark. We straggled along down the street. I ran alongside Whereby and watched my grandparents ahead of us. My grandmother called angrily at times to Grandpa, but he went on, almost running, all the way to the jail. Once, in an alleyway, I saw him step in a hole that sent mud gushing up over the top of his boot, but he did not stop. I had a violent desire to ask Whereby the meaning of all this, how my father's fatal riding accident was concerned with the death of this man whose place, with its brightly lettered windows of frosted glass and noisy, overflowing light I passed by on my every trip to town. The two perfect and unchangeable worlds could not be akin. But, somehow, I did not want Whereby to be the one to tell me.
Harve had Grandpa sitting in the swivel chair at his desk when the rest of us entered the jail's office. Grandma with me suddenly under her protective arm. Harve was drinking coffee out of a thick china mug and talking to Grandpa in that persuasive, professionally calm voice that he used toward drunks and angry cowboys, his huge blonde balding head jerking up and down in self-agreement. He greeted us with a gesture and went on talking to Grandpa while we stood on the fringes of the circle of lamplight, the square smudged names and stereotyped newspaper drawings of outlaws filling the walls about.

"Boys got in kink of bad trouble for sure this time," Harve said. "I don't know, though. Self defense, you could call it. Dutch drew first and shot first. Just wish they hadn't been beatin' up the dealer first, is all. There'll have to be a trial. You can send Jack Turner over to Cross Forks tomorrow to see about arrandin' bail with the judge. I'll have to keep 'em here till I hear."

"Where are they?" Grandma asked.

"Upstairs in the old courtroom with Charley. Didn't want to risk anything, just in case. But there ain't goin' to be andy real trouble."

My grandfather had by now turned slowly around to face us, and I saw, shocked, that he was crying. "Do you know what they've done this time, Melissa? They've killed a man."
"Go ahead and cry for some dirty saloonkeeper that's already killed one of your sons and left this boy without a father." I stared away from the sound of her voice, feeling as if I had been caught at some dirty action. "The boys you have left are in trouble and can't lift a hand to help them. As if they weren't worth more than--"

Harve said, soft and sympathetic, "You want to go up and see the boys, m'am? It'd do 'em a world of good right now." Grandpa pivoted around in the chair, digging feebly in his pocket for a handkerchief, and Grandma, after a second's hesitation, knelt by his side and looked up at him. Her ugliness was gone, and there was a look on her face that reminded me of the times that she used to tease Will at table about his latest swap in horses, or tell Grandpa the latest trick of old Bobbie Lee, our collie.

"He was your son too, George. I know how you've suffered for him. And it was this Dutch that caused it all, wasn't it? It was him who made you suffer, wasn't it?" I had heard her speak like that when I was younger and she would talk me out of a violent frustrated rage at someone or something that stood between me and pleasure. Grandpa did not answer or look at her, and after waiting a moment she got up with a helpless gesture and went up the dark dirty stairs. Wherely had drifted toward the rifle rack, and Harve was pouring another cup of coffee. I went up to him, desperate.
"Why's Grandma keep saying that about papa? Why's she deep saying Dutch killed him? Did he? Did he kill him?"

Harve kept looking at his cup. "Naw", he said at last, "he didn't. That's just your grandma's idea's all. You go on upstairs now and see the boys. Go on; I want to talk to your grandpa some more."

There was a single light in the large dusty room the hadn't used since the county seat was moved in '87. My uncles, Will and John, and Charley Greer, Harve's cousin and deputy, sat on opposite sides of a warped table just outside the broken railings. The kerosene lamp between them threw a faint glow up onto the ceiling where the peeling plaster hung down in great strips. Old Ramirez, the jail cook and handyman, sat hunched up on the unmade cot in the corner that was his, smoking, and staring at the men around the table. There was thick dust, full of footprints, and I held my breath, trying not to sneeze. No one noticed me. My grandmother stood before the table, very tall in the shadows, and ignoring Charley, who had half risen and touched his hat. She was staring at Will and John. It was a pantomime I had seen a dozen times before, and it seemed to me again, for one moment, as if the boys collapsed back into the size and semblance of the children which to her they were. Then they sat in the dim light as before, John still quite drunk and now sick, his
dark curly head resting massively in his hands, a splotched of half-dried vomit down the crumpled breast of his white shirt. 'ill sat away from him, stiff and erect in his chair. There was a small cut over his eye, and the blood he had not bothered to wipe away formed a dry smear on his pale skin. He stared past my grandmother as she stood before him.

"You've done it this time, I guess", she began, and her voice held no more than its usual measure of not quite serious anger; it might have been the time they pulled the pins out of her hair at the church social whe she wasn't looking or when the dumped old Axel down the vault of the outhouse to sober him up. "It'll take a little more than just money to get you out of this." She paused, and I saw her tremble slightly. She leaned forward, her hands resting on the edge of the table. "Henry'll rest the easier for this. Don't worry I won't let them do anything to you. Not for this. Not for this. We'll sell the place if we have to."

"Please, Mama", Will said. "You don't know how it was." His voice was very patient and very tired. "It wasn't on account of Henry. I never held with that. Me'n Johnny were drunk and we shouldn't have been doin' what we were. But he shouldn't have drew on us." He shook his heap clumsily and I thought him still drunk. "We weren't doing nothin' real bad. He shouldn't have
drew on us. We were friends."

My grandmother moved swiftly away. John started to cry loudly, like a frightened child. The tears ran grotesquely down his handsome red face. "It was my fault he done it, Mama. It was my fault. Dutch was our buddy."

Will began to rub the palms of his hands against the table. "It wasn't never like you thought, Mama. Dutch wasn't bad. He wasn't bad no more'n Laurie was."

The cold of the unveiling filled me again; Laurie was my mother's name, the sight or sound of which had always made me picture her regal and handsome, in a steel engraving world of arbor and flowers.

"Henry always knew what he was doin'. You never had to treat him like no kid, Mama, like you always did."

His voice had been steadily rising, and now my grandmother interrupted him shrilly, her mouth twisting and suddenly loose.

"You shut your mouth, Will Prior", she screamed, "You shut your mouth. You talk about him and that whore in front of me..."

I began to edge back toward the door, stunned. John was crying again, and began to curse; Charley was shaking him and whispering in his ear. I heard Will saying suddenly, "You jbin the tune we sikk ed the team? We lost every goddamn cent of that at Dutch's and he lent it back to us so we could take it home and show you and papa."
And then, "Goddamn it goddamn it", slowly and softly. As I went through the door, Old Ramirez raised up on his cot and thrust a twisted gaunt finger at me. "Dutch good to lots of people" he said. "Bad, bad." My grandmother's crying pursued me down the stairs.

Grandpa was alone in the office, still sitting at the desk. The demanding words came out of me in a sudden desperate rush at the sight of him slumped and small. "Grandpa, Grandpa, Will's saying all kinds of things about Papa and Mama and he's fighting Grandma about Dutch." I babbled a confused account of the incredible things I had seen and heard, Grandpa not raising his head or giving any sign that he was listening. Then I began to cry as I thought of the craziness upstairs and my other words were wild questions about my child's faith in an order that I had never questioned before, or had to.

When I had done crying, I found Grandpa sitting motionless, looking at me. He had not drawn me to him for my comfort. Silently he handed me his handkerchief. His own eyes were red, but dry and very calm. After I had returned him the handkerchief, he stood up, pulled down his vest where it had ridden up slightly, and stretched out his hand. I took it silently and we went out into the night.

We walked for a block or so, the boardwalk loud under our shuffling feet, the rain falling again, fine and cool
on our faces. Voices floated in the air from far off, and a piano was playing, over and over, "Abdul and Bulbul Amir". I tried to remember the words to it, that John had taught me one afternoon when I had bee indoors with a cold, but it was hopelessly jumbled in my head.

We stopped in the dull cold glow of the nightlight in Barstow's store window. "Acton", my grandfather said, in his slow, serious one-adult-to-another voice, "I suppose we owe you an apology, your grandmother and I, for not telling you these things sooner." He looked off into the night. "We're going to see someone. But first I want to tell you this. You have to promise you won't cry anymore, though", he added jarringly, as if all his new self-possession depended on it.

This last irritated me; I looked away from him, without answering, into Barstow's window at the long rusty buld of the buffalo gun which he kept there for show. After a moment's pause Grandpa began to speak again, and I brought my gaze back slowly to his half-shadowed face.

"Your grandmother is a person whose life is love. You know that yourself. Love for just a few people. Maybe too few. She's a harsh judge of the people outside her love. Especially when she thinks they're trying to hurt her. Your grandmother hasn't had an easy life, Acton."

He scraped his feet on the walk, staring downward. She tries to hold on to the things that are precious to her.
You can understand that." I nodded, even though he was not looking at me. A woman was trying to sing to the piano; I heard "--and perform of the Spanish guitar", followed by a burst of muffled laughter.

"Your mother was a friend of Dutch's? "A friend of Dutch's?" I repeated, unbelieving. "Before she met your father", Grandpa said. "It was through him they met. They wanted to get married, and your grandmother wouldn't let them. She said he was too young. She didn't want him to leave home. He was the oldest and her favorite. I didn't say as much as I should have, maybe."

He was still not looking at me and I began to feel that perhaps I was forgotten, that he was simply talking to himself. The night air was beginning to seep through my coat, and I moved uneasily.

"She told him no. So he took his good suit and came in and changed in the livery stable and they got married anyway. They stayed at Dutch's about a week. Then your father had a fight with Dutch. I never knew what about. Your grandmother was moving heaven and earth, so he came home. That was in the summer. He stayed until a couple of days before Christmas. He wouldn't go off the place. Then he and your grandmother had an argument." He stopped short. "She said some things she shouldn't. So he left." He continued swiftly, almost mumbling, as if to end it as
quickly as possible, as if he could no longer hold it.

"He said he was going into town and be with your mother. A storm came up just before dark and he lost the road and tried to cross the river on the ice and his horse fell on him. It took us three days to find him."

Even then he kept to himself the final cruelty that Harve was to tell me years later, after Grandpa's death—the bonehandled jackknife in my father's hand, and the great black stain on the ice where, with a broken leg, he had cut his throat to escape freezing. But the horror was in my grandfather then and shook him—with the cold, I thought—in that dirty cheerless light. I felt nothing at the revelation, neither the chill pain nor the desire to question. The evening had been too awful for me to break down again. And I was still ashamed of myself for having cried. Into the deep silence, I said, "Let's go, Grandpa. I'm cold."

We went down down the street. He did not speak to me or take my hand. A drunken cowboy rode shrieking past us through the mud, his voice cracking in the midst of his yell. We stopped across from a large, brightly lighted building. "Where are we going?" I asked, but he did not answer, although he muttered something for a moment under his breath. Then we picked our way over the planks laid down in the mud of the street and past the black knot of men talking together on the corner. Looking up as we climbed
the steps, I saw the lettering on the frosted glass of the window. My grandfather did not pause; he pushed open one of the heavy batwing doors and we entered into a huge, crowded, brilliant world at whose outside overflow I had oft marvelled. I pressed against my grandfather.

All I could see were the legs and towering backs of men who stood gathered together, staring into the great high room beyond. There was only a whisper now and then exchanged among them. The quiet that filled the place was terrifying.

Some of them stood apart; Barstow the storekeeper was there, talking to a Double R cowboy with a red mustache whom I had seen Harve knock down one night in a fight over a horse. Old Man Odrecourt sat in a corner, his head on a windowsill, crying. I turned away and dragged my feet in the sawdust.

The familiar hand was there again, and Wherely was beside us. "You go on home", he said to my grandfather. "You can't do no good here. Might be trouble here yet, anyway. We gotta clear this place out."

Instead of answering, my grandfather suddenly walked through the crowd, through the cowboys and the men in frock coats and along the length of the bar. I ran after, knocked against the round corner of a table, and hurt my arm before I caught up with him.

He had stopped a short distance from a long table covered
with green felt. A little group of people stood around it, and on it a man lay sprawled full length, beneath a heavy grey blanket. His protruding feet were toward us, and one was turned in at such a twisted angle that it increased the pain of my bruise to watch it. A man in a black coat was doing something at his head; when he straightened up, I was with surprise the red face of old Doc Marlowe. He was wiping his hands on a cloth.

A short fat man suddenly broke out of the group and ran toward us. He was in his shirtsleeves and wore a celluloid eyeshade which cast a sickly green light on the heavy flesh that seemed to be dragging his features downward. The creases in his face were moist. "Go 'way", he ordered with a weary gesture. "This ain't no damn circus. A man's dying. That goes for all you", he called past us. "Go home. Goddamn you, go on home."

"I'm George Prior", Grandpa said. "Will's father. I want to see Dutch."

"Your son's a dirty murderin' bastard", the fat man said. "How's it feel?" Suddenly, absurdly, he squatted down beside an overturned table and began aimlessly to pick up the cards scattered on the floor about it. He kept his head down, his stubby body jerking silently.

We went up to the table.

The people there stared at us. There was a woman with
massed into countless ringlets and a shiny dark dress that seemed to sparkle in the light when she moved, and a tall man in a loose flowered vest. He had a thin dark mustache and a cut lip he kept touching with a finger that had a big turquoise ring on it. An old bald man with black-rimmed spectacles stood beside Doc. Across his arm hung a bunch of clothing; there were streaks of blood on them and on the dirty apron he wore. Doc reached toward his satchel, which sat on a corner of his table, and I saw the stain across the back of his familiar fingers, like a wound. Looking fearfully away, I stared into the face of the man on the table.

It was a young looking face, to my surprise; his name had conjured up the vision of a jowled, middle-aged man. His beard was thin and silky and lay limp and richly brown against his drained skin. The flesh was drawn taut and white across the curved bridge of his thin, sharp nose. His eyes were shut, and there was dely blood at the corners of the thicklipped mouth and in the tangle of auburn mustache. I wanted desperately to be sick.

My grandfather was leaning over the table and speaking very low and gently. "Dutch, can you hear me?"

The heavy lips curved only slightly, but the voice was clear and strong—a young voice. "Yeah. Yeah. I'm still good."

"I'm George Prior, Henry and Will's father. You re-
remember Henry?"

"Henry...yeah, Laurie...He was a good kid." The eyes opened a little; I was the light of the huge kerosene chandelier glisten on their slits. "Long time it's been." The eyes flickered shut. "Christ, somebody give me drink."

I stared, appalled at the glistening film of sweat that had appeared on his face. There was an even deeper silence about the table; Dutch's head rolled slightly to one side, toward me, and he asked again. I broke away from the spell of him and saw the meaning of the faces of the people standing round. The woman thrust a hand into her mass of curls and swung her head violently away. I stared at her thin hand twisting. Than Grandpa spoke again. "Dutch. Dutch."

There was no answer, and he went on in the same gentle, even tone, as if reciting something the obvious truth of which no one could question. "I've lost one son, Dutch. You know how. It wasn't your fault, or Laurie's. Nobody's fault, I guess. But I don't want to lose another. It wasn't in Will's heart to hate you. He didn't know what he was doing. I want you to forgive him your death."

The woman jerked about toward us, beginning loudly, "For Christ's sake--" and ceased.

The man on the table seemed not to have heard, and the fear gripped me that he might already be dead. Then he moved slightly, as if uncomfortable, and I saw his hand, square and strong, slide noiselessly up the table along his side, leaving a moist streak on the green cloth. "It
don't make no difference now", he murmured, and I was horrified at the blood rising to and slowly overflowing the heavy lips. He coughed, and a fine spray flew into his beard and mustache. "We were buddies. He didn't know... Why not?" A thin thread of blood escaped the corner of his mouth and ran in a perfect curve across the side of gage. "I forgive him", he whispered, and tried to raise a hand.

My grandfather caught it in both of his and fell to his knees beside the table, his forehead resting on its edge. Dutch writhed for an instant, the table trembling beneath him. Someone pressed against me, and I hid my face against my grandfather's shoulder, feeling there a renewal of the strength that always comforted me when I had a nightmare and he came to my bedside to hold and reassure me. Then he got up, his arm going about my shoulder, and we walked toward the door, without looking back. Harve stood near the door with Wherely beside him. The people had begun to leave, some looking over their shoulders at us. Behind us, they were beginning to put out the lights.
TWO HEROES
The cafeteria was filled with snark and the noise of those tramping out for their two o'clock class. Turk sat uneasily on the edge of his chair, balancing the unstudied biology text on his knee, while he looked apprehensively across the table where Cavednick slumped, the thin fingers of his remaining hand pressed against his high balding forehead. Turk's sudden flurry of angry words lay in the silence between them.

"You'll be late for your quiz", Cavednick murmured, without looking up.

"I don't give a damn", Turk said abruptly, and then felt himself embarrassingly younger than his eighteen years, as he always did when he swore in front of Cavednick. Irritated, he leaned forward, shoving aside the heaping ashtray and empty cups. "All I asked you was a straight question. Don't you
ever get tired of pussyfooting around? Why can't you tell me what you believe about entelechy or whatever you call it?" His heavy face, with its wispy blond mustache and small delicate mouth, was flushed with self-conscious anger.

Govednick raised his head slightly. "Never", he said in his fine low voice, "demand profundities of a man suffering from a hangover." He shifted further down in his chair, the empty sleeve of his tweed sports-coat flapping limply across his broad chest. "Because of the great value I place upon our friendship, I will tell you something I think you should know.

His smile, as always, struck Turk as ugly, a cold distortion of the handsome ruddy face which looked the ideal type for use in a ski poster. "The question, after all, is not my belief or lack of it, but yours. Actually, all such questions I have found to be highly irrelevant, at least on the individual level. What personal interest I had in metaphysics after bootcamp, I left, with other things, on Porkchop Hill. But as you are insisting", he said, with a slight rise in his voice, cutting off Turk's attempt to break in, "I will tell you where you yourself seem to me to stand on this matter of faith and belief. It may be of interest to know a friend's frank opinion."

"Faith?" Turk demanded sharply.

"Certainly." Govednick feigned surprise. "Isn't that what they insist on in church and Humanities lectures? The backbone of civilization? But this is incidental. You have a desperate and sentimental craving for faith, my dear fellow."
Simply for the ability to have it, to possess the capacity for it." He took a small volume from his coat pocket—Turk recognized the words stamped into the leather cover as Latin—and began to read, the standard signal for dismissal. Almost as an afterthought, he glanced up at Turk, who was opening his mouth to speak again. "but you don't have the guts." The empty sleeve slipped down and dangled limply at his side.

Turk made a sudden convulsive movement with his hands; the biology book fell open onto the floor. "What the hell do you know about it?" he asked loudly. "How much do you know about me that you can say that?"

Gevednick did not reply, and Turk, after a moment's pause, retrieved his book and got up to go. As he did so, Gevednick added softly, "You don't really want to believe in the way you do fondly think you do. You prize yourself too much. And faith, commitment, is, you know, a form of suicide."

Turk walked rapidly away and up the stairs to the glass doors giving onto the campus, shoving through the mob pouring in from their one o'clock classes. He was halfway through the doors when he paused to look back; the plump girl whom Gevednick playfully called Sophia was bearing across the cafeteria toward his table, followed, as always, by the dark handsome kid who was a drunkard and maintained that he was going to become a priest. From where he stood, Turk could hear her sharp laughter even above the general noise. He amazed angrily out
into the spring afternoon.

As he crossed the campus to the natural science building, he tried to think just how much real hatred he had toward Govednick, and found to his surprise that there was none at all. "I suppose the poor bastard's got the right to his illusions", he said to himself, and felt better; he began to tear the apostles, as he termed them to himself. "He probably gets a kick out of putting them through their paces. Just like a trained flea circus." He wondered if Govednick was sleeping with Sophia. "God, no. He's got some taste." He moved shuffling through the rich uncut grass, suddenly pondering something Govednick had once told him about Heraclitus.

It was cool in the large shadowy lecture room, and Turk leaned against the door jamb for a moment with his eyes closed, knowing by the murmur of voices and the scraping of feet that Carstairs was late again. There was something peaceful here out of the sun; even the pervading smells from the labs down the hall did not offend him today. "What a hell of a great good place", he grinned at himself, and sat loosely down at a desk near the door. He tilted his head back and was staring at the waver ing patterns which the trees outside made on the stained ceiling, following their jerky movements intently, when his neighbor leaned over and poked him. He jerked quickly about to see the grinning face of Ben Ely.
"Man", Ely said, laughing, "you musta had a couple drags on the old Mary Jane today. Come floating in here just like you was on Cloud Two. Must have this crap cooled. Let's have the old word. How's that damn classification order go-- phylum, class, species?"

"I don't know", Turk said sharply. "Who the hell studies?" He yawned and tried confusedly to remember how far he stood on the grade curve above failing.

"Hey, Joanie", Ely called, swerving around in his seat, his black Wellingtons scraping loudly on the floor, "How's that deal of yours go again?"

"Just remember t is", the girl behind him said. "Please Come Over For Ginger Snaps! See--please, phylum; come, class; over--" She leaned forward as she spoke and Turk looked over at her with mild interest, vaguely remembering having seen her before, a small thin girl with black hair who looked Irish. He listened aimlessly, trying to regain the mood that Ely had broken into. "Typical demon student", he thought.

"Hell, Joanie", Ben said, "you're better than one of them study-as-you-sleep machines." She answered his cajoling grin and Turk saw that she had fine even teeth and an eager smile. He started to run her sentence key over to himself and then Carstairs bustled into the room with a sheaf of mimeographed tests under his arm.

There was a 40-point question on classification, and
he felt an aura of great self-confidence as he worked his way through it. Joan handed in her test within the first fifteen minutes and went out, slender and almost shapeless in a dark tubelike skirt and roomy blouse. He guessed at the rest of the questions, met Carstairs's sarcastic grin with one of his own as he dropped his test on the table before him, and loitered in the hall, waiting to bum a cigarette from Ely. The two of them wandered back across campus smoking and cursing the science department without heat. Turk asked casually, "Who's our little lifesaver?"

"Cynic like you's got no business givin' women the eye," Ely said. "Just members of the common herd like me. Names Joan Schuster. She's from Butte. Sparks told me about her once. He's double-dated with her a couple of times. Good personality, I guess. Drinks, too. Seducer like you's got no chance though. She's real solid Catholic. Packs holy water and keys to the arsenals in her purse."

"She smart?"

"Don't show it especially if she is. I mean, I think she's one of these babes is real good in schoolwork and don't know a damn about anything else. That'll be two bits."

When he came into the cafeteria a little later, Turk saw Joan sitting with another girl from the quiz section a few tables from Govednick, who was in his same place, reading, while Sophia and her admirer played Scrabble with a shrill intentness. He got his coffee and was automatically
heading toward Govednick's table when he saw that Joan's companion had left her. "Hell", he thought ironically, remembering his distaste for the apostles, "no use makin a bad habit of it." He walked over and sat down across from Joan. "You sure saved my life today", he said cheerily.

She appeared puzzled for a moment, searching his face with her dark, almost solemn gaze. "Oh, yes", she said finally, "you're the fellow sitting next to Ben."

"Jim Sjalholm. They call me Turk. You could make a fortune selling gimmicks like that, you know." She smiled, faintly and briefly and glanced away.

"She's scared", Turk thought, and the realization gave him confidence. "You're from Butte, aren't you?" he asked, and at her nod went on. "You know Chris Sparks?"

"He was in my advisory in high school."

Glancing at her, he noticed for the first time the small, delicately engraved silver cross which she wore about her neck. He said quickly, as if afraid of having its impression escape him, "That's a pretty cross you have there."

She half raised a hand to it and looked at him this time as she smiled. "It's from my uncle. He got it in Rome during the Holy Year."

"Your a Catholic?"

She nodded. "My uncle's Monsignor Elliott, from Helena."

"Sure, I remember now. Chris went to Central High."

In a sudden desire to talk, he found himself giving way
to a wild impulse of imagination. "Do you remember the time he climbed the flagpole in front of the courthouse and ran up the Confederate flag?"

"I don't remember that at all."

"It was when he was a junior, or thereabouts." Undaunted, he further elaborated his theme. "Somebody bet him a case of beer and he told them that he'd put the flagpole over the capitol building in Helena if they'd buy him gas."

Joan laughed. "That's just like Chris. I remember once he lived in a hammock for three days on a bet. I think it was Terry Monahan-"

As he sat back listening, Turk thought wonderingly, "God, I haven't been as eloquent as that since the last time I testified in church." He smiled grimly at the memory. "Wonder what old Bibleback'd say if he could see me talking to one of the Pope's henchmen."

He discovered half a crushed pack of cigarettes in a pocket and extended them to her; she took one carefully in her small skinny hand and smoked it with a kind of graceful ease. Turk sat watching her slight nervous movements as she talked. Her hands were seldom idle, but moved quickly back and forth, toward and away from him, in time with her thoughts. Her shyness was gone now and she spoke of high school and how different things were in college, of people whom they both knew. He surprised himself by saying little, only enough to keep the conversation going.
Once it lagged; they sat and smoked in silence for a minute or so and it was still all right.

He realized, in a kind of awe, that he had a deep interest in this girl, that he wished to draw closer, to become fully acquainted with her, to enter into her past, her mind. "Not love at first sight again", he thought, and wryly pictured Govednick's reaction to such a situation. "Ah, the hell with Govednick", he thought abruptly and, bending toward her, asked if she had seen the latest Thespians' production and what she had thought of it.

They passed by Govednick's table on the way out; he glanced up as Turk sensed he would, and looked dispassionately at them without catching Turk's eye. Then he returned to his book, smilingly listening as Sophia bent her body toward him, speaking rapidly and laughing. Turk was not angry; he laughed at something Joan said as they came out into the sun.

At the door of her dorm, she seemed to pause, and he stood about a minute or so in sudden awkwardness, dragging out the conversation. Looking down at her as he successfully completed a sentence intended to be witty, he saw a tense sadness in her dark eyes and thought, "My God, she has to lean, too", and wondered at her frailty and thinness. Into silence, he asked, "Would you like to go out for coffee tonight?", knowing that she would accept at once.
The look he had seen in her eyes bothered him as he walked away. "She has to lean on something, too", he repeated, and then remembered Govednick speaking of faith. "What does the son-of-a-bitch know about being alive?", he asked himself.

He returned to his room. His roommate had drawn the heavy curtains across the window and lay sprawled asleep on his bunk in the imperfect darkness. The artificial night within the room troubled Turk; he sat at the desk and snapped on the study light. Before him lay a litter of books long overdue at the university library, and scraps of paper covered with his unreadable hand. Two letters his roommate had left for him caught his eye. One was from his mother; he put it aside and opened the other. It was from the minister of his hometown church. "Dear James", it read, "as I have not heard from you since you returned to school after Christmas, I am hoping that--" He threw it into the wastebasket.

He suddenly felt very tired. Aimlessly, he began to stack the books strewn across his desk—Descartes, Pascal, the unread copy of Heidigger that Govednick had recommended, a volume of excerpts from Aquinas. He opened one at random and began to read.

"The nature of man consists in this, that his will strives, is satisfied, and strives anew, and so on forever. Indeed, his happiness and well-being consist simply in the quick transition from wish to satisfaction, and from satisfaction to a new wish—\text{"}
The print swam before his eyes; he slid the book away and turned out the light. Sitting in the now and deeper dark of the room, he began to reconstruct Joan in his memory, than other girls he had known, and finally Sophia. "She hasn't a bad body at that", he thought, remembering the drunken party they had had the previous quarter, soon after his acquaintance with Govednick had become something like friendship and they had begun to sit up into the mornings, talking, arguing, Turk confessing and listening uncertainly. He had spent the evening drinking and necking in a corner with Sophia, and had ended by laying his head down upon the bottlestrewn table and breaking into inexplicable tears. Sophia had laughed and Govednick had slapped her across the mouth with such violence as to draw blood. At this moment he could hear her crying and being sick in the bathroom, and Govednick whistling as he moved easily about among the staring guests. Turk had been bothered by the slap, and the next day had told Govednick that he was sorry, that it hadn't been necessary, that Sophia hadn't meant anything. Govednick, after a moment's quizzical and then amused stare, had broken into hilarious laughter. "I was drunk", he said. "I would have slapped her anyway." Their friendship had ended from that moment, easily enough for Turk and with no obvious reaction at all on Govednick's part. The bond remained.

Now he recollected Sophia's laughter at the sight of him and Joan. "The bitch", he thought. A sudden wry
smile touched his lips in the darkness as he saw Joan's plain, pale face and angular body. "I bet we made a pretty couple, though." He almost laughed, and then the memory of Govednick's aloof, calm smile came to him violently. He remembered the time in Ethics when Govednick had talked old Doctor Abrahams into a corner and immediately afterward, at his table in the Nook, completely, logically, reversed his own previous position and laughed at those who tried to protest. "The goddamn superior bastard!"

Turk said aloud. He lay down on his bunk and stared off up into a corner of the room until he fell asleep, searching his mind for memories destructive of Govednick.

He dreamed, as he always did when he slept in the daytime. He was to testify in church, but the dream experience was only a repetition of his last testimonial before leaving for school; he stood again, hot and awkward in his new suit, in the single crowded room of the converted Quonset hut that served as a church, feeling his parent's eyes upon him as he stumbled through the confession, muttering the lies about the descent of grace upon himself and his purification for the trials to come. The minister raised a prayer for his deliverance from temptation, but he saw and it was Govednick laughing instead of Brother Cooper, and screamed curses at him.

He was awakened by the gleam of electric light; he raised his head and saw his roommate at the mirror, shaving.
It was night outside. "What time is it?" he groaned, squinting.

"Around 8:30. I didn't figure you'd want to get up for dinner. We had pork again. Goddamn pork--"

He lay awake for some minutes, his face averted from the light, before he remembered the coke date. His mind was very clear and calm. He got up, washed and changed leisurely, and then, with some minutes to spare, opened his volume of Aquinas to the five proofs of the existence of God. He reread them carefully, as if memorizing them for a test, and then walked slowly over to her dorm.

She was waiting for him under the dim porch light, wrapped in a long heavy coat despite the warmth of the night. He could barely make out her face in the shadows, but he knew that she was looking up at him intently.

After the brief, somehow uncertain greeting, he asked her, "Would you like to go to the Nook?" He felt her hesitate just slightly before she answered, "That'd be fine." She added valiantly, "I've never been in there--they say it's quite colorful."

Turk grinned. "That's one way you could put it."

The Nook was a small restaurant on a side street a block off campus, where most of the recognized cliques, professional and temperamental, held down customary tables and tap beer was sold with food orders only, in order to get around a zoning ordinance. Turk steered Joan through
the dark narrow hall into the smoky, table-packed room. The lettermen, congregated in their usual corner, paused to give her a brief collective once-over and went back to their noisy cramming for Survey of European Civilization.

Govednick, stein in hand, was carrying on a caustic exchange with half a dozen Thespians. Sophia and someone with a crewcut were coaching each other loudly in a French assignment. Turk hoped that Govednick would see him with Joan; the handsome head turned slightly in their direction, and Govednick winked. Turk ignored him.

They found a tiny circular table half hidden by a hat rack. The waitress scuttled up with a menu; Turk followed the usual custom and ordered two doughnuts and a glass of beer. "What would you like?" he asked Joan.

"Could I have a glass of wine?"

The waitress hesitated; Turk shook his head at her reassuringly. "It's O.K. She's legal."

"We got Petri and Virginia Dare."

Joan ordered Petri. After the waitress had left, she turned to Turk with a smile. "This is an interesting place."

"You find the types here sure enough", Turk said. He hunched over the table, leaning on his folded arms. "So you come from a clerical family?"

"Just uncle Charles. And I have a cousin who's a nun. I suppose you could say we're more commercial than vocation-minded, like Uncle Charles does." There was a pause. "Are
you a Catholic? I think I saw you at mass once, now that I remember."

Turk shook his head. "No. No, I'm an agnostic." He remembered the time he had gone to St. Francis Xavier's; it had been in the fall, shortly after his arrival on campus, when he had determined to visit every church in town and choose for himself which he thought best. The first meeting with Govednick had set him on other tracks.

Joan frowned slightly, only half humorously. "An agnostic.---let's see, you're only about half as bad as an atheist." She leaned slightly toward him, a new interest in her face. "Didn't you ever have a church?"

Something in her tone irritated Turk. "No," he said shortly. "My parents are both free-thinkers," he added deliberately, with a wry smile.

She seemed at a loss for a moment. The waitress set down their orders and Turk realized suddenly that he was setting up a wall between himself and her where he wanted nothing but openness. He saw Joan staring past him.

"What's up?" he asked quickly.

"Who's that fellow looking over here?"

Govednick was leaning against the counter, waiting for his glass to be refilled, and staring at them, smiling. Turk turned hastily away.

"Do you know him?" Joan asked.

"I see him in here now and then. Philosophy major, I
think." Govednick's silent intrusion had recalled him to his original purpose. He shot a nervous glance at her; she was sipping her wine and looking interestedly up at a German travel poster. He said suddenly, "Joan, why do you believe?"

He had spoken too loudly; she looked at him, startled.

"What?"

"I mean, why do you believe in things like religion? How do you believe?" He felt himself trembling at having given way so completely. His words had sunk at once to the simplest, most essential level. He sat anxiously awaiting her answer.

"In religion?" Joan said. "I don't know--I've never really thought too much about it." She seemed embarrassed. "When you're sort of born into your religion, like I was, it's nothing you ever really wonder about. Maybe it's because you know." She emphasized the word very slightly.

Turk was on her at once. "What do you know?"

"The reasons for things, I guess, she said slowly. "You know the reasons and you can accept what happens because you know why it does. You don't have to worry about asking. You're certain."

"But what if you're not certain? What if you have to ask all the time?"

She seemed surprised. "You don't, if you believe."

Turk shifted uneasily. This was not what he had wanted
from her. He said, brusquely, "But what if you aren't born to it? How do you get it then?"

Joan looked up at him like a solemn child. "Do you believe in God at all?" she asked.

"What does that matter?"

"An awful lot."

"Do you know Aquinas' five proofs of the existence of God?"

She paused and repeated the name, stumbling slightly over it. Then her face brightened. "Oh, yes, Saint Thomas."

"Do you know them?"

She shook her head.

"There's five of them." He almost started to enumerate them but found he could remember only that based on the concept of the unmoved mover. "They weren't even Christian in origin. He got them from Aristotle. And Kant's shown them all up as being based on false logic." He somehow realized that it was not for this, but for affirmation that he had looked at them earlier this evening. He rushed on. "So if you don't accept them, what do you do about believing?"

"Do you know how Saint Paul was converted? I heard my uncle preach a sermon once on the feast of his conversion. He said that it is only way a person can come to an acceptance of truth is the same way as Saint Paul." She hesitated
before she added, "Through the free gift of God."

There was something too familiar in her words. Turk felt himself, stiff and afraid, sitting again on a cold metal folding chair, listening to Brother Cooper crying out, to himself lying about grace and the Holy Ghost. Joan was speaking again, hurt vindictive, in Turk. "How can you believe in God if He doesn't feel like giving you His free gift?"

That hurt her, he saw, and he went on with his attack, angry but controlling his anger as he knew Govednick would have, his gaze fixed on her as he spoke of ontology and cosmology, of Schopenhauer and will, of systems and theories as he had often heard Govednick talk, calm, aloof, and omnipotent, watching her slip back into silence, the dark eyes bewildered and sad and afraid.

When he was tired of the game, he got up with a hearty pleasantries, and she slowly followed. He was pleased that he did not forget to help her on with her coat. The place had almost emptied by now; the owner was stacking chairs and the small neon signs in the windows were out. As they walked in silence to the door, he saw Govednick sitting alone and stopped in front of him, letting Joan walk on ahead.

"Amusing?" Govednick asked with that smile that Turk had feared.

He was not afraid now. "She's a stupid bitch", he said.
"Ah, well." Govednick stroked the side of his jaw absently. "Some of the Thespians are financing an expedition to the Blue Barn presently. Care to come?"

"After I dump her", Turk said. "I'll meet you out front here."

Govednick's smile slowly broadened and, after Turk had passed on, he began to laugh.