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A HOUSE OF PALE GRASS

A Novella

By

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"... and now I am paler than the grass,
just a little shy of death I seem."

--Sappho, Fragment 31
CHAPTER ONE

In the late winter of 1915, when the great war in Europe was not yet a year old, Robert Mahon took his wife and his two young sons to the dry, flat lands of West Texas. They rode a train for three days and three nights to reach their new home. Nearly everything they owned and everyone they knew, they left behind in the Iowa farm country, for a piece of land of the size Robert had never dreamed of owning in the blackland dirt of the Middle West. But he never paused to think of what he left in River Falls, Iowa. His thoughts were filled with the acres and acres of grain he saw ahead. Still he knew in his heart that the woman did not want to leave, though in his own excitement he did not see this clearly, or did not want to. On the day he told her of the Valparaiso in Texas, she left a pail of milk sit outside over night. It froze solid and was ruined. In the morning, before he went out in the cold to milk, they drank their coffee black and bitter. They did not speak of cream.

The next night as they dressed for bed, he said to her, "What is it you dream of?"

"At night?" she answered him, and laughed. She wondered why he would ask a question like that, for Robert never spoke easily of things so close.

"No," he said. "I mean your daydreams." The weak light of a winter moon shone on one wall of the bedroom. The floor beneath his feet was cold. "What are they?"

"Texas," she lied with a smile that wasn't hiding anything. Then she curled up in the covers on her side of the bed.
When she was a child Lucy Mahon had read a book—some uncle or someone had sent it to her from the old country, thinking she was a boy—a book about fishermen on the Irish Sea struggling with the ocean to survive, and for a long time after that Lucy dreamed of living by the sea and wearing rubber slickers and pulling in nets full of cod. It seemed to her like a good life then. She remembered the book was called *The Men of Kilkeel*, and its cover was a picture of a violent sea, and sometimes she wondered where it had gone. Later on, as a school girl, she had daydreamed about distant beautiful cities on the seashore, about seeing them from the rolling deck of a ship. But she had never told anyone these things. They were private, and they were childish.

Nowadays, when she dreamed at all, Lucy dreamed of an orchard, with purple plums and cherries. But her dreams never went far beyond that.

"In the morning," she said to Robert, rather than speak of dreams, "we'll have to decide what we can sell before we leave."

Robert didn't mention the way she changed the subject. He did not ask her more about her dreams. They were part of some mystery of womanhood to him, something unspeakable and peculiar and past his reach. But he loved her in an odd, silent way. There were times, after he had taken her, when the memory of it could choke words in the back of his throat for days. Other times he adored her so, he almost feared to touch her. And now, for reasons he did not understand, they had not made love since the day he first spoke of this land he wanted to own in the Valparaiso.

"We can't haul everything we own down there," she said, sounding practical. Then she wound a strand of hair around her two fingers and touched it to her mouth, a habit she'd had since she was a little girl.
On the next morning Robert Mahon rose early. His breath floated up like a mist in the dark morning cold. He took an old Colt revolver, an Army Colt with ivory grips that had always seemed a lucky piece to him, and he went down into the bottoms alone to shoot. There in the low pasture, when he fired, he couldn't even hit at thirty paces the thick trunk of an old elm.

On the train ride south, separated by seven Pullman cars, Robert and Lucy watched their winter turn to spring. The train was called the Texas Rover, and through its steam and black coal smoke, with every beat of the rails, silhouettes of bare oak and hickory gave way to buds and then to leaves, and brown grass turned to green beneath the tulip trees.

Riding in the baggage car alone to save the fare, Robert Mahon met an old colored man, the first colored he'd ever seen. He said his name was Isaac Waters. He was crippled in one foot and born with a twisted back, and Robert in his loneliness on the train took to him like an old friend. It was in the Kansas City Depot the first trouble came, a rail-yard detective found Ike Waters pissing alongside of a car, because he did not know where the Negro bathrooms might be. They hauled him in for vagrancy, freeloading, and whatever else they could find, but Robert Mahon bailed him out. Robert bought him an "immigrant" ticket with the freight and they sat on the floor in the open doorway of the boxcar, enjoying the way a train rumbles through one pissant town after another, and shared the better part of a bottle of bourbon. When they came to the end of that cheap bourbon, Robert flung the bottle out at the other set of tracks. It curved off and smacked onto a steel rail and shattered into pieces of
sparkling light. Over the rattle of the train for just an instant they could hear the bright tinkle of the glass. And that was when Ike decided to tag along.

Once as they rode through the fields of Kansas and the old colored was humming a low tune, Robert remembered his own father, though he did not think of that man often. Still he remembered his old man sitting in the board-sided wagon in the hot Illinois summer, and tilting a bottle of liquor back. He heard the sound of a red-winged blackbird whirring in the timothy and falfa. He heard him sing up to "Rosin the Bow" and heard the old man's voice croak. "Send down a hogshead of whiskey," the old man had sung, "to drink with old Rosin the Bow."

There was a bad incident on the last night of their ride, a memory that would mark all their days, and tear some of the gentleness from Robert forever. The Texas Rover came jerking to a halt in a fog to the south of Peterson's Spur. After a long wait in the countryside a stranger came walking out of the mist. He asked if they knew of a Mr. Mahon, and then he took off his hat and said, "Your wife's been hurt, sir." So Robert ran through the fog toward the coaches ahead and he found her lying unconscious in a strange compartment. The children stood wide eyed with strangers outside her door. She lay on a cot with her face to the wall, her bare white shoulder peaking from under the cover. The smell of iodine and alcohol was thick in the air. Robert felt his knees loosen when he saw her lying there, with him not knowing what was wrong, and then he couldn't even hear the doctor whisper at first because the train whistle blew again, at the wrong time. And the little compartment was bathed in the sparse yellow light of those new electric lamps.
She had been walking along the train alone in the depot at Fort Worth, and out of the fog someone attacked her, using the dark to hide. Someone had struck her. Lucy kept it to herself and rode the train for miles at night in shock, before she collapsed in the common bathroom of the passenger coach, and a woman found her sleeping there on the floor.

If this was not enough to mark their trip, Robert learned that night for the first time that she was pregnant. The doctor gave her morphine to relax her and let her sleep through the state she was in, and the first thing he said to Robert was, "She hasn't lost the child." Robert had mumbled something back to hide his surprise, but that was how he learned. So he sat beside her through that night with nothing to do but think while she slept, and somewhere along the way in the strange light of electricity he tried to count the days since he had touched her, and in the end he began to wonder if that child was his. There was no way for him to know it was, no way but trust.

The Texas Rover split up at the Temple trainyard in the morning dusk. Just two passenger coaches and a freight were pulled off on a siding and sat as the rest of the train turned east for Austin, and then long after it was gone workmen latched the cars to an old three-wheeled engine that tugged them slowly off to the west and the empty spaces. Somewhere south of San Angelo and west of Eden, the rails came to a dead end. Out there five tired souls disembarked in the morning light. Robert and Ike carried her on a makeshift palette, the children walked behind, and they climbed into a waiting truck, a black Ford T with Valparaiso Development Co. stenciled on the door. Above them the sky stretched out clear and bright as the eyes of a new born colt.
There was a lone board sign nailed to the stump of an old mesquite beside the truck. It pointed out into the prairie, where there were no roads.

Welcome, Texas
35 miles away

it read, and the red print of an open hand was pressed next to the "W" at the top. Robert Mahon's eyes kept drifting up, away from his wife, to look out at the windy grassland. "Welcome to Texas," he muttered to himself. Then he rested his head on his hand and listened to the grind of the Ford truck as it started to move, and when he came down on the rolling grass the driver eased the spark up and ran her at twenty-five.
CHAPTER TWO

It was only a two room house, and the bedroom where she lay was small. Robert had trouble that afternoon twisting the bed through the low doorway, and now its brass frame filled most of the room. Ducking under the doorframe, where he'd bumped his head twice in half of one day, he found her lying there awake in the dark. Her hands were stretched out at her sides on the bedspread, and her hair was combed and spread onto both of the pillows under her head.

She smiled at him as he came in, and didn't say anything.

"How are you feeling?" They were words that he'd said to her a thousand times in the few hours since she finally came to.

As he walked toward the foot of the bed, the roof sloped down so Robert had to stoop lower and lower as he came farther into the room. Lucy noticed this. She had been noticing a lot of things about him in the past few weeks, things she'd ignored before. The way he touched his chin when he couldn't think what to say. The way his cowlick lay down by the middle of the morning, but stood up like a corn stalk when he got up for the day. The way he never noticed the time pass, even with a clock at the foot of the bed. Now, as he walked into the room, it was like watching him grow old and frail. When he got to the foot of the bed he was as bent over as the colored man Waters was, the man Robert had dragged along with them to Texas.

"I'm tired of lying here," she said. And she meant it.
"The doctor on the train told me two weeks," Robert said. "At least," he said.

Robert sat down on an old trunk that was wedged between the wall and the bed frame, underneath the tiny west window. Their living room clock, instead of sitting on the hearth in the other room, sat on the trunk beside him. She had asked for that clock. She wanted to be able to see the time while she lay in bed, she said. Robert stretched his back up straight. It was a conscious decision he made not to sit at the foot of the bed.

When he was settled on the trunk it seemed funny that no one was saying anything. So she winked at him. He laughed and still had nothing to say to her. He laughed because he had no idea what that wink of hers could mean.

After a moment she said, "I'm going to go crazy lying here." Then on purpose she squirmed around in the bed and made the springs squeak. "I feel fine now, you know," she said. Outside, beneath the awning that covered the front of the house, she heard Ike Waters' low voice. He was out there with Jack and Vince telling them a story. He was keeping the boys busy so Robert and Lucy could be alone.

That was when Robert felt a question sitting between them, and he knew again what he had realized on the train: she just didn't share his dream and that was spreading a long, clear stretch of ground between them. But what was there a man could do about that?

So to fill up the long seconds in a moment of honesty, he asked her the easier question.

"Who hit you, Lucy?" he said.
So Lucy told him about a man, a stranger called Henry she believed; she couldn't say if that was his first name or his last. He had seen the money she was carrying with her, and when he caught her alone in the fog he tried to take it. He struck her and he threw her down on the tracks. For a moment she was afraid there was more than money on his mind, but someone spoke from the train then and he was gone.

While he listened Robert rested his hands on the painted brass. And his wife told the story to his hands, without looking up at his face. Gradually the grip of his fingers on the bedstead turned his knuckles white.

When she was finished he walked around the bed, growing taller and straighter as he came. With every step. His arms swung awkwardly at his side and his hands were limp. Then he touched a finger to his chin.

"He didn't get anything," she said. Robert laughed at that.

"The bastard got away, didn't he?" he said.

Lucy liked to sit alone and listen to the tick of the clock. It had become a comfort to her. Time was just something to get through. And every tick was another moment gone. Tick. Tick. Tick, she heard the clock go. It is just a matter of time.

She said something to him about the time then. It was getting late, and she told him the two boys should be asleep and in bed by now. It was long after dark, and it had been a long day. He said, "Sure," and took the way out of the room that she was offering him. He left her lying in the bed and walked slowly outside. Slowly for no special reason. Not to think or anything like that. He saw the night stars from the porch, and then he reached down into a grassy patch against the wall and he tasted the dirt. It was dry and grainy, and his boys laughed at him hunkered
there with a mouthful of sand. But to him it tasted sweet.

Robert never asked her why she was walking in the fog that night.
And they said not one word about the child.
He woke up on Monday morning three days later with the taste of bad whiskey on his breath, and the throb of too much of it behind his eyes, and he didn't know where in hell he was. He sat up and found himself naked on a straw tick. The weekday sun was streaming in a glassless window. His nose was clogged and his mouth lined with a sour crust. In a clay pot by the bed he lost everything that was left in his stomach, all of it just a runny bronze liquid full of phlegm. Whiskey, and the other crap he'd drank. Then his memory flashed. "Hey amigo?" a young Mexican woman yelled at him, her brown cleavage hanging out of a hot red dress. Her breasts were the size of the cantaloupes growing along the Big Creek. Robert wiped his mouth on the dirty tick, and found his clothes on the floor in the corner. Putting on his pants, he began to remember Sunday in pieces, like a bad dream.

"Hey Amigoo ... " the woman had kept singing to him last night. She knew about as much English as he knew Spanish, but her work crossed the language barriers. He didn't remember her leaving, but he didn't wonder where she was. Robert put on his shirt and looked out the hole in the wall that was a window.

The light was still early morning. Out there he could see the backside of all the buildings in Welcome, Texas. This was where he had come to start over. The only building that wasn't on the north side of main street was this whorehouse. The south side of main street was all
taken up with the Big Creek. So from this window he had a prime view of the butt end of the Welcome skyline.

He didn't wonder where Hey Amigo went, because the next thing Robert remembered was why she left. She couldn't spend all night on him. And he couldn't have spent her if she'd worked on him all week. It was the first time that had ever happened to him. She crooned "ameeego-o-o" in his ear and stroked him in all the right places, but last night it was just no use. He couldn't have poked his way through plum jelly, much less penetrated a woman. He checked the money he had stuck in one of his pockets, suddenly remembering the seed he had come to Welcome to buy, but it was all there. And the woman had even put back in one of his boots the money he'd paid her. Hey Amigo hadn't even charged him for her time. Then he laughed and thought, well at least I got my money's worth.

He blamed it on the whiskey, thinking of the black tuft of hair between her legs. But he didn't know what it was. Guilt, he told himself, because that idea was a comfort, and he pulled a hanky from his pocket. He hadn't once cheated in five years of marriage. And it wasn't because he hadn't the opportunity. But now, thanks to this little problem of his last night, he could still say he hadn't. In a way. Then he remembered Lucy lying there in that compartment on the train, unconscious and beat up and pregnant besides. He sucked the little saliva he could work up in his dry mouth, swilled it around, and spit out the window. But his mouth tasted as bad as before. There were just some things that wouldn't go away without time. "Christ," he muttered, and it sounded loud in the room.
Running his fingers through his hair, he tried to remember how he'd wound up in there. Nothing came to him. He walked out through the two burlap sacks tacked over the doorway. A long dark hallway ran down along half a dozen more burlap curtained doors. It was then he remembered Ike Waters and the old Cuban woman. After they finished the fifth on the street last night, Ike had found her somewhere, or maybe she found Ike. She was darker than he was, spoke with a thin accent, and she was bragging. She claimed she knew Jack Johnson when he was a boy in Galveston. Maria. That was the Cuban woman's name.

"Ol' Jack Johnson's a friend a mine too," Ike told her. He swung a fist in the air and stumbled to one side, drunk as he was. Then with a big grinning leer on his face, and an inebriated laugh, Ike and Maria had disappeared and left him alone with this Mexican woman in a red dress. She turned and said, "Hey amigo," for the first of many times.

Three doors down the hallway, Robert found the burlap sack over a door was torn loose. Hey Amigo was there lying on a tick inside next to an old man who smelled of horse manure clear to the doorway. A grey sheet was over the two of them. The old man snored softly on his back, with one foot resting on the floor. He still wore a wool sock on that foot, though his big toe was sticking out of it. His rumpled straw hat lay on the floor beside the bed. Hey Amigo had her back to the man and the sheet was up over her shoulder. Robert remembered then the only other English sentence she had. He tried to tell her to go to the saloon and find a better customer last night, but she sat down beside him by the creek and she whispered to him, "You be gone for long?" Later, when they were going nowhere in the room and she was stroking him with the tips
of two fingers, she said the same thing. "You be gone for long." He'd wondered then how many other ways she could use the same words.

Now he walked quietly into the room, to her side of the bed. A small wart was on her cheek, two black hairs growing out of it. He'd never seen it last night. And he'd never noticed the shadow of dark hair above her lips either. Just to check, he lifted the sheet and saw her brown melon breasts. The way his loins woke up was reassuring to him. Then he tucked a two dollar bill gently into her cleavage. She stirred, but she did not wake. The little man beside her mumbled "Rosita?" in his sleep.

Robert found his way across the one street in Welcome and he sat in the grass by Big Creek. How the hell am I going to find Ike, he said to himself. He knew the colored man wouldn't be inside the whorehouse. The only colored in there were the women. Yesterday, he remembered then, when they finally got to town on the backs of those dray horses, everything in Welcome except the two saloons was closed up. They found a wirey man in his fifties who sold them a used wagon for twenty bucks more than it was worth, but there was nothing else they could get done.

"Hell, I hate to go way back out home there, just to ride in here again tomorrow," he said to Ike.

Ike had said nothing about leaving Lucy and two boys overnight, thirty miles from nowhere and all alone, with her in that condition she was in. He kept his mouth shut, just answered, "You the boss." But even his compliance angered Robert.

"Well, let's go get a drink and think on it."

Robert Mahon tried both of the drinking places in town and he was told twice, "The colored don't drink in here." In the Red Rocks Welcome
a bartender sold him a bottle of local whiskey, Eldorado Mist. So they sat on the edge of Big Creek and slowly emptied the bottle. By nightfall the fifth was gone. "We couldn't find our way home now if we tried," Robert had said, lying in the soft grass that grew on the banks of the creek. It was the first night he hadn't come home since his wedding day.

Robert dipped his blue handkerchief in the Big Creek and washed his face. With a cupped hand, he drank from its cold hard water. "I should've known," he muttered, finishing the rest of the sentence in his head. Anything called Eldorado Mist has got to be bad for you.

The cold water reminded him of the pond they passed on the way in yesterday. Big Creek ran toward Welcome out of that pond, and a spring filled that pond and fed the creek, they found out later. It was sure one welcome sight to them. "Lord, I think I'd do better if I be walking," Ike said when he had climbed off of the broad-backed dray. It was true. Riding a dray horse for some thirty miles was no picnic. "Well, we'll get a wagon when we get to town," he'd told Ike, and that was the only thing they did get accomplished on Sunday. The only thing.

Robert wondered again how he was going to find Ike. The old man would eventually come looking for him, he thought. Dipping the handkerchief in the cold water again, he laid it on top of his head, let the water run through his hair. Then he lay back down in the grass and closed his eyes. The old darkie'll come looking for me along the creek, he told himself. But when he remembered all the crops they saw east of town, he sat up. "There's no time for this kind of wasting around," he muttered. Yesterday, before they bought the fifth, he and Ike followed Big Creek east of Welcome for a ways. You should have seen the crops growing out there, next to two storey houses back from the road. It wasn't just
wheat either. There were vegetables, beans and lettuce and tomato plants. A whole field of tomato plants. Right up next to the Big Creek cantaloupe melons were growing. Cantaloupe melons already, at the start of May, green and round. And here, he hadn't even let his plow bite the ground yet.

It was a man named Joe Sagart had sold Robert his land. With a touch of a drawl and a white suit he'd come to River Falls talking about this land. This Valparaiso Grassland. Sitting behind a desk in Baldwin's State Bank, Joe Sagart had warned him, "After all," he said, "this is what you are buying, Mr. Mahon, a farm that someone else has failed with. But then," Sagart had changed his tune quickly, "there will always be those people who can't make a go of it. Ne'er do wells, Mr. Mahon. There will always be ne'er do wells." Sagart had told him it would be tough. But he had not told him there would be cantaloupes on the vine in May.

"Where did we leave the god damned horses," Robert was talking to himself again when he stood up. Down the street a man was opening the doors to the Valparaiso Company Store. He saw Sarah and Job tied to the railing in front, where he'd left them the night before.

"So how was your slumming?" Robert heard Ike Waters say.

The deep voice came from down an alley. Ike emerged into the morning light with his teeth shining through his grinning lips. His clothes were neat and his hair was all in place. Even his scruffy grey beard seemed trimmed and shaped. How he could down the better half of a bottle of Eldorado Shit and look like that in the morning made Robert feel even worse. He thought jealously, practice makes perfect, I guess.

"Well, you seem all bright and shiny," he said to Ike. There was bloodshot red in the old man's eyes, he noticed when Ike came
closer. But that was the only sign of Sunday.

Ike breathed in the morning air with obvious relish. "Ahh, how long it been since this boy had him a night like las' night. That Holey Mary, she be one kind of lady, I's telling you." Then he winked. "How you all do?" he said.

"I did fine."

"You sure look like it." Ike's eyes lingered on the handkerchief draped over his head, until Robert pulled it off and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"Well, I guess I don't mind saying I've spent better nights."

The colored man laughed again. "Let's not start remininting," he said. "The onliest thing Ike wants to be remininting about right now be las' night."

With the heel of his hand Robert wiped the cool sweat from the hollow of his eyes, and he said, "We got some work to do."

"Sure thing, Mister Mahon suh." But Ike hadn't stopped grinning since he strolled onto main street, and he kept grinning as they walked down the street to the Development Store. "This man gone be remembering las' night for the rest a his days," he said. All there was to the town of Welcome, as they walked the length of it, were the two drinking establishments, a sharp two storey hotel named for the president of the Confederacy, a real estate office, and the Valparaiso Company Store. Other than that just a couple of stables, and the whorehouse, filled out the town. Robert remembered the hand-painted scrawl that was written over the door to the whorehouse that stood behind the hotel. "Grant's Home for the Lost and Lonely" that sign read. And as he looked at the nice facade
on that hotel, he understood the scrawl for the first time. One lone telephone line ran out an upstairs window of the Jeff Davis Hotel and then headed northeast, making a fine resting perch for scrawny looking sparrows and fat crows eyeing fields to the east. So this was the Confederacy, Robert thought.

"Please, call me Willie," the man in the Development Store said. "Willie Greene. And where is it you've planted yourself, sir?"

Willie was greying at the temples and he sported a waxed mustache. In his starched shirt, he showed them around the wares in the store: everything from finishing nails to hardtack, with white flour and stationary in between. And all of it over-priced. Off to the east of the store was a narrow yard with a seven foot fence surrounding it like a fort--full of lumber supplies, piping and implements, and under an awning the seed grain. A lean German shepherd slept in a corner of the yard, in the shade of the awning. It all seemed a might too secure for a town the size of this one.

A lot of the merchandise was dusty and a little beat up, as if it had seen some use already, but the Company Store sold it as new. Robert protested once, but the storeman wouldn't budge on the price and he just shrugged off any complaints. "Had this on stock for quite a while now," was all he said.

An old man from the stables brought their wagon then, and hung around to help them load it. Two bushel sacks of early wheat, a shoulder sack for sowing, a good assortment of garden vegetables, flour, beans, pork, two laying hens and a Rhode Island rooster in a wire crate. He bought fifty board feet of pine and the odds and ends for adding to the
house; Willie sold him an old roll of barbed wire and some post at the last minute. He was a salesman with a smile.

The stable man, just as a show of plain neighborliness, brought out a little hound pup from the barn. It was a mix of nearly any breed you could think of, but you could see the German shepherd in its ears and muzzle. "May be your missus would like a puppy?" the stable hand smiled too. Robert recognized him then, he was the same old man he'd seen sleeping beside Hey Amigo that morning.

It really wasn't an afterthought. Robert had it on his mind since they left the farm Sunday morning. He just hadn't found anyone he could ask, though he never went out of his way looking either.

"Is there a medical doctor in town?" The constant wind blew across him as he climbed onto the wagon seat.

"Every other week on Thursdays. Doc Hamburg comes through. A week from Thursday he'll be here," Willie Greene was still smiling.

"Something ailing you, Mr. Mahon?"

"My wife is going to have a baby."

"Well, I'll mention you to the Doctor."

"That'd be good," Robert said coolly. He snapped the reins and the two men from Welcome waved at them from the store front. The prevailing west wind kept blowing strong as they rode straight into it. Ike held the puppy in his lap until it wet on him. It whined and cried for the first mile or so, but by the time they stopped and took one last drink from the Welcome Pond the pup was sound asleep in the shade of the seat. The chickens squacked with every bump, and all the way home Robert listened to Ike talking about "Holey Mary" while the sun baked them and the wind buffed his headache away. And he didn't like the town of Welcome.
"I didn't see any women in that whole town but Maria and her employees, did you?" he interrupted Ike.

"Aren't they enough for you?" the old man said. Then he went on about some restaurant he knew on the South Side of Chicago called Ruthie's Rest Stop, where if you order rest you didn't get any.

That was when Robert Mahon finally put his finger on what bothered him about the town. Everyone in Welcome, Texas, was middle aged, except the whores.

Willie Greene watched the wagon roll out of town. "That's the one was drinking with his nigger on the street yesterday, ain't it Charlie?"

The old stable hand shook his head. "Darkie doesn't look like he's worth two shits in a tipped over out house, either."

"That lumber he bought." Willie looked up at the sun. "He was bragging how he was going to add on to that house out by Yellow Run Ridge, you know? What do you think he's adding on for?"

Charlie stepped inside the Company Store doorway, out of the sun. "He said they was gonna have a baby." His straw hat was tilted down against the wind.

"Nope, Charlie," Willie Greene laughed. "That nigger's living in their barn now, but he's going to be moving up to the house. How about that?"

Charlie laughed. "Mr. Sagart is going to love this one."

Willie loosened the button on his collar. "There's more coming in today, Charlie. Better look sharp."
CHAPTER FOUR

The plowshare bit deeper and cut the sod clean when Robert threw all his weight into his shoulders. That bent his back and rounded it like the billowing sides of a grain sack. He kept the furrow straight and rolled the sod over neatly. "The Green Thirty," that's what he called the square field he'd laid out for planting, and it turned easily under the plow. He loved the feel of that opened ground under his hobnail boots. But this furrowed land was just a patch compared with the ground that was his stretched out between the horses' sweating rumps ahead of him. So he kept his back bent as a full sail pulling hard. He set the wing like an expert. But like the ache in his back that wouldn't go away, his thoughts kept coming back to the kids and the woman lying in the house. The harder he pushed that blade down, the straighter the furrows ran, and the deeper his share cut through all the crap that went on in his house. So he clicked his tongue and the horses pulled. They came to an end of the field, the edge of the Green Thirty. With one pluck of the reins the team wheeled around and he plowed on away with the buildings on his farm to his back. And he clucked with his tongue as he bent.

Lucy was standing before the mirror. In the bedroom, the wall sported just a painting of the Sacred Heart and an unframed mirror, only a sheet of glass painted silver on the back. She was only a little thicker around the waist. Otherwise she hardly showed. Her nipples had grown
browner, and they were tender again, like at the start. Yesterday morning, when she woke up alone, a fluid had leaked from them in the night, clear as water, but thicker. Her breasts hadn't swollen much this time. But she knew they would, just as she knew soon the baby would begin to kick.

Last night she was in bed when Robert came in. "We're all ready to start," he said. There was dust in his hair. "We passed three empty houses on the way home," he went on. "Almost nobody, out this way, with crops in." She rolled on her side and did not watch him undress. He talked on about what he'd brought from town, and he lay on his back behind her. He made the whole room smell of sweat and harness leather. He fell silent until she thought he was asleep. Somewhere an owl gave out its childlike call, and she heard the new pup whine.

Then he wrapped an arm around her and kissed her at the base of the neck. His hand took her breast. She rolled toward him, and her hands found the tight muscles in his back. He began to pull her nightclothes up. "What are you up to?" she laughed.

The seriousness of his laugh answered hers, though she sensed a nervousness that was new in him. His hands pulled her clothes up above her breasts, he cupped one of them and ran his thumb and then his lips across her tender nipple.

So he took her, with the old, dark passion he'd always had in the past. But the dust in his hair smelled of familiar sweat, and sour liquor. And his mouth pressed her lips against her teeth when he kissed her. And with every nerve in her body she recognized the callouses on his hands. Afterwards they did not speak. He kissed her once on the cheek before he fell asleep, but he never said where he had been on Sunday night. She never asked.
Lucy looked at her pale white shape in the mirror again. Her view settled on the thickness of her waist and she remembered how small it had been once—without any stretch marks—before she had carried two children, back when the love between the two of them was strange and clear, but not charred.

Not liking what she found in the mirror, Lucy slipped a dress over her naked form. She fastened the front of it up to her neck, and her fingers played with the strip of cloth that tied around the neck, while she remembered a particular night, nearly seven years before.

It was when she was working at Ben Kidders' drugstore. She'd only met Robert once or twice. The young man had taken up with Agnes Heaney and he made a fool out of himself with chasing her. He hung around old Tom Heaney's Hardware, chumming up to the workmen in the evenings, because Agnes would have nothing to do with him. It got around among all the girls, Robert Mahon had asked Agnes to marry him—twice. Agnes wouldn't even go for a Sunday stroll with the man. Still Tom Heaney liked the fellow, and Robert just kept hanging around the store at night.

Lucy was living at the convent with the B.V.M.s then. Her mother had died the winter before. It was the same fever and cough that carried off her father after he'd lost the farm. She had no place to go. So the local priest talked to Ben Kidders, and to Sister Mary Julisia, and suddenly Lucy had a job at the store and a place to stay, with safe room and board. And people began to assume she would be joining the convent.

There was a dance in the church basement coming up, to raise money for the missions in China. Riley's Rompers, a six piece band from Chicago,
would be playing their sweetest and no one had asked Lucy Skahill to go. So when Robert Mahon turned up on the convent steps, with his collar buttoned tight around his neck, and asked her to the dance, Lucy said yes. She didn't want to be seen with this gawky, serious man, almost eight years older than she was, who kept asking Agnes to get married, but she could not miss that dance. She had to make it known she was no Sister of Mercy, and never would be. So she said yes.

The night of that dance was the beginning of all this, Lucy thought as she fingered the button to her dress, the beginning of a string of events that led right here to Texas. At the dance he was so shy they barely talked at all. He knew only how to waltz, and even then she could sense him counting 1-2-3 to his steps. Gradually, he had a little more to drink and she began to lead. He never noticed. When he'd gotten a bit drunk, he still didn't open up and talk. He just grew more and more polite with every sip of the spiked apple jack someone had snuck in.

He walked her home afterwards, and on the way she found a lovely spot in the park beside the river. Lucy sat him down in the grass beneath a big dark elm, and for some reason she still didn't understand, Lucy untied the string that held the collar of her dress about her neck. She sat beside him in his arms and, though he was less shy then, he was still entirely at her beck and call. She pointed to the smooth area of her chest, just above where her breasts parted, and she told him to kiss her there. That night she was disappointed, there was no new sensation in the touch of a man's lips there. But there was Robert Mahon, who took her home, and then came to visit her every evening after that one; there was something new in the persistence and the desire she found in the way he pursued
her, there was something new in the way she thought she owned him after that night. There was something of the servant and the master at once in the way he loved her so single-mindedly. And that was new.

In those days, when she was young, she believed a person could choose her own life. She believed she could make it whatever she wished, and that she could shape a husband to her dreams. Of course, she never spoke of thoughts like that. They were her private, secret knowledge, the understanding that would set her free. But now Lucy tied the cloth string around her neck, and her whole life seemed to open out of that one moment when she loosened a string, and didn't know why.

Lucy walked to the doorway to watch the men working in the fields. She saw Ike Waters take the team, and her husband sat down in the grass. While Robert rested, he seemed to watch Ike Waters work. Then she remembered the Kansas City train station where the colored man was caught; she remembered Ike Waters with two men holding his arms, and it was clear to her. Her husband was attracted to the broken, to the people life had left behind, to those who suffered for someone else's failures. He collected them. No, it was that he couldn't pass them up. Even when it was better if he did.

She knew he had never noticed her before he showed up on the convent doorstep to ask her to that dance. Agnes had sent him there, she admitted that to Lucy a few days after the dance. Agnes had told Robert Mahon about her situation, homeless and stuck in the convent. So she was part of his string of the broken and lost. It was Lucy Skahill first, and then Ike Waters.

For a moment she was ashamed to be just an object of his pity. But then it all became another part of the pattern of her life, the
pattern that began with the untying of a string beneath a dark elm and led to that last sad kiss of the night before. It was meant to be, she decided. It was as clear as the calico pattern of her dress. And suddenly she believed that she hated Robert Mahon for it all. But what drove her mad was the way he loved her helplessly, and that she had come to need him too.

He ripped loose a tuft of the grass underneath him. It was green, but it was crisp and bristling. Yellow had tipped the edges of the plant. The start of May, and the grass was drying. He looked closer and found strands of baby wheat, dwarfed and dying. The remains of someone's field --another man's failed crop--were right there in the palm of his hand. Robert threw it down. Then he got up off his ass and walked behind Ike and the team, breaking the clods of sandy dirt he found with a kick, eager to take back the plow and cut deeper into the Green Thirty.
CHAPTER FIVE

On the morning before Joe Sagart’s visit two weeks later, it took Ike Waters five minutes to pump water from the well. It took longer everyday. He mentioned this to Robert. The other man just shook his head, not knowing what to do. Keep pumping was all that either one of them could say.

It was late on a Friday afternoon, May 21, 1915, when Sagart rode up to the house on a roan stallion. He found Lucy Mahon at home with two kids in the yard. The woman quickly sent her children off to get Robert and their colored man, then she invited him inside.

The house was spotlessly clean and scented with a pot of brewing coffee that she must have started when she saw a rider coming their way. He had never seen the inside of one of these houses before, he tried to stay away from them, but this place showed the signs of a woman's hard work.

"Lucy—that's right, isn't it?" Her faint smile answered him. "May I call you Lucy?"

She nodded yes, a bit shyly, but shy in a confident, sheltered way. And he sensed a sternness in her too.

"How do you like it out here, Lucy?" Sagart looked around at the meagerness of the room, that probably accounted for the cleanliness of the place. People who don't own much have less to keep in order. But thinking of the tiny house in Alabama where he'd grown up, and how it
was a constant mess, he took that back. He noticed that he couldn't find
a clock in the room anywhere. That struck him as odd. "It's a hard life
out in a place like this, I know. For someone like you. I grew up in a
house smaller than this," he said. "Do you wish you'd stayed back home,
Lucy?" he said.

She didn't answer him immediately, and he knew she was being
careful around the land man, wondering what he wanted. "At first, Mr.
Sagart, I didn't care for it down here at all." She sipped at the coffee
that she had poured for herself after she poured him a cup. "But then,
it begins to grow on you, I think. If you let it. The flatness, you
know. It has something you can start to like."

That was all she would say about it. A practiced silence fell
over her. The silence of a married woman, who was once probably a dreaming
girl. She smiled stiffly, took another sip of hot coffee. "It will be
tough out here," he said, putting his emphasis on the "will." She was
light complected, though that added something fragile to her looks. She
did not fit into the harsh landscape surrounding the house, into the endless
rattle of the prevailing wind, or into the bareness of the room. But
Sagart recognized someone else in her. Time and bad luck would mold
her face into one of those faces belonging to the lean ghostly women who
got by in a place like this. With age her stern prettiness would turn into
a hollow will to survive. He'd seen it happen before. He'd seen a thou­
and faces like that, men and women, he'd seen faces like that in places
where he grew up, in his home. "Don't you ever think, maybe, that you'd
be better off--"

"At times, Mr. Sagart." He heard the sound of footsteps outside.
"But don't we all wonder that. At times." She is a god damned fine looking woman, he thought. It's a shame.

"I guess we do at that," he said.

Robert Mahon walked in the door then: the kids at his feet, the crippled nigger at his back. "I saw you coming, Joe. Nice piece of horseflesh you got there." Mahon clasped his hand hardly. There was no quit in him either. Mahon was covered with yellow dust so even his face was a sallow mask. He grinned proudly through the dust, the way a farmer should. When Mahon came in the door, Joe Sagart watched Lucy stand up. She kept a chair between herself and her husband. The angle of her neck and the way she held her chin seemed to stiffen. Yes, these people were going to be trouble, he thought, so he knew he was right in coming.

At the early supper Lucy served, he talked about news from Austin and the State Senate. They discussed the war in Europe, how Wilson seemed determined to keep them out of it. "Hate to say it, but the war will be good for prices next fall," Mahon said. Lucy served all the food to them, getting up from the table to pour more coffee or to slice bread. Ike the nigger sat at the same table and ate with them, and she even served the darkie.

"How'd you get started in this line of work, Joe?" Mahon asked him, chewing on a piece of corned beef.

"My father was a salesman," he said. "Sold almost all his life. Over in Alabama. Land mostly," he said. He watched Lucy bend over the table to cut the salty beef for the youngest boy. She had a shape that filled out her dress. You didn't see many women like that in these parts. This was a lean woman land.
"He started life as a merchant, a respected man. But he lost all that in the war." What Sagart didn't say—deferring for some reason to the nigger at the table—was his father was a slave trader, among many other things. The Civil War and its aftermath had wrecked him, left him broke. His father had lost his left hand to a Yankee shell at Antietam, and like his son he was left-handed. "After the war he traveled and sold land in the West. When I was old enough, he took me along. Taught me everything I know, and I've been selling one thing or another since. You might say I was born a salesman."

The nigger kept quiet through the meal. He seemed to know he was out of place. Mahon tried to draw him into the conversation once or twice, but he knew where he was. "We got nearly thirty acres in wheat out there. Don't we, Ike?" Mahon said. The dumb nigger just nodded. He only opened his mouth to shove corned beef in it.

When supper was finished, Mahon pulled a bottle of whiskey from the cupboard. "This was for our housewarming. I'd say it was about time we opened it." He twisted the cap and broke the seal. The bottle was a fifth of Bushmills. He poured whiskey in a glass, pulled two more glasses from the cupboard. Sagart could see the thirsty look in the nigger's eye.

"No, I really got to be moving on." Sagart stood up. "Check in on the Delahanty's yet tonight."

"Joe, you can't leave without a shot," Mahon said. "Besides, Joey Delahanty is fine. He stops in once a week to exercise his jaw," he said.

Lucy began clearing the table. "All right," Sagart said. "But only if we have it outside. I got a proposition for you."

Mahon looked over at his nigger, shrugged his shoulders. "Sure
thing," he said. Mahon never seemed to notice his wife. "We want to talk to you about a few things, anyway. There's the well, you know."

"Just you and me," Sagart said. "Alone."

"However you want to drink your whiskey is fine with me," he handed the nigger the glass he'd already poured.

They stood in the shadow of the house outside. The sunset was slowly making the sky red. Sagart took a sip of the whiskey from his glass. "All right, Robert, I've got an offer to make you." It wasn't Scotch, but the whiskey was clean and good. So Joe Sagart sipped it again. "I like you, Mr. Mahon; that's why I'm doing this. I'm taking a hell of a chance. So you give me your word you won't say anything of this."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"Listen, Robert, in a month you'll be begging to get out of this place."

Mahon downed his whiskey in one quick gulp.

"I can get you all your money back--two fifty, wasn't it?--but you got to leave this week." He sipped at his whiskey again. Mahon's face was stiff. "You don't say a word to anybody out here. Just pack up, get yourself to the train, and be gone before the end of next week, and I promise you you'll get every cent back."

"Wait a minute," Mahon set his glass down by the door. "Have I heard you right? You want to buy this place back?"

Sagart didn't answer. He just stared Mahon in the eye, finished his whiskey with a few long gentlemanly sips.
"Well, listen here, Joe Sagart. I'm not stupid. I know that well back there is going dry. And this ground here. Well, it's awful god damned patchy at best." Mahon took a couple of steps toward him and pointed a finger at his chest. "I'm not licked yet, Joe Sagart," he whispered to him. "It'll have to get a lot worse than this before I throw it in."

The damn fool, Sagart thought, he doesn't know how to give in. Sagart pushed his glass into the hand pointed at him. He climbed onto his horse and looked down at Mahon. "I took a chance coming out here," he said. "That's the last time I'll mention it." He turned the horse away and then looked over his shoulder at the farmer, standing in front of his greying house. "But it's not the last time you'll remember that offer, Mister Mahon." Then he spurred the roan away.

Christ, that was stupid, Sagart cursed himself as he rode south toward the patch of rocks he'd sold Joseph Delahanty, that fat jabbering cuss. But then he laughed to himself. The word will get around, they'll hear about what he'd said to Mahon, but these stupid farmers will think it's good news. They'll think they have something we want back. Something worth something.
CHAPTER SIX

At the end of May, on a morning when the west wind curled hot out of the mountains and rode its way across the Valparaiso toward the sun, a string of riders left Welcome. Just west of town, where all the roads ended, they fanned out to cover the valley. With the dry wind in their faces, the riders stopped at every house and farm to pass the word. From the backs of their horses they told all the blank stares, and all the friendly smiles the message. There were some who'd rode a train from North Carolina only the week before, who listened with a neighborly stance and held their doors wide open; there were others from Kansas who knew the heat like an old enemy, who listened and heard the grass dry in the talk; and the rest who watched the riders come from their windows, who cracked their doors to hear and remembered the black dirt of Iowa under their nails. There was to be a meeting, the riders said. In the hotel, in town on the first Sunday of June, there was to be a meeting. It would be important. Be there, they said, and don't miss.

The sun was going down and supper was done, when the rider came to the Mahon place. Robert took the paper notice the rider handed him. He listened to word of the meeting: a water meeting, the rider said. His wife took the notice from his hand. He thought of the bad seed in his field. The wheat coming up patchy and short. The bull thistle and curly dock growing tall and thick. He blamed the waterless wind, but he remembered the bushel sacks of seed in his wagon. The seed from the Company Store.
She saw the yellow dirt on the rider’s pants and she read the notice. The Valparaiso Development Co., it read. She thought of the dark, silty water that came from the well with pumping that made you thirsty enough to drink it.

The boys wondered what it was that made their father mean. Vince remembered the day his father had walked on his hands, and the night he’d tasted the dirt. The older boy Jack thought only of the Yellow Run Ridge. Up there on the side of the hill he had found a cave hidden between two red rocks. There were markings of the stone, a red hand print, a herd of scratchy stick animals, and above them all a painted bird, a hawk or a crow. So with his brother’s help Jack began digging under the painted rocks. A secret dig that no one was to know about. And under a mound at the door of the cave they found painted triangular stones and charred bits of wood from old fires. Everyday they could slip away, the boys climbed up to their secret place. They climbed the ridge to be alone and to do important, secret things. And they climbed the ridge to be away from home.

But Ike Waters looked at the ground. He listened and waited to read the notice, and he felt the rider’s eyes watching him. Ike Waters remembered the smile of Joe Sagart at the table. He heard the rattle of Robert Mahon’s dreams beside the pond, and he saw the sparkle of Pappy June’s Bourbon bottle, breaking on the rails. And he shook his head.
Ike was sound asleep under the wagon, shading himself from the hot morning sun, when Robert and Joey came out of the church. They left early. In the midst of the Jesuit’s long Spanish sermon. It would be a hot ride, slow and uncomfortable, through the midday heat to the meeting at Welcome.

"Ike," he reached under Delahanty’s wagon and prodded the black man with his fingertips. Ike woke slowly, wetting his lips with his tongue. "It’s time to get going, Ike," he spoke softly, hearing the Mexican priest inside begin the Latin of the mass again. *Credo in unum Deum* . . . it went.

Ike rolled out into the sun, never answering, not fully awake yet. Lucy got them up in the dark every Sunday morning now; she insisted on riding the thirty miles to this Mexican mud church for the mass. And it was odd, for she had never been so insistent about church-going in Iowa. Before it was a duty, a rule, but now it was a need with her. Usually Ike watched the farm when they were gone on Sunday. He slept late on the extra bed in his new room, the one he and Robert had just added onto the house. So he slept in, while Robert drove the team all morning long to make communion. "It’s only right," Lucy said. "I don’t ask for much." And she was right, it wasn’t much. And he didn’t want the kids growing up pagan, he supposed, though he wasn’t sure why.

Ike climbed into the wagon box sleepily. In the distance Robert could see the ripples of heat rising off the flat ground.

"You don’t think the ladies’ll get lost, do you?" Delahanty slapped the reins to start his team.

"They’ll find their way," Robert said. Lucy was driving Alvina
Delahanty and the kids home in their wagon, so the men could make the meeting. "If they get at all close, they'll be able to see where they're going."

"S'true," Delahanty said, "everything's so nice and flat out here." Those people who come from Kansas admire the flat, Robert thought. It reminds them of home. Robert heard Ike snoring in the back, and then over the snore, the congregation in the church chanted in ragged unison, "etcum spiri tutu Ooo."

"So what do you think that sermon was about this week?" Delahanty laughed. They joked about this every Sunday.

Robert didn't answer. He was remembering Hey Amigo. Three weeks ago he thought he saw her at the mass. He couldn't be sure though. She was hard to recognize with her clothes on, or at least without some cleavage showing. But the woman he saw hadn't been there since. He watched for her each week, until he convinced himself it wasn't her he saw at the mass at all. It was just another Mexican woman. And he wasn't sure why he wondered if it was her in the first place.

"Well, he looked mighty pious to me. I think he was preaching chastity to the Indian women again." Joey's stomach jumped up and down as he laughed. The big man was sweating like a pork roast in a Dutch oven. Ike snorted in the back, rolled over, and started snoring again.

"How the hell can he sleep in this heat?" Robert unbuttoned some of his shirt.

Ike Waters had big plans for the afternoon. He was going to find his woman, Maria the Cuban. With the meeting going on, she wouldn't be busy till nightfall. "Been almost a month since Holey Mary got a visit
from Ike," he'd grinned when he heard Robert was going to town, without Lucy. The last two trips to Welcome, she'd been along. To visit the doctor. She was doing "remarkably well for what she's been through," Doctor Hamburg claimed. Robert hadn't liked the way the doctor chose to put that.

The wagon came onto two yellow ruts of the road that lead from Welcome to the mission. Far out on the horizon a shadow appeared, green but it looked black in the sunlight. Delahanty mopped his forehead with a hanky already soaked with his sweat.

"I'm looking forward to this meeting," the fat man said. A dark speck moved across the wet cloth in his hand.

"Yeah," Robert answered. "Water meeting. That's good." Delahanty picked a brown ant off his sweaty hanky, and squeezed the insect between his fingers. Robert wondered at that instant, in the way irrelevant thoughts come to mind on their own, he wondered why he hadn't worried about leaving the farm alone all morning, with no one to watch it. Then, in the way random thoughts can make sense with a reasonableness that you had never seen, or wanted to see, he realized he didn't have much to lose out there. He was beginning not to care, and that seemed a bad sign to him.

"I swear these little ants are everywhere out here," Joey flicked his fingers several times quickly, and like magic the speck disappeared into the air. "They're going to take over," his fingers rubbed together and the brown stain melded into his skin.

They took a head count when the lobby was full. One of those counting was the man who ran the Company Store, and there was one of the
men who stood at the front armed with shotguns who was counting too. When they finished they compared tallies, and waited a few minutes. The room smelled of bodies. Some of the farmers looked around for him, but Joe Sagart was nowhere to be seen.

Two of the armed men walked through the crowd and closed the doors to the hotel lobby. Then the store man climbed onto the hotel register. It was a long pine desk about belly high. From a handwritten list, the store man read a roll call of the farmers' names. He was shaved and annointed so you could see the shininess of aftershave glowing on his chin and neck. But it only showed the grey sprinkles in his hair more clearly. Outside Barret Wynchel's dog started barking again. The German shepherd that stayed beside the store man stood up then with his black ears peaked, listening to the other dog.

"Gawd damn mongrel," Wynchel drawled in his Carolina tongue. He headed toward the doorway, and a laugh rippled through the crowded farmers, without easing the quiet heat of the room.

Barret Wynchel's dog was no mongrel. The bitch outside barking was a golden retriever and spaniel mix, with a coat as yellow as the Valparaiso dirt. The only flaw she had, besides her temperament, was the number of her eyes. The way Wynchel told it, when she was a pup she cornered an old buck jackrabbit and that "bunny" slashed out her eye with one sweep of its hind legs. Wynchel always laughed when he told that tale. The bitch had been mean ever since, but one hell of a guard dog.

As the lobby had filled up, that yellow bitch had stood by the doorway growling and snarling at everyone who walked in. Wynchel yelled at her a couple of times, swatted her on the ass once, and finally stuck
a bone in her mouth. She gnarled at that on the hotel steps, and stared at the men going in the door.

When Barret Wynchel reached for the doorknob to go out and quiet her, one of the armed men put a hand on his shoulder. He was holding a 12 guage Remington with double barrels. "Let it be," the man said around the cigar stub in his mouth. "The dog isn't bothering anything."

Wynchel just shrugged his shoulders, "If you don't mind, I guess I don't either, Mister."

"There's two missing yet," the store man looked at a dark haired gentleman in a suit behind the register. The dark fellow nodded his head. "They'll get word," he muttered.

"Well, I guess we can start," the store man said, putting his hands behind his back. One of the armed men at the front coughed a deep old hacking cough. The dog outside was still barking her heart out. "I think I've met most of you gentlemen, but just to keep it straight, I'm Willie Greene. I take care of the Valpo Company Store, most of you've been in once or twice, at least." He smiled brightly, and then the smile disappeared. His feet shuffled a little on the countertop.

"I've been authorized by the board of trustees of the Valparaiso Development Company to talk to you this afternoon." The room grew even quieter than it had been before. The silence of yielding men took over the hot quiet of fear. "I've been authorized to make you all an offer." The air in the lobby was still and dry.

"One of you boys open a window in here, would you?" Mister Greene pulled a white folded handkerchief from his pocket. Johnny Nordson from Minneola, Kansas, beat the armed man to the wall, and pushed the window
open. A gust of hot west wind rushed in and lifted the curtains in the air. Greene looked around the room. Everyone was from one of those three places: Kansas, Iowa, or North Carolina. With just a few exceptions, they were all older men with nest eggs and pensions to fall back on, and with just a few exceptions, they were all licked already. Scattered in the tired crowd, there were a few younger men, two or three of them, young enough to start over. Not young enough to make trouble, Willie Greene hoped.

"The longest any of you have been here is a little more than a month. A good number of you a lot less than that." Some of the North Carolina people were barely unpacked. Willie tucked the handkerchief back in his pocket, never having used it. The German shepherd at his side was still standing, keeping sharp attention. Willie Greene clasped his hands behind his back again, and nervously began to wring them. He wondered why he was always the one stuck with this job.

"Those of you who been here the longest might remember the last rain. It was weeks ago. Well, gentlemen, I've got bad news for you. That was the last of it. You fellows won't see anymore rain till October, maybe not till November. That's the end of it, gentlemen."

A hushed rustle ran through the North Carolinans. The rest of the men stared at Greene and the men surrounding him, and looked beat. Thomas Somerset yelled out from the side of the lobby near the open window, "How do you know what it's going to do, Mister?" His yell was followed by a jumble of shouts and grunts, all in a nasal drawl.

"Because I tried making it out south of Yellow Run, sir. And I've been here the nine years since. Believe me, gentlemen, unless you're
east of Big Spring, you've seen the last of any water until winter. And if it does happen to rain, it won't be enough to save you." He paused then, letting the message sink in. "If it does rain hard, it'll wash down off the Ridge and flood over the crust in your fields. Gentlemen. It just won't work."

Someone in the back of the room spit tobacco at the floor. A laugh rose up out of the crowd. John Chandler hefted his shotgun around in his hand and, standing at the doorway to the hotel, spoke to the man loudly, so all could hear. Their laughter died with the sound of his voice. "Wait long enough, Mister," he said, "and that'll be the only water you'll see out there. If you can work that much spit up."

Someone from the Kansas side of the lobby asked, "Where in hell is Sagart?" Grunts of approval came from all over the room.

"John is right," Willie Greene spoke loudly over the crowd. "The longer you gentlemen wait, the worse it's going to get for you. Now you can believe me or not. That doesn't matter to me one bit. But the Valparaiso Company has an offer to make you that I think you ought to listen close to. We're prepared to buy that land back from you."

The room fell silent again, and the German shepherd sat down with his shoulders high and his ears alert to every whisper. But the yellow bitch outside was still barking loud enough to hurt her throat.

"Mr. Lopez here has all the papers, and he'll handle all the details." Willie Greene pointed at the man in the suit. He didn't look Mexican, despite the name. Lopez nodded his head sternly, acknowledging the stares of the men. "But I want to explain this to you so I'm sure you got it straight. The Valparaiso Development Company is prepared to
buy back your land—all straight out and legal change of possession—for twenty-five cents on the dollar." He paused, waiting for the uproar in the room, but it never came. This was the easiest one he could remember. They just stood there and took it. So he went on with the rest of it, more firmly. "That's two bits on the dollar for the first week, gentlemen. The price will go down three cents every week after that. In other words, you wait till next week and you get twenty-two cents on the dollar. The week after that it will be nineteen. And if you're not gone in two months—that's eight weeks, gentlemen—the land you're sitting on will be worth a penny on the dollar." The crowd was still silent. They were giving in like a bevy of cheap whores. Willie had never dreamed it could be so easy. "Now Mr. Lopez will tell you all about the details."

"Where's Sagart?" somebody yelled from the quiet of the lobby. A few men yelled behind the voice, but most just stood and thought about what they had heard.

Willie Greene stuck out a trembling hand to help the lawyer, and Lopez climbed on to the register. "Where the hell is Joe Sagart?" another voice yelled. Maybe they are going to start late, Willie Greene thought. He hated this part of his work. It made him take to drinking to get to sleep at night.

"He'll be back," John Chandler stepped toward the crowd from the doorway. "He'll be here the end of the month, but that doesn't mean anything to you." His voice was gruff and condescending.

"That's enough, Chandler," Lopez didn't sound Mexican either. He stood in front of Willie Greene on the register and began to talk to the crowd. There was no trace of a Spanish accent in his voice. When
he talked about the legal details, almost no one understood exactly what
he said. But they all caught the drift. There would be papers to sign
to get their money. It would all be legal, start to finish. The Company
had already won two disputes in the Texas courts. So just sign up and
then get out. That was the drift of it.

There were some men, two dozen or so, who waited behind when the
farmers left. They were selling out already. Willie Greene could only
shake his head. "Easiest crew I've seen in eight years," he whispered to
Chandler. The man with the 12 gauge shotgun just nodded his head. "But
they ain't out of town yet, Willie. I don't like it so quiet. Not yet
anyway."

Outside the farmers stood around in the hot sun. They kicked at
the dusty street and talked in small groups. They shook their heads,
glanced at the skies and at the hotel doors. They watched the armed men
on the hotel porch. They squinted their eyes against the dry wind.

Barret Wynchel's yellow dog finally shut up when Barret came out
the door. The bitch picked up her bone and followed him, hanging her head
a funny sidewise way so she could see with her one eye.

Willie Greene and the Lopez man came out half an hour later.
Chandler and another man carrying a .32 Winchester were right behind. The
german shepherd walked at Willie Greene's heels.

That was when the yellow bitch dropped her bone and snarled. She
sprinted, away from Wynchel, to the center of the street, barking repeatedly
with a low growl filling the gaps between, until she stood showing her
full side to the shepherd, daring him to come.

On the hotel steps the shepherd bared his teeth and growled right
back. "Atlas," Willie Greene said, "stay, Atlas." The yellow bitch kept barking, her muzzle thrust in a straight line with her neck. The shepherd took three long bounds toward her. Following the rules of the ritual, she moved backward a step, and she turned so her flanks were protected. They both stood with heads down, growling.


That was when the bitch took her chance. She lunged at the shepherd's turned head. It was the neck she went for, but he was too quick to be caught like that. As the shepherd turned, the bitch latched her jaws into his muzzle. He jerked and shook at his head, but she held on.

"You," Greene looked over at Wynchel. "Call off your dog, Mister." Barret Wynchel stood quietly for a moment. The shepherd jerked its head free and the dogs faced off again, snarling. Then Wynchel smiled, looked over the dogs at the store man standing on the porch of the Jeff Davis Hotel.

"Atlas will kill her, Mister, call her off," Behind Greene, John Chandler shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. The man with the Winchester wiped a sleeve across his forehead. Barret Wynchel reached in his pocket and Chandler felt for the safety on his 12 gauge and released it. But Wynchel pulled a plug of tobacco from his pocket, bit off a chew.

"Wayell, Mistuh Greene," he said slowly, "we'll jes have ta see who'll keell who. Won't we?" The lump of tobacco in his cheek never moved when he spoke.
The men in the street began to cheer on behind Barret Wynchel and his dog. "Sonovabitch," they yelled. "Atta girl." "Kill that piece of crow crap." All along the street, not one resident of Welcome appeared. The noise beside the Big Creek was familiar to them. They stayed inside. The few who were not tied to the Company muttered let the Company men handle it.

This time it was the shepherd that lunged. Willie Greene stood on the steps helplessly watching. The silver shepherd missed the bitch's neck. He threw a foreleg over her back, and with his head twisted over it, the dog bit deep into the bitch's shoulders. She snarled at the air around his ribs, reaching but not taking. Her one good eye rolled in its socket, looking for the opportunity to tear somewhere at the shepherd.

John Chandler snapped the safety back on. With nothing more than a glance, he took the rifle by its octagon barrel from the man beside him.

The farmers in the street sent up a yell when the yellow bitch clenched the shepherd's hind leg in her teeth. She pulled at the thigh of the dog. He let loose of her neck with a yelp, and they saw the blood lining his muzzle. They cheered when the shepherd stumbled on its one free hind leg. Barret Wynchel spit tobacco juice at the street, and nodded his head at the meanness in his bitch. She was enough to make a Carolina fool proud.

Chandler aimed the Winchester at a spot of white on the yellow dog's chest. When the shot went off, both dogs fell to the ground, and the farmers in the street seemed to step back in mass. Willie Greene ran out into the middle of the circle, looking back at Chandler like he had a
madman behind him. Wynchel moved almost as quickly, but he stopped in
his stride when John Chandler fired the .32 rifle again, this time in
the air.

"You all hold up there," Chandler yelled holding the rifle at his
shoulder.

Greene pulled the yellow dog off his shepherd. "Atlas," he
mumbled stroking the silver at the base of the dog's black ears. The
farmers in the front row of the ring could see the streaming red spot in
the center of the bitch's chest. They saw her one good eye staring calmly
at the yellow street. Only the men standing beside Barret Wynchel heard
him mutter, "Dirty two eyed son of a bitch."

The German shepherd shook its head. Its muzzle was oozing blood
like the froth on bad mash. The hind leg was broken. Willie Greene
rubbed at the shepherd's neck. The men in the street stood as silently
as they had inside the hotel lobby. They just stood, waiting for the next
thing to happen.

Then Barret Wynchel picked his yellow bitch's bone up from the
street. He flung it at the dog lying in the dust beside her and it thudded
hollowly off the shepherd's rib cage. The German shepherd let out a weak
yelp. It was clear that bleeding muzzle hurt it.

The rifle went off again in the air. "Go on home now," Chandler
yelled at them. He picked up his shotgun with his left hand. The Lopez
man pulled a silk handkerchief from his suit pocket, unfolded it gently,
and mopped at his face. The silk soiled quickly, and left the sweat to
dry on his face in the wind. "Get on now," Chandler said, "don't come
back till you got a pen in your hand."
There were a few long silent moments—only the sound of flies starting to gather around the puddle of the bitch's blood—before the men at the rear of the crowd began turning away to leave.

"It was a long ride," Robert Mahon said to the two baking powder biscuits left on his plate. "For once Joey didn't have much to say."

The room was dark, filled with the dusty smell of the manure she burned for cooking. The boys were in bed when he came home, long after nightfall. She watched him poke a hole in the crusty top of the biscuit with his knife.

"What's he going to do?" she said from across the table.

Robert set his knife down and got up. He walked across the room toward the cupboards someone had built, probably with lumber bought at the Company Store. "He's giving in," he took out the fifth of Bushmills with just three drinks gone out of it. "Christ, Lucy, he's raising horses down there, he could make it. He could graze them on that field of weeds I've got growing out here."

The Old Bushmills thumped deeply against the wood as he set it on the table. "But he's gonna sell out." Robert sat down again. He didn't open the bottle, just looked at it standing by his plate.

"Did you talk to him about the horses?"

"Sure."

"What did he say to that?" Lucy noticed again, as she did every night now, the absence of the chirp of crickets in the dark outside.

"He said he didn't come here to scratch out a living. He came here to retire. Take it easy and all that."

"Well, I guess I can understand it then. Can't you?"
He nodded his head, then tore a piece off a biscuit and stuck it in his mouth.

"Maybe we could raise the horses. He'd sell them to us cheap."

Lucy heard the soft sounds of the two boys sleeping in the other room. She put a hand on her stomach and felt the swell of the third child.

"It's a thought," Robert answered. "We could get by." He took the cap off the fifth of whiskey. "Not much future in horses though."

He poured his water glass half full of the amber liquid, and picked the glass up in both his hands. "Not much at all, anymore. Besides, that carload of quarter horses he had coming from Beaumont, he sent off a wire and cancelled them right after the meeting. Only thing he's got to sell are those nags he's got over there now." She thought she could smell the whiskey clear across the table, but knew she was imagining it. "This was for our housewarming," he stared into the whiskey in the glass. "Some housewarming, huh?" He took the first drink, then gave out a hollow, unconfident laugh.

After that laugh the room was so silent Lucy could hear the liquor swirl in his glass. She hesitated, a little afraid to speak, the next question was so obvious it hung in the air waiting for words.

"What are we going to do?" she heard herself say.

He shook his head, staring at something in front of him. With another swallow from the glass, he spoke gently. "Sleep on it tonight, I guess." It was the voice of reason in him; she recognized it, welcomed it, prayed it would stay.

A minute passed in silence. "I guess I'll get ready for bed," she stood up. Again she felt the gulf between them, and she felt a
moment of intense love for him at the same time, but he was somewhere outside her grasp, alone.

In the bedroom she changed her clothes. At first, by herself in the room, their situation came to her like an abstract problem. There were two courses to follow: to stay here and try to make it by themselves somehow, to go home to friends who would help. But then, just as plainly she saw that decisions never presented themselves for long that way, as two clear choices; you get caught up in them. Emotions begin to mix in with all that reason. The fear of staying behind, of losing everything, of being alone; the shame of going home, of wanting help and having to ask for it, of just being in need. It was never so simple as reason made you think it was. There was too much at stake, too much for reason to see, too much you could never understand. She sat down on the corner of the bed, feeling tired and confused.

But there was the other thing. The fate that led them here to Texas, the fate that let them stick a life savings—meagre though it was—into this shambles here. There was punishment. They were thinking too big, getting proud, making plans, until old Providence stepped in.

It was an attractive idea for Lucy: this old idea that a human being was born with a role and a set of limitations. And all you need do is learn your place. It was just another shade on the old master and slave routine. And she was learning, not all slaves hate their slavery.

She couldn't say how long it was she sat on the edge of the bed. It seemed a long time though. What stirred her out of her thoughts was the quiet in the next room. Faintly, out in the dark, she heard the pup bark. Rising quickly, she got into her nightclothes, listening close
for something in the next room. But an empty rolling sound was all she
heard, and the bark of a dog from some distant farm.

"Robert? Are you coming?" her whisper sounded empty against the
grey, shadowy walls. He didn't answer.

She found him sitting at the table still, rolling his plate on its
rim slowly, from one hand to the other. His gaze followed the plate
blankly. She stayed in the doorway to the bedroom.

"Are you coming to bed?"

"Sure," he held the clay plate in his hands then, still passing
it from one hand to the other. "In a minute."

The distance of the tiny room between them seemed endless. "All
right," she whispered.

But before she could turn around to leave him, he slammed his fist
down on the table. "Christ Almighty," he said, and he got up and walked
from his chair. She took two steps toward him, but she stopped when he
said, "God damn it all." His back was to her, and she was standing near
the table. He looked at the board wall, his fists clenched.

But there was nothing to say to him. His back, in a wrinkled
cotton shirt, showed no signs of his breathing, no matter how close she
looked. She was as tongue tied as the Texas night, and the boys in the
room their father had built for a colored man never stirred.

She stood by the table for a long, serene moment that was out of
place in this hard time. Then she knew, if they stood this way any longer,
the ridiculousness of it all might make her laugh at him. She still had
nothing to say to him. She felt the tension in her arms from the fear of
him, but to escape her own laughter, she stepped toward him. The table stood right in front of her now.

In the instant after she moved, he turned around and with his forearm swept everything off the table. The crash of glasses and plates on the floor pierced the quiet. He drove his other fist into the wood of the tabletop. Then he hung his head and hid his eyes beneath a hand. She heard the kids rustling in the next room. Her laugh was dangerously close to bursting out.

Suddenly he reached down at her feet and picked up the square whiskey bottle. In his eyes she saw the fury to deface, and that frightened her.

But she looked at the clear bottle in his hand, and it was still three-quarters full. At that moment she knew she was safe. He could destroy everything around her, everything inanimate and meaningless, but the rage was not deep enough to let him hurt what mattered. It had not touched his reason.

So, feeling safe, she spoke to him. She said his name. That was all. Just his name.

Automatically he answered, "What--" Then he threw the chair he had been sitting on over, looked at her once, with his chin jutting out. He left the house with the bottle in his hand leaving the door hang open behind him.

In the moments after he'd gone the boys walked meekly into the room. Somehow, with lies and pleas, she got them back to sleep. She closed the front door, stepped over the broken dishes, lay down in her bed and after a short dark time, fell deeply asleep.
She awoke to see a man standing over her bed. At first it seemed a dream, but slowly she saw it was real, and she knew she had not dreamt at all in her sleep.

"Where is he?" the shadowy form said.

"You know?" she sat up in bed and realized by the bend of the man's head that one side of her nightclothes had torn loose in her sleep. She pulled the cloth over her breast. In an agitated sleep it was the swell of her stomach that had helped to tear the old cotton fabric.

"I heard," the voice said. Now coming out of her sleep she recognized Ike Waters.

"He left. Walking. He's out on the farmland somewhere." Ike Waters had brought a strange perfumed scent into the night air of the bedroom. "He took that bottle of whiskey with him, Ike."

The old man stood still. She listened to him breathe hard through his nostrils like an animal. His grey hair loomed in the dark, and she made out the shape of his humped back.

"I'll finds him," he whispered. "Don't you worry now." Then as soundlessly as he came, he left her.

Robert took the last swallow of Old Bushmills, and it tasted a whole lot better than the first. The empty bottle disappeared into the starry dark when he hurled it, but bursting on the rocks it rang out pretty as long clock chimes on a Sunday morning. It must be Monday morning by now, he thought.

Short, scrubby mesquite was scattered around him. Bunch grass as dry as needles crackled when he moved his head. And above it all the prevailing wind whipped through everything in its way. The wind would
prevail. Sooner or later it was going to blow this whole state in the ocean, and as far as Robert Mahon was concerned, the ocean could have it.

But, damn it all, he wasn't going back. He sat up and looked down at the field below him. The land moved in and out, like an ocean already, hard to focus on with a head full of whiskey. He couldn't go back—not and look Baldwin and Kehoe and all those other folks he'd bragged to in the eye, he couldn't. But what was out here: his big future. It wasn't even worth building a permanent outhouse on that wind-swept desert. The longer he sat there, the more he felt Sagart's trap biting in all around him.

Suddenly he remembered Hey Amigo's words, her only English. He remembered the hundred ways she seemed to use that one sentence. Or so it seemed that night. Now he heard in that little, twisted sentence what he had missed the first night she spoke it. And he knew in a flash why she used those words so often, so well. She was telling him what he was too much of a fool to understand. "You be gone 'fore long," she said. And it sounded like her sales pitch. "You be gone 'fore long."

Then he put a hand out to steady himself, sitting up on the hill. It was fear that was closing in on him, but he wouldn't admit it to himself. All he could see was what he could not do: it wasn't worth staying here, on a piece of yellow ground that cost him more money every week, with nothing coming back out. But he wasn't going back. He couldn't do that either. So Christ Almighty, what was he going to do?

"Yo--Robert--" a man's voice bellied out at him. Down at the base of the ridge he saw the shakey image of a man standing, scanning across the rise, looking for him.
Robert lay down quickly, flat on his back staring up at the stars again. The bastard stars were the only thing far enough away so he could see them clear. Jesus, he hoped that fellow hadn't seen him. But if he lay still, the sonovabitch would never find him in these weeds, and in the dark. Not unless he stumbled right onto him. A brown shoot of some sort of golden rod, drying up before it reached full flower, pointed straight from his shoulder to the stars. He was careful not to move, because even a shake of that weed might give him away.

What the hell were they looking for him for anyway? He didn't need any help. Just leave him the goddamned alone, please.

That was what his father had said. Christ, it was the exact words the old man used. "Just leave me the goddamned alone, please." In that little town in Illinois, where the old man picked up the letter. He knew by the way the old man stuffed it in his pocket that the letter had something to do with his mother. It came from New York, from someone who knew about the old man's wife: the mother Robert Mahon had never seen, not that he could remember anyway. He and the old man were traveling in the wagon then, and the old man was selling banana liquor from Nicaragua. It was pretty hard for the mail to catch them, they moved so quick. Still Robert remembered the letter though he saw it only once. Later Robert watched the old man read it in the corner of a hotel room in Galena. It was a big thing, them staying in a hotel. "Go to sleep, would you?" the old man had said before he went out to buy a bottle. He could barely stand the liquor he sold, so when he could afford it he bought whiskey. The old man came back and drank by himself in the same corner of that room, and he burned the letter in an ashtray. And after the whiskey had done its
work, the old man said to him, "Your mother won't have you, boy. She's married some big German in New York. So you're a secret now," he said. "Your own mother." It was later when the old man caught Robert watching from the bed, that he said those words. "Just leave me the goddamned alone, please." So Robert had rolled over in the bed, more afraid than he'd ever been before that. But at the age of four he had a lot to learn about fear.

It was the next morning the old man asked at the hotel desk, "How do I get out to that Holy Name Home?"

The old man was a failure. That's all there was to it. He was every kind of failure Robert Mahon could think of. And now it seemed like father, like son. Because if they couldn't stay here, and they weren't going back, then he was going to end up dragging them across the country-side like his old man did. Dragging them around until--

"God damn you, Robert, stupid hunk of white trash, this be Ike. Where is you at?"

So it was Ike. But he was supposed to be in town with that Cuban woman.

"I know you're up there, Mister Mahon, I heard that bottle crash."

Robert almost answered. Out of all the understanding faces in the world, Ike would give him no crap. Ike would see there was no way out, but without any feeling sorry for him. Ike would know that he just had to sit there alone and face, front forward with no pity. It was all up. Robert Patrick Mahon was a failure. A flat out, stinking dirty flop. Just like his old man was. Suddenly all the fight went out of Robert.
It was as if it just didn't matter anymore: you just give in and give up. He found out it didn't hurt so much. When you give in, the fear goes away.

Out of everybody he'd ever looked in the eye, Ike Waters might understand that. Robert knew then what his old man must have known, what the old man had to have learned. That failing is awful damn close to freedom.

"I knows by that busted bottle you're empty. You're not dumb enough to throw away good whiskey. Well, I gots a bottle here of something you gone remember."

Robert Mahon laughed then. At first it was just a chuckle, but then it grew louder as he climbed up onto his wobbly feet.

"Bring it on up here, Ike boy," his laugh nearly knocked him over. "It's confessing time," he yelled.

He tried to stay standing up so Ike could find him. But it wasn't long before his eyes weren't holding anything still. Sit down, was what he told himself. But as he went down his feet didn't move right and the next thing he knew his back crashed into the side of the hill. He laughed hard at himself. "I can't even sit on my own ass right," he guffawed merrily while the old life of trying and trying again peeled away slick and whole like the cool label on a sweating bottle.

"You don't look like you hurting none," Ike sat down beside him.

"I think I feel better than I have since I was four years old."

"Sure you do."

"Where's that bottle you promised."

Ike handed it to him, another fifth about a third gone. Robert held the bottle up by the stars so he could look at it straight. "No,
Ike. Not this stuff again." It was Eldorado Mist.

"This boy had to steal that liquor from Holey Mary, now. You can't be choosey," he reached to take the bottle back, but Robert pulled it away. "She didn't like me taking that no more than I liked leaving her nice warm bed. So I don't wants to hear complaining on it. Hear?"

"But they make this stuff in the outhouse behind the saloon, Ike. It's been used once already."

The colored man laughed and Robert looked over at him in the starlight. His head filled the center of the Big Dipper. "You can't tell the difference right now anyway, Farmerman, so shuts you up and swallow it, or hands it back here."

That made sense. He twisted the cap off the brown bottle and lifted his head enough to pour a taste in his mouth. He was ready to talk it all out with Ike. Ike had an ear that would listen at the right moment in time. The ground was rough and sandy under his head, but he knew sitting up wouldn't help any, so he laid his head back down. Ike Waters took the bottle out of his hand.

"So how'd you hear about it?" Robert let the breath blow out of him and his head felt lighter, but it was whiskey numbness. So what did he care what it was? It was good.

"Holey Mary. She know all about it." He heard the bottle slosh and gurgle as Ike took a drink. There was no pause in the black man's speech to wait for the liquor to pass his chest and let him have his wind back. He went on as if he'd had a slug of beer. "Them folk do this every year rights about now, 'cording to her. She's seed it for eight years now."

Ike took another swallow and waited this time. Robert heard the
grass crackle as Ike lay down on his side. The colored man curled into the position that let him rest comfortably. It was a position Robert saw him curl into a dozen times a day, the poor cuss. Ike didn't hand the bottle back.

"So how you doing?" Ike asked. Robert heard him twist the tin cap onto the bottle.

"Hell, I'm doing fine, Ike. I feel good, pretty good. It ain't the end of the world." The words came easy to him, rising somewhere out of his new found, carefree failure.

"Yeah," Ike's back was turned to him, "that's what a nigger name Boss talked after he done sit in the field a long time too. Don't be giving me this crap, Farmer. How you doing?"

"It's no crap, Ike. I feel good. I got took. A sonovabitch played me for a fool. But that isn't everything."

Ike sat up then. He set the bottle at his side. "Well, this boy's been thinking, Robert Mahon. All the way home, riding in the back of Mister Somerset's wagon, I figured we gots one chance left out here."

"Somerset?"

Ike grunted an affirmation. "He be spending his land money at Holey Mary's."

"He sold out."

"'N he's rolling out what he gots like there's no tomorrow."

Robert heard the cap twisting again, and Ike Waters took a drink. "Let me have a swallow of that."

"Like I say, there's one chance we got left," Ike was slow in handing him the bottle. He talked a little more before Robert got hold
of it. "Man, something got to be feeding that Big Spring down there, I says to myself, setting in the back of that wagon. Then this nigger hads a thought. You knows that big stump down there? In the field?"


"That's the one."

Robert sat up and took a big slug from the bottle. Then Ike snatched the liquor back as if he wanted to put that bottle to bed for the night.

"That old stump is jus' full a shoots and leaves. It's the only green thing left out here," Ike squinted at the stars as if he saw something out there. "'Cept for the insides a Mister Sagart's money belt."

"So?"

The cap went back on the bottle slowly. Then Ike Waters stood up and pissed down the hill, with the bottle safely leaning against one leg, out of Robert's reach.

"So that old stump must have roots gone down a long, long ways." Robert laid his head down on the stone. Ike's piss rattled on the dry ground like a fire, and the ripe smell of it rose up like steam in the air. "That old man stump he's gittin' water from somewheres. May be the same somewheres that spring's comin' from." Then Ike kicked at the ground under his feet. "'N this rock here, it's pretty crumbly and soft."

The old colored man was talking nonsense, but he sounded like he knew what he was saying. "What are you getting at?" The fear Robert Mahon thought he had lost forever was rearing up its head again.

"This rock, it runs on all 'long here, don't it? Like this here whole hill be made of it. All nice and soft and easy to dig on. You know,
them kids is even digging in it. It's easy as that."

Robert recognized that a lot of the stone on the ridge was sandstone. He noticed that on the first day they walked up here. But now he did remember something he'd heard once, from a well man or a government surveyor or someone, that sandstone was loose and porous enough to run ground water through it. And Ike was right, the water in the Big Spring had to be coming from somewhere, and probably somewhere uphill, like a ridge.

"What this nigger be thinking was: we don't know how deep that well behind the house be, do we?" Ike sat down again, wiped his hands on his pants, and twisted open the bottle. "May be jus' ten feet down. Jus' a little stick poked in the ground." This time he handed Robert the bottle first, and with a smile watched him drink.

Robert Mahon rubbed his eyes and sat up, curling his arms around his knees to hold himself steady. "You think there's water down there?" he said. Sitting up he couldn't see Ike clear, and he wasn't sure he was thinking straight. But the fear of being nothing was coursing through him again.

Ike set the fifth down, put the cap back on it, and then he laid it on its side on the stone. "If we pull that well 'n it be shallow, may be we gots us a chance yet." There was a wicked grin curled his lips, though he was trying to hold it back.

"God damned, Ike, it'd be good to beat them bastards at their own game. Wouldn't it?"

"Now, this old nigger here, he don't know a thing about digging no wells. This is jus' a chance we gots."
But there was not going to be any giving in. There would be no
having to go home crawling. Not now, and not no more. "Son Of Aay Bitch,"
Robert said. "Why didn't I think of that?" he said. "We'll lick this place
yet. We will." Robert beat his hand on the yellow sandstone like it was
an old buddy, and the gesture threw him off balance. So he fell over on
his side. He felt his cheek scrape against the ground, the whole world
was a whirl, and his eyes closed. The next thing he knew Ike's arms were
wrapped around his shoulders, and with the old man holding him he climbed
up onto his feet. He let loose with a whoop, and then the world was spinning
again. But he wasn't giving up on the dream. He wasn't selling out. And
he wasn't giving in.

"Joe Sagart, you bastard, you gonna crap in your pants when you
see this," Robert bellowed out at the flat lightless plain below him.
The prevailing wind swept across his back, and he wavered on his feet.

"We got a well to pull tomorrow, Farmerboy." They began walking
down the hill. Robert had his arms wrapped around the old man's humped
shoulders. "You needs a little mattress laying," Ike chuckled and tucked
the fifth into his coat pocket, "'fore that old land man be cleaning out
his corduroys."
"Can you get it open?"

Down on his haunches Ike Waters grinned like a kid at play, with two snips of wire in his hands. Inside the fence the German shepherd hobbled to the center of the yard, and it growled low.

Using a long sliver from the side of Grant's home, the colored man pulled the padlock into the narrow crack between the boards of the fence. Robert held it there for him, while he inserted his wires, twisted them for a few seconds, until they found their place. With a click the padlock fell open.

Ike whispered proudly, "When Mister Landlord got tough, these was my keys." His eyebrows raised as he spoke. He carefully bent the wires together then and slipped them into his pocket. The shepherd limped on its bandaged hind leg to the grate, looking pretty weak for a guard dog.

"Lay down there. Around the corner, like we's planned now," Ike whispered. The dog was trying to bark, but its muzzle was bandaged nearly closed. So whimper and growl was about all it could do.

"What if the dog doesn't follow you?" Robert whispered back. He crawled around the corner of the fence. The two o'clock sky was black and moonless.

"He will," Ike laid the padlock on the ground and pulled the chain through the fence. Then he picked up the two foot length of two-by-four on the ground at his feet. The dog was waiting right on the other side
of the gate from him, making as much noise as it could, jumping at the gate awkwardly and growling low. "You lay flat now and be still."

Then on the second floor of the store a lamp was lit, and Willie Greene opened the window to look out. He was in a nightshirt, holding his pants up with one hand. When he saw the german shepherd at the gate he yelled, "Good fella, Atlas," and shoved the window down.

"I's gonna open it. Don't you even move like a white chile, now," Ike spoke a little louder than before. The dog was trying to push at the gate with his forepaws, but he couldn't stand on that hind leg.

Ike Waters pulled the tall gate wide open, and the German shepherd stood there in the gateway looking at the colored man for a long second. Robert wondered if Ike was wrong and the whole thing would be ruined.

"That's one southern dog, Mistuh Mahon," Waters had told him sitting in the afternoon sun with his good foot dangling in the Big Creek. "If there's one thing we can be sure of, that dog knows how to chase a nigger."

With the gate wide open, Ike stood a few yards from the shepherd, taunting it, jerking his arms to startle it and then laughing. The dog had its neck down, the hair along its back was stiff, he growled as well as he could and stood his ground. The back door to the store opened then.

"Who the hell's out here?" Willie Greene yelled from the doorway, holding the lamp and a shotgun. The same moment the dog heard Greene's voice, he made a hobbled bolt at Ike. The black man ran then, staying in front of the limping dog easily, but not far enough to leave the shepherd behind.

Willie Greene hurried out to the gateway and stood there holding the lamp high. Robert watched him through the boards of the fence, and the store man's grey hair seemed thicker when his hair was mussed. Lying
flat, Robert set his feet in the dirt, waiting for Greene to move away from the gate.

Ike led that German shepherd straight out from the gateway a good fifty or sixty yards. The ground was so flat that even in the dark his movement made him visible.

"It's that damn old nigger," Robert heard Greene mumble, his voice rising higher with each word, until he fairly bit off the last one.

Ike had turned around and was hopping back and forth in front of the dog. The two of them faced off at each other for a moment, like a pair of hounds getting ready to scrap. Then the black man raised his two-by-four high, so it could be seen a good long ways, he swung down hard and clubbed the dog between its ears. The shepherd stood still, then its legs folded in like a cardtable on the morning after the party.

"You son of a bitch," Greene practically threw his lantern on the ground. He raised the shotgun to fire, but Ike was gone by then. Willie Greene waved the shotgun from side to side, aiming for anything that moved. Then he fired the gun anyway, at nothing.

"Dirty nigger," he muttered, and then ran out toward his dog in the dark. Robert waited for him to run a few steps, then he quietly slid around the corner and crawled into the Valparaiso Company Yard. He looked frantically around for a place to hide. There were several stacks of lumber to his left, so he rolled behind them, lay flat on his stomach, and tried to catch his breath before the store man came back. He was still breathing hard when Greene carried the guard dog in his arms through the gate. Then a couple of men came running through the store carrying guns. Robert had to smile at how slick he'd gotten in. That bastard Ike, he lay there grinning and smelling the dry wood near his face.
"It was the nigger lives with that Mahon fellow. You know, the crippled up one. They was in here this morning together." Robert crawled around to where he could see the shapes of the three men by the doorway to the store. Willie Greene laid the dog inside. Robert had felt bad about that part of their plan, beating on a poor, helpless dog. "That's no helpless dog," Ike had laughed at him. "That is one mean cuss." Now he found himself wondering if Ike had hit it hard enough. If that shepherd came to before morning, Robert Mahon was in one nasty mess.

The three men were talking quietly in the doorway then. Robert took the chance of crawling to the next lumber stack, so he could hear what they were saying. He recognized the two other men from the water meeting. One of them was the old gent who ran the stables down the street.

"Damn glad this didn't happen in two weeks," Greene was saying. "Joe doesn't like to be around when there's any trouble."

"Somebody better keep an eye on this place tonight. They may come back. Who knows what they're after."

"I can take a good guess, Charlie. That nigger and Mahon were trying to buy pipe for a well this afternoon."

"A well!" the third man laughed. "That's a new one."

"I don't think Joe Sagart'd like that talk. Not about wells out there, he wouldn't."

Then their voices dropped low as if they didn't want to be overheard. Robert couldn't make out what they said, and he didn't dare take the chance of crawling any closer.

The one called Charlie, the old man from the stables, broke away from the triangle after a bit. He walked to the gate to lock it up again.
It took him a few minutes of searching in the dark to find the padlock, but eventually he did. Robert remembered how he'd wanted to throw the thing far away, but Ike said no. "That'll only cause trouble. They'll hang around all night. And besides, if I can open it once, I can open it twice." Charlie picked Greene's lamp up and twisted the chain around the gate, snapped the padlock in place.

When he turned around he said, "Go on, get some sleep, Willie." He said, as he ambled back, "It'll do your nerves some good."

The third man handed Charlie a shotgun and, dawdling in the doorway for another quarter of an hour while they spoke in whispers, they finally left him alone in the yard.

"Anybody comes back you just fire a shot," the man from the water meeting said when he closed the back door to the store. Robert heard his steps creak through the building and then the front door opened and shut. Charlie walked back and forth in the quiet after they'd gone, but before long he sat himself down on the stack of irrigation piping near the lumber piles. The same god damned pipe they said they didn't have that afternoon. Robert rolled over against the lumber silently.

Now comes the wait, he told himself. In his mind's eye he drew a picture of Charlie sitting on the pipe. His hair was white and curly, the kind of white hair that probably was red at one time. And he had a high forehead that must have made him think he was going bald back when that hair was firey red. He wore his shirt collar buttoned tight on his neck, and the straw hat he was always sliding around on his head would leave a little gap of thin white hair between its rim and that collar. That would be the spot.
But if I wait long enough, he'll get drowsy. The trick will be to keep myself awake, and talking to himself seemed to help. Robert laid his head up against the hard boards at a god awful angle. This would be the second night in a row that he was up till dawn, and they'd pulled that well this morning besides.

There wasn't much of a job to that, though. Just three lengths of four foot pipe came up before they got to the rusted out filter. Twelve feet down was all the farther that well went. "If we's lucky," Ike had said, "and there's nice soft stone all the way down, may be we can hammer her in for another twenty feet." But Robert had said, "We'll drive it down fifty feet if we have to."

It was a chance; that was all. And when Greene wouldn't sell him any piping--kept saying they didn't carry such merchandise--Robert decided that chance looked better than ever. There had to be water down there. The water that fed the spring Welcome, Texas, lived on.

He must have fought back sleep for over an hour. He couldn't be sure, but he may have fallen asleep anyway. He kept dozing in and out. There was beginning to be a faint light in the east. It had to be past four o'clock. He lifted his head off the boards and his neck was stiff. He rolled back over onto his stomach and his shoe rapped against the lumber. His god damned leg was asleep. He lay still, waiting for long minutes with his chin in the dirt, afraid to even breathe. But Charlie never made a sound.

When he crawled around the lumber pile ten minutes later, he saw the stable man's shape still sitting on the irrigation pipe. Charlie's head was tilted down, resting on his chest. It sure as hell looked
like he was sleeping. And if he was, there was no time to lose.

Robert rolled back behind the stacked lumber. Straight down beyond a rack of four-by-fours he could see the backside of that pile of pipe Charlie was resting on. He got up onto his knees, and still heard nothing from Charlie. So he darted over behind the four-by-fours. On his haunches he looked around. The store was still dark. Scanning along the fence there was no sign of Ike anywhere. A shock ran through him then. What if that shot of Greene's had somehow hit Ike? He'd have lain out there bleeding all night. But at the moment there was no point in worrying about that. He had to just carry out his part of their plan, and count on Ike to be there.

Robert darted again, this time into the racks of piping. He knew right where Charlie was. He could sense him somehow sitting on the other side of those four-inch irrigating pipes. A rusted iron rack held several sizes of pipe off the ground. Robert looked through them for a moment, but he wasn't shopping for well pipe. He saw a piece in the rack of two-inch steel that was cut a little under four feet long. That was what he was looking for. The only problem was it sat high up, in the top joint of the rack. He crawled over on his hands and knees, keeping the four-inchers between himself and Charlie. When he looked back he could see the top of Charlie's straw hat over the pipes.

He drew in a deep breath and then held it. Slowly he rose up letting his legs straighten out. The top of Charlie's hat didn't move. He could see down to the old man's shoulders now. Sure enough, he saw that white spot of hair, between the straw rim and the collar. Robert put one hand on the pipe, he felt the threading with his palm. He got his other
hand on it about three feet up the pipe. Now is when a sound will mess it all, he thought. He gripped the pipe tightly and lifted, taking care not to raise one end higher than the other. He'd lifted pipe and lumber and all sorts of things a thousand times, but he'd never watched himself do it so closely before. He'd never noticed how hard it was to hold something perfectly level and lift it slowly.

The pipe was raised up free of the rack now. He raised it to the height of his forehead. Slowly he tilted one end down, watching the edge of the iron rack. One bump against that would be like setting off an alarm clock. When he had it away from the other pipes, his legs bent back down. The pipe was in his hand then, and resting on the ground. He let the breath in his lungs out. The top of Charlie's hat was still where it was supposed to be.

He rested on his hands and knees a moment, trying to let his breath come back to something near normal without making any sound. But it wasn't easy. His heart was pounding like a barrel drum in his chest. He looked at the square peak on the hat and wondered: would it be better to go at him quickly, or should he crawl around quietly? The decision he made was easy. He couldn't stand anymore of this creeping around, waiting to make a mistake. Quick was the way to go at him.

Robert got his feet under him again and crept over to the edge of the four-inchers. He got his two hands wrapped around the threaded end of the pipe. With his length of pipe, from here he figured he could reach Charlie. Just stand up and swing, like he was hitting a sucker pitch. Remember to get a good stance. Get your weight into the swing. Robert smiled. He felt bad about beating a dog, but this was going to be all right.
He stood up and planted his feet a good distance apart. Swinging the pipe back, Charlie was farther out than he'd planned. He was going to have to lean into it. How hard do I swing, ran through his head. Then the pipe swung round and at the last instant Charlie lifted his head. The end of the steel landed where the brim met the crown in the straw hat. The leaning swing pulled Robert out of his stance and he fell forward on to the four-inchers. For an instant Charlie looked around at him, but he was already sliding off the pipes toward the ground.

"Rosita?" he breathed out, and he fell forward onto his face.

In the same instant that Charlie hit the ground, Robert heard a sharp click. He lay still on the pipes. Where that click came from he couldn't tell: a window latch, a door, a pistol hammer? It was a long moment he lay there on the cool steel waiting for the next sound. Then the gate creaked and, smiling at himself, he knew it was Ike.

Robert stood up and looked down at Charlie's slouched form on the ground. He was wrong: it didn't feel so good after all. Robert bent down and checked the stable man. He was bleeding a little, but the pulse in his neck was strong. That was when Ike Waters backed the wagon up to the gate.

Robert was still on his haunches watching Charlie when Ike walked quietly up beside him. "You gone to wait for him to wake up?" he whispered.

Robert didn't answer.

"He be all right. But that morning sun ain't waiting for you none."

It was only a matter of five minutes before the two of them had forty some feet of three-inch, reamed drive pipe in the wagon. They walked the horses out of town, then got in and drove them at a run for a ways.
When the horses were walking again, the two of them had a good long, lazy day laugh. Then before he noticed it coming on, Robert's head was nodding. All this was catching up with him. Ike took the reins and he crawled into the back with the well pipe and a little chunk of two-by-four, and he stretched out. He found a gunstock there, peeking out from beneath the pipe. Robert pulled it out. Then he held the shotgun up for Ike to see.

"What the hell is this, Ike?"

"Just something Mistuh Greene suh left behind. I thoughts maybe we'd find it useful sometime. Since Mistuh Greene is most worried about his dog." Ike chuckled then. "That man be one awful shakey soul. But you know," he said, "I likes him. Better than that dog anyway."

Robert just shook his head, too tired to laugh, and he laid the store man's shotgun down on the smooth pipes. When he rested his head back on the sidewall of the buckboard, he fell straight to sleep.
CHAPTER EIGHT

In the first weeks after the water meeting far more than half the farmers in the Valparaiso Grasslands had packed and gone home. A good many of those who remained were sell outs, still trying to leave, trying to decide where to go. Joe Sagart returned to Welcome quietly at the end of June, and it was about a week before the Fourth of July that the fires began. At the start of it, they were small. A grass fire burned through Thomas Somerset's fields, and swept over some of his neighbors' land. But Somerset was already on the train back to Carolina, with his wife and grandkid. He never heard of the fire that took the dry leavings of his crop. Two other small fires on vacant farms followed that one. Just enough to start people to muttering. Then late on a Sunday night, Barret Wynchel's barn burnt to the ground. Three horses and a prize shorthorn bull went down with the building. The fire was set so hot and fast, Wynchel could do nothing more than watch it go and listen to the braying of the bull. It was only the persistent west wind that kept the flames from leaping to his house. Barret Wynchel had been determined to stick it out, and he'd been vocal about it too, disparaging the ones who gave up and left early, telling them they were fools to their faces. But he took 16¢ an acre when he sold. Without his usual smirk, Mr. Lopez held the paper still while Barret signed. There was no handshake to bind that deal.

Alone out beneath the Yellow Run Ridge, the Mahons were nearly ignorant of the departing families and the burning fields. Working from
sunrise until long after dark, Robert and Ike rigged a block and tackle over a hundred pound chunk of stone, and with the horses lifting they drove a well forty five feet into the ground. Lucy carried their meals to them and sparingly gave them drinking water from the tub they'd filled before they pulled the old pipe. It was only three days and two split shanks of steel pipe before they had water—a clear, hard water with a chalky taste—but water all the same.

In the days that followed, while Joey Delahanty brought them the news of the Somerset fire and the way the Iowans and Kansans were leaving in droves, Robert and Ike tore out the lumber in Ike's room to improve the pump, and they worked slowly at a reservoir in the side of the hill. The wheat in the field turned grey from the draught and the heat. There were times when they had to break the soil with a pick, as they dug one long ditch toward the field. It was clear to them all that this crop was lost. But maybe a second crop would have time. The season was long. It was what he said at night when Robert lay in bed and put his arms around his wife again.

They were digging at their shallow ditch, just west of the Green Thirty that was now grey and patchy, the wind was picking the dust off their spades and spreading it on the field, when Joey D. rode up to tell them about Barret Wynchel's barn. "No accident, that one," he said repeatedly. Robert and Ike cut away at the yellow sand, talking between spadefuls. "Someone set that fire. They did. No accident, that one. No sir," Joey sat in his wagon. "You be careful out here, Robert, with this well of yours. Barret was like you, by golly, he said too loud he was going to stay."
Robert stood up straight, glanced at the sun high in the blue sky, with a few wisps of white clouds like smoke in the heavens. "Been telling nobody about this," he said. Ike pointed in the direction of the farmhouse. Lucy was walking toward them across the Green Thirty with a basket under her arm.

"It doesn't matter. The word will get around."

Ike picked up the bottle of water, half empty now, sitting in the sand beside the ditch. When he tilted it to drink, the sediment at the bottom of the jug rose and colored the water white. But he was used to the minerally taste by now, and it was all they had.

"Well, don't go talking like that around Lucy," Robert said. He planted his spade in the loosened dirt at the side of their ditch. She came carrying their lunch in that basket. Her green dress was bright against the ground. For a moment Robert felt like he had ten years ago when he'd started with the Baldwin place on his own: he felt eager and loaded with promise. In those days he had taken that feeling to be his own shrewdness, but he had learned since that shrewdness only comes with age, and even then only sometimes. Robert looked back along the jagged line of their ditch and saw the circular rigging they'd built with the lumber from Ike's room, so that the horses could work the pump when it came time to flood the field. They had no rigging and no time to build a windmill, and they knew no one in town would order one for them. So for the time being, horsepower would have to move the water, and the wind would have to wait. Robert looked at the wooden slush gate to the little reservoir they'd dug up the side of the ridge, and by God he felt shrewd this time. He had more sense than this fat old talker Delahanty sitting
in his wagon any day. Because he was going to make it work, one way or another. Or he'd die trying.

Ike sat down in the thread of shade that Joey D. and his wagon cast. "So when'll you be leaving, Joey?" Robert leaned on his shovel. He could see the little curve to Lucy's belly now. He waved to her, and she waved back.


"That's what you been saying for the last three weeks." Robert knew what it was. Joey was ashamed to go home. He'd go eventually, and laugh it off in Kansas telling jokes on himself in the local tavern, but he wasn't anxious to leave. If he stayed a while longer, it would seem better when he got home. So what if he had sold out in the first week, no one in Kansas would know that.

"Vinnie's in a hurry, I suppose." Joey rustled in his seat and made the wagon creak. "But me," he chuckled, "I want to get my money's worth out of my retirement."

Now Robert could make out the green of Lucy's eyes, they seemed to glow, set against her pale complexion. "What's for dinner?" he yelled to her.

"Wait and see." He heard her laugh roll back to him across the grass. The hair around her forehead was damp from walking in the heat. It curled black and tight above her eyebrows.

Robert walked out to meet her. Trying to take the basket from her, while she playfully knocked his hands away, he reached up for an instant and touched the curls by her temple. "You'll just have to wait," she said. Her skin was brighter and more full of that milk and rose color than it had been since before Vince was born.
"Let me see," he picked at the cloth that covered the basket, but she pulled it away with a mock frown on her face.

This was a ridiculous game they had begun to play. The food in the basket was about the same as it was everyday. Left-over salt pork, last night's extra biscuits, jam, and a jug of hot coffee. But most games worth playing are a bit ridiculous, Lucy thought. It's what makes them worthwhile. So she slapped his hand away from the basket.

When they got closer to the wagon, Lucy greeted Delahanty and inquired after Alvina. But she interrupted Joey's long answer. "Where's Jack and Vince?" she looked around for them. "They're supposed to be with you," she said.

"I guess they wandered off somewhere," Robert said. Ike hopped awkwardly out of the shade and onto his feet.

"I knows where they are," the colored man said to Lucy, and his head nodded a kind yes to her. Ever since the night of the water meeting, she had grown fond of Ike Waters. It was as if she had suddenly seen his worth, and Ike recognized the change. He was always jumping up to wait on her. He paid her all the deference of a servant to a lady, until Robert began to chide him for it. "What are you, her slave?" he would say to Ike as they dug in the Texas sun. When they tore out the walls of Ike's room, it was Lucy that objected.

"Are they up there again?" Lucy said.

Ike hobbled over the irrigation ditch and headed up the ridge. "I'll bring them down for dinner, Missus. You jus' have those biscuits a yours ready." And the wind lifted the dust from his footsteps up into their eyes.
Robert saw Lucy squint against the cloud of dust that followed the colored man, but she watched Ike limp up the hillside. She set the basket down and pushed a few curls away from her forehead and said, without looking toward the wagon, "Will you and Alvina be going to church with us Sunday, Joe?"

"Oh sure, sure," he said. "We'll be here yet." The fat man's horses stood motionless in the harness, except for the swish of a tail working hard to keep the flies in the air. "We'll be here," he said.

They were digging with their hands when Ike snuck around the red rocks. He snatched Vince out of their hole, and tossed him in the air. Their hole was two feet deep at least--waist deep to Vince.

"So what you all find today?" Ike said to Jack. The yellow dirt was piled all around their hole. The garden rake was leaning against the sandstone face--the stone they'd found painted with the outline of a bird and with the red prints of a hand. In the shade of that rock the pup was sleeping.

"Nothing," Jack threw another cupped handful of dirt onto the pile. Ike had watched them over the last month as they turned a three foot mound--a burial mound for some Indian, Robert had said when he saw it first--turned it into a two foot hole. He was sworn to secrecy. They couldn't chance being caught with a shovel, so whenever they could sneak up the hill they got the old split handled rake out from under the stones and used it to loosen the sand. Then they scooped out the dirt by hand.

"We found those." Vince pointed sincerely to the top of one of the red rocks. Lined up on it carefully were charred pieces of wood and
broken bits of bird or lizard bones. Whatever they found pleased Vince, but Jack had visions of a human skull, or at least some rib bones.

"Nothing. That's what we found." Jack threw out another scoopful of dirt. Then he put his hands on the side of their hole and jumped out. "There ain't no bones in there," he dusted his hands off by rubbing them together like a man who just finished a long day digging on the Panama Canal. Ike was politely fingering through the morning's find.

"May be you're not deep enough yet," Ike stared at a splintered piece of some large bird's leg.

Jack shook his head. "There's no bones down there."

Ike leaned against the red rock and took the weight off his bum foot. He held it in the air and looked down into their hole. There was no grin lurking on his face, no hint in his voice of talking down to the boys. "Well, if they ain't there, they oughts to be." He saw the red handprints of the yellow rock face. "This be one good place."

Ike let his back slide down against the rock until he was sitting. The scraping of the rock felt fine against the constant ache in his upper spine. Somewhere in the shade of the stones nearby a locust whirred, with its brassy sound bouncing loud off the sandstone. And the pup raised its head to look at him, heaved a big puppy sigh and went back to sleep.

"There is something about this place, ain't there now," Ike said. Jack wiped what was left on his hands onto his pants. Both kids were quiet, because Ike was acting strange.

"Come over here," the colored man said. So the kids sat down by the rock, one on each side of Ike. "Now look out there," he said.

The locust whirred again. Then they heard the flick of its jump
against the rocks. Ants were crawling up the side of the red stone. Jack sat forward and brushed them off his back.

"What you see?" Ike asked.

They were still quiet, wondering what he meant. "Welcome," Jack said. The pup's eyelid twitched to shoo off a fly.

"No. No. Slide down here a little, so's Welcome is back a that rock. Now. What you see?"

They didn't know what to say. Then Ike's big laugh rang out off the sandstone face. "What you see?" he said again.

"Nothing," said Jack.

Ike laughed again. "No. Look hard now," he said. "You looking hard?"

Jack and Vince twisted down so they were nearly lying flat, but their heads were both propped up against the red rock. Vince began to giggle.

"Look way out there. Can you see the edge?" Ike chuckled to himself, a low sound like the rumble of a rolling boil in a steam kettle. That made Vince giggle even more. "Can you see where the end be?"

"No."

"'N why not?"

"Cause it's all hazy out there." Then Jack laughed too.

"Well. Tell Ike whats you do see."

"It's all flat and green, and then it's all foggy like, and then it's the sky." The boy paused. "That's all."

"'N don't you know where that is? that foggy place out on the edge?"

"Where is it?" Vince sat up.

"Stay down here," with a hand on his shoulder Ike pulled the boy
back down. "Now you see it again? You 'member that nigger man from Vir-
ginnie I told you that story about, the one with a daughter with a magic
bowl, that man that walked out his door and nobody ever seed him again?
You remember him?"

The two heads nodded, one on each side of the old man.

"Where that is be where he went. It's that place jus' over the
hill, that place around the corner you never looked around before, it's
that store down the street with the doors always locked. It's that place
we's all headed for, and the place we never gits." Ike laughed once then,
loud and full of white light.

"That's why them Indians picked this place right. That's why they
oughts to be bones over there." He looked at each of the lads, one at a
time, as impishly as the little man in the story their mother read them
once, as impishly as Rumplestiltskin when no one knew his name. "Say,
you could plant a man over there with his feets first and fill it way up
to his nose with dirt, and he never would complain. Not once. He be
looking out there trying to see through the mist." Ike Waters laughed
down a low descending scale, and his chest echoed with glee. "You could
plants a dead man there, and he most be seeing forever. He most be seeing
forever."

"That's where that man in the story went?" Vince sat up again to
get a better look. Then they heard the roar of their father's voice. His
shout belled out and rose up the side of the ridge like a growing wind.
Slowly, as if they had all of time to waste, as if they lived in a world
without any end, the old man and those two kids got up. They strolled
downhill, and as they walked, Vince's and Jack's eyes kept lifting up
toward that horizon.
Vince could not keep from staring at the misty place where the land turned into sky. But he stumbled on a patch of mesquite, and he looked over at the old man. Ike Waters limped along with his eyes on the ground. He kept them there just to be able to walk. But every now and then, Vince saw, the old man would come to a stop and look up. Then he'd lower his head and hobble on, with the pup running around his feet, down toward dinner and the irrigation ditch.
CHAPTER NINE

It was a hot evening in Welcome, Texas. Joe Sagart sat in an upstairs room with the windows open to let the night air in, and with the jacket of his milk white suit draped over the headboard of the bed. Occasionally a breeze wafted in and moved the air. His window faced south, looking across the street toward the creek, and the nagging west wind was blowing from the northwest tonight. So his breezes were few and precious.

Mike Lopez was telling him how many had left and how many had sold. Willie Greene sat on a cane bottom chair in the corner, and he nervously picked at something at the edge of one of his nostrils. Then John Chandler gave him the details on who was left and where they were at. There were a lot of people lingering around after they'd sold, it seemed. Too many of them lingering around.

"We got to move them out, John," Sagart said. "We can't afford any hangers on." Joe Sagart was tired. It had been a long ride from Canton. A three hour layover in Chicago in the middle of the night, with no hotel rooms near the station open. Some sort of organ peddlers convention downtown.

Now it was too hot to sleep in Texas. He rolled his sleeves up another notch, rubbed at his eyes. "I got a carload of people coming in to look around in the middle of August. So we got to have them all out by the end of this month, John. Can you handle that schedule men?" Sagart said, looking around the room.
"Joe. We got a problem, Joe." Willie Greene put his picking hand in his pocket. He played with some change, jingling it inside his pants. "It's that Mahon fellow."

Sagart shook his head at the floor, let out a weary sigh. "I was afraid he was going to be trouble. I didn't like it up North, when he signed up. But there was this banker," he glanced over at Mike Lopez, hoping for an understanding professional mind, someone who would know the way the world worked. "Mahon was pals with this banker. I couldn't turn him down, or it might've risked the whole Eastern Iowa thing, and the bank was behind him--" His voice trailed off and he got up. He looked at the green paper on the walls, printed with cheap looking fleur-de-lis. He would have to have someone paint this room. He hated that paper. It looked too much like hotel paper. To have the room painted green would probably be the easiest. He would have to see about that, soon. "So what is it?" Sagart said. "Won't this Mahon leave? or what?"

The change in Greene's pocket tinkled again. The greying store man glanced over at Mike Lopez. "Well, what is it, Willie?" Sagart pressed. John Chandler pulled a cigar out of his breast pocket, took off the paper ring, and began to lick at the tobacco casually. He watched Willie Greene the whole time.

"Mahon's drove himself a well, Joe." Greene tinkled his change. His other hand searched for a place to rest on the dresser beside him, but couldn't find it. So his arm wandered around in the air like a lost insect, for a moment. Without pausing he went on, "He's planning on irrigating out by the Yellow Run." Chandler kept a steady eye on the store man and bit the end off his thick cigar.
Sagart just laughed. "That's where you were, isn't it, Willie? Yellow Run?" Greene nodded his head yes. Then the match John Chandler lit fizzed and he held it up to the tobacco. No one spoke while Chandler puffed and turned the cigar around in his fingers, lighting it evenly. Chandler still eyed Willie Greene when he said, "Mahon's going to make it, Joe, unless we do something about him."

Sagart leaned against an overstuffed chair. He had never cared for tobacco, but he had learned how to share a cigar with a client at just the right moment. And he knew the way most smokers used their habit as a prop, to give themselves an air of confidence they lacked on their own. So after a moment of watching Chandler fill the air around his head with smoke, he said, "Willie?"

"It's a real well he's got, Joe." Greene shook his head as if he were talking sadly about the drought. "He's getting ready to flood twenty, thirty acres out there."

"Hell," Sagart strode across the room and leaned his hands on the window sill. Big Creek was reflecting the stars in smears of light out there. "God damn it," he said quietly.

Then he turned around. "Where'd Mahon get the damn pipe to drive with?"

"From the Company Store," Chandler puffed away comfortably.

"Willie, you know none of those people are to get piping."

"He didn't buy it, Joe." The smell of the cigar was beginning to fill the room. Looking sagely at his own smoke hanging in the air, Chandler said, "Him and that nigger of his stole it."

"It was that god damned crippled up nigger, Joe." Willie Greene
took the hand out of his pocket, and said, "They broke in. Hit Charlie on the head."

Joe Sagart glanced over at the lawyer again. When in doubt, he had learned, you always check to see if the law can bail you out. The law is like a gun: if you can pull it on someone fast enough, before they know it's coming, a man can usually get done what needs doing. But it always works best with that element of surprise. You got to be fast.

"No good, Joe," Lopez said. "I never heard of it for better than a week."

"Some of us," Chandler said, staring at Willie Greene, "wanted to go out and take care of it right away. But--"

"But you said we shouldn't bring in the law unless you were here to see to it yourself," Willie Greene said. "So I said we should wait till you came in, Joe."

"And wait for him to drive his well, besides. Right, Willie?"

Chandler looked away from the little man.

"I never heard a word about it. By now they've got all that pipe in the ground, and we've got no way to prove it's ours." Lopez shook his head. "Not without bringing in Rollvag."

"No. No, I don't want him around," Sagart ran his fingers through his blonde hair going white. "Not now when there's so many lingering on."

Edward Rollvag was the District Marshall in Sutton and Crockett Counties, and the parts west to the Pecos. Twice they had beaten him in the courts over eight years before, but only by bribing the judges. Since then he had seemed to look the other way whenever the town of Welcome came up, though Joe Sagart could not guess why. For some reason, Rollvag had
made his peace with the Valparaiso Development Company. But he was still an unknown. Rollvag was also an honest man, and Sagart knew better than to try to bribe him, so he preferred to let the Marshall work somewhere else in the summertime.

"I don't want Rollvag poking around here now. Let him come through here in December when it's all quiet."

"Couldn't we send somebody out with a badge," Willie Greene said, "try to scare him off."

"Mahon won't scare off," Sagart said. "Not if he's the kind of man I think he is. That will just make him stick tighter to what he's got."

"Even if we could prove he got that pipe from the yard, the fellow could fight it in court for a year or more."

"Everybody who comes next year would be out to drive a well like his, by that time," Chandler said, straightening himself up in the chair. "We got to get him off that place. We got to make it unprofitable for him to stay here. No two ways about it." Then he sucked a mouthful of smoke off the cigar, and puffed it smoothly into the air.

"Well," Sagart breathed deep, "how do we propose to do that?" He sat down on the edge of the bed. Lately Joe Sagart had been wondering how he'd got started into all this. He used to blame his upbringing, and the way the North had treated his father. But nowadays he found it hard to fool himself with that. So he sat on the bed remembering that this whole showboat was his idea to begin with, and tonight he just felt tired and older than his years.

"We could offer him more money," Lopez suggested.
"Won't work, Mike. I tried to get him to leave a month ago. I offered him all his money, and he didn't take it. He won't take it anymore now than he would then."

"You offered him all of it?" Greene said. Sagart just nodded and reached over to the night table by the bed. He opened the drawer and took out a bottle of Scotch. He liked a drink now and then, but tonight he felt like getting drunk. Joe Sagart hadn't been drunk in eight years. Not since the day Mike Lopez beat that first suit, and sent the Marshall packing.

"That's beside the point," he said. He poured the Scotch into a water glass. "So. Where does that leave us, John?" he said.

Mike Lopez got up from his seat then. He smiled and picked his hat off the back of his chair. "It's best I don't hear any of this. In case of court, you know." Sagart downed the Scotch in one swallow. He nodded his head to the lawyer.

"See you in the morning, Mike," he said. Chandler puffed his cigar. Willie Greene smiled enviously at him, and the counselor at law departed.

With Lopez gone, the room was quiet. Joe Sagart poured himself another Scotch.

"You know, Mike has got a point," John Chandler spoke first in the room filled with his own impressive smoke. "You'd be the first one called, if there's real trouble, Joe. Mike'd come in after you."

Sagart had the bottle of Scotch in one hand and the glass in the other.

"Why don't you let Willie and me handle the Mahon thing," John Chandler said. Willie sunk a little in his chair then, but after a moment,
Willie Greene put in his two cents worth. "Don't you worry about Mahon," he said.

So Joe Sagart poured another triple shot of Scotch into the glass. Then he handed the glass to Willie Greene. Leaning out he gently tossed the fifth to John Chandler. He was too old to believe that the Scotch would make him feel any better. So he got up and walked across the room to the Edison on a table by the window. Cranking it around three or four times, he smiled over at the tall man puffing away on the cigar. "Mahon who?" he said. Then he laid the needle on the cylinder and the strains of a violin, singing "Listen to the Mocking Bird," whined out of the horn.
The morning it started Jack found the pup dead. Its eyes were bugged out, and its lids swollen, the tongue hung out dry and attracting flies. Its hind legs were hog tied. The boy found it halfway up the side of the Yellow Run Ridge, after searching a whole day and most of the next morning. A trail of broken grass led from its body to the top. The pup had crawled halfway home on its belly before it died. "Sonsa Bitches," was all Robert said when he saw the dog.

That same morning Robert and Ike found the ditch shoveled in for about twenty feet or so. They dug it out again easily, and in the afternoon they worked the hard ground another ten feet farther. Robert Mahon laughed in the evening, because the ditch was nearly long enough then, and because he was planting that second crop in his head.

"They took that puppy from the porch," Lucy said over supper. "Right out there," she pointed at the front door, as if no one knew where the little board awning she called a porch was. Her eyes were tearing from the fear. She slept light that night, and she overheard the two men talking softly outside.

"We's ain't seen an end a this yet," she heard Ike. Her husband said something low, that she couldn't catch.

First thing in the morning, Robert drove over to the Delahanty place. Joey was sitting in the shade of his house and using a train schedule for a fan. He was sipping at a quart bottle of lemonade.
fat man stashed his bottle under the schedule when he saw the wagon coming, and he stood up waving to his neighbor. Alvina was in the house, packing her husband's clothes into two hard-sided suitcases. She waved through the screen door when she heard Joey yell.

Robert tried not to stay long. All he wanted was to buy the Delahanty's dog, but of course Joey wouldn't hear of it. "You can have him," he leaned on the Mahons' wagon. "The mutt isn't worth much." It was only then Robert told him why he needed the dog.

"Well, he likes to roam, he does. But if you keep him chained up for long, Old Paddy will be plenty mean." The hound was black and short-haired, with brown splotches across his front like splattered mud. The fur on his behind was thin, with greyish-pink skin showing through; Joey had dumped a fry pan full of bacon grease on the dog, a clumsy accident, one Sunday morning in Kansas. But the hot grease only seemed to ignite the dog's libido, it had roamed every night since looking for anything that howled and stood still.

So Delahanty lifted Paddy into the wagonbox—the dog was named after a long dead great uncle who had made a fortune with a chinchilla farm—and Paddy just curled up in the corner beneath the seat. Then of course Robert had to stay to lunch, which wasn't for another hour and a half, and even then the Delahantys ate early. The dog slept through the whole time. Halfway home to the Mahon place, it woke up long enough to look around and then pee in the corner under Robert's feet. Without a whimper or a bark it curled up again and dozed off. Some kind of watch dog, this one, Robert thought.
Cutting west right across his grey wheat field Robert found Ike working in the irrigation ditch. It had been filled in again. This time they'd used big chunks of sandstone first, and then threw the sandy soil in on top. Some of the stones took the both of them to lift out, they were so big.

But it wasn't until the next morning they found the salt in the reservoir. Ike noticed in the barn, when he woke up, that the cow had its tongue hanging out as if she was hot. But she wouldn't drink from the trough, and neither would the horses. It only took a taste of the water in the reservoir to know why. They'd dumped enough salt and nitrate into it to turn a chicken blue. So Robert and Ike broke a hole in their wall and let the water drain out beside the farmyard and away from the field.

There never were any notes found, never any riders seen, no yells heard in the night, but the message was clear. For two weeks straight some part of the irrigation ditch caved in every night, and every morning Robert and Ike dug it free. They packed mud back into the hole in the reservoir, waited for it to dry hard in the wind and sun, and then started pumping water back into the pond. They never went to town, spoke to no one about the ditch, kept the dog chained in front of the house day and night, and knew their message was clear too.

Then one Monday morning the ditch was left alone. Robert and Ike checked the whole length of it carefully and found nothing. The reservoir was half full of water that tasted good enough to pass for clear. For three days running there was no sign of tampering. Water pumped into the pond in the day. Each night they lay awake a little longer, listening for Paddy to bark or growl, and they fell asleep to the jingling of chain while the dog paced.
The sky was growing white in the east on Friday morning when Paddy started braying. Robert rushed out into the dark and found the dog straining against the chain, yapping at the sky above the Yellow Run Ridge. Jackrabbits, some of them as big as that dead pup, were hopping down the hill toward the house. There were so many, the ridge itself seemed to be moving in the dim morning light. At first it looked like false dawn in the west, a yellow light breaking off the top of the rise. In the next instant he saw the black smoke billowing up above that string of light.

Robert ran to the reservoir and pulled up the gate, and the damp wood was slippery and cold in his hands. The water poured out into the ditch while he stood there holding the gate. The rushing of the water and the crackle of the fire mingled in his ears. He couldn't see it until the fire burned farther down the hill, but the water ran up against a stretch where the ditch had been shoved in. So it flooded over the edge, and ran east toward the barn.

He stood holding up the gate, glancing down at the water level, then up at the fire line, when a sharp buzz hurtled past his ear and mud kicked up on the wall. Ike rushed up behind him. The old man pulled him down into the corner of the wall; the water gate jerked out of his hands and slammed shut. The two of them sat behind the wall, looking at the blue sunlight growing in the east, listening to Paddy bark at the hills.

"Was that what I think it was?"

"You damn betch your ass it was," Ike curled his leg closer against the wall.

As the daylight brightened they saw where the water had run, flooding the farmyard along the same trails it had made when they had
flushed the salt out. The grass fire burned swiftly down the hill and across the dry field, leaving a charred black behind it and chasing jackrabbits every which way. But the flooded farmyard made a fire break, and saved the buildings from any damage.

When it was fully light out, Ike cautiously stuck his head above the wall. There was no sound but Paddy's hoarse bark. So Ike Waters slowly stood up. All down the charred ridge and through the blackened field, the burnt ground breathed a thin smoke. The black was spangled with the crazy shapes of bare yellow rock, and the smokey green of mesquite.

Ike dipped his hand into the water, sloshed it across his face. He licked the moisture from his lips.

"Looks like they cleared that field for us," Robert said.

Ike Waters laughed at that, leaning down against the wall once more. He sat and watched the ground fire spread out across the Valparaiso, across the empty landscape, where everyone else had gone home.

Now they were awakened every morning before dawn to the sound of yips and yells and horse's hooves pounding the ground. When the light came up they found shattered whiskey bottles at the doorstep. Twice the dog's head was wet with urine. Robert Mahon had begun to feel helpless.

On the night after the grass fire Robert went through his guns, cleaning and oiling them, searching for the right tool. Late in the evening, he loaded a double barreled Marlin .20 gauge and set it by the door. It was the gun that Mr. Greene of the Company Store had forgotten one night. Now perhaps it would have a use. The boys were already sent to bed. Ike sat drinking clear settled water from a glass at the table.
Lucy watched her husband in silence, listening to the even breathing of the children as they slept in a corner, the corner that had once led to Ike's room. She rested one hand on her stomach.

After Robert had set their borrowed shotgun in place, he unwrapped his Colt pistol from the soiled cloth that kept the dust off it. It was an Army Colt, the first gun Robert had ever owned. He bought it at an auction in Wisconsin when he was just seventeen, just two years after the Holy Name Home was past history to him. The pistol was supposed to have belonged to Abraham Lincoln's commanding officer in the Blackhawk War, though no one put much stock in that story. Still, it was a gun that maybe Old Abe had handled, so Robert looked on it as something special, as a charm against bad luck maybe, though Robert would laugh if anyone had ever said such a thing to him. He set the Colt on the kitchen table.

No one spoke the whole while. The children are asleep, they told themselves. But there was still a knowledge that made the room tense, the knowledge that every step in time had an end, that endings can come suddenly, or with the slow creep of fate, and that no one ever knew which way their own end was coming.

"You all sure you want to keep that there?" Ike's low voice broke the silence, but not the tension. Robert didn't answer, and Lucy gazed blankly at the gun.

"They's probably waiting for that," Ike said.

Then, without a word, Lucy walked across the room and took the shotgun. She broke it open and fumbling at the table she let the two shells fall out on the checkered cloth. Outside, the chain that held Paddy jingled like cowbells, and all three of them listened for the dog
to bark. But the hound only started to pace, like it did every night. The dog chain rattled with an intermittent rhythm that could keep a man awake a long while. If he let himself listen to it.

"Maybe they should be waiting for it," Robert said. But when Lucy stuck out her hand, he picked up the Colt and gave it to her without a word. She took both the guns into their bedroom and, after a few minutes, came out without them.

"That's just what they wants you to do," Ike Waters said. The colored man was thinking of stories that he'd heard, about the roaming of the Ku Klux Klan, about midnight lynchings, about turkey shoots without the bird. He knew from those long-implanted stories the secret of subjection: that in the end it is the servants who are bound together and the master who lives alone. "We is hurting them hard with that ditch," he said. "That's the best way to beats them. With that ditch. Not with a gun."

But Robert Mahon knew nothing of that. It was his dream someday to be the master, and not the slave. So he sat quietly by the cold fire, and watched his boys sleeping on the other side of the room, and he thought.

And early every morning they stared up at the dark ceiling and listened to the yips and yells and the pounding hooves. And everyday they dug hard at their irrigation ditch and pumped water from deep underground, and one day they sowed leftover seed on the charred ground.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lucy woke up when she heard someone thrashing around in the other room. There was a heavy stomping sound, then she heard Vince begin to cry. In that instant she rolled out of the bed, and she heard the stomping mix with a whimper, and the scrape of fingernails on wood.

She rushed from the bed to the doorway of the other room. Behind her Robert was slowly rising. Jack was scratching and kicking his bare feet at the door, whimpering something in his throat that never made it to his lips. His eyes were darting all around the room and his nose was flared with his breath. She ran over to the boy, and wrapped her arms around him, and she pulled him away from the door. At the moment of her touch, he began struggling in her grasp. Then the word in his throat burst out. "Fire," the boy whimpered. Slowly she saw the fear in his dream fade back into a confused sense of where he was. All she could do was hug him and whisper calm words to him.

Jack had walked in his sleep before. Once they found him in the barn milking a cow in the harsh cold of a winter night. He'd walked barefoot through the snow and never woke. They still locked the doors to keep him in at night. But this dream, this burning house in a child's nightmare, it was not cute any longer.

Robert held Vince in his arms. He carried the boy back and forth across the room, bouncing him gently, rocking him back to sleep. She laid Jack in the bed again and he fell to sleep quickly; he would remember
little of this in the morning, and that was just as well. She took Vince
then, and before long he too was asleep.

In the bedroom Robert wrapped his arms around her, she kissed him
on the cheek, remembering the closeness that used to be. With his two
fingers in the shape of a V, he closed her eyes.

"Sleep," he let her eyelids go. "They'll be here to wake us up
again."

She slid a hand down his stomach. He rolled to her, held her in
a gentle hug. With her fingertips she touched and outlined each bone
in his spine. He entered her then, slipping roughly into his own absence.
But at the same moment, in the same way the first snow flurry of winter
dies abrupt and sad, the emptiness in him shrunk away, and his love failed.
So he lay back, not wanting to be touched. And after a wordless human
time, he got up and left her alone in the dark.

Robert Mahon walked to the porch and stood looking out at the
night. A pickaxe leaned against the dam, left out from the day's work.
Thinking of the vandals who would come in the morning, he walked to the
reservoir behind the house and brought the pick back. He set it down,
and looked at it crusted with dry yellow dust, then he leaned the tool
against the wall just outside the front door. In the daylight there would
be work, cleaning out where the ditch was shoved in. He was tired, but
for a long time he did not go back to his bed.

The riders came in the middle of that night. They circled the
farm at a distance, hesitating, and then slowly closing in. Not one of
them yelled or hooted. They didn't even speak as they rode. It was almost
as if each man was alone inside the group, but moving in unison like the separate muscles in the body of a lean cat. In the flickering torchlight the blue and red bandannas they tied over their faces and the hats they shoved low on their brows kept them anonymous and alone.

Then, in an order that seemed prearranged, four men broke from the circle. They rode hard toward the barn and hurled their torches onto the roof. The two riders who followed them dismounted long enough to set the walls ablaze, and then they tossed the torches they carried inside. In a matter of moments the old barn rose up in flames, like a stack of kindling.

While the fire blazed, Ike Waters darted in and out of the burning building leading out the team of horses and a cow. The nightriders fired guns in the air and whooped and hollered as they rode a tight circle around the farm. They rode close enough to curse at Robert Mahon who just stood alone beneath his awning, and did nothing but watch.

And then according to their plan two of the horsemen wrapped a drag chain around the well. Their horses strained and pulled at the chain and the riders whipped them with strips of braided cowhide, until something snapped and they broke the pump rig free. So the well was dragged around the house, and then thrown into the blazing barn. They poured a sack of sodium nitrate down the pipe, and followed that with dry cement. And then one after another in a line they filled what was left of the pipe with their urine, while Lucy watched through a big, paned window from inside.

Ike Waters stood quietly away from the fray and the burning barn. While he watched, one of the horsemen holding a torch above his head pulled a pistol from his belt. Paddy brayed at him and jerked at its
chain. Then the man's well-trained mare stood still and calm as he clenched her reins in his teeth and shot the hound twice in its back. The dog's hind legs went down, and its scarred pink rear was streaked with red, but Paddy barked and growled and never once squealed as it settled onto the ground and its blood ran out on the sand. Robert Mahon took the pickax leaning by his door and, so angry he trembled and was dizzy as he reached, he hurled it at the horseman with the reins in his teeth. The pick spun through the air like a hatchet and glanced off the arm of that rider. The man screamed over the sound of the barnfire and the yells of the others and the braying of a dying hound, and he flung his torch onto the roof of the house. With his good hand he reached down and grabbed the reins that had fallen from his teeth, and when he turned his fine roan mare and galloped away, the nightriders followed him into the dark.

Robert and Lucy and Ike had no time for fear or anger. They put Jack and Vince standing in the reservoir to fill the buckets with water, and Robert climbed onto the roof. For over an hour they fought the blaze on the house by passing pails of water from hand to hand. Joey Delahanty came in his buggy to help, and even the west wind seemed to quiet for a while. So they only lost half of the roof and one wall of the bedroom. But the barn burnt down to cinders on the ground before the house fire was out. And somewhere, indistinguishable, in the center of the smoking ash, lay the remains of their homemade pump.

To Robert Mahon it became clear what he had to do. He stripped himself of his blackened clothes, and in the tepid, minerally water left in the reservoir he bathed the soot off of himself. Inside the trunk, at
the foot of Lucy's bed, with stars peering in through the opened roof, he found his Colt revolver and he found his suit of clothes, that smelled only a little of the smoke. He dressed, tucking a box of shells into his breast pocket.

He harnessed the horses to the wagon, thinking serenely of what lay ahead of him, thinking practically of how he was to do it. The team was skittish in the harness. Lucy spoke to him, and Ike Waters pulled at his shoulder. "I'll be seeing you," was all he would say to them, though he said that over and over. It was still dark when he slapped the reins onto the horses' backs and followed the trail of the nightriders. This time the trail led toward Welcome, not back up over the Yellow Run Ridge. It was a pale yellow road in the night cutting across the charred grass of the Valparaiso.

When the dawn was greening in the eastern sky, the riders' trail spread out onto unburnt ground. He was nearing the Big Spring. The ground grew brighter from the rising sun, and from the moisture that ran in the soil. Robert absently noticed Sarah limping in her trot. With a whisper of a call, he slowed them to a walk. He came to the spring in the morning light then, shining like a patch of yellow rock. Robert unhitched the team and let them drink. They had run hard after the scare of the fire in the night, as hard as a team of drays can run. But they were a good sound team. He found the big mare was burnt on her chest and down her forelegs. A pair of mating dragonflies, coupled in the air above the pond, flew blindly into the horse's chest and she lurched with the pain.
So he left them staked by the oak tree that grew alongside the spring, and he walked toward town, because it didn't matter. It didn't matter to him that the trail was gone. Robert Mahon knew where he was going. The nightriders were only a piece in the works. It was dignity he was after. They would say back home in River Falls that there was a man with real strength, there was a man with no give in him, there was a man with a hard clear dream in his hands, that Robert Mahon. He wouldn't give in. And it didn't matter either that he was on foot. In fact, it was better that way, better that he would do what he had to do on his own two feet. There was a man, they would say. He was no failure, no ne'er do well, not Robert Patrick Mahon.
They left the hotel in Galena, Illinois, late in the morning. It took the old man a long bath and a hot shave to shake the remains of his whiskey from the night before. When they left, they didn't turn north for Scales Mound and Wisconsin, like they had planned. Instead the old man headed the wagon south and then to the east. The directions he'd got from the clerk in the hotel lobby, for the road to the Holy Name.

In the wagon the old man sang, as loud as if he was drunk again. The August noon was full of humidity and hot sun. He bellered out "Whiskey You're the Devil" and "Nay Come Home No More," and later he sang his favorite one: "The Gallant Forty Twa." Robert leaned against him and watched the red-winged blackbirds perch on the bluestem in the ditch. He was afraid to ask the old man about the letter. So he just leaned against him and smelled the whiskey smell that came out under the old man's arm pits. As the long afternoon whiled slowly away, the old man slouched in his seat and sang:

"When I'm dead and laid out on the counter,
A voice you will hear from below,
Saying send down a hogshead of whiskey
To drink with ol' Rosin the Bow."

Robert fell asleep to the sound of the old man's voice, croaking and hoarse but full of heart. He fell asleep a happy boy on a summer's day.

It was a lazy summer evening by the time the board sided wagon pulled up to the Holy Name Home for Boys. The white stone face of the
building rose up to forever above Robert's waking eyes. Every window he saw was covered with meshed wire fence, nailed soundly to the frame. High above it all, etched against a violet sky, a tiny black cross jutted from the peak of the slate roof.

They were invited in to supper, because it was that time. Sister Anastasia, who looked frail, even when she was covered with black robes from three inches above her head down to the ground, led them down the square green stairs to the basement. The rattling beads around her waist sounded like bones. The basement walls were made of dark stones, mortared together, painted the same dull green as the stairs. A plain oak table filled the room, and it was lined on both sides with the pale faces of boys, sitting in perfect silence. Every white face turned as they walked into the musty room, and they all watched the man in the rumpled suit, and the four year old boy beside him.

At the head of the table sat a black robed nun wedged into her place like some pagan figure: Sister Julisia. Her face was lean and angular as a stone, and almost as pale as the white inverted V that began at her forehead and pointed up to the low raftered ceiling. The nun smiled and rose from her place, greeting them kindly like new slaves for the fields. The old man stuck out his hand to shake, but then remembering where he was, he pulled it back. He cleared his throat, and smiled the grin of a man out of place.

"Bless us our Lord," the nun began, "for these Thy gifts . . ." and she made sure that all their heads were bent, before she lowered hers. The meal consisted of salty split pea soup—the soup Robert ate every Tuesday night for the next nine years—a generous slice of heavy white
bread with butter, and a constant quiz on the catechism. "Why did God make you?" one of the black nun's in a row at the table asked a boy.

"God made me to love, serve, and."

"And what?" Sister Julisia commanded.

"And obey him, Sister." She smiled at the boy's answer.

"A bit hard on the digestion, isn't it, Sister?" the old man grinned at her, and this time he added his salesman's wink. But the nun merely turned the same lordly smile on him.

After dinner, Robert sat in the green corridor, while the old man and Sister Julisia talked inside. "The boy hasn't really got a mother, you see," the old man was saying when the door opened to Sister Julisia's two-toned green office. "And, well, Sister, I can't. . . ."

"Yes, such cases are sad," she said. "But we do our best." She looked at the old man and gracefully nodded her white peak at him. "It is what we are called to do, Mr. Mahon."

Then she left Robert alone with the old man for a moment. In the hollow, echoing corridor, the old man bent down on one knee to talk to him. "You'll be staying here tonight, Bobby, with the sisters. They'll take good care of you. You listen to what they say, now." He gave the boy a hug, and Robert smelled the sweet, candied scent of banana liquor in the air around the old man's head. "You be ready for me to pick you up in the morning now, Bobby," the old man looked straight at him, and winked. "Won't you," he said.

He stood in the doorway, with the white muscular hands of Sister Julisia on his shoulders. She towered above him like a black pillar, holding him in place. The old man climbed into his wagon and clucked his tongue
to the horses. The wheels creaked. The wagon turned around. The old man pointed his finger at him, as if he was pointing a gun, and yelled, "I'll be seeing you now, Bobby." There was a hint of brogue in the way he said that, a brogue the old man almost never let slip.

So the wagon rolled down the graveled lane, turned at the bottom of the hill, and carried away his father. He never saw or even heard of that old man again. "Well, Robert Patrick," it was from Sister Julisia that he learned his name was Robert, and not Bobby or Robby, or even Bob. "You'll be better off without him, Robert," the nun said. Then she took Robert's hand, for the sisters never picked up or carried the little boys in their care, and Sister Julisia led him back inside. "He's just a ne'er do well, Robert," she said. "That's all."

And since that day there was a peculiar, pale shade of green he could not stand to see painted on a wall.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The hotel lobby was empty. The curtains were drawn over closed windows to keep out the early morning sun, and against the heat of the day to come. A white haired man, with a face so wrinkled he might have been soaking it in milk all night, dozed behind the register peacefully. Robert walked across the wood floor. A hard backed chair sat in a corner, beneath the stairway, away from the line of sight at the register. He hurried his steps and kept his head low, and he sat himself down there with his back to the wall. The old fellow at the desk didn't even stir in his sleep.

The wrinkled old man behind the desk was new. Robert had never seen him before. But it seemed like he saw a new face every time he came to town. The people who lived there kept to themselves, and everyone seemed a loner. You never found the friendly nods and the chitchat that belong to a small town when you walked the street in Welcome. Most of the people just seemed to be watching one another, keeping an eye out for trouble. Welcome was a town full of strangers.

There was no point in asking any questions at the desk. Even if the wrinkled man was a stranger, he would know about the trouble out below the Yellow Run Ridge. And no matter what happened, they wouldn't be handing out the information Robert needed, not to anybody. But if he sat down and waited, he might get a chance. He might hear something, or see someone. Or Joe Sagart might come right down that stairs into his
lap. Robert could sit and wait a long while to get his chance. He was in no hurry.

A week old copy of the Temple Herald was rolled up, and sitting on a dusty table next to him, so Robert picked it up and unfolded it. The newspaper would serve to hide his face. No one would recognize him in the suit of clothes he wore: a solid black cotton pants and coat, single breasted, and an unstarched white collar with a black wool tie. They were his Sunday best, back in Iowa. The knees of the pants were going shiny. But it was too hot to wear them to that mission church down here, too hot and too long a ride in the dust.

His eyes ran across the newspaper without comprehending a word. His mind was leaping from thought to thought too fast to read. Except for an occasional grumble out of the wrinkled man's stomach, the lobby was silent. Upstairs in the hotel rooms, Robert couldn't hear any footsteps or movements. It was early in the morning. Every decent man was asleep, and the hotel was for the most part empty. But one of those rooms upstairs Joe Sagart called home, and sooner or later, Sagart would come down.

Though he hadn't been reading, suddenly the words of a headline on an inside page seemed to jump into his mind.

ASSASSIN MUENTER ADMITS BOMBING
Claims He Shot Morgan Afterwards

He had not read another word of the paper. It was nothing to him but a way to cover his face. But now it seemed someone had taken a shot at J. Pierpont Morgan.

In an upstairs room of the hotel, Robert Mahon heard footsteps. It drew his attention from the newspaper. He listened carefully to the sound, waiting for some clue, for anything that might give him the di-
rection he needed. The soft creak walked across a room somewhere on the second floor. Then it stopped, and after a pause, it began again. It told him nothing, nothing more than that someone in the hotel was moving about in these early hours. Nothing at all, really. But as he began to stare at the week old newspaper again, trying lamely with his distracted mind to piece together the story, his attention stayed on the silent hotel. It seemed that a man, a German he guessed by the sound of the name in the paper—Erich Muenter—this man had planted a bomb in the Capitol building in Washington. It exploded in the Senate Wing, shattered the telephone system in the Reception Room, broke windows down the hall, blew open the doors to the Office of the Vice President. The man was caught when he fled to Long Island and tried to shoot J. P. Morgan. But the story was piecemeal and it seemed this Muenter had gone by several names, so no one was sure who he really was, or why he had acted in the way he did. That was all Robert could make out of the story. But he realized somewhere that the assassin had failed. Morgan was injured, but still alive.

Then the wrinkled man at the register grunted, and shifted his feet, one on top of the other. So Robert raised the paper higher. Upstairs, the footsteps ceased. He began to wonder how long he could wait this out.

More than half an hour passed like this: sitting stiffly in the chair, gazing at the paper he no longer read, listening for the footsteps upstairs to begin again, though they never did. Until he heard the sound of a truck rumbling down the street. There was only one truck in Welcome. The Valparaiso Company Ford touring car. The link between the town and the train to the north.
The black Ford rattled and came to a solid halt in front of the hotel. He watched two men climb out and come toward the door. He'd seen them both before. Robert was sure one of them was a rider, the dust still covered his pants. And he was the man who had driven them to the farm when they first got off the train. But the other man he couldn't place. He watched them from behind the paper, pressing close to the wall. Both of them looked over at the wrinkled man behind the counter as they hurried toward the stairs. They did not smile to see the sleeping old fellow, and neither of them spoke. On the way up the stairs, Robert heard the footsteps above him creaking again. The thin, bearded man carried a grey case. With his free hand, he pushed his oiled hair back and then wiped at his nose. At that instant, when those two men were halfway up the stairs, Robert recognized him. He was the man who had treated Lucy on the train, the doctor so free with his morphine.

He waited for them to reach the top before he closed the paper. Counting off a few seconds, he followed them upstairs and watched them enter a room down the hallway. They did not knock. The truck driver opened the door for the doctor. Robert waited again. He heard the muffled sound of men's voices. The Colt was tucked in his belt, beneath his coat. Taking it out he checked the chambers. There would be no misfiring with this one. He had loaded it with six bullets, just before he reached the outskirts of town. No safe, empty chamber sat under the hammer.

The voices inside continued to mumble through the walls, so he quickly walked down the bare-floored hallway. He stood outside the door. His breaths came shallow and slow. His heart was racing and he felt his sweat on the pistol grip. But his eyes were clearer than they'd ever
been before. If he closed his eyelids, he was afraid his vision would pierce right through them. He saw so clearly the air seemed crystalline.

"Don't tell me," a voice said inside the room. Robert waited, listening for the one voice he would recognize.

"Can you stitch it up?"

"It's going to be a week or two before you use that arm," the first voice said. There was a pause. "Do you have any alcohol in here?"

"Patch him up." There was the voice he was waiting for. "Then you can have a drink," it said.

"Joe, I need it to clean his arm is all."

Another silence. The sound of steps, and Robert listened close. There were four men inside, he figured, at least. The two who went in. The man who wanted to be stitched. And Joe Sagart. Robert's hearing seemed acute too, as he tried to envision where the men were in the room.

"You know what it was?" He heard the gurgle of a tilted bottle.

"I don't want to know. Hold your arm still."

"He threw a pick at me, the damn bastard. A pickax--" The voice trailed off into a low, teeth clenched grunt.

"You're lucky it wasn't worse, Chandler," Sagart spoke again.

"Jesus. I don't know why he wasn't shooting at you." There was another pause. Then a man grunted.

"Damn it. Hold your arm still?"

"You just keep your shakey hands on that cut," the voice that grunted said. "Where was Doc Hamburg, Joe? Is this sopped-up-off-the-floor veterinarian all you could get?"

"You know we couldn't get Doc Hamburg." It was Sagart's voice again.
"But this son of a bitch ain't worked on anything but horses since
the Scots invented whiskey." The voice was thick with liquor.

"Shut up and hold your arm still," the doctor whined and snuffled
his nose.

A fourth man laughed then, and Robert placed him across the room,
ear to Sagart. He hoped it was the truck driver.

"Shut up, John. You went too far, and you know it," Sagart said.
"You're lucky we aren't burying some of you. Lord almighty."

Robert cocked the pistol, and then laid his hand gently on the
doorknob.

"But the son of a--"

"Hold your arm still."

Robert pushed the door open, swung inside, and then pushed it
closed behind him. The room before him was vivid. Over the barrel of the
Colt, the pale green wall spread out like a field. To his right, John
Chandler sat bareback at a dull brown table, his white arm lying out, a
three inch gash of red, surrounded by a putrid yellow bruise, marked it
just below the shoulder. An open fifth of Scotch sat on the table beside
the grey bag. The doctor from the train, a tong of his oily hair hanging
in his eyes, stood behind Chandler. He held a damp rag, pink from blood.

Across the room, beside the unmade bed, stood the two other men.
The dusty truck driver. And Joe Sagart in his shirt sleeves. He pointed
the barrel of the pistol at Sagart's chest. The room smelled of sweat and
dirty sheets, laid over with the mediciney scent of the Scotch. Robert's
eyes stared at Sagart's chin, but in a clear periphery he saw the
whole room.
No one moved for a long instant. Then slowly Sagart raised his hands, palms out, in front of him.

"Listen, Mister, you better think this over." He shook his head no, in jerky movements. "Don't do something you'll regret. Like Chandler here. He was way out of line. I don't know what he was up to, Mister--He went too far, Mister--"


"Listen, Mister Mahon--" Sagart went on and a small smile broke across his lips. "We can make a deal on this--"

"Shut up." Robert's voice was so thick he could barely speak. He wet his lips and swallowed. He stepped away from the wall. "Everybody just shut up and hold still."

Robert took another step toward Sagart, toward the center of the room. He kept the barrel aimed into the middle of Sagart's white, sweat-dampened shirt. Every small move he made took an hour of contracted time.

"Mister Mahon, we can make it up to you," Sagart began again. Robert watched the flash of the blonde man's teeth. The doctor to his side snuffled his nose.

"This little con of ours is about up anyway. It can't go on forever." The wounded man at the table chuckled, he enjoyed watching Sagart squirm. "We can get your money back to you, and a little more for your trouble. Enough to get you home again. Say an extra hundred bucks, Mister Mahon. Or a hundred fifty?"

Robert used all his concentration to hold the pistol still and dead center. He knew he was a lousy shot. But they didn't. For a moment that money sounded good. There would be a story to tell the men
in Iowa. How he came out clean. And the two kids entered his mind, but he stared into Sagart's blue eyes and used them to keep his concentration, wondering all the while what he would do next. How was he to trust this huddle of thieves? He wouldn't be taken in again, he knew that. And he wanted something abstract too. He wanted it for himself, and for ten years worth of busted farmers wandering home from Welcome, Texas. He wanted to be sure he had evened the score, somehow. And at the bottom of it all, Robert Mahon wanted to know why.

"Where did you come from?" Robert nearly whispered. A fly whizzed at the screen covering the window, bumping into the wire mesh, trying stupidly to get out.

"We can," Sagart glanced over at Chandler, "we can work it out so you can stay too. If that's what you want. You can come in with us on the deal. We'll get you a place out east of town, right alongside Big Creek. You'll just grow nice produce, and once a year or so we'll come out and show some strangers around the place. Then there's a nice little kickback on the deal too, right John? Chandler here, he's got a little place down by the Llano Hills."

Robert spoke a little louder this time. "Who started all this?" A breeze stirred the green curtains. He jerked his head a little. The truck driver beside Sagart sucked in a tense breath.

Then Chandler spoke up, with a cocky sneer on his face. "Joe comes from Alabama, don't you, Joe? He came out here twelve years ago, bought up everything west of the spring. Told us he was going to sell to niggers that didn't know any better." Chandler leaned forward, and he winced when his arm moved. "And that's what you did, too, Joe. Ain't
it? Only thing is, after a couple of years the niggers they turned paler and paler. Till they was white."

"Mister Mahon, if you don't like your family knowing the set up, you can send them away." Sagart had a broad smile on his face by then. "Lots of the men do it. Mac here has got his lad in a boarding school over in Florida. Some Sisters of Mercy are caring for him. And don't worry about the cost. There's plenty of money in this for everybody concerned."

The doctor's shakey hand reached out then for the whiskey bottle. Robert jerked his head at the little man. The doctor, frightened, tipped the bottle over, and as the doctor reached out to set the Scotch back up, Robert threatened him with a nod from the pistol.

In that instant, both Chandler and the truck driver dove for him. Chandler grabbed his forearm and gripped the hand that held the pistol. The other man lunged and took Robert's legs out from under him. The pistol fired once in the air as they went down. When they hit the floor, Chandler twisted his arm toward his back. The long barrel of the Colt struck repeatedly at Robert's ribs. Chandler squeezed hard on the hand and twisted the forearm tighter at the elbow. Robert felt the driver squirming to get out from underneath both of them. Then the Colt went off again. The bullet entered Robert's back near his right side, ran along under the skin in his back muscle and pierced his spine, shattering a lumbar vertabra, it left some sliverings lodged in the nerves and departed his body to strike a post at the foot of the bed. The last thing he hoard was the pistol dropping to the floor behind him. Someone muttered, "Oh Christ." Before the darkness that followed came down on him, he saw Lucy in a wide green field and then the flash of a plain, white light.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They stood and watched the wagon rattle away across the old charred grass. For a long while no one said a word, because Ike and Lucy and Joey Delahanty just stood there feeling helpless. It was a feeling like waking up in the morning with a hard hangover and knowing another good day is shot. There were only two sounds in the farmyard: the dog Paddy whimpered where it lay still chained to the house, and the two kids were splashing in the reservoir where they still sat, pushing a bucket up and down in the chalky water.

Joey Delahanty looked down at his sooty hands. To avoid Lucy's glance, he walked over to the pond and washed them off. But Ike Waters just stood beside the woman, right were they had stood moments before alongside the wagon, before Robert drove off. Now Ike stood and watched the dust cloud rise behind the wagon, obscuring it from sight, with the pale green sky of early dawn breaking in the east. He was guessing at where Robert Mahon was headed, and he was trying to make up his own mind, doubting there was anything he could do to change what was in that man's head. He'd known a dozen men in his time who were pushed to that point, to where something broke and then something had to be done. The first man he'd ever seen break under a hidden master was his Cousin Boss. But there'd been a lot of men since, in Kansas City, in Chicago on the South Side, and now back in Texas again. All of them niggers who finally had to change the way they lived from day to day. The inner workings of their clock were set to run down sometime, from the beginning of their days, and the
sometime to come was today.

A long while passed before Ike Waters looked away from that cloud of dust in the dawn. But when he did, it was that tough, whimpering dog that he found. He knew all along that he would have to finish the job. Even if it was his own dog, Delahanty hadn't the guts, and Robert had more pressing things on his mind. Robert had his own pain to do away with. So Ike Waters went in the house and found a rifle and shot it. The hound's belly shuddered once more before it stopped moving at all.

At first, watching it all, Lucy felt weak. But she remembered the way she had come undone and collapsed on the train, and maybe she had learned from that. All the talk she had soothed herself with since then --the punishment and the Providence and the will of God--it all fell away like so much useless cloth in the springtime. Standing free and by herself, she simply knew it was not a time for collapse.

"Go after him, Ike," she said. It wasn't a plea, or an order, just a plain statement, as plain as it was true. It was what he had to do, and it was only Ike Waters now who could do it. So the old colored man got a shotgun--the store man's shotgun--and he put it in Delahanty's carriage, setting it below the seat. When he drove away, Joey Delahanty was playing with the kids. Lucy found a spade and set in to dig a hole to bury the dog.

By the time Ike Waters rode away from the farmyard, the wagon ahead of him had a start of nearly three-quarters of an hour. Ike followed the wheel marks on the black ground and snapped the reins to keep Delahanty's horse moving. The brown stallion was old and not used to running hard. He ran out of steam before he left sight of the farmhouse. So Ike eased off the horse, giving in to what was useless.
The yellow sun was already climbing in the morning sky, when Ike found Sarah and Job grazing beneath the oak tree and Robert's wagon sitting there beside the Welcome Pond. His back ached like an old ornery mule's when he twisted to climb down. His good foot was asleep, and evened out his limp into a stagger. With every step in the grass, hoppers clic-clic-clucked into the air, landing a few steps ahead of him, waiting for his next limping step and their next brown leap.

He stroked each horse's neck, and looked along the shoreline of the pond. Ike hoped to find him resting in the weeds at the waterline, with a foot dangling in the water. But Ike knew his luck wasn't running that way.

Standing there he thought about turning north to the trains. There was nothing waiting in Welcome for him but trouble, he could see it coming on. And there was no point in following the innocent into the fire.

But then he saw that wide, open-grown oak beside the spring, and he remembered the story of his Cousin Boss, a story that was always at the back of his mind somewhere, whether he knew it or not. Boss was a freedman, though he'd been a butler in a big house in Baton Rouge when he was a slave. And when Andy Johnson offered him thirty acres and a mule, Cousin Boss figured that sounded a whole lot more like freedom than being a servant. So he moved up into Northwestern Texas, on the Llano Estacado, though he'd never farmed before. Then on one July afternoon when the corn he was growing was tall, Boss let the mule get away from him and it tore down the field. He walked off alone then and hung himself in a tree, and Ike Waters was there to see it all that day. He saw them cut his cousin out of an old open oak when he was a child. And when he asked why, no one said a word.
to the boy. No one seemed to know. Not until one dark night years later
did Ike Waters come to think he understood his Cousin Boss. Maybe. He
saw that night, in deep troubles of his own, that it's as hard as dying
for a man to say he was better off a slave. A hard thing to say, but that
was what Boss was doing. Sitting beneath an oak with a rope in his hand
telling himself he made a better slave than a free man.

Ike knew he'd spent a whole lifetime sliding away from troubles
like that, smiling and nodding his head to the boss men who brought trouble
on without knowing what they did. Just grin and walk away from it all,
that was the lesson he thought he'd learned from Cousin Boss. It was
what Cousin Boss had never learned to do. Still everywhere Ike Waters went
--and he'd spent time in every nigger place east of the Missouri River--
everywhere there was another stubborn mule waiting for him, and maybe,
just maybe, it was time now to stay home and set that mule to work.

He rode the carriage toward town, shaking his foot now and then
to keep it awake. The distance was short. Steering a wide arc away from
the street, he left the carriage behind the first building, at the edge
of town. Welcome, Texas, rested quietly in the early sunlight. Ike
stood a moment and listened to the quiet, and it worried him. He walked
around the side of the whorehouse to Holey Mary's door. Banging on it
first was the safe thing to do, because you never knew who might be inside,
but Ike didn't feel like doing it that way. So he just called "Maria"
loud and then opened the door. He wanted to see who was in there, what
white man was using his old black woman, and he was feeling reckless
enough to do it.

But the room before him seemed empty, though the bed was mussed.
Maria had her little picture of Jesus on the table by the bed. That usually meant she wasn't working. "Maria," he whispered this time. He wondered a moment if she was working in the hotel. But then her round, black face stuck out from behind the bed.

"What are you doing here?" she said. Ike remembered the smokey smell he was probably dragging in, and the soot on his clothes.

Holey Mary crept slowly out from her hiding place. "I heard someone coming at that door. Who do you think you are, some gringo?"

She was naked from the waist up, her dark breasts bouncing over the two folds of fat on her stomach. She stretched across the bed, with her brown flesh drooping onto the sheets, and she took a lacey handkerchief from the table.

"Iseek, don't you come to the door like that, not now when all the trouble is," she laid a thin penknife on the table, and let her body collapse on the bed. "Coming here like some mad gringo," she wiped the moisture from her face, dabbing around her mouth to save the red lipstick. "Come in here, amigo," she said with a smile, looking up from her hanky. "Cerra la puerta," she said.

"Where does Sagart stay?" Ike stood in the doorway. "When he be here, Maria, where do he stay?"

"Oh, Iseek," she shook her head and the bed springs creaked with the movement. "I can't tell you that. That would make big trouble for us."

"I know he be in that hotel, Maria, but what room? Where he staying?"

She wouldn't answer him. She only winked, and wiggled her finger at him, telling him again to come in and close the door.

"If anybody knows where he be, you the one, Cuba," now he used his own name for her. "I's here for stopping trouble. So where he stay, Cuba?"
It was at that moment they heard the first shot. After a pause that sounded dangerous, a second shot followed. Ike came toward the bed, glaring at Holey Mary. "Where he be, Cuba?" he said. But she still wouldn't answer him. Ike snorted in disgust, picked up the penknife from the table, and walked out leaving the door open behind him.

Ike Waters hobbled in the rear entrance to the Jefferson Davis Hotel. The backstairs lay in front of him, and men's voices came rolling down the steps. A sharp pain shot through his back and stopped him. He stood a moment and let it pass, looking at the stairs the whole time. But he couldn't imagine what was up there. The pain would not leave, so he walked up to the second floor trying to ignore it.

In the hallway he found a crowd of men's backs pressing toward a doorway. A few other men, stragglers in various states of undress, were rushing up the main stairs from the lobby. He walked toward the crowd, passing a few open doors in the hall. No one noticed him coming down the hall. Ike bent his head and slowly used his low shoulders to wedge his way through the throng. He didn't speak, he just shoved and twisted his way in. "Christ, all right." "Who in the hell?" "Easy now, boy." "It's his nigger," the voices went as he worked his way through the door. But they let Ike Waters through, because he knew that man lying on the floor inside.

In the hotel room, Ike Waters found Robert Mahon lying in a crumpled heap on the floor. A thin, greasy man bent over him, touching the blood on Robert's shirt, saying, "Back off now. Please give me some room, please." Two other men sat on the floor near Robert's body. Joe Sagart
stood with his hands hanging at his sides, looking down intently at the body. At his feet, the Colt pistol rested on the floor forgotten.

Ike Waters paused a moment, looking over the shoulder of the man in front of him. In that pause he did not think, he only saw. He stepped past the men in front of him. Sagart looked up and began to say, "Wait--" But before the word was finished the pen knife pierced up through his rib cage and into his heart, turning in the incision when it reached its mark. Ike pulled the knife free and let Sagart's body fall away from him to the floor. There was a hush while the men in the hall struggled to comprehend what was happening so quietly in front of them. A man's hand grabbed his shoulder, but Ike spun around on the toe of his half foot, slashing at the air with the knife. The throng of men were silent when the knife waved at them. That pause was long enough for Ike to reach toward the Colt on the floor. A shot fired and the bullet grazed Ike Waters' hand, but he grabbed the pistol and pointed it at the crowd.

Outside someone said, "What the--" Several men pushed out of the doorway. "Back your white behinds right out that door, all you," Waters ordered and jerked the gun at them. "All you," he yelled this time. Then men scurried out like rats in a fire. There were two bodies on the floor now, and Ike ordered the doctor and one of the men to leave. "Now you, git up and come on over here. Slow," a wide grin broke across Ike's face. "I can use you, white boy." He waved the gun at John Chandler, who was still sitting bareback on the floor. "We gone out that door, white boy, and you try anything this old nigger puts an end to you. He might even enjoy putting an end to you. See. I's got nothing to lose now, boy. Right?" John Chandler just nodded his head once, and stood up.
"Say 'yassuh Massuh' for me," Ike said. "Come on."

"Yes sir," Chandler said. "Master."

Ike held the pistol pointed at the base of John Chandler’s skull, he twisted the white man's injured arm behind his back. They walked slowly out the doorway together and backed down the hall. The hallway was long, but they covered it quickly once they were outside the room.

"It's the nigger," someone yelled. "That nigger from out there."

Ike Waters used the white man for cover and backed his way out the rear of the hotel and across the thirty yard stretch of open ground to Holey Mary's room. Standing in the worn, sandy spot before her door, he glanced up and down the backside of Welcome, and the town appeared as quiet as when he'd driven in that morning. He poked his half foot up into the seat of Chandler's pants, said "Can't say I's gone to miss you, white boy," and shoved the man on his face in the dirt.

The moment Chandler hit the ground, gunfire started. Like a young man, Ike Waters fell backwards and rolled over the crook in his back into Holey Mary's room. He kicked the door closed and bullets thudded and splintered the wood all over the thin walls of Grant's Home for the Lost and Lonely. He lay flat on the board floor, crawling away from the wall, toward the empty bed. When it fell dead silent outside after a few minutes, Maria poked her head up from her nest behind the bed.

"You here for stopping trouble, hey Iseek?"

"All my troubles, Lord," he smiled back at her. For the first time he could ever remember, even since he was a tiny child, Ike's back didn't ache.

* * * *
John Chandler crawled back to the hotel under the cover of their gunfire. The dozen or so men who lived in or near Welcome lined every back window in the town, and for five minutes they poured their fury into the walls of the whorehouse. When the shooting stopped, slowly and spontaneously, no one moved out of cover toward the building. The men sat and waited silently for some sign that it was over.

About half an hour passed in quiet. Then the women who worked in Grant's Home began to come out, hands in the air, looking like a lingerie parade. There were hoots and hollers, but they slowly died away. Men began then to trade glances, wondering if the job was done. There was only one door to Maria's room. They had the nigger cornered. So it was Charlie the stablehand who stepped out of the backdoor of the saloon, and too late he saw the colored head move in the window. A pistol fired. Little Charlie took the bullet square in his chest. He fell in the grass behind the saloon, and no one pulled him in. They fired at the wall again in frustration, but no one had the guts to drag Charlie in.

The word went up and down the valley: nigger gone crazy, holed up in Grant's Home with a gun, a nigger killed two white men. As each new man rode into town, someone pointed him toward Maria's room. Three shots left, they'd tell the newcomer. Everyone was counting. Two gone in the hotel, and one in good old Charlie. Three shots left, they said. Unless he's got more. Late in the morning, under another frenzy of gunfire, Willie Greene brought Charlie inside. They laid him upstairs, next to Sagart.

Around noon the nigger began to sing. Just a low blue melody at first, growing louder and clearer slowly. The men in the windows and doors leaned close to the wall and crouched quietly, trying to make out the
words. The nigger sang, and then he would stop, and a while later he'd begin again. Different words, different pitches, with the same slow melody. The men from Carolina, stragglers who hadn't gone home yet, shook their heads and spit at the floor. "He's got liquor in there," they muttered. "He's all drunked up. They sing like that when they're all drunked up."

The July sun beat down. The men argued in whispers among themselves how best to smoke the crazy nigger out. "Don't wait till dark," the Carolinans said.

Only a few men noticed when Doctor Hamburg arrived. Someone showed him the farmer with the bullet in his back, he looked at Chandler's arm, and at the bodies of Sagart and the stable hand. Later in the afternoon, when he'd done what he could, the doctor yelled something about a fair trial out the back door of the hotel. But the nigger never answered, and Doctor Hamburg ended up waiting, like the rest, for what would come. An hour later, in the quietest part of the hot afternoon, the nigger sang out loud and clear, from somewhere near the window. He sang out loud enough for the white men to hear, and he sang with a tremble of laughter in his voice.

"It's south at eight
'n it's north at nine,
Got to see that long haired
Brown a mine."

Gunfire drowned out the rest of the nigger's words. When the guns stopped, his song was a low and constant hum again. It was something again they couldn't understand.

The west wind laid the grass flat in the evening, and picked up dust from the streets and from the dry fields. It blew in the open windows and drove grit into the eyes of the waiting men. They blinked and squinted
and cursed. Sometime about dusk the nigger stopped singing. As it grew
darker, Chandler sent Willie Greene and two other men around behind the
whorehouse. "Take the dog with ya," he said. "That nigger is going to
try something. Soon," he said.

The sun went down and a cool moon, just past full and waning, took
its place in the sky. "He'll be coming now," a man lifted the barrel of
his Sharps from the window ledge, and spoke to a man sitting on the floor
beneath the next window down. "The moon's coming up. He'll be coming now."

But it was three hours later when the moon was sinking toward the
ridges in the west, when the crickets near the waterline sang louder in
the darker night, that the doorway to Maria's room opened. A creak in the
hinges raised every rifle, and held every breath. In the doorway, the
white of the mattress shone out. Maria's voice shouted, "It's Maria,
don't shoot, it's Maria." The bed slid down, away from the door and into
the darkness of the room. Out of the black, Maria bounced and jiggled
toward the hotel. She was stark naked, running with her hands held
shoulder high and wagging in the air. "He been raping me all day long,"
she screamed. In the dim moonlight she looked like a sagging old medicine
ball, brown and bursting at the seams. "He been raping me," she yelled,
and a nervous laugh rose out of the throats of the waiting men. They began
to fire at random over her head and into the room. "He's in there. All
day long," Maria shouted into their fire.

But then Atlas began to bark. From beyond the whorehouse a shout
went up, and the crackle of gunfire silenced the rifles in the windows.
The men stood, waiting again. Maria stopped her run and turned around in
the grass, looking back at the building she'd left. She went to her knees
on the ground and the wind blew grass over her sepia legs. Her brown hands covered all her face but the eyes, as she knelt there and watched for the colored man.

The nigger had broken through an inner wall sometime during the day, and made his way clear to the back of the building. In the darkness, he crawled out of the whorehouse and turned north, toward the trains lying miles away to the north. But the dog had picked up his scent in the dark, and when the nigger saw that German shepherd and the three men closing off his path to the trains, he glanced down at the wall and then turned back limping toward the west edge of town. Willie Greene fired at him. The two men running behind him fired then in stride. Willie fired again. The nigger hobbled quickly, bent low to the ground like a scolded dog. Suddenly he turned and laid one knee in the sand raising his pistol with both hands. Willie saw the grin on his face. The pistol flared twice in the dark, and a groan caught in the throat of one of the other men. Willie Greene dove for the ground, heard his own knees popping with the strain, and he hugged the grass. But there was no more firing. Two shots means one left, he thought, unless.

When Willie looked up again the damn nigger was hobbling toward a carriage at the end of town. Pulling his rifle straight, steadying his elbows on the ground, he aimed at the nigger's back. From the other side of Grant's Home he heard the gunfire from the hotel begin. But the nigger was almost to that carriage. The wind swished through the dry grass around his ears. Willie squeezed the trigger and let the gunstock jerk into his shoulder easy. Sighting along the barrel, he saw the nigger tumble to his knees and clutch at his thigh.
The crackle of the gunfire was a steady rattle then. But that nigger lifted himself up on his crippled leg, and pushed forward reaching for the seat of the carriage. He got one hand under that seat and held himself up, pointed his pistol blankly at the hotel. But the pistol never fired. The nigger's legs collapsed under him. He fell down into the bunch grass.

They shot at him for a minute longer. Then the town went silent. But no one stepped out of cover. With one shot left, they muttered to themselves and waited for someone else to take the chance. Maria fled back into her room and Willie Greene laid flat, remembering the grin on that darkie's face when he shot at them. It would be a lot of nights before he forgot that grin. He looked over his shoulder trying to find the man the nigger had shot behind him. "Wynchell," he yelled. "Are you all right?"

It was John Chandler who walked out of the hotel with his arm in a sling, strode the distance toward the nigger, hanging in close to the buildings along the way. From ten feet, he fired into the black man's chest, and waited. Then he took the Colt out of the nigger's hand, waved it over his head in the air for the cheering men in the windows to see. He put the barrel of the Colt between the nigger's eyes, and with the one bullet left, he mutilated Ike Waters' face.

They hung the body by its feet from that open oak out near the spring, and fired shots into it to make it swing, until when the sun came up they grew sick of themselves and rode away without talking and without looking at one another, to bury their dead. And they left Isaac Waters hanging by a rope in the tree.
CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Joey was asleep in his chair at mid-morning when Lucy heard the buggy coming. She looked out the bare window of the Delahanty's bedroom, leaning on one of Alvina's packed trunks, and saw a strange carriage coming from the direction of their farm. The boys were sound asleep on the bed. It had been a long time last night before they edged into sleep, asking where their father was and when he would be back.

Lucy walked out the open bedroom door toward the fat man quietly. Stirring in his chair, Joey's sleep was light. The room was scattered with packed boxes, and it was Alvina who looked up from her novena book with querying eyes, unaware that a buggy was coming, for her ears were going bad. With an incongruent shock, Lucy realized why Joey always talked so loud. Lucy raised a palm to keep her silent. Let him sleep, her gesture said. But the hefty man jerked upright when he sensed Lucy's presence. Recognizing her, a smile broke his lips, and then disappeared as he remembered the reason she was walking in his house.

There was an awkward pause while Joey and Alvina Delahanty pondered what to say during a time like this to someone who was really still a stranger. It was like having some traveler's tragedy foisted on you at night in a railroad depot. For a moment, perhaps even a day, you feel humanly close, companions on a night train slipping from one station to another in the dark while you sleep through the changes in terrain, you go to bed in the summer full of meadows and wake up to the cold of a moun-
tain winter. But with time the real distance between strangers creeps back in, you don't know this fellow traveler, beside you and lonely, as his tragedy disappears down the track. And now, after all they had seen of this woman, Joey still felt she was alone.

"Are the boys still sleeping?" Alvina asked.

Lucy nodded. Then she said, "Someone is coming, from over at our farm."

Joey Delahanty stood up and brushed the creases out of his shirt front. "You let me take care of it," he said. But standing in the middle of the room, Lucy was controlling the situation.

When the knock came at the door, Joey buttoned the top of his pants, and he answered the door. A black woman on the step asked him, "Is Mrs. Mahon here? I seek say she might be here." The woman had no time for pleasantries.

Lucy stepped past Joey into the doorway before he could speak. "I'm Lucy Mahon."

"I seek said you would be here." Sweat had dried dusty on the colored woman's forehead. In the carriage behind her a younger woman sat holding the reins, a Spanish woman with darkly made up eyes. "Your husband is in town. And he is hurt. I seek told us to get you. And then Meester Greene, too, he say to come and bring you. Afterwards."

Lucy merely nodded her head yes. Before she could react, or even truly feel anything, the Delahanty's were bustling around the room.

"I'll come with you," Joey said, "by George. And Winnie. She can take care of the kids, by golly." He was flustered and began to tuck his shirt back into his pants, where it had popped out as he scurried
around. "That's right, by golly," he said to himself.

Lucy found herself wondering whose carriage this was outside. It certainly didn't belong to the colored woman. She couldn't own anything so nice. A black, leather-seated surrey, and a young roan mare harnessed to it. But why she would bother to worry about such a thing, at a time like this, angered Lucy. She wondered why the whole world hadn't changed with what had happened to her. But it was the same, and she was wondering who owned a carriage.

With such calm she surprised herself, Lucy asked the woman, "Where is he?"

"He is at the hotel. The doctor is there too."

"Doctor Hamburg?"

Lucy had not slept for over twenty-four hours. When Ike had not come back during the day, it was clear something terrible had gone wrong. She prepared herself for the worst. It was the payment coming down on them, but the children were her first concern. She bathed them and cooked for them and collected their things. In the evening, afraid to keep them another night on that farm, she had agreed with Joey and Alvinna. Keep the children away from it all. Don't let them know. Keep them safe until it was all straightened out. Because she was pregnant, she had tried to sleep beside Jack and Vince on the Delahanty's bed, but her eyes wouldn't close. She lay awake and at the first light she prayed a little. But not for long.

"We best go," the colored woman said.

Lucy rode between the two women in the carriage. The air was full of sweat and rose-scented cologne. Joey followed behind them on horseback.
They pushed the tired horses hard. The younger woman, Rosita, with a wart on her cheek covered by her makeup, spoke no English, and Maria chose to keep silent. Lucy was grateful for the quiet. But the wind constantly buffeted the leather shell covering the carriage, its drumming made the only sound.

"How badly is he hurt?"

"I don't know. They just sent us to bring you." The woman breathed heavily all the time, she was always out of breath. "He has been shot."

When all Lucy could see was the flat ground in front of her, a postcard of desolation, she asked, "And Ike?"

The colored woman just shook her head no, and kept breathing through her mouth. She steered the carriage north, staying far out of sight of the spring. But toward the green grass to the south, she waved to Joey. "Go down there, Meester," she told him, stopping the surrey. For a moment she couldn't speak, but then she went on. "You meet us at the hotel. When you done with what's down there," she said. Joey went because there was something honest in the way she spoke. Because she knew what she was asking for, even if he didn't understand.

Along the way, in the quiet of the ride, Lucy made up her mind. She would call back home for help. There was a telephone in the hotel. She would call Pat Baldwin who ran the bank. He would know what to do, or Father Roche would know. As they came into Welcome, and the sound of drinking men bellied out of the saloon into the empty street, it was as clear to her as the living swell of her stomach. As soon as Robert was able. It was time to go home. It was time for him to give in. Time for help.
They buried Ike Waters on the side of the Yellow Run Ridge. The wind blew down across the mesquite trees, and far off to the west sat the Davis Mountains, looking for all a man's faith like a thin line of thunderclouds, but they never grew any more than a pretty woman's plucked eyebrows, and they never even rumbled as loud as a hungry stomach does. The afternoon was ungodly hot.

The hole that Vince and Jack had dug was three feet deep, and with fat childhood tears they insisted Ike Waters must lay there. And it was as good a place as any. The mission church was far away, and Lucy knew Ike didn't belong there. So Joey Delahanty shoveled the grave deeper down, another two feet in the sand, and they laid him in the hole on his side wrapped in burlap sacks. Alvinna read from her missal the passage about ashes and dust, and they said the Our Father together. Lucy threw purple clover flowers in the grave. Early that same morning she collected them on the banks of the Big Creek, outside the hotel where Robert lay.

In black lines on the yellow rock, Joey Delahanty painted the old colored man's name. They knew only the one date.

Isaac Waters
dead July 16, 1915

Beneath the letters two old red handprints reached up, and under them, hidden in the shade of tall red rocks, the outline of a lonely crow soared.

It was the first of August before they left, before Robert was
able to move. Doctor Hamburg wouldn't touch the slivers of metal in his back. "Leave it there," he said. "Till you get someplace where they can do it right." No one said a word about the law. The guilt ran in too many directions at once. The Company men only wanted it quiet, and soon; Lucy only wanted to go home. So, quietly, Willie Greene paid them to leave: he bought back the land and paid for their train, and Lucy Mahon took the money without a word.

Lucy sat by his bed in the Jeff Davis Hotel and tried to keep him cool. She wiped his brow, his shoulders, his chest with a damp cloth. They gave him a room in the corner of the second floor. There was just a bed and a rocking chair someone brought in from another room for her. There weren't any curtains on the two windows, one on each outside wall. They gave him this room and they gave him morphine to keep him quiet. And while he slept she had time to think. She had a week of time alone by his bed to think.

At the moment there was a hot breeze blowing in one window. Robert was asleep, but not deeply. Every now and then he would turn his head or mumble something.

She had made a telephone call to Iowa on the first afternoon. "Whatever you do, by God, don't stay down there," Pat Baldwin told her. "Come on back, and we'll work something out here. But don't stay there." Then he offered to wire her money for the train.

The moment she hung up that receiver, before she had time to turn and walk back upstairs to the corner room, Lucy had learned how even doing the littlest thing can change the world. She felt like she had
moved the earth into a safer orbit, and set her straight on the axis. Everything was different. And by the time she got back upstairs and settled into the rocking chair, she knew something else. Robert had stirred then and he asked her, "Where've you been?" She told him all about her telephone call, and all the while she knew she had been wrong. Her father used to say often, whenever he had troubles, "I sure hope there's somebody counting the chips on the other side." But it wasn't that there was no one there, on the other side. There just weren't any chips to count, not if you really lived.

Now Robert mumbled something again. The only word she could make out was "Maria." Outside the window there wasn't a single cloud in the sky. And her chair was so solid it never creaked when she rocked. But the floorboards did. Over beneath the west window, where you stood to look out.

On the afternoon when they buried Ike Waters, she rode back to the hotel alone and found Robert awake, talking with Maria. When she came in they were sitting in silence. All the way back from the ridge Lucy had been thinking about Ike. The wagon ride back to town had been silent too. She thought about the way he grew up, and how he had been born crippled. About the way they treated him and how they had all come running when they thought they could take a safe shot at a nigger, and then drank themselves stupid to forget what they had done. About the way he kept his mouth shut around white people, and how he was still, Abraham Lincoln and Jim Crow aside, a slave in the world.

She thought about all that on the way back to Welcome. Feeling sorry for Ike Waters as the wagon swayed. But when she walked into the
room and found Robert still lying there, Lucy knew she had it all wrong. Ike Waters was no slave. He lived in a world that kept him down, trod him underfoot and held him in thrall, but he was no slave. All the things that bound him to mean streets and low hopes and back-breaking labor, everything that tied him to an endless, futile poverty, they were all outside of Ike Waters. But he moved where he had wanted in his world. And inside that bent, colored body, he was no slave.

On the wall above the door there was a crease in the wallpaper. It ran from the ceiling halfway down to the floor. It curved around the corner of the doorframe. To Lucy just then it looked like the branches of a bare tree, and on the top where the tree should have been splitting and sprouting into a thousand twigs and shoots aiming for the sun with a mad growth, the ceiling cut it off. Above that crease there was a brown water stain, a place where someone upstairs had spilled something against the wall and then let it stand and leak down to the floor below. A place where someone had done nothing.

She rolled the sheet down away from Robert's shoulders, because he looked hot, and because she was hot herself. Then she sat back in her chair and watched his chest rise and fall with his breath.

Lucy understood what he had done. It was hurtful and wrong and desperate, but she understood him. There can come a time when a man must do something, no matter what it is, just so he knows he's got a will of his own. Most times, when he's feeling that way, he'll do the contrary thing. What he knows he shouldn't. That's what he heads for. But Lucy Mahon could understand that now.
He turned his head suddenly and looked at her sleepily. "What time is it?" he said. And he said it as if it mattered.

During the fever that Robert carried in the first days after he was shot, his memory folded into the confused dreams he had whenever he slept. And one moment of his life returned so often to those dreams that he could not in the end separate the reality of it from what he dreamt. He dreamed of how she sat in the wagon with her head tilted just so, back on an April afternoon in 1910, on the day when they were married. He saw again and again the way she looked out at the fields when he brought her home. He carried her things into the house, everything she owned in one tin trunk, while she sat looking out there. And when he lifted her out of the wagon to carry her inside, she said, "It's such an afternoon, Robert Mahon. Let's go out there. In the fields."

So in his dream she took him by the hand, and she led him in his blue wedding suit down a dirt lane. They walked slow, and the evening sun was big in the sky. She took him through plowed corn fields, around a stand of elms, and into the pasture land. And he could not say who or what was leading him on.

They crawled one after another into the old field of oats, and then she did an odd thing. The ground was green with new straw just a few inches tall and the woman got down on her knees. With her white hands she cleared a little spot of growth, so the black Iowa dirt showed through. Slowly she pushed more of the young straw aside, while he stood and wondered what she was up to, until the ground was a bared patch a few feet round. Then this woman stood up, and she walked over to him,
and kissed him on his chin like a child. Robert Patrick Mahon dreamed of the way her dress fell loose, and the way he fumbled with a corset she didn't need, the way her ivory skin pressed against his. He made love to her in that field, and twice she cried out his last name at the peak of it, and they rolled in that spot she'd cleared, until it was growing dark.

Then, as quick as a dream can move, she sat up. There, in the new grass, her nipples were pointed from the cold. She reached out and patted him once on the chest. A tap of the hand, like a woman scolding a child. Then she took up her dress, and she ran away, pulling it over her head as she went.

When Robert stood up to put on his pants, the dirt was wet and muddy where the two of them had run together. But he didn't have time to wonder at that. The woman was already through the fence and gone. So he picked up the shoes, and his shirt, and his hard-earned coat. And he picked up that corset in the grass. He chased her all the way back to the farm, to the old farm, the home place in Iowa. He ran in his barefeet through the plowed fields and the rocky timber, holding up his pants with one hand, the same hand that carried her shoes. And when finally he caught her inside the house, laughing and hugging her arms around her waist, her wedding dress was dusted from her breasts to the floor, with dirt and pollen and burrs.

Before he dreamed that twice, he lost track of what was truth and what was dream. And by the time his fever had broken, Robert Mahon had come to believe in it. He believed that was the day he'd conceived his first son, though he knew it wasn't so. It was a thing he wanted to believe.

* * * *
Robert saw his burned out shell of a farm only once more. On the
day they were to leave he broke out of the morose silence he kept, and
demanded to be taken to Ike. They laid him in the back of his wagon and
drove him out to the farm. He watched the sky roll by, with high wafts
of cloud like a candy glaze on the blue. At the base of the ridge,
Delahanty stopped the buckboard.

"We can't be carrying you all the way up there, Robert," the big
man said. "We've got a train to catch." The two women and the two chil-
dren watched him, waiting for him to answer.

Robert raised his head and shoulders up, and ran his eyes across
the rising ground until he found the yellow stone face. A grasshopper
flicked into the air in the line of his sight. It thumped on the wagon
box and sat beside his knee, scratching its legs together. Robert tried
to write that yellow stone's image deep in his brain, where he could call
it up exactly, whenever he wanted, knowing all the time that it was futile
and the image would fade with time until it was indistinct, like everything
else. And in the midst of his mental painting, he felt the trickling down
between his legs. "Damnit," he muttered. Jack giggled, until his mother
glanced at him. Lying flat on his back in the bed of the wagon with his
two kids watching him, Robert Mahon wet his pants, like a god damned baby,
again.
"Oh Lord, your tie is fine."
"I never did this part before, John."
"Well just get out there and show your shiny teeth a lot."
The train hissed steam. It was the twentieth of August, and
Willie Greene climbed out of the rider's side of the touring truck.
"I guess I met them before, at the hotel, you know."
There were just two nice Pullman cars behind the engine.
"It's just all that trouble we had this time. It kind of changes things."
"Well them people are all gone. They left weeks ago. So just act like nothing's happened. All right?" The voice was clipped and short.
"Yeah. I know."
Willie closed the truck door and stepped toward the train. There were older gentlemen in the windows of the Pullman cars, looking out with curiosity.
John, I just thought of something."
Behind the wheel, Chandler frowned as he used his right arm to pull the brake tight. "What now?" he slipped the arm back into its sling.
"Most of these guys know Joe. They're going to be asking for him, aren't they?"
"Sure they will. But Mr. Sagart's out of town. At the moment.
Right? Just smile and say he's gone on business. And I had a little harvesting accident here, with my arm, you know. Right?"

"Yeah. Sure." Willie shrugged his shoulders to get the white jacket to sit right. The suit fit pretty well, considering it wasn't his. "I'll ask them if it gets this hot in Ohio," he said softly.

"And Willie--"

John Chandler was standing at the front of the truck wearing a bright and shiny grin that rivaled the chrome lady on the hood ornament.

"Smile. All right?"