

ALL THE WIDOWS IN THE WORLD

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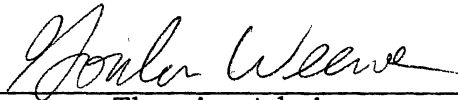
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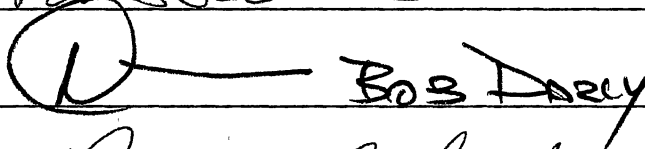
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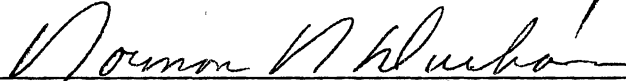


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BELIEVABLE MAKE-BELIEVE:
CONSTRAINTS IN THE FICTIONAL RENDERING OF EXPERIENCE

Ask anyone interested in literature to cite the difference between fiction and non-fiction, and you are likely to hear something about reality or real-life and how one genre is bound by it and one is not. You are likely to hear, too, that the maker of fiction therefore enjoys a creative freedom not available to one whose business is to write about real people and events and things.

With this working distinction in mind--and without taking up a discussion of the creative-prose sub-genres of romance, science or historical fiction, fictional autobiography, creative non-fiction or prose poetry (whatever these last two inventions are)--we might then press for some critical criteria, for an explanation of what makes the rhetoric of fiction and non-fiction engaging and effective. In the course of articulating a response, we would come upon one of the great and stubborn ironies of the whole field of literature: though we identify fiction and non-fiction as two very different endeavors motivated by very different aims, we turn around and measure the success of both against the same requirements. Definitions of successful fiction sound strangely similar to those offered

for writing that claims, before all else, fidelity to the real world. Those who review novels and short-story collections employ essentially the same vocabulary as those who deal with histories, biographies, and personal essays. A piece from almost any genre is good if, in the impressionistic (and hackneyed) terms of approbation, it manifests a "gritty and unflinching realism," "headlong honesty," if it is "well documented," "genuine," "accurate," "authentic," if what it finally presents to a reader is "the real article."

This irony lies at the heart of the literature classroom's main concern--and, increasingly, its main vexation: What do we say about a given poem or fiction? How can we react, usefully and meaningfully, to important writing? Almost every academic approach to a work--historical or biographical criticism, straight literary analysis, feminism and Marxism--comes back, if it pretends to address imaginative writing at all, to some sort of discussion of how the world of that writing, the context created (reflected?) by and woven into its lines, the character life engendered with its rhetoric, the emotions and biases and politics communicated through an arrangement of words--how that world squares with the real one. This dichotomy manifests itself even more clearly when we contrast the malleability of created contexts with the intractability of their real-life counterparts.

Whereas this irony merely perplexes the literature

classroom, it can actually paralyze the creative writing workshop. Fiction pedagogy necessarily stalls when the prevalent, and sometimes only, evaluative yardstick among a group of aspiring writers is whether or not a classmate's draft "speaks" to them or presents a circumstance with which they can, in some vague way, "relate" or "identify."

Instead of devoting class time to techniques of craft that make a wholly imagined story more believable (whatever its correspondence to real life, a story to be told must first be imagined), workshop members praise this or that character because they know someone in real life "just like her"; this or that predicament because they have "been through it."

Or, conversely, they censure a name or place or sequence, an object or line of dialogue only because they cannot find, in their real life, any likely match.

It would be foolish at this point to suggest that our personal and individual "realities"--that amalgam of perceptions, knowledge, biases, emotions, and attitudes that make up experience--do not in some way bear on our perception of literature and, specific to my purpose here, our perception of a given fiction. Anyone who presumes to make fiction operates, in ways never satisfactorily clear to those who do not make fiction, from his own accumulated experience. Nor is a reader immediately guilty of critical immaturity when he recognizes parallels between some of his own real-life particularities and those in a fiction. But the notion of writing purely and restrictively from

experience, treating only those occurrences and predicaments with which we are intimately acquainted, is just as problematic as evaluating a novel or story solely on the basis of whether or not you can "see yourself" in it. Our theory of fiction must simply be fuller and more considered than such approaches suggest. For the "creative" writer who proudly adheres to a depiction of life as it "really" is, who comprehends and redacts experience (his or someone else's) only in the most literal and factual sense, and limits himself to "historical" fidelity--for this writer the door to compelling fiction closes almost before it opens.

The question arises, then, as to what a fiction is. What makes it compelling? What is its obligation to real life? In their elaboration on the subject, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren go a long way toward elucidating a very complex, and subtle, connection. "Literature," they hold, "must always . . . stand in recognizable relation to life, but the relations are very various: the life can be heightened or antithesized; it is in any case a selection, of a specifically purposive sort, from life" (212). Thanks to this clarification, we can almost reconcile the apparent contradiction a writer faces in desiring to make something believable by lying. In yoking the lived-in world to one imagined, he must commit to "specifically purposive" alterations of the former. Otherwise, the "pull" in the fiction will emerge, at best, uneven--at worst, directionless. So long as a writer satisfies the criterion

of a "recognizable relation to life," he is free to do whatever advances his story's purpose.

Few have taught us more about the purpose of imaginative story telling than Henry James. In "The Art of Fiction," he reaffirms that "a production" like a fiction "is after all only a 'make-believe'. . . . For what else," he asks, "is a 'story'?" (4). If we are to understand fiction at all, we must grant that it is, first and foremost, artifice, utterly made up, a tale invented, contrived, manipulated, fabricated, arranged. The more skillful the artifice, the better the fiction. Paradoxically, however, the writer faces more constraints in making something up than he would in simply trying to report reality point for point--because whatever he does has to seem natural and unaffected. James goes on to complicate this exigency considerably. "In proportion," he says, "as . . . we see life without rearrangement do we feel that we are touching the truth; in proportion as we see it with rearrangement do we feel that we are being put off with a substitute, a compromise and convention" (16). That is to say, the maker of fiction must rearrange; he must, by necessity and by the nature of what he is about, involve himself in what Wayne Booth terms an "ordering of intensities" (60); but the writer must do all this as invisibly as possible, without allowing the evidence of that rearrangement and ordering to show.

Whereas a non-fiction writer can always excuse a drab

or vacuous reality as something beyond his control, the whole responsibility for a fiction's success--its power of persuasion--rests with the writer. A skillful fiction can make absorbing the most banal or motionless situations. On the other hand, a writer may encounter great difficulty in believably rendering the most sensational real-life episode in the form of a fictional tale. Real life seldom crosses the border into fiction without undergoing significant, if often subtle, change. But the "seams" of such change cannot show without challenging our credulity.

This change, then, stands as the writer's main concern. A deeper understanding of the constraints inherent in achieving an absorbing make-believe comes, interestingly enough, from noting Picasso's contention that "art is not truth" but is, instead, "a lie that makes us realize truth." Had he said fiction instead of art, his next line would be only more pertinent here. "The artist must know," he maintains, "the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies" (25). For the writer, this "manner" involves nothing more or less, certainly nothing more mysterious, than rhetorical persuasiveness. We have realized only minor irony with respect to making fiction until we acknowledge artfully told lies as the agents that yield up truth.

However disconcerting this concept is to the person who sees fiction as one of the world's few forums for honest expression; and, on the other hand, however rhetorically

liberating falsity seems to would-be writers, however self-indulgent and frivolous "creative" writing seems to some scholars and academicians, we have to remember that Picasso qualifies the task of telling lies: they must be rendered "whereby to convince others" of their truthfulness. It seems to me that the heart of a fiction rests with its capacity to convince a reader, and that when we speak of a story's success--or when writing workshops decide whether or not a piece "works" for them--we are really referring to how fully and unreservedly we believe and accept the "lie" of that fiction, how willingly we lend an ear to the voice of a make-believe narrator.

Telling a good, credible lie, though, is not so simple an achievement as it may appear. A careful reader, by nature, develops a nose for deception or inconsistency, is, in fact, on his guard for it the instant he commences reading. However we verbally reduce the grand philosophical phenomena of human existence, they end up encompassing so broad a spectrum of actualities that any given reader can know and appreciate something about almost any given fiction and can thereby judge some corner of the work's persuasiveness. From the simplest reader response ("My grandpa's house was like that") to the highest evocation of pathos or keenest impression of tension, a fiction surely takes as its referent the territory of humankind. And to make up anything credible about that territory, to persuade readers to accept a proposed version of it--when they at

every turn exercise a native's scrutiny--is an intriguing and maddeningly delicate venture.

Though the maker of fiction must certainly take into account universally familiar material--what James refers to as "the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle" (12)--the success of his lie ultimately depends more on his skill with, his manipulation of, language than on his fidelity to such material as drawn from "real" life. Clearly, a contemporary fiction writer like Gordon Weaver would agree that the only thing a writer can presuppose about his audience is that they share the language with him, and that any appeal to that audience, any effort to convince them of anything, comes only through that language.

As if to emphasize this point, Weaver puts into the mouth of a fictional narrator a very cogent critical statement about truth as rendered in writing. In a story entitled "The Parts of Speech," Weaver's narrator contends that "everything is language, that anything that is real--the truth--is real only in the substance of the language that embodies it" (101). Much more important, in other words, than any mutually appreciated facts or knowledge, any particularities of experience held in common, any shared mind-sets or worldviews--more important than any of these is the substance of a shared language.

Whatever the fiction writer says about experience, therefore, must credibly "embody" that experience, must

ultimately sound enough like the truth, to be convincing. A reader believes the "lie" of a fiction not so much because of what a writer says but because of how he says it. Like the imposter who wishes to convince a large and extended family of his claim to a wealthy patriarch's estate, the maker of fiction must know, or--with a certain relaxed and seemingly natural familiarity--pretend to know, enough names and circumstances and relationships, enough "family" history to make his story plausible. It is always amid a plausible accounting of such detail that the imposter must operate--here citing a little real-life truth, there telling a little very convincing lie. To spin a full-blown yarn about some other family, one completely unknown to the patriarch's clan, would be infinitely easier. To be sure, a story teller is constrained by a reader's fundamental capacity to measure a tale told against the broad verities of human commonplaces. But even more important than this capacity in a reader is his reaction--ranging from unqualified acceptance to amused skepticism to dismissive rejection--to the way a story is told to him. As Richard Weaver affirms, "we all react to some rhetoric as 'untruthful' or 'unfair' or 'cheap,' and this very feeling is evidence of the truth that it is possible to use a better or worse style of appeal" (211).

Fiction is nothing if not a style of appeal. And at the very center of that appeal lies a perception of experience--since experience is, after all, the "territory"

of the writer, too. How he deals with it, how he fashions a rhetorical appeal that wins for him a reader's assent, is what I am finally most interested in. If fiction is, as Henry James contends, a convincing but nevertheless crafted rendering of experience, then we need here to dwell on at least one aspect of that craft. To appreciate, for example, why good dialogue compels us, and bad dialogue does not, we must understand, at least in a rudimentary way, how a writer fits human orality to artifice.

In nothing does a writer wrench and rearrange real life more than in his management of fictional utterance. The whole premise that a first-person narrator, for example--often operating at a substantial temporal remove--can remember exact spoken lines is, from a practical standpoint, nothing short of absurd. Human beings can seldom recall with any precision what they said as recently as yesterday. Yet when fictional dialogue is well made, we do not question its plausibility. In short, we must grant that dialogue is a fictional convention--not a journalistic recording of the way real-life people talk to one another.

Nor do we pause to realize that well-made dialogue demonstrates, at the word level, a creative and imaginative handiwork that unequivocally proves the artifice of writing at the same time it makes the product of that artifice compelling. The dialogue of the dullard, for instance, is, in a fiction, never dull. The ramblings of the loquacious are never tedious. The bombast of the pretentious does not

annoy or offend us--except with a captivation quite different from anything we would feel in real life. Even expressions meant to approximate the fluffy nullities of actual verbal exchanges have calculated purpose in story telling. And here we arrive dead-center at the magic of fictional dialogue: in the mouth of an oaf or a windbag, a line of finely made speech at once reinforces character and compels us to read on. The effect is wholly contrived by a writer who selects certain words, to the exclusion of all others, to put into the mouths of his fictional people. But by so carefully governing what they say, he creates the illusion of natural exchange by effectively stylizing it.

In fact, dialogue fails when a writer attempts a word-for-word fidelity to real-life speech. Without significant balancing and pointing, a given utterance drawn unaltered from real-life may well seem wooden and unlikely. On the page, a long and pleasant true-to-life exchange might well strike us as more superfluity than substance. Fictional exchange depends on a certain elliptical quality, the sense that a single word or phrase is the best choice to act as surrogate for myriad words and phrases--and for the subtleties of feeling behind them--a character might utter in a given context. The artifice, and artistry, of such an endeavor is total.

In his comment on James Joyce's interior monologue, G.S. Fraser unknowingly clarifies the theory behind the crafting of all fictional utterance. "The monologues are

artistically effective," he says, "and indeed this is their main importance. They are not a real transcription of what goes on in one's head in directionless reverie" (382). If, in an effort to be unflinchingly realistic, a writer were to record the verbal exchange of two real people, every word, every truncated locution, every linguistic emission, and if he then transcribed what he had recorded, the passage would, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, fail miserably--precisely for want of artistic effectiveness. In other words, the dialogue would sound too true to life. In reading a fiction, we do not want "real" human conversation; we want, instead, fictional communication that sounds real. To achieve such an effect, a writer must succeed, as Fraser says Joyce does, in "creating a kind of equivalent" (383) of the communication--with all its attendant gestures, inflections, nuances--actual people engage in.

As with all other fictional equivalents, this one is pure make-believe. Even when a well-intentioned writer employs elisions of one kind or another, wrenches orthography, lards in impressive quantities of dialect or profanity, and justifies such moves by declaring that he knows real people who speak thusly, he risks an effect exactly opposite of persuasion.

In trying so diligently to record people's actual utterances, a maker of fiction commits perhaps both the mistakes T.S. Eliot notes in some poets trying to write for the theater: "that of assigning to a personage lines of

poetry not suitable to be spoken by that personage, and that of assigning lines which, however suitable to the personage, yet fail to forward the action of the play" (101). However slight the incongruity created when a story teller assigns scrupulously real-life utterances to a fictional "personage," it is nonetheless irreconcilable for a reader.

Possibly the most important application of the theory behind making dialogue comes from another of Eliot's remarks about the poet's voice. Here, Eliot's distinction between two degrees of representation or approximation--mimicry and impersonation-- actually pertains to everything I am arguing about the nature of fiction in general. "The poet," he writes, ". . . cannot bring a character to life: he can only mimic a character otherwise known to us. And does not the point of mimicry lie in the recognition of the person mimicked, and in the incompleteness of the illusion? We have to be aware," he continues, "that the mimic and the person mimicked are different people: if we are actually deceived, mimicry becomes impersonation" (104). What I am suggesting is that every element of a fiction, from its character names and dialogue to its election to "dramatize" certain scenes and summarize others, should be pointed toward "impersonation," a make-believe so thorough and compelling that a reader never detects mere mimicry and, thus, an "incompleteness" of illusion.

We do not study well-made novels and short stories without desiring, quite understandably, to identify and

label the principles behind the creation and sustaining of a fictional impersonation. But such principles are elusive. "The only obligation," Henry James observes, "to which in advance we may hold a novel [or a fiction of whatever length], without the accusation of being arbitrary, is that it be interesting." It goes without saying that a fiction will hardly convince us if it does not first engage our interest. Well and good. But how, then, does one achieve the first end? James' response should be etched in the tombstone of every forgotten how-to-write guidebook ever written: "The ways in which [fiction] is at liberty to accomplish this result (of interesting us) strike me as innumerable, and such as can only suffer from being marked out or fenced in by prescription" (8). Frustrated writers may find little consolation, or even counsel, in such a statement, but they should admire James' honesty and, more to my point, the accuracy of his expression.

He agrees, for instance, with Mr. Walter Besant (the person to whom his essay is indirectly addressed) that fictional characters "must be clear in outline." "But how he shall make them so is a secret between his good angel and himself." No one way--or even two or three--guarantees good characterization. "It would be absurdly simple," James adds, "if [a writer] could be taught that a great deal of 'description' would make them so, or that on the contrary the absence of dialogue and the multiplication of 'incident,' would rescue him from his difficulties" (12).

But no such advice serves.

There really are innumerable ways to confront human experience in a fictional context. These ways proliferate in our minds in numbers inversely proportionate to those available to the student who would measure--and limit--fiction according to its degree of correspondence to his peculiar, idiosyncratic reality. To reemphasize, reality certainly matters but mainly because a writer must always play off it, without necessarily trying, in any meticulously comprehensive way, to transcribe or account for its every fact and facet.

All of which leads us to the rock-bottom practicality of making fiction. James is the first to admit that "you will not write a good novel unless you possess the sense of reality." But he also admits, characteristically, that "it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being" (10). What an astonishing number of writers and readers want is exactly that: a recipe for making compelling stories, a formula for rendering something as delicate and subjective and intricately universal as human experience. And it is this desire for a prescription that makes so alluring the misconception that we somehow judge the value of a made-up story by how stringently it adheres to a concrete and factual and documentable real life.

Fiction demands far more than an all-inclusive cataloguing of the actualities of a real-life existence,

more than a facile amassing of nouns and adjectives in its countenancing of experience. Despite the classroom truism about "showing" as opposed to "telling" and the overworked "realism" label, mimetic verisimilitude is not the chief goal of the fiction writer. If exacting verisimilitude were his only concern, he could satisfy himself in every descriptive passage with an exhaustive enumeration of everything in (and outside) the fictional picture--every speck of dust, blade of grass, leaves, trees, every hue of sky, any and all character thoughts and fears, much quipping and querying, every gesture and reaction down to the least twitch. But as Wellek and Warren point out, "the reality of a work of fiction--i.e. its illusion of reality, its effect on the reader as a convincing reading of life--is not necessarily or primarily a reality of circumstance or detail or commonplace routine" (213). Wayne Booth implies, further, that more than one writer has ruined a story by fixating on a sort of warped recipe for "realism": "Physical immediacy, sought by some modern novelists as if it were always a virtue, is a weapon that can easily destroy a work if used indiscriminately" (60).

At the same time, however, I--like James--am "far from intending . . . to minimize the importance of exactness--of truth of detail." In fact, James goes so far as to "venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of the novel--the merit on which all its other merits . . . helplessly and

submissively depend" (11-12). As notable a man of letters as Roland Barthes conjectures that the reason people "enjoy in certain novels, biographies, and historical works the representation of the 'daily life' . . . of a character" is because the (seemingly?) "petty details" of that life may well create "the hallucinatory relish of 'reality'" (408). Admittedly, such "relish" serves as perhaps the chief impetus in the reading of a fiction.

As vital as it is, though, a fastidious attention to particularity cannot ever become an end unto itself. While a piece of writing will go absolutely nowhere so long as it floats on clouds of generality and summation, the curative effect of anchoring specifics will not, in and of itself, guarantee success. To be sure, particularity is the sine qua non of almost any writing, but it must come in harmony with a good many other considerations. Many people enjoy an acuity of vision in detailing their real-life surroundings, perhaps even a facility for articulating their sensibilities, and can do so with some rhetorical grace. But to create and advance a compelling fiction, one has to be capable of a judicious--and sometimes inexplicable, perhaps even logically indefensible--selection of that detail.

At the risk of being abstruse, I would propose that we are dealing with two versions of "real" life, roughly analogous to two "versions" of a person with whom we wish to become acquainted. We seek familiarity with one version by

learning all manner of factual and biographical information (age, culture, affinities, aversions, height, weight, general appearance, and other more disparate minutiae). If asked to describe this person, we could, of course, compose a long list of details--all of them accurate, all of them documentable--and conclude that we have portrayed this person the way he or she really is.

But there is another kind of acquaintance and familiarity that exhaustive historical information can never adequately reflect. To point to this other version of an individual, one could only hope, through a careful, and perhaps imaginative, representation (which would undoubtedly call for some credibly presented biographical facts) to make this one individual recognizable to any human being anywhere.

Perhaps universal familiarity--facilitated by the second version of reality, limited or frustrated by the first--is not so far distant from the "participation mystique" Carl Jung attributes to effective art. He pronounces a fiction successful when it involves a "level of experience at which it is man who lives, and not the individual, and at which the weal or woe of the single human being does not count, but only human existence" (1023). To presume a bit of interpretation, I would say that individual characters do matter a great deal in stories, precisely because of their individual "weal and woe," but only insofar as we come to know, through them, the second, higher version

of "real" existence. What any fine literature does is to somehow make us aware of the ubiquitous points at which our private weal and woe intersect those of all other human beings. In his own analogy, Morris Cohen indicates that "fictions, like maps and charts, are useful precisely because they do not copy the whole, but only the significant relations." In line with Cohen's concept, I am suggesting that fiction's mapping of reality, drawn carefully to scale, is ultimately more familiar to more readers than a purely photographic depiction ever could be. This familiarity stems from the premise that the "significant relations" mentioned "are identical in analogous cases," that "we perceive and master the flux of phenomena only when we see running through it the threads of identity" (112). The enduring paradox of make-believe is that it reveals such threads much more economically than truthful real-life reportage ever could.

Mimetic detail alone will forever leave a fiction wanting, a conclusion made much clearer when we remember what Picasso says about the "lie" that enables us to perceive truth. The "truth" communicated by a fiction obviously transcends exactly accurate imitation. I am speaking of the difference between reflective duplication and selectively balanced representation. Booth's long discussion of Henry James' mirror metaphor in The Art of the Novel helps us differentiate these two processes. While Booth agrees that the "observer" in a fiction (a term that

refers to narrative control but which also applies here, I think, to the writer) "must be 'the most polished of possible mirrors'" (45), he goes on to warn that "the illusion will be sacrificed if the mirror is too highly polished." Again quoting James, he indicates that a brilliantly truthful mirror may, in effect, reveal too much of a given reality "'for our credence, for our compassion, for our derision'" (46).

Because it evolves, at its best, into nothing more than reality misrepresented as art, flawlessly precise duplication perhaps presents to a reader's sensibilities too many cues. Without some ordering, some positioning of its elements, the expanse of reality would confuse, even suffocate writer and reader alike. Still undaunted by this stricture, however, and bound as he is to a mimetic accounting of reality, the purist true-grit writer must do something to make his work sound like fiction. Perhaps he claims, as hundreds do, that his "creative" story is "loosely" biographical (all fiction is loosely based on human biography), thus justifying--supposedly--his characters and chronology. But to satisfactorily disguise this real-life history as fiction, he must throw in some symbolism or motifs or themes or metaphors, thus veiling the story's nature as nothing more than the chronicle of a real person's real life.

As Booth points out, the main deficiency of such "fiction" rests with the fact that "there can be no

intensity of illusion if the author is present, constantly reminding us of his unnatural wisdom" (45). Such wisdom is betrayed when we first discern that the writer presumes to make a fiction without leaving behind enough of his own real world--including his own author's voice and often a tiringly obtrusive thematic agenda. The whole premise of writing, according to Booth, is that it "falsifies life." Even those fascinated with mimetic verisimilitude would have to acknowledge that "any sense of composition or selection" imposes an order or system of priorities nonexistent in actual life. With every word he puts down, the writer remakes actuality. Whether or not he does this remaking consciously and artistically is beside the point. To deal with words is to take liberties. To understand fiction is to understand that taking liberties is the whole point. Indeed, Booth argues that "all fiction requires an elaborate rhetoric of dissimulation" (44).

Part of the "lie" behind an art like fiction is nothing more disturbing than what Booth goes on to call "unnatural ordering." Only through such manipulation "can art achieve an intensity not to be found in life." It is this intensity that mere mimetic verisimilitude cannot effect. To return to the two-version analogy, we cannot thoughtfully or thoroughly know anyone simply on the basis of biographical information, however abundant. We have to quickly qualify, though, this notion of ordering. A writer is always constrained to make choices that contribute to a fiction's

power of illusion. Booth indicates that this "intense illusion of truth" is so paramount that a writer who knows what he is about will sacrifice "both structure and literal truth" for it (45). Only by thus sacrificing can a writer arrive at a higher truth accessible to all readers, and not just those privy to one specifically literal actuality.

The premise of fiction, then, is that it aims for a persuasive illusion of life, not a poorly masked allusion to it. Over and over, important author-critics have, in one fashion or another, suggested this very idea. Henry James himself identifies the writer's responsibility "to represent and illustrate" (6). Poe may have illusion in mind when, early in his "Philosophy of Composition," he remarks that he prefers "commencing" any such discussion "with a consideration of an effect" (1432). Indeed, it is the effect of reality to which the story teller aspires. For their part, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren liken fiction to "a tissue of significances" (600). Similarly, Wellek and Warren refer to it as a "'case history'--an illustration or exemplification of some general pattern or syndrome" (214). We would have to identify this "general pattern" as nothing more or less than the whole of experience and acknowledge that any one compelling fiction can, in a way disproportionate to its length or explicit "theme," reveal and illuminate that pattern.

Finally, James echoes these efforts to articulate how a fiction connects to, draws from, interestingly and

selectively mirrors experience. He urges the story teller to "try and catch the colour of life itself" (22). This a writer will accomplish--and a reader will perceive--only if he realizes that fiction can do more than report life; somehow it can stand in for it with a power peculiar to its mode. As Brooks and Warren remind us, "the underlying significance of all fiction may be the faith of the writer that experience itself is significant and is not a mere flux of unrelated items" (600).

This faith impels a writer to attempt what James, in his preface to The Ambassadors, calls the "squeezing-out" of the value of human existence (37). To stop at mimetic reportage and rigid duplication would be to leave value unacknowledged, and this a writer cannot do. Ultimately, writers make fictions, I am convinced, because in and through their efforts to render a make-believe compellingly, they can communicate the value of experience as they can in no other way.

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JUST BETWEEN GOD AND FERRILL RAY

My brethren and sisters! My dear cherished brethren and sisters! I would indeed be remiss this beautiful morning if I didn't stand on my feet and thank God for my myriad blessings. That's the way my Uncle Ferrill Ray Pratt, hog and potato farmer, always launches, almost yelling, into his testimonials at church. Booming nasal tones--because of his bum ear--ringing in the chapel's sound system, like talking loud enough, with lots of phony instant emotion, will make everybody believe what he says. Good old fast and testimony service and devotional, first Sunday of every month, like clockwork--all my life. He doesn't need to fast. His kids even call him Jack Sprat when Aunt Naomi can't hear them. She's the big one, well over two-fifty on her trimmest days, sits through church with that smile, hair piled up, flower muumuu, Kleenex for her emotions when the spirit burns in her bosom. There is expanse aplenty for that fire to take hold, I tell you. She could fast for forty days and forty nights, no problem whatsoever.

"Wasn't the spirit just so strong?" she always asks my mom. They're sisters--by blood, not just church. "Wasn't it wonderful? Weren't all the testimonies fantastic? Weren't the flowers pretty?" Aunt Naomi stocks the podium

with floral arrangements almost weekly--looks like a greenhouse sometimes, Bishop Dingleton poking his head through the foliage to announce invocations and benedictions and a good quantity of syrup in between.

"We do thank Sister Pratt for these lovely flower arrangements, for her and her good husband's faithful devotion to the Kingdom. They are a wonderful family, and we're blessed to have them in our midst."

Their wonderful family sits on a pew up front, on the organ side of the chapel--seven blessed spirits wedged in between Uncle Ferrill Ray on the aisle and Aunt Naomi at the other end of that white oak bench, hip hollows worn from ten thousand Sabbaths of faithful attendance. Multiply and replenish. They are a fertile pair, asking my folks the whole time I was growing up when they planned to have more than just me and my little sister. My dad always tried to laugh. "We're doing all we know to do, Ferrill."

Uncle Ferrill Ray gives thanks for his seed every time he stands during testimony meeting. He doesn't wait for either of the youth ushers to string the microphone cord way up to that front pew. He stands, clears a month's phlegm from deep in his throat, swallows hard, runs his hand through hair slicked straight back, shiny with Vitalis. Aunt Naomi smiles up at him, that pew begging her to heave to her feet after him--which she always does--and offer some relief to its overloaded oak fiber. While her beloved spouse bears his longish testimony, she grabs the closest

child in a headlock, kisses it, wipes her eyes, the whole show.

My beloved brethren and sisters. I feel so very blessed this day. I am truly one of God's most unworthy servants when I consider the numerous joys and bounteous blessings of my life--chief among them the opportunity to raise up some of the choice youth of Zion. I would indeed be most negligent and remiss if I didn't thank the Lord publicly this morning for smiling on me and my dear sweetheart in such a glorious fashion.

All that smiling and bounty and worthiness makes me want to throw up. Twenty years I've been hearing about Uncle Ferrill Ray's blessings. That's what this is all about. You won't understand this story unless you know some things about Uncle Ferrill and how blessed he is.

He and my dad started farming the same year, famous Idaho potatoes going to prosper them both. They knew each other from when Burley played Rupert in football--highlight of my dad's life when they beat them one time, one single time in five or six years. They both took FFA, started out with little bitty places over here at Heyburn, a mile from each other--same kind of overgrown ditches, dike irrigation, lava spots in the middle of a field. They had the same kind of machinery--old double-lung John Deere tractors, two-bottom trip-spin plows, hay rakes ready to fall apart unless you greased them every twenty feet. They actually owned a grain drill together, bought it at an auction

outside of Jerome, paid a hundred dollars back in 1951. My dad tells this story all the time. He had to put up the whole wad because Uncle Ferrill didn't have fifty dollars cash. They lashed the drill's tongue to my dad's car bumper with chain, trailed it home at ten miles an hour. They both wanted to farm pretty bad.

One time I asked Uncle Ferrill how long it took to come from Jerome to Heyburn at ten miles an hour.

"Now what's this, nephew?" he says, like he's foggy or I'm nuts. I reminded him--the drill, the auction, the fifty dollars. He shakes his head, smiles that kindly super-spirituality smile he's learned from Aunt Naomi. "You sure your daddy's got the story right?" Pats my shoulder. "You best check it out with him. I don't hardly remember any fifty dollars. But I could be mistaken."

The story's right. You bet your Jack Sprat it's right, Uncle Ferrill. My dad doesn't doctor up his life for testimonials. He knows how it was. He married my mom--Gwen. But Uncle Ferrill married Aunt Naomi even earlier, got a jump on the multiplying, and a lot of other things, from the beginning. That's when this all started. Do you know how my Uncle Ferrill Ray got in the hog business?

My dad gets drafted to Korea, turns over five pregnant sows, some York gilts, and a registered Duroc boar--his whole bunch--to Uncle Ferrill for some measly percentage of the litters. And he rents his place to him for next to nothing. The land isn't much to brag about, I got to admit.

But those pigs were a gold mine. Best pork cross in the world, Duroc and Yorks. My dad was desperate, didn't know if he'd even come back but wanted something to offer my mom if he did. And Uncle Ferrill Ray could take fine care of his new hogs because he didn't get drafted. They said his hearing was bad in one ear. Guns, bombs, grenades--he'd have heard those, same as anybody. The guy hears what he wants to hear. And he remembers the same way.

My faith waxes strong, dear Christian soldiers, when I realize how God opens the windows of heaven on even the least of his children--as long as they try to walk in His paths. So gird up your loins, brethren and sisters. Fresh courage take. The Lord is no respecter of persons. I know that for a fact!

None of Aunt Naomi's or my mom's brothers wanted to farm Grandpa's place over by Declo. Smack when Dad's driving truck in Korea, Grandpa gets shingles real bad, decides he's too old for farming, scared to death he's got no family to work the place--three hundred acres of prime flat fields, neighbors drooling for a chance to sink their plows into it.

Whatever's fair, says Uncle Ferrill Ray, big heart, fair mind, generous and selfless all around. Write Lester. See what he wants to do. See what he says. Gwen is the older sister.

Do you know what my Dad said? Do you know what his grand business sense came up with? Go ahead, Ferrill, my

brother, my friend, my fellow farmer. Go ahead and do what you think's best. You're there and I'm not. It would be foolish for you to pass up this opportunity. My future is uncertain, and I can't ask Gwen's father to risk his life's work on an uncertainty.

My mom has told him a million times how big of him that was, how God has blessed him in less visible ways for his generosity in a delicate situation, for his wanting to keep peace and harmony in the family. Is there one of us really believes that? He could have been just as peacemaking with a thousand acres of his own.

My dad's letter was barely out of the mailbox when Uncle Ferrill started moving onto Grandpa's place in time for planting in 1952. He and Aunt Naomi sent a Christmas card to Korea after their wheat and potatoes and sugar beets--and thrifty crossbreed feeder hogs--all sold at top dollar. A model b.s. card for all the years since. May the good Lord bless you as richly as he has us, and may we always keep in mind that which is truly important.

You can guess the rest of this, except for maybe one part. And that's what I'm getting to. My dad came home a couple of years later to his rocky plot in Heyburn, empty hog sheds, moldy feed ration hardened in troughs, machinery even more worn out from sitting idle than from hard use. In a letter he'd offered to loan it all to Uncle Ferrill Ray when he and Aunt Naomi first took on Grandpa's three hundred acres. But they didn't want it. No sooner does Dad get

home than Uncle Ferrill brings the old grain drill back, says it won't cover near enough ground in a day. Besides Grandpa's, he's renting eighty acres of corn and wheat--raising his own hog ration--along the road to Albion and says he needs some big equipment. But he still wants my dad to buy back his half of that damn drill, when my dad's not so sure Uncle Ferrill ever paid a half in the first place. But Uncle Ferrill Ray knows how to talk. You ought to hear him. I can imagine how he said it. We've always treated business as business, Lester. Safest thing for everybody concerned. That's the way to avoid contention in family dealings. And it's the best way I can think of for me to get rich.

My dad really wanted to get back into hogs when he got out of the Army. So he asks Uncle Ferrill how much for five pregnant sows. Uncle Ferrill assures him everything's gone way up, but he'll be as fair as anybody.

And then look what happened. Except for one year, one season in the twenty I've been around, Uncle Ferrill gets blessed with the good things of the earth, and my dad gets blessed, as Mom says over and over, with the things you can't put a price on. So everybody's even and happy.

No. It's not even and fair, it's not right, and nobody can explain it because it makes no sense. That's just the way it is, but people will never admit that. They got to have a reason. God wants you a big rich farmer, or he wants you to muck through all your life. And either way's fine,

just so that's what God wants. It's bullcrap.

It's that one season I'm going to tell you about, but you got to have some idea of what all the others were like.

For five, ten years after Korea, my dad works his butt off to make his place pay. He buys a chip of ground here or there until he's got pretty close to two hundred acres. I remember the day he told me a man had to have two hundred acres in this age and time just to make a decent living. I remember him telling me that when I was eleven or twelve, getting up with him in the middle of the night when our water turn came.

But every time we got another ten acres or twenty, and I think we're going big-time, my cousins tell me they got another hundred somewhere. Every time we save seven pigs in a litter, Uncle Ferrill weans fifteen or twenty at top weight. When I was fourteen my dad finally affords a tractor with a diesel engine instead of those old propane bubbles you can never see around--a McCormick Farmall 566. It was used, but I really loved that tractor, loved its power steering and seat with a real cushion instead of an old rug or gunny sack. The block was steam-cleaned, not coated with grime and wheat chaff. It could pull a three-bottom without tearing its guts out, go all day and not burn a drop of oil. And it was painted fresh red with white trim, rubber grips still on the throttle and hydraulic levers.

When I told cousin Harley about it in Sunday school, he

almost snickered. He's trying to be polite--"No lie, a 566?"--choking back hysterics. I'm sure Aunt Naomi told them to be polite to me and my sister. "That's good. Daddy says they were a real good old tractor." He's just as humble as his folks, waits a proper second before he tells me they just bought a brand new John Deere 3440.

It was always that way. If we get a Plymouth, they get a Chrysler. We finally get aluminum syphon tubes so we don't have to shovel notches in our ditchbanks, and Uncle Ferrill converts two thirds of his operation to wheel-line sprinklers. We get a badminton set for Christmas, they get a pool table. We finally get a decent black and white TV, and they're inviting us over to see Ed Sullivan on their new color console. We take a trip over to tour the capitol in Boise and think it's a big deal for our motel to have a heated pool. Uncle Ferrill Ray and Aunt Naomi take their whole gang to Disneyland and get pictures with a movie star in Hollywood. A few years back we get a new spout and spigot set, stainless steel double sink in the kitchen, and they buy a dishwasher.

Everything they have and do and say and think and dream and lie about has always been bigger and better than anything we can come up with. Aunt Naomi raises strawberries, raspberries, has peach and cherry trees bearing heavy every summer. And she has flowers. My mom loves flowers, can't get anything but a few weakling irises to grow around our patio--in dirt I wheelbarrowed from the

floor of our irrigation lateral when the water was out.
"That Naomi sure has a green thumb," she says.

Same tone as my Dad's when he drives real slow by Uncle Ferrill's fields, sees potato vines and beet leaves giant and bushy, solid bumper crop from sea to shining sea. And the wheat. Uncle Ferrill does the humility bit and claims something like a hundred and eighty bushel an acre. Modern-day manna, my fellow Saints. He probably really does get a hundred and ten. You've never seen wheat so high and even, especially out on his fifteen-hundred-acre lease on the Snake River Plain. He never says anything in his testimonial about lucking into that lease, how the government almost paid him to farm the ground. Anybody who sows crop on soil that prime is going to make a good harvest. Jumbo spuds just for thinking about big yields. It's the ground out there, and plenty of water, and later freezes. That's what's on Uncle Ferrill's side. But my dad thinks it's something else.

"How does the guy do it?" he whispers. "How?"

And every month of every year, my aunt and uncle are saying it's God who's done this for them. They're real crafty and meek about it, of course. In their whispery spiritual voices they say they know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the good Lord has smiled on them far beyond what they could ever merit before the judgment bar.

In my opinion, the Lord Almighty wants and expects his humble followers to enjoy the fat of the land--so long as we

prayerfully acknowledge its source. For it's all His. All of it! And he could snatch it all away in the twinkling of an eye. Then, my kind brethren and sisters, what would we do?

He must rehearse in his sleep. Who could say that stuff seriously? Over and over, the same spiel. All I really need to be happy, to be at peace with my Maker, is my family and my faith.

Sometimes he has his kids stand up beside him in the pew, Aunt Naomi holding a baby or two. He points to them one by one, gets shaky with emotion. This, my good fellow Saints, is the source of all peace and bliss we can know in mortality.

Then he goes into the poverty thing, says if he lived in a tent on the Snake River, or in a sod hut like his brave pioneer forebears, he could be just as happy as he is farming two thousand acres--just as long as he has his seed with him. I've been to enough testimony meetings to know the only people saying that sort of baloney are the ones with big houses.

When I tell you about Uncle Ferrill Ray's new house, you'll start to see how this all ends up. He invited the whole congregation for a housewarming barbecue in late May one year, even sent out invitations--to us, too. Mr. and Mrs. F. Ray Pratt request your presence. He loves that initial, thinks up reasons to use it. The whole week before the barbecue he had eight or ten of his hired Mexicans and

Indians hauling furniture and boxes into the new house so it'd be ready for a show-off tour.

He didn't want Aunt Naomi lifting one pudgy finger. She was great with another child, waddling around their lawn sod--fresh laid, hauled clear from American Falls--asking people if they were finding anything at all to eat. She said this standing between two long columns of fold-up tables heaped with food. Besides the fold-up tables--borrowed from church--there were half a dozen sheets of plywood set on barrels and sawhorses to hold the extra Jello and green-bean casseroles. More potato salad and crocks of baked beans than any fellow Christian will ever again lay eyes on. Tons of rolls, other salads, tanks of lemonade. And a whole York-Duroc pig turning around and around on a big pipe and sucker rod spit. It had to take one of those Mexicans or Indians a whole week to weld such a thing. I tell my Dad we couldn't use a hired hand if we had one. Thinking up silly things like that to keep them busy. How would you like to hire on as a tractor and combine driver and end up turning a pig over hot coals?

Uncle Ferrill goes first class, that's for sure. Mesquite coals shipped from Texas and sauce everybody crowed about because they saw the price sticker on the bottle. He cooked a side of beef, too, slow simmered in a big steel drum, somebody else's welding project for a week or two. People teased him. Since when does Brother Ferrill Pratt worry about any animal except hogs? He laughs right along,

says he doesn't want any of God's edible creations feeling slighted.

And his prayer to commence the whole deal--it lasted a good ten minutes. Uncle Ferrill Ray stood in the back of his pickup, held out his arms like Moses, to shush everybody, said in his loud nasal boom, "Lest we be ingrates, Father, let us extend our thanksgiving and praise this special evening. Pilot us this day and always, particularly as we enjoy this bounteous repast, and bless those marvelous hands responsible for its preparation." He pinched his eyes shut the whole time and kept his hands spread out on the cab.

On and on about the land's bounty, God's mercy bestowed on His modern pioneers, the righteous toil of His people, nature's tempered spirit, full reservoirs, bright sunshine, harvesting two- and three-hundred fold from the sweat of the Pratts' brow.

Uncle Ferrill Ray always acts that way with any kind of crowd listening--when he takes the youth group out on Lake Walcott in his boat or drives the young marrieds to West Yellowstone to try out his new snowmobiles. I'd bet money he gives them his whole sermon on being blessed. He always works in some story about how righteousness--especially his and Aunt Naomi's--pays dividends in the end. And he isn't talking about heaven and salvation. He means it really pays off here in the mortal sojourn. Deep down, that's what people with big houses and Chryslers always mean. God

doesn't forget a soul--not a sparrow, not a hair. And certainly nobody as meek and lowly and business smart as F. Ray Pratt.

But here's why I remember the cookout, besides Aunt Naomi licking barbecue sauce from her fingers like a milking machine and cousins Harley and Darrell giving girls rides on their motorcycles--and every word of Uncle Ferrill's ten-minute prayer.

Bishop Dingleton loaded his paper plate--the good thick kind, won't soak through and wilt--and came to sit by me and my folks on a couple of hay bales.

"How do, Lester . . . Gwen?"

Fine, fine, fine, just fine. Super. That's nice. Beautiful evening, pleasant weather for May, not many mosquitos. The whole run of cheerful fakiness.

Then Bishop Dingleton's wife walks up, says she's never tasted pork so tender. "I don't know what Brother Ferrill Ray does to it, but this is nigh unto perfect."

Talk, talk, talk, about this and that, and then Bishop turns to my mom, gets a little more personal.

"You and Sister Naomi are family, aren't you?"

He knew they were because he asked the same thing a year earlier when he came to our house for a fellowship visit. I could tell what he really wanted to know was how my dad and Uncle Ferrill could both be farmers of the same crops, same pigs, in the same country, and one be rich, throwing barbecues for the whole congregation, and one be

the same as poor. That's what Dingleton was digging for.

"Isn't this lawn gorgeous?" Sister Dingleton says. She sits on a hay bale, tough paper plate in her lap. Bishop doesn't answer except to nod a little. He'd seen the scraggly patch between our cottage--I swear, that's what he called it--and the Russian Olive windbreak to shelter a bunch of junk machinery and a stack of old tires. Our grass won't spread or get any thicker no matter how many springs my mom re-seeds.

And then Sister Dingleton asks the dumbest question in the world. She's chewing, just blabbing while she eats, doesn't mean anything, isn't thinking too bright or serious about much except how tender her pork is.

"What do you suppose Brother Ferrill ever did to deserve all this?"

She waves her arm and lumps everything in her question--new house, giant metal shop with cabtractors and big bright machinery parked all around it, fuel tanks, shiny hog sheds down the road, stink luckily blowing away from the party. And all two thousand acres, wherever they are.

She laughs. "All I can say is he must be in pretty good with God. That's all I can say."

Bishop Dingleton looks antsy, smiles at my folks. "Blessings are tricky," he says. "We never know what the Lord has in mind for us."

My folks didn't say a word. It was the same simple, stupid thing people said all the time about Uncle Ferrill,

trying to figure it all out. How do you figure something like that? There's no way.

My dad didn't even finish his meal. He folded that plate around his beans and salad, poured his lemonade on the grass, threw it all in a big trash bin by the dessert tables and started walking toward our car.

"Where you going?" Uncle Ferrill Ray yells after us. "There's a lot of hog need's eating yet."

"I believe I've had aplenty," my dad says. Then he says, "Thanks just the same."

I know it doesn't seem like much of a big deal just talking about it, but we never went back to Uncle Ferrill's new house after that night. After a while, I started to think that the only thing's ever going to change Uncle Ferrill Ray, shut him up, cork all the meekness in testimony meeting, is something tough happening to him. No car wreck or cancer or choking to death on a piece of meat. No accidental shooting or falling into a machine of some sort. Nobody dying--not that. Although he and Aunt Naomi would learn a thing or two about blessings if they ever saw the look on my mom's face--and Dad's, too--when she had that last miscarriage. I wish Uncle Ferrill could learn from such things.

My folks wanted a baby bad. I know they did. Mom never told anybody but us when she got pregnant because she was tired to death from the other times, having to explain to church people why she never got any bigger. Once Bishop

Dingleton even announced for everybody to keep us in their prayers, and the congregation dedicated their fast to us. I tell you the truth, though, the sympathy was as hard for my folks to take as no baby. Tuna noodle casseroles, loaves of bread, cakes, pies. Phone calls and fellowship visits and questions in the church foyer to count for somebody's monthly service project. If there's anything we can do. Five hundred women from Ladies Relief Society said that. I know just how you must feel. Guess who said that?

My mom cried after Aunt Naomi's visit, bit her lip and clenched her fists at my dad and sister and me, and at God and the whole world. "How can she say such things? It's almost more than I can bear, Lester. Almost more than I can bear."

When she finally had a hysterectomy, she didn't tell a soul, went to the hospital in Twin Falls so nobody would see her name in the paper.

"You understand this is just between us and the good Lord," my dad told me and my sister.

Our trials and tribulations make us strong, my brethren and sisters. They refine us. How would you know, Uncle Ferrill? I don't know how God feels about real nasty hurts, but I don't like them. No formula to it.

So I didn't wish anything that bad on him. All I wanted was an ordinary mix of tough breaks, some real first-class hard luck. Just a normal dose. I can't say his life was a fairy tale. I'm not saying that. When wheat

fungus or grasshoppers or beet blight came along, Uncle Ferrill always got a taste of it. He got nipped a few times with late frosts, same as my dad or anybody else. And you don't farm over two thousand acres without getting hailed on somewhere, sometime. But it was like he got the flavor of that sort of thing and then could dodge the whole swallow.

Uncle Ferrill's tribulations never really hurt him, if you can understand me. That's what I'm saying. Even when their daughter Rona poked her eye with a stick or Darrell broke his leg bad falling off a horse--had to wear a brace for nine months--and even when they found a black mole on one of Aunt Naomi's sizeable breasts, somewhere on the expanse, it all turned out okay, better than ever. Rona's got twenty-twenty vision, Darrell's a football hotshot, and the mole was benign, no threat whatsoever to that nurturing cleavage. And to hear their testimonies, the happy endings were guaranteed because God loved them extra much--a few prayers, anxious moments, a little testimony trauma, and presto. Just for once, I wanted something not to be so fine and dandy for Uncle Ferrill Ray. Just for once.

When his hogs started dropping dead from cholera--that came close. He bulldozed a burial pit and killed about two hundred of them himself before it could spread to his other sheds and pens. What ruined the cholera, though, was my dad's hogs got it, too. And we couldn't afford to lose near as many. It took me a month to disinfect our panels and feeder bins with a rag and bucket of bleach water--no

Mexicans or Indians to boss around.

But then finally comes this season I've been leading up to. Something happened to Ferrill had never happened to him before. His potatoes got core rot. And this wasn't like other years when he planted only a quarter of his ground to spuds. In the spring he guessed right--like he always does--about the beet market going sour, so he planted some piddly amount of them. And not very much wheat or corn, either--just enough to carry his hogs into the new year, when he figured--right on target again--he could buy grain just as cheap as he could raise it.

He put almost his whole place--eighteen hundred acres--in spuds. He had them everywhere. And up until August it looked like they were going to make him even richer. Ten dollars a hundred for all those potatoes. Until one morning he digs one when he's checking his water, washes it in a sprinkler nozzle, cuts into it with his big pocket knife like he always does--to eat his abundance raw--and he finds a brown stain at the core. A lot of things can rot one potato, but Uncle Ferrill pretty quick found out something was rotting all his. All eighteen hundred acres.

He came over to our place in a panic, first time his pickup's tire rubber touched the gravel of our yard in two years. He had two halves of a potato in his hand, wanted to know if my dad had found any rot in his crop. My dad says he sure has, says it looks pretty widespread and bad and

costly and dangerous for the whole valley. The processing plants are talking about the worst disaster in half a century. Once you notice the rot, it's too late to do anything about it. Some farmers were already disking their crops under.

Uncle Ferrill says, "My Lord, we could be wiped out." And he says this with real trouble and pain and worry in his voice.

Eighteen years I wanted to hear my dad's answer. And I think he'd been wanting to give it ever since 1952.

"I should be all right, Ferrill. I don't have but ten acres here behind the house, so we won't be out much."

Uncle Ferrill Ray stared at him, and I swear, the smile was gone. That Aunt Naomi testimonial smile was gone without a trace of fake meekness or humility. I know he wanted to act like he didn't hear quite right, but we all knew better.

"Well ain't you the lucky one," says Uncle Ferrill Ray Pratt, half mad at our little house and clunker tractors and two hundred acres growing crops worth at least something.

It was sweet. I hate to say it that way, but harvest that year was one of the sweetest times of my life. I'm not saying I loved seeing Uncle Ferrill try to dig those rotten spuds, so mushy they broke open on the digger's conveyor chains, left nothing but a smelly mess. Or that it was any fun driving out to the Plain lease and finding the banker's car next to Uncle Ferrill's pickup. Both men stepped real

slow across hill after hill--vines as bushy as ever--knowing the spuds underneath were worthless.

But I loved it when the testimonies stopped. Not a peep from that front pew during fast meeting. September, October, November--not one whispery breath about myriad blessings and the fat of the Lord. Aunt Naomi still smiled, but now it was like a smile to keep from crying--a whole lot different from the kind of smile she was used to.

I wish that was the end of the story. I truly do. Then I could make sense of Uncle Ferrill Ray and my dad and farming and this world. But what happens? Because Uncle Ferrill's loss was so disastrous and horrible and crushing, so complete and total--selling the boat and snowmobiles and motorcycles, selling off hogs way too early in a glutted market, the whole bit--the government comes in with some kind of insurance they pay only when a guy as big-time as Uncle Ferrill loses as big-time as he did two seasons ago. And they don't just cover the loss. They pay the guy for his grief. He ended up making more than he would've with healthy spuds at ten a hundred.

Before I knew it, he was standing again on fast and testimony Sunday, accounting to the Lord for blessings too numerous to mention in that setting. But, heaven help him, he was going to try.

I remember the testimony just after his first insurance payment. That slicked-back hair looked just a fleck or two grayer under the Vitalis, but he was in top spirits.

My brethren and sisters, I can truthfully affirm that the morning breaks and the shadows flee--if we just hold fast to our faith. God does bless us according to our needs.

What do you say to a guy like that? Amen, Brother Ferrill, amen? I can't do it. Not sitting there next to my mom and dad. I was glad for Uncle Ferrill Ray's hardship and problems, happy for his few months of misery. I can't lie about that. That rot made him humble for the first time in his life. Then he couldn't talk about it any more because there's nothing you can say. Do you see? There's nothing in the world you can say to explain why things happen. So people go for the baloney and meekness and syrup. And God knows that's not how living really is. Except maybe to a guy like Uncle Ferrill Ray. Except maybe to him.

ROSES DOWN THE FAIRWAY

Within a month after sewer, gas-line, curb and gutter authorization, a surveying crew parked their truck on a cactus patch just north of Riverton Country Club's golf course, unloaded transits and marker sticks, and before their morning coffee break hammered the first ribboned lath stakes into the baked ground of future Tropicana Subdivision home sites.

The steady tap tap tap of the surveyors' work floated across the sandtraps, the roughs, the carefully shorn grass of the fairways and greens. It floated across quaint ponds and electric fountains, over and around the paved cart paths, along the broad fairways. This sound, this tap tap tapping of venture, progress, possibility carried as far as the putting green outside the door of the Riverton Clubhouse itself and perked the ears of every man and woman freed from their schedules that morning for a few holes. At last a chance to build dream homes bordering their own playground, young and old professionals set to enjoy their respective seasons of living. At last the club community would be complete, all eighteen holes enclosed by one extensive nice neighborhood. People who had longed to live among their club fellows and sisters out here, away from the heavier

heat of Riverton's streets, the burdens of their offices, now had the chance. The demand for these plots, the most ideally situated in the valley, was sharp the instant there were any plots to be had--mid-career children wanting to relocate close to post-career parents, active members close to their clubhouse, golf lovers close to their game. So what a sweet, sweet investment it was for those who got in on the buying and selling of that sagebrush in the first place.

On the Tuesday morning the surveyors went to work, there were people who couldn't finish their games, women like Glenice Lowery who actually dropped their clubs on the putting green and ran to the nearest telephone, their tiny cleats clicking on the sidewalk. She, for one, was giddy, breathless, desperate to find out about the availability of those Tropicana lots. She had seen the sign announcing the future home sites and patiently lived her days and nights waiting for an opportunity to bid or buy or negotiate. And then suddenly on this regular Tuesday morning of coffee, Danish, and nine holes with friends, a regular Tuesday morning to occupy before worrying too much about that night's dinner club, those ribboned property stakes began marking off opportunities into real measurable sections. No matter that Glenice Lowery was long settled in another of Riverton's nice neighborhoods, supremely comfortable, established, someone for whom the short drive to the club was as routine as a trip for groceries. This sort of real

estate proposition came rarely in life, and she planned to take full advantage of it.

Within three months of sewer, gas-line, curb and gutter authorization, culverts and gravel roads tamed the worst of the new subdivision's gully and mole-hole terrain and brought lucky first-come, first-serve buyers for evening inspections of their newest property. City zoning had already assigned street names like Flamingo and Palm Nut, and lately club members had to do their golfing against the engine throb and occasional whiffs of diesel exhaust from backhoes chiseling the first footing trenches. The dry ground was misleading, realtors said. Pour enough water to her, they promised, and she'll blossom.

And buyers never doubted for an instant. This was chosen land. Despite some unexpected wind and biting flies, a dearth of trees, and dust they had never known to drift within the golf course's chainlink border, they looked with eager faces upon their plots and caught a vision of contentment as vast and assured as the country club's manicured greenness spread out before them.

At the edge of the ninth green, down a long fairway, the gable of retired Colonel Harmon and Glenice Lowery's new house loomed as a sort of target for members and guests feeling powerful with their drivers. No chainlink to overshoot anymore, no sagebrush in which to lose their fresh

dimpled balls, no uncertainty about how much muscle to use. Instead, there was the Colonel's house rising up like a temple of good fortune, something by which to gauge their depth perception. If club members and guests sent that first long drive anywhere close to the Lowerys' lawn, they put themselves within chipping distance of a green all but hidden around a dogleg. They dreamed of such shots, wagered tens and twenties on them. Often, on good days when the sun shone perfectly on colorful visors and sunglasses, shorts and cotton pullovers, the second or, more generally, the third stroke rolled onto the Colonel's lawn. But the prospect of reaching it in one always excited their play.

Once, after a few drinks, a planner of financial portfolios vowed to put that little white ball right through the window of the Lowerys' breakfast nook, right in the Colonel's corn flakes if that's what it took to break par on this hole. While Glenice Lowery would have enjoyed overhearing such a comment, while she enjoyed her home's place at the bottom of the fairway, she worried over it, too. Several times she woke in the night dreaming of bigger and bigger golf balls--the size of billiard balls, softballs, basketballs--crashing through the dozens and dozens of glistening panes in her home. What if someone someday actually found such strength of swing, such accuracy?

Meanwhile, the house was what she had always dreamed it must be, a landmark in this world of landmarks. To say that

it stood out is the sort of understatement club members loved to utter in reference to their own properties. Whenever a discussion of homes and furnishings arose, as it habitually did, those most given to the understatement of the club world performed admirably. Just four ordinary-sized bedrooms and three baths, and the gameroom and den--nothing spectacular. But we like it. Listeners of course nodded at such assertions and waited for their chance, in yet other, more exclusive discussions, to interpret the understatements as bald boasting, transparent pride, social insecurity.

So it was that twosomes and foursomes playing the ninth hole remarked what a monster Colonel Harmon Lowery's house was, despite Glenice's fond public description of it as our little place. And even though all who selected slightly pejorative synonyms for the dwelling--fortress, behemoth, castle, gymnasium--lived in ample homes themselves, they were right about the Colonel's. It was the biggest in the Tropicana subdivision. And Tropicana was a neighborhood full of two- and three-story brick creations, ranch-style split-levels, early Americans with pillars, Spanish-white stuccos with tile roofs--all sprawled on generous acreages, all appended by spacious garages, all within a golf cart's sprint of the clubhouse.

To stand out or above in this neighborhood represented a feat. In the early days of the subdivision, as houses rose safely on schedule, everyone spent great sums of money

to create, among other things, the illusion of native verdure. Everyone called turf specialists, landscapers, tree services, and soon the trucks came bearing pallets of sod, small forests of shrubs in plastic buckets, saplings with root pods carefully swathed in biodegradable burlap, the entire flower yield from local greenhouses. Day after day the trucks came to Tropicana, inevitably congesting traffic just a bit as drivers took care not to park too close to uncured curbs.

Laborers, crews of them in sleeveless T-shirts, Levis, laced boots, offloaded all this potted beauty, trenched channels for underground sprinkler systems (the best drought security available, realtors said), pieced together sod squares to form front and back yards of instant lushness, hauled shrub buckets to places assigned by landscape blueprints, shoveled transplant holes--and tried in all their efforts to satisfy home owners who badly wanted to be distinctive.

Because of this desire on the part of the homeowners, the turf specialists, tree services, landscapers and, later, the fence builders, dared not neglect or grow lax about any detail of their trade. With a Tropicana husband or wife, perhaps children on bicycles, always watching from somewhere, stopping off at the property for a quick peek, workers never buried slightly cracked sprinkler tubing, nor could they overlook faulty joint seals--as low bids and tight schedules occasionally constrained them to elsewhere.

They never laid sod on one square inch of hardpan without a thorough pre-soak, never planted an already feeble and browning azalea, and certainly never lopped the butt end off fence posts just to spare a measure of hard digging.

Even when the idiosyncratic tastes of the owners happened to violate aesthetics, the protocol of the trade, all good sense, the laborers nodded and complied anyway. White pebble shrubbery beds? Black pebble shrubbery beds? Gravel or crushed shale? Underlaid with black weed-proof plastic or the less reliably weed-proof but more environmentally compatible hemp-nylon weave Mother Earth landscaping fabric? Lovely fescue or hardy Bermuda? Whatever they wanted in the whole world was fine. It was, after all, their money.

Abundant, reliable, warmly familiar money. It gave Tropicana residents so many, many worthy options: pine-needle bedding, bark or sawdust mulch, cedar, redwood or oak chips--or native Great Lakes peat four, six, ten inches thick; the choice of peach trees here, dogwoods there, crepe myrtles at the corners, in the center, around the perimeter; petunias, tulips, irises, mums, impatiens, marigolds, pansies; tufts of liriope, sedge, variegata bordering, accenting, punctuating everything; lilacs, acacias, magnolias, burford hollies, forsythias, junipers, rhododendrons to frame and enhance these splendid properties. And all of it, all of it, the sod and shrub bosses agreed, in any combination, in any variety or pattern

or proximity, would look good and right and proper.

Fence contractors came last to nod on cue during husband-wife debates over four- or six-foot chainlink, wrought iron, cedar slat, split rail, or peeled pole for that certain look. A look like no other. That Tropicana Subdivision Riverton Country Club look.

It was precisely this appreciation of her options, this craving for singularity, that sustained Glenice Lowery when the general contractor balked at knocking a special door for her golf cart in the garage wall's fresh masonry. This particular request was more than simply an annoyingly capricious afterthought, as both the contractor and the Colonel argued. But there was no changing her mind, no persuading her to abandon that cute little door. This was the sort of craving that motivated her to adorn her house and grounds long after the workers left, to make them bear the Lowery signature. Hence, the little weather vanes in her flower beds, wind chimes over the patio doors, birdfeeder forever stocked with a neat portion of seed, set in one quadrant of the back yard next to a decorative antique water pump. And always, despite the aggravation they represented to the mowing crew, the never-played croquet wickets stood positioned as if for an imminent game.

Of all her touches, though, nothing delighted Glenice Lowery more than the hewn wooden nameplate--The Lowerys, Hank & Glennie--hanging beneath their mailbox. She spotted the nameplate man in his booth at a craft show, triggering

his chainsaw to notch and shave lengths of old timbers, gouge names to order with the tip of his chain bar--roughly asymmetrical but beautiful nonetheless. She knew in that instant she could go a step beyond other Tropicana nameplates fashioned from etched and burnished rock slabs, rosined cross sections of log, weathered corral planks, carefully bent reinforcement bar, miniature cabins supporting letters on their roofs.

For two weeks, Glenice Lowery enjoyed this particular measure of distinction, until a duplicate of the nameplate appeared beneath the mailbox of the Hillertons, four houses down. Over Danish at the club, Glenice overheard how Maureen Hillerton had come across the cutest booth at a craft show and had to have one of those nameplates. So there it was, The Hillertons, Tom & Maureen, swinging in the breeze four houses down, irritating Glenice Lowery until she noticed the silver chain and eyebolts suspending it from its mailbox platform. Her hardware, thank God, was brass.

But even more than the houses and the instant lawns and gardens, more than all the boats parked off-season on wide drives, snowmobiles shut away in the spacious garages, more than all this, the cars reflected Tropicana life--brand new and shrewdly dealt for, every one of them.

In due time each morning, after the Toyotas and Hondas sneezed to life and darted away to early practices and classes, the motorcade of Lincolns and Gran Marquises and Delta 88's, Regals and New Yorkers and Bonneville's glided

toward offices, agencies, clinics, practices, toward Riverton University; to brunches, workshops, seminars, coffees; luncheons, conferences, panels, teas. On their way to run a host of errands, women in mini-vans tooted horns at golfing companions, waved, left behind twin bags of trash beside the now fully cured curb, answering machines clicked on, remembered only after several blocks their intention to call and caution the paperboy with a poor aim. No one liked to fish among their flowers, their shrubbery--especially the barbed holly bushes--for the evening newspaper.

And each evening the cars returned in time for their owners to squeeze in a few holes, some tennis, a soak in the club Jacuzzi, an aerobics session before the evening's member function or benefit--in time for these people to enjoy, with what most of them considered a mocking brevity, the considerable fruits of their professional labors.

Such was the world into which Glenice Lowery wholly immersed herself when she and retired Colonel Harmon Lowery reestablished a home, for the last time, in the Tropicana subdivision. Such was the world as it appeared to those working the ninth hole each morning and afternoon. And yet even in this world, the Colonel's grand house was truly notable for reasons beyond its size and beauty, beyond even the opulence of carpets rarely sullied by so much as a clean slipper, guest beds never slept in, gameroom pool cues never

chalked.

No, what really made this house worthy of consideration was Glenice Lowery herself--a consideration the club family rarely exercised over coffee and Danish, in the club Jacuzzi, on the handsomely mowed aprons of picture-perfect greens. To call her, as some did, an indefatigable social climber was to single her out for a description applicable to almost every member of the Riverton Country Club. Likewise, to call her worldly or materialistic said nothing the house didn't already suggest. One had to see deeper. One had to know Glenice Lowery more fully than club fellows and sisters ever could, more appreciatively than neighbors who actually spoke at any length across the hedge or fence only when they loosed their dogs for ten minutes each evening.

Across a hedge or fence, they could not know the tenacity, the dedication, the perseverance, the loyalty of this woman--loyalty to her house and her shrubs and her cars and her hewn nameplate, and to the ideal behind such things. And more than all this, more than everything else, the loyalty for forty-three years to the Colonel, twenty-two of them on assignments overseas, seven or eight more spent intermittently in Stateside bases whose names became as familiar to Glenice Lowery as those of neighborhood streets do to most people. There was always another fort somewhere--Ord, Benning, Polk, Bragg, Hood, Lewis. Twenty-two years split between the Philippines, Okinawa,

Thailand, Java, Ponape, Guam--and several places she could not remember without consulting a map. She bore their daughter, their only child, in a fanless hospital in Quezon City, sent her to schools for international students in Bangkok, Jakarta, Kolonia, watched her graduate in Saipan with friends she had known six months.

Two and three and five years, sometimes stints as brief as three months, here and there, packing, unpacking, always moving somewhere else. And still, well inured to a schedule of this kind, Glenice Lowery held fast to the hope, the dream of a permanence that would someday compensate this transience. It was a dream to which she became stubbornly loyal. She would have her own home someday--no more rentals and subleases fortuitously arranged with other service families. No more despising floorplans, carpet hues, incorrigible odors. She fiercely believed she would one day have adequate shelf and closet space, reliable heating and cooling, a commodious kitchen with some means of swill disposal besides a covered bucket. The time went fast, veteran service wives assured her. At the Colonel's retirement they could, after a final obligatory year or two at a Stateside desk, go home to Riverton where a fullness of life, not to mention a marvelous financial security, awaited them.

On certain Christmases and during five or six of the twenty-nine summers, they timed long leaves to get back to Riverton, home for ten- and twenty-year reunions, several

graduations, home to new buildings, new businesses, a new generation of prominent people; home to parents, nieces and nephews growing older, friends growing more wealthy, everything happening on schedule, so intractably on schedule. Only seven or eight years into her marriage, Glenice Lowery first became vaguely aware, as only one long away from home can, of the abiding indifference of time and place and even people toward the absence of any one person. And though she tried, she could not write enough letters and postcards to belong to a world fifteen thousand miles away, could not really convince any one of her Riverton peers and classmates that, so many worlds away, she was their equal.

This is not to say Glenice Lowery suffered unhappiness for nearly thirty years. She did not necessarily pine for home or regard her life as fruitless or desultory. In everything she supported the Colonel, made a home for him, for their daughter. She listened endlessly to his talk of his work's political intrigue, listened with each new season as he grew hopeful, expectant, impatient for the next promotion. With each new set of orders, she tried to match his enthusiasm or sooth his disappointment.

At every reception and party, every toast, she stood by him, smiled and struggled through the greetings in foreign tongues, and genuinely felt as though she ought to recognize and appreciate some adventure peculiar to this lifestyle. Surely there were virtues in all this moving around, blessings to such rich exposure to other places. These she

would have missed had her course never called her away from Riverton's familiar parameters.

And as to her actual lifestyle in foreign places, Glenice Lowery found little cause for complaint. For meager wages she enjoyed the services of maids, chauffeurs, laundry boys, was able almost always to find food to suit her family's palate--no dog or horse meat, fish and rice only in moderation, a plenitude of fresh vegetables and fruit if one had a sharp houseboy who knew the market. On-base health care, while understandably limited, nevertheless met their needs--and it was free. The leg brace their daughter wore in third grade to correct an unacceptably severe pigeon toe, and her broken arm, her glasses, extensive dental work, three different pairs of contacts; Glenice's own appendectomy, thyroid surgery to excise a large but harmless cyst; the Colonel's hernia and hemorrhoid operations. Everything was free. Glenice Lowery caught herself thinking in random moments through those years that if destiny had in mind any relatively minor health setbacks for her family, she wished it would act on them while the army was liable.

Few circumstances of military life pleased her more than free checkups, doctors, hospital stays. According to her Riverton friends, at least those not married to men in medical professions, health care was so outrageously expensive at home, and she should count herself lucky. Essentially, Glenice Lowery did just that. She frequently reminded herself how fortunate she was, how others had life

much worse.

She felt the abundance of her situation most sincerely where her foreign acquaintances were concerned. She and the Colonel were well liked by their house help, chauffeurs, neighbors. At each departure, each new transfer, people bid farewell with gifts, tokens, mementos, souvenirs--a bonsai bush, exquisite dolls, beads, strings of shells, ornate island lapidary, leather work, and glass. She wept at such generosity, clutched each new gift to her bosom and wept as she kissed the giver's cheeks and wished in her heart she could preserve the face and feeling forever.

Only at night, in a new pension or suite, a new country and assignment, did she weep for any other reason. They had their daughter, took her home to their suite in Quezon City and loved her, delighted in her, planned for her a resplendent future. But after the Philippines, after a promotion and his new mantle of lieutenant colonel at the base in Naha, Harmon Lowery wanted a son, began to talk often of passing on his name, raising a boy into a fine, permanent profession, a boy to round out the family. He badly wanted this son, with a desire so urgent it rang in Glenice Lowery's ears when he turned to her at night and brushed his fingers under her ear, down and along her neck and collar. Only this one insurmountable, implacable reality marred her vision of contentment in any lasting way.

And even in this extreme of helplessness, this vagary for which nothing and no one was precisely responsible, she held

to the belief that something would happen to free her from her limitation, her urgency. In each new place, each new bedroom, she knew as certainly as she knew anything that this time everything would happen as she dreamed it would.

But not in ten years and finally not in twenty. By then her souvenir collection had swelled to occupy a full set of shelves. Couples at home regularly sent Christmas photos--boys and girls growing up before her eyes, boys and girls rounding out families, making full use of place-mat and silverware sets. And there were newspaper clippings, some of which she could certainly answer with clippings to evidence her own daughter's academic excellence, participation, leadership. But none to match the growing boys, the boys in athletes' uniforms, nothing ever to match them.

In time the Colonel's longing subsided. For a while he drank heavily, stayed away at card games or watched television late into the night. But he never mistreated her, never said anything mean or callous. Eventually they grew into their early forties, and his ambition for a full colonel's eagle, for retirement and life beyond gave him new purpose. As it did her.

Lying beside her one night, he held her hand and said they had been away from the States, from the ordinary life she deserved, long enough. He said she needed a proper cabinet for her souvenirs, something she could display to all her friends with pride. If she would just stay with him

a little while longer, a few final years until he merited a full pension to supply their wants and needs into old age, then he'd give her everything she could think of in the world. Everything she'd ever wanted.

It was amazing how smoothly Glenice Lowery reverted back to Riverton's society. All those years in places so far from this main street and business district, from the churches, three movie theaters, grocery stores, pharmacies, service stations, a new mall. And she came right back without any conspicuous disorientation. The only lingering effects from their time away were her stubborn scalp rash owing to the new arid climate and the Colonel's minor but persistent fatigue. An expensive dermatologist cured the rash with a foul-smelling salve and an order to wear scarves and hats for several weeks. As for the Colonel, his doctor said he had thirty years worth of fatigue coming and advised him to play a little golf and give up his cigars.

Almost as soon as they returned, the Lowerys, through friends, contacted various realtors and, because Tropicana was only a sketch on someone's drawing board, and because the country club neighborhood had not one available house or lot, they settled in a lovely home elsewhere. These same friends urged them to join the club, apprised them of membership fees, the protocol behind donations, explained what privileges their kind of financial security could buy.

Quite soon the six-mile trip to the club became routine. Their calendar filled with events and gatherings to which they were invited, at which they were, in fact, expected. When people asked, as they incessantly did, how the Colonel planned now to occupy his time, Glenice Lowery smiled and said he was going to enjoy doing absolutely nothing.

For nearly a month the Colonel enjoyed this nothing confined in the lovely new home with books he'd always wanted to read and an idea for a bit of writing about his years overseas. But she never saw the bookmark move, never saw more than a half page of his scrawl. What she did see was his reluctance to confront stairs, his resting after the slightest exertion, his standing at a window here or there, staring for longer and longer stretches, it seemed, at nothing in particular.

With undisguised eagerness she met his plan one morning to putter in the garage, perhaps build a shelf for basement storage, a shelf, they both agreed, no one would have to see. But when she interrupted her dusting to call him to his sandwich and salad, she found him sitting on a lawnchair among the half-sorted contents of an army duffel bag, gazing at the wall pegboard. On the workbench by the chest freezer, his power saw and drill rested with their cords still neatly coiled.

In time, he began to follow her about the house, wondering when she planned to start lunch, what she had in

mind for dinner. Before she went for groceries, to the post office, anywhere, he quizzed her for long minutes about the most banal details--which store, what was on sale, could they please try Colby cheese for a change, would she not buy the ugly bird postage stamps?

Finally one morning, as he followed her from clearing breakfast to making up the bed to the den where he stood over her payment of bills, she asked him if he might not enjoy spending a few hours at the club. She said that since they paid through the nose for the facilities, they ought to enjoy them while they were still young enough.

At first the Colonel spent only mornings at the club, but after a few weeks his stays extended further and further into the afternoon and, occasionally, into the evening. And at first his club brothers listened quite willingly, perhaps indulgently, to his bottomless repertoire of army stories. They glanced at their watches as inconspicuously as possible, sipped their various beverages only as quickly as decorum allowed.

When club members themselves grew scarce during the off-hours of the day, the Colonel spoke to anyone whose schedule could accommodate the shortest segments of his raconteuring--cooks, janitors, drivers of frozen food trucks, the boy who soaked the putting green each morning. Most club brothers her husband's age, Glenice Lowery discovered, had jobs, however nominal, duties, however superficial, places to be. She grew to envy their having

the best of work and retirement.

Not until she persuaded the Colonel to take up golf with some passion was she certain she could bear another twenty years or so of his leisure. With him out on a fairway somewhere, moving from hole to hole, a goal always before him in the form of a bright flag and little cup, she knew he would not so soon show the signs of retirement's atrophy nor bore his companions unduly.

And as a bright and blessed future would have it, one of those very companions told retired Colonel Harmon Lowery of the available instructorship in the business school. The Colonel had enough education, certainly enough experience trotting all over the world to do something like that. It was just what he needed, she thought. His doctor asked if he was up to it, if the fatigue still nagged him. The Colonel said he was healthy as a horse, had never felt better, said he wasn't about to sit down and rust.

What Glenice Lowery never told anyone was how welcome the money was. Payments on their lovely house perched scenically in a hillside neighborhood were nearly double what she and the Colonel had figured during their last months in the military. Plus one hundred dollar full-privilege monthly club fees, plus their daughter's exorbitant medical school tuition and jumps in every insurance, every category of tax, such ridiculous prices for cleaning people she could afford a lady to do her floors only once every two weeks. Every charity organization with

access to the club roster sent letters asking for minimum fifty and hundred dollar donations. A lady from the Riverton University Alumni Association called to say she understood the Colonel was part of the university family again and asked Glenice Lowery if she thought her husband would like to express his gratitude for all the school had done for him. Even the most basic things--food, electricity, gasoline, water--seemed high. The meter readers were so much more attentive here than in Jakarta and Ponape.

With the Colonel working, though, the budget was manageable and, within a year or so, quite comfortable. Between his instructor's salary--a bit modest, she thought, but tolerable until the school awarded a professorship--his regular monthly pension, and some nicely yielding investments, she could pursue the savings plan for their real retirement home.

It was this same plan she amended, elaborated on each Tuesday and Thursday morning as she golfed with friends. This was the plan she came to equate with the very game itself. Walking with other women in white cotton skirts, she sketched and resketched every hall and floor and ceiling of the house to be, mentally positioned her new furniture, equipped her future kitchen and bathroom with every appliance and gadget imaginable. She talked with them, felt privy at last to the secrets of their world, told them again and again how good it was to be back, how sorely she had

missed Riverton and her friends, this lifestyle, how therapeutic golf was for her.

Glenice Lowery came deeply to love teeing off, blasting the little white ball with a club that seemed to multiply her strength so incredibly, loved to follow the arc, watch the ball drop and bounce. She felt thoroughly at home humming across broad grassy stretches in a cart, felt her life shaping, coming together as she had long expected, felt a control as surely as she felt the textured leather grip of a chipping iron.

It was the reassurance of a program, a plan, something predictable and calculated, predictable because it was calculated, that drove Glenice Lowery to do as she did, act as she acted in the years after her homecoming. Through everything, she clung to a sort of blueprint in her mind. Through the Colonel's worsening fatigue, his first heart attack, his second and final retirement, a long, tedious convalescence during which she had to cut her golf to Tuesdays only, a diagnosis of degenerative heart disease; through his growing helplessness, frustration, irritability, his yelling breathlessly from his bed for a cigar she could not give him; through a second and nearly fatal attack, bypass surgery; throughout every attendant setback and sadness and despair, she did not, could not, give up her schedule completely.

Although approval for Tropicana's sewers, gas lines, curbs and gutters was issued during roughly the same months the Colonel lay in bed with the sickening heart weakness following his first attack, the weakness from which he would never recover, Glenice Lowery did not hesitate to go ahead with the negotiations for one of the prime new plots.

"But why now?" the Colonel asked her without raising his head from the pillow, when she came from her regular Tuesday golf game and told him she had called on one of the home sites.

"Because it has to be now, Harmon." She clutched his hand, clutched it hard to hold on to him and the house and the retirement. "Those lots are opening up, and it has to be now."

For a season after they established themselves in the new home, after the bypass, the subsequent pacemaker stitched under the skin left of his sternum, defibrillator implanted in his abdominal wall, he became stable enough to leave his bed or sofa for short intervals, even felt well enough on certain nights for the now everlastingly short drive to the clubhouse for an evening function. Club members knew, of course, all about his illness, made a point to greet him, tell him they missed him in the foursome, missed seeing him at the bar, on the putting green. They all wished him good health, a speedy recovery, and probably knew even as they returned to their own dinners or private conversations, knew without saying anything to anyone,

perhaps without even thinking about the real meaning of their conclusion, that the Colonel's days were numbered.

It was the sort of admission no one made lightly, an admission Glenice Lowery tried not to make at all on yet other Tuesdays as she fluffed his bed covers and assured him she would play the holes closest to the house. But the presence of his sickness, the nearly insufferable flatus of his confinement, his doddering whenever he tried to walk, the suction-legged standing frame in the shower, the special blender in the kitchen for his chalky formula; his constant nausea, his hoarse and labored yelling for no reason, every reason, his idle gazing at hour upon hour of maddening television, the endless bills and insurance claims choking the mailbox above the hewn nameplate--this long, heavy presence of his sickness left her no recourse but to number his days and nights. Life in the new house, no matter what anyone on the outside saw, betrayed its own end.

On sunny afternoons the last month of the Colonel's life, Glenice Lowery helped him outside to a chair on the patio, a chair from which he could see straight up the fairway. She positioned him there, wrapped him in a blanket to still a shiver impervious to sun and pleasant temperatures, told him to keep his eyes open for golfing companions, club brothers and sisters playing their way to this tricky green so close to the Colonel's back yard. Each afternoon as she tried in vain to fit his bright Riverton University visor snugly on his scalp, she promised that the

players would notice him, would wave, perhaps yell a kind greeting to cheer him. And she said these things because she knew deep within herself that all the players could not help looking in awe, as they came down the fairway, at her beautiful azaleas and roses, could not help in the end seeing what she saw.

NEW BOOTS

By the one-year mark of his mission, Bernie Kendall had worn the soles of his size-thirteen double-E black shoes to nails on Ecuador's streets. A zapatero in Machala, who whistled and said "Qué grandote" when he saw Bernie's feet, charged more than his usual two-hundred suces to stitch the uppers to truck tire, said he bent his best awl trying to get through that ten-ply. But the material would last forever, he promised, running a thumb along the tread--even considering Bernie's size. Bernie didn't care about forever and told the guy he just wanted something to make it through the second year, until he got home to Pingree, Idaho, his mom's roast beef, and girls.

"Yes!" said Clair Elroy. "There's no better combination in the whole mundo, man." Clair Elroy was Bernie's companion in Language School, came down in the same group. He was from Pocatello. "One year's nothing," he said. "It's cake."

Only guys like Clair Elroy could count their calendar pages and make two years sound like less than two years. He always knew of a reason the next month would go by faster than all the rest and saluted every time a Braniff roared away into the clouds. First thing he told Bernie in

Language School was how they ought to get together when they got home. "Pingree's just up the road from me, Kendall," he said. "That ISU campus is thick with babes waiting for guys like me and you. And Ricks College has dances every weekend."

Bernie remembered saying it would be a long time before he danced again, before he got back to his Dodge Coronet and helping Uncle Dewart frame houses.

And Clair Elroy said, "You won't even know you've been gone."

Right away Bernie liked listening to Clair Elroy. It was as if his words alone could recalculate time, speed it up, make real a scheme to go and do a mission and come home without ever leaving. The problem was other people--Spanish teachers, culture specialists, the mission president and his wife--never missed a chance to mention how long everybody had signed on for. Two years really isn't that much, they said. Just a fleeting moment compared to eternity but one that serves as a foundation for the rest of your life. So make the most of these two years. Two years away from the distractions of work, college, dances, dates--just pure dedication to the work.

"Arm's length," his mother had said, smiling through her tears on the day he was officially ordained, when his Uncle Dewart and the bishop and a couple of other church regulars shook his hand. "Two whole years for the Lord," she said, almost silly with happiness, her oldest son

setting the example. "Your father would have been so proud of you." She kissed his cheek and dabbed her eyes with a wadded handkerchief. "God will reserve one of his sweetest daughters just for you," she whispered, "if you'll sacrifice your heart for the twinkling of an eye."

That's the name of the game, Bernie thought. He was half finished, the sacrifice on the downhill side. If his mom or anybody else cared to ask, though, the twinkling lasted a little longer than people let on.

"Just one more," he said, holding up a finger to the zapatero. A couple of greenolie missionaries looked at him, at that one finger. Lord, what would they give to be half done? Anything. Cars, savings accounts, stereos, record collections, peanut butter, Dr. Pepper, boxes of American candy bars, maybe even girlfriends. Anything they had. Bernie loved that look on their faces--envy, despair, almost reverence for anybody with shorter time than theirs.

And who could blame them? Being brand new was the worst. He remembered feeling fogged out and lost, tagging behind senior companions walking deeper and deeper into mazes of cane shacks and windowless brick apartment buildings, haze and smoke and mongrel dogs everywhere, everybody's Spanish sounding like slurred gibberish, puddles of nasty green water smooth and still as poison in every low spot. Clair Elroy said hell was a toss-up between July parking lot jobs for Bannock County Asphalt and that first week in Ecuador.

You could always tell the missionaries fresh down from Language School--shoes shiny, in perfect shape, unfrayed ties, unfaded shirts and underwear; unbelieving faces when they first walked by the beggars holding out cups and cans all along Nueve de Octubre; the first time most of them had seen cripples or blind people up close, or a lady with an elephantiasis leg propped on a thick rug, lisping into a flute for whatever coins people threw into her basket.

Not a half hour into the country Bernie had the same look on his face when he figured out there wasn't any leash law. He scraped his foot again and again on the sidewalk in front of the airport where dogs slunk around the vendors' wagons.

"You got you some stompers, fella." That's what Clair Elroy had said. "Which could be a wee bit of a trial and tribulation since there doesn't appear to be a leash law in this part of the vineyard."

And everybody had to go through the first time getting called over to a sidewalk cantina table, thinking this was a big chance, pumping up to talk salvation to two or three gastados swilling beer. They loved to get you close, blast weedkiller breath right in your face, touch your shoulder with moist hands and cry about somebody dead or their nag mujer or tell you to eat verga, Yankee fag spy. And all the time that crazy hard-luck jukebox music plinked so loud you had to yell just to tell those losers so long.

Most missionaries wised up fast. The problem was

nobody at home, in all the talk about mission blessings, ever got very exact about what you had to go through down here. They just knew you had to go through two years of it, whatever it was, just to be a good catch, a fine young man with your head on straight.

After new guys got a dose of basic Ecuador, Bernie teased them about never going home, forgetting the taste of good hamburgers and root beer, about getting used to the itch of crepe toilet paper. And after they showed him yearbook pictures of their girlfriends, Bernie said "Pretty nice," let the compliment settle in, then, "She'll never last." Over and over, guys told him to shut up, got almost mad.

"Who're you, Kendall?" they asked. "Who're you to mouth off about girls waiting?" Everybody knew he didn't have a girl at home, no pictures by his bed, only a rare letter when Young Adult Fellowship drew names and spent their Wednesday evening devotionals supporting the work in distant lands. "Why bother?" Bernie always said. "They just write you off anyway."

Nobody liked to hear it, but it was true. From the start Bernie decided if he was going to do a mission, he was going to do it without sweating mail day every week--praying for a letter or a cassette, praying that a Pam or Cindy or Naleen was still hanging tough. No way, thought Bernie. No way. The guys at home, the ones back from their missions,

the ones talking about all the blessings--they had the big advantage.

Bernie remembered watching them. Before the mission, he was right there at all the Sunday firesides, the dances and retreats, standing around with a cup of punch and napkin full of cookies, like everybody else. Going for the wholesome uplift--and for the girls. When a missionary came home, it was big stuff. He talked in church, told his stories, got invited to show his slides of Japan or Germany, Guatemala, Zimbabwe, even some stateside soft-duty like Boston, New Mexico, Tempe, Arizona.

Everybody had stories and slides. Bernie watched the girls offer to click the projector, watched them hang close all evening, run for more punch when the guy's Styrofoam cup ran dry, stay around to clean up when there wasn't much of anything messy. Oo, I bet it was exciting down there. And scary. Gol.

Yeah, that's true. But it wasn't so bad. We adjusted.

Were they really poor?

Unbelievable, but humble--and just wondrously receptive to our message.

Was it a challenge? Did your faith grow?

In leaps and bounds, babe.

I'm so jealous. Did it go by too fast? I bet it did.

Long, long pause--carefully timed. Just the right

look.

Like the twinkling in your eye.

Any answer would do. Then they'd say, Super. That's just super. A few of the cuter ones would congregate after Bernie gave his report in Sunday service, eager to meet him, shake his hand--high school girls when he left, all filled out now, treating him like hot news. Did you hear? Bernie Kendall is home from Ecuador.

It could happen. Bernie remembered the homecoming of a short no-name guy, almost bald after his time in the Nevada mission--real exotic trip getting there from Idaho, no food or humidity stories to tell. But still a few girls circled him after the service, happy and swaying in their dresses with bows, clutching quilt-covered scriptures to their sweet little bosoms. They giggled at anything he said, made out like Reno was halfway around the world.

Two years, even two long ones, for that kind of charm, vibes, magic. Not a bad deal. And his mom would be in heaven. She wanted him to go so bad, wanted to stand at the pulpit on Sunday morning and give updates on her missionary son, like other mothers. "A mission will bless your life," she always said. "A girl would be foolish to overlook a nice returned missionary, what with all the kooks in the world."

One year down and nobody chasing him yet, but Bernie did have three letters from different girls, all on flower stationery. For somebody without a girlfriend, three wasn't

so bad. Not that they said anything. How are you? Are the mosquitos bad?--as if the settling pond south of Pingree didn't hatch plenty of its own. Sure miss you in Young Adults. Hurry home! (But not too fast--the Lord needs you down there. Ha, ha.) They all wrote big and loopy, took pains to close with Yours Truly or Love Ya, something harmless, cheerful, but something to keep in mind. The one named Gayla dotted her i's and j's with stars, spent two pages of purple stationery saying she really didn't know what else to write. She said she knew Bernie must be growing and progressing in ways she didn't even understand.

Girls at home were so far away. Clair Elroy said they might as well live on the moon. At least these Latinas were in Ecuador, part of the real story, not trying to act interested and absorbed from ten thousand miles. And after a few months, they started looking pretty good, too. Bernie warned the greenolies--no matter how big the bedside picture of the girlfriend, the image faded.

Nobody believed him, though, when they saw the ones in El Guasmo who had never visited a dentist, or the fullback señoras not a bit shy about unhaltering a giant bazooka in the middle of a charla, nuzzling the baby's face into all that flesh until it couldn't cry if it tried. New guys saw things like this, went back to the pension after work and wrote the girls in the bedside pictures about how they were still adjusting to Ecuador. Only after a month or so did they start to really see the chicas in high heels, thin

blouses, no damage yet from straight rice. I hope you're adjusted by now, wrote the girls from home. I bet it's a challenge.

But rewarding. That's what his mom said in every letter. She only tried to sound the way she thought she was supposed to sound. She didn't know any different. Bernie's dad was in the army when she married him. The stories Bernie remembered were army stories. He wondered if girls circled around to hear those.

The zapatero in Machala knew his stuff. That truck rubber never showed a sign of wear over some bad terrain in half a dozen barrios. After seven months, it had as much tread as ever. While Bernie was in El Salado, his last sector assignment, a street crew with shovels and rakes filled all the puddle sinks with crushed brown shale sharp enough to bruise a foot. His companion for the last three months, a guy named Virlinger from Pleasant Grove, Utah, always complained of sore feet, said the Lord would have to bless his arches if he was going to be doing so much walking. And he said he never adapted well to new climates or diets. He said even camping trips back home, the smell of Coleman fuel and hotdogs, made him sick to his stomach any time he thought about them.

"I especially don't like rice," he said after their first lunch, "And I've never favored bananas."

Bernie pitied him right off, hated to see him mince those nice Florsheims on the street. He'd seen the type before--socks and underwear embroidered with initials, meaningless to the laundry lady; days scheduled to the quarter hour on lists taped to the wall by their pillow; journal, scriptures, hymnbook, Missionary Guide, all personalized, full middle name included, inscribed in gold letters; Garth LeGrand Virlinger, Garth LeGrand Virlinger, a big silver GLV monogram on every piece of luggage, everything metal; Eagle Scout, club and scholarship person in high school, piano player. Virlinger had paperback books on how to be successful, a leather-bound Franklin day planner and nice pen and pencil set from last Christmas, watches and alarm clocks; he was the only guy in Ecuador who kept files.

Guys like Virlinger did better in a world with air conditioning, vitamin pills, mint floss, eight hours of sleep, lots of corn starch baby powder, green vegetables, Lysol. There were no roaches crunching under your feet in Pleasant Grove, scattering every time a light went on, perching on pop bottle and toilet rims, shower heads, the least crumb or rind.

On his first night in the Salado pension, Virlinger came from the four-by-four bathroom, eyes wide, his mouth foamed with toothpaste. "There's something in the sink," he mumbled. Rust flakes, sludge, pebbles, moss? Bernie saw it all in his first week.

"Just don't swallow it," he told Virlinger. "You'll be all right."

Virlinger shook his head. "It's not the water," he mumbled, foam dribbling from one corner of his mouth. "It's a roach."

Bernie took a thong from beside his cot, stepped into the bathroom and slapped hard inside the sink. He mopped up with a crumpled pamphlet, opened the spigot to splash away the stain.

"Gosh, that's sickening," said Virlinger.

"You said it."

Virlinger had that same wide-eyed look when kids ran up to him in the street and blabbed out their primer English. What time is your mother? Hey, mister! Hey, you, son of a beetch! Or when he saw carne vendors with hoofs and tongues, udders and other organs hanging from their yokes. No picture of anything like that in the culture book.

"People eat that?" Virlinger asked.

"You bet your sopa especial," said Bernie. "Staple as my Uncle Dewart's fried potatoes."

Virlinger stared. He stared at everything.

"You've never seen that?" Bernie asked, walking past the lottery-ticket Indian ladies outside the post office. They fed open-barrel with half of Guayaquil watching.

"Never." Virlinger's face blanched.

"Not your mom or aunt or a lucky peek at somebody?"

"I'm the youngest."

"We'll walk by here every week," Bernie said. "Get you used to it."

Virlinger didn't hear him, didn't get it if he did. "To think they're all God's children," he whispered to himself, "and they all need the gospel."

"Pretty amazing, isn't it?"

Virlinger, like most new guys Bernie knew, had to learn the hard way about God's children. They weren't all lining up to hear the good word.

Knocking doors down a freshly-graveled side street off Portete, Virlinger's sixth afternoon in the country, they heard a downshift whine and backfire and turned to see a taxista taking a shortcut over to Gomez Rendón. The gravel had hardly settled at all, but the guy never eased off his gas pedal for a second, never thought about slowing down. He dodged the worst spots with hard leans on the steering wheel, rocks pinging like buckshot against his driveline.

"Man alive," said Virlinger.

People up and down the row of huts heard the engine and came to their windows, turned from their conversations. Barefoot kids stopped playing.

Suddenly there was a jolt, a puff of dust, and the rattling stopped.

"They drive crazy down here," said Virlinger.

A car door creaked open. The Datsun lurched like an overloaded boat, and then the shirtless driver was out kicking his front tire, yelling "Ay, dios santísimo! Dios

santísimo!" He was big for an Ecuadorian, and the car shuddered with every swing of his foot. When the dust cleared, Bernie saw the rock, big as a soccer ball, the tire rubber mashed and twisted, two wobbly scratches where the rim gouged along for twenty or thirty feet.

When the taxista tired of kicking the Datsun, he slugged its hood a couple of times. His hair came completely ungreased, and he kept running his fingers through it, trying to get the strands out of his eyes. "Ay, Santa Maria," he moaned.

People began to move. "Let's go," said Bernie.

"Maybe we can help," said Virlinger in his Eagle Scout voice.

"No we can't. Come on."

But Virlinger didn't move. He stood staring at the big Ecuadorian. Slowly the guy looked up from where he leaned, arms outspread on the hood of the Datsun. He surveyed the whole street, up and down on one side, up and down on the other, and focused finally on Virlinger.

"Qué me mire, gringo americano?" he yelled, stepping around in front of the bumper, a few steps closer to Virlinger.

Virlinger smiled, didn't have a clue what the taxista said. "Hola. Co-mo está? Soy misionero."

Bernie grabbed one of his skinny arms. "Come on, Virlinger. The guy's pissed." Probably the same driver who hunted them after a rain, sliced through the gutter at

forty-five miles an hour trying to muddy their ties and white shirts.

Virlinger pulled away. "We have to help people." He walked into the street, smiling, fishing for a pamphlet.

The big Ecuadorian sized up his audience from Portete to Gomez Rendón, everybody interested again. He stepped away from the car. "Qué te pasa, mormón infeliz?"

They were ten feet apart, five feet. Virlinger held out the pamphlet. His hand shook. "Somos misioneros de la iglesia--"

Up and down the street people took quick breaths when the taxista hawked and spat.

"Virlinger!" said Bernie. "Get away from there!"

When Virlinger pulled a brand new embroidered handkerchief from his pocket the pamphlet fell to the ground. He wiped the saliva and mucous from his hand, then wiped again, staring open-mouthed at the man across from him.

"Ven acá," said the driver, grabbing his own crotch. "Tienes juevos, maricón rubia?"

Bernie took a step. "Get over here, Virlinger."

Virlinger backed up, stumbled on the rocks. He looked like he was going to cry. The driver toed gravel hard, sent dust and pebbles showering at Virlinger's feet.

Bernie dropped his books. Most Latino smart-asses didn't come this cocky. "Ya basta!" he yelled. He walked straight up to the taxista, a half head taller than the guy,

pointed to Virlinger. "No le molesta. Me entiende?"

They were face to face. The taxista ran both hands through his hair, looked at Bernie's forearms, shoulders, looked down at his shoes, and finally over at Virlinger massaging his ankle.

"Dile que se cuide," whispered the taxista, "cuando ustedes caminan por la calle." He patted the Datsun's hood. "Yo no sé manejar muy bien."

"Hay que aprender," said Bernie.

With one big hand, the taxista blew his nose into a red mechanic's rag, never looked away. Then, breathing deeper and deeper, he leaned toward Bernie, flared his nostrils and eyes wider and wider, gritted his teeth, lots of cheap fillings flashing.

Bernie couldn't dodge the odor, the guy oily all over from shuttling people around Guayaquil's bad barrios, Pilsener gargler if he'd ever smelled one. His own white shirt and underwear were soaked, pants chafing him between his thighs. And it was strangely quiet--not a dog or burro anywhere close, no tinny jukebox music chipping away at the afternoon. He heard once in a while of missionaries getting beat up, sliced with a broken bottle, rocks thrown at them, balloons full of sewer water. Suddenly the taxista blinked hard, stomped his foot and growled. Only when Bernie flinched and accidentally touched the guy's arm, only when he expected the next move to be a swing or punch, somebody going for somebody's legs--only then did he hear the guy

chuckle, louder every time he inhaled, like a motor gaining steam.

"Hay que aprender!" the taxista yelled, swallowing his laughs, belly heaving. "Bueno, gringo grandote. Qué bueno." He threw back his head and laughed so loud the whole street relaxed. He enjoyed the audience, swept his eyes over everybody in front of their huts, shouted his next question to them.

"Qué me responde el gringo jefe, el gringo soldado de dios, el gringo buena gente?

"Hay que aprender!" they yelled.

"Así es!" The taxista turned, waited as the street again grew quiet. Then he patted Bernie's shoulder, bowed, gestured as if introducing him to a place like El Salado for the very first time. "El hombre de La Palabra. Salva el mundo!"

People in front of their bamboo huts, ladies with mercado baskets, even kids laughed. They all laughed.

Bernie turned, gathered his things, the pamphlet.

"What did he say?" asked Virlinger. With the worry gone, he had his Florsheim off, initialed sock bunched inside, rubbed his ankle with careful fingertips.

Bernie dropped the pamphlet next to the shoe. "He said to watch your step from now on."

"I sure will," said Virlinger, wincing. "That hermano wasn't too receptive, was he?"

"Don't fill the font just yet."

People on the street started moving again, but all the while the driver still chuckled to himself. He flung open the trunk, found the jack, lug wrench and spare. "Salva el mundo!" he yelled after Bernie. "Salva el mundo!"

"What's he saying now?" asked Virlinger, holding his sock in front of his face, squinting to make sure it was right-side-out.

"He's saying this sure is a peach of a way to spend a couple of years in the prime of your life."

Without even a pause to think it over, Virlinger said, "We'll be blessed for it." He finally got to his shoe. "The Lord won't forget this stuff."

Bernie thought of the homecoming firesides, the girls with bows and quilt-covered scriptures. Virlinger could hold them in a circle for hours and hours. He'd make getting spit on sound like a highlight.

Even if he turned all the nasty stuff into highlights, Bernie would never have quite as many stories and slides as Virlinger. In twenty-one months he never turned an ankle, never had a cast or wrap on, didn't even bring a first-aid kit in his duffel bag. He never hobbled around making people ask what his problem was. Not once was he really very sick. Except for a gamma globulin shot every three months, he didn't need regular medicine of any kind. With the truck tread, his feet did sweat more, and he got fungus bad for a while. But now he powdered every morning and blotted iodine between his toes, and the itch was going

away. He missed all the popular mediocre bad stuff that made guys sound worthy and dedicated. Nothing ever got to him.

But he couldn't complain. The last thing he wanted was to go home with a radical disease or virus nobody in the States had a cure for. He heard of a missionary, sickly like Virlinger, got home with a worm no prescription could kill--ended up losing a third of his stomach. There were other stories, too--guys with colitis, dysentery, incurable ringworm, migraines, and one with some hernia thing a doctor in Jipijapa wanted to cut into right there in his barn of a hospital. The missionary had surgery in Los Angeles the next night, finished his two years in Spanish-speaking San Antonio. Probably had three or four kids by now.

When Virlinger heard the story, he said you couldn't neglect your health and expect the Lord to watch over you. It wasn't long before he lectured whenever Bernie bought Pepsi from a little montuvio who ladeled from a wooden tub into plastic bags, handed them to his wife to knot and stack on a plank counter.

Even before Virlinger spotted the dirty ice chunk floating in the center of the tub, melting flecks and particles into the dark, gently lapping bubbles, he turned down Bernie's offer to buy.

"Who knows what's in that stuff?" Virlinger said.

"It's just sawdust."

"I mean the pop. I've heard some pretty bad things

about their factories down here. There's no regulations, you know."

"Those bags do look sort of like bladders."

"You make me sick, Kendall. You really do."

"Listen," said Bernie, punching a hole with his pen, squeezing a stream of Pepsi into his mouth. "A lot of drink vendors aren't near so good about shooin' flies."

"I can't believe you do that," said Virlinger.

The Pepsi was just a start. Bernie hiked through Salado cobble day after day, drank people's Yupi Kool Aid stuff or liquid cherry Jello when he knew they hadn't boiled water by the book. He ate hot fried banana chips fresh from a vendor's open-air oil vat, boiled eggs and popcorn, the sorriest hotdogs he'd ever tasted. He even gagged down a pork sandwich he was sure would give him trichinosis. He watched those sandwich makers slicing from the same roast morning to night, out in the sun, more flies, only this time like seasoning all over the meat, specking the panes of the glass case. But still he couldn't say no to the hermana when she offered him a sandwich. You couldn't say no. It really tasted pretty good, but Virlinger took a few nibbles and started to look sicker than usual, had to say no gracias in his brand new Spanish.

Yet it was this sort of thing, this exactly, that Virlinger could turn into a big spiritual plus, something people at home loved to read about when the story was doctored in the right way. Virlinger suffered from diarrhea

the first three weeks he was in Salado, but he told his mom such things built your faith. She sent Kaopectate tablets in every letter and promised the whole family prayed for him daily.

Early in the mission Bernie's own specimen, sealed in a film canister, tested positive for intestinal parasites at El Laboratorio de Gustavo. He remembered sitting on the rimless toilet in his pension until his thighs went numb, bowels like a faucet, stomach knotted. He took big pills twice a day, bought half a dozen rolls of toilet paper and two cans of Pino Fresco air perfume for the bathroom. And not one word to anybody about how it built his faith. He could have played it up, could have shown a lot of spiritual progress with that one. But how could you expect a girl or a mother ten thousand miles away to really get it? Diarrhea was diarrhea, something to get over, live through, just like sunburn, toe blisters, sand chiggers, crotch-rot fungus.

Virlinger wanted all his sickliness to sound like dedication, fortitude. On their weekly rec-day, when missionaries from different sectors got together to play football, Virlinger sat in the shade with all his recent letters and a pad of airmail stationery. Guys asked him to join the game, teased him about how sharp his pale legs looked in shorts. But he said no thanks, he was behind on his letter writing, needed to stay in touch with his home bishop, old Sunday school teachers, young cousins still debating a mission. He wrote more letters than anybody

Bernie knew, used every spare moment to strengthen somebody's faith by talking about his own. At their eating pension he looked pale during the whole meal, about to choke on every bite of rice or beans, finally gave up and took out his airmail pad and monogrammed pen while Bernie ate another bowl or plateful.

Finally Bernie had to ask. All those letters couldn't be going to family and friends. He said everything he had to say to his mom every other week, in one page; sent Uncle Dewart and Aunt Lenore an aerogram on holidays, mostly thanking them for the smoked almonds and licorice they sent the holiday before. And he didn't worry too much about answering the bishop's Xeroxed letters To Our Missionaries In The Field. He spent a while on letters to those three girls, tried to come across as a real fine missionary, but the writing was nothing to miss a meal over.

"You got a woman?" Bernie asked one afternoon during siesta. He loosened his tie, looped it with others around a bedpost, kicked off his shoes. He and Virlinger were going on four weeks as companions. The letters with Pleasant Grove postmarks and stick-on heart seals came two or three at a time, every mail day--but still no picture by the bed.

"Sort of, I guess you could say." Virlinger turned on his cot like he was hurting for a nap. He never talked about her, stuck to the rule in the Missionary Guide about stuff like that. No frivolity, jocularly, irreverence, lightmindedness, or levity of any kind. No rough-housing or

horseplay. Keep the discussion about home and trivialities, especially girls, to a polite minimum.

"Is that who you're writing all the time?"

"I don't write her all the time."

"Baloney." Bernie sank down on his foam-rubber mattress. "Every spare minute you're spilling your guts to somebody."

Virlinger covered an ear with his pillow. "I'm not spilling my guts to anybody."

"What would you call it? What do you say to the girl page after page? I've been down here a long time, and there just isn't that much to say--nothing any of them really understand."

Virlinger didn't answer.

"Do you tell her you love her? Ask her to wait, to hang in there?"

He still didn't answer.

Bernie tried to imagine Virlinger and a girl doing anything besides quoting scriptures to each other.

"Do you tell her you want her body?"

Virlinger rolled from underneath his pillow, hair mussed into his eyes, nose flushed where his glasses usually rested.

"Would you shut up," he said. "I can't even believe you said that."

"Just trying to get to know the real Garth LeGrand Virlinger."

"Well, keep my private life out of it."

The afternoon heat was dense in the pension. Only Virlinger's fan, mounted on a brick and stack of books, stirred the air at all.

"Is she cute?"

"Oh my heck!" said Virlinger. "We're just close friends. That's all. Just buddies."

"I've heard that crapola before. Why won't people come up front with this stuff? She's a good buddy, an old pal, just a friend. Everybody says that. What a crock. That's why you drool every mail day? She's just a good old buddy?"

Virlinger tried to say something fast, coughed instead, coughed in a hard spasm, then couldn't seem to swallow the phlegm. He shook his head and sank back on his mattress like props had been kicked out from under him. Still, he didn't make much of a dent in the foam rubber. His slender piano-player fingers combed the hair out of his eyes.

"I don't drool," he whispered. "She happens to write a very uplifting letter."

Bernie fanned himself with a pamphlet.

"I've known her since junior high. About the only girl who ever paid any attention to me. And she was fun to be around."

Virlinger stared past the clothesline above their beds--nothing but a rope stretched between an eyebolt in one wall and the thief-proof window grate--draped with towels, rec-day shorts, tee-shirts, suitcoats worn on Sundays and

special occasions only. He stared into the far high corners shadowed with webs and dust. And if staring, just staring, at the ceiling of a pension during a hot siesta in Ecuador could take somebody back to Pleasant Grove, Virlinger would have been there in an instant.

After a while Bernie said, "What's she look like?"

Virlinger shrugged, got his wallet from a chair and slipped a picture from its plastic sleeve. He stared for a second, then handed the picture to Bernie.

"Hmm." One look and Bernie knew she crocheted doilies, sewed her own dresses, kept a hope chest stocked, baked zucchini bread. Across from him Virlinger sat like he did when his stomach hurt.

"You going to marry her?"

"If it works out."

"You better marry her," said Bernie. "You two will be good for each other." He gave the picture back. "If you're not all wasted away."

Virlinger blushed. "I won't be wasted away."

"You better eat more, then. She'll want a little meat on you. Something to hang onto if the passion overcomes her when she sees you walk off that airplane."

The fan hummed, clicked like a ratchet every time it began a new sweep. And finally--finally Virlinger smiled, shook his head and smiled again. As if he could picture such a thing in an airport, as if the vision embarrassed and fascinated him at the same time.

"Her name's Melodie. That picture isn't the best."

"Sure it is." Bernie yawned, flipped his pillow to the cool side. "You two will sure enough look good together."

Very good. A perfect fit. A sweet daughter of God.

"What about you?" asked Virlinger, eyes closed, innocent, no idea Bernie had asked himself the same question a thousand times. "You got a girlfriend?"

"All girls are my friends."

"Anybody serious?"

"You're asking about serious?"

"You seem like you want it."

"Guess again," said Bernie. "Maybe you want to be signed off, but not me."

Serious. Seriously serious. Love ya. Sure miss ya. Young Adult Fellowship girls with flower stationery drew names, wrote that to any missionary, checked the map in the church foyer to make sure they weren't mixing him up with the colored pin stuck in Bolivia or Argentina, connected with a matching tint of yarn to a picture and address. There was only one girl on earth who would care anything at all about Garth LeGrand Virlinger, anything for just him, his queasy stomach, pimpled face, eyes blind as a bat without those glasses. But he'd found her. He had found her.

And what did it matter if his letters didn't talk about the corner idiots who yelled mormón maricón! mormón maricón! every afternoon and night, in every missionary sector in

Ecuador? So what if there wasn't a word about braless girls in paper-thin blouses leaning out windows, hissing, arching their backs like they were born sexy; Latinas right here, not a million miles away, mashing into them on rush-hour colectivos, asking all the time if missionaries could dance or go out, stroking their eyes up and down conservative polyester-blend American slacks? Nothing about the smoke from grilled tripe curbside, the sickly ripeness of the mercado, open sewers in El Cisne. Nothing about barrios crammed with people who didn't want to convert to anything except color TV.

What did it matter? As long as what Virlinger did say was something Melodie could understand. Through Adversity We Grow, Hard But Worthwhile, Endure To The End, Building Up The Kingdom, Best Two Years Of My Life, Wouldn't Trade The Experience. Something she could believe with all her heart.

On his next to last night in Ecuador, the last one he'd spend in Salado, Bernie picked his way between swaths of garbage in the same lot they crossed every day and night for three months. With the truck tread he never worried about Cristál flasks crunching underneath peelings and husks sour like silage, cans, bottles, ashes still smoldering, wax paper and Baggies ditched by people finishing up the street refreshments Virlinger had nightmares about--pickled yucca, peppers, fresh mango and papaya strips, parched hominy,

runty spare ribs, and a trail-fry hash Clair Elroy swore they laced with dog meat.

Like all the other nights, while Virlinger leaned against a crumbling cinder block wall to catch his breath, Bernie rocked bottles and hoped the rats would come out. On the nights they came out, he could sometimes coax a throwing contest with Virlinger. He really wanted the rats to come out on his next to the last night in Ecuador.

Virlinger sat limp on a cinder block, wiping his arms with a handkerchief. Bernie toed the neck of a Pilsener bottle upright, backed away to aim, then stopped. Everything about this place seemed distant from the streets and apartment buildings, different. At one end of the lot, green water dribbled night and day from a drain pipe, sounded clear and weirdly soothing, always reminded him of Aunt Lenore's little sewing-room aquarium, bubbling quiet and easy enough to lull you asleep even when you weren't tired. And somewhere in the weeds at the other end of the cinder block wall, a pig worked the mercado's rotten melons, always dumped in the same spot. Best to stay upwind of places like that.

And then, as if on schedule, the rats came from nowhere, everywhere, covered the garbage up and down the swaths.

"Now those are genuine rodents," Virlinger whispered.

Bernie gathered rocks, cement chunks, broken bricks.

"You get first shot," he said.

"I don't want first shot." Virlinger folded the handkerchief, dabbed his upper lip and brow. "I don't want any shot."

"Come on." Bernie held out a rock. "Just take one--for me. And don't scare them with any sudden movements."

Virlinger looked at him, at the rock. Finally he took it in his thin fingers and stood, fought off one of his usual head-rushes just to balance his books on a cinder block.

"I don't know about this."

"You say that every time."

Virlinger took as deep a breath as he could, teetered just a bit, then lobbed the rock into a cluster of rats and watched them scatter.

"Oh, nice show," said Bernie. "That's really putting your heart into it."

"What've you got against rats?"

"Everything. You got to throw like you mean business."

Bernie put rocks in his pockets and climbed on top of the garbage, pitched several times with all his might, trotted ahead, stumbling, sinking, then threw again--so hard he knew Virlinger heard the slight zip of his rock. Like always, though, the rats seemed to melt, between blinks, into Salado's trash.

Except for one, busy with a bone pile from the pollo dorado place up the street. Standing still under the moon

spilling down, Bernie saw the rat's tail slide over a mackerel can, heard the tin's faint rustle.

"You see one?" asked Virlinger.

"Shh."

One last rock. Two steps and he'd fire, drill the rodent right in the middle of supper. He cocked his arm and tiptoed. Virlinger never threw with any muscle, never even tried.

The rat nosed a pollo dorado bone, glued to his spot.

At ten feet, Bernie brought the rock straight back above his shoulder and stepped with his right foot into a little depression, a shadow, something mushy, maybe bananas too ripe to sell, slick like dog crap; stepped with all his weight on one size thirteen double-E shoe, stepped, tripped, and broke into a cavity, something scratching his calf and shin like broken lath, clear up until the pant leg bunched at the knee and stopped sliding. In that instant on the garbage pile, he felt the truck tread bow and knew even before the sting that he was onto a pretty good nail.

"Darn it," he said, tossing the rock aside. "Darn it, darn it, darn it--damn it!"

"What's wrong?" asked Virlinger, staring hard toward the mackerel can. "Did you get it?"

"Nothing," said Bernie. "Nothing's wrong." He lifted his foot, felt the truck rubber flex the other way. Just a little poke, nothing like goofing off with Uncle Dewart's nailgun--latex-coated number eight hair-triggered right

between the two big toes on this same foot, its point just catching some skin. A terrible feeling, unable to budge his sole from the plywood, a little drop of blood oozing up around the nailhead. The first time Uncle Dewart let him do roof chalklines with the gun, and Bernie had to yell down for a crowbar, his foot heavy and numb inside a brand new boot.

"What the hell?" Uncle Dewart kept saying. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"Something happen to you?" Virlinger asked, stepping closer, shivering in an eighty-degree night breeze.

"Nothing. I'm okay." Bernie kicked the mackerel can hard, sent up a belch of dust and fresh rot, made Virlinger cough until he gagged.

"Geez," said Virlinger, mopping his mouth again. "It always surprises me how bad this place smells."

When they stopped at a corner tienda for a pop, Bernie leaned against the chest freezer to pull off his sock. He couldn't find a hole in the cloth and only a red-blue dot in his foot. The air made his toes itch.

Virlinger sipped his Buzz lemon-lime, turned from trying not to look at the calendar girls on the wall.

"Hey! Hey, are you hurt?" He knelt down fast, set his bottle on the floor, hitched up his glasses and studied the puncture mark. "I knew you were hurt back there," he said, craning his neck, squinting through his heavy lenses. "I knew it."

Bernie hopped for balance, pressed a cold Pepsi bottle to his foot. "No biggie. I've seen a lot worse than this."

Virlinger shook his head, stood up as if his night had new purpose. "You better do something about that, Kendall. Lockjaw freezes your muscles and joints, the whole body, stiff as a plank. I heard of it happening to a guy over in American Fork. Like rigor mortis before you're actually dead."

"Bull-oney."

Virlinger lowered his voice. "And I hate to say this, but I've heard it can affect a man's ability to sire children." He was down to a whisper, no more than mouthing the words. "Make you sterile."

Bernie hurried to roll the sock back on. "What's the odds, Virlinger? One in a thousand? One in a million?" Under the tienda's single bulb his foot seemed big, even to him. "Where in hell's bells do you hear this stuff?"

"I hate to see you take that chance," said Virlinger, managing another weak pull on his lemon-lime, piano fingers wrapped around the bottle. "You ought to get you a shot before you go home."

"Don't worry about it." Bernie tipped his Pepsi straight up and chugged until the last strands of foam slid into his mouth, until his eyes watered and a burp burned his throat.

"I'd hate to see anything happen to you," said Virlinger, skinny, stooped, pale, sickly. He got quiet,

awkward, smiled at the tienda owner. The light glinted off his glasses. "I mean, I'd really feel bad."

There was no way to react to something like this, somebody like Virlinger. All you could do was stand there, trying to smile back, wishing you could feel what he felt, but not knowing what exactly that was. Joy, peace, bliss, contentment? Happiness by the book? Saying all the right things, acting all the right ways, feeling all the right feelings? Or just happiness? Virlinger's own brand. Which did a mother feel, crying over her boy in a new missionary suit, clutching her Kleenex into fodder?

You choked your way out of the bind, said something stupid, easy, something you'd read or heard others say. Me too, thanks so much. Maybe you hugged or shook hands, anything to break that spell. But at this moment with Virlinger, nothing came to him, nothing worked. Nothing would've said what Bernie really wanted to say.

Later, back in the pension, Bernie kneaded his suitcase full, sat on it and thumbed a latch under each thigh.

From his bed, Virlinger reached to uncoil his mosquito net from the clothesline, let it drape down around him, tucked the hem under his mattress.

"Tomorrow's nothing but going-home paperwork," he said. "A night in an air-conditioned motel room, hot water and tourist food, then you're out of here."

"Hallelujah."

"You'll be married before you know it," said Virlinger.

"Not this kid. I've got some living to do. There are more girls on one dorm floor at Ricks College than all of Pleasant Grove put together."

Virlinger didn't hear, was talking far away like he always did. "There's somebody out there just for you. I feel confident of that." He pivoted on his knees, searching the mosquito net for holes, same ritual he went through every night. Still, he'd sprawl in his sleep, knees jutting against the net's fabric, wake up with splotches of fresh bites.

Bernie thought about girls and how they were out there, up there, over there, always somewhere else. The last letter his mom wrote included half a page about the nice young ladies attending Young Adult Fellowship. She said any one of them would be lovely company, said a couple of them paid pretty close attention when she happened to mention her son coming home from his mission in Ecuador. That was it, the big ticket. Clair Elroy had the same idea. "Whip a little como está on them," he always said. "They'll freak."

Virlinger settled onto his mattress, drew his sheet up to his neck and flapped it twice over his frail body. "Are you scared?"

"What's there to be scared of? I'm leaving El Salado first thing tomorrow morning."

Virlinger closed his eyes. "Nothing, I guess." He was just acting nice, trying to make some conversation, get brotherly. "I think I'll be scared. That's all I meant. I

think I will be."

If he closed his eyes tight enough, maybe Virlinger could see himself filling out a pinstripe suit, Melodie in a cotton dress, both of them bright and healthy forever.

"I do hope everything works out for you," Virlinger mumbled, half asleep. "I mean it. I really do."

Bernie had his response planned, ever since the tienda. It's been good. I'll get a shot first thing. Take care of yourself. But he let it go, let Virlinger fall asleep with no heavy last-minute, last-night breakthrough, no soul to soul rapport, nothing like that.

For his last chore Bernie soaped the soles of his shoes with a washcloth, dried them on newspaper. The tread was as thick as ever. Maybe he'd show up wearing these at the first few dances, make girls ask questions, tell them about the dogs, the rats.

For a long while after he pulled the string to the lightbulb and stretched out for the last time on a mission cot, Bernie listened to the salsa music from a jukebox somewhere, to Virlinger snoring. Through the gauze of his own mosquito net he saw the moon high and full, framed inside the pension's big window.

Virlinger knew all the things to say, just like they were supposed to sound. There's somebody out there for you. He said that. I'd hate to see anything happen to you. He said that, too.

They'd never write, never get together for water skiing

or camping or golf. They wouldn't be college roommates or take the same classes. Bernie wouldn't go to the wedding reception in Pleasant Grove or hug Melodie in her white dress. If anybody wanted to know the truth, they'd probably never see each other again. But Bernie thought about what Virlinger said, what he was able to say, thought about the things that made him do what he did, think what he thought, dream about whatever it was a Virlinger dreamed about. And on his next to the last night in Ecuador, the next to the last night before he went home to Pingree and his world, Bernie believed him.

SWEET AUGUST CLOVER

In the spring of Rulon's sixth year, Daddy seeded more than a third of his two hundred acres to alfalfa, assured Mama the drought up country, around Yula Bend and Willowville, the drought plaguing other poor devils, would, according to God's curious ways, prove a boon to him, would lift the farm away from that crumbling edge of despair where it forever teetered.

"Just you think on it, Ila Jill. What could happen with the price doubling to sixty-five dollars a ton, and me with all those acres growing that green gold? Chew on that a while."

"My jaws are plumb worn out chewing on your ideas, Harp."

The drought spared Daddy, but the aphids didn't. At the suggestion of a county extension agent, when aerial spraying didn't take, they started into first cutting two weeks before June bloom.

"There's still considerable forage out there, Ila Jill. It's hardly what you'd call a total loss."

But it was close--leaves chewed, stems stunted, a few premature, runty purple blossoms perversely isolated amid the acres and acres of rusty, unnatural green. Rulon

saw Daddy swipe his hand through the alfalfa, saw his fingers and palm crawling with aphids. Besides Daddy, only Rulon saw the radiator screen plugged, sickle and guard fingers coated, bugs amassed through the first few hours of swathing, until they lay two inches thick in the narrow depression between sickle and canvases--everything stained black-green with aphid pulp.

"Well?" Mama asked after curing, when hay bales fell from the New Holland's knotting chute a third as often as they should have. "Are you set to rescue your fellow man up in Yula Bend?"

"I don't have all the answers, Ila Jill. You can't expect me to have all the answers."

Though Daddy plowed up half his alfalfa the next spring, planted more beans and silage corn, he never abandoned the idea that his fortune, to be made at all on this two hundred acres of gravel and some good clay-based loam, would be made in hay. Willowville was dairy country, within profitable trucking distance, a market, he claimed, to which his neighbors here in Penrose County hadn't given a moment's thought.

"They're sleeping, Rulon," he said, looking over his fields each evening, sloshing across stubble flats flooded with irrigation water. "Dead to the world."

Rulon heard Daddy say over and over that Yula Bend farmers, with their shorter season and rougher elevation, couldn't raise an alfalfa crop without divine intervention--

and that was probably good for a whole measly ton an acre. Daddy said they had to buy from outside markets. It was a matter of simple economics. And what Rulon heard sounded good and right to him.

"A whole market to tap into up there in the Bend, and these guys around here piddling with winter feed for a few steers and lambs, a little herd of brood cows like I've got. Lord's my witness, Rulon, there's money to be made."

But Daddy wasn't set up just yet. He said he needed a cash base, and to come up with a cash base he had to raise more cash crops. This Willowville idea would have to look like a pretty secure risk, he said, before the bank would go along with committing every acre to hay.

So when the field man named Goddard, from Big Timber Cannery, came around offering pea contracts in February of the year Rulon turned nine, the year Elgin Lee was born, Daddy signed up for thirty-five acres.

"Peas is a cash crop?" Mama asked. "Since when has anything on this farm brought us a dime?"

Her voice sounded different, though. It lacked the conviction, despite her better judgment, that Daddy's latest plan was as doomed and foolish, as damnably optimistic as all his plans and projects stretching away into an always promising future.

Spring came early the year Rulon had his ninth birthday. Rare south winds blew warm during March, melted snow on fields where the moisture did some good, thawed

gravel and clay-based loam enough for plowing. And Mama said over and over what a glorious angel she now knew in person, come to her in the form of Elgin Lee.

He was a small, delicate baby but suffered none of the colic, spitting up, pink eye, ear infections, rashes Nina and Gertie suffered their first few months. In turn, Mama said, he made her suffer less. And he acted sweeter, better tempered than his eldest brother Rulon at that stage.

"Ain't beans and corn risky enough, Harp, without getting tied up in peas?"

"There's money in them. The man said."

"You got no pea equipment."

"Don't have to do a thing besides spread the weedkiller and fertilize, and till it under. They plant and they harvest, and there ain't one lick of work in between."

"I find that just a wee bit hard to believe."

"They drill the seed just like barley. They're supposed to come up thick. And virtually no weed problem, the man said."

Mama coaxed smiles from baby Elgin Lee.

"And you can make money on these?"

"Just you tell me, Ila Jill--just go on and tell me how a man could lose on such a deal. These peas do okay, and I can get your sewing machine or vacuum cleaner or anything else you've been pestering me for."

She said, "I'll believe that when I see it."

Still, after Daddy signed up with Big Timber, she began

to spread her catalogs on the table after supper, looking at piano benches to match her old dowry upright.

For Rulon, raising peas had nothing to do with a promise of money, everything to do with the pea swathers. They came one morning in late July, three slick machines, a few stray vines clinging to their reels and sickles, as if they moved on so fast there wasn't time to distinguish one man's crop from another's. Rulon stood for a long time on a ditchbank, watched them open the field with five laps around the border, then cut perfect straight lines up and back, up and back, hardly throttling down on their pivots. In his life he'd not seen machinery work so beautifully.

At noon, when the swather engines didn't shut down, Mama wondered if the drivers had food. She hurried to slice bread, spread butter and mustard, layer on cold pork.

"What'll they drink?" Daddy asked, pacing from cupboard to cupboard in the kitchen and pantry. He flung open the freezer and stared as if to make something bright and delicious appear amid paper-wrapped roasts, Baggies of mummified vegetables, a margarine bowl bulging with rock-hard chicken livers in their juice.

"What we got that's cold, Ila Jill? Not a drop of anything in this whole house? They got to have something cold to drink. They'll never get that sandwich down without something."

Finally, she fished two tightly folded dollar bills from her purse, handed Rulon the sandwiches in a cloth sack,

told him to ride his bike the mile to Texaco and buy three cold Pepsis and three candy bars--and to hurry up to the pea field before the pop lost its chill and the chocolate made a mess.

The swathers had worked past the halfway mark of Daddy's crop when Rulon dropped his bike at the ditchbank, chased down the first machine, pop cans chinking together in the bottom of his sack. They were still cold.

Ten feet behind the swather, stumbling through pea stubble, Rulon yelled for the driver to stop. But with his radio headset, gaze locked fixedly onto another twelve-foot strip of vines and pods, the guy couldn't have heard a bomb drop one swath over. Only when Rulon caught up, ran alongside waving an arm clumsily against the counterweight of the lunch sack, only then did the driver notice and haul back on the clutch lever so fast the rear wheel popped a foot off the ground. He had a beard, no shirt, tatoos up and down both arms, looked slightly annoyed, maybe confused, at the interruption--until Rulon handed him a sandwich, Pepsi, Almond Joy.

"Well, I'll be God-darned," he said above the engine's throb. "My savior, you are, kid. Ain't this a fond sight. And cold, too."

He popped the can, nearly drained it in three deep bobs of his Adam's apple. He bit into the bread and pork, mustard staining his lips, crumbs spraying when he patted Rulon's head and said, "Ain't you a kind little chit? Now,

ain't you?"

Running again, the cloth sack noticeably lighter, Rulon loved Mama for sending sandwiches, for making these guys appreciate Daddy's peas.

The third driver, an older man wearing a snap-button western shirt and tennis shoes, waited for Rulon in the middle of the field, engine idling.

"Climb aboard, son. You don't have to chase me like you done those other two jaspers. No sir. Not if'n you're bringing goodies. I'll stay put for that any day."

He unwrapped his sandwich, bit and chewed slowly, lips pooching with each flex of his jaw muscle. He kept looking at Rulon, smiling kindly.

"How old are you, son? Nine, ten?"

"Nine."

The man sipped pop through his pooched lips. "Nine. I would've guessed about that. Nine's a good age. I saw you riding your bike, and I thought to myself, I thought how good it is to be out on a bike at your age."

He looked at Rulon like he wanted to embrace him, then smiled and blinked fast, wiped his eyes and mouth with a ratty blue bandanna.

"Ride with me a round or two--unless you pap's got chores for you right this instant."

Rulon shook his head.

"I'll take you back to your bicycle, let you steer this thing if you'd like."

Rulon had never ridden a machine capable of running all morning without a breakdown, without Daddy getting off every five minutes to nurse a bearing or chain idler with soft oil. For two acres, he sat stiffly, the older man's hand, heavy and warm, guiding his on the steering wheel.

As peas fell away behind them, Rulon became more uncomfortable with the constant staring and pained smiles, the whiskered cheek too close when the man put an arm around his chest and told him to try the up-down reel hydraulic.

"I gotta go," Rulon said. "Daddy'll be wondering about the noon water."

The man grew immediately penitent. "I'm so sorry, son. I didn't mean to keep you. I didn't mean to bother you, just fetching us food and all."

He pulled up at the ditchbank. "This close enough, or you want I should run you on down to your bicycle?"

"Close enough." Rulon wanted to jump the four feet from the operator's platform.

"You sure, son? Just give me the word, and I'll run you down the ditch."

"It's close enough."

At last the man relaxed the arm securing Rulon, long after the machine stopped bouncing across corrugations.

"It's just good to have some company out here once in a while. You know? I am sorry to interfere with you and your pap's schedule"--he smiled and blinked again--"but not too sorry. And tell your ma that was a fine sandwich. Really

fine. Will you do that for me, son?"

Rulon started down the mounting ladder, had to look at the man, intrigued if only by the voice.

"You're a good boy. Lord bless you, you're a fine boy, make a fine man."

The driver began to cry, wiped his eyes with the blue bandanna.

"I had one just like you--just like you." His voice faded to a whisper. "A beautiful little boy, healthy, God he was healthy, riding his bike, me right behind him in the pickup. I just wanted to toot the horn, scare him a little."

He looked away all of a sudden, took a deep, deep breath, then stopped crying as simply as he began.

"It's a hurtful world, son. Lord bless you in it. Make your ma and pap proud on you. Hear?"

"Yes, sir."

The man searched Rulon's face a moment longer, seemed to etch it in his memory, then throttled up and was gone.

Rulon watched the pea swath spilling neatly between the tires of the receding machine, stared a long time at his bike before he righted it and rode toward home.

Next evening, seven brand-new tractors towed big combines down the highway, the last sun flashing off galvanized hoppers. The convoy drew neighbors to windows and yard fences when it turned into Daddy's place. Nobody ever saw that kind of action anywhere on his farm.

Older high school kids in tanktops, a couple in headbands, worked the gears on Massey Fergusons, Fords, John Deeres, waved at Rulon standing on the ditchbank, marking passage into the pea field. He and Daddy worked half the afternoon hauling ties and timbers to fill the deep ditch, shoveling to flatten and smooth the crest of both banks. Yet the high school kids hardly looked at the crossing. With fluid motions of long practice, they eased those giant combines into Daddy's field and, never getting off to jerry-rig anything with wire or friction tape, revved up in clouds of diesel smoke, straddled windrows and began chewing up pea vines.

When Goddard the field man drove up in a Big Timber pickup, Daddy offered his old International Loadstar farm truck, in case the combines needed a place to dump before the company trucks showed.

"Trucks is right behind me," Goddard said. "But I thank you." Then, looking at the Loadstar: "And truth is, that old outfit wouldn't hold but a hopper off one of my combines. They're awful damn big machines--make short work of these little contracts."

Daddy nodded.

Before long, three or four tandem trucks approached, dust boiling around them as if they knew Daddy's dirt road by heart.

"I got two more coming," Goddard said, pointing the drivers to the fullest combines. He fluffed a pea windrow

with his cowboy boot, stripped a pod into his mouth. "Ain't sure now I'm going to need them."

For an instant Rulon caught a look on Daddy's face, a hurt that made the roar of combines and trucks seem far away. For one instant, a half year of hope for these thirty-five acres of peas melted into utter disappointment, embarrassment for that old Loadstar sitting there, its rusty running board and dented fender unworthy of Big Timber.

At supper, though, Daddy acted as he always acted, told Mama to call family, neighbors, people from church, and offer fresh peas, all they wanted.

"Tubs, buckets, bushel baskets," Daddy said. "Anything they can carry peas in." He looked out the window, at the combines working in the day's last hazy light. "Might as well share something like green peas. Big Timber won't miss them."

"Are they hauling many away?" Mama asked. "It sure doesn't seem like they're dumping those hoppers very often."

"They're a big outfit, Ila Jill. They'd do anybody's acreage quick as a sniff."

Later, Rulon sat on a haystack watching the combines from a distance that muted their noise into a pleasant hum. When dusk blurred into full darkness, their lights came on, bright beams sweeping up and down windrows, like boats in a fog of dust. The high school boys in tanktops and headbands would drive those shiny tractors all night, suck in those peas without ever caring how fast the hoppers filled. He

wondered if they ever got sleepy or lonesome for their families.

The farm smelled good. A breeze off river-bottom pasture carried Russian Olive, sagebrush and swamp, clusters of cattle bedded for the night. Below him the empty corral, bull pen, chicken coop, grain bin, pump house all mingled into one heavy fragrance, lovely in the calm summer darkness.

He would learn to run a swather as good as any Big Timber high school boy. He and Daddy could cut their own crops. He would make Mama proud and happy.

Instead of giving up on peas after that first poor crop, as Mama wanted him to, Daddy tried them two more seasons, convinced in his heart he'd never ship hay to dairy farmers in Yula Bend unless he raised a good crop of peas first. Mama said such thinking sounded even more ridiculous than what he usually cooked up. Daddy said maybe so, but he had to try something to invigorate his enterprise.

Mama looked at him. "Wherever did you hear such jackass phony talk as that?"

"It's in all the magazines, Ila Jill. They're all talking about branching out, getting diverse. You can't put all your eggs in one basket and make it in farming. You just can't do it in this day and age. I got to spread out, try things."

"You ought to be on the TV, Harp--talking about farming instead of doing it. You and my precious Elgin Lee, dolled up slick, father and son fresh from pea harvest."

Daddy stared at the floor, acted tired. He climbed this hill with Mama a hundred times a year, and they never reached the top.

"Be still, would you? Couldn't you just hold off with the smart remarks for one little bit? I'm doing the best I can. I truly am."

Even when Daddy finally abandoned peas, he didn't abandon the dream of bolstering his cash flow and sending hay to Yula Bend. When the seed radish field man came around the spring Rulon turned twelve, Daddy signed up, told Mama this was it--a guaranteed profit up to five hundred dollars for every one of the twenty acres he sowed.

At the field man's suggestion, he sprayed a herbicide so toxic to anything but radishes it obligated him to a second year. When Mama opened the bill from Penrose County Weed and Pest, she flipped it again and again with her finger, asking Daddy how he planned to afford that.

Daddy said the field man guaranteed no berryweed with this spray, and that was worth something.

Mama said if she waited for a proper piano bench before trying to give lessons to Nina and Gertie, she'd wait forever.

"How could I know I decided to grow smack during a plague of radish blight?" he asked, when his second crop

yielded more meagerly than the first. "How could I know?"

With the forgetfulness of blindly obstinate hope or simple dogged perseverance--whatever it was exactly that moved him to sit down in December and, on pieced-together cardboard, sketch field outlines, color code the planned crops with crayons--Daddy contracted fifteen acres of rye grass seed two springs later.

"Guys get rich off this stuff," he said, reading a brochure. "I've been missing the boat, Ila Jill. All's I got to do is keep it weed-free. The man said."

That's when Mama smiled, said a weed-free plot on Daddy's farm was as likely as a windless, dustless March in Penrose County, as likely as one of his youngsters showing any interest whatsoever in something she liked.

But Rulon, now approaching his fifteenth birthday, believed in the grass seed, as he had in peas and radishes. He believed in dairy farmers' sore need for alfalfa, in the inevitability of Daddy's success.

He envisioned himself driving a shiny swather, laying alfalfa, grass, clover in perfect green ribbons all across Daddy's place--as perfect as any picture in the farm magazines. He saw himself baling hour after hour, harvesting yields so bountiful the only fitting description would call to mind sands of the sea, hairs of the head, stars in God's heaven. And he envisioned hauling load after load of that sweet green hay up through Willowville, people on the streets staring in amazement at a boy so young, so

capably driving a huge tandem truck. And he imagined, finally, the look on the nameless faces of dairymen at long last rescued from the hunger of their herds.

In Rulon's mind, it was fate or good luck or God-- something powerfully controlling--that planted in Daddy's mind the idea to go into custom haying as a means of increasing cash flow. When a neighbor simply asked if Daddy would cut his five acres of fescue, the seed of this newest dream suddenly sprouted. All the way home on the swather, Daddy waved the neighbor's twenty-dollar check in Rulon's face, fingered it fondly. He said there was a good deal more like it if a fella knew how to get at it. More than anything in his life, Rulon wanted to master precisely this trick, wanted Daddy's fresh tack on success to reveal things thus far hidden from both of them.

They still had a swather, used only minimally since the aphids, and though, as Daddy admitted, it had seen its better days, there was still some life left in it. At least there'd better be, he said. They had the baler. They had the Loadstar. If the girls helped, even manpower wouldn't present much of a snag.

They could start small, Daddy said. Not much prime haying left this year, but come first thing next season, they'd run a free ad in the Penrose County Shop and Swap, call into the radio want ads every noon. They could manage the whole operation, handle people's crop from field to stack. That's how Daddy wanted his ad to read, said it

ought to point a hell of a mob of customers their way. Until they rounded up a side-loader for the truck, he and Rulon could buck bales. They'd hire a couple of Mexican kids away from thinning beets, pay them better to stack hay. Nina or Gertie could drive. Daddy said such an outfit could make hay like nobody's business.

"Lord of mercy," Mama said. "You'd think I didn't need one bit of help around the house."

But she didn't care one way or the other about custom haying--just so Daddy didn't go too broke. What absorbed her more and more toward the end of that summer was Elgin Lee and his singing--little Sunday School tunes here and there, regular, continuous, coming from the chicken coop, grain bin, Daddy's lean-to shop, wherever his chores took him.

Rulon never paid any attention to the hymnal Mama stuck under his nose at church, giggled once at an imagined rhyme when a boy in a bow tie sang "How Great Thou Art" in a childish soprano. Interrupting her admiration, Mama reached down the pew and pinched his ear, for days afterward told him he was nothing but impudent. After that, he never even sang radio songs where she might hear him, never plunked out Chopsticks on her piano.

Until Elgin Lee, Mama couldn't interest any of the children in music. Not even Gertie liked the piano, and Mama considered her the most inclined.

"I'll teach you myself," Mama told her. "I was just

your age when I took lessons. I know enough to get you started. Then maybe we can get you some proper lessons. I'd make you a new dress for playing in Sunday service."

But Gertie said sitting on Mama's piano stool too long made her mind go buzzy.

"We'll get a new one," Mama said. "A real bench."

"Oh, Mama," Gertie said. "You been saying that so long."

All the coaxing and incentives ended, though, the year Elgin Lee turned five, the year he first stood on the chopping block or haystack and sang full verses.

"You are my angel child," she told him. Rulon saw the way she looked at Elgin Lee, the fascination she could not hide--for his handsome blond hair, olive complexion like hers, bluest blue-blue eyes she ever saw, and flawlessly smooth cheeks.

And Rulon saw something else in Mama: an adoration, certainly, but a happiness, contentment, a joy he had never before witnessed in her.

"You are my gift from God Almighty," he heard her say to Elgin Lee when she dressed him in Sunday clothes in the middle of the week.

"Why do you dress the boy like a dandy?" Daddy asked one morning. "He'll just muck up those duds with his choring."

"Maybe you don't realize, Harp, but there are things in life besides choring."

"The boy'll tote his share, as he's able, like all the youngsters."

"Can't you see he's got music in him? He's got fineness and rhythm. He's got a gift, Harp. It's a gift. Lord help us if we smother such a thing under too many fool chores."

"Rulon, Nina, the rest"--Daddy surveyed the children-- "they've managed what all interests them around their chores."

Mama couldn't help her tone, her inflection. "But it ain't Rulon's got the music gift." She glanced at Rulon quickly, apologetically. "He's a fine, strong boy, and more help than he knows. But ain't nor him, Nina, Gertie, or any of you all's got one little fraction of the music Elgin Lee's got in his thumb."

Daddy studied Elgin Lee--still too small to take a side or care for anything but peace and calm. He studied the white shirt, bow-tie, polished shoes. He studied Mama.

"I got nary one thing against the boy's music, Ila Jill. I'll admire him for carrying a tune where I never could. But he'll do his share of the work on the place. Pure, steady work ain't never done lasting harm to any soul I know, music inclined or not."

However vehemently they disagreed, this was exactly the sort of confrontation Mama wanted, an airing of feelings she had to have, a broaching of a subject they never dealt with. Rulon suspected she planned it this way all along.

Almost desperately, as if waiting another moment would put Elgin Lee's future at risk, she said, "I want Elgin Lee to take the piano." She said, "I want him to play, have lessons, study music for real. Not some corn-pone Sunday school tour of the church organ, Sister Alma letting all the children sit on her rickety bench, hollered out with those hips of hers every Sunday." She said, "I want this chance. . . ."

"The boy ain't but six years old. Not even commenced in the school 'til this fall. You ought to give a thing like this some time." He shook his head. "Piano? I'll be damned if I saw this notion cooking in your brain."

"Since when do you know what's in my brain?"

"You got me there, woman. You truly do. Thick as I be, though, I know music lessons cost money. I do know that much. Now just how do you reckon to get around that?"

"I've got the money, Harp. Some of it. I'll have more." Mama ran to her flour bin, probed with a wooden spoon, pulled out a baking soda tin powdered white.

"It's in here. It's all here." She fumbled with the lid, let it fall to the floor, shook a loose roll of bills, some coins, into her hand. "Fifty-seven dollars--and some change." She slid a few nickels across her palm, counting fast. "Some change. I don't know how much for sure. But there's fifty-seven dollars. Good for better than nine lessons with Mrs. Ruth."

The name meant little to the rest of them. Mama talked

even faster.

"She teaches piano, played at the college in Willowville. Everybody in town knows her, says she's good. My mama knew her, always wanted to send me to her. She's strict but good. And she says she'll take Elgin Lee when school starts back up, as one of her regulars."

She paused, swallowed, searched Daddy's face.

"Don't you see, Harp? This is what-all the boy needs to make the most of the gift he's been blessed with. Good strict lessons and lots of practice. I've got my old upright in there waiting all these long years for a body born to it. And now finally, finally!"

Daddy smoothed his hair straight back several times, figured on his fingers, mumbled to himself.

"Six dollars a whack, Ila Jill? For a music lesson? We never spent nigh such a sum on the other youngsters, not for anything."

She clutched his hands, halted them before they could smooth his hair another time.

"Elgin Lee's different," she whispered, sweeping a glance at the girls and Rulon. "Lord, I love them all, but he's different."

Through the early fall, musical gift or not, Rulon was never convinced Elgin Lee wanted to be different, never sure he wanted to stand apart from him and Daddy and the farm as badly as Mama wanted him to. He was a sweet boy, though, never balked when Mama called him away from playing or

working with Rulon to practice scales. But in his eyes Rulon noticed a longing when she hollered from the screendoor on Tuesday afternoons.

"You, Elgin Lee! You'll put us late for Mrs. Ruth if you don't make haste."

There was never the slightest risk of being late. Rulon knew Mama probably started at two o'clock bathing and dressing herself for a four o'clock lesson only three miles beyond Texaco. With a half hour to spare, kids just home from school, she burst from the house holding Elgin Lee's hand, announcing they were off to study music.

In those moments, Rulon felt--wanted to feel--Elgin Lee's longing to stay, change into work trousers and boots, eat peanut butter and crackers with him. If faced with Mama and the piano, anybody would rather go along to find Daddy and help with the last of the bean harvest, help pick apples, dig potatoes, mulch strawberries, insulate the pump house with straw bales, pour anti-freeze in every truck and tractor radiator against the first hard frost--any of the dozens of tasks that came daily to Daddy's attention like leaks in a bad dam. Anybody would rather do those things.

Through late October and into the winter, Rulon became accustomed to the new schedule of their lives. Daddy still flushed the toilet shortly after five every morning and, after a blurry, instantaneous interval that amazingly accounted for a half hour, stepped into Rulon's bedroom.

Just as he had almost every morning--except Christmases

and birthdays--since Rulon started school, Daddy came in by his bed without turning on the light, gently tugged his toe through the covers, whispered, "Up with you, Rulon. Roust out, boy. Come on."

Then Daddy made sure Elgin Lee got back his share of the blankets, stood for a moment half waiting for Rulon to come awake, half watching Elgin Lee sleep in the lovely ripe quiet, the peaceful dimness of early morning.

No need to whisper anymore, though. From his bed, in the distant, dreamy awareness prefacing wakefulness, Rulon traced Daddy's steps creak by creak, through the living room, kitchen, into the porch, almost felt him, heard him there, next to the washing machine whose motor armature smoked under load and a yellowed tile sink forever on the verge of an indissoluble clog; there where coats and hooded sweatshirts missing drawstrings tried futilely to hang from sloped wire pegs, ended up in heaps on the floor; there by the old bureau shedding paint blisters, full of mateless mittens and gloves, most fingertips long ago stuffed useless with hay leaves, and knit caps thin and porous in a stiff wind.

No sooner did Daddy pull on his Big Mac denim coat, patched red across the back where a strand of barbed wire snapped and tore, his cap with wool earflaps, dung-crusting boots--no sooner did the porch door close behind him than Mama came along the same path of floor creaks, humming as she clicked on the radio, set water on the stove for mush,

broke eggs in a bowl. In this newest season of her life, she habitually passed the piano on her way to Rulon's room, positioned the stool, tried to fluff its old quilted pad. Then she laid out scale books and hinged the heavy oak lid away from the keys, resting it on its felt buttons with a faint thud--a sound more audible, curiously, than any other morning sound. She stood outside his room and knocked on a door swollen just far enough beyond its frame to prevent a tight seal, secure latching. She knocked and, without ever waiting for his response, entered, slapping on the light, often caught him in his underwear but ignored the intrusion in her zeal to wake Elgin Lee for his practice session. She leaned over him, smoothed the blond hair, kissed his forehead.

"Come on, little honey child. Up, up, up. You got to make us some melody in this place."

Every morning, when Elgin Lee groped for the comforting darkness so suddenly dissolved, squinted against the lightbulb's glare, came awake with shock, even fear, on his face, Rulon wished Mama would let him be, let him rest on and sleep his fill. But then he wondered, pulling on his own coat and hat, stepping into the abrupt cold of the darkness outside, wondered if she might not be doing right, if Elgin Lee might not someday thank her for sleep sacrificed one morning at a time.

Again and again he wondered these things, with an inchoate perception he couldn't fully understand or trust.

He thought of Elgin Lee and Mama as he pulled the lightbulb string in the barn, invited the Holstein to her stanchion by pouring a measure of rolled barley in her trough, brushed her flank and udder. With the first fine blasts of milk singing and steaming against the bucket's ridged bottom, Rulon imagined Elgin Lee perched sleepily on the stool in front of the piano, Mama spreading piece after exercise piece before him.

Singing, singing, the milk foamed, rose according to corrugations in the bucket's side. Two cats, both lethargic mousers, waited in the stall's corner, poised over an old Ford hubcap. Several winters ago Rulon found it in the borrow ditch by Texaco, brazed a half dozen holes with Daddy's torch so the cats had something better to drink from than a charred tuna can.

"You've got a real knack," Daddy kept saying when the hubcap held milk. "You can do welding or anything you like. That kind of skill can make you a decent living. A man can do a lot if he can fix things. There's no substitute for it."

The hubcap's shiny domed surface reflected, distorted the cats' faces. So meticulous in their habits, they licked the least droplet, the slightest film of liquid from the letter indentations. Rulon milked, his head warm against the cow's flank, his forearms and wrists, hands and fingers finding their strength again after the paralysis of sleep.

Sometime early in January, right before Elgin Lee's seventh birthday, Daddy read somewhere that the ammonia in chicken manure prevented aphids in first-year alfalfa.

"If we're going to be in the haying business," he said, "we ought to be able to raise some decent fodder for our own stock." He said, "Praise be for those sixty layers blessing us more than double--just doing what comes natural to them. Soon as the frost's gone from out the fields, we'll spread five acres of our new growth thick."

"You better not upset their routine none," Mama said. "That's all I got to say about it. Those eggs are supporting a mighty important cause."

At about this same time, Mrs. Ruth announced the first recital of the new year, scheduled on a Sunday afternoon in late February, told Mama she could look forward with great pride to Elgin Lee's performance.

"Practice, practice," Mama called to Elgin Lee on the morning of his birthday. "Play, play, play. Night and day. You're my little prodigy. Mrs. Ruth says so. We daren't take a day off, not with your performance coming up."

Rulon had never seen Mama sustain a happy temperament for so long. Even when the house pipes froze during early February's bitter cold, when she had to wash everything with water bucketed from the pump house spigot, heat bath and dish water on the range--even then her pleasantness endured. Mama's countenance reflected more than a fickle emotional

levitation. At times her mood bordered on ecstasy, a kind of blissful delirium that defied the ubiquity of dirty puddles around the bootjack, cow manure flaking off trouser hems in trails to the bathroom, extra socks strewn throughout the house.

"Play on," she told Elgin Lee at ten to six on a morning the thermometer outside the kitchen window registered thirty-five below zero. "Thank the Lord there's nothing in a piano to freeze." Rulon stood aside when she poked wood into the heating stove until it rumbled with warmth and radiated heat in comforting waves.

"That cow won't milk herself," she told Rulon.

He nodded, reluctant for the first time to do what was his to do, disinclined beyond a simple aversion to pulling away from the stove's lovely warmth on his hands and backside, on trousers still cold from a dresser drawer next to his bedroom window.

Rulon heard the scales growing more complex every week, listened as the practice pieces assumed recognizable, even mellifluous forms. He watched Elgin Lee play deliberately, competently--wrists and palms precisely postured, fingers moving easily after only five months, instinctively, tongue protruding slightly when he confronted new chords. Already Elgin Lee sensed keys with nimble certainty, played familiar exercises almost absently.

"You heard me, Rulon," Mama said. She tapped and waved her wooden spoon to the rhythm of Elgin Lee's scales. "That

cow's out there bulging her seams this very minute."

She stopped on her way to stoke the fire again, looked at Rulon. "I'll have your biscuits hot when you get back. Now go on."

The cold awaited him, Rulon knew, to make snow squeak with every step, to numb toes and fingers, freeze his nose's incessant drip as it did Daddy's, to glaze the milk bucket with white ice. And then came the miserable chore of helping lug the half-barrel with welded handles from pump house spigot to the porch, water sloshing their mittens and trousers as they stumbled across frozen turds, squeezed through a narrow gate, hopped a ditch by the barren lilac bush.

"And, Rulon," Mama called, just as he pulled on his boots, gripped the knob on the back door. "Mind the wood box needs filled--we're running low in here."

He didn't turn around, but didn't open the door, either. Piano notes floated smooth and warm everywhere, through the rooms behind him. His heavy hood and cap, coats, long underwear suddenly constricted his breath, and he flushed, irritated by the itch of his wool scarf.

"Wood box is Elgin's chore," he said. "And he knows it."

The tap of the wooden spoon continued, and for an instant Rulon wondered whether Mama heard, whether she heard and tapped the spoon anyway.

"Daddy says Elgin can at least. . . ."

"I know what your Daddy says." The tapping stopped at the same time the piano did. "But it's bitter cold out there, Rulon. You're older, used to it." She paused. "We've got to make some allowances."

Rulon tried to read her voice. Insistent, ingratiating, sincere? He didn't want to turn around, wanted only to walk into the cold, let it swallow his flushed face, his itchiness.

All sound from the living room ceased--no exercise books shuffling, no creaking stool, no heavy lid closing, no slight vibrations echoing through the piano's bowels. There was no sound at all except the water kettle hissing on the range and Gertie humming in the bathroom. Without looking, Rulon knew Mama stood behind him.

"Rulon, honey"--he felt her hand on his shoulder, through all the layers of clothing--"you're the best chorer we could ask for. You know that. We couldn't ask for better help around the place. Just fetch the wood this once. Will you do that for me?"

He knew she wanted him to face her, but he couldn't.

"Will you, Rulon?" Her hand slipped away.

"Yes, ma'am."

He wrenched the porch door from the jamb's icy encrustation and stepped outside.

"I'll make you biscuits," Mama said.

The door squeaked firmly closed behind him, as if in an effort to deny the chill even a slight admission, and Rulon

walked only halfway to the grain bin before he again heard the piano, faint but clearly distinguishable, its notes oddly fragmented in the dark and cold. At the grain bin door, he imagined Mama whisking eggs and flour with a strength nourished by her newfound joy.

On the Saturday before Mrs. Ruth's Sunday recital--the cold having yielded to Chinook winds, dripping eaves, melting drifts--Daddy left breakfast early and backed the manure wagon to the coop, moved with his own inimitable energy, drawn from a hope and expectation as renewable as the seasons themselves.

"Hurry up, Rulon," he said, tucking his trousers into rubber boots. "You can fork or shovel--makes no difference to me. We'll trade off with the wheelbarrow, rig us a ramp right into the wagon. Simple as pie."

"And you, Elgin Lee, get yourself ready. We can use you."

Mama looked up sharply, stopped clearing the table.

"I've got the roosts apart," Daddy said, "and am wanting to take a putty knife to the slats this time, get them good and clean. That's a job made to fit for you, Elgin."

Elgin Lee smiled at Rulon.

"Now wait a minute, Harp. Wait just a minute. You just wait. The boy's got practicing to do--for tomorrow."

"And he's got manure to scrape for today." Daddy looked down at Elgin Lee's clean, pressed clothes. "Go get

dressed in some proper work duds, boy."

Elgin Lee slid from his chair, left his glass of milk half full.

"Harp."

"I'm telling you, Ila Jill, I won't coddle the boy. The piano will still be here after supper. Right now there's a bird coop needs mucked out." Pointing at Rulon and Elgin Lee, he said, "And I know just the fellas for the job."

Mama tried for the second time to coax a viable stream from the kitchen faucet, muttered something vaguely profane, then slid dishes into the sink, threw silverware piece by piece, in quick, jerky motions.

"You're just a real big help. You know that, Harp?"

Daddy stood behind her, listening, as they all were, to water laboring through pipes, the accelerated shuffle of Mama's house slippers on gritty linoleum as she moved from sink to table, the refrigerator's convulsive hum. The half-eaten jellied toast Daddy held to his mouth seemed to lose its flavor even as he chewed.

"We'll be done in plenty of time for Elgin to bone up on his scales."

Mama dropped the frying pan into a sink already threatening to overflow, splashed suds on her apron.

"A little work won't hurt his piano playing."

She wheeled suddenly, a rubber spatula trembling in her hand.

"Damn you, Harp!" With an aim warped by her anger and frustration, she threw the spatula at Daddy, hit, instead, the refrigerator, where it bounced harmlessly away.

Daddy held the half-eaten toast almost shamefully, seemed for an absurd instant to offer it to her.

"Ila Jill."

"Damn you, damn you, damn you all!" She flung a handful of water at his face and pivoted back to the sink, crying in choked, muffled heaves.

The spectacle of Mama's distress profoundly unsettled Rulon whenever he witnessed it. But this time her anguish seemed to issue from an inner world starkly distant from the one she created around Elgin Lee and her hopes. Her breathless, truncated sobs, punctuated with short gasps, and the crying, deep and dry in her throat and lungs--all of this must sound, Rulon concluded in a strange, isolated moment of detachment, like someone drowning.

Daddy placed his toast gently in the swill bucket beside the sink, wiped his face with a dish towel.

"All right, Ila Jill. Okay. All right. We'll let the boy decide. I just don't care enough to have you in tears over this. Ain't but very little worth that. Let Elgin Lee decide."

Turning to Elgin Lee, Daddy rubbed his eyes, tired before the day's work even began.

"You can practice some more on the piano for Mrs. Ruth's show tomorrow, or you can help me and Rulon clean the

coop. And no," he said, gathering his gloves and hat, "I don't expect that's a drastic tough choice."

Still, Mama waited for the answer. Hurriedly, self-consciously, she dried her eyes, blew her nose on the wad of toilet paper carried as a fixture in her apron.

"Well, Elgin?" she said, her voice strangely sober and pleasant, as if from long disuse or sleep. "Your daddy's give you a choice."

Elgin Lee hesitated, looked for a long time at Rulon, Daddy, then back at Mama.

"I can help them, Mama," he said. "Won't bother my playing none. I swear it won't. I'm practiced as I can get, nigh onto tired of it."

Rulon wanted Daddy to lift the pall of distress, cheer them all. He could always make the girls laugh.

"All's I know, Elgin, is you've practiced plenty enough to drive the rest of us loony."

Gertie and Nina wanted to laugh.

Elgin Lee appeared not to hear. "You'll see it won't hurt me, Mama. Please?"

For the briefest instant, Rulon thought she would cry again. Her eyes welled with the same ineffable sorrow he saw once when she stood at this very sink, looking out the same window, watching hail bounce a foot off their one patch of real lawn. Rulon remembered her expression, a sorrow purified by a foresight of shredded corn and beans. Even as the hail eased, Daddy kept saying it might not be so bad out

away from the house. And Mama never answered. She never could bring herself to answer.

"What of it, Ila Jill? The boy's chose."

"Mama, I can do it."

She nodded then, bit her lip and smiled, knelt and hugged Elgin Lee.

"You leave yourself plenty of time." She said this as if he were the one person in the world who could understand the urgency in her voice. "Me and Mrs. Ruth is counting on you."

"Okay," Daddy said. "Come on, you all. We got hay to fertilize."

Rulon was last out, noticed Mama look up from the dishes only when Elgin Lee--dressed now in denim trousers, rubber boots with inner-tube patches on both ankles, man-sized gloves flopping hay-stuffed fingers--followed Daddy down the back stoop.

"Scraping them slats ain't too bad," Rulon said. "I read strong hands helps a piano player. And I reckon a putty knife will help make them that way."

He saw her arms only to the point where they were thrust into water, where the sink rim cut them off from view. Stray suds wisped toward her elbows.

"Mama, he wants to work with us."

"Go on and help your daddy," she said without facing him. "And leave me worry about Elgin Lee."

Something happened to Mama that spring. She sat in the front row of folding chairs at Mrs. Ruth's recital but didn't care--after Elgin Lee came from the chicken coop reeking of manure, sleeves covered with feathers--whether Daddy or Rulon or any of the rest of them dressed up and went along. Even so, they all went to hear Elgin Lee play--and hit only one minor sour note--to see Mrs. Ruth award him a porcelain dalmatian and Great Dane for best new student and hardest worker, there to see Mama completely absorbed in a reverie of pride.

Rulon came in from tilling one evening in March to find the porcelain dogs centered on the shelf above the piano, in a space formerly occupied by his own plaque for the best welding project in freshman ag shop.

As if she took note of his puzzlement intuitively, Mama yelled from the kitchen.

"I put your plaque on your dresser, Rulon. That's where you wanted it in the first place. Remember?"

She was right. That's where he wanted to put it on the night he brought it home from the ag banquet a year ago.

"You know," she said, "it's a nice little plaque. I was very proud of you."

Her voice floated to him, though, infused with pride for something quite distinct from the stock rack he welded for Daddy's pickup. Her tone stemmed not merely from Elgin Lee's award dogs but for the small corner of a very distant

refinement they brought to the shelf in her living room. Rulon knew she could have just as gaily announced the burning of his plaque. Her tone belonged to that small space, arduously dusted and waxed, around the unflinching dalmatian and Great Dane. Her delight for this one minute euphony somehow stood resilient against a thousand vagaries not assuaged in the least by beautiful, flawlessly played melodies.

But her contentment did not--could not--endure through her days and weeks. She became more and more adamant about Elgin Lee's practice schedule, told him he wouldn't amount to piddly-dee without practice, woke him some mornings even earlier than Daddy woke Rulon.

At first she resented any task that took Elgin Lee away from the piano. Then she begrudged anything that took him away from her. If Daddy wanted Elgin Lee to burn ditches or shovel silt from irrigation laterals, Mama said she needed him to rake twigs around the yard or spade the garden. If Rulon needed help toting pliers, hammer, wire, and a coffee can of staples to ready river-bottom fence for spring pasturing, Mama needed help washing windows or painting a stretch of dilapidated fence she'd never bothered with before.

"Let Nina or Gertie help you," Daddy said. "You got plenty of hands around here."

"I need Elgin Lee," Mama said. "Case closed."

But it wasn't as closed as she wanted. With each week

of that spring when Elgin Lee was seven, he wanted more and more to go with Daddy and Rulon. He still practiced his scales dutifully, still impressed Mrs. Ruth with his God-given ability for music, still played for Mama when she asked. But his passion for these things, at least in Mama's eyes, came nowhere close to equaling his passion for driving the old hand-clutch Case while Daddy or Rulon hitched a chain to cedar saplings along fencerows.

Even more than seed treatment on Elgin Lee's hands or blood sprayed in his face from a messy dehorning, Mama hated his driving a tractor. She hated it not so much because of the bad thumb blister from clutching or his wincing every time he hit middle-C, but because he became so soon enamored with machinery, with things out on the farm. And for whatever reason, whatever intricacies of aspiration and loyalty, he became enamored with Daddy's plan to do custom haying.

"I don't like it, Harp. I don't like it one bit. Elgin Lee's too young yet to be sitting on a tractor."

"He's no younger than Rulon was."

And then the line she used with increasing frequency: "I don't give the slightest damn how old Rulon was."

"The boy does live on a farm, Ila Jill. Maybe I need to remind you of that once in a while."

"I wish to high heaven I could forget it. What a sweet, precious blessing that would be."

Daddy paused, at the same dead end he always came to in

arguments with Mama.

"I give the boy his choice," he said. "I ain't tying him to no tractor seat."

Rulon wondered about age, about what it did or didn't mean to be sixteen, what he could or couldn't do. He wondered about choice, force, obligation, loyalty, habit, wondered what moved Mama to marry Daddy, to agree--as she surely must have--to a place and purpose she now seemed truly to disdain. More and more intensely, Rulon wanted her to embrace the idea of custom haying, hauling loads and loads to Yula Bend. He wanted her to embrace something about the farm.

When school ended in May, Elgin Lee told Mama he didn't want to take piano lessons through the summer.

"Elgin Lee, honey, you can't just stop like that." She reached to brush the hair from his eyes, gently turned his face to her when he flinched and ducked. Stroking and stroking, she said, "Mrs. Ruth is expecting you."

"Mrs. Ruth ain't got no hay to cut and haul, either."

Daddy smiled. Rulon smiled. He couldn't help liking the way Elgin Lee said what he said.

"Elgin, you can't forget you're my little music man."

She could always make him feel torn between her and Daddy. With that voice, that tone, however sincere it was, she drove Elgin Lee to silence and guilt, to think nothing mattered in his life except playing the piano.

"It ain't every boy," Rulon said, "can sit in the cool

and play the piano all summer."

Quick as a blink, Mama turned, poked him in the chest. "You shut up, young man. Do you hear me? You just shut right up. This ain't one lick of your affair."

Daddy tried to soothe or understand her. He always tried. "He meant nothing by it, Ila Jill."

"What would either one of you know about it?" She held Elgin Lee's head to her bosom, stroked his blond hair. "Huh? How would either one of you simpletons know the first iota about a thing like piano?"

Shortly before alfalfa's June bloom, Rulon and Daddy drove down into the gravel pit to jump-start the swather in its winter parking place between a roller harrow and old McCormick thresher. The swather sat backed against a steep bank still showing scars from a gravel scraper's teeth. Elgin Lee went with them.

Driving by his machinery, Daddy always told the same story about how much money he made selling gravel to the highway department when they widened the secondary all through this stretch of Penrose County. He said all he needed was for them to build a road like that every year.

"Pit gives us some windbreak, too," he said, lifting their train-rail peening anvil from its deep dent in the swather's seat, his voice happy that more of the rump cushion hadn't torn away and blown into the river.

He sounded just as glad to find the ice-cream bucket in its place under the seat, whistled as he poured out reddish water, knocked its bottom against the floorboard to loosen spare sickle sections and rivets molded in an inch of rusty goop.

Rulon watched Elgin Lee holding the jumper clamps, standing closer than he should have when Daddy blew powdered acid from the terminals and worked a wire brush until the lead shone. Of his own volition, Elgin Lee cleaned a mouse nest from the battery box, brushed away dung kernels with his bare hand, leaned his head into the box and blew.

"Mind you wash those hands good," Daddy said. Elgin acted fascinated, eager, as willing as the clear blue of the day.

With the cables hooked up, Daddy revving the pickup, Rulon sat in the swather's seat and waited for amps to build. He took the WD-40 Elgin Lee offered and sprayed the choke cable, worked it in and out, sprayed again until it dripped. Then he waited--knew Elgin Lee waited--for that first chug of the starter, just like waiting for a rifle blast after a long aim.

Daddy signaled and Rulon hit the ignition button. The engine rolled over, caught and died, caught and died--finally coughed a cloud of smoke and fired for good. Rulon loved the swather coming to life--hydrostatic whine, engine vibration, warm radiator air blowing in his face when he stood beneath frame beams and engine mounts looking for

rotted gaskets, fluid leaks. After waiting so long for this day, for the move toward custom haying and the now not-so-far distant prospect of Yula Bend, he loved the exhaust pipe and muffler melting away dew, shimmering before the sun climbed high and hot.

Rulon knew Elgin Lee envied him, saw it even as he throttled up, eased the drivestick forward. Elgin looked small standing in the hollow left by one of the big-tread tires, watching grubs and ants mill. Nothing was as familiar to Rulon as his own vision of rolling those same tires over ditch crossings hastily fashioned in preparation for his coming, his sharp eye guiding the swather's reel through tight gates, under low-hanging cottonwood limbs.

Back in the yard, they put a charge on the battery and tried to muster enough blow in the air compressor to pump up the big tires. But anything over a hundred pounds heated the pulleys until they singed the frayed belt. Elgin Lee took a rag to every zirk before Rulon greased it, helped scrape away moldy chaff between canvases and sickle guards, punched a pour-spout into each new can of motor oil as if he'd done such a thing every day of his life. He even got gas in his eye when Rulon flushed the settling bulb. With the sickle laid out in front of the tool shed, he steadied the peening anvil while Daddy riveted in replacement sections.

In two days the swather stood ready. Daddy planned to try it on the alfalfa he now called the coop patch. He told

Mama that plot was probably the finest fodder he'd ever grown. She said she didn't doubt that.

Even her insinuating, though, about Daddy's simply perceived successes, the likelihood of those successes, came from an indifferent heart. She cared little when the coop patch yielded over four tons per acre, when Daddy reported a blessed absence of aphids in that stand and all his others. She did little more than force a pleasant countenance when Rulon passed on a neighbor's response to their radio ad.

"We got us some business," Rulon said. "People will get to know Daddy's name. It won't take long. I'll be on that swather night and day."

But neither that prospect nor any other excited Mama. She went from clothesline to berry patch to garden to town for groceries as if every movement and action were an afterthought, a nagging errand happily forgotten only to be remembered again.

On a hot afternoon, coming through the yard to fuel the swather, Rulon stopped for a drink. It was cool in the house, quiet--and empty, he thought, until he heard a single piano key, then another, halting, weirdly out of place against the sleepy outside sounds of young roosters crowing, bees in the lilac bushes, flies everywhere.

"Mind your feet on my clean carpet," Mama said before she even saw him.

Rulon stopped at the threshold of the shadowed living room, squinted after the bright sun to locate Mama sitting

in front of the keyboard, holding a photo album in her lap. He'd seen the pictures--a set showing Mama when she was ten, playing piano on a makeshift stage in the basement of the Odd Fellows hall, matching, ridiculously oversized bows on her dress, in her hair; another set of her singing in a youth talent show at church, gaze directed upwards in a manner Rulon always found peculiar.

"Mama?"

She traced her finger around the edge of several pictures, and, as if his listening were only incidental, she said, "That was so long ago."

She closed the album reverently, ran her hand again and again over its old embossed cover.

"So much to do," she finally said, "and here I sit."

She sighed unnaturally, affected a wistfulness that made Rulon uncomfortable.

"You never wanted to try piano, did you, Rulon?"

He felt strangely unwilling to admit something she knew more certainly than he. It was she who left a course-bristled handbrush in his Christmas stocking several years ago, the one who told him to use the porch sink and Lava soap when he came in greasy. She didn't want his mess in her bathroom sink. She told him to keep his nails clipped short and clean so he didn't look like a barbarian. She never meant such things to sound harsh or critical. But she meant them nonetheless.

Subject to fitful, capricious stirrings of air, the

living room stayed cooler than the rest of the house. It appeared extraordinarily dim in the afternoon sun, shaded, as it was, by immense, overgrown cottonwood boughs visible through Mama's beloved picture window, crowding out, in fact, a view of anything else.

Can't you prune them just a little, Harp? Would it hurt you to do that for me?

"You didn't want to play?"

"No, ma'am."

"You're so handy, though. Your daddy tells me all the time how good you are around the machinery, how he thinks you could make a fine living with welding as your trade."

Mama stared through the big window's pane, always bug-specked no matter how regularly she cleaned it, stared for a very long moment, almost entranced.

She said, "The Lord gives us all a different gift, I guess." She said, "I'm blessed to have what gifted youngsters I have. Some folks don't have any youngsters at all." She said, "I am blessed."

Rulon watched her blow her nose gently, press a knuckle repeatedly to each nostril.

"Do you understand me, Rulon?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're a good boy. Heaven only knows what your Daddy would do without you."

Sounds from beyond the living room filtered in--a rooster's hoarse immature crowing, bees in the lilacs, flies

on every window screen. Rulon took a step toward her.

"Mind your feet."

"I like to help you and Daddy," he said. "I want to help. We can do good on this place, make good profit haying for people."

Even as he spoke, Mama lapsed back into that curious state wherein she seemed always to listen--not with a calculated insensitivity or thoughtlessness but with an almost ingenuous preoccupation--for something or someone more appealing than anything this house and everything around it had to offer.

"You're a big help to your Daddy," Mama said even as she exhaled another great sigh.

Rulon suddenly wanted to run from the cool room, run and climb on the swather and prove to her just how much hay he could cut, how much money Daddy could make.

He backed away slowly from the narrow brass lip separating dining room linoleum from the living room's threadbare carpet. His ankles itched from brome seeds stuck in his socks. He backed away from Mama sitting on the stool in front of her old upright piano.

For the tenth time she brought her wad of toilet paper to her nose.

"There's Tang in the fridge," she said without looking at him. "Mind you get some. It's hot out there."

And Rulon obliged, gulping a sour glassful before he noticed the sugar pulp settled in the bottom of the pitcher.

Mama's kitchen was clean for once. He couldn't bring himself to disturb so much as a spoon, drank his second glassful without stirring any sweetness into it.

Because Daddy cut hay for two dollars an acre below rate, he had more than he could do by early July. Mama said such pricing was the dumbest business move she'd ever heard of. Daddy said he compensated with cheap labor--and smiled at Rulon and Elgin Lee. The two Mexicans he hired were good workers, too, he said. If they just had somebody to drive another truck, they could haul as much as they cut and baled, hang onto customers throughout the season. He felt sure they would, in some cases, meet up with farmers willing to barter their crop just for getting it out of the field. The trick was to stockpile as much of that cheap summer forage as possible and corner the market when dairymen up in Yula Bend started hurting for feed next winter--when alfalfa, or anything green with baling twine around it, doubled, tripled in price.

But they had to have another driver before Daddy could justify a second truck.

"Not my Elgin Lee," Mama said. "You know how I feel about him driving machinery when he's so young."

"He's hardly big enough to be stacking for us, Ila Jill."

"Well he's damn sure not big enough to be driving a

truck."

Despite Elgin Lee's begging, she didn't change her mind. She said he could stack, and that was it--said he better stay clear of that bale-loader or he wouldn't be doing that. She bought him a pair of calfskin gloves with her milk and egg money, told him to keep them put up in his room.

So Elgin Lee, wearing new calfskin gloves to protect his skin from the considerable chafing of hemp twine, rolled bales in place atop the truck and on the stacks around the house. Until one afternoon when the Mexican boys' uncle threw a main bearing in the family one-ton and sent a cousin for them.

Daddy stood in the alfalfa stubble, bales stretching away from him in all directions. They had to keep hauling. Daddy kicked the tire on the bale-loader, kept saying, "Judas Priest, Judas Priest Hemlock."

Rulon knew they had to keep hauling.

Finally Daddy smoothed his hair, replaced his cap. "We got no choice," he said. "Or none I can think of just this instant."

He sat Elgin Lee on a sack of Purina trough salt to steer the Loadstar, rode the running board until Elgin got the feel of things, warned him to yell for somebody if he needed to stop--or kill it with the key.

A week passed before Mama found salt pellets in the back pocket of his trousers and asked him at supper where

they came from.

He hurried to tell her how they'd hauled five thousand bales since he started driving, how the Mexicans could help their uncle the rest of the summer--and forever.

Rulon had never seen her so angry, wholly flushed and fervid, so enraged she could hardly utter coherent sentences. She'd never spoken so bitterly to Daddy.

She reacted with only slightly less vehemence when, a few evenings later, at yet another supper, Rulon asked her if Elgin Lee could ride the swather with him. He wouldn't ask, he told her, unless Elgin Lee wanted to ride.

"No no no no no no! How often do I have to tell you and your Daddy? I won't have it! And I'm hoping, Rulon"--she ignored Daddy--"you'll listen a little better than he does."

She held a knife and slice of bread, jabbed the butter, spread a bit, jabbed and spread, jabbed and spread, until the bread disintegrated in her palm.

"Ila Jill."

Mama dropped the knife squarely on her plate, let the clatter choke everybody in the middle of a swallow.

"Don't you Ila Jill me, Harp. Some stuff I got to put up with. I know that by now."

She pointed out the window at looming haystacks--one behind her clothesline and another between the old cistern and garden, and a couple they couldn't see from the table. Rulon didn't have to see the remains of a little stack of

last season's hay next to the calving shed, just across the yard, to know Mama meant it, too. No need for much of a fence around it, Daddy said last winter, when this latest version of his dream first captivated him. Just old fat cows in the next corral. They got into the stack one night during a wet snow, messed all over, tramped it into silage--sour when the breeze shifted.

"Hay, hay, hay," Mama said. "Every damn blasted place I look, there's some of your hay's going to make you flush--if it ever does take a notion to go up, that is. And as if you don't have enough of your own, you got all the neighbors' to cut and bale and haul." She shook her head, said, "How long you think that pitiful old machinery's going to hold up, cutting every ding-a-ling's hay in Penrose County? Huh? Tell me that."

Daddy's rolled-up sleeves loosened. He went back to creasing and folding, always rolled them up to eat.

"I got to make a living, Ila Jill. I got to do what I can do."

"Shoot, Harp! You think you're going to tell me one thing I don't already know about what you can and can't do?" Mama laughed short. "I'm just sick and tired of all this hay sitting around, not worth a fool dime."

"It could go up," Daddy said.

"Oh right!"

"You'll be perky enough when the checks roll in. You always are."

"When, Harp? When? I can't hardly enjoy your money if I'm ninety-five. What do I do in the meantime? Wait in this hay pit of yours for a decent price? Green dust on my nice clean clothes every time the wind blows--which is always. And I can't lay down to sleep without catching a whiff of that smelly mess behind our bedroom. You guys tramping in here all hours, boots and socks covered with leaves, stems, dust, dirt, and Lord knows what else from the corrals. Makes it awful damn tough to keep this place clean."

It was the same argument, the same old repeated, incorrigible, intractable argument--all the worse when Mama kept saying Harp with a bite in her voice. If she got mad enough, there wouldn't be any talk of Elgin Lee riding the swather or of anything else.

Nobody spoke. Rulon wanted to eat, normally, noisily. But no spoons or forks scraped against plates.

Daddy started to say something, stopped. "Ahh!" He waved the argument aside, went back to his potatoes and eggs.

Mama drank her milk, ate her bread piece by piece.

All the while she knew Daddy wanted to say something, knew he wasn't eating. He leaned across his plate, lips moving, breath in his throat like he wanted to make a word. But as close as he came was bits of words, little starts and stops to match his hands sliding back and forth on each side of his plate.

She turned finally, and they faced each other without blinking. "There's things about you, Harp, I can't hope to change."

Her eyes filled with tears, and her words sounded wet. Rulon chewed and swallowed without tasting anything, wanted to get away from the house and forget this supper. He wanted Elgin Lee to ride the swather. That's all he wanted. And she cried about it.

Living out his own ideas about how things should be wasn't worth Mama's red eyes and face, high-choked squeak of a voice, her worn-out anger. It wasn't worth his own meal turning into yellow and brown, swimming before his eyes, mashed potatoes dry as chalk, meat like rubber, impossible to swallow.

They ate. That's all they did. No talk, nobody laughing. Just forks and spoons working to empty those plates and get the whole thing over with. When Daddy asked Nina to pass the eggs, Mama slid the bowl to him fast. She didn't want the words hanging at all.

After another long silence, Daddy set his knife, fork, spoon and glass on his plate. Next he'd stand, Not bad eating, Ila Jill, take his plateload to the sink.

But not this time.

Elgin Lee scraped his plate, again and again, scraped and licked his spoon, as if there were food in the pattern of his chipped stoneware only he could see.

"Lord, Elgin Lee!" Mama said. "Why are you tormenting

me with that noise? You're not riding that God-forsaken swather on any old God-forsaken farm, so just let me be about it! Do you hear me? Just let me be!"

She scooted backwards in her chair, stood fast. "I'm against it, Harp. Remember that. You too, Rulon. And you all can get your own dessert."

They heard her steps through the kitchen and living room, every joist and floorboard squeak, then the bathroom door, water splashing in the sink, toilet paper spooling, nose blowing.

Daddy sat for a minute, fingering his silverware, twisting his glass around and around. Finally he nodded for Gertie to bring the peaches and cake sitting next to the incessantly humming refrigerator.

"When are you going to play something for me?" Mama asked Elgin Lee a few days later, when she thought Rulon was asleep on the floor in front of the living room screened door. She sat on the piano stool. Across the room Elgin thumbed through an old Outdoor Life, half reclined on the swayback couch.

"You've hardly touched those keys all summer or even looked at your pieces. Mrs. Ruth says you can start up a little before school if you like. You'll likely be a bit rusty, she says. Says she wants you back up to speed fast as she can get you there."

Elgin Lee shifted uncomfortably.

"Elgin?"

"Mrs. Ruth is so faky, Mama--living with all them cats in that messy house.

"Oh, Elgin Lee, honey. It's not messy. She's collected things."

"Mama, you can't call that dusty old parlor nothing but messy. And it smells like cat crap."

"Shush, Elgin! Shush that kind of talk. It don't smell any such way, and you know it. Mrs. Ruth's house is beautiful. All that glassware and souvenirs from all over. She's been to England. Did you know that?"

"She talks faky."

If Mama heard him, heard what he actually said, she did so without even a pained pause.

"Elgin, honey, you've got to take piano. You don't use a gift, and God's likely to take it away. You don't want that, do you?"

Rolling his face ever so slightly on the carpet, Rulon could see them. He saw Mama sitting next to Elgin now, both of them trapped in the pit of that couch, her holding onto his hands tightly to keep them from withdrawing in awkwardness.

"Don't you want to play for me? Won't you do that for your Mama?"

"If I can ride the swather with Rulon. I'll play if I can do that."

For the next two months, Elgin Lee squeezed into the wedge of seat in front of Rulon and rode with him in field after field, cutting their own alfalfa, then a neighbor's, then back, and on and on every day. His toes dangled above the floorboard, offering little stability, but still he perched on this wedge of seat no bigger than a pie saucer, precisely where a big notch of cushion foam had eroded away, and rode six- or seven-hour intervals. Without one shred of padding between him and the seat's plywood base, two anchor bolts sticking up, angle-iron edging, Elgin Lee rode through dead-hot curing afternoons and muggy evenings. He rode with Rulon's stomach always crowding him, especially on downslopes in brome pastures, and a steering wheel six inches from his nose.

At the edge of a field, when the swather pivoted, bucked across corrugations, pointed up a new strip of alfalfa or clover or grass, Rulon held onto Elgin Lee's belt, most the time prevented him from popping his nose or biting his tongue when one of the big tires dropped into a washout or hidden ditch. Even when Rulon couldn't hold him firm enough, Elgin Lee didn't cry.

On the hottest afternoons, when green dust from pigweed patches coated their hair and arms, sifted down their necks, Rulon asked him if he was sure he didn't want to go back to the house. And Elgin Lee always shook his head adamantly. Over and over, Rulon asked him if he felt okay, sometimes stopped the whole machine to pat his head, gently grip his

neck, shake his shoulders.

"Your butt hanging tough?"

Elgin Lee always nodded.

"If it gets to you, just holler."

Rulon knew he wouldn't holler or whine, no matter how badly those two little gouging anchor bolts and angle-iron edging and merciless plywood numbed his butt, bruised his thighs swath after swath.

Rulon knew Elgin Lee loved riding, loved feeling the machine. Neither of them minded the tight fit, deer flies thick right after noon, mosquitos when the sun started down, swatting with every blink and breath.

"Mind you don't gag on a mosquito," Rulon said.

However caked and salty his mouth and lips, Elgin Lee didn't take a drink until Rulon uncorked the waterbag for himself. And he never seemed to mind dodging Rulon's big wrists--slipping back and forth from steering wheel to sickle and reel up-down levers, to p.t.o. handle, to throttle knob and drivestick. Even when Elgin didn't move fast enough, when knuckles inadvertently cuffed his chin or jaw, he didn't cry out.

In mid-August the last late clover bloomed on the bench ten miles above Daddy's place. That's when the neighbor from up there, T.B. Gillette, came in his backfiring Bronco, bad muffler gurgling down the road, came to see about his fifteen acres--same as the year before, almost as soon as he heard Daddy was doing any custom work at all.

"When you reckon, Harp?" he said.

The swather was down with a dry bearing. Rulon knelt over the sickle pitman in pieces on the floor of the tool shed.

"Just as soon as I can get to it," Daddy said. "Won't take us long once we get the swather back ship-shape."

"Cause I was thinking, Harp," said T.B. Gillette, poking his jaw full of chew, "was thinking I might could ask somebody else--if you all are particular busy."

"Never that busy, T.B."

"And Harp"--T.B. Gillette scratched an immense belly--"if you're of a mind, I could let you have some of it for your labor. Right much of it, in fact."

That night Mama said she didn't trust T.B. Gillette as far as she could spit. And, as usual, she didn't like Daddy's way of handling the deal.

She said, "With what all you got to do, all your own second cutting sitting out there ripe and ready, you up and run to T.B. Gillette's." She said, "All's he has to do is get it in his fool head to cut that old clover patch of his, and you drop everything."

"He's giving me most the crop, Ila Jill. Good sweet clover. You can't beat that. Those dairy men up Yula Bend way will pay a pretty penny for clover."

"Giving, Harp? T.B. Gillette wouldn't give you one sweet stem of anything. Do you know why he's pawning that stuff? Do you? Because he couldn't find another dupe as

good as you if he looked the world over. That clover ain't got no more value than weeds, and T.B. knows it."

Rulon wanted to believe Daddy, but this time he couldn't. Clover didn't make grade-A milk. The magazines said. And it was hard to swath when it got old and rank, so tall even a good machine would have trouble handling it. Rulon knew this by now. Most of what they cut was clover, people's patches here and there where no other custom swathers wanted to take their outfits. The stuff was miserable, weighting down worn canvases, overloading them until they slowed, stalled, belts smoking, clover accumulating only to spill off in huge matted gobs. Swaths made of such gobs never dried properly, made for hard baling, maddeningly fatigued a clutching leg. And wet bales molded in the stack. Rulon wanted to believe Daddy, but clover promised nothing.

"T.B. Gillette's got connections, Ila Jill. He knows folks in Willowville. Word gets around. If I don't keep him happy, who knows how many others will go to somebody else?"

"Wouldn't hurt my feelings one little bit if they all went right straight to you know where."

"I know it, Ila Jill. God help me, I know it."

"He's really got the nerve," she said. "Asking you to go all the way up there and kill half a week cutting his little patch. He ought to find somebody else."

Mama was referring to the short culvert into T.B.

Gillette's place, badly grown over last summer with weeds. Daddy easily crossed it going into the clover fields, but coming out, maneuvering to follow a steep kink in the road, he dropped the rear tire into a ditch, snapped it off when he tried to force it free.

"Snapped like a green bean," he said. "Sounded just like that."

It took one day to free the swather, prop its rear end on blocks, disassemble the damaged parts--and another to find a blacksmith willing to straighten the wheel forks and weld the hardened steel of the swivel shaft.

"Looky there," the blacksmith said, pointing to a half dozen beads mending older fractures. "This sumbitch's been broke more times than a Popsicle stick."

Daddy knew nothing of these other beads when he bought the swather used at the International lot in Willowville.

Rulon remembered driving down T.B. Gillette's road, eager to take Daddy his lunch. Mama sent ham and beans, fried potatoes, scones and honey. He's bound to be hungry. Sometimes she spoke of him more sweetly when he wasn't around.

Your daddy's a good man, she said when people they hardly knew shook Daddy's hand in the shadow of Big Timber's combines, then hogged all the free peas they could carry. And don't you forget it.

The plate stayed hot under her dish towel. And cold rootbeer. Daddy loved cold rootbeer. Around a bend in the

road, Rulon came on him standing over the broken tire, running a hand through his hair.

"Snapped like a doggone green bean," he said. "Popped clean off."

At that moment beside T.B. Gillette's overgrown culvert, Rulon wished he had something to work with besides Daddy's burned-out Forney welder. Using a good welder--one not stuck permanently on medium-high--somebody who knew what he was doing could repair any kind of damage in any kind of steel.

When, a year later, Mama alluded to the culvert and wheel fork and downtime and blacksmith's bill, Daddy couldn't do anything but shrug.

"There ain't nobody else going to mess with the man's rocks and ditches. I do know the place, and with Rulon and Elgin. . . ."

"I don't want Elgin Lee anywhere close to anything up there."

"Just hear me out," Daddy said. "With Elgin Lee watching--and that's all he'd be doing--Rulon can stay clear of all the electric fence T.B. forgot to pull up."

"And tree limbs and wet spots and rotten bridges."

"No, none of that this year." Daddy touched her arm. "He says the field's ready to go."

"And you believe that?"

"No. I guess not." Daddy threw up his hands. "But darn it, Ila Jill, I can't not cut the man's clover. How

would I do that--him driving by every single day, waving and friendly? How?"

"Try saying no."

Daddy shook his head, put on his hat and irrigation boots. "It won't take us long. One day at the most with Rulon on the swather. And the man did pay on time."

Rulon watched him and listened to his damnably high hopes as if for the first time. No matter how promptly T.B. Gillette paid, nobody could imagine clover in dairy feed bunks as any kind of solution.

Next morning Daddy woke Rulon and Elgin Lee at first light. It wasn't just Mama who wanted them on the highway before barley trucks began rolling to the elevator.

"Just work it steady," Daddy said. "We're in no big toot. Everybody's hay will still be there tomorrow."

Mama hugged Elgin Lee, kissed his cheek, pressed into his arms a half-full grocery sack rolled tightly shut and a Styrofoam cooler packed with ice and two mason jars of lemonade.

"There ought to be enough lunch for the two of you." She faced Rulon. "Don't you work my little boy too hard."

"I won't, Mama."

Mounted on the swather, Elgin Lee waved to her. They'd never gone this far to cut a field. Eager to move, Rulon pressed the ignition button, but triggered only a hapless click. The damned electrical connections failed more regularly every day. This click used to sound only when he

tried to start the engine hot, after a fueling or some other brief shutdown. But now, even cool, the starter functioned sporadically, forced Rulon to gas up with a running engine. Daddy warned him every day to be careful about splashing on the muffler. Yet there was no way to pour from a five-gallon can without spilling.

Even more vexing than the swather's not starting was its not stopping. Most days, when Rulon turned the key to kill the whine and clacking and pulley squeals after a long run, nothing happened. So, time after time, he throttled low and ramed the drivestick all the way forward. The p.t.o. lever controlled the swathing mechanism just as unpredictably. Because of worn trunnions and bushings, loose linkage from the p.t.o. handle to the belt-tightener itself, the reel and canvases and sickle inched and crept continuously, even with the power lever disengaged.

Rulon slapped the starter box several times as viciously as he dared with Daddy watching. Just like the baler. Just like the Loadstar. On this morning, Rulon had awakened to find Willowville still quite high and luminous in his mind, but so soon into his day he earnestly doubted whether this machine could take him from here to there, after all.

As always, Daddy vacillated between mounting the driver's platform to act helpful and standing where he was to act merely attentive, confident in Rulon's abilities.

"Take it easy, Rulon. It'll work for you."

And true to Daddy's undying, unfailing hope, the starter at last caught like a blast in the stillness, chugged firmly, cranked the engine to life.

"Be careful, you all," Mama yelled, as they started through the yard. "I mean it. Anything of T.B. Gillette's has got to be a mess."

She was right. All the way up the secondary--trying to center the vibrating reel an even two feet left of the faint white road stripe, wondering what would happen if he snagged a reflector post at fifteen miles an hour, reminding Elgin Lee to hang on tight--Rulon suspected she was right. But when he saw T.B. Gillette's crop, he was convinced.

Nowhere else had Rulon seen acreage so cut up, spread all over in crooked, skinny plots. Clover grew in strips between ditches and fences, in swells between clumps of cottonwood, aspen and willows, down in a hollow soggy from a creek running through its middle, mole holes bubbling randomly, chaotically.

Rulon warned Elgin Lee about the little steel posts--how hard they were to spot when clover grew up and hid them.

"Only sure way to find one," he said, "is with the sickle bar. Then whoo-ee! So keep your eyes open."

For the first time, Rulon told him to stand beside the seat, hold onto the ladder rail and steering column brace. Mama echoed in his ears.

"There's plenty of limbs, too," Rulon said. "So don't go to sleep on me. Keep your eyes peeled--this stuff's

tricky. We'll get through it okay."

That's what Rulon decided to do--get through this. He set his mind to finish T.B. Gillette's sorry rank clover, get it over with so they could move on. Every custom hayer had to take a few dud contracts. They were part of the business.

Elgin Lee stood on the knurled floorboard, legs barely clearing the hydraulic levers, stood and stared out into the field. Rulon wondered if he had any clue what to look for.

So much time to think while running machinery. Days and days and days. More little plots and fields than Rulon ever imagined, more breakdowns and setbacks than he expected. Still, he thought constantly of how things could be--hay convoys rolling toward Yula Bend and piano benches more lovely and useful than they ever could be in catalog pictures. He thought of how he could reconcile the most fragile dreams in the world if he just had a good swather and field after field of sweet alfalfa.

Like lapping waves, the thick clover stems and yellow blossoms fed into the reel, folded down between the canvases, heavy and spongy, trailed behind in a perfect swath. Rulon liked to follow the sickle's flash as it dropped for a new sweep up the field, slipped like a knife along the pale shady base of the tangled yellow and green. The sickle vibrated so fast it seemed not to move at all--except for a sort of buzz when he fixed his eyes on it.

"Twigs and willows it'll cut clean," Rulon yelled.

"But a branch or one of these posts can flat do some damage."

Again he saw Elgin Lee stare ahead hard, trying not to blink, saw him sweeping his gaze. Then suddenly:

"Stop, Rulon! Stop! Stop!"

Rulon tripped the p.t.o. lever and hauled back on the drivestick at the same time, the engine whining so loudly Elgin Lee covered an ear.

"That a boy," Rulon said. He saw the silver post sticking up ten feet in front of the sickle, wondered if he would have spotted it. He hopped down the ladder, waded through clover and yanked the post. "That's the ticket," he yelled to Elgin Lee, holding it high before tossing it onto a ditchbank.

He climbed back onto his seat, gripped Elgin's shoulder. "Just keep finding those for me. You got it?"

After three stops, and only a hundred yards cut, Elgin Lee tapped Rulon's arm, pointed to some branches wound into the clover. "Let me do it," he said. "I can do it. I'm okay."

Rulon looked at the clover all around them, at the one swath laid down. "Okay, go ahead. We're going to be here all year if we don't pick up the pace somewhere."

All morning Elgin Lee watched, yelled, jumped down to drag away limbs, pull up metal posts. Rulon knew he liked being part of the farm and the work. Around a couple of older aspens, where windfall scattered thick, he clawed his

way through clover, trotted in the thinner places, watching to keep the swath clear so Rulon didn't have to stop at all.

At noon, Rulon risked killing the engine, wanted to have lunch in peace. They sat under a tree, ate sandwiches, boiled eggs, potato chips Mama measured frugally into Baggies, a half pie still in its tin. The lemonade stayed chilled in ice only now beginning to puddle in the bottom of the cooler.

"You've got some sharp eyes," Rulon said. He surveyed T.B. Gillette's fifteen acres, not quite half the swaths laid down, stubble dark green and shiny from that sickle, sharp despite the nicks and chips in its sections.

"Saving me all kinds of time, Elgin Lee."

"I can do it. I told Mama I could." Elgin Lee chewed his pie with vigor, drank deeply from a mason jar, his enjoyment of this day thorough.

"She'll get used to it," Rulon said.

Up and down, up and down Elgin Lee hopped after lunch, catching everything, preventing a breakdown. Again and again, he tugged Rulon's sleeve, yelled, tried to make his voice deep when he cried Whoa!

Finally, late in the afternoon, when the waterbag hung almost empty behind the seat, they worked into T.B. Gillette's last little hollow by a shallow creek, out away from any trees. Elgin Lee hadn't found a post in more than an hour, didn't have to watch so diligently. They'd be home for supper, home to tell Mama they finished everything okay,

another contract all taken care of. And the job would cost only one day this time, and Mama would be more than pleased.

Rulon was tired, sunk into the seat cushion, working levers by habit. He leaned back, steered with one hand, rested his feet on the top edge of the short metal wall between the driver's platform and header, whistling against the noise.

Again, stubbornly, the piano bench came to mind. Mama asked him once, the year Elgin started lessons, why he didn't take wood shop and learn to turn nice shapes on a lathe. I don't want anything fancy. Just some oak to match, or even some nice mahogany or walnut. Just big and stout enough for two people to sit, and a place for books--maybe a pair of brass hinges. You could do that, couldn't you? I just know you could if you wanted to.

Heat shimmered above the greenery and above distant sagebrush knolls and gullies. Only occasionally did they spot clover rippling in crooked lines alongside the swather, catch a glimpse of a pheasant hen sprinting for cover, her chicks scattering in the din.

"You doing okay?" he asked Elgin Lee. "Legs holding up?" He patted the seat in front of him. "Want to sit? Ain't no posts or anything down here."

Elgin Lee shook his head, gripped the rail with slender fingers, nails smooth and unbitten, hands finer than Rulon's--not square, no grit or chap yet from irrigating.

Through the afternoon, clouds occasionally mitigated

the sun's glare, shadowed a pair of hawks drifting in high loops. The last clover was thickest, hardest to manage. It wrapped and tangled around the swather's reel, binding tighter and tighter until the drivebelt slipped and smoked on a pulley long since discolored from heat, until the reel's fingers picked at the yellow blossoms slowly, as if everything happened under water.

Rulon held the reel at its height, bumped the hydraulic all afternoon to keep that leaky left cylinder full, the reel free of blossoms, to keep feeding clover into the sickle, onto the canvases, smooth and continuous.

But the clover lay tousled, two weeks past prime, rank and wind-twisted. One stem caught, just one, then a yellow flash encircled the whole reel, blurred into a belt of color--reminded Rulon of a distant ferris wheel in the dark, lights on the big spoke tips turning, whirling. If stared at long enough with unblinking eyes, the motion blurred into one big fluid ring of light. T.B. Gillette's clover blossoms blurred yellow, no good to anybody. No Holstein preferred it to alfalfa. It would end up as brittle and juiceless stems in trough bottoms.

The sun started its slow evening descent. They worked the last three acres. Rulon loved this point in a day of cutting, when the end finally came within reach, when he could guess with gratifying accuracy the number of swaths remaining.

He bumped the throttle, eased the drivestick one notch

forward. They would finish, he knew, before dark, would wait in the delicious silence for their ride home. Daddy would come if the swather wasn't home by late dusk. That's always how he arranged things. That was their agreement. They understood each other. He always came for Rulon at mealtime, forever pleased with whatever he'd accomplished.

This last section grew exceptionally tall and thick, on a grade steeper than Rulon first perceived. He gauged the engine's pull by its protracted lugging, smelled the acrid torque exhaust deep in his throat.

"Gets to your eyes," he yelled, and Elgin Lee smiled, squinting against the sting.

On the down slope, even with gravity favoring him, Rulon took pains to prevent the swather's worn hydrostatics from freewheeling, only to shudder violently when he eased back on the drivestick. He hated not being able to control the machine's jaggging, hated making sloppy crooked swaths, missing tufts of forage completely.

Often at this stage of the day, so close to the end, Rulon willed the mechanisms to hold together, to cut with miraculous efficiency. If he could just cut enough, keep the machinery running, bringing in a little money, maybe he could please Mama.

In a sort of trance, an inevitable inattentiveness born of noise and heat and fatigue, Rulon didn't see the bent silver of a single post. He drove with his feet up, steered with one palm, looked forward to supper and a shower. With

the other hand, he bumped the reel hydraulic, felt glassy-eyed watching for any glitch, any slow-down. If anything balled up, caught, plugged, broke, Mama would back even further away from Daddy's dream than she already had, recede into that mysterious private world where only she felt at home. Rulon didn't want to think about letting go of hay and Yula Bend. He didn't want to think of dairy cattle eating the fruits of someone else's labor. He thought only of this clover expanse before him, the tallness of the crop, how the overripe, drooping flowered heads forever threatened to bind the swather's reel to a standstill.

His thoughts came in disturbing fragments, disjointed, scattered too randomly to follow with any ordering accuracy or sense. And in the midst of Rulon's mildly disquieting stupor, Elgin Lee grabbed his elbow, screaming "Stop! Stop!"--pointing to the bent silver rod long forgotten in T.B. Gillette's lazy haste to convert from winter pasture to summer growth.

Rulon ran into a post once before. He remembered the reel's fingers hooking the little half-inch bar, the brittle snap, the whole machine shuddering, ending up with its header sitting cockeyed to the swath.

When he found out, Daddy looked like he wanted to cry. Oh no. He repeated that as he looked at the three completely broken sickle sections, two guards. No, no, no, when he found the pitman boss cracked beyond his welding

competence. But he never yelled at Rulon, never stopped telling him he was good on machinery. He told him only to be more careful next time. These things happen. Just watch it. That's all I can ask.

"Good job," Rulon said when Elgin Lee climbed back on the driver's platform and dropped the post with some others. "You saved our bacon."

But the reel and canvases had no momentum, and when Rulon clutched the p.t.o., the main drivebelt only squealed, the engine lugging a bit.

"She's bound up," Rulon said. "Makes it all day, and now she's bound up."

Clover lay wedged in dense masses between the canvases and reel. Even throttled down, the machine wanted to creep ahead--twice as threateningly on this little slope in T.B. Gillette's creek-bottom clover. The only way to brake the wheels steadily was to hold reverse pressure on the drivestick.

"Mind that clover balled up, Elgin Lee. Just push it into the swath, and we'll be all right. We'll be out of this patch."

Elgin Lee looked at him, at the big tires straining forward. This time he climbed down the ladder rung by rung.

"I got her," Rulon said. "Go ahead."

Elgin Lee stepped around in front of the header, dwarfed by the clover. With the reel impeding his vision, Rulon apprehended only that the clover loomed heads taller

than his little brother, all around him, a monstrous tangle to penetrate.

Rulon held back on the drivestick, listened to the familiar whine of hydrostatic pressure, trembling, vibrating through lines and hoses, into converter gear boxes. He envisioned massive drive-chains tightening, rigid, linked to interior sprockets on two thick axles.

Elgin Lee confronted the reel, hesitated, then worked his way between it and the sickle, moving as if both carried electric current. He clawed stray hanging stems away from his eyes, stepped between the canvases and pulled sheaf after sheaf into the center space where he stood.

Their old New Holland baler would have to clutch ten minutes on this one pile.

"Hurry up," Rulon yelled, faintly uncomfortable. Elgin Lee stood in the middle of the swather's machinery, pulling sheaves of clover all around him. Rulon yelled again: "It don't have to be perfect."

As soon as the evening temperature accommodated them, deerflies swarmed from their hiding places. Amid swatting and suffering bites all over his arms and neck, Elgin Lee cleared the canvases handful by handful, motion by motion.

He turned and looked up at Rulon, proud of all this, proud of his work.

"I'll get the reel," Elgin Lee yelled.

"Leave it be," Rulon heard himself say in instantaneous response, aware of flies on his own cheek and neck.

"I'll be okay."

When Rulon finally released the drivestick long enough to slap, to rid himself of a tormenting deerfly, one tire lurched forward four inches, just enough for Elgin Lee to lose his balance, fall from where he stood on a canvas spindle, fall harmlessly into the huge pillow of clover just stacked. But in falling he reached, only out of instinct, for something to hold onto.

And Rulon, panicked by the swather's jarring movement, by the deerfly and slap and hydrostatic fluid whooshing through a line to compensate a big wheel's sprocket rotation, frightened desperately by Elgin's fall, by the thickening twilight and hunger and eagerness--panicked and frightened by the sheer simultaneity of these things, he plunged his hand, as he had on a hundred other such afternoons, plunged it reaching and feeling, intuitively groped for the drivestick, as a means to stop the swather's wretched creeping.

And Elgin Lee, in his own panic at the suddenness of all this, unquestionably frightened by the advance of the great machine seemingly toward him, lunged away from that advance. He couldn't have known in that precise and awful flash of indecision that the safe place was on the swath exactly where he fell, where wheels and engine frame would easily clear him, leave him resting on the clover.

Instead, he lunged toward the reel, urgent to escape the way he came. And his hands found, instead of a way out,

the serrated edges of a very few sickle sections. And Rulon, in his delirium of fear, hit not the drivestick but the p.t.o. lever. With a hellish and terrifying lucidity, in just one unfathomably retarded instant, the reel rolled freakishly forward, and the newly repaired pitman, given the engine's low throttle, stroked no more than a couple of lethargic strokes, and Elgin Lee screamed.

Rulon knew, he knew what he'd done, and he fumbled and groped for any lever to stop it all, groped finally for the key to kill every movement. But the key stopped nothing. Save for the engine's momentary skip, like a faulty pulse, nothing happened.

"Elgin! Elgin! Elgin Lee!"

Rulon strained to reach the battery box behind the seat, to see what he was doing, strained to keep the drivestick firm, the machine still--while pulling, twisting, wrenching wildly on one of the battery cables. Oh Lord, Oh Lord, Oh dear God! It had to come off. He had to be able to loosen one of those cables--always, always corroded, blue-white acid, frozen to the terminal, wedged even tighter with tacks driven between clamp and post. He had to get it off. He had to do that.

With damning impotence, he pulled on the battery cable until its insulation chafed through the skin across his finger joints, until the cable wire stripped from its own connection, came loose with a blue spark arcing once and popping before the engine's throb faltered, then stopped

altogether.

Rulon expected crying, wailing, hideous screams-- something other than the low moans all but swallowed by the abrupt stillness and contracting ticks of the cooling engine block.

With the hydraulic pumps now powerless and locked, the wheels could not creep, and Rulon jumped from the walled driver's platform into the mounded swath, absurdly aware of how badly it would hurt Elgin Lee to land on his legs.

"Rulon." Elgin's voice sounded sickeningly plaintive, weirdly unfamiliar, choked with phlegm and shock. "Rulon, I think I got cut." Elgin lay face-down in the stubble, folded around his hands. One of his tennis shoes had come off.

"It's okay, it's okay," Rulon said, flinging strands of clover away from the now motionless sickle, expecting but wholly astonished to see the faint red stain on only two or three green-hued sickle sections. He remembered from somewhere, something he heard or read or maybe just thought about once at length, remembered that severed arms, toes, fingers could be salvaged if a person found them in time, packed them in ice. He wondered where he might find ice on T.B. Gillette's place. Where in all the hells of this place would he find ice?

Then he remembered the Styrofoam cooler, still under the tree where they ate lunch--a half mile away.

He gently rolled Elgin Lee to his back, for one breath

nauseated as much by the blood soaking the shirt front as he was by the bright-flowing knuckle stubs--all but the thumb on one hand, the three big fingers on the other, cut at the base, two of these attached by a single thread of skin.

"Rulon . . . Rulon. It hurts, it hurts . . . it hurts hurts hurts hurts."

Elgin cried now, between quavering mumbles, bit his blanched lip. In his pallor, he looked at Rulon with wondrous puzzlement.

"It'll be okay," Rulon said again and again, pulling off his own tee shirt, ripping it into strips, binding Elgin Lee's stubs as best he could.

Elgin Lee looked sicker and weaker with every breath, his chest heaving, the clearness in his eyes giving way to a dull fixation.

"I've got to get home, Rulon. Mama will wonder where I'm at."

"Hang in there, little Elgin. Do that for me."

Rulon gathered him in his arms, so much lighter and smaller and frailer than he'd ever seemed before, cradled him against his bare chest, blood warm and sticky on his skin, and at the same time saw three graying fingers lying neatly, side by side in the clover's undergrowth.

In one quick motion, he wrapped them in Elgin's sock, placed the cloth delicately in his own back pocket, as if the nerves still registered. Ice could preserve nerve endings, if applied soon enough. It could do that. Rulon

was positive.

"I'll get you back, Elgin Lee. Don't you worry. Don't you worry one little bit. Not one bit."

Rulon said this even as he stood, cradling Elgin, even as he cursed, for the thousandth time, the leaky reel cylinder. In an awkward, laborious crouch, he stumbled over the sickle, ducked under the ever-lowering reel and still felt one of the fingers claw his scalp.

Clear at last of the swather, he walked and trotted toward the far edge of T.B. Gillette's clover, toward the faint scar of road running along the ditch with the narrow culvert, the culvert Rulon was so determined to cross successfully. In its gradual ascent from the hollow, that road passed the tree. There Rulon would carry Elgin Lee--to the cottonwood where their cooler rested in soft sweet grass, where some ice might still be floating. It was all he could do, the only thing he knew to try in this place fifteen miles from home, far, on foot, even from the closest county road.

He labored across rough corrugations until his windpipe burned, quickened his pace with every moan, cradled his burden all the more gently. Doctors save fingers. Rulon knew they could do that. He believed in them. Miracles happen every day. People at church gave testimonials. It could be all right again, if he acted fast enough. Fast enough.

Twenty minutes from here to Willowville hospital.

Daddy always came for him before full darkness, especially when Mama worried about Elgin Lee. She saved supper, more food than if they showed up on time. It always tasted so good, and something ice cold to drink. Forty minutes at the most--to spot Daddy's headlights, flag him, and . . . Dear God almighty, there had to be some ice left.

In a great surge of adrenalin, of urgent necessity, Rulon hopped the wide border ditch, as sorry as he'd ever been for the jarring pain that made Elgin Lee whimper, sorry now in an almost overwhelming and debilitating wave of regret.

"Rulon, my hands are pounding," Elgin Lee cried.
"They're pounding so hard."

Rulon kissed his forehead as he trotted clumsily on the road, tried not to shiver himself against the settling coolness.

"It'll be okay, Elgin honey. Everything will be all right."

And as if running fast enough could make what he said believable, Rulon willed his torpid legs and arms to take strength they no longer had, his heart a second wind, and he ran as if toward Yula Bend, wanting again to know and feel that such a place lay out there ahead of him somewhere. But in the end, he was certain, however unconsciously, of only the fact that moving on this road could save Elgin's life. It could restore nothing, bring nothing to fruition. But it could save his little brother's life. Only if he kept

moving, on and on, as if he had someplace to go, as if getting there might change a thought or action, only then would there be any chance of anything when Daddy came to meet them.

ALL THE WIDOWS IN THE WORLD

I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and
snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

--T.S. Eliot

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Early Friday Minch parked his Bronco by the biggest of three greenhouses at Meadows of Eden Lawn and Garden Center. The Delta 88 Custom--cargo leafsprings on the driver's side--was already in its gravel space marked by the railroad tie with a No Parking sign tacked to it. T. Glenn Billiter, jolly rich bossman made of money and blubber, opened before seven to get a jump on the business day. The bloat didn't want to miss one single shot at selling a shrub or tree, bird bath or sack of dried steer dung at five thousand percent mark-up. He probably never went home to sweet skinny Rolette and the poodles. Never felt the need. Obesity considerably curbed the sex drive. Minch knew that much. That's what Chuck and Nancy at New Day Spa said.

Regular exercise enhanced everything, retarded all sorts of bodily degeneration--especially crucial during the mid-thirties, when male metabolism dropped like a rock.

Minch rubbed his arms, felt the leg-press soreness in his thighs and groin, tail-bone callus from the Nautilus pad. He'd shoot himself if he ever got like T. Glenn.

"Morning to you, Mincho. How in the happy hell are you?"

T. Glenn counted yesterday's receipts, worked an adding machine with a finger as big as four-to-a-jar dill pickles. Fat as they were, those fingers never missed a key, kept the little machine whirring and ratcheting full-steam.

"Things on the mowing crew going fine and dandy for y'all?"

Owner of several enterprises, man of multiple business interests--A-1 Lawn Care included--T. Glenn Billiter didn't look up in the course of his questioning, licked a jumbo thumb and forefinger every three tickets. A carton of assorted doughnuts and bucket-size cup of Dr. Pepper rested within easy reach. Diet Dr. Pepper. Rolette stirred at least that much consciousness.

"Go the Friday usual?" Minch asked.

Even if the answer was yes, T. Glenn would pause, take a mental inventory of accounts they both knew by heart. He loved to pull a phony memory lapse every few names, ballooned and deflated his cheeks while he supposedly struggled to recall. Oh, and hell yes, Amoco, Quality Inn,

Elks, DeSoto, Ethan Allen--I almost plumb forgot about them places. He got off that kind of horse manure even when he knew, to the penny, what his commercial contracts brought in every week. The whole fatman delight came in the fake surprise, like finding a box of chocolates or ice cream he thought he'd already eaten.

It ruined his joy when anybody finished his sentences, but on a Friday morning with eight or ten yards to do, and ladies night waiting all weekend at the Star Market, Minch had to get on with his life.

"Sedgefield residential first?"

"Yessir." T. Glenn stopped punching numbers, leaned back, his eyes lit up--probably salivated about stuff like this. "How many you got over there?" He revved his brain to go through them name by name.

Hefty, husky, corpulent, stout, rotund T. Glenn Billiter. Rolette might say it any way she wanted, but he was a walking heart attack--always paused for breath on the three porch steps next to the pallets of dried steer dung, toting around way too much adipose. Fat's a killer, people.

Chuck liked to walk around the weight room saying that. Minch imagined T. Glenn collapsing halfway through the lightest kind of workout, rolling onto his back like a grain-fed bull walrus, dying on the spot because he couldn't hoist his own bulk.

"Let's see," T. Glenn said, "I have the hardest time with these accounts. . . ."

"Everybody on Peach Street," Minch said, fast.
"Kroutil, Hodge, McDonaldson. And Miss Pott, back side of
the golf course."

The bossman's ecstasy faded, his jowls drooped. He
wolfed a powdered doughnut, thrust his muzzle into the
crushed ice and diet Dr. Pepper, swallowed deeply. Highly
pissed off and frustrated--hormonally and otherwise.

"And over North Winston--Garden Street?" Minch said,
counting with his fingers, no pauses anywhere.
"Weisenfarth, Stahn, Aycock, Goble."

T. Glenn's face flushed, nostrils whistling with the
strain of ordinary breath. Suddenly he sneezed, then
sneezed again. "I hate this stinking pollen," he
said--nasal voice choked, garbled around a mucous bubble.
Get him laughing or coughing, either one, and he never
stopped. That extra poundage really squeezed off all the
body's defense mechanisms. He blew his nose hard into a
Winchell's napkin, kept saying, "I hate this pollen."

Finally those eyes--always red, bugging out, watery
enough to make even compassionate, well-insured Rolette
uncomfortable--rested on Minch. Wealthy T. Glenn Billiter's
upper lip showed the residue of Dr. Pepper, powdered sugar,
napkin flakes stuck to a faint stubble, one tiny ice chip.

"You need something, Minch--or are you just killing my
precious time?"

"Just checking in, your highness."

"Well, check on out, smart ass."

T. Glenn slurped another half pint of his Dr. Pepper, went back to his numbers. "And see can you grease my mowers once in a blue moon, check the oil--huh?"

Minch saluted, stepped into the customer service area. He dodged humming bird hutches and patio chimes hanging from open rafters, smelled the Ortho grub and beetle poison T. Glenn bought cut-rate from a guy named Doc. Almost through the front door, making sure to ring the bell extra, Minch felt the whole office floor heave slightly, heard the fatman lumbering through the little hall, lots of knee friction, bronchial wheezing.

"You forgot Roffingers," T. Glenn yelled. "I knew you forgot somebody, Mr. Mincho Intelligencia. Ha, ha." He pointed one of those pickle fingers, tried to hitch his belt to some ridge or fold or crease that would hold it at least until his bulk shifted.

"And I know something you don't, Mr. Hotdog foreman."

Minch rubbed his own stomach, liked the feel of all those dips and sit-ups. Chuck and Nancy said the upper body was the first region to go.

Minch waited.

"Old man Roffinger finally died."

"Yeah."

"What do you mean yeah? How the hell do you know this stuff before me? I'm supposed to be the boss."

"Miss Kroutil called me first thing this morning. You're the one gave her my number." She knew Roffingers.

She knew everybody they mowed for. And she almost always knew when somebody died.

"Well, would you mind letting me in on your knowledge once in a damn while? Would that trouble you? Huh?"

Hello, hello, Mr. Minch. Is that you? Hello? Did you hear about Roffingers? I wanted you to know. Y'all need to know. Wendell died day before yesterday. Colon cancer. Mabel thought the radiation was taking. He was just sixty-seven, Mr. Minch. Same as my Hugh when he had his second heart attack. The very same.

T. Glenn belched, pulled a small plastic bottle from his front pocket and squeezed decongestant mist into each nostril. He shook his head, jowls quivering, mopped the swollen nose with a handkerchief.

"But something you don't evidently know, Mr. Brain--the funeral's this afternoon. So don't be running those mowers if they got a wake going or something. You hear? Get the missus done before they come back from the cemetery--and those neighbor widows, too. Tell Pug and Cecil. Y'all might have to hustle for once. And if you do happen to see her, tell her I'm right sorry. Give her my condolences. Give her plenty of those. She don't have to worry none about her yard, either. She needs to know that. You got it?"

"You're all heart, T.G."

T. Glenn leaned his sausage forearms on the sales counter, worked his tongue against some doughnut lodged back

in those overworked molars.

"You got to pamper these widows, I tell you. Hear me on this. You could learn some stuff about business if you ever put your mind to it."

"I'll tell Miss Roffinger you're devastated."

"Just use your bean. That's all I'm asking."

"Ten-four, big guy. Don't overdo it today. I don't want you getting depleted."

"You're so funny, Mincho." They heard Cecil drive up. The Burpee Seed clock behind the cash register showed seven-thirty. "Try to earn what I pay you, huh? And tell Pug to slow down with the tractor. I'm already getting gripes about tracks around the trees. See can you get him to take some pains."

Cecil always showed up dressed in clean J.C. Penney work clothes and an A-1 cap stained above the bill. He didn't wear one of the green T-shirts, said he felt naked with no more than that on. Coming clear from the Projects on the other side of Winston in a Rambler just rolled over two hundred thousand miles, he still beat Pug--just two miles up from T. Glenn's meadows.

"Morning to you, Minch. You doing all right?"

"We'll see about that."

While Cecil greased deck bearings on the two Kubotas, Minch soaked push-mower air cleaners in a coffee can of gas, wrung them, poured fresh and did it again.

"We mow dust," Minch said. "I see very little green in

the color of this gasoline."

"Ain't naught but dust," Cecil said. "And a mighty lot of it for May. We don't get some rain soon, our lawns is going to blow away. I never saw it so dry, and I seen a good lot of dry in my time."

"Don't be feeding me that old-man mess."

"It's the truth, brother Minch. Those chilly mornings a month ago give me the bursitis something fierce. And those banks out Amoco--whew Lord! Like to choke me up but good. Blow my nose for a week after, and I still tasting Amoco in ever which pipe you can imagine."

Cecil laughed, high-pitched and friendly. With careful hands he cleaned bunches of dry grass from around the blade drive-pulleys. "The wife bought some sinus dope at the Rexall, told me she ain't sleeping with my hide one more night 'less I try some. So I try some, and it done naught but make it worse. She say I snore louder than before. Ain't that depressing--considering I been snoring in her ear for nigh on thirty-eight years.

On the hour Pug slid his new Camaro to a stop in the gravel beside the A-1 step-van and trailer, opened his door gently. He wore shorts, a sleeveless green T-shirt, sunglasses on a cord, and nice white tennis shoes. He always waited until the last second to change into his K Mart Turf Grabbers, pulled them from a grocery sack in the back seat. He took pains not to touch them to any of his upholstery or carpet, slapped them on the driveway to loosen

little cleat patterns of mud and grass stems. Then he stood in his socks, unfolded a cardboard sunscreen behind his windshield, spread a towel over his seat.

"Let's go get this done," said Minch. "Sooner we work, the sooner we play." He fired the van's engine, let it warm up.

"Y'all's shoes reek as bad as mine?" Pug yelled, sniffing the tongue and eyelets, the nylon weave stained green-black.

"You smelling the wrong part," Cecil said. "You never step in nothing with the laces."

Pug looked at him, winced. "Goll-ee, Cecil. Now I don't want my breakfast." He pulled a granola bar from his pocket, stared at it. "Thanks a lot."

They could never get away from the dogs. Minch didn't like them. He hated mowing back yards ripe with the smell of their half-digested Alpo dook, cowardly beagles, dachshunds, terriers, chihuahuas always yapping from a safe distance, from the other side of low chainlink fences. When the widows let them out the back door, these dogs sneaked around shrubs, slunk off to a familiar corner to pee on a bush--or, worse, scratch around, then run back into a picky-clean house and leave the only other set of tracks across musty carpets in living rooms and bedrooms.

Every time Minch got to trimming great guns with the Snapper, feeling good stamina and wind, lots of muscle tone from regular workouts, almost walk-jogging, he slipped in

dog dook. He always knew what it was before he looked. And the front yards were no better--dump spots for all the neighbor widows out walking their dogs. Scared to death to tackle anything really dirty--clogged sewer pipe, compost piles, motor oil--they stood around chatting, or waved to somebody, while their dogs made mowing nasty. Blades and weedeater line splattered into that dook, knobby-tread tractor tires ran over it, turf-shoe cleats found it if there was one deposit in a whole giant yard. There was no getting away from the stuff.

"It is one minor drawback to the profession," said Cecil. "There more dogs over Sedgefield than rich folk."

"Let's roll," Minch said.

"How many we got?" Pug asked. He gathered sun lotion, another towel, bottle of Gatorade from his passenger seat, tiptoed across the gravel holding his turf shoes and climbed into the van.

"Too many," Minch said. "Unless we run into a funeral party there on Peach Street. Old man Roffinger finally died."

"About time," Pug said. "No use living when you're like that."

Cecil looked at Minch. "That the truth? Mr. Roffinger really die?"

"Cross my heart."

"Lord a mercy," Cecil whispered, staring out his door. Minch remembered the afternoon last July when

Roffingers came home from the hospital. He was trimming around Hodges' rose bushes next door, saw the big Oldsmobile turn in from the street, two of those nice new steel-belted radials smashing lirioppe all the way up one side of the drive. Mrs. Roffinger looked small behind the wheel, smiled and waved when she got out to help Wendell Roffinger from the back seat--both of them shifting their weight, leaning awkwardly, struggling to clear pillows, blankets, a suitcase. Her husband wore a coat and stocking cap in the late July sun, slippers, clutched a vomit bag in one hand. When he saw Minch he waved feebly, then leaned on Mabel Roffinger to help him shuffle up the sidewalk to the front door.

Red meat and cholesterol. Chuck and Nancy warned club members against both of them. They said you were asking for trouble to eat such poison, all kinds of cancer linked to it--chances tripled if you led a sedentary lifestyle.

"T. Glenn fatman still want us to cut grass over there?" said Pug. "Today?"

"Slip in during the funeral."

"I could do with getting done early for once." Pug cinched his shoe laces, tied them in a double bow. "What's lard chops thinking? No respect for the dead?"

Minch worked the clutch, levered the column gearshift in and out of first several times, then eased the van and trailer forward.

"I just take orders."

"I wonder if his dog will die like in the movies. They get all sad and won't eat. You know?"

"It's still got Miss Roffinger," said Minch.

"Would that be enough to keep you alive?"

"I just mow their grass, Pug. That's all."

"It wouldn't me, I'm telling you."

"They could all die," said Minch, "no more than I care today."

"Lord a mercy," Cecil whispered.

Out on the eight miles of freeway between Meadows of Eden and the Sedgefield exit, Minch rapped the van's engine. He always left his slide-door open until one of the others shivered, liked to drape his clutch foot into the wind, let the air inflate his pant leg, chill away the sleepiness in his face and eyes, make his pectorals feel tight and strong against his shivering. His own T-shirt still felt plenty loose--no blubber tits, no belly jiggle when he walked. You were about as healthy as you wanted to be, could tack on ten or twenty years with regular exercise and an active lifestyle. When people at the spa asked him what he did, he always said mowing was good exercise--fair money and lots of sun at the same time. He didn't have to pay a tanning salon to cook under their lights.

Cecil sat on the other bucket seat, cleaning his fingernails with a pocket knife. T. Glenn Billiter said he was pretty white-acting for the Projects. Pug slouched on the water cooler between them, smoking one of his long

Marlboros.

"Those are going to kill you," said Minch.

Pug drew deeply, held the smoke, tipped his chin high and exhaled powerfully. "But what a way to go, don't you think?"

Chuck and Nancy warned everybody to stay away from cigarettes, cigars, pipes, even smokeless. "It cuts your wind for fifty years," they said, "and then it kills you."

"I don't mind him smoking in the truck," T. Glenn said when Pug first applied to mow, "though I am allergic as hell to it. But if he lights up anywhere close to those Amoco tanks, I've done lost me a contract, and I'll can his ass in a second. That depot manager's got eagle eyes for lit tobacco. Just one whiff of gas and spark, and it'd be law-suit city for old T.G. I got nothing I can afford to lose in a law suit."

Except for 180 pounds, an early grave, Rolette's pity and celibacy, endless post-nasal drip.

"You lifting tonight," Pug asked, trying to dodge his own smoke.

"Just the bench and a few curls," Minch said. "I work legs and wind Tuesday-Thursday, upper body in between. It's the schedule Chuck and Nancy worked up for me." He tapped the steering wheel, wondered all of a sudden if the wind blew cooler this morning or if his hairline really was receding.

"And after that?"

"It's ladies night all weekend at Star Market." He could expect a little hair loss.

"It's coed jazzercise, too. My favorite feature at New Day." Pug's brows moved, but Minch couldn't see his eyes through the orange-tint lenses of his sunglasses on a cord. "It's coed everything--aqua-jogging, power aerobics, racquetball. Everything. Tomorrow's a big-screen party, Braves and Padres. Chuck says he's going to outfit that place so people can do everything but work their jobs there--exercise, entertainment, health-food bar, guest rooms, the works."

"I might get Nick and Jiffie for the afternoon."

"I wouldn't miss it, Minch. You seen that instructor Fern?"

"Dark hair, big jugs?"

"Lord yes. And she can pure-T aerobic any man in there into the ground. She ain't all mammolies like some of them."

"That what all you favor?" Cecil asked. "How good she can exercise? Lord, I can't see the sense--paying somebody so's you can sweat."

"You even know what we're talking about?" said Pug.

"Cattin' is cattin' no matter how y'all talk about it."

"Tell truth, Cecil. It's been a while since you and the old lady gone anywhere on a Friday night--ain't it?"

"Thirty-seven years of Friday nights, brother Pug. They can't all be carnivals." He folded out all his knife's

blades, blew lint from the sockets. "All's I know is me and her is still doing Friday, Saturday, and ever which night together. Her daddy took me out in that field of cucs down by Beulaville, said, 'You take her, you gotta keep her.'"

"Did he pay you?" Pug sucked one last time on his cigarette, flipped the butt out Minch's door.

"Lord, no. I would've worked seven years and seven more for my Larinda." His laugh was slow and deep. "I was one lovesick jasper, I was. You ever been lovesick, brother Pug?"

"Who needs lovesick? I've got Fern."

Of all of them--T. Glenn, Pug, a few of the widows--Cecil sounded the most hurt when May Lynn left with the kids two summers ago.

"You don't want to be alone, brother Minch," Cecil kept saying, every morning for weeks. "And her, neither. Y'all can fix this."

Sometimes Minch laughed. Sometimes he said May Lynn was the one to talk to. Sometimes he told Cecil to mind his business. "It ain't pretty, but it happens. So I'd be obliged if you just let me be. There are other women. Life goes on, you know."

T.G. stuck his nose in it, too. "You got problems at home, Minch? You can tell old T.G. I live with a hundred and five pounds of problems. Hell yes, I know what it's like. I surely do. When they turn off the sweet, it can affect everything. Believe you me, I know. Marriage ain't

nothing but one big negotiation."

Minch slowed the van, shifted down for the freeway exit. He wondered if T. Glenn and Rolette had any kind of sex life at all.

"Don't think me and Rolette haven't had our differences, by God. But it's ever what you want to make it. It surely is. And they can be mighty soft and pretty when they take a notion. Whoeee can they be soft!"

Nobody spoke as a train clacked by at the first intersection. Six years of doing this, and Minch still hated the last moments riding to a job--never able to really relax in the truck because the work always waited somewhere up ahead. It was the same way working for May Lynn's dad up in Danville, burying phone line for Southern Bell. Just get settled and drowsy in the pickup, and it was time to hop out and grab a shovel.

Back then he could do that sort of thing on five hours' sleep--he and May Lynn wide, wide awake long after midnight, finally drifting to sleep on the cool side of the bed. Still he felt good the next morning. He felt strong.

Crossing the train rails and two deep intersection dips, Minch checked the side mirrors to make sure the tractors didn't bounce loose. They were okay when Cecil loaded them, but sometimes Pug forgot to boom the chains tight between jobs. T. Glenn would never know how close they came every now and again to dropping a five-thousand-dollar tractor in noon-hour traffic.

Before they even rolled to a stop in front of Miss Kroutil's house, third one on the south side of Peach Street, Pug said, "Do we have to start with this old thing?"

Cecil hopped out, stretched, checked the house's curtains, downstairs and up. Minch knew she watched them coming when they rounded the curve a quarter mile away. All week she waited in that big empty house. Getting her grass mowed was a high point.

"Bitch bitch bitch bitch bitch. That's all she knows how to do."

"Shh, Pug." Cecil smiled. "You ain't wanting to hurt Mr. Billiter's business like that. She might can hear you, take a notion you don't care for her yard."

"That'd be one thing she got right." He turned to Minch. "You riding or you want I should?"

Pug always rode Miss Kroutil's, didn't have to listen to her while he buzzed full-throttle on a tractor. Machinery scared her. Minch watched her every time another lawn crew's blower whined to life two blocks away, saw her flinch and brace herself like she was walking into a stiff wind.

But she had to talk, like she might not have a chance the next week. Cecil would have listened to her, but she didn't want to talk to him. So he kept the weed eater wide open, tipped his A-1 cap when he saw her.

But somebody had to listen. "That's what I pay you for," said T. Glenn. "These old sisters have to whine and

cry to somebody. You just got to figure on it. But it's good for business. How do you think I got so many accounts? One widow tells another, and pretty quick I'm doing half the neighborhood. They want to trust somebody after hanging on a man for forty or fifty years. They don't much like to break their routine."

When Minch first applied for a job, T. Glenn said, "You know how to deal with people?"

Minch didn't know what the honest answer was.

"You know how to deal with old people? Especially old women?"

"I mowed my grandma's yard."

T. Glenn Billiter laughed. "I suppose that is a start. Your grandmammy times ten thousand of the most eccentric, hypochondriac, money-pinching, tightwad, paranoid, lonely, bitter, broken, sick, scared-to-death old biddies you'll ever meet in your whole life. Yessir!

"But--they are the best frigging accounts you can find. Frugal old widows of guys worth beaucoup insurance, retirement, pension. Don't let them fool you with their little coin purses. Some of these old darlings are nothing but rich. And nothing to spend it on except Exlax and poodle food. And contract yardwork. No sir, by God. Not one other single thing."

No wonder T. Glenn made so much money. Minch unloaded a Snapper push-mower and fueled it slowly. He fished a screwdriver from T. Glenn's old tackle-box tool chest and

scraped matted grass cud from inside the blade canister. He didn't want to start the engine only to have to kill it when she appeared in one of her ancient frocks, old polyester slacks, gray hair winched into a tight bun as if she hoped the pull would smooth some of those face wrinkles.

"Mr. Minch?"

Her voice sounded even wetter, more choked up and reedy than it did on the phone. Why didn't she swallow down all that phlegm or spit it out? Her wet wheezing slightly sickened Minch, made him want to guzzle cold ice water, brush his teeth with mint paste, gargle away every trace of bad breath and dryness.

Even before he turned from where he knelt by the curb, he could smell her ancient sickly-sour perfume. And he could hear the slight jingle of her dog's collar and nametag as it trotted around the back hedge. Minch had heard of a city mower--one of the big ones with five separate reels flexible enough to hug contours--hitting a dog. The driver wore ear mufflers, didn't even know until the next lap. Miss Kroutil would never recover from something like that.

"Mr. Minch, I didn't know if you were coming or not. I nearly gave up on you."

"Every Friday, Miss Kroutil. Same as always." He tried to smile T. Glenn's business smile. She was so afraid they wouldn't come. Every time he saw her she was worried that something, anything, was going to put a kink in her routine. "A little earlier, a little later--but we always

get here."

Her palsy seemed worse today, made a person dizzy looking at the endlessly nodding head--webs of saliva stretching between top and bottom false teeth, rouge and face powder dusted thick on her sagging cheeks, bright orange lipstick clotted at the corners of her mouth. Today she wore a sleeveless summer blouse, always forgot to button the neckline completely. Minch looked down at the fuel cap, tightened and retightened it.

"A week from Monday is Memorial Day."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I have a doctor's appointment next Friday." Her eyes stayed riveted on him, but the head went around and around. "What time will you come?"

"That's hard to say, Miss Kroutil. It all depends."

"Hugh always had our yard pretty for the holiday. We had company over, you know." She swept a frail arm in a wide arc. "We filled the whole yard with lawn chairs--and cooked barbecue by the tubful. One year we had a pig-picking right out back by the big magnolia."

Streaks of bath talc ran down her neck, down her hollow sternum toward withered breasts. Probably read in a doctor's office magazine about taking off twenty or thirty years with rose-scented talcum powder. She hitched her bra straps, tried as she always did to make them stay on her thin shoulders.

"We'll fix you up, ma'am." Minch stood, fingered the

grip-end of the Snapper's pull-cord. "We're not happy until you are."

Through thick oversized octagonal lenses, her eyes gleamed, as big and glassy as fakes--like a frog or fish. She didn't blink much.

"Did you ever know Hugh?"

"I didn't, ma'am." Minch pulled the cord until the piston started up its compression stroke.

He got so tired of the Hugh stories. That's all these widows wanted to talk about--Hugh and Norm and Ralph and J.B. and Irwin and Dick and Jack and Lucky. Their husbands got cancer, high blood pressure, sugar diabetes, growths of one kind or another, went senile a decade before they were supposed to, had strokes, heart attacks, bypass operations--dropped dead almost faster than Minch could keep up with the names.

Lucky. What a thing to call somebody. Every old person in North Winston went to the funeral last summer when Lucky Aycock died. They all knew each other from the country club or bridge club or dinner club. Lucky Aycock had a tumor wrapped around his vocal cords, smoked a cigar for forty years--used to rake leaves right alongside him and Cecil. His voice got so bad he couldn't even say hello.

Poor old Lucky. That's what the few husbands still living said. Poor Joyce, said the other widows. There was nothing poor about her. Lucky Aycock was vice-president at R.J. Reynolds. He got rich quite a long time before he got

throat cancer.

Before Lucky Aycock completely lost his voice, he told Minch everybody had to go sometime.

"You're only as old as you want to be," Nancy chanted during aerobics. "So who here wants to be overweight! and out of breath! and sexual slugs!" All the guys laughed when she said anything about sex. Minch always laughed. Nancy could bounce around forever on her instructor's mat, in perfect rhythm with taped music, and never sound tired. Everybody agreed she was cute, just the right height, built--blue headband, blue body-suit glued to her, not one extra percent of body fat anywhere. No child-bearing hips, stretch marks, no Caesarean scar.

Child-bearing did it to women--just as bad as age. May Lynn was in labor almost two days with Nicky. Dead-tired, sweat beading, dripping from several strands of hair, hospital gown twisted, bunched above her belly. She looked so pale, lips salt-rimmed from twenty-nine hours of hard breathing. Can I have some ice? Can you get me some ice? Harder than anything Nancy did on the spa's busiest night.

But Minch remembered--he remembered how good she looked. She looked fine. She looked quite undeniably fine. That face--eyes so clear and close. She said, "We got you a son, Royden Minch. Now your name won't die."

Miss Kroutil pressed a hand to her ear when the Kubota came close, waited for Pug to circle a juniper in the corner and start back around the house.

"Well, Mr. Billiter was closely acquainted with Hugh--said Hugh kept the neatest yard he'd ever seen."

"I don't doubt it, Miss Kroutil." Leave it to charmer T. Glenn. He had that line memorized. Every widow he mowed for had the most beautiful yard in the world.

"It just broke Hugh's heart when he couldn't keep the place himself. But those were the doctor's orders." Her big unblinking eyes misted. With the magnification of the thick lenses, Minch saw her tears well in drooping lower lids, glisten and quiver just before they spilled down the rouged cheeks. She dabbed a monogrammed handkerchief at her nose. "He spent all his free time out here. Oh, how he loved it."

Minch straightened, exhaled, worked the throttle lever--anything to break her out of this mood. He dreaded these stories. All the widows told them, everywhere he mowed. "We'll get your yard pretty, Miss Kroutil."

She dried her eyes, suddenly composed. "Would you tell Mr. Cecil he nipped one of my gladioluses last week? I need for y'all to be careful, Mr. Minch. Hugh had great respect for growing things, and that's one trait I intend to maintain."

The Snapper started on the second pull, drowning out whatever else she said.

Hugh did this, Hugh did that. Dead husbands were the ones to blame for flower-bed borders too curved for the tractor to follow--made more to push-mow. It was all the

dead husbands who agreed to ugly cement bird baths
dead-center in the back yard, wrought-iron lawn furniture
nobody ever sat in or ate off, heavy redwood picnic tables
to mow beneath or around, ceramic chickens and frogs,
plastic flamingos, hanging bird feeders or miniature houses
on poles, even silly little plaques staked in the grass--
Squirrel Crossing, Don't Look--Birds Bathing. That kind of
clutter made weedeating tough, cutting line wrapping around,
stalling on all the legs and stakes and wires and posts.

And mowing was half dangerous. In thick grass his
first summer, Minch ran over a shellacked leather knot, a
chew toy for Weisenfarths' cocker spaniel--killed his engine
cold. Since then he'd mowed into tennis and golf balls,
patio rugs, hose ends, a rubber horseshoe, Tonka trucks
after a visit from grandchildren, hand spades, pliers, and a
transistor radio when Elray Stahn got so pitifully forgetful
in the months before his death.

None of this did the blades any good, even if the mower
managed to chop up the rubber or plastic or metal and spit
it like backyard shrapnel. In six years of mowing, nothing
ever changed. After three seasons he couldn't remember
which spring was dry or wet, which fall they had to
hard-rake acorns before they took root. He couldn't
remember which year the different husbands died. All he
remembered was the old widows and that he mowed their yards
every single week.

These dear old ladies--always bathed and perfumed to go

absolutely nowhere except the health clinic, maybe the post office, bank, grocery store, maybe a church bazaar or bake sale--checked calendars and appointment books to make sure the next Thursday or Friday was all right for mowing. And it always was. Months in advance they mentioned plans for short trips out of town and got tears in their eyes when they talked of leaving their dogs behind. From week to week they asked Minch if he liked dogs, spoke of theirs almost as they would speak of children. Oh, Nutmeg just loves to play with company. Peanut brittle is his favorite.

And they talked to their dogs. Minch knew that. These old ladies told their dogs everything because they were the one pair of ears still around and willing to listen.

"They do love their dogs," said T. Glenn Billiter. "I'm not sure why. My Rolette surely loves hers, treats them better than she treats me."

Minch wondered just how serious T. Glenn was about that. Nick and Jiffy said their mama was thinking about getting a dog. Pity the guy who had to mow her back yard. At least she didn't like all the junky decoration. The squirrel hutch her parents gave them one Christmas was still boxed in Minch's garage. When they divided belongings, he asked May Lynn who owned it. She said, "I'm pretty sure I'll never have any use for the thing."

What a life. Old ladies and their dogs, T. Glenn, Cecil, Pug. Hopping from the van, unloading, taking turns mowing, trimming, blowing off drives and sidewalks, setting

trash bags of juicy wet grass beside curbs, loading up once more, moving a block or two to do it all again--over and over, Thursdays and Fridays blending into one day called Residential, every week for a nine-month mowing contract. They ate lunch at Hardee's, McDonald's, Burger King--just because that's where they always ate. Same hamburger or fish sandwich, footlong or corndog, medium fries, large Coke. Too much grease. He knew that, but those salads Pug ordered tasted like their plastic containers. Exercise is the great equalizer, people. Three dollars and change for food he was so sick of he could scream, but just hungry enough to eat every noon.

"What a screwy way to make a living," said Pug, sitting on the water cooler, drowsy after lunch. The van moved through the midday heat, late-May humidity, toward their afternoon rounds in North Winston. "I'm probably going to die sitting right there on T. Glenn's Kubota tractor."

Cecil picked his teeth with the little blade on his pocket knife. "You gonna die if you keep nicking Miss Pott's dogwood with that mowing deck. She show me where that sapling's bark all gnawed off like some beaver been in the back yard."

Pug worked another Marlboro into his mouth, cupped a hand around it and struck a match. "Nah. Miss Pott likes me. Says I remind her of her husband. If she was eighty years younger, we'd get along just fine. She's always telling me how old Norm used to love sports, always playing

ball or golfing--loved running on the beach. They had a house down at Wilmington."

"Is that where they always went?" said Minch. "I wondered."

"She says they thought about moving there to live after he retired."

"I believe that's where he died," said Cecil.

"Sick?" Minch heard a chain vibrating loose on the trailer's steel floor. He didn't check the mirrors. "Was he sick or something?"

"No sir. He went out running and didn't come back. After an hour or so she went looking. Kid found him two, three miles away in a ditch. He went to jump it like he always did, right on his regular path, and a blood vessel busted in his head. Never sick a day in his life."

"That's sure the way to bite it, though," said Pug. "Die with your jock on."

Even more than usual, Minch looked forward to the Gobles' yard today. No junk to mow around, nice square lawn plot with just a few trees, stumps all power-chipped below ground level. Mr. Goble raked twigs and pine needles himself so all they had to do was mow. And Mrs. Goble always waited by the back porch with a box of Eskimo Pies or fudgesicles.

Minch wished all their contracts were so easy to get along with. Never a complaint about a missed sprig of grass in a shaded corner or scalping the turf or leaving it a tiny

bit shaggy.

What a rarity among T. Glenn's accounts--a husband and wife both alive, happy, cheerful. And they were healthy. They'd taken good care of themselves. For their age, DeLyle and Vesta Goble were in good shape. They looked good. Healthy complexions, no liver spots, glasses necessary only for reading the newspaper. Minch admired Mr. Goble's shoulders, still square at seventy-eight, no hairpiece or false teeth. Mrs. Goble used no dye, very little makeup. So different from all those women forever fracturing hip and tailbones in the slightest fall, stooped, rheumy eyes, hands so shaky they could hardly write a check. Mr. Goble still spaded his own vegetable patch, toted fertilizer and peat on his own shoulder, changed his own lightbulbs.

"Who's first?" said Pug.

"Gobles."

"What you betting? Ice cream or fudge bar today?"

"They nice folks," said Cecil. "Been on that street a long time. I remember edging sidewalks over here with hand clippers. No weed eaters back then. No sir."

"You poor old geezer," said Pug. "Ain't we all just poor old geezers? I've heard that hand-clipper story a hundred times."

The instant Minch turned onto Garden Street, he sensed something different about this afternoon. The broad pavement was peaceful and quiet, as always--bordered, in places overarched, with oaks, elms, maples, poplars,

magnolias. Traffic ran so slight he could trim and blow along the curb without ever checking behind himself for oncoming cars, without worrying, as he did on commercial contracts, about shooting a pebble through somebody's windshield, a shredded beer can into sidewalk traffic. He actually enjoyed the Gobles' yard, liked to make it pretty from week to week, shorn fescue deep green, smooth, beautiful.

It was a big square yard on good soil. While so many retired people tilled and fertilized and watered every year, every single year, while they babied and worried about their lawns more than almost anything else in their lives, DeLyle Goble just left his alone. And everybody on the street could see his results. His yard was the last one on the left side, two houses past Roffingers', where the street ended abruptly in a thick woods.

But something was different today. As the van pulled up to Gobles' drive, rolled to a stop in front of their mailbox, Minch saw Vesta Goble working alone in her flowers. It was unnaturally quiet.

Cecil spoke no louder than a whisper, but it seemed all North Winston could have heard what he said. "Must be the whole street went to lay Mr. Wendell to rest."

Minch had forgotten the funeral. Of course DeLyle Goble went, rode with one of his many neighbors--took an afternoon off from working in his yard to attend the funeral of an old friend.

doctor's office on such a pretty afternoon. And I didn't want to go to Wendell's funeral by myself."

She untied the bonnet, lifted it from her matted hair, pulled off her cotton gloves one finger at a time. Beads of sweat stood out on her forehead, around her mouth. Her eyes were bright, alive--not like the dull-polished rocks of some of these old widows. Yet she breathed fast, a little too hard just from standing after a long crouch. She looked older than Minch remembered.

"DeLyle's been having a little chest pain. Nothing bad--just a little discomfort when he exerts himself. The doctor wanted him to take a treadmill test, said they can probably get by with some pills. That's what we're hoping."

She smiled again, the nicest old lady of them all, nothing like T. Glenn's description of old ladies.

Vesta Goble touched Minch's elbow. "But they won't let him do yard work anymore. That's a no-no. And nothing's going to break his heart as much as that. We're going to have to count on y'all."

She squeezed his forearm, her fingers warm and soft. He felt no wrinkles in them, no stiffness, nothing to betray her age.

When she smiled this time, she took his hand in hers, patted it. "We'll let you young guys do the real work. Me and DeLyle will just putter around like old fogies." She paused, the smile fading for just one breath, tears welling ever so perceptibly. "Thanks so much for coming," she

whispered before turning away.

Minch watched her walk toward the house, watched her pick up her feet carefully when she moved from lawn to sidewalk, when she mounted her front steps. At the door she turned. "I've got ice water, tea, Coke--so don't y'all get dry. And I'll have a treat ready in a bit."

The front door closed behind her. Minch knew they never came from those doctors' appointments in the same condition they went. Hugh Kroutil had a bad heart. His widow told Minch the story every week. And from Lucky Aycock's diagnosis to his death, Minch was able to see the decline a week at a time right there on his canopied back patio--standing one Friday in his undershirt, sitting a month later in pajamas trying to balance a small glass of iced tea in one hand, finally lying down on the patio sofa under a blanket in hundred-degree weather, barely able to lift a finger in greeting. Nothing but gray fuzz left on his head after treatments, skin deathly pale. For eight months, Minch hated mowing that kidney-shaped back yard. Even above the strong odor of mixed fuel, two-cycle exhaust, sweat, dog dook, heavy wet grass, he could smell death around every curve, lap after lap.

Pug cut Gobles' front lawn in fast circles, no saplings to injure, eager to finish, to go admire Fern's body at New Day Spa. Cecil's weedeater sounded dimly from a lot behind the house, a wild spot beyond the property line, beyond T. Glenn's contract agreement, a place he kept trimmed just

because he liked the Gobles.

Minch unloaded the Snapper, felt a crick in his spine that worried him more than it used to, set the machine on a small corner of bare flat ground between this yard and the neighbor's. The first thing he learned about mowing was not to try pull-starting with the blade in heavy grass. "It'll kill you doing that," T. Glenn said on that first morning six--was it six?--years ago.

On his second pull the Snapper started this afternoon in late May, so many afternoons since the first time, so many stretching away forever into Thursdays and Fridays and holiday weekends he couldn't begin to count, didn't want to count. The throttle roared wide open--Pug always left levers and switches at their top setting--and the blade wind kicked up a cloud of dust with unbelievable suddenness.

It was dry for this time of year. For a moment Minch felt suffocated, even afraid, grit stinging his cheeks and eyes. But before he rolled the mower onto grass, he caught sight of the funeral procession starting down Garden Street, new widow Roffingers' guests coming to mourn with her. And in that same instant, he knew T. Glenn could forgive their falling from a schedule this day. He would have to forgive that because the only thing Minch could concentrate on was all those cars coming toward him, headlights beaming, and how the driver of one of them looked strangely like May Lynn, and how suddenly a very real pain and weakness swept through his body like a deathly chill.

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VITA

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Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: ALL THE WIDOWS IN THE WORLD

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