# MINNEKAH TALES: A THESIS IN CREATIVE WRITING

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# PREFACE

"Minnekah Tales" is a story cycle consisting of novellas and short stories set in a small town in Oklahoma in a period from about 1907 to 1962. There is no central character in the cycle, unless one considers the town itself a character as different facets of its collective personality appear. The stories have third person, generally effaced narrators, and the focus of the narrative point of view shifts from story to story so that the reader sees the community and various social phenomena from different perspectives. Since most of the stories have clear plots in the traditional meaning of the word, they differ in this respect from much of contemporary fiction. The form of this work--the story cycle--is a well defined sub-genre in American literature, dating back to Nathaniel Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales (1837) and including such works as Sarah Orne Jewett's Tales of New England (1879), Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, John Steinbeck's The Pastures of Heaven, and William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses.

The town and characters of "Minnekah Tales" are completely fictional creations.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

If one dates the inception of the American short story as a literary genre from the publication of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales in 1837, then the sub-genre of the collection of short stories, or novellas and short stories, that develop a composite character of the people in a defined area is perhaps as old as the short story itself. The Puritans in Hawthorne's collection, whether they are in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, as in "The Ambitious Guest" and "The Great Carbuncle," or in Boston, as in "The Gray Champion" and "Dr. Heidegger's" Experiment," all blend into his dark vision of New England.[1] Even Wakefield, the dour and perverse husband in the story by that name (the only one not set in New England), would seem to the reader to be far more at home in Boston than in London. Another story cycle set in New England, Sarah Orne Jewett's Tales of New England (1879), a collection of remarkably fine short stories about life in variously named villages that might just as well be one, must be included after the Twice-Told Tales in any account of the early development of the sub-genre. Also in the ancestry are Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's A New England Nun and Other Stories (1891) and Hamlin Garland's Main Travelled Roads (1891), which includes stories of the "Rock River" area of Wisconsin, farming life in Iowa and Minnesota, and "sodbuster" life in the Dakotas and Nebraska; the tone of the stories is the same and the generally gloomy depiction of character and life consistent, so that despite the geographical disparity one feels the stories might all occur in the same small rural

area. Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896), a series of fictional "sketches," as Jewett designates them, about life in "Dunnet Landing," Maine, also is related. In other literary forms works in poetry such as Edgar Lee Masters's Spoon River Anthology (1915), in the novel proper Sinclair Lewis's Main Street (1920), and in drama Thornton Wilder's Our Town (1938) are closely related in subject matter. Three British works of the early twentieth century--George Moore's The Untilled Field (1903), Katherine Mansfield's In a German Pension (1911), and James Joyce's Dubliners (1916)--all exhibit the story cycle form, although the latter two have urban settings. According to Walter B. Rideout, Moore's book may have provided some of the inspiration for the best-known example of the sub-genre in American literature, Winesburg, Ohio, by Sherwood Anderson.[2] Just as the beginnings of the story cycle may be related to Hawthorne and the beginnings of the short story, so may its modern origins be associated with those writers generally credited for setting the pattern of the modern short story, Mansfield, Joyce, and Anderson.

In the twentieth century, the genre has become well defined in American literature: it is a collection, or cycle, of stories set in a small town and in the farming area around the town. Malcolm Cowley notes in an introduction to an edition of Winesburg, Ohio that the cycle has "several unifying elements, including a single background, a prevailing tone, and a central character. These elements can be found in all the cycles, but the best of them also have an underlying plot that is advanced or enriched by each of the stories."[3] Cowley errs when he asserts that all of the cycles have a central character. It is true that Winesburg, Ohio has a dominant character, an "observer," or "learner," George Willard, and thus has some of the quality of a Bildungsroman, although one should note that Willard does not appear at all in the longest of the stories, the four-part "Godliness," or in two others, "Paper Pills" and "The Untold Lie"; but the requirement of a central character would exclude John Steinbeck's

The Pastures of Heaven (1932), after Winesburg one of the finest examples of the genre, a book which Cowley indicates (also erroneously) has a central character, as well as Jean Toomer's Cane (1923) and William Faulkner's Go Down, Moses (1942), which, despite its insistent and sometimes boring preoccupation with the bi-racial genealogy of the McCaslin clan, is first of all a series of stories developing the character of a town, "Jefferson," Mississippi, and the farming area around it. It is better to say that these "composite novels," as Rideout refers to them,[4] may or may not have a central character, but are unified through setting, tone, and various characters who appear in some but not necessarily all of the stories and thus constitute integrating links among them. The "area," setting, of the story is more-or-less fictional, Toomer's "Sempter, Georgia," for example, or "Friendship Village," presumably in Wisconsin, of Zona Gale's novel by that name (1908). The stories may trace the settlement and history of the area, as in Go Down, Moses, and offer considerable physical description, as in Steinbeck's Tortilla Flat (1935), so that what eventually emerges is a portrait of the personality of the area. To quote Sarah Orne Jewett, "When one really knows a village like this and its surroundings, it is like becoming acquainted with a single person."[5]

The story cycles are generally divisible into those whose meaning may be derived primarily from their narrative surface and those which are multivalent, achieving a multiplicity of meaning through some structural complexity, usually symbolism or ambiguity of the narrative persona or narrative chronology. The division, however, is not always easy to make, even in the case of Hawthorne, for in Twice-Told Tales one may find, alongside such univalent stories as "David Swan" and "Endicott and the

Red Cross," "The Minister's Black Veil," where, to quote Edgar Allan Poe in "Twice-Told Tales, A Review," "a strong undercurrent of suggestion runs continuously beneath the upper stream of the tranquil thesis."[6] The veil acquires various symbolic meanings as the story progresses: it symbolizes the minister's guilt for a specific but unnamed crime, his share in the original sin of the human race, the general guilt of the members of his flock, and, ultimately, the guilty mistake of shrouding oneself, one's life, and the lives of others in all this "guilt." Jewett's stories rely for the most part on ironic surface structure to make their point, but at least one, "A White Heron," makes skillful use of imagery to suggest without explicitly discussing the fears and yearnings of Sylvia as she nears puberty. The cycles of Freeman and Garland belong in the univalent group, as does Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs. Although her later stories are multivalent, most of Mansfield's stories in In a German Pension rely on ironic structure to create a single level of meaning. Joyce's Dubliners, containing such heavily symbolic stories as "Araby," in which a girl comes to symbolize both religious and sexual ideals for a boy, and "The Dead," where snow blanketing Dublin symbolizes intellectual and sexual sterility and suggests the death of nationalistic fervor, belongs in the multivalent group. So also does Winesburg, Ohio, in which the imagery in stories such as "The Teacher" points symbolically to the sexual maturation of George Willard. Toomer's Cane achieves complexity through ambiguity of the narrative personae as well as through symbolic imagery, and Faulkner in Go Down, Moses uses in addition to ambiguous narrative personae a convoluted narrative chronology, particularly in "Was," "The Fire and the Hearth," and "The Bear."

Both of Steinbeck's story cycles, Tortilla Flat and The Pastures of Heaven, on the other hand, generally have a single level of meaning.

"Minnekah Tales," having with one exception unambiguous narrative personae as well as straightforward chronological patterns, belongs primarily to the single-level group, although image patterns in all of the stories point either to meanings not explicit in the narrative surface or else reinforce such meanings, and in "Changes" and "Early Summer, Late Spring" constitute the most important structural elements. In addition, the point of view in the latter story shifts rapidly, contributing to the thematic ambiguity of the narration.

In "Changes," the most important pattern of images is thematically concerned with the sterility, both physical and emotional, in the lives of Marvin and Hellie Shakaskey, and, more comprehensively, in the relationship of Marvin to his total environment: again and again, he misidentifies what he sees--Hellie, a new spring-fed pond, eight yearling heifers, a deep hole in the creek--as images of life and fecundity, before they prove to be associated with death and barrenness. Other repetitive images here involve the deaths of various characters--Marvin's mother, father, and grandmother, Orville Tucker and his wife, Ralph Bradshaw, and finally Marvin himself--as well as the funerals, which Hellie either attends indifferently, ignores, or else attends with inordinate enthusiasm. In "Early Summer, Late Spring," the patterned imagery points to meanings not explicit in the narrative surface at all. The association of Mrs. Tucker with images of seasonal change, or, after her daughter is violated by Paul, with images of drought and famine, relates her and Nancy to the Demeter-Persephone myth, while another pattern of images identifies Nancy as a child-woman who biologically has experienced

womanhood but who emotionally is determined to return to childhood. "The Oration" is basically univalent, but the image of the great birthday cake baked for Amos Evers becomes the focal point of the characters in the story, Ab Johnson and, to a lesser degree, Rufus Tucker coming to realize that they too participate in the greed which drove Evers and which overwhelms Cloy Ikard. In "Love among the Starlings," the imagery associated with Uncle Billy--his trotting gait, his sure-handedness with the fish--suggests his satyric qualities and his sexual prowess, as well as his general ability to fare well in unlikely circumstances. May, like Uncle Billy, attains somewhat mythical stature through the various images--ferocious appearance, strength, riotous activities--associated with her. In "Eternal Things," the primary image pattern involves the identification of Rev. Colby with various images reminiscent of Christ: the etched lines of suffering on his face, suggestive of the Passion; scenes in which he appears in halo-like light; and recurring cross-like postures. This pattern serves not to delineate Rev. Colby, but to make his character more ambiguous, for the reader must always juxtapose these images against the minister's mildly earthy inclinations.

The dominant structural device in "Eternal Things" emerges from Rev. Colby's relationship with three women, Mrs. Colby, Opal Bradshaw, and Wilma Klepmann. As the story opens, the reader sees him facing all three, seated on the same row in the church. From then on, the narration moves from encounter to encounter between him and one or another of the women, each meeting revealing a degree of his dominance over or ineffectuality with them. In "Love among the Starlings," the ironic tension between the "outer" story about the social elite of Minnekah and the "inner" story about May and Uncle Billy is the primary structural

element: the exploits of May and her lover, the most disreputable of the town's citizens, appear against the background of the same kinds of activities or at least desire for such activities among Maybelline Klepmann, Ethel Evers, and others. The narrative structure of "The Oration" builds around the focal point of Cloy Ikard's chastising speech over the body of the suicide, Amos Evers; to the disgust of Ab Johnson, who wants to hear the end of Cloy's story, various interruptions occur, many caused by Cloy himself, the interruptions providing details of the suicide story both before and after Cloy's "moment" as well as structural elements (such as the relationship of the various men to Amos Evers) in the short story itself. Besides the patterns of images in "Changes," the longest of the stories, narrative tension is produced by the relationship (or non-relationship) of Hellie and Marvin Shakaskey, beginning with their "courtship," in which only Marvin takes any interest, and continuing through two decades of marriage during which Marvin ekes out a living for them on the farm while Hellie, indifferent to his problems, follows a daily pattern of visits with her cronies which is apparently satisfying to her. Since Marvin is a nearly inarticulate character, other characters such as Orville Tucker and later Ab and Clara Johnson sometimes state his case regarding the behavior of Hellie, or else a dramatic scene brings the two together and helps specify the non-symbiotic nature of their existence. As he grows mature enough to be a valid observer, Ab Johnson becomes a cohering element in the story, commenting on and trying to understand the actions and motivations of his neighbors; Orville Tucker provides the same sort of structural cohesion early in the story, linking the drought problems faced by Marvin with the heritage of the village farmers in his "empty rain barrel" story and also commenting on

Hellie's actions. Ab also serves as a structural link among the stories, either appearing briefly or being mentioned in "Eternal Things" and "Love among the Starlings," and emerging as the comprehending, commenting observer in "The Oration." "Early Summer, Late Spring" has the least amount of dialogue, most of the dramatic scenes being severely limited to description by the third person narrator so that the characters, particularly Nancy and her mother, are held somewhat aloof in keeping with their mythical associations. For the same reason, the story skims over daily activity and touches only on those events that directly shape the story, so that the time lapse of the narration, over two years, is compacted into a few key scenes and pages.

Some of the works mentioned above--Winesburg, Ohio, Main Street, and Spoon River Anthology--are part of what Carl Van Doren called in 1921 the "Revolt from the Village" literature, that is, prose or poetry that treats rural life in the realistic vein of George Crabbe's The Village (1783) rather than in the blithely pastoral terms of Oliver Goldsmith's The Deserted Village (1770).[7] Anthony Channell Hilfer writes in The Revolt from the Village: 1915-1930 that in Goldsmith, Jewett, and Wilder, "we can see the persistence of the myth of the small town as a refuge from the complications and intensities of life. Civilized life in these works is divorced from tension and history and dissolved into nature."[8] Hilfer wisely refers to Jewett's The Country of the Pointed Firs rather than Tales of New England to place her in the Goldsmith camp. The quiet realism of the latter book aligns Jewett neither with Goldsmith and Wilder nor the "rebels," but with writers of the nineteen-thirties and forties such as Steinbeck and Faulkner, after the "revolt." A feeling of surprised indignation pervades the "revolt" literature, with the

exception of Winesburg, Ohio: the narrator of a Main Street or of a Main Travelled Roads appears to awaken, sit up on his pallet in the town square, and cry, "My God! This isn't the idyllic paradise they promised me!" The excessive zeal of these writers to convey an atmosphere of intellectual and spiritual barrenness ("an almost helpless and sterile poverty," Garland says in the foreword to Main Travelled Roads[9]) perhaps forestalls any pervasive exploration of character in the "locals" of their works; only an outsider such as Carol Kennicott or a "returner," a sort of palmer who has not only seen the world but made his financial mark in it, preferably in some artistic endeavor, such as Howard McLane of Garland's "Up the Coolly," is allowed the luxury of any perceptive consciousness or complexity of character. Perhaps because of the attacks of Garland, Lewis, and others, the old myth of the village as a pastoral haven has been at least partly replaced by the new myth of the small town as a locale of hyperactive sexuality, violence, and concentrated viciousness, as illustrated by the immense popular success of Grace Metallius's Peyton Place (1956). The film version of Larry McMurtry's novel about a west Texas town, The Last Picture Show (1966), probably owes some of its success to the perpetuation of the same myth. Anderson avoided both the startled, over-reactive tone of Lewis and Garland as well as the danger of shallow, sometimes superciliously handled characterization in Winesburg, Ohio, as did the best of those that followed him--Toomer, Steinbeck, and Faulkner: the external paraphernalia that distinguish Jefferson, Miss. from Sempter, Ga. or Las Pasturas del Cielo, Calif. are there, but the author delves beyond them and into the psyches of his characters. Like Jewett, he tries to understand the village inhabitants not as quaint rural zoological specimens but as human beings acting and

reacting from motivations and stimuli through webs of considerations and constrictions as complex as those governing his own behavior. Rather than bring the world a simplified caricature of a village character, he shows the world its own complexity in the complexity of the village, no mean feat: as Jewett once told Willa Cather, "One must know the world so well before one can know the parish."[10] Whether I have learned enough about the world to write knowledgeably about the parish is a question for readers, should there be any, to decide; but it is in the realistic, non-pastoral, universalizing mode of Jewett, Anderson, Steinbeck, and Faulkner that I have attempted to fit the "Minnekah Tales."

The story cycle has a clear advantage over the traditional novel with regard to narrative point of view. From story to story, the author may re-focus, as Anderson does in Winesburg, Ohio, moving in for an intimate glimpse at an event in George Willard's life in "Nobody Knows," setting him on the periphery as a puzzled observer in "The Strength of God," revealing to the reader but not to Willard some hereditary impulses behind his desires and actions in "Mother." There are of course excellent novels which employ shifts in point of view, most notably James Joyce's Ulysses (1914), and American works such as Faulkner's As I Lay Dying (1930), Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath (1939), and Joyce Carol Oates's Do with Me What You Will (1973), to cite a contemporary example; but the format of the story cycle is ready-made for narrative shifts, while the reader often experiences some disorientation or unnecessary disruption of continuity (for valid thematic and aesthetic purposes, one hopes) when the shift occurs in a novel.

The most radical experiments with point of view in a story cycle are in Toomer's Cane, where one may find as well as the usual

first-person narrator a first-person plural narration in "Becky," a societal "we" representing the black perspective in a Georgia town; a first-to-second person narrator--"If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta"[11]--in "Fern"; and stage-direction-like omniscient narration combined with dramatic dialogue in "Kabnis." Toomer further varies the narrative focus by interspersing poems among his short stories. The shifting points of view in Cane help portray both the fragmented black culture of Georgia and the collective mind that perceives this fragmentation. In the Walpurgisnacht scene which occurs in "Kabnis," these shifts help keep the reader off balance, never allowing him a base from which he might order the events of the night or set them in perspective, so that following the narrative pattern in a sense forces the reader to experience the social fact. The cumulative effect of these rapid changes is to cause the reader to comprehend and empathize with the collective "we" of "Becky": one understands the stories through the racial consciousness of the sub-culture.

Steinbeck's third person narrator in The Pastures of Heaven, in contrast to that of Cane, is consistent throughout the cycle and is almost completely effaced, with only an occasional authorial irony. Because a narrative distance is maintained at all times, even when the reader is exposed to lengthy "internal" narration such as that which takes place in the mind of Molly Morgan, the school teacher in the valley, one sees the narrator as a detached observer, exercising an amused, non-participatory judgment. At times this detachment verges unpleasantly toward patronage, as in the story of Maria and Rosa Lopez, in which the

sisters decide to grant sexual favors to customers who eat large amounts of tortillas and enchiladas in their restaurant; the persona oversimplifies the characters and their motivations and thus leaves the reader doubting the truth of the fiction.

Faulkner's narrator in Go Down, Moses is a puzzle, hovering somewhere between what might be called "third person intimate"--intimate because the tone is so subjective--and "collective stream of consciousness": the narrator, never an identified character, mulls over problems, actions, and motivations, wanders backwards and forwards in time through several generations, and moves in and out of the minds of the characters at will. The narrative voice in "The Old People" will illustrate the technique: "But that was all right. McCaslin and other grown people often said things like that and he paid no attention to them, just as he paid no attention to Sam saying he wanted to go to the Big Bottom to live. After all, he would have to live there for six months, because there would be no use in going at all if he was going to turn right around and come back."[12] Like Toomer, Faulkner brings the reader close to the racial consciousness of the people of Jefferson, black and white, through the ordered thought patterns of such passages as this; coupled with the telescoping of narrative chronology, the intimate tone helps the reader feel the people's continuing awareness of their place in the passing of the generations, of their social inheritance or disinheritance. Thus Lucas Beauchamp, one of the descendants of the black branch of the McCaslin clan, is one of the disinherited in that he owns nothing, never has and never will, yet he has more money in the bank than his white "cousin" and landlord, Carothers Edmonds, and he feels--and exercises--his psychological superiority over Edmonds, a superiority which

came about by chance and circumstance in earlier generations, and which time has merely reinforced.

In the "Minnekah Tales" I have used a third-person-limited, generally effaced narrator in an attempt to achieve an overall tone of austerity, a tone which would be consonant both with the often ungenerous quality of the land and climate and with the rather straightforward motivations of the dirt farmers such as Marvin Shakaskey and Bink Martin who spend their unornate lives struggling with this environment. The same tone pervades the town, where a grim economic pragmatism motivates controllers of property and money such as Amos Evers, Ray Perkins, and Opal Bradshaw, haunts would-be controllers like Cloy Ikard, and is the sole criterion of respect for the Hellie Shakaskeys. Such a narrator merely presents the "facts" of event and circumstance, and the reader supplies his own commentary as he comprehends the ironies in the story. I feel the inconspicuous narrator combined with a style using a preponderance of words of Anglo-Saxon derivation (such as stiff, black, white, wet, flight, laughed, hip, twisted--often monosyllabic words bounded by consonants and usually ending in stops so that the sentences are seldom smoothly vocalic in their flow) to be the best vehicle for conveying the quality of sparseness in the lives of the characters. The narration is wholly scenic, or objective, revealing the thoughts of the characters only through dialogue and action, in "The Oration" and "Love among the Starlings," and nearly so in "Changes." In "Eternal Things," the point of view is closely limited to Reverend Colby, allowing the reader to see the other characters only as Colby sees them, or fails to see them, and often verges into semi-stream of consciousness, so that the reader is aware of a continuing discrepancy between the stiff,

stereotyped public rhetoric of the preacher and his unspoken desire for rich food, complaints about physical discomforts, and vague sexual speculations about Wilma Klepmann. The narrator of "Early Summer, Late Spring" is omniscient, disclosing the thoughts of the characters at will except for Nancy's mother, Mrs. Tucker, who in keeping with her mythical attributes remains aloof. One paragraph in this story is stream-of-consciousness narration from Nancy's point of view, revealing her sorrow for the abridgement of her youth and suggesting additional motivation for her part in her husband's death. "The Oration" represents an attempt to achieve dramatic tension through the use of the "camera eye" technique, restricting the reader to what may be seen and heard in a single room of Cloy Ikard's house during a short period of time. Since the characterization depends almost entirely upon monologue and dialogic reaction, this story is somewhat like a one-act play.

In several of the story cycles there is a curious muddling of tall tale, mythical, and even biblical figures into what one might call "village superlatives," characters who represent the community's archetypal notion of some human quality, condition, or ability. In Anderson's "Godliness" (Winesburg, Ohio), for example, Jesse Bentley, by being the hardest of taskmasters, a kind of archetypal taskmaster, becomes the richest farmer in the valley, who confounds his ill-wishers by almost miraculously turning a swamp into a drained and profitable truck garden, convincing rival farmers of his infallibility. He imagines himself first to be the biblical Jesse, then Saul, aligned with his (Jesse's) grandson David against the "Philistines," the other farmers in the valley, who covet his land, and finally he sees himself as Abraham and his grandson as Isaac in an attempt to make a sacrifice in order to

receive a "sign" from God. Winesburg, Ohio has other characters who are "superlatives" or are of mythic proportions in some sense: stern Rev. Curtis Hartman, the most respected minister in town, suddenly finds himself unable to resist the temptation to be a voyeur and looks upon a naked "Eve," Kate Swift, from the bell-tower of his church; Wash Williams is the ugliest man in town; Joe Welling talks most excessively; and Seth Richmond is, in the townspeople's eyes, the deepest thinker. In Go Down, Moses, Rider is the black man of god-like strength as well as grief in "Pantaloon in Black," and Lucas Beauchamp is the trader and schemer who cannot be outwitted or outlasted in "The Fire and the Hearth"; and in The Pastures of Heaven, there is Edward "Shark" Wicks, the trickiest man and sharpest trader in the valley, who nevertheless lives on the edge of poverty; Tularecito, "Little Frog," an animal-man of fantastic strength who was supposedly born with a mouth full of sharp teeth; the John Whitesides, the acknowledged "first family"; and the fat Lopez sisters, makers of the best tortillas.

Such characters--the richest man, holiest, trickiest, strongest--serve as economical shortcuts to the delineation of values, possibilities, and probabilities in a story. The reader's understanding of a fictional community is not based on physical description but on what he conceives are the desires, needs, ideals, necessities, and expectations of the characters. The "superlatives"--the archetypal representatives--help the reader reach an understanding of the borders of these desires and needs: what the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional limits of the parish are. Thus, in "Changes" the Shakaskey family is said to have been in the area longer than anyone else; they are the "Ur-farmers," the archetypal farmers, and so one might expect that they would hold a

position of respect in the community; but times and values have changed, and as the story progresses it becomes apparent that other superlatives are more important: the man who owns the biggest tractor, the widow who can bury her husband in the most splendor, the woman who becomes the ultimate griever. Similarly, in "The Orations" Cloy Ikard in mourning for Amos Evers, the archetypal representative of the shrewd, ruthless, grasping, and successful man, merely mourns for himself, the man he wants to be, the self he has tried and will continue to try to pattern after Amos Evers, who was the outer limit of his expectation. In "Love among the Starlings," May Goins is thought to be the least womanly of women, no more than an animal, but she shares a weakness for the bottle with one community leader, Ethel Evers, and a wistful desire for a handsome boy with two others, Maybelline Klepmann and Hazel Neufield. She helps define the community's ethical borders.

One of the fine strokes of characterization in English literature occurs in Katherine Mansfield's "Marriage a la Mode" when William, the unhappy husband, glances out a train window, sees a grinning, greasy-faced workman by the tracks, and thinks, "'A filthy life!'" In three words, Mansfield conveys William's dull narrowness of understanding, condescending attitude, and utter lack of empathetic imagination. One who decides to write about a small town runs the risk that he, like William, may cry "a filthy life!" too soon. One cannot help bringing along his own preferences and preconceptions, but he must be able to do more than momentarily imagine himself in the circumstances he sees, reject the possibility with a shudder of distaste, and, sure that he has fathomed the essential nature of the people, proceed to write. This attitude is illustrated in the introduction W. D. Howells wrote to

Garland's Main Travelled Roads: "...these stories are full of the bitter burning dust, the foul and trampled slush, of the common avenues of life, the life of the men who hopelessly and cheerlessly make the wealth that enriches the alien and the idler, and impoverishes the producer."[13] Howells's assessment of the people is as invalid as that of the Southwesterner who rides a Manhattan bus or subway car during the evening rush hour, notes the carefully expressionless faces and unseeing eyes, and comes home to announce, "I know the New Yorkers. They're like robots. They hate each other and they're afraid of themselves. They don't know what happiness is." Howells errs (and Garland too) in assuming that the northern plains people are hopeless and cheerless. They were there because they had hope, they worked and endured because of hope. Such writers forget that all settlement history, whether of Plymouth or Virginia, South Dakota or Oklahoma, is a record of deprivation and hardship--and of hope. Charles Dickens made the same mistake in American Notes in describing the area where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi: "...the wretched wanderers who are tempted hither droop, and die, and lay their bones...the wretched cabins few and far apart, their inmates hollow-cheeked and pale..."[14] Like Dickens, too many visitors were disappointed when they failed to find a skyscraper or a St. Paul's springing up out of ground which a farmer had just cleared of stumps, a university library instead of a green-timber lean-to, a Royal Academy rather than anti-rustler vigilantes meeting in a tavern. Such observers would do well to read James Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie, where an accurate and understanding analysis of the settlement process may be found: before the first farmers, the Boomers, or Shakaskeys even of Oklahoma, come the Ishmael Bushes, the men always on the periphery of

civilization; the succeeding waves of migrants are more and more like the people of the long-settled, stable centers of population, and eventually the new area may come so close to the visitor's notion of a respectable culture that it will be to his liking.

The change of character in the people of the fresh settlement comes about not only from new migrations, however; there is "vertical" change from one generation to the next. The homesteader whose first three years in Oklahoma Territory were spent in a dugout, in comparison to which a cave would have seemed luxurious, may have seen his sons and daughters graduate from a university, or he may have starved out. Both eventualities were commonplace and depended upon a great many factors: the amount of capital the settler brought with him, weather, soil quality, perseverance, shrewdness, adaptability, bankers with faith and understanding (there were a few), and more than anything else, luck. For those who managed to stay, a distinct cultural change occurred between generations.

In the "Minnekah Tales," especially "Changes," I have tried to deal with another facet of this change in character from parents to children. A furious energy, probably analogous to the biological drive that causes fish stocked in different water to grow and reproduce at an abnormally high rate for a few years, pervaded the early settlers. "Sodbusting" was a slow and difficult work, yet the homesteaders managed it quickly; houses, barns, fences, churches, schools appeared within a very few years. There is in the stories the underlying suggestion that succeeding generations must pay for this expenditure of energy, that the superhuman effort of their forebears sapped them. Thus Marvin Shakaskey lacks the grim determination of his grandmother and even of his father,

and Maybelline Klepmann is barely a shadow of her aunt, Opal Bradshaw; Frank Shakaskey, on the other hand, behaves like a grafted scion on the family trunk, adapting and responding with quick energy to the challenges of the machine age, incorporating once more the frontier-seeking spirit of his ancestors.

The denizens of the Minnekah area have surnames that might derive from many European countries, in keeping with the character of the migration and settlement patterns of Oklahoma. Generally, the northwestern and north-central areas were filled by settlers coming south from Kansas, Nebraska, and the high plains states, or southwest from Missouri and Illinois. These people might have names indicating their German (called "Dutch" by the settlers, mispronouncing Deutsch), Scandinavian, or Eastern European ancestries, although there were many English names, too, such as that of Ralph Bradshaw's "people." In the eastern and southeastern parts of the state, the migrations were earlier and came often but not exclusively from Arkansas, Texas, and other southern states, with surnames pointing to English, Scottish, Irish, and some French and German roots. But Oklahoma is probably more than any other state a mixture of undefined ethnic backgrounds, and the names of people in Minnekah illustrate this fact: Johnson appears to be English, but a bureaucratic slip (or a deliberate re-spelling) may have changed -sen to -son; Walder sounds German, but might have been shortened from a Slavic name, or the second syllable modified from the French -eau; Cloy Ikard's German-sounding name may have been shortened, too, and in any case his use of everwhen and everwhat places him with the same hillbillies that he sneers at in "The Oration." Shakaskey, which has an Indian ring to

it (cf. Chikaskia River) might be an approximation of a Czechoslovakian, Russian, or even Italian name.

The fact that the advent of the machine coincided with the settlement of Oklahoma has much to do with the emergence of the term "Okie" for those who were forced out by drouth and low prices: whether or not the majority of the settlers could have survived on their 160-acre allotments (the "quarter-sections" Cloy Ikard talks about in "The Oration") in a horse-and-mule age is academic, but it was a grim reality that no one could do it once the tractor, combine, truck, and bailer allowed a single man to farm hundreds of acres. "Minnekah Tales" touches on various aspects of the painful adjustment that the use of the new farm machinery caused. In "Eternal Things," Reverend Colby cannot cope with the machine-age farmer, or the farmer's wife; in "Changes," A. J. Robinson, Fred Starks, and others are pushed off the land by the arrival of a new tractor, and those who have capital--Amos Evers, the Perkins family, the Bradshaws--have an enormous advantage over the marginal farmers such as Marvin Shakaskey; only those like Jud Wallace, whose venture into "custom harvesting" replaces the traditional community threshing, and Frank Shakaskey, who becomes a part-time farmer, survive.

These are some of the social considerations I had in mind when I began shaping the "Minnekah Tales." The story cycle, a genre with some outstanding examples of American literature in it, seemed to me to be the most suitable form for the material, allowing both continuity and shifts in narrative focus. I hope to have brought a fair amount of understanding to Minnekah, and neither to have patronized the life and people of the town nor to have erected false heroes. In the twentieth century, we are not allowed the luxury of heroes, or of clearly defined

"goods" and "bads"; accordingly, in Minnekah there is merely a good-bad continuum, and everyone is a bit of a villain. Fortunately, he can also be something of a hero, too.

## NOTES

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[2]"Introduction," Sherwood Anderson: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Walter B. Rideout (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 7.

[3]"Introduction" (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 14.

[4]pp. 7-8.

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[6]In The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Sculley Bradley et al., 4th ed. (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1974), pp. 872-78.

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[10]Title page, The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902, 1, ed. William McCurtain (Lincoln, Neb.: U. of Nebraska Press, 1970).

[11]Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: Liveright, 1975), p. 14.

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# CHANGES

## I

By the late nineteen-fifties people in Minnekah were used to saying that a funeral without Hellie Shakaskey wouldn't be a funeral at all. She was always the first one there, her barrel-shaped body installed two rows back next to the center aisle, right-hand side. It didn't matter which church it was. Afterwards, she never failed to get a ride out to the cemetery, where she crowded in against the seated row of grieving relatives and watched intently as the coffin resting on the big web belts was cranked into the ground. She was as much a part of the scene on the windy hillside as the old yellow canopy and the bright green grass carpet from Ikard's Funeral Home.

It was common for Hellie to attend two funerals the same day, one at ten o'clock and another at two, and on occasions when Minnekah laid three souls to rest she hurried from church to church and took them all in, gasping for breath, but eyes sparkling. She cried real tears at every funeral, and at the graveside her sniffling was often the only sound to be heard in that long moment after the preacher's final amen and before the undertaker's movement forward to whisk the flowers from the coffin.

People said Hellie began going to the funerals after her husband, Marvin, died in 1949, but that wasn't quite true. She started before then.

Marvin and Hellie (her name was Helen, but the children on the playground started calling her Hellie, and it stuck) had been in the same class. She was the liveliest girl in high school, a noisy, chattering, laughing village girl with large breasts and hips, not tall but strongboned, who was courted by Ab Johnson and Amos Evers and a dozen others, some well-off like the Evers boy, some poor but hopeful anyway. Her parents, the Orville Tuckers, kept a little tin-roofed grocery store and filling station, and sometimes Orville worked in the oil fields. Hellie's brother, Rufus, was about eight years younger than she. Hellie was supposed to help in the store, but she slipped off with her friends at every chance.

Marvin was not part of Hellie's crowd, or of any crowd. His people farmed in the thick blackjack oak country on the Cimarron River, nearly eight miles east of Minnekah. Some people claimed they had been there forever practically, certainly since back in the Territory days when their clan covered ten or fifteen square miles along the north bank of the river. In the Run of 1889, the story went, two men on Kentucky thoroughbreds out-distanced everybody in their race to stake town lots in what was to be the county seat, Bramwell; but as their lathered horses galloped over a low rise, neck and neck, they found themselves in knee-high sweet corn, and a few rows in front of them was a small man on a two-horse cultivator. He wore a wide brimmed gray felt hat with a single eagle feather stuck in the band, and when they appeared he showed no surprise but all at once a long-barrelled shotgun was lying in his lap and he said crossly as the cultivator went on down the row, "Don't let them horses tramp on my corn." That was a Shakaskey, it was

said, the grandfather of Lewis Shakaskey, Marvin's father.

Marvin and his little brother, Frank, who was ten years younger, met the T-model Ford truck that served as a bus every morning, appearing on the road suddenly from the thickets of cedar, persimmon, and hedgeapple, from no discernible trail. Like all the Shakaskey's they were short with small hips and waists and wedge-shaped torsos. Their home-trimmed black hair was combed over steady brown eyes, and they walked with quick strides, shoulders back.

When Marvin and Hellie were seniors one of the jokes in the school was that Marvin was supposed to be in love with her. She had been the first to suggest it, and she laughed louder than anyone else at the idea. But it was true. In class, she would look up to find him watching her intently from the other side of the room. Out of class, he was seldom far from her, though he never spoke. Sometimes as they left the school house she would suddenly turn and call loudly up the stairwell to him, "Hey, Marvin Shakaskey, you farmer-boy, are you following me around?" Then the other girls would giggle and she would laugh, showing her large, strong teeth, and the boys might smile, but they didn't push him. They had grown up with him, and despite his size, they knew better than to tangle with him.

"There ain't but one way to make him stop fighting, and that's to kill him," Ab Johnson once said.

So they graduated in the spring of 1925. Late that summer Marvin's grandfather died, leaving him and Frank each a quarter-section of land. About half of Marvin's quarter was plowed ground, eighty acres of fairly level bottom land on both sides of a little creek running the length of it from northwest to southeast. The field

was bounded by the contour of the wooded hills on each side and by the sandy edge of the river bed on the south. Marvin moved in with his grandmother in her little rock house up in the blackjacks and began to farm the land as he had known how to do almost since he was born. He raised wheat and oats and occasionally some corn, although the July sun and wind usually burnt it up, and he had stock cattle and a few milk cows.

He managed to see Hellie once in a while by buying supplies at Tucker's Store, although she often wasn't there. She was usually out with some boy or another, or with her girl friends, those that were still unmarried. She was supposed to have gotten married at least half a dozen times, but something always happened: once she told her father, Orville, she thought she could do better, and a couple of times the boys simply disappeared. Some said she was holding out for Amos Evers, who was going to business college in Tulsa. Certainly, she was seen going into his father's hardware store often enough when he was home, and sometimes leaving town with him in his new roadster, and there was talk that Orville had tried to take a strop to her when she came in about sunup one Monday morning, having been gone somewhere the whole weekend with Amos. But if Orville managed to use the strop it didn't show, and Hellie continued to do as she pleased.

She was still apt to taunt Marvin if she caught him looking at her, and he was as shy as ever. But after the harvest in 1927, when he had a good crop and had put money in the bank, he come in the store and within hearing of her father and mother asked Hellie to marry him. She was fully mature then, with wide, wet lips and

taut, heavy breasts. She wore her straight brown hair bobbed close to her head, and her jaw was square and strong. He was small and tough, with a thin face browned by the sun and wind. He stood with his arms at his sides and spoke plainly in a flat, toneless voice, and Orville had the feeling that he was frightened by Hellie's liveliness, by her quick, eager brown eyes.

But he spoke his piece without taking his eyes from her face. She listened to him, grinning, surprised to hear him talk at all, let alone propose. Orville stood beside her behind the counter, and Mrs. Tucker, who was in the far corner of the store putting cans on the shelves, stopped to listen.

Hellie looked at Orville and back to Marvin and then turned sideways to him and arched her back, perhaps as she had seen an actress in a moving picture do it, and said, "Well, farmer-boy, I sure am glad to hear you talk. I thought the cat had got your tongue for good." She laughed while he regarded her steadily. "I guess I ain't much interested in milking cows and living in a shack in the woods right now, farmer-boy. Maybe you better find somebody else to live out there." Then she went down the aisle and through the curtained doorway at the rear of the store, swinging her hips with every step.

Orville was embarrassed. He liked Marvin, and he valued him as a cash-paying customer. "I guess maybe she just ain't ready to settle down yet, Marvin," he said, "Maybe she ain't ready to get married and have little ones yet." He shuffled his feet behind the counter and fished for his tobacco sack and papers. Marvin was still looking toward the doorway where Hellie had disappeared, and

Mrs. Tucker was again stacking cans in neat pyramids on the shelves. Her gray hair was pulled back tightly in a bun, and she wore small rimless eyeglasses.

Marvin turned to him. "Would she change her mind if we were to live here in town?"

"Well, I don't know," Orville said uneasily. "That might help. Maybe she just wants to have a good time a little longer."

In October Marvin's mother had trouble giving birth. The Shakaskeys brought out the new doctor in Minnekah, Willis Townsend, who stayed an entire day and night, but he could do little for her. He and the old grandmother delivered the baby finally, a boy, but she died a few hours later.

"I'm sorry," he told Lewis, "but she was so weak I couldn't help. It seemed like she didn't even have strength enough to think about trying to stay alive."

Lewis nodded, shaking his heavy, graying moustache. "Her family starved out of here in a dry year, after we were married. They moved out to California, or maybe Oregon, we never heard for sure. She always missed them bad, and worried, and she wasn't strong enough to stay out here." He lowered his head and muttered, "She shouldn't have had to stay out here. She wanted to go with them, but she felt obliged to stay with me. It wasn't right for her."

Lewis named the baby Milo, after its mother's father, and took care of it with help from the grandmother, who came up the road in her long dress and homemade bonnet to stay with him and Frank.

Marvin had a good crop again the next year, and in 1929. Ralph and Opal Bradshaw were having good crops, too, and during the spring

and summer of 1929 they built a row of rent houses on the south edge of Minnekah, just outside the town limits so they wouldn't have to install plumbing. There was a little oil boom going on around Minnekah, and they expected to rent the houses to oil field people and get their money back in two or three years. But in August after he had sold his crops Marvin took his savings from the bank and bought one of the little four-room houses. In the slack time before fall planting, he dug a shallow well at the rear of the house, and in the far corner of the back yard he dug a hole and built an outhouse, planting small cedars from the farm at the corners of the house and around the outhouse, and building a frame in front of it to train honeysuckle vine on. Then he went to Tucker's Store and again confronted Hellie and Orville.

This time Hellie did not laugh. She was almost twenty-four, and she had had no proposals since Marvin's. All of her girl friends were married, and she had to sit in the kitchen with them and listen to them talk about babies before she could launch into the gossip about flirtations and village romances. After Amos Evers's father died in 1927, Amos had come home from business college to take over the hardware store, and he and Hellie had raised plenty of eyebrows during the next year or so. But then he suddenly married a high-toned girl from Bramwell, a girl who had studied music at the state university and whose father had the Red Man Oil Company distributorship for eight counties. And Ab Johnson, too, was about to be married, to Jud Wallace's older sister, Clara. So she wasn't quite so fast to turn Marvin down.

She listened to him as he talked, ill at ease but determined, and when he finished she did not answer right away. Orville and

Marvin waited, watching her, and at last she said, "No, farmer-boy, I guess not. Pop says you got yourself a house in town now, but I hear it ain't much of one. It'll take more than that to get me."

By the summer of 1930 the effects of the depression had reached even as far as Minnekah. Orville Tucker couldn't collect from any of his charge customers, and he saw it was a matter of weeks until he would have to close the store. When he heard that Marvin had sold his wheat crop, he stopped Hellie as she was leaving the store one day and said, "You better take him while you can. At least the farmers have something to eat. The town people are going to starve to death. It's plain enough you're too lazy to work; you're nothing but dead weight around here, and it sure as hell ain't any favor to Marvin, as he'll find out, but you better take him while you can."

Hellie said, "Why ain't you smart like Amos Evers and Ralph Bradshaw? You may be going to starve to death, but they ain't. They've got plenty of money, and they're buying the land right out from underneath all the dumb farmers, for nothing. Amos told me so."

"What're you doing talking to Amos Evers? You better stay away from him."

"I guess that's my business. And if I don't feel like working in this dinky store, where there ain't nothing to sell anyway, that's my business too." Along the far wall, Hellie's mother was re-arranging the canned goods, stacking them in a straight row on the front edge of the shelf. There was nothing behind them.

So when Marvin came in, Orville said to him, "I think maybe Hellie's changed her mind about that business of yours. Why don't you see what she has to say now?"

Hellie was sitting behind the counter with her back to them, listening to the crackling music coming from a Chicago radio station, and before Marvin could say anything, she turned and said, "Yes, farmer-boy, I've changed my mind about living in that dinky frame house without any running water. Now ain't you happy?"

Hellie made Marvin give her a big wedding at the First Methodist Church of Minnekah. At the reception she kissed practically every man there, including Amos Evers, whose wife had not come, and Ab Johnson, whose new wife, Clara, was there, watching with disapproval. Orville and her brother, Rufus, who promised to be as tall and lanky as his father ("all shanks and spindly," Ab said) stood around with foolish grins on their faces. Orville slipped outside once in a while to drink from a jar of whiskey as clear as water, while Mrs. Tucker carefully poured fruit punch in the matching cups. The Shakaskeys were a stiff, silent little group in one corner. Marvin's grandmother had not come.

At last they drove off toward Bramwell in Marvin's Model T Ford. There were tin cans tied to the back, courtesy of Rufus, a big Just Married sign was painted on the side, and Hellie leaned far out the window, yelling and waving. Her bridal dress with its rows of flounces in the skirt shone white and satiny, her stockings glistened white, and Marvin smiled with quiet, anxious pleasure at her pleasure. He had never touched her, but now as they drove up the new state highway toward Bramwell he reached out and covered her hand

where it rested on the dashboard. She turned to him and laughed with her wet lips and strong teeth and said, "You got calloused hands, farmer-boy. You've been working too hard."

In the lobby of the Monarch Hotel the black porter whisked the suitcases away from Marvin, and Hellie grinned and muttered, "That'll cost you" and she nudged him toward the clerk's desk. They followed the porter up a flight of stairs, and when he stood waiting after Marvin had said "Thank you," Hellie giggled and said, "You got to tip him. Give him some money. Give him a dime." Marvin paid him, and he left them in a room that had once been bright in flowered wallpaper, the riotous pinks, greens, and yellows now all grayed together.

"Undo me here," Hellie said. She had closed the Venetian blinds and shot the bolt on the door. Now she stood with her back to Marvin, pointing to the row of buttons on her dress. He unfastened them carefully, as though they might break, the unfamiliar white cloth-covered buttons. When he finished, he went to the closet, took off his coat and hung it there, opened his suitcase and closed it, opened it again and fiddled with the folded extra shirt and shaving gear, trying to decided whether to put them in the dresser, and then he felt that Hellie was watching him, and he turned to face her. She was standing naked by the bed with her hands on her hips, her clothing in a pile on the floor, standing with her strong legs spread, grinning, watching him. He flushed, bent his head, and looked down.

"Oh, what's wrong, farmer-boy," she said, "Haven't you ever seen a naked woman before?"

"No," he shook his head, without raising his eyes, "No, I never."

Her eyes widened, and she stared at him; then she laughed aloud, so that Marvin looked quickly to the gray-flowered wall, as if he feared someone might hear her. She laughed, paused, watched him, and then she said, "No, I suppose you ain't." She still stood with her hands on her hips and her feet spread, the pile of shining white clothing beside her. She pulled her shoulders back, laughed again, and said, "Well, look at me, then."

He looked to her dark wet lips and her white heavy breasts, and his hands opened and turned out toward her, his lips pursed as if he were about to say Please, Please to her. He looked to the heavy fruited promise of her breasts, down her tight stomach, and his eyes moistened and blurred as he looked to the black live pool of her.

"Well?" she said, "Well, you going to take your clothes off or not?"

When they returned to Minnekah early the next afternoon, Hellie said as they turned onto Main Street, "Let me off here. I'll have to buy things. You go on to the house; I can get a ride or walk. And I'll need some money."

"Will you be home soon?"

"I'll be there. I might visit around a little. Don't you worry, old man," she grinned. She shut the door and leaned in the window to take the bills from his hand. "You go over to Pop's and pick up my things and bring 'em to the house. They're all stuffed in boxes. You pick 'em up. At least you can do that right." Then she whirled and walked down the street. Marvin watched her, his lips pursed

again as though he might say Please, Please, until she disappeared in one of the stores. Then he drove on to the house.

## II

Hellie would not go near the farm. Most mornings Marvin left early for the farm and worked there until dark, while Hellie slept late and then spent the day doing her "rounds," as Orville Tucker began to call them: she spent hours in the Home Cafe, joking with the men she had known in school and with the new oil field workers who had come to town; sometimes she visited her parents, still living in the back of the store, and she walked in unannounced at the back doors of any of a dozen other houses belonging to old school chums. She sat, talked, and ate whatever was offered her, and she began to put on weight. Occasionally she went into Evers Hardware and back through the dark storerooms to the office; but one day Mrs. Evers met her at the front door and stopped her, and then Hellie did not go there any more. The clerks said that Amos Evers watched the exchange from the door at the back, smoking a cigarette slowly, and later Mrs. Evers screamed angrily at him in the office, but when they came out she was flushed and shaking, and he was unhurriedly smoking a cigarette.

In the early thirties Marvin didn't make any money because he couldn't get a decent price for either his wheat or cattle; but he traded grain and beef for what he needed and managed to sell a little. He was not in debt, so the bank didn't gobble up his land as it did that of other small farmers around Minnekah. The crops were

fair, and the spring above the large pool in the creek never failed, so that the cows were healthy, if not fat.

When he was caught up with the farm work, in the off seasons between calving and harvest or after the harvesting and plowing were done, he worked around the house, trimming the cedars he had planted, planting more honeysuckle so the outhouse was hidden, putting a new coat of white paint on the buildings. He traded two calves for paint and lumber with John Walder at the lumber company and built a porch on the front of the house, and occasionally Orville Tucker or Ab Johnson would come by, when they were not roughnecking in the oil fields, to sit on the edge of the porch in the shade and talk.

Hellie was seldom at the house, and she almost never ate there. She went to bed early and slept late, and soon after she got up she left on a route which changed a little every day but eventually took her to the Home Cafe.

Orville said to Marvin, "You don't have to let her do that, fooling around all day long like that every day. She don't need to be so worthless."

"It's all right," Marvin said. He had been building a walk from the porch to the street with large flat pieces of sandstone brought in from the farm, and now he rested on the porch with Orville. "I don't see any harm in it," he said, "She likes to do it; she likes to be with people and talk to them, and I don't see there's any harm in it."

There was neither rain nor snow during the winter of 1936. The green winter grass failed to appear under the trees on the warm, sunny hillsides, and on still days Marvin could look back from a

hilltop and see the dust his pickup had raised hanging thick in the air, miles away. Then one morning late in February of 1937 he came out of the house to a world that had changed colors. The sky, or rather the air, so close it seemed, was deep purple. A fine dust of a purplish ashy color covered the pickup. When he drove up to the little rock house, his grandmother was standing before it, listening and watching the sky, which was still very dark, although it had lightened slightly. The faint light seemed to come as much from the west as the east, as if the day had been denied the rising of the sun.

The sky was all of the color, the purple color, and they could not see clouds moving, nor was the wind blowing through the trees. But high overhead they could hear the wind crying, making the sounds to be heard far in the distance after a vicious spring storm. The robins and the other birds that had wintered in the blackjacks were silent; even the crows and the red-winged blackbirds along the creek made no sound.

Marvin took off his cap and slapped it against his leg. Already a puff of the purple dust came from it. He looked to his grandmother, and he saw that there was both anger and fear in her face. The old woman, barely five feet tall, stood with her heavy gray braid hanging to her waist. Her knuckles and the joints of her fingers were enlarged from arthritis and overwork, and her shoulders were rounded. The dark fragile skin of her face was all creases and wrinkles, but her very small, evenly worn teeth were still white and strong.

"Where does it come from?"

"From eastern Colorado," she said, still looking to the sky, "I

was there with your grandfather, before your father was born, and I saw land that was like dark ashes, like this."

The spring was running less water, and the cows and Marvin's pair of workhorses were crowding into the shrinking pool and wasting it, so Marvin and his grandmother hauled down smooth chunks of sandstone from the hillside and built a small tank. Then they fenced off the spring and pool, and Marvin poured the water into the tank, bucket by bucket. Each morning the cattle waited, packed against the fence, for him to begin. His grandmother tried to beat them away with a stick to keep them from tearing down the fence.

The purple dust sifted down for about a week, and then the skies cleared. There was no rain, not even the puffs of white, rainless clouds to be seen. When the March winds blew, they stirred and shifted the layer of new dust and began to dig at the soil of the fields. Then in the third week of March the air was once more thick with dust, and the high winds cried again in some remote region above them; this time the day did not come at all; the sky was brown and without light, and the coal-oil lamp remained lit in the little rock house. The ash-colored dust was covered with a darker, heavier layer.

"This is from Kansas, isn't it?" Marvin said.

"Yes, their soil is better than ours."

Marvin was buying water in Minnekah now, hauling it out to the farm slowly, carefully in two fifty-gallon barrels. The spring was still running, but only at night. Each morning the pool edge was covered with signs of frightened life from the woods, with the tracks of coyotes, deer, racoon, bobcats, and smaller animals.

"I remember back in nineteen-six, or seven, somewhere in there,

about the time you was born, there was a bad dry year like this. I think it was the time your mother's family had to leave, Marvin," Orville said. He, Marvin, and Ab Johnson were sitting on the edge of the porch, looking to the west where the sun should have been setting, but where the brown-tinged sky was only a little lighter than elsewhere. The town lights were already on, and they burned bright in the houses across the street but were barely visible a few blocks away. Orville had a bottle of whiskey, to which he helped himself regularly, but Marvin and Ab had sampled it and then declined more. Hellie had not yet returned to the house.

"Old Ira Starks, who was Fred Stark's granddad, had a place not too far from yours, Marvin, a mile or so this side of you. Well, there was a drought this one year, only it kept raining about fifteen or twenty miles on east of Ira, and besides that, they got good wells on over there, or used to, until the oil companies got salt water in ever damned thing. So you could take your wagon over there and buy water. Ira put four fifty-gallon barrels on his wagon one morning before sun-up and went over there and found a farmer that would sell him water, or even give it to him maybe, I heard some of them did. Well, he was coming back that afternoon with the water when it come up a thunder-storm, and it just poured down. The roads of course were even worse than they are now, and it kept getting muddier and muddier. When he got in south of Rollins, only about four miles from where he lived, he hit that stretch of black gumbo, and the horses just couldn't pull that wagon through it; it just kept sinking in deeper. It was still raining, so Ira he just decided to pour the water out of those barrels so the horses could pull the wagon out. So he did, and they got on through, and went on towards home, and about half a mile farther

on the rain stopped, and the road started looking dryer, and when he got to his place it hadn't rained a single drop there."

The three of them laughed quietly. Orville and Ab's cigarettes glowed in the brown darkness, and as the winds the men couldn't feel moaned overhead they looked to the west, where there were no sunset and no clouds.

When the dust from Kansas stopped coming, the winds dropped lower and began tearing at the planted fields. The skies did not lighten; they just changed from brown to red. In a few days the wheat blew out of the ground. The farmers moved in with tandem discs and harrows to break up the hard crust and try to turn up some moisture to hold the topsoil, but the moisture was not there.

After the winds had blown for a week, Marvin was turned away when he went to buy water. Some men were putting up a barbed-wire fence around the pumphouse and water tower, and the old man who usually filled the barrels said, "The commissioners met last night, Marvin. They said there'd be no more water for farmers, or anybody or anything else outside the city limits."

"What's wrong with them? There wouldn't be a town here if it weren't for the farmers."

"I know that, I know that as well as you do. But people don't remember so good when times get hard."

"Maybe I'll just come and get the God-damned water whether they like it or not."

"They thought of that. They already hired two men to guard the tower, and they can get a hundred more for fifty cents a day, men with orders to shoot. I'm real sorry, Marvin. You know that."

That evening Hellie stood behind the screen door at the front of the house and said, "If you're too tight to buy us a decent house, then at least you could put plumbing in this one. I'm tired of carrying water in from that well pump, and I'm tired of cranking it up out there."

Marvin was sitting with his back to her between the round shrubs on the west side of the porch, watching the redness fade down toward the horizon.

"At least you could put plumbing in the house. I'm ashamed to invite anybody here and have to tell 'em they have to use an outhouse. That thing is rickety. I'm afraid of snakes out there. At least you could put plumbing in the house."

Marvin said, "What do you care whether I fix the house up or not?" You're never here long enough to know the difference. Right now I've got troubles out at the place."

"I ain't interested in you and your grandmama's problems. And there ain't no reason, not <u>any</u> reason, why I'd want to stay around here any more'n I do."

He stood up and looked toward her from between the bushes. The flushed sky still lit and pinked the white front of the house, but Hellie was hidden behind the screen in the dark slit of the doorway.

"There's no money for plumbing," Marvin said. "Even if there was, we couldn't use it. The water table's dropped. The well's low. I tried to fill a barrel for the cattle from it this afternoon and got mud after three buckets."

"That water ain't for cattle! I ain't a animal, and I ain't drinking at the same trough with cattle!" The last redness shriveled

in the west to a mere line along the horizon, and the house became a white blur in the gloom. "Them cows can die for all I care, but don't you take no more water to them from this well!"

The river bed had been a wide strip of blowing sand since the middle of the winter, but Marvin dug a broad, deep hole, carefully slanting it so the loose sand wouldn't cave in, and when he reached the dark clay beneath the sand it was moist, and he managed to catch a little water there each day. He put a flat stone floor in the bottom of the spring pool and even surfaced the bank under the spring seep with flat stone so as not to lose any water. As he and the old woman worked, the cattle ringed the fence, watching silently. Occasionally a cow would lick the bottom of the stone tank.

In mid-April when all the calving was done, there came a day when the cattle had drunk all the water that Marvin could bring them, but they still crowded the tank. The calves had not drunk any. One old whiteface tried to push into the circle and was knocked down by another cow. She tried to get up once, and then lay still, panting, half on her side.

Marvin's grandmother was watching by the fence. Her braid had worked loose and swung free below her bonnet. She was gripping a cedar post with both hands, and she held on as she turned her face angrily to Marvin.

"Can't you sell them?"

"They won't bring enough to pay for the gas it took to haul them," he said.

"Does Lewis have any water for them?"

"He has less than we do, and Frank doesn't have any at all."

They faced each other above the little spring. On the hillside a hackberry tree bent and moaned in the burning April wind.

"Then kill the old ones!" she screamed, her voice harsh. Her lips twisted, and tears ran down her face. "Kill the old ones, and kill their calves, too!" She turned and walked up the hill toward the house.

That afternoon he drove the herd up to the barn lot. He released the two-year-old bull but kept the old one; he kept the old cows with their calves, and even culled some of the weaker calves, driving their mothers back down the hill. When he was done, more than half of them were still in the lot. Then he shot them with the twenty-two rifle, the single-shot squirrel gun. He worked carefully through the herd, calling to the older cows that he and his grandmother knew by name, shooting them in the brain at close quarters. He aimed just below the bony topknot, and when he fired the fine white hair flattened as though touched by a stray breeze, then the dark blood jetted from the tiny hole as they fell. Even as the blood smell spread, the cows did not try to break away but wedged themselves tightly in a corner and faced him with braced forelegs, heads low. Dust had clotted in the corners of their eyes, making them look as if a practical joker had painted great mud tears there. When he finished, he harnessed the snorting, frightened horses to a sledge and hauled the dead animals down to the river bed, taking several trips. Although he knew the coyotes would be at them during the night, he dug a shallow trench for them in the loose sand.

After the last trip he unhitched the older horse, the bay gelding, and shot him too. The air was thick with a frenzied swarm of flies,

even after he covered the animals with a layer of sand. He returned to the barn and hung the rifle on its pegs.

Marvin did not see his grandmother the rest of the day. The next morning he found her dead at the pool. She had gone out early so as not to let any of the spring water be lost to the wind, and she had died as she tried to carry the bucket up to the tank, her head and back bent forward to meet the sloping ground, her legs still tensed as though she were climbing. The water had not spilled. When Marvin lifted her, her body seemed as parched and light as the powdery brown grass on the hillside.

The Shakaskeys buried their grandmother in the little plot on Marvin's father's land. Marvin had asked Hellie to come, but she refused.

"I would like for you to come," he repeated. He stood on the board step at the back door. She had not moved from the arm chair which she kept at the table. She was heavy now, with a band of fat under her strong jaw and thickly padded upper arms.

She watched him curiously from the low chair. His face was lean, leaner than ever, and there was gray in his hair. He was only thirty, but lines had formed across his forehead, and others spread from the corners of his eyes. He stood erect and alert, but there was tiredness in his eyes and in the set of his mouth.

"I'm not going out there in that wind and dirt," Hellie said.

So the little Shakaskey group buried their grandmother in the grave hacked from the dry earth by Marvin, Frank, and their father, with help from the little boy, Milo. Ab and Clara Johnson, who were running the Home Cafe, came out from Minnekah and brought Orville

Tucker with them. Two young farmers, Bink Martin and Jud Wallace, came with their wives, and some of the older farmers, still undefeated or being defeated or too old to be defeated or care, came dressed in their best overalls to stand with their bonneted and black-clad wives by the mounded red dirt in the swirling dust of the cedar grove near Lewis Shakaskey's sandstone house.

"Did you look in the bottom of that hole?" Ab asked as they walked away afterwards. "Dry all the way down."

"I saw it," Orville said.

Orville groaned as he jackknifed his long body and climbed into Ab's Model A Ford, glad to sit down. He pulled a bottle from beneath the seat, drank, then gestured toward Ab, who shook his head. He said, "Did you hear what Hellie told him when she heard about it? She said, 'If you was as smart as Ralph Bradshaw you'd of made money out of them cows, instead of shooting them.' Wasn't that nice of her?"

Ab said, "It's some joke. Clara comes home from her church meetings and tells me about people all over the place that're starving, and there's some right here that aren't far from it. And yet, by God, Marvin has to shoot his cows and leave them to rot or for the coyotes and buzzards to eat, because they're starving too, or at least don't have no water. Now that's my notion of a damn poor joke."

"Ab," Clara said, "Don't talk so rough." She had been watching the boy, Milo, while the preacher was speaking. He was wearing clean, cut-down overalls, and she could see that he was determined not to cry. But as they lowered the casket Lewis had put his arm around the boy, around his shoulders, and he had suddenly twisted and hid

his face against his father's side. And then Clara found herself crying, too.

Orville began to roll a cigarette, his hands unsteady. The years on the oil rigs had sapped him. In the grove, Bink Martin and Jud Wallace were helping the Shakaskey men, except for Lewis, who was walking toward the house, mound the loose dirt on the grave. Orville looked to the grove, but he could not focus on the men, so he looked to the floor of the car as it began to move, looked to nothing. "Well, yes." His voice was raspy as he bent for the bottle. "Yes, it's a poor joke."

## III

The rain came in May, came not gentle and healing as the cracked and scarred land needed, but fiercely, ripping great red trenches down the slopes of the fields. The fence Marvin had built at the pool was torn out, and the stone floor disappeared. But the rains came, and the green replaced the brown deadness.

The drouth eased off in the next two years, and when the war started prices went up. Marvin and Frank bought a tractor together in 1940, and by the next year Marvin had built his herd back up almost to the size it had been in 1937. The big farmers, the Bradshaws and Amos Evers at the hardware store and the Perkins family at the bank, those who had had hard cash during the thirties, were beginning to make more money than they had ever dreamed of. They had used their money at the tax sales and farm auctions while the sharecroppers and small farmers, people who lived and worked on the land, stood dumbly by. Now, as the money piled up, they were once again at the little farmers on their quarter-sections, offering then five, ten, twenty times what the land sold for in the drouth. Some of the farmers sold out and moved to war jobs in Oklahoma City, Wichita, or even California, but the Shakaskeys stayed.

In the fall of 1941 Marvin installed a sink and a hand pump in the kitchen. Hellie wanted him to put in plumbing, but the Bradshaws, who still owned the other little houses on the street, had refused to let them be taken in by the town council because they

didn't want to pay street assessments or city taxes, so Marvin couldn't hook on to the town water supply, and he couldn't afford to have a deep water well drilled. He repainted the house and the outhouse, repairing as he found time.

Orville Tucker tried to go back to the oil fields, but he could not keep up with the younger men, fresh and full of fight and hard work, and the drillers stopped hiring him. He still owned the little tin-roofed store building in Minnekah, but when he tried to re-open it, the bank refused to lend him enough money to stock it. So he got odd jobs around town, sometimes helping at the gas stations or loading out feed at the back of Evers Hardware. Marvin and Frank hired him whenever they needed help and sometimes when they did not need it. He sold the store building to Ralph and Opal Bradshaw "for just a bit less than the ground beneath it's worth," as he told Marvin. Then he and his wife moved into a small trunk-shaped house with a tiny covered porch on it that the Bradshaws rented out. It was on the same street Marvin and Hellie lived on.

Orville still liked to drink, but he stopped making trips to the back room of the Minnekah Hotel Lounge because he felt himself less and less able to work, and he had a fear of getting behind on his rent to the Bradshaws. When he could not work he stayed in the little house or, weather permitting, put on extra layers of clothing and sat on the front porch.

Hellie seldom visited them, but one April afternoon in 1941, while he watched a thunderhead build up in the southwest, he saw her coming slowly up the sidewalk. She waddled as she walked, and when she stopped before the house she was panting.

"Looking for a ride up to the Home Cafe, Hellie?"

"Yes, I am. Wilma Klepmann was supposed to pick me up on her way back to work--like I always ask her to--and she went right off and left me."

"May be she gets tired of being your bus driver."

Hellie frowned. "That's about all you do these days, ain't it? Sit in a creaky rocking chair."

"It's as much or more than some have done in their whole lives, and at least I ain't eating myself fat as a hog. You ought to go in and say hello to your mother."

"Whether I eat or don't eat is my business," Hellie said, and, over her shoulder, "Say hello to her yourself."

"You better get a slicker," Orville called after her, "It's going to rain in half an hour, and you can't make them four blocks to town in that time."

When the rain started, Orville's wife came to the door and said, "You better come in."

"No," he said, "I want to watch things get wet and start to growing again."

It was a heavy shower, and water quickly overran the drainspout at the corner of the house, which was clogged with a wad of leaves and grasshoppers from the previous summer; suddenly, however, the water broke through, gushed out, and scattered the dead mess. Even in the rain the birds were singing, and a jay dropped down to investigate, but he flew back into the tree when he found the grasshoppers were only dried-out shells. Beneath the drainspout the water flushed the sand out down to the roots of the brown grass, and the rain dispersed the grasshopper bits. It whipped

the white blooms from the pear tree across the street and doubled over the dead Johnson grass in the vacant lot, but Orville saw the grass turning green, looming up green around him.

When his wife came to call him in again, she found him at the edge of the porch. He had bent over and fallen out of the rocker, and the rain had peppered away at him, soaking his hair and shirt collar.

In 1942 the draft board called up Frank, Rufus Tucker, Bink Martin, and Jud Wallace, and in 1944 it overlooked the healthy young sons of prominent families in Minnekah and instead took Ab Johnson and plucked Marvin from the farm, leaving Lewis, in his sixties, and the youngest brother, Milo, on the land.

Frank had worked part-time at the blacksmith shop during the lean years and had learned how to weld, so the Army by some quirk of common sense assigned him to the Corps of Engineers. The training officers at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, noted Marvin's sureness with a gun, the accuracy that farmboys who go into the woods not to make noise but to bring back something to eat develop, and soon he was firing a rifle with a telescope on it. But his career as a sniper was short. He was shipped to France late in 1944, in time to be rushed northward to become one of the army of wounded at the Battle of the Bulge. And so after three months in an Army hospital he came home to Minnekah in April of 1945, limping from a knee that had gotten in the way of a whizzing piece of shrapnel.

The street beside the Home Cafe was empty when the bus stopped, and Marvin was the only passenger to get off. As the roar of the bus faded, he heard Hellie in the cafe, so he leaned his duffel bag

against the wall and stepped inside. Hellie was sitting in a booth, the remnants of a piece of pie with cream filling before her. She was talking to two men at the counter whose backs were turned to her, one squat and fat, the other heavy but taller, with a large, balding head; but she looked quickly when the door opened. Her voice caught in surprise as she saw him, and the men at the counter glanced sideways at him in the silence.

"Well, look who's come home!" she said. "Look who's here, Mr. Perkins!" The short man turned slowly on the stool, but the taller just looked over his shoulder. "Look who's back from being a soldier! May! Mrs. Johnson!" she called to the women working in the back. "Come see who's back from the war. Shake hands with Mr. Evers, Marvin. Mr. Perkins graduated from law school while you was gone, ain't that nice?"

Marvin had limped to the table as she talked, and he looked down at her, wedged tightly in the booth. She was massively thick and rounded, her breasts a formless bulk that divided at the edge of the table and partly rested on it. Her hands and wrists were disproportionately tiny, useless-appearing extensions of her great, meaty upper arms. Her jaw was heavy, her quick brown eyes gleaming deep in her head, and there was a trace of meringue at the corner of her mouth. At her ankles, her gray lisle hose ended in a thick roll.

"Shake hands with Mr. Perkins, Marvin," Hellie said. The squat man had stood up and was adjusting his tie clasp over his paunch. "Mr. Perkins, you remember Marvin, don't you?"

"Glad to have you back, Marvin." He crossed the room, took Marvin's hand, and shook it. "It's good to see you home safe."

He watched Marvin, who had not moved. "You planning to keep on farming?"

"Shake hands with Mr. Evers, Marvin." The taller man came to the booth. His head was domed like a honeydew melon on end, set close to his sloped shoulders, his trunk thick and strong. "Ain't this just like a class reunion, Mr. Evers?" Hellie giggled. "Mr. Evers grew a moustache while you was gone, Marvin."

"Glad you're back, Marvin. Glad it's just about over for everybody." He did not offer to shake hands, nor did Marvin.

"You planning to keep on farming, Marvin?" Perkins asked again. He held a half-chewed cigar in his hand, and there were wet brown pieces of it in his teeth.

"I'm going to farm. Why?"

"Nothing, no reason, I just wondered. Some of the boys coming back are deciding they don't want to work on the farm any more. They're selling out and going to work for the oil companies or for Boeing in Wichita. I don't blame them. Farming is damn hard work, isn't it?" He looked at Amos Evers, who nodded slowly.

Marvin watched them, looking from one to the other. Standing in the kitchen doorway were Clara Johnson and May Goins, the brawny woman who helped in the back.

"Maybe it's a good idea, Marvin. We heard they're paying real good wages," Hellie said. She was picking at the fragments of pie crust on her plate, but her eyes darted back and forth among the three men. It was not a hot day, but she was sweating, puffing a bit when she talked.

"Yes," Marvin said, "yes, it's hard work." He walked across to

where the women stood, trying to keep his step even. "Howdy Mrs. Johnson, May. What do you hear from Ab?"

"It's good to have you home, Marvin," Clara said, shaking his hand. "Ab's still in California, and we're hoping he won't have to go overseas. He asked about you in his last letter."

Marvin smiled. "That's good. Maybe he'll be home soon. I hope so. I don't suppose it's been easy, running this place alone."

She had not released his hand. "Thank you, Marvin." She looked to the front, where Hellie was talking to the two men as they moved away from her toward the door, and her voice dropped lower. "You stay on the farm, Marvin. You belong there. You know it."

"I know it. I'll stay." He turned and walked toward the door. He could not disguise the limp. "I'm going to the house and then to the farm," he said to Hellie, without stopping.

As she went back into the kitchen, May said, "He looks awful tired, don't he, Mrs. Johnson?"

"He's tired, and he's lost weight, that he didn't have to lose, and he's been hurt." She watched Hellie pushing herself up out of the booth. "But he was tired before he left."

## IV

So Marvin was home for the wheat harvest in 1945, although Lewis and Milo soon found that he could not work the long hours at the threshing machine that were needed. He did not regain his weight, and the smooth rhythmic strength with which he used to work on the header barge was gone, so that the old farmer driving the header sometimes had to stop and let him rest, and Lewis, who with Milo's help shaped and built the stacks for the thresher, had time to get down and wait in the shade between loads. But the harvest was good, and eventually they were able to finish it and to take care of the farms belonging to Bink Martin and Jud Wallace, who were still in the Pacific and did not return until that winter. Ab and Rufus also came home during the winter. Neither had been sent out of the States, and, as Rufus put it, "We ain't complaining a bit."

Frank was not released until the fall of 1946. He had been lucky during the war. He had learned about all there was to know about welding, and he had spent the last two years as an instructor. So during the winter he bought a pre-war truck in good condition, cut the frame short, and built a bob-tailed bed on it of sheet steel. Then he bought a heavy army surplus welding engine along with some acetylene bottles. He had a blacksmith shop on wheels.

"I want to stay on the farm, but I don't want to be caught the way we were in the thirties," he told Lewis and Marvin. "We were lucky. If we'd ever borrowed money from the Perkins bunch at the

bank or from Amos Evers, none of us would have an acre of ground right now. I don't want to take that chance again."

Frank offered to teach Marvin how to weld, but he refused.

"I know I should. I know it makes sense. But I just don't feel up to it right now. I want to build a pond or two, and if I can do it without going too much in debt maybe I can stay out of that trap you're talking about, too."

After wheat harvest in 1947, he hired a man with a bulldozer to throw up good wide dams across two of the largest ravines coming down out of the woods, one on each side so the cattle wouldn't have to cross the field to drink. He had the man dig them deep, so deep that he struck a vein of water in the one to the west. When the dozer was finished, Marvin sodded the dam with native grass and hauled in rock and covered the spillway so it wouldn't wash.

"There's a spring in the bottom of this one," he told Frank and Milo. "I'm glad of it. The hottest day of July or August, when the wind's burning the green right out of these blackjack leaves, the cows can come down in here out of the sun and drink and soak in the coolest water in the country. It'll be just like new life coming right up out of the ground to them." He grinned, embarrassed. "I might jump in with them."

They were in the spillway, watching a trickle of muddy water run into the pond at the upper end. It was late September, and the rain had come down hard enough the night before to run the pond a quarter full. Although a few of the bushy clumps of grass Marvin had set in had washed out, most were intact in the straight rows across the dam. The wet blackjack leaves, yellows, reds, rusts,

browns, and a few tardy green ones, moved in the breeze and flashed the afternoon sun, clinging stubbornly to the branches.

Frank had contracted to weld for a pipeline company in Venezuela during the winter. He was taking Milo along as his helper, and they had come to say goodbye. Hunkered down in the spillway, Frank and Milo in jeans and khaki shirts and heavy, oiled black boots and Marvin in his overalls, faded blue shirt, and work shoes, they plucked at last year's leaves that had blown in. They were the same height, the three of them, born a decade apart; but Marvin was very thin, and his hair was gray, nearly white, theirs Indian black.

"How do you think you're going to drive that truck all the way to Venezuela? That's on the other side of the Panama Canal, isn't it? You think that thing will swim?"

" Maybe they keep a ferry boat down there," Frank said. "We'll find out. Get to see a lot of new country. You're the one that's better worry, taking care of all the cattle. The old man isn't going to be much help to you."

A string of whiteface heifers emerged from the woods at the upper end of the pond. They halted briefly when they saw the men, but then they lined up, eight in all, and began cautiously to drink the roiled water.

"They'll have to get used to that," Marvin said. "They've been drinking from the puddle the spring made."

"Are you keeping them?" Milo asked.

He nodded. "They came early last winter, so they're nearly yearlings. I'm going to winter them over here, away from the bull. I don't want any calving trouble." He watched as the curious heifers

waded out until their bellies were nearly touching the water. "Those are the best calves I've ever had; best markings, best shape. Look at the feather on them," he said, pointing to the narrow strip of white hair between their shoulders, "Perfect width. They'll put new life in the herd."

"We need to go," Frank said. The heifers started and backed out of the water as the men arose. "Sorry to leave you with all the worries and work here this winter. But we'll be back in time for most of the calving, and for sure for harvest."

"There's plenty of grass. We may not even need to feed hay, unless the weather gets too bad."

But the weather was bad. Even before Thanksgiving Day, there was heavy snow, and although it was wet and the ground still warm, it held long enough to force Marvin to feed hay to all the cattle. On the fourth day, when the grass was beginning to show through, he got the pickup mired to the running boards in a low spot on Frank's place and spent all afternoon getting it out. He was coughing when he returned to town after dark.

It occurred to him as he passed the little house that Hellie's mother lived in that she should have a light on, so he stopped. When there was no answer to his knock, he went in and found her in bed, her glasses neatly laid in their open case on the dresser where she had left them two days earlier.

The cough stayed with him while he helped Rufus with the funeral arrangements for Mrs. Tucker. After Thanksgiving the weather became steadily colder, but it did not snow again, and Marvin was able to rest a bit. He spent some of each day before the hot wood stove in

his father's stone house, keeping plenty of kindling stacked by the back door and inside along the kitchen wall because Lewis's mind was beginning to wander at times. Then the week before Christmas a sleet storm hit, and for two days he hauled hay and cottonseed cake to the huddled cows on the Shakaskey farms. Ice was forming on the ponds, and he had to chop holes along the edges in the mornings for the cattle. The sleet had begun to wear off, but the temperature kept dropping lower.

On the third morning, he was coughing more, and his chest hurt as he coughed. He was sweating when he awoke, but he blamed that on the heat in the house, for Hellie insisted that the gas heaters be kept high. He made himself some coffee, cooked some cereal and an egg, then put on his heavy clothes. When he stepped out of the house the north wind hit him, turned the fever to a chill, and drove it into his bones so that he crouched low in pain on the little porch.

"Hellie, what's Marvin doing?" Ab Johnson asked. He was refilling the coffee cups for Hellie, Roy Fultz, who was the town constable, and Rufus Tucker. All three were working on plates of hot bakery doughnuts. "I didn't see him go out or come in yesterday. I haven't seen his pickup this morning, either."

Hellie laughed and winked at Roy. "Oh, he don't like this cold weather any more. He's at the house, loafing around till it warms up."

"Is he sick?"

She speared another bite of doughnut. "Naw, he's not sick. He's just laying around till the weather suits him. Don't you wish you was a farmer, Roy? So you could work when you felt like it?"

Roy and Hellie were still laughing as Ab went into the kitchen. He put on his heavy sheepskin coat and his cap, earflaps down.

"I'm going to Marvin Shakaskey's," he told Clara, "There's something wrong."

Marvin was awake when Ab came in. He was lying on a couch in the half-darkness of the second bedroom, fully dressed, even to his shoes, with a pair of ragged quilts wrapped around him. The pillow under his head was wet, and Ab saw fresh bloodstains on it.

"Ab," Marvin said, "I can't get to the pickup. The chills double me up. I never had anything to hurt so much. My leg never hurt like that." Suddenly he covered his mouth and began to cough. He was lying on his side, and his body jerked as he coughed, his knees pulling up toward his chest. Sweat came out on his forehead. At last he stopped, and he put his hand beneath the quilt so Ab couldn't see it.

"When did you eat last, Marvin? Don't you have anything to drink in here? Christ, ain't there any place for you to lay on but this couch? The springs are sticking up through it."

"I'm thirsty. I got some water in the night, but I got to shaking and dropped the cup."

In the kitchen, Ab found the cup on the floor and filled it from the hand pump at the sink. He took it to Marvin, helped to raise him, and held him while he drank it all quickly. Even as he finished, Ab saw that he was beginning to shiver.

"I'm going over to Fultz's house to call the doctor, Marvin," he said. "Ain't there somewhere else for you to lay? You need more cover."

"I've been sleeping here for ten years," Marvin said. "I don't want any of her cover." He could not keep his teeth from chattering. "Ab, I haven't seen the cattle for two days. There's ice has to be cut, and they need feeding. I'm worried about them, and about Papa. He doesn't remember so well any more." He could not control the twitching in his jaw muscles, so that he stuttered as he spoke.

When Ab reached Willis Townsend, who was out on calls, the doctor said, "It's probably pneumonia, Ab. I don't need to see him to tell you that. Take him straight to Bramwell. I'll call ahead, and meet you there."

Ab started his car and turned the heater on before going back into Marvin's house. Taking a blanket from Hellie's bed, he wrapped it and the quilts tightly around Marvin, lifted him easily, and carried him to the car. As soon as they were outside Marvin groaned and began shaking violently, but after Ab got him in the car and started toward Bramwell he slept and did not awake even when he was wheeled into the hospital.

When Ab got back to Minnekah early that afternoon, he picked up a sandwich at the cafe and then took Marvin's pickup out to the farm. He saw the cattle standing on the dam above the pond on the east side, so he drove over there along the frozen track and chopped holes in the thick ice while the thirsty cows pressed around him. He fed them, and then went to Lewis's house to find the old man had fed his cattle and cut the ice for them. He was all right, although irritated and worried because Marvin had not shown up. He went with Ab to take care of Frank's cattle, and after that Ab helped him stack more firewood inside the house. It was after dark when Ab returned to Minnekah.

The next afternoon Ab was resting before the hot stove in Lewis's house, drinking strong black coffee from the enameled pot on the kitchen stove. They were speculating on how long the cold weather would hold when Lewis, who was watching the wind whip the dark bare limbs of the elm in the yard, said absently, "I guess them heifers are all right, aren't they?"

"What?" Ab smiled. "What heifers?" He had discovered that Lewis sometimes muddle events and winters and cattle problems that were fifty years apart.

"Why, those Marvin is keeping on the west side of his place. He's got eight yearling heifers over there."

When Ab came up the spillway of the west pond, he saw first the dullness of the thick white ice, and then the dark sheen of the circle of thin ice in the middle, a black pool barely frozen but with sheets of thicker ice angling up crazily, and finally he saw them low in the pool. The icy strip of white over their shoulders was like the furry dorsal of some strange fish swimming quietly in the dark water.

A few days after Christmas the wind switched to the south and brought warmth back to the land. The sun shone all day long, and the ice on the ponds quickly melted, except in shaded spots. Ab was grateful for the spring-like weather, for he had had to leave the cafe to Clara while he was taking care of the Shakaskey cattle. He had been back to the hospital once, but Marvin had been too weak to talk much, other than to ask about his father, and Ab had been too busy since then. On the second warm day he and Clara drove over to Bramwell, and they found Marvin much better. Although he looked tired and thin, his eyes were clear, and he was ready to leave the hospital.

Ab was uncomfortable as they talked, for Marvin was watching him closely.

Finally, Marvin said, "Ab, you might as well say what's on your mind. I knew something was wrong the other time you were here, but I didn't feel up to hearing it."

Ab shuffled his feet and crossed and uncrossed his legs; he lit a cigarette, and Clara stood up to arrange the things on the dresser by the bed.

Ab said, "Something happened to some of your cattle, those over on the west side of the creek."

"The heifers?" His face did not change, but his hand gripped the rail of the bed.

"I found them in that new pond, the day after I brought you here. I didn't know they were there until your dad mentioned them. They drowned, Marvin."

"All of them?" Clara still fussed at the dresser, her back turned to the men.

"I drug eight heifers out. The ice was thick, thicker'n I've ever seen it around here, maybe eight or nine inches, but it seemed to be a lot thinner, maybe only half that, out in the middle. They must have crowded out there in a bunch, after water. All the ice was broken in, a big circle of it, right in the middle."

"Right over the spring." He passed his hands down across his face, the sleeves of the hospital gown falling away to show the whiteness of his forearms against his brown hands.

"Right over the spring." He looked to where Clara stood and then back to Ab, and he seemed about to smile. "Cool water in the summer

is warm water in the winter." His lips twisted. "And so much for new life."

After a few minutes Clara said, "You might as well tell him the rest of it while you're at it."

"What's that?" Ab said.

"About Hellie."

"Oh. Well," he hedged, "Maybe you better tell it."

"Ab was pretty upset about the way he found you, Marvin. And he knew Hellie hadn't been over here to see you. So yesterday afternoon, when he got in from the farm, he came in the cafe and Hellie was there, and he ran her out. He told her not to come back."

Marvin watched Ab tap a cigarette on the bed railing, then light it. He said, "She hasn't run up a bill with you there, has she?"

"No, she don't owe me anything. Once in a while she'll put something on the ticket, but I always have her pay it in a day or two."

"She shouldn't owe anything, or ever charge. I always give her money. Not much, I admit, because there isn't much, but I give her enough."

Marvin lay back on the bed, his eyes on the ceiling. After a minute he turned to Ab and said, "I'd like for you to let her come back in. That other business doesn't mean anything to me. I don't care. But most of the people she used to spend time with don't want her around any more. The cafe's about the only place she can go now."

Ab nodded. "Whatever you want. I shouldn't have said anything anyway."

A few days later Ab and Clara brought Marvin home. It was the first week of 1948, the warm weather was holding, and they could see

a trace of bright green winter grass under the cover of the brown bunchgrass along the highway. When they arrived at the house, Marvin thanked them and went directly to the pickup.

"I suppose he's worried about Lewis and the cattle," Clara said. "He's not even going in to see Hellie."

"Why, hell, she's probably not there anyway."

"I suppose not. The house needs painting bad, doesn't it? And the shrubs should be trimmed. Everything looks run down. Marvin used to keep it up so nice."

"You keep up a home. Maybe he's decided it's not a home any more."

## V

The last storm of the winter came at the end of January. The temperature dropped to zero and the winds came howling in from the northwest, bringing with them a dry snow that did not stick to the ground but drifted high in protected areas. It blocked the entrances to cattle sheds and made the cuts on the country roads impassable. It left the grass on the west and north sides of Lewis's house bare, but drifted back against the east door, the kitchen door, so that when he opened it he faced a chest-high wall of snow pressed against the screen door.

Marvin had left plenty of wood inside, so Lewis was not bothered. He heated the coffee from the day before and made some oatmeal. While he ate, he listened to the weather news and market reports on the large battery-operated radio. Then it occurred to him that his cattle would be under the low shed built against the barn and would need to be fed. He put on his heavy clothes and, perversely, tried to open the screen door. It angered him that it was blocked, and he heaved again and again against the diagonal brace on the door frame, but it would not budge. Giving up at last, he went to the front door, the west door, and when he opened it the sharp dry snow whipped in his face and he was pushed backwards with the force of the wind. A weariness came over him. It was all he could do to shut the door.

He felt that his head was spinning, and for a moment he thought he might fall. When he regained his balance, he went back to the wood

stove, put in two knotted chunks, dropping one and burning his hand, and closed the damper. Then he sank down in the chair where he could see through the window the wind swirling the snow about, still in his heavy clothing, and when Marvin got through the next day, he found him there.

The room was cool, but there were still coals glowing in the stove. The wind had stopped blowing, the sun was gleaming warmly on the patchy snow, and in the barn lot the hungry cows were looking toward Marvin's pickup and bawling.

The big cedars had caught and held the snow around the tombstones west of Lewis's house, so that Ab Johnson, Bink Martin, Jud Wallace, and a couple of older farmers had a fairly easy time digging a grave next to that of Lewis's wife. They would not let Marvin help. He talked to the men as they worked for a while, then went into the house and made coffee for them on the coal-oil stove. As the afternoon sun began to cast red on the little group of men under the dark cedars, Rufus Tucker drove up, too late to help. But he had a bottle of good whiskey with him, and all of them except the old farmers, who did not drink, gathered around the fireless stove in Lewis's front room for a warming nip before they went home.

The next day the chrome-sleek hearse from Ikard's Funeral Home brought out the body, and a tall, rail-thin preacher from Pleasant Dale named Colby, hired by Jud Wallace, stood over the gray metal coffin at the grave and delivered a half-hour sermon while Marvin, the only Shakaskey there, and the others stared at the bright scrolled handles. Marvin had not asked Hellie to come, had not even told her, knowing that she knew, as she knew everything in Minnekah, and she

was not there, although Rufus had come, driving out with Ab and Clara as his father had done a decade earlier.

Marvin was left with all of the farm work, but the spring weather came early and stayed, and he had no trouble. Just as the calving began, at the end of March, Frank and Milo came home. The fenders were hanging loosely on the welding truck, a headlight and side window were missing and the front bumper twisted, but they had money in their pockets. Marvin had saved the news of Lewis's death until they came home, but they were not surprised.

"We knew it was coming," Frank said. "We talked about it several times, wondering if he'd get through the winter."

"I didn't see any use in worrying you with it," Marvin said, "There wasn't anything to do."

Frank and Milo moved back into the sandstone house. Lewis had left the home quarter to Milo and divided his remaining quarter, eighty acres apiece, between Marvin and Frank. Frank and Milo arranged to have a telephone put in the house, setting in the last half mile of poles themselves, because their welding rig was always in demand, and they wanted the work. When Frank was busy on his place Milo sometimes took it out by himself. Milo bought a Ford coupe with his welding money and began seeing a farm girl near Rollins every night.

By mid-May the calving was done. It had been a wet spring, thickening the wheat stalks and filling the long, waist-high heads with fat, milky grain. As the wheat turned the ground dried out, and the noisy, clumsy combines moved quickly through the fields. The Shakaskey brothers hired Jud Wallace, who was getting into the custom cutting business, to cut their wheat, and by early July their harvest

was over, the fields plowed, and the heavy stubble turned back into the ground.

Frank and Milo were putting their harvest money into a new welding rig. On a hot morning in late July they had just returned from Bramwell with the new truck when Ab Johnson ran out of the Home Cafe and flagged them down on the street.

"Say," Ab said, "do you know where Marvin is?"

"He's out at his place, setting some fence," Frank said. "What's the trouble?"

"Well, I don't know exactly. But there's something funny going on. Old Uncle Billy--you know, May Goins that works in our kitchen's boy friend--he just come in and told me I ought to go down to Hellie Shakaskey's house. I asked him why, but he just grins all over and says I ought to go down there. And he said someone ought to get Marvin, too. He and May are out in the kitchen laughing like hell right now, but I can't figure out what about."

"We'll go down there."

"I'll follow you," Ab said.

It was not apparent to them at first when they drove up to Marvin's house and got out, but as they stood in the driveway they began to realize that many eyes were watching them--or the house, or something. Children's heads peeped through the shrubbery, around bushes from across the alley and even across the street. Window curtains that had never been moved before were pulled aside. Old men in groups of three and four leaned on fences or against trees, looking toward Frank and Milo, or so they thought, and there were children in some of the trees. Across the alley, Frank saw several

heads behind the dirty back window of a tool shed.

Suddenly, there was a roar, a scream--something of both--full of anger and threat, yet of pain and fear, inhuman (the two men wanted it to be inhuman) and yet certainly human, distinctly like Hellie Shakaskey's voice, although she must have never sounded like that before. It was loud, very loud, outraged and plaintive at the same time; and then there was silence again.

"That's out back," Milo said. "That's not in the house."

"She fell in," a voice between then squeaked. They looked down to see Uncle Billy pushed in between them, smaller even than them, panting, his grizzled face ablaze with joy, split by a great gapped, stub-toothed grin. "She fell in," he said, "Ol' Hellie fell in. She was cussin' some boys throwed a rock at it, an' all at onct crash! She fell in."

Frank and Milo went into the back yard, toward the little building partially hidden by honeysuckle Marvin had planted long ago. As they approached the bellow of rage and fear came again, and Uncle Billy giggled happily, but hung back from them.

"Hellie?" Frank said.

"Who is that? You get away from here! You better get away from here, goddam you! Who is it, anyway?"

"It's me, Hellie. Frank. Frank Shakaskey. And Milo. We'll help you, if you'll let us."

"Don't you come in here! Don't you come near here! Where's Marvin? You go get Marvin!"

"He's out to the farm, Hellie. That'd take quite a while, don't you see?"

"You go get him! I'm telling you, Frank Shakaskey, don't you come near here!"

Frank turned to Milo. "Maybe you better run out and get him," he said. He grinned at Milo and Ab, who had just walked up, and spoke louder, "I guess he'll come in. I wouldn't if I was him." A low, choked snarl came from the gray-weathered building.

Milo drove off in the new welding truck, and there was silence for a few minutes. The sun was moving directly overhead, and no breeze stirred the honeysuckle leaves. Frank and Ab heard the door of the tool shed across the alley creak as it was softly opened, the watchers driven out by the heat on the corrugated steel roof. Uncle Billy loped across the street to join a half-dozen old men who had gathered under a large elm tree, some squatting in the dust, one sitting on a backless chair, another resting carefully in a tire swing.

An old black pickup skidded around the corner, stopped in the middle of the street, and Rufus Tucker got out, leaving the door open; he came over to stand with Frank and Ab. The only sound was made by the yellow grasshoppers singing loudly in the sunflowers lining the street. Rufus, uneasy in the quiet, spoke in a low voice: "Is she in there? Is she hurt?"

"Yes," Frank said. "I don't know. I don't think so. She won't let anybody in. Milo's gone to get Marvin."

Rufus raised his voice. "Hellie, are you all right?"

"Who is that? Get away from here!"

"Hellie! Sister Helen! It's me, Rufus. Don't you know your own brother, damn it? Are you hurt?"

"Is there people out there watching? There is, isn't there?

You tell them to get away from here! Rufus, they're watching, ain't they? You tell them to get away!"

"She's all right," Rufus said. He turned and made a vague sweeping motion with his long arm. "You people go on home, now. Go on home and mind your own business. Rosalee," he called to the town constable's wife, whose head was visible above those of her children, Harley and Amy, behind her screen door, "You tell those old fellows to get out of your front yard."

Mrs. Fultz's head disappeared, and the old men shuffled their feet, but they stayed.

"Hell, Rufus," Ab said, "you might as well try to chase off gnats. They ain't going to leave. This is the most exciting thing's happened since the war. Let them be."

Rufus said, "Hellie, do you want me to come help?"

"You stay away from here, Rufus Tucker!" He backed away, gratitude on his face.

"Where's Marvin? Frank Shakaskey, I told you to get Marvin! Where is he? I'm going to melt in here, Rufus!"

"He's coming, Sister."

"He'll be here. Milo went after him. He'll be here," Frank said. High-pitched laughter came from across the street, where the old men in overalls or gray work trousers and patched shirts with turned-back sleeves were hunkered down under the elm. Uncle Billy had taken over the tree swing and was pretending to fall through it with feeble yelps that were unmistakable imitations of Hellie's cries.

"Here now, that's enough of that, Billy," Rufus said, walking toward the street, "Now damn it, stop that." The little man jumped from

the swing and scampered around the house, still yelping, while the others rocked gently on their heels as they laughed, their yellowed cigarettes pinched carefully between thumb and forefinger.

"You know, Frank, maybe we ought to get Doc Townsend out here," Ab said. "It's bound to be like an oven in there, and she's awful heavy. She might have a heart attack."

Frank nodded. He called, "Mrs. Fultz! Rosalee Fultz, would you call Doc Townsend, please? Tell him--" he glanced at the happy gallery under the elm, and continued grimly, "tell him it's an emergency." The old men chortled. There was no answer from the house, but Frank heard quick footsteps inside.

Hellie's roar, almost as load as earlier, came twice more, and finally Marvin drove up, followed by Milo. He came limping across the yard quickly, his eyes flicking over the spectators, to Frank and Ab, to the ground. His face was flushed, and he did not look up as he talked to them.

"She's all right?"

"We think so. We had Mrs. Fultz call the doctor. She said she was about to melt," Ab said. "She wouldn't let any of us come near, so we haven't done anything."

"Milo told me," Marvin said. He limped to the sagging honeysuckle trellis and stood before the door.

"Hellie, I'm coming in now."

"You get away--is that you, Marvin Shakaskey? Is that you?"

"Yes. I said I'm coming in now."

"Don't you let anybody see in here! Don't you dare, Marvin Shakaskey!"

The redness in his face and neck deepened. He turned to the waiting men. "Rufus, Ab . . . you two, too," he said, nodding to Frank and Milo, "Would you stand here with your backs to the door?" They arranged themselves, and Marvin said, "Hellie, we've got the door blocked off now. Nobody can see. I'm coming in. Can you unlatch the door?"

"Course I can't! I can't reach it. Goddamn you, Marvin Shakaskey, this is your fault, you should have put plumbing in twenty years ago, let alone fix this. Hurry up, hurry up, God, it's hot in here!"

Marvin pulled a long screwdriver from the side pocket of his overalls, slipped it in the crack of the door, and lifted the latch. As he opened the door, Hellie screamed from the darkness, "Shut the door! Shut that door quick!"

"It's all right. Nobody can see in."

"Get in here and shut that door!"

The door closed. The four men ranked in front heard Marvin, speaking low, say, "I can't brace myself, can't get any leverage."

"Pull!" Hellie screamed. There was silence, and then the creaking of boards, and at last a release of breath and a groan from Marvin.

"I can't do it," he gasped, "There's no room. We've got to open the door and get help."

"No! I'll die right here first! You got to do it!"

"He'll never do it," Rufus said; "I'll risk ten on that. She's twict as big as him."

Again there was the long taut silence, and then a groan from Marvin, and groans and curses from Hellie. "I can't do it," Marvin said. The door opened and he stepped out, blinking in the bright sun,

flushed, trembling, and sweat-soaked.

The men gathered around him while Hellie shrieked behind them, "Get back in here! You help me!"

"I can't budge her," Marvin said. "She's wedged in. It broke in, and she's wedged against the back wall with her feet off the floor. She needs to be pulled straight ahead, and I can't do it. It's like an oven in there."

"By God, right between hell and heaven, ain't she?" Rufus said. Ab snickered, and Milo grinned and looked away.

Frank said, "We got a winch on that truck. Why don't we just move it around here, loop a rope around her, tie it to the cable, and pull her out?"

Marvin was drawing boxes in the dust with the toe of his shoe. He looked to meet Frank's eyes. "That'll make a fine joke for everybody in town, won't it?"

Ab said, "No more'n what there already is, Marvin. And no more than if we all have to get on the rope and pull her out that way, like boys at a Sunday School picnic."

A roar from the toilet, and Marvin jumped. He eyed the door for a moment, then nodded. "All right."

While Frank drove the truck down the alley and turned it into the yard, Marvin fetched a white, thick lariat of soft braided cotton from his pickup. Frank kicked the winch into reverse, and Milo walked out a dozen yards of cable. Marvin pulled the big claw hammer from the loop on his overalls and swung at the door, the straight claws biting easily through the gray wood.

"Stop it! Stop it! God, what are you doing? You'll tear it down!"

"Just be quiet," Marvin said. "We'll have you out pretty quick now."

He twisted and pried with the hammer and split out a jagged hole the size of his hand. Then he shook out the rope, passing the loop through the hole and giving Milo the other end to tie to the winch hook, and stepped inside and closed the door.

"What're you going to do? You'll hang me."

"Just shut up, shut up," Marvin's voice came low, "Get your arms hooked over this; you'll be out in a minute."

The old men had come to the edge of the Fultz yard, and the heads of several boys peeped around the back of the welding truck. Uncle Billy was crouched at the corner of Marvin's house, and May, escaped from the kitchen of the Home Cafe, stood in plain view behind him. Cora Tucker, Rufus's wife, a quick, bird-like little woman, slipped in the front door of Marvin's house with the baby Nancy in her arms. She was followed by her two little boys, Kenny and Wayne, and they watched through the back screen door. Ralph and Opal Bradshaw, by odd coincidence, had chosen that moment to visit a delinquent renter across the alley, and they stood with the culprit on his unshaded back porch. At the head of the alley, a plump sky-blue Buick with an enormous chrome-toothed grill came to a stop. In it, the onlookers could see the shining head of Amos Evers beside the driver, Ray Perkins.

"All right," Marvin said, "tighten it. Easy."

While the truck engine idled, the winch spool turned slowly, picking up the slack; finally the cable and rope came clear of the ground, swaying, and Frank paused. From inside, the men heard Hellie saying,

"Oh! Goddamn it! Don't!"

"Do it now! Go on, keep it going!" Marvin grated. "Turn it!"

"Go it, Frank!" Rufus yelled.

There was a scream from Hellie, a creaking and cracking of boards, the little building suddenly leaned dangerously toward the truck, and fifty voices shouted, "Stop!" to Frank. The door swung open and was quickly closed as the building settled back down.

"Give me some slack," Marvin said.

"Hell, Marvin, tell us what's happening," Rufus said. "Is she out?"

"She's out."

Rufus turned and yelled, "It's all right now. Everything's okay. Y'all can go to hell on home now." But no one budged. The engine in the blue Buick started, but the car did not move.

Marvin stepped outside, closing the door quickly. As he pulled the rope through the hole, Willis Townsend, the doctor, came across the yard, his hands stuck in his hip pockets. One of the suspenders attached to his seersucker pants was twisted, and he was wearing what appeared to be bedroom slippers. His short-sleeved shirt looked as if it had never seen an iron.

"Is she all right, do you think, Marvin?" He fished a cigarette from his shirt pocket, stuck it in his mouth, then searched for matches. Rufus took a lighter from his pocket and lit it for him.

"She's all right." Marvin flushed and ducked his head. "Some splinters, maybe. Hellie! Go on in the house now."

"Is there people out there watching? There is, ain't they? I bet ever long-necked snoop in town is out there!"

"It doesn't matter. The doctor is here. You've got to go in the house. Now! Hurry!"

There was a pause, and then the door flew open, and Hellie, puffing, her face a luminous red, pumping her short arms, walked as fast as she could to the house, where Cora Tucker was holding the door open for her. She was wearing a bright green dress splashed with floral patterns, her hair was sweat-soaked, plastered to her face and neck, and one shoe was missing. She looked straight ahead, not even glancing at May, who called, "Was you scared in there, Hellie? I bet you was! Did you think you was going to die in there, Hellie? I bet you did!" The door shut behind her and then re-opened as Townsend ambled up the steps. The Buick pulled away, and the knots of people scattered in retreat from the glaring noonday sun.

## VI

"Where's Hellie keeping herself these days?" Ab had sat down with Frank and Milo in their booth at the Home Cafe. "I haven't seen her but one time since her accident, and that's been two, three months now."

"I don't know," Frank said. "Home, I guess. We haven't seen her at all."

"She came in here one time, maybe three weeks afterwards, and sat down right here in this booth. But nobody would come sit with her, not even Roy Fultz, and pretty soon somebody, I don't remember who, called out 'Been in any tight situations lately, Hellie?' and everybody laughed. She got up and left."

"I don't know what she's doing. Marvin doesn't say anything to us about her. Never did, and we don't ask."

"Now I think of it, I haven't seen him in a month or so. Never see his pickup go by."

"We're a little worried about him. We think he's staying most of the time in the old house, Grandma's house, on his place. Or if he stays in town, he leaves before daylight. But he's not doing anything. He hasn't set any more fence since that day last summer. He just stays out there and mopes around."

"He's not eating right," Milo said, "I don't think he eats at all some days. Once we found him down on the river, just sitting on the tailgate of the pickup. And we had to tell him three or four times before he got started sowing wheat. He still isn't done."

In early November Ralph Bradshaw came driving into town with the biggest rubber-tired tractor any Minnekah farmer had ever seen. He had it loaded on one of his long-bed grain trucks, and a little knot of men gathered around as soon as he parked it lengthwise on Main Street, taking up four parking spaces. Jud Wallace and Bink Martin had a look at it and listened to Ralph brag for a few minutes, then went to the Home Cafe.

"What do you think of it?" Ab asked.

"Why, it's a wonderful piece of machinery," Bink said. "It'll pull five bottoms through tight clay half again as fast as my tractor will go, and it only costs two thousand dollars. Why hell, that's only a little more than what my whole crop brought this year."

"It certainly is wonderful, Mr. Martin," Jud said, "Do you know, I was standing out there looking at that pretty green tractor and thinking about Old Man Bradshaw just a-kitin' across the fields with those five bottoms, and, it's a funny thing, all of a sudden it seemed to me like I saw A.J. Robinson and Fred Starks and three or four of his other tenant farmers getting turned under by that big five-bottomed plow."

"By God, you're right," Ab said, "I heard Ralph and Opal been stalling on leases for next year. They're going to run 'em off."

When Ralph Bradshaw took his new tractor out to his shiny steel roundtop barn to unload it, however, he forgot how heavy it was. He backed the truck down into the bar ditch so that the end of the bed came within a foot of the slanting bank. Then he climbed on the tractor, started it, and began to back it off; but when the weight got behind the rear wheels of the truck, the cab flew up in the air, the truck rolled forward, and the giant tractor flipped like a toy and caught

and pinned Ralph as he tried to leap away. There was no fire, because he had turned off the ignition in mid-air.

"They say it'll be the biggest funeral we ever seen," Rufus Tucker said to Ab. "Bigger than Amos Evers's old man's, or any of the Perkinses. Cloy Ikard told me old Opal wouldn't even look at his sample coffins. She made him get out his catalogues, and finally he had to take her to Tulsa to see what they had at the big undertakers over there. And she's having him a regular marble house built at the cemetery." Rufus paused and frowned. "One thing I don't understand. Everybody knows she's even tighter'n Ralph was. Why do you suppose she's spending so much money to bury him? Why, Cloy says that coffin she picked out will take ten men to carry it, empty."

"That's easy enough," Ab said, "It's not just for him, it's for her; they'll have to match her casket to his, and she'll see to it they do; matter of fact, she'll probably buy both right now, get a discount that way. But what I don't understand is, you can't have a big funeral without people; and nobody, not one soul in this town--not even her niece, Maybelline Klepmann--liked Ralph Bradshaw, let alone Opal. Now, how you going to have a big funeral without people? Who's going to go? You're not going, are you?"

"Course I am."

The preparations required two days longer than most Minnekah funerals, but finally the casket arrived, shipped directly from the Chicago factory, and the crowd ("nearly a thousand mourners," the Minnekah Beacon reported) gathered to fill every corner of the First Methodist Church and stand outside twelve deep around the steps in the warm sun of a November afternoon. Hellie was among the first

to arrive, almost an hour early, so she had a seat just behind the little cluster of Bradshaw relatives on the first row. She was dressed in black, with a little hat of woven black straw and a half veil that Cora Tucker had been seen buying the day before, and a dress that had had much wear but only recently had been altered to fit her.

Hazel Neufield came in to the left of the pulpit and sat down at the organ, installed the past year, and began to play. In a few minutes Ethel Evers--that is, Mr. Amos Evers, the town's musical authority and talent--and a pretty, slender, frightened high school girl, Linda Sue Fultz, daughter of the constable, came through the door to the choir benches and sat behind the organ, looking out over the flower-covered coffin to face the already-filled church. The minister took his place in one of the two high-backed chairs on the right of the pulpit, and then the Bradshaw relatives began to shuffle down the aisle, led by Royce and Maybelline Klepmann, each holding one of Opal Bradshaw's arms and bending toward her. She was in her late sixties and obviously needed help from no one, for she walked stiffly but strongly, looking with clear eyes over the crowded pews as she came, saying luodly enough for half the church to hear over the music, "There's lots of flowers, aren't there?" and "Are we supposed to sit there?" pointing to the empty front pew.

There was a prayer from the minister, a brusque man in his late twenties who prayed not up toward the yellow ceiling but directly to Opal Bradshaw, tossing in easily all the time-proven phrases, "This vale of tears," "pass through the valley of the shadow," "offer up the soul of this good and Christian man." After he finished

Hellie put a handkerchief to her nose and blew quietly. Then Mrs. Evers and the Fultz girl rose to sing, Mrs. Evers solid and sure in a tailored beige suit ("buys her clothes at a store--Newman Market?--plumb to Dallas, Texas, she told Linda Sue," Rosalee Fultz said), holding the hymnal at arm's length, setting the tempo for both Linda Sue and Hazel Neufield with her shrill, overpowering soprano voice, the Fultz girl's faint alto hovering in the background, attendant, subservient. While they sang Hellie dabbed with her handkerchief at her eyes, and eventually she closed her eyes and nodded in gentle rhythm, the corners of her mouth pulled down. As they finished the song,

> In the sweet (in the sweet) by and by (by and by)
> We shall meet on that beautiful shore,

she sniffed audibly twice, as if holding back a sob. She was seated behind Mrs. Bradshaw, and the older woman, who had been surveying the gleaming casket and the sprays of flowers arranged across the front of the church and had scarcely noticed the singers, half turned in the pew when she heard Hellie.

During the minister's sermon, Hellie's snuffling continued. She appeared to be listening not to the words, to what he was saying as he eulogized Ralph Bradshaw ("a man who built his house upon the rock, from whom God exacted heavy and tiresome labor and rewarded justly and accordingly"), but to his flow and cadence, responding dutifully to his heavy syllables of warning and admonition, tearfully to the falling, drawn-out notes of sadness. Mrs. Bradshaw's attention wavered between the bright casket and the sounds coming from Hellie

behind her. Again and again she shifted, as if to turn and look directly at Hellie, and each time Royce and Maybelline Klepmann stopped her with gentle pressure on her arms. Annoyance showed clearly on Royce's pudgy, smooth-skinned face, and once he turned to glare at Hellie through his round, black-rimmed eyeglasses, and the minister was aware of the distraction, but there was nothing to be done. At last the sermon was finished, and Mrs. Evers and Linda Sue rose again, the social pillar and the sapling-slender girl, singing

Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,

and Hellie was sobbing aloud now. Despite Royce and Maybelline's whispered protests, Mrs. Bradshaw turned around to watch her. The words of the song came to them, clipped and clear in the hard soprano and muted by the trailing alto,

Could my tears forEVer flow,
Could my zeal no languor know,

and Mrs. Bradshaw began to nod as she watched Hellie, pressed black and shapeless in the pew. She elbowed Royce and said, "Handkerchief," her eyes still on Hellie. When he put it into her hand, she began to touch at her eyes. The song finished,

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee.

A final long prayer, and then Cloy Ikard and his wife began quickly to move the rows of people past the coffin. But as they came

to Hellie's row, Mrs. Bradshaw reached over the back of the pew, touched her arm, and said, "No. You wait for me." At last the church was cleared, those waiting outside had passed through, and only the relatives were left. Royce and Maybelline started to move Mrs. Bradshaw toward the casket, but she shook off their hands and pointed to Hellie, who was sobbing steadily, her massive shoulders and torso shaking violently.

The two women went together to the casket; Mrs. Bradshaw stood a little apart from Hellie and stared down at the waxy face of her husband, but Hellie seemed never to look; her crying grew louder, her hands covered her face, and the heavy folds of her throat quivered with each gasping intake of breath. Mrs. Bradshaw turned to her, nodding as she had before; tears were coming down her face, too, and she stepped to Hellie and put her hands on her shoulders, began to pat Hellie's shoulders and said in a coarse voice,

"Yes, yes, Hellie, cry for all of us; for God's sake, cry for all of us, rich and poor, that ain't got time, that don't know how to cry no more," and the women pressed their heads together and wept while the Klepmanns, the minister, the Ikards, and the handful of cousins watched uneasily. Opal Bradshaw cried for her helpmeet, her killed husband of forty years; she clung to the fat heaving shoulders of Hellie Shakaskey, who cried for mean and miserly Ralph Bradshaw and everybody else, and the two women cried together.

## VII

"It beats me, " Rufus shook his head. He stirred his coffee with his right hand and took a cigarette from his shirt pocket with his left. "It don't make no sense. Old Lady Bradshaw had Hellie ride out to the cemetery with them, made her sit right beside her in Ikard's big black Cadillac, had her sit in one of the chairs under that--what do you call it? tarp?--at the cemetery, squeezed her in instead of her own cousin, and then, so help me, Cora was with her and swears to it, met Hellie on the street two days later and didn't even speak to her. Now what do you make of that?"

"I don't," Ab said, "except that she probably figures she can't afford to let her hair down any longer. She's got to get back to collecting rent and running off tenant farmers. She gave Fred Starks notice yesterday, and A. J. Robinson will be next. You watch. The only one she'll keep will be the one agrees to run that big damn tractor the cheapest."

"Cora says Hellie went to old man LaFortune's funeral Tuesday. I didn't even know she knew him."

"She didn't. And she didn't know that cousin of the Neufield's that was brought back here, either, but she went. And cried through the whole thing, I heard, and damn near fell in when they let the coffin down, she crowded in so close."

"Now I don't know why anybody'd want to go to a funeral if they didn't have to," Rufus said.

A few days later Ab drove out to the farm to see Marvin, and he put the question to him. There was a bit of a chilly north wind, but Marvin was sitting on the south side of the little stone house that had been his grandmother's, simply sitting out of the wind where the slanted rays of the November sun could warm him. His hair was completely white and had not been cut in months, and Ab could clearly see the bone structure of his face beneath the skin, the line of his jaw, the sharp ridge of his brow. He was wearing an old felt hat with a white feather stuck in the band.

"It's an eagle's, or I think it is," Marvin grinned, "There was a pair nesting in a sycamore this year, down where the creek runs into the river." He turned the hat in his hands. Whatever color it had been had blended with sweat and dust to a doubtful brown. "It could have been a crane's, or belonged to a goose, for all I know." He put the hat on and took up a limber hackberry stick, which Ab assumed he had been using for a cane, and began drawing rectangles in the dirt. "I'll tell you why she's going to funerals: it's simple enough. You can't laugh at a person at a funeral. She's got to be around people; she can't stand to be by herself, not for very long, but she can't stand being laughed at, either, no more than anybody else can, so she's hit on going to funerals."

Ab watched the stick trace lines from one rectangle to another to make badly shaped transparent boxes. "Is that why you're staying out here? And damn near starving yourself to boot? You think they might laugh at you, too?"

"Maybe so. I'd rather be here."

Hellie even lost a little weight during the winter. She had less time to eat, because if she was not going to a funeral she was busy altering and sewing a dress or ironing one or blacking and repairing her old shoes, or making wearable a black hat someone had given her. She walked to the post office twice each day, not to get mail because that was delivered, but to see if there were funeral notices pinned on the bulletin board in the lobby. Although Marvin stayed out at the farm even when cold weather came and did not come in for weeks at a time, she received a weekly check from him amounting to enough to let her have a telephone installed so she could call people for rides to funerals in the country churches around Minnekah, or find out the time and location of one from Cloy Ikard. When people began to call her occasionally to invite her to an out-of-town funeral, she was not surprised. She always accepted.

Then in February Hellie finally had a funeral in her own right to attend. Frank and Milo had turned down winter jobs because they were worried about Marvin, and one or the other and often both had seen him almost every day. They had tried to get him to move in with them in Lewis's house, but he preferred the little rock house on his place. Ab and Clara had driven out several times to spend part of a Sunday afternoon with him, and he always seemed happy to see them, coming limping out of the house or up from the barn to shake their hands. Clara fussed at him because they often found the fire gone out in the kitchen stove, the only one he pretended to keep going, and she always brought something, a pie or half a cake, and would bully him and refuse to budge until he had eaten some of it.

But in the winter cold his body seemed to turn in upon him, his

shoulders pinched in, his leg would not straighten out, he could not walk upright. He listened to Ab and Clara's news from town and appeared to be interested, and he laughed gently at Ab's jokes, but he often looked out to the gray-bronzed leaves, dead but still a part of the dark post oaks, waiting till spring to fall to the earth.

He would ask about Hellie, "She's all right, is she? She's busy? That's good." but his face had taken on the color of the leaves, and his eyes seemed to reflect them, and when they left they drove home in silence. They were not surprised when Milo came in the back door of the cafe one bleak morning to say that he and Frank had found Marvin curled in the bed in the little dark bedroom, his old hat with the feather jauntily stuck in the band hanging on the bedpost.

Hellie knew all about caskets and floral sprays and funeral arrangements by then, so she planned things with Cloy Ikard, although Frank and Milo paid the bills. She insisted on having the funeral in the First Methodist Church, and she would have had the burial in the Minnekah Cemetery, but Rufus convinced her to let him be taken to the Shakaskey farm. There were only a dozen or so people at the service.

Hellie asked Ethel Evers to sing with the Fultz girl, but she said she had to be out of town, so Linda Sue sang two quavering solos and the minister preached a curt sermon in which he twice mentioned the fact that Marvin was not a church member. Hellie cried steadily throughout the service and at the graveside, and she ignored the urging of Rufus and Cora, who were shivering and anxious to get our of the north wind, staying at the grave until

the bright green carpet had been rolled up, peering in as the loose dirt began thudding down upon the plywood cover set in to protect the casket.

Rufus leaned on the counter, his chin in his hands. Smoke drifted up from the cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "What I couldn't get through her head was that there was no damned sense in having the funeral so early. Hell, I told her, country people have to get their chores done in the morning in winter. They'd have been twict as many people at the church if she'd waited till afternoon. That's why some of them just come to the burying. They just couldn't get to town that early. I don't know why she had to have it so early."

"Why, I know why," Ab said. He poured coffee in Rufus's cup from the round glass pot. "She had another funeral to go to that afternoon. There was one for somebody--Claybaker, somebody said, I never heard of them, don't even know who they're related to here--at the Baptist Church. The Fultz girl had to sing at it. She said Hellie bawled all the way through it."

## LOVE AMONG THE STARLINGS

There was unanimous agreement among the women who got things done in Minnekah that something should be done about May Goins. Even Opal Bradshaw, May's landlady, agreed. But no one could think of what the Something was, so they kept on talking about it and Opal kept on collecting rent from May.

"Somebody's got to help the Lord take care of his wayward children," she said, "and I guess she's one of 'em he gave me to look after."

They sat in Hazel Neufield's living room, the Executive Committee of the Garden Club, nibbling at the little sandwiches made with white, crustless bread. It was a dark November afternoon and Hazel had turned on the floor lamps, so that the corners of the room were brightly lit but the women sat in the center in a circle of shadow.

"They're drunk every night," Ethel Evers said. "Every single night she and that Uncle Billy are in that place till it closes, then they go out on the street like animals." Opening her cigarette case, she saw that it was empty, so she pulled up her heavy purse from beside her chair, slipped one hand inside while she held the top closed with the other, searched, and pulled out a fresh pack. Linda Sue Starks took a lighter from the coffee table and leaned over, slender and graceful, to light Ethel's cigarette.

"Just like animals," Maybelline Klepmann said, "Just exactly

like animals. And that Uncle Billy--he should be locked up somewhere, in an old folks' home--they say he digs around in the city dump and brings stuff back to town." She leaned over to pat the Neufield's watery-eyed miniature poodle, huddled shivering against her foot.

"I had them both locked up," Opal said, "Put in jail. I had Harley Fultz do it, more than once. May'll drink her rent money. I have to watch her." She worked her dentures noisily.

The poodle suddenly yipped twice, causing Opal to jump and peer around angrily. It hid behind Maybelline's legs.

"Pierre!" Hazel said, "shame on you!" The kitchen door slammed, and they heard Bobby Neufield's voice.

Hazel said, "Excuse me. I'll just see who Bobby's brought home with him." As she hurried into the kitchen, Ethel stood up and headed for the hall bathroom, taking her cigarette and handbag with her. Opal snatched the last sandwich from the tray on the coffee table. Linda looked at her watch, frowning, and Maybelline bent to stroke Pierre's yellow-tinged white coat.

Hazel came back into the living room with her son, Bobby, and Bud Wallace. She was walking with Bud, and she said, "Look who's here! Our All-state football player!" She put her arm around his waist, gave him a hug, and smiled up at him as he blushed.

"Hello, Bud!" Maybelline said. She nudged Pierre away with her foot, sat up straight, and patted her hair.

"Quit it, Mom," Bobby said, "You'll give him the big head. He's not All-state yet, anyway. But he might be after tonight."

Hazel, whose head came just to Bud's chest, hugged him again, pressing her corseted breast against his side. "Oh, well," she said,

"he's our All-stater, isn't he!"

As Bobby started up the stairs, Bud twisted carefully out of Hazel's grasp and followed him. Maybelline, watching them climb the stairs, said "Just like animals." When Bud's blue-jean-clad legs had disappeared at the top of the stairs, she turned back to the others. "They're just like animals, just like Ethel says, and I worry, I worry, let me tell you, about what the children think--even these boys right here!--when they see them, like animals in the street."

Linda said, "Did you know that Uncle Billy lost his false teeth once, when he and May were drunk? Harley saw them looking for them."

"I heard that," Hazel said.

"Royce has a solo part in the choir tomorrow," Linda said, "Aren't you excited, Maybelline?"

"If he can remember the words for once."

"I wish Ernst could sing," Hazel said. "He can't sing a note."

Ethel had returned. She stood a little apart from the others, still smoking her cigarette. Wednesday was her beauty shop morning, and her nails were painted a brilliant orangeish red. She said, "Lin dear, can you take me home now? Are you ready to go?"

Linda stood up quickly. "I'm ready." She smiled brightly. "I'll get our coats. I know just where they are." In an instant she was around the corner and in the hallway.

Ethel sighed. "Isn't she beautiful? Isn't she just a marvel?" She raised her voice. "I suppose that tyrant will make you work late again tonight, just because you got the afternoon off."

"Probably so!" Linda came back with the coats, light on her feet, almost dancing across the room. "Probably so!" she chirped, holding

Ethel's coat for her. "It'll be just my luck!"

"Oh, he's a slave driver!" Ethel moaned, shifting her purse to her other hand so she could put her arm in the sleeve. "He makes poor Lin work terrible hours, doesn't he?"

"Pretty bad!" Linda moved close to Ethel and nudged her gently with her elbow. "I'll tell you," she whispered loudly, smiling and looking at Ethel out of the corner of her eye, "why don't you catch him before he's wide awake some morning, and tell him to give me a raise? Catch him before his coffee, and make him give me a raise. Before his guard's up!"

"Oh, yes, I will! I will make that awful man give you a raise!" She laughed, flashing her gold fillings, turned toward the door, and stumbled a bit, so that Linda had to catch her elbow and steady her. "Dear Lin, thank you!" She bent to her, until her lips were inches from Linda's face, and said, "Always there when I need you! And Amos too!"

Linda opened the door for her and then turned to say, "Goodbye! Thank you, Hazel! Everything was so nice!" Ethel had gone on down the steps and was walking across the lawn to the car, so Linda said, "Goodbye! See you all later!" quickly, and hurried after her.

Opal had apparently dozed off at the end of the divan, her hands in her lap, but now she spoke up. "They say that girl's down there in that hardware store every night with Amos Evers. Every night. She's a fool. She's a fool if she thinks she's fooling anybody."

"Aunt Opal! Shh, shhh! The boys will hear you." Maybelline sat close to the old woman and patted her arm.

"Don't you shush me!" Opal pushed her niece's plump, white arm

away. "I've lived in this town too long not to know what that Linda Sue is up to. I know what she and Amos Evers are up to." She clicked her teeth together and seemed about to withdraw, about to doze off again, but then she sat up, pushing her eyeglasses back up on her nose, and said, "And that Ethel Evers was drunk today. She carries a bottle in that purse. I could smell it clear across the room. She's drunk all the time."

Maybelline said loudly, "Aunt Opal, we'd better go. It's time for us to go," at the same time catching Hazel's eye. They nodded, their lips pressed together.

The boys came back down the stairs into the living room, still wearing their orange letter jackets. Maybelline helped Opal put her coat on. While she went back to the hall closet to get her own coat, Opal sat on a straight-backed chair, blinking, watching the boys.

Hazel came to stand by Maybelline. They looked at Bud, who was sprawled on the divan. Hazel said in a low voice, "Out of the mouths of babies, or of old ladies. The truth comes out, doesn't it?"

"What?"

"About Ethel, I mean. And Linda Sue."

"Oh." Maybelline looked away from Bud, from his heavily muscled legs stretched out in tight jeans, to Opal, who seemed to be day-dreaming. "Oh, yes. It does." As she began to struggle into her coat, her breasts quivered like jelly at the neckline of her dress. From the corner of her mouth, she said, "They say Ethel drives by when they're down there at night. By the store. And in the back, down the alley. All the time. But she goes home before they come out."

"I heard that."

Maybelline stepped over one of Bud's outstretched legs, then turned, bending over him, and shyly patted him on the thigh. "Good luck in the game tonight, Bud. I hope you boys beat old Rollins this year. Come on, Minnekah!"

"Let's go, Maybelline!" Opal said.

"Coming!" She hurried to her aunt's side.

Opal said, "You shouldn't wear dresses like that. You can see right down you."

"Oh, Aunt Opal!--"

"Thank you for coming today, Mrs. Bradshaw," Hazel said, "It's always so nice to see you. So nice to see you looking so well."

"Well, I'm feeling about as good as I can expect, I guess. I got a lot to take care of. Renters and all that. And May Goins, and there's others about as bad, I can tell you."

"Oh, I'm sure of it!" Hazel said. She looked back at Bud Wallace, who was watching a television cartoon, his hands clasped behind his head. "I'm sure of it! There must be something we can do!"

* * * * *

May worked in the back of the Home Cafe, washing dishes, peeling potatoes, and carrying out garbage. No one seemed to remember when she hadn't worked there. She opened up the place every morning at five, slamming handfuls of forks and knives and spoons on the counter, hellishly clanging big kettles onto the iron burners, always gnawing on a day-old doughnut or a stray piece of pie. Sometimes she remembered to unlock the front door and start the coffee, but she usually forgot one or the other.

The men who kept the giant balanced beams of the oil pumps groaning away for Conoco and Red Man, the pumpers, tried to delay their arrival at the cafe until the waitresses and the cook came to banish May to the kitchen. They were afraid of her. They were tough men in hardhats and steel-toed boots who could handle balky engines in all kinds of weather and an occasional copperhead or red wasp's nest, but they were fastidious about their breakfasts and preferred not to have May dropping plates of burned eggs on the counter and throwing a well-squeezed handful of toast on top. She couldn't run the cash register or make change, so the customer without the exact price of his meal had to wait for a waitress anyway.

The pumpers didn't mind so long as May was confined to the kitchen, or to the alley where she could toss garbage cans around as the sun peeped between the buildings. But the noise of the chairs being swept off the tables as she set up the restaurant for the day, or her loud "Whatcha want?" as she pushed her broad belly against the counter, hands wide apart gripping it as though she might flip the whole thing over, was too much for them. She watched them and seemed to sense their fear, and that made her all the more ferocious.

Her eyes, under thick black brows, were insanely bloodshot at that hour; a sparse crop of black stubble grew on her chin, and she had a swarthy complexion, or it may have been that she was unwashed. She was always sweating, and loose strands of her brown hair stuck to her face. The various ladies' aid groups of the churches tried to supply her with clothing, but it was difficult, because no Christian woman in Minnekah wanted to admit her clothing would fit May. There was also the pain of watching a once-fine dress disintegrate

day by day, the ribbons and buttons disappearing, the colors fading together to a hideous brownish-ash shade, and rips and tears appearing, until finally May would show up in another bright castoff and the cycle would repeat.

So the pumpers avoided May, although they could hear her in the back as she cursed and kicked cans and buckets or anything else that made a decently loud noise. Ab Johnson paid her thirty-five cents an hour and gave it to her every Saturday night in cash. He seldom cheated her of more than a dollar or two, for he valued her services. She did some chores that Mrs. Johnson occasionally hinted should fall to his lot. Besides that, as he told Royce Klepmann and Ira Jensen at the nine o'clock coffee table, "She scares me and I ain't scared of nothing."

Once when he was short of girls he had her help the waitresses serve in the banquet room, where the Lions Club was having its weekly meeting, but that didn't last long. President Klepmann came steaming out in search of Ab, the top of his bald head and his round face a dangerously deep red. "I'm running for district governor and I got half the goddamn bigshots in the country here and you send that goddamn gorilla back there, dumping lemon jello on everybody and eating chicken right off their plates and scratching her goddamn ass right in front of Mrs. Evers while she's singing a solo. She even hummed along with her. You get her out of there and don't do that again or we'll eat somewhere else, I don't care if it's in the next county."

May worked until ten o'clock each morning, then walked three blocks up Main Street to the Bradshaw Apartments, perhaps to sleep, no one really knew, until around five when she reappeared at the

restaurant. She was nearly as fierce then as in the mornings, but as closing time drew near she became more and more merry. She flipped the metal chairs with their red plastic seats into the air and onto the tables and swung the mop in frothy semi-circles so that waitresses and late customers leaped and dodged. She watched the clock hanging next to the box in which signs turned over advertising "Klepmann Real Estate," "Holderread's Ice House--Minnows and Worms," and "Minnekah National Bank, Deposits Insured to $10,000 FDIC." At straight up nine o'clock she dropped the mop handle and left, ignoring Ab Johnson's cursing protests, splashing right through the soapy mess she'd made and tracking across the dry floor Ab would have to finish.

May lived on the third floor of the old Bradshaw Apartments with Uncle Billy, who wasn't her uncle or anyone else's, so far as those Minnekah citizens who made it their business to know could find out. They had the top floor of the narrow black building to themselves. Opal Bradshaw was never in any hurry to re-tar the roof, so consequently tenants left as soon as they found the rotting ceiling was only a little worse than the floor beneath them. May and Uncle Billy occupied a single room at the far east end of the dank corridor, paying Opal twenty dollars a month. The landlady kept a fifteen-watt bulb burning at the top of the stairwell, figuring that was protection against lawsuits for broken necks if May or her lover fell down the stairs. Opal having inflexible scruples about such things, she was forced to ignore their co-habitation. This she did by simply failing to recognize Uncle Billy's existence; she came by the Home Cafe on the twenty-fifth of each month and collected two

crisp tens from May, and she would never have admitted knowing that was the day Uncle Billy's social security check came in.

Uncle Billy always had a week's growth of gray-white whiskers which were exactly matched in length and color by a small round patch of hair on top of his head. He was shoulder-high to May, with crooked, stick-like legs, and he was perpetually grinning, rheumy eyes peering from beneath the arched wisps of his eyebrows. Time had pinched his toothless skull down till it began to appear that his chin, nose, and forehead would soon meet and grow together. Until the spring when he got his teeth, that is.

The regulars remembered it, because May and Uncle Billy had suddenly stopped coming to the Minnekah Hotel Lounge and Pool Hall. They stayed away for a full month, creeping miserably homeward when May got off work. Then one Saturday evening they paid a visit to Doc Porter, the dentist, and soon afterwards they marched triumphantly into the Lounge. They had saved enough money to fill Uncle Billy's mouth with teeth, more teeth than any man ever had naturally, big straight teeth like those of a young horse. They gleamed with fluorescent whiteness in his happy face, like a sealed-beam headlight in a wrinkled fender.

That night they whooped and sang with the jukebox, with the customers, with each other; May marched everyone (none dared resist) by Uncle Billy for a close inspection, and he strutted joyfully, his question-mark eyebrows dancing over misty eyes, his magnificent teeth leaping out like white youth from the grave.

When the Lounge closed they came out singing, well-supplied with beer and a bottle of bootleg whiskey. They greeted every passing

car with a shout, and if the car stopped they traded obscene jokes with the passengers. Seated back-to-back on one of the Old World wooden flower pots provided by the Chamber of Commerce and planted by the Minnekah Garden Club, they sang strange medleys of jukebox favorites and revival hymns.

After a couple of hours Harley Fultz, the night watchman, tired of their serenade and told them to "Cut that damn noise out and go to hell home." They complied, slowly, taking many detours and stopping occasionally to chunk a beer can at a street sign or to reel with raucous laughter in their victory over old age and decay.

Near daylight, Harley awoke in the patrol car to see them out again, but this time they were quiet, if not sober. Creeping carefully down the sidewalk, as if it were subject to sudden tilts, they looked like newly-hatched, alien insects in the shadows of the red dawn. Sometimes May nearly carried Uncle Billy; then they would weave, and he would support her.

Harley pulled alongside them. "May, what the hell you doing? I thought you done went home to bed a long time ago." His voice was plaintive and full of protest, like a small sleepy boy's. He wanted it to be seven o'clock so he could go home and sleep in a real bed.

"Billy lost his teeth," May said. Neither looked up. They shuffled on down Main Street, peering in garbage cans and kicking through trash in the gutters, while Harley watched them grumpily from his car and then dozed off again. They came to the wooden flower pots, and, at the third one, in front of the bank, Uncle Billy let loose a shrill victory cry that startled Harley so that he accidentally hit the car horn. By the time he reached them, the teeth were

gleamingly restored, and they had produced a bottle from the lining of Billy's coat and were tipping it up.

"Now, by God, enough is enough!" Harley said. "You two put that damn bottle away. Don't y'all know it's Sunday morning? Y'all put that damn bottle away and get the hell on home, and don't you sing or holler or anything on the way." And so they went home, weaving arm-in-arm in the red-burnished morning.

While May worked, Uncle Billy followed a busy schedule. He kept droplines along the deep side of the Cimarron River and in Cattle Creek, which flowed into the Cimarron from the north. He had several hooks on each line and baited them with small live perch or carp or big minnows, tying the lines to tough green tamaracks. He caught channel catfish of varying sizes in all seasons, and perhaps once each spring he might find a big flathead catfish on a line, thrashing the water and all but tearing the tamarack out by the roots. The larger fish he skinned and cleaned behind the apartment house, hanging them on the clothesline posts, and then sold to Ab Johnson at the cafe. He always took the heads of the big cats out to the edge of town and jammed them down over the creosote fence posts in front of the "Welcome to Minnekah" and "Minnekah is a Garden Club City" signs. The ladies of the Garden Club were of course furious, Royce Klepmann swore, and the Minnekah Beacon complained. But no one removed the heads, and so the record of Uncle Billy's fishing luck grew from year to year, stretching from the newly butchered greenish-yellow head, covered by swarms of flies, to the leathery black ones to the sun-whitened bones of the oldest.

Early-rising motorists might pass Uncle Billy just as the sun came

up, trotting like a goat over the S.H. 128 bridge, khaki pants rolled up over second-hand tennis shoes, the tail of a yellowed dress shirt flapping behind. He carried an empty gunnysack to put fish in, and, if he meant to re-bait the lines, a minnow bucket. From the bridge he turned left up the river and wound his way through the dense growth of tamarack, willow, and cottonwood. He checked his lines on the river, then turned right and ran the lines in the greener, narrower Cattle Creek. If there was a fish, he squatted low in the wet sand to unhook it, his left hand slipping up the wet slick body to hold it just over the sharp side fins. He twisted the hook out with a quick motion and then held the struggling fish up to the sun, grinning, before he dropped it in the gunnysack. When he finished running the lines he would strike out eastward, coming after a few hundred yards to the rear of the Minnekah City Dump. Here, if no one was around to order him off, he would rummage through the unburnt piles for items that the Minnkeah Antique Shoppe might buy or that May might like. He hid what he found deep in the blackberry thickets, to be picked up when he pleased. Then he crossed the dumping grounds and came out on the highway just south of Ralph's Junction. By now the sun would be overhead, so he would trot across the pavement to the Three-Way Tavern for a sack of potato chips or pigskins and a beer.

He varied his route back to Minnekah, depending on how he felt. At the edge of town, between Roper's Conoco Station and the river bridge, were little two-room houses, not much better than shacks really, crowded along both sides of the highway. There were sharp-eyed widows living in some of them, Goldie Ospaugh and Mrs. Bembo

and Hattie Blackbear, and one or the other and sometimes all three were ready to trade a piece of raisin pie or maybe a thick slice of meat loaf with gravy for a nice channel cat. Goldie Ospaugh especially was on the lookout for him and in her house he could expect a bottle of beer or even a glass of sweet red wine with the food. She fluttered around him, short and breathless, praising his fish if he had caught any (he didn't need a fish to be invited to her table), patting his shoulders and even the stubby patch of white hair on his head. But it was a nuisance to get away from her, and the others too, so as soon as he crossed the river bridge he usually left the highway and came into town through the pasture.

Sometimes in the afternoons, if it wasn't too hot, he could be prevailed upon to trim a hedge or dig a flower bed; but he usually chose not to be cornered by would-be employers. Instead, he disappeared into the black apartment building.

On summer evenings, he would be hunkered against the yellow-painted sandstone wall of the Home Cafe in the last rays of the sun, whittling on a willow stick, glancing up with a quick registering look when someone left the cafe, until May came out. Then he would grin his great white grin and stand up and close his pocket knife, pressing the back of the shining blade against his hip. They would head straight for the beer joint in the old Minnekah Hotel, two blocks down Main Street, Billy skittering alongside May's colossal stride.

On summer nights passer-bys could see May in a sturdy chair near the bar, facing the open door, her feet planted widely and firmly on the floor. She sat directly under a small lightbulb that dangled from the high ceiling, a bottle of beer in one fist, the other hand

sweeping dangerously through the air as she talked on and on to Uncle Billy. She interrupted herself to shout a greeting to anyone she knew that passed the door or came in. When a man she did not know entered, her eyes would follow him as he took his place at the bar, and she would shift her chair so she could watch him. Uncle Billy sat easily on his heels to May's right, looking up to her. His portion of the talk was a steady series of agreeable grunts or shrill chuckles that punctuated the rumble of her voice or echoed her grinding laughter.

They could be found there on any night of the year, and in any year. And so they were on the night before Thanksgiving, drinking more than usual because May didn't have to work the next day, when six senior members of the high school football team came in.

The boys had just played their last game for Minnekah. They had been thoroughly beaten by the Rollins Red Dogs. So now their careers were over, and they had been trying to feel sad about it, drinking beer as they drove slowly up and down Main Street. Each had picked up a few bruises and scratches in the game, and, as the beer took hold and washed away the disgrace of defeat, they began to feel increasingly heroic. They bought two more six-packs at the Three-Way Tavern. They forgot football and talked about women. The streets were emptying of cars, and the bars, except the Lounge, were shutting down.

Randy Klepmann belched. The others laughed. A belch was always funny.

"Damn, I want a woman!" Randy said.

"Yeah, me too," said Steve Jensen, who was driving.

Bobby Neufield and the others, Bud Wallace and the two Tucker boys,

joined in. "Let's get us some!" they yelled.

They went to the Lounge. The Jensen boy parked his father's station wagon around the corner and half a block down the street from the bar.

"How come here?" Kenny Tucker asked. "Hell, are you lost?"

"I got to put it back here. The old man'd kill me."

"Damn, ain't we brave, though," Randy said. The others snickered.

"What're you laughing at? None of you'd dare park any closer than this," Steve said.

"I would," Kenny said.

"And me," Wayne Tucker added. But the others were silent.

They swaggered around the corner: the two lanky brothers, the strident-voiced Klepmann, Jensen, Neufield, and Bud Wallace, the great golden-haired tackle, all rippling, sculptured muscle, square jaw and straight nose and intense blue eyes. They tumbled into the Lounge.

May was tilting up a bottle, finishing it in noisy swallows, and she seemed to see only the beautiful Bud when they came in. He was taller even than the Tucker boys, a head taller than the others. May watched him find a place at the bar, turning her head slowly, her empty bottle still tilted up. When Bud turned his back to her, she put the bottle down without taking her eyes from his sunny hair, the broad shoulders under the orange letter jacket. She wrenched her chair around. Uncle Billy shifted too, so that he could look up at her.

The boys were underage, but the bartender served them anyway. There was little danger of trouble with the law, because Harley Fultz

seldom came into the Lounge. Its clientele didn't vary from night to night or week to week: middle-aged pumpers in oil-stained coveralls who hid there from their wives and children; a few farmers in western boots and hats and bib overalls; old men who lipped their glasses of draught beer carefully, tediously while they studied the dominoes on the tables or gummed over old lies. Except for an occasional jukebox song or outburst from May, the place was quiet enough that the rattle of the big fan in the water cooler over the black-painted windows was audible in the summer, and the multiple click! of the racked pool balls being broken carried to the door.

The boys leaned against the bar, smoking cigarettes, and drank their beer. They spun on the barstools just as they had at the drugstore up the street a year earlier. They drank and ordered more. They watched May, as she watched Bud, and they grunted, "Put a sack over their heads and they're all alike." They hooted and laughed and dared each other; they were daunted a bit by May, but more than anything else they feared their own derision. At last they huddled, giggling, and elected Randy and Bud to approach her.

When Uncle Billy tripped off to the back to relieve himself, they moved in. Randy stood before her, holding a can of beer, the thumb of his other hand hooked in the front pocket of his jeans. "Hey May! Wanna have a little fun? How about a little fun with us? Me and Bud and those guys."

"What?" Her eyes were on Bud, whose face shone like the sun over Randy's shoulder.

"I said, wanna have a little fun! You know, we go up to your place for a while. You know. We'll give you a dollar apiece. That's six

dollars. That's pretty good, huh?"

He had to explain the proposition again and again. Neither noticed that Uncle Billy had returned and was hunkered on the floor, his misty-bright eyes flicking from one to the other. May listened to Randy, but her eyes were on Bud. At last she understood.

"That's good," she said. "Six dollars is good." But she watched Bud.

May looked at Bud, and a yearning for his smooth young skin came over her. She too had had a lot to drink, and she was caught in his sea-blue eyes; she floated over the sea. She was caught in the boy's blue eyes, and she wanted him. She nodded vaguely to the Klepmann boy, taking six wrinkled one-dollar bills.

Although it was near freezing when they left the Lounge, no one appeared to feel the cold. Randy was very drunk, but he had an arm around May's waist and they led the procession up Main Street, Bud a step behind. May had an iron grip on Bud's wrist and, puffing a little, tugged him on at every step. Bobby Neufield, the Tucker brothers, and Steve Jensen were bunched in closely behind, weaving and sometimes stumbling off the sidewalk, grasping streetlight poles and each other for support.

Trailing by half a block was Uncle Billy, warmly wrapped in an overcoat that once had belonged to the Jensen boy's father. The hem of the coat was frayed, because it dragged the ground. His progress was slow, although he took light, sure steps; he kept May and the boys in view, but he paused to wave to the friendly red-haired mannequins in their autumn skirts and sweaters in Bobbi's Style Shoppe and to inspect the refrigerators in the windows of Evers Hardware. He saw

a dim light far in the back of the store, and when he peered closely through the glass he saw Linda Starks and Amos Evers. But when he shouted and waved at them, the light went out.

He had several cans of beer tucked in his overcoat pockets and in the lining of his inner coat, and he drank from still another when he stopped before the stores. In front of the bank he picked up a package of cigarettes dropped by Bobby Neufield and counted those left with satisfaction. Then the pack disappeared inside his coat.

The pageant stopped. Disaster had struck Randy Klepmann. Both hands out to brace himself, he leaned with dignity against the corner of the Walder Lumber Company building. "Y'all go on," he said. He spoke quietly, as if preoccupied. "Y'all go on, I be there in a little bit." May pulled on Bud's arm, but he hung back and the Neufield boy stood still, watching Randy curiously. "I said go on, goddamnit! Go on, goddamnit, I'll be there in jussa minute!"

They left him, Bobby Neufield taking Randy's place by May, his right arm around her thick waist, his hand kneading and exploring the padded flesh just over her hip. Bud was still in tow, and the Tucker brothers, who were arguing about who would be first, followed. But Steve Jensen slowed his pace, let them edge ahead. He turned back to Randy, who at that moment lost all dignity in a tremendous spasm. He pushed off Steve's sympathetic hand with a strangled "Get away." Then the sounds and smell of sickness engulfed Steve, and when Uncle Billy reached the lumber yard corner both appeared to be bracing up the building as they vomited. Uncle Billy patted them on the back, bleating compassionately, but he could not help them. He shuffled on after the others.

He admired the pyramid of paint cans in the lumber company window, and in front of the Minnekah Natural Gas Company Office he shook his head in wonder at the Thanksgiving turkey a happy young housewife was taking from the oven. He saw Ethel Evers drive out of the alley in her Buick, and he waved and shouted at her.

In front of the apartment building, he rested on the fender of a car and listened to the tramp of feet as May led the boys upstairs. He tipped his beer can up and finished it. When they had all passed the broken window on the third-floor landing, he stood up, flipped the empty can onto the porch, and headed for the edge of town, trotting along quickly in his handsome overcoat.

"Jesus," Kenny Tucker said, "she's already taking her clothes off." Kenny and Wayne stood on the third-floor landing, feeling a great weariness; they smelled sweat and unwashed bodies, damp piles of clothes and old vegetables. May was pulling Bud into the darkness at the far end of the hallway while the Neufield boy clung stubbornly to her waist. She kicked at the door to her and Uncle Billy's room. There was a small gas heater inside, and when the door flew open the hot fetid air rushed out at them. Bobby released his hold and fell back. May pulled Bud through the door, but now there was a greenish cast to his handsome face and fear in his blue eyes. Her left hand was working down the buttons of her dress.

"Uh, May, I guess Bob's first," Bud said. He was trying to twist his wrist loose.

"No."

"That's okay, Bud," Bobby said, "You go ahead." The Tucker brothers had crowded Bobby back up to the door. He gripped the jamb

on either side and was braced in case they tried to push him into the room.

"Bob, you're supposed to go first," Bud said. His voice was high. He had worked his wrist loose and was backing away from May. He was sweating, trying not to breathe.

"No," May said. She smiled and stalked him.

"I got to go, May!" His voice was full of fear and savagery, and suddenly he whirled and drove his shoulder hard into Bobby, bowling him and the Tucker brothers back against the wall and falling down with them. Then he was on all fours, scratching, crawling away, gasping, and finally up and racing down the hall. May's enraged curses followed him as he stumbled on the third floor landing and crashed on down the stairs.

"Dirty little piss ants! Get out of here, get your ass out of here!" May stood in the doorway and screamed at the Tucker boys and Bobby, who had had the wind knocked out of him and was sick. The brothers turned their heads away from him and dragged him down the hall, trying to run, fearful of the screaming woman behind them.

"Damn babies! Damn babies! Get out of here, get out of here, get out of here!"

The first- and second-floor tenants could hear the boys blundering, falling, stumbling down the stairs, and the crash of bottles and cans being hurled against the walls. Long after they were gone, the building shook with the force of May's strides, up and down the hallway, shook with her bellowing. But at last she stopped. The building became quiet, and after a time the light went out in the room on the third floor.

*  *  *  *  *

When the great red sun pushed over the hills to the east, its rays struck the heavy frost on the roofs of the little houses stacked along the highway and lit them in wild pinks and oranges. The roosters in their pens behind the houses crowed as they had seldom crowed before. The robins were out, fat and busy, and the coarse mottled starlings were shrieking and cursing in the brush along the pavement, until suddenly everything hushed.

May stood on the yellow line in the middle of the highway, coatless, in her gray-brownish short-sleeved dress. Her fists were clenched, and she faced one side of the road and then the other.

"Billy! Where are you?" She crouched like a wrestler, watching the little houses with their tarpaper roofs. "Billy! You come on home now."

There was no answer, but curtains began moving behind the windows in the houses.

"Billy!" She planted her feet wide apart and put her hands on her hips.

"Billy! You come on out <u>now</u>!"

Behind the houses, dogs began barking. A truck came rattling across the river bridge, and when the driver saw May he honked and put on his brakes. On the other side of May, a large blue Buick came to a halt. From its shadowy interior, windows tightly closed, Amos and Ethel Evers watched May stamp her feet on the yellow line.

"BILLY! I'M TELLING YOU, YOU BETTER COME <u>ON</u>!"

"Oh, God," Ethel said, "she is an animal."

"BILL--LY!"

The truck edged by May on the left side of the road and then

pulled back to the right of the Evers car, picking up speed as soon as it was clear.

The door of Goldie Ospaugh's house opened. One of Uncle Billy's river-stained tennis shoes, then his leg, and finally his head peaked out. The sun glinted on his head and caught the fringe of white hair. He was smoking one of Bobby Neufield's cigarettes, holding it carefully between thumb and forefinger, and he brought it slowly to his lips and drew on it as he watched May.

She did not move from the yellow line. She looked at him flushed pink in the sun's rays. She straightened up, and her hands fell to her sides.

"Well, Billy," she said, "Why don't you come on home now, Billy?"

The dogs had stopped barking, and it was quiet on the highway as Billy watched her. He dropped his cigarette and put it out carefully with the toe of his tennis shoe. He scratched the stubble on his head. Suddenly his great row of teeth glittered in the red sunlight, the door opened wide, and he came trotting out, dragging his overcoat behind him.

"That dress belonged to Vivian Jensen," Ethel said. She shuddered, pressing against the armrest on the door, as the blue Buick moved on. In the brush, the starlings began to chatter again.

May and Uncle Billy were horrendously drunk by noon on Thanksgiving Day. In the chill November sunshine they wandered up and down Main Street, and when they came to the Post Office they danced a Thanksgiving skip-to-my-lou around the flagpole, just as the Klepmann family (minus Randy, who was ill) drove by on the way home from the special service at the First Methodist Church.

"Turn around," Maybelline said to Royce, "Go back to City Hall. I want you to make Harley Fultz put those filthy drunks in jail."

"It don't look to me like they're hurting anything."

"You turn this car around. Right now!" Her face was flushed and angry. "Right now, and hurry up about it! We got to go get Aunt Opal."

But the pockets and linings of Uncle Billy's coats were marvellously well-stocked that day, so they sat in the little cage in the back of City Hall and crooned their favorite songs, keeping metallic tune on the iron bars. They howled with glee at their own jokes until Harley could stand it no longer and kicked them out on the street again, out into the November sun.

They sat on the wooden flower pot in front of the bank, drinking and singing, and just as the sun disappeared behind Akeman's Market May saw Bud Wallace come driving down the street. She stopped singing, and her eyes narrowed for a moment; but then Uncle Billy smiled his white smile and shouted and waved to Bud, and she laughed and shouted at him, too. Bud ducked his head and drove on.

"There they are," Hazel said. "Harley let them out again." She and Maybelline were taking Opal Bradshaw home. She slowed the car as they neared the bank.

Opal clutched the tin foil-wrapped package of leftover turkey in her lap. "You should've given me some dressing," she said.

"We ate it all," Maybelline said. "Remember? There wasn't any left." She twisted, trying to see Bud Wallace's car, but he had turned off on a side street.

"Sit down," Opal said, "You're squashing me! And shut that window."

Maybelline settled back down in the seat, frowning, her plump lower lip pushed out. May and Uncle Billy were waving at them. "I just knew he would," she said, looking straight ahead, "I just knew Royce would forget the words again."

"Tomorrow's the twenty-fifth," Opal said. "I got to go by the cafe tomorrow."

# ETERNAL THINGS

Reverend Colby sat in the high-backed pulpit chair while the collection was being taken, uncertain as always about what to do with his long legs, stretched out so far in front of him. He crossed them again, but then he thought that to the congregation his bony knee must appear nearly as high as his head. So he put his feet flat on the floor once more and sat stiffly, hands clasped in his lap. He realized with a start that he was not smiling. He raised his eyebrows and stretched the corners of his mouth, making the long creases under his knobbed cheekbones even deeper. The muscle over his shoulder blade, between his neck and shoulder, began to twitch painfully, as always when he was about to preach.

Reverend Colby began to sweat against the hard back of the chair. The narrow windows of the church were all raised, but there was no breeze to relieve the morning heat of late June. Air conditioning, he thought. There'd be twice as many here with air conditioning. He looked to the back, to the large drawing of the new church, all gleaming red brick with a great white cross above it and round shrubs at every corner. Central air it will have. There was an identical drawing in front of the pulpit, facing the congregation. Reverend Colby and Wilma Klepmann had worked every weekend for a month on the drawings. Beside each of them on a tall piece of white cardboard was a sketch of a thermometer labeled "Building Fund." The red mercury in the thermometer was very low.

The ushers were making the usual mistakes with the collection plates, sending them down one row from both ends, skipping another entirely. When one came to Royce Klepmann, who was seated with his wife, Maybelline, her aunt, Opal Bradshaw, between them, he held his bright yellow folded check higher than necessary so all could see, then let it flutter down like a faulty parachute. Opal pulled Royce's arm down so she could peer into the collection plate, then carefully dropped in her check, also bright yellow and folded. Three dollars. Always look to see. Three dollars a week, and if five Sundays in the month, nothing the fifth. Say about tithing? Nobody but Wilma Klepmann. Maybelline took the plate from Opal and leaned over to hand it to Reverend Colby's wife, who sat apart in her pink summer dress at the end of the row. She gave it to the usher without looking at it.

The usher passed the plate behind Reverend Colby among the choir members, and then they rose to sing:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him, all creatures here below

While the choir filed down to sit with the congregation--it was too hot to stay on the benches behind Reverend Colby--he talked about the building fund. He was grateful to hide his long legs behind the pulpit. He gripped its sides and leaned out over it, his elbows spread like wings.

"We have made some progress with the fund for the new Temple for God, but so much remains to be done. We must renew our spirits, renew our efforts." Smile. Wilma Klepmann eased past his wife, sat

down beside Maybelline, and raised her face to him. "All of the various organizations within the church--the Sunday School classes, our wonderful youth groups, our very active ladies' Circles--need to struggle to meet their goals for this our Lord's work, to find the means to lay the foundations for a fitting Temple." Mrs. Colby's hands were folded in her lap, and she appeared to be gazing down at them. She sleeps like that through the news and weather. He leaned farther out over the pulpit. "Every day I find encouragement from a new source for this endeavor. Just this past week I received a promise of support from a businessman, a man who had not previously shown any interest in the Church." Ab Johnson said he might. Royce, who was figuring on the back of a church bulletin, looked up. His glasses, round with brown plastic frames, had slipped down on his nose. Not you. "I know that we all joy when we find a new source, an unexpected source of help in God's cause. Praise God! How heartening it is!"

Wilma Klepmann smiled up to him, nodding, her lips silently forming the words too: "Praise God!" Beside her, Maybelline, plump cheeks and bright thick lipstick and stiff frosted hair, was using an emery board on her nails, holding it before the dark line between her breasts, frowning, concentrating. Opal was staring straight ahead, gray and unmoving, like a stone. Sweat was gathering on his forehead, in the deep crease of his cheeks, under his collar. He felt it roll slowly down his spine, cool and tickling. Hot. If I didn't wear a tie? Royce doesn't. "Yes! Praise God for all help! But He requires of us that we find our main strength in ourselves, through Him. He will give unto us, but we must give ourselves unto Him.

He is waiting!" Wilma mouthed the words, "Praise God!" as she nodded happily, leaning toward him. Smile.

After the sermon he made his long-gaited dash up the aisle to the vestibule, the rickety vestibule, to position himself to greet them: the embarrassed farmers, anxious to get past him and out to their cars, where they could lean against the fenders and smoke and talk; the loud-mouthed businessmen like Royce, who pumped his hand and reached up to slap him on the back; and Opal Bradshaw, who slipped past him behind Royce and then said to Maybelline, "Well, I say this building was good enough for me fifty years ago and it's good enough now. All it needs is a coat of paint."

Wilma Klepmann held his hand and smiled up to him. "A beautiful sermon, Mr. Colby. You speak with such power."

"Come on, Wilma, if you're going with us," Royce called.

Mrs. Colby had gone out the back door of the church and had been in the parsonage across the parking lot nearly half an hour by the time he got there. She had shucked her old pink dress and corset, and now she stood at the stove in her robe, frying small dark pieces of meat. Hurry home for a cigarette. The television set was in the doorway between the kitchen and living room, the extension cord and antenna wire trailing back into the bedroom. She was watching Laurel trying to hoist Hardy into a second-floor window. When Hardy fell in the fishpond, her expression did not change.

"I thought you didn't like Laurel and Hardy," he said as he squeezed past the television.

"It's all that's on. You ask me that every Sunday."

As he had expected, the bedroom was full of cigarette smoke. At

least she kept the windows shut. He looked across the parking lot, to where some farmers and their wives, Bink Martin, Jud Wallace, and two or three others, were still lounging against their big cars. Cafe. Go to the Home Cafe, or to Rollins. Or even Bramwell sometimes after church. Medium rare. He thought of the thick steak with its wet reddish center he had watched Royce Klepmann cut into at the Home Cafe a few days earlier, of how Maybelline had squeezed out the lemon slices over her fried breaded shrimp and asked for more. Lemon. Sour. The juices gathered in his mouth. And dip in red sauce. When he pulled his coat off the stale air was momentarily cool on the wet back of his shirt. He held his elbows up to the mirror and saw that the right sleeve was tearing out again around the patch. A new one. This fall. Two. One not white. He bent to watch himself pull the knot from his tie and frowned because he was not smiling. On the tie, he saw that the green ducks winging their way across a bronze background had nearly faded out. Where? Christmas. From? The children. Pleasant Dale. No running water. Ten years? Nineteen forty-eight. Eleven. Outside toilet. He heard Hardy crash to the ground again, and the sizzle of the meat frying.

While Mrs. Colby set the table, he squeezed into the little breakfast nook and read for the fourth time the story in the Beacon about Opal Bradshaw:

> The Mayor and members of the Minnekah City Commission took a significant step forward Monday night by unanimously accepting a deed for street right-of-way from Mrs. Opal Bradshaw.

> Hailed as the beginning of a tremendous period of growth for the city, the proposed street will extend one-half mile from the west end of Delaware Street to the new residential area now being platted by the Minnekah Development Corporation. In recognition of her generous gift, the new street as well as Delaware Street will be named Opal Bradshaw Avenue.
>
> The Mayor and the Commissioners voted to join with the Minnekah Chamber of Commerce and the Minnekah Dev. Corp. in sending Mrs. Bradshaw a letter of commendation in recognition of her continued interest in the growth of the city.

"If she can give land to the city, why not money to the church? She could just as well do it." He scooped sugar into his iced tea. The lilac bush at the window blocked off what breeze there was, and he was sweating again.

"You keep saying that. She didn't give it. They pay her for it. They don't charge her city taxes and things. The movie's on." She turned the dial to channel nine with a quick wrenching motion.

He looked out the window, between the lilac branches, to the church. It was shaped like a barn, with narrow, square-topped windows on each side; there was a mosque-like steeple with asphalt shingles over the little vestibule, but no bell. On the side next to the parking lot a meeting room with a kitchen had been built on, and on the other side, out of sight, Sunday School classrooms had been added. The pastor's office had been built onto the back of the meeting room, next to the alley. Each shed-like addition had

been coated with the current bargain paint from Evers Hardware, so that there were several different shades of white.

"Move your knees." Mrs. Colby slid in on the other side and put her hands in her lap. He bent his head to give the blessing, remembering to add an extra line for Sunday. She's watching the movie.

"What kind of meat is this?"

"It's just meat." She trapped some peas in the mashed potatoes and loaded them on her fork. In the movie, a musical, a woman whose hair was piled high on her head danced along crowded New York streets, flinging her arms about, singing, while people watched her indulgently. She wore a dress with square, padded shoulders. When a commercial came on Mrs. Colby said, "The building fund's a flop. Nobody's giving anything."

"It's not a flop. The youth group made quite a bit washing cars--"

"Thirty-two dollars. That was three weeks ago. Who was the 'businessman' you said you got a promise from? You didn't tell me. Or did you make it up?"

"I did not. Ab Johnson told me, last Tuesday it was, he might give something a little later on--"

"Oh, Ab Johnson. Everybody believes that stand on their head. He just told you that to get rid of you. In the cafe, he can't hide from you like Royce Klepmann and the others do."

"Well, he said he might. If you'd work with the women's groups it would help. Get them to start some projects."

"I'm not going to bake pies or make quilts with Rosalee Fultz and Wilma Klepmann. Besides, the ones that have money to give don't do those things anyway. They don't help a bit."

The woman in the dress with padded shoulders had danced down a subway tunnel and onto a car packed with smiling sailors, and they were singing together. Reverend Colby tried to shift his cramped legs, but managed only to crack his knee under the table, rattling the plates and silverware.

"Every day you do that." She ground a piece of meat into two bites with the edge of her fork. "We'll have to leave, won't we? Next spring. You had two years to get it started, and it's up next spring. There's not enough to start nothing."

"We've got some. We've made some progress. It takes some time. I think by then we'll be able to show the bishop we can start." She's right. Sweat was gathering on his bald head and beginning to roll down his sharply slanting forehead. He refilled his tea glass and sugared it.

"Don't clang your spoon. I don't. He won't give us another town church, will he? He'll send us back out in the country, like Happy Valley or Pleasant Dale. If he does I'm not going." She wiped her plate with half a slice of soft white bread, folded it, and ate it.

What did it smell like? Pleasant Dale. Happy Valley too. And Roscoe Junction. Like parsonages. The screens curled up. Rusted. Windowlights broken out. Like parsonages, they smelled.

Mrs. Colby slid out from the table and began to back the television into the bedroom while the commercials were on. He watched her bend from the hips as she picked up the wires. Several buttons were missing from her robe. Her hair, brown with gray running through it, was pulled back in a bun at her neck. Like Wilma's. Only hers

not gray. I don't think. And not scraggly. She was barefoot, her ankles and feet small beneath her stubby body. She disappeared into the bedroom, closing the door carefully. I wonder do they know she smokes? If someone comes do they smell it in here? Do I smell like it? He put another spoonful of sugar in his tea, stirred it, watching the sugar disappear, and turned back to the story about Mrs. Bradshaw.

On Monday morning Reverend Colby decided to try Royce Klepmann again. It was only four blocks, but he drove his black Plymouth, parking it directly in front of the building with the big "Klepmann Real Estate" sign over the metal awning. When he came through the door, ducking his head out of habit, Wilma Klepmann stopped typing and smiled up at him. If more like her.

"Good morning, Mr. Colby!" Such a good sermon yesterday! I thought about it all afternoon." She touched the little gold cross at her neck and looked up at him, her eyebrows raised. "You must have been filled with the Lord's spirit, Mr. Colby."

Why does she talk so loud?

Behind her, the door to Royce's office was slightly open, and he thought he heard something--a click, or a creaking, like a swivel chair; he looked toward the door, and motioned as though he would step toward it.

"Can I help you this morning, Mr. Colby?" She was still fingering the cross, bending forward, as if she were about to stand up. Her voice was high, quavering. "What can I do for you, Mr. Colby?"

"I was hoping to catch Royce this morning, this morning early, before he gets too busy. To talk for just a few minutes about the

building fund." The muscle over his shoulder blade was twitching.

"I'll just see--I think he's probably stepped out, just before you came in--let me just look." She moved to the door, awkwardly, still facing him, and then she peeked inside, holding the door so close she could barely put her head through. She turned to him. "Yes, it's just what I was afraid of. He's stepped out to see somebody about a claim, I think, only a few minutes ago." Her face was deeply flushed. She closed the door and went back to her desk.

He sighed. The muscle stopped twitching. She looked up to him uncertainly, her face still red, and said, "Won't you sit down, Mr. Colby? You can talk to me, at least."

He sat on the yellow steel chair, a lawn chair actually, next to the desk. Cold. It always is. "That's a lovely little cross, Miss Klepmann. I've noticed that you wear it often."

"It isn't bad to wear it so much, is it? Royce says I wear it so much I must be a Catholic."

"No. You wear it as a symbol, a reminder. You don't misdirect your worship toward it, as the Catholics do." Control they have, more respect. Easier life. Priests.

She nodded anxiously, covering the cross with her hand. "Yes, you're right, it's a reminder. But I think it comforts me, a little. That's not wrong, is it?"

Like a nun sometimes. Smile. "I have no fears for you in that respect. But there are other things that do trouble me. Not about you, I mean."

"You mean the building fund? Royce said yesterday . . . it wasn't going anywhere, he said."

Pretty, she must have been. Or almost. Still, almost. False teeth? She's older than Royce. "Yes, I'm worried about it. In spite of all we've done--especially you--the people just don't seem to be responding. It's growing a little, I grant you, but too slow. It's just too slow."

Removing her glasses, she let them hang from her neck. She set her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on her clasped hands. "But does it matter if it grows slowly? Isn't time just something we of the . . . we people down here worry about? I don't mean that we shouldn't do everything for Jesus Christ, Mr. Colby, of course we should, but I'm just saying that time isn't important to Him." She smiled and touched the cross below her collar. "After all, Jesus Christ is forever, isn't He? You said it so beautifully a few weeks ago. Easter, I think it was. 'The Lamb of God dwells forever'--no, 'dwells in joy forever--in the Heavenly City.' I wrote it down, Mr. Colby."

Ought to put a cushion on this chair. Tight, Royce is. "Of course you're right. Time means nothing to Him." He twisted his chair around to face the desk and leaned over toward her. "But it means everything to us, Wilma. There is a place for us, too, there with the Lamb, there in that Holy City, amid that heavenly chorus. He can make a place for us, His arms can open for us." She leaned to him, her hand at her breast, her mouth open. Lipstick? No. "But we must earn His graciousness, Wilma; we must earn the right to be enfolded unto Him, to be taken singing with joy unto His bosom."

"Yes, I know that; I know it's true; I just meant that if we don't finish His work it won't matter to Him, He won't be any less joyful--"

"But He will be, don't you see, Wilma, He will be, because we--you and I, Royce, Mrs. Bradshaw, everyone in the church--we are all bound by time, we must work within its terrible constrictions, we mortals have a race with time, and Christ Jesus waits to know the victor. If I lose, Wilma, or if you lose, woe to our souls, woe to our eternal souls. If I lose, Wilma, or if you lose, He is saddened by our sadness, saddened beyond our sadness, don't you see, because He yearns for us as we yearn for Him, and His yearning is eternal. His yearning and His love are eternal."

She was holding the cross tightly in both hands, her arms pressed against her breasts. "I don't understand, I don't see what you mean, Mr. Colby. About the race? Please tell me what you mean."

He was startled by the shrillness in her voice. There was a tremor in the cords of her neck, in the muscles of her face. She looks about as gray as Opal Bradshaw. He felt a surge of strength, and he half rose from the yellow chair and leaned over her. "I'm saying, Wilma, that we have a race with time, that the Lord our God sets us into a race in our daily lives, you and I and every soul, and the winning of that race is more important to you and to me than life or death itself." Don't smile.

"But the race? How?" Her jaw trembled.

Yes. False. "I'm saying that we have been set a task, you and I, in our daily lives, and I believe that task is to complete a temple for Jesus Christ our Lord in Minnekah. I know this, Wilma. It is our race. We must do it. Christ Jesus waits with his arms open to enfold us joyfully singing unto the love and warmth of His bosom, but I say unto you, Wilma, we must win this race! His hand shot out

and grasped her wrist, and she gave a little shriek and cowered down in her chair, shaking, looking up into his pale blue eyes. He glanced out the window, but there was no one in sight on the street. "We must win it, Wilma. I believe the Lord demands it of us. Of me. Of you." Smile now.

He released her wrist and sat down. "I'm sorry to frighten you. But it is a serious thing. Terribly serious. And there are so few who are capable of understanding the enormity of the seriousness. So very few." He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. It is my charge. I will tell you something that the others do not know. But you must guard the secret. Can you do that?"

She nodded. She had pushed her swivel chair back when he let her arm go, but now she pressed against the desk, breathing heavily.

"The bishop gave me only two years to start the church. If I fail to start it in that time, I will have to move on, I will have to leave here." She shook her head and started to protest, but he said, "It is my charge. He put it upon my shoulders." He straightened his thin shoulders and looked over her head. "Two years is time enough. But the spirit is so weak here. I may fail."

"It isn't fair. They're so slow here. Two years isn't fair."

"If only everyone had your faith, had the spirit that burns in you." Smile.

"But what can we do?"

Now. "We must be realistic. The Sunday School classes are making their little contributions, the children do what they can. But it is so little. We must have help from those who are capable of decisive contributions."

"Like . . . Royce, you mean. Or Mr. Walder, or Mr. Perkins, or Mrs. Bradshaw."

"Yes."

Early Wednesday morning, just as he was about to wedge himself into the breakfast nook, Wilma called, her voice shrill and trembling. "Royce just called me from Oklahoma City, Mr. Colby. He and Maybelline took Mrs. Bradshaw down there to the hospital last night. Royce says she's asking for you, Mr. Colby. He wants you to come down there."

"All the way to Oklahoma City? Well--"

"Royce says to tell you he'll pay your expenses."

She shrank from the white walls, the white nurses, the cold steel railing around the bed, the cold steel trays, the white gown they made her wear. She trembled, small and gray and frightened, under the white sheet. She flinched when his shadow fell across her face as he bent over her, and her teeth were chattering as she looked up his height.

"I might die, right here, Mister. Today. I might." She was looking straight up into his cold eyes, his long white face. Her hand came from under the sheet, touched the railing, jerked away from it, then clawed along it until she found and clutched his hand. "I don't want to die."

"Aunt Opal, they said you're going to be all right. Just fine," Royce said. He pushed his glasses up on his red nose. "You don't have nothing to worry about, they said."

"I want to talk to the preacher. You go on out. You and Maybelline. But you be right by the door, right there by the door if

I want you. I want to talk to the preacher."

"All right. We'll be right there."

Smile. "It's good to hear that you're going to be all right. It's good to hear, Mrs. Bradshaw. Praise the Lord!"

"I'm afraid to die. I don't see why I have to. I'm afraid to die, Mister."

"I prayed for you on the way down here, Mrs. Bradshaw. I prayed that you would be all right."

"Yes, pray for me, I'll give you some money if you'll pray for me." She looked toward the door, then whispered harshly, "They say I have gallstones. I don't know what that is. They want to operate on me, but I'm not going to let them." She tugged at his hand with both of hers, her teeth clicking together in a quick, rabbit-like motion. He looked away from her, but she kept tugging at his hand, searching his face, trying to look into his eyes.

What is she looking for?

"I don't know what gallstones is. It hurts me a lot. Willis Townsend gave me a shot last night, but it didn't help any. I'm afraid I'll die if it starts hurting again. I'm afraid I'll die if they operate." Her voice rose. "Oh, I don't want to die!"

Maybelline opened the door and said, "Aunt Opal, you all right?"

"Yes, you leave us alone!" The door closed.

"If I die will I go to heaven, Mister?" She tugged at his sleeve. "If I die will I? I always gave money to the church, I always went."

"You have been a good Christian--"

"What's heaven like? I don't like this place. The nurses don't

listen to me. I don't know what heaven's like. I don't know what gallstones is. What's heaven like, Mister?"

"No one can say for sure what it's like--"

"Then maybe I don't want to go there. If I don't know what it's like."

"But we believe that it is a joyous place, a realm of eternal joy--"

"It hurts there. Right there. What's a realm? Why are they happy there? Don't people die there?"

"Of course not, Mrs. Bradshaw. There is no death in heaven. In heaven you live forever. Eternally, in heavenly harmony. Eternally, amid joyous singing, forever in bliss." New Church. Say. My knees hurt.

"Forever. Well, that's a long time. And singing." The pain under her lower ribs seemed to be easing, for she let her hand fall away to her side. "There's people in Minnekah'd be glad I died. I know there is. They'd be glad."

"We all have enemies, Mrs. Bradshaw." I don't. "But we must direct our energies toward the pleasing of the Lord our God. We cannot worry about our earthly enemies. When we are in heaven, we will not care about our earthly enemies, or whether our death gladdened them, or whether they despise us in their memory."

"Some of them will despise me. I know it. They will."

"But just as we depart from this earth, so shall the memory of us. We shall be forgotten here, but it does not matter, because in heaven--"

"They won't remember me? In Minnekah? Them that'd be glad I died?"

"Neither friends nor enemies shall remember, Mrs. Bradshaw--"

"Or relatives? Will relatives?"

Maybelline cracked the door open. "Aunt Opal, you all right in there? You want us to come back in now?"

"You shut that door!"

"Of course relatives treasure the memory of their loved ones--"

"I bet they won't. They won't, either." Her hands fluttered helplessly, and then she reached for his hand and clung to him.

"But Mrs.--"

"They don't say nothing about Ralph. Ever. Just eleven years it's been, and they don't ever mention his name, or pray for him, or anything. At all." There were tears in the gray lines of her face. "They'll forget me, just like him."

Fund! Say! "But in heaven--"

"Will I get there? Will I get there, Mister? Do you know for sure, Mister?" She was pulling at his hand, his arm, her rimless octagonal glasses askew on her face, a wet dribble at the corners of her mouth.

"I think you have been a good Christian. But no one can say certainly--"

"I gave money. Every week, three dollars. Except fifth weeks. It wasn't right, the extra week--"

Now. "But you could have given much more. You didn't tithe. I'm afraid you didn't tithe, Mrs. Bradshaw. The Bible says you should tithe. The Lord our God requires of us the tenth part of our worldly possessions, Mrs. Bradshaw. You didn't tithe, did you?"

"No, but--"

"I'm afraid you didn't tithe."

"Well, that's an awful lot--"

"Aunt Opal, you all right in there? You through yet?"

"She's all right, Mrs. Klepmann. We'll be finished in a few minutes."

"You hadn't ought to wear her out."

"We're almost finished."

Say it. "Didn't tithe, Mrs. Bradshaw. And haven't contributed to the Lord's work of building a new temple to Him in Minnekah. Isn't that right?" He leaned over the bed and looked down into her eyes.

"Well, but I said, I told Maybelline, it was good enough--"

"The Lord our God is not satisfied with 'good enough,' Mrs. Bradshaw. He requires of us a sacrifice, a manifestation of our love. He requires it, He will have it! And we must not refuse Him, Sister Opal Bradshaw. We dare not. He alone can grant us eternal life, He alone can grant us eternal remembrance!"

She clung to his hand, her fingernails dug into his wrist. "Well, I didn't know--"

"We dare not refuse!"

She was searching, looking up into his pale eyes. "How much? How much should I give?"

He held the cold railing of the bed, his mouth open. The bed seemed to him a pool of icy white water. Fifty thousand, she could. Fifty. Or more? She could fifty. He sucked in his breath, held it, and leaned out poised over the white bed. "Thirty thousand dollars, Mrs. Bradshaw. With thirty thousand, the foundations could be laid, the work begun in good earnest."

He was in the air, diving toward the freezing water, but it

was far away, far below him. Her mouth snapped shut, the clicking stopped. She adjusted her glasses, settling them down over her nose properly. She seemed to be looking at the bottles of capsules on the bedstand, at the shiny chrome railing that guarded the bottles and the water pitcher and the glasses in their aseptic covers. What's? My watch. Too much, I asked. Her hands suddenly pressed at the place beneath her lower ribs, and he saw her knees draw up under the sheet.

"Yes," she said. "I can do that. I'll give thirty thousand. I'll give you thirty thousand to start that church, Mister."

The door opened, and Maybelline said as two nurses came in, "Aunt Opal, they got to come in now. They said they got to start now. I couldn't keep them out, Aunt Opal." But the old woman's eyes were closed, her lower jaw resting slackly so that her mouth was slightly open and she appeared to be grinning. Reverend Colby's arms were stretched out, in benediction perhaps, his eyes tightly closed. His arms were moving slightly, as if he were gently afloat in green, sun-warm friendly water.

"You really don't think she'll do it, do you? Opal Bradshaw? Why did you ask her for just thirty thousand? She could give a lot more than that. That won't be enough to build it, will it? Not the kind the bishop wants." Reverend and Mrs. Colby were lying in bed, he in striped shorts and undershirt, she in her robe. His feet stuck out several inches beyond the foot of the bed. She was smoking and watching a summer re-run while he lay with his hands behind his head, looking at the ceiling.

"She said, 'I'll give you thirty thousand dollars to start that church.' Those were her exact words." He sighed and pointed his toes toward the far wall, listening to the bones in his ankles pop. Steak. Rib-eye with bacon around it. Good. If Royce again, try the K.C. "Thirty thousand won't build the church, but it's enough to get it started, and we can borrow the rest. At the last board meeting they said we could start with thirty or forty thousand."

He waved his hand to clear the smoke away. "Once the board signs a mortgage, they'll have to raise the rest. 'I'll give you thirty thousand dollars to start that church.' Those were her exact words."

"I just say, I'll believe it when I see it. All I know is, I'm not about to go back and live on some bare hill in the middle of nowhere again. I'll go live with Sarah in Dodge City first, whether she likes it or not. She couldn't turn her mother away." She twisted and bounced on the bed so she could see the television better, fisting her pillow into a compact lump. The smoke drifted slowly toward the ceiling and gathered around the light bulb.

"Praise God, Mr. Colby. Praise Him from Whom all blessings flow!" Wilma's hands were clasped at her breast, and she looked up to Reverend Colby's pained smile. Tears sparkled in her eyes. "And praise Him for a good and faithful servant. You said it had to be done, right here, just on Monday, and now it is done." She touched the cross at her throat. "It's almost a miracle, don't you think?"

"It is indeed a miracle."

"They operated after you left yesterday, and Royce says she's doing just fine."

"Praise the Lord."

"She's very weak, but the doctor says she'll be all right. She's already asked for you, but Royce says he thinks you should wait a day or two before you come down."

K.C. "All right. Please tell Royce I'll come the minute he thinks it's all right."

"I prayed all day yesterday for her and for you, Mr. Colby." She smiled, and then blushed. "I . . . fasted, too, I guess. I didn't eat at all. That's all right, isn't it? I know the Jews did it in the Bible, but it's all right for a Christian to do it, isn't it?" She looked up to a large framed picture of Jesus on the wall to Reverend Colby's left.

That's new. "Why did you do it, Wilma? Fast?"

In her lap, she was interlacing her fingers, pressing her thumbs together, pushing her hands apart. "I didn't want to think about anything else but praying, and Him . . . ." She glanced back toward the closed door to Royce's office. But he's in Oklahoma City. She leaned toward Reverend Colby and whispered, "I'll tell you something. Sometimes I didn't even answer the phone yesterday. I just sat here, like this, and prayed, and fasted . . . isn't that what they do, don't they kind of fast to be purified? I read that somewhere. So they can talk to Him better?"

"Yes, I think--"

"Or see Him almost, do you think? I'll tell you something. I was sitting here yesterday and thinking about you in Oklahoma City

and down on your knees and praying up for Mrs. Bradshaw, and I could see you--it--just as clear, I just about knew. It was like--the light was shining down on your forehead, just like in the picture there, and you were holding your hands together, up like this; I think it was a kind of a vision, Mr. Colby. Like the saints have?"

That's Catholic. Collar, they wear. If I did? Dignity. "I think you have had a wonderful spiritual experience, Wilma. Such as few of us are ever privileged to have."

"Is it? Do you think so?" She took a Kleenex from the box on the desk and dabbed at the corners of her eyes. "I could never tell anyone else."

"When will Mrs. Bradshaw be coming home, do you think?"

"Were you suffering when you were down praying like that, Mr. Colby? In what I saw, you know, it looked like in your face like you were suffering. Sometimes, when you smile, it looks like it hurts you."

The light on me. Like that. "But we all must suffer, Wilma. In His name. You and I. We all have to."

"Oh, yes!"

"Do they know yet when Mrs. Bradshaw will be coming home?"

"No, not yet. But you should go down there, Mr. Colby, if you can. Tomorrow or Saturday. I think you should. Royce will pay your expenses."

He rose to leave, and she also stood up and came around the corner of the desk. "Yes, I'll go. Tomorrow or Saturday, whenever, and as often as they wish. Please tell Royce I said."

"He'll be calling this afternoon. He checks on things here."

"That's a lovely cross, Wilma." He reached out to touch it, but she flinched and jerked her head back, startling him so that he stopped, his mouth open, his hand suspended.

"Oh!" She smiled, flushing quickly, stepped forward and grasped his hand and pressed it so tightly to her throat that he could fell the vein pulsing beneath the sharp edges of the cross. She looked up into his face, her eyes shining, her breast against his arm.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Colby, thank you. Thank you for everything. And praise the Lord!"

The light on me.

"How come you waited so long to come back and see me? How come you waited so long, Mister?"

He stood against the white bed, his hands on the railing. She was scrabbling at his hands and coat sleeve, searching up, up to his cold eyes. What's she looking for? "Royce told me to wait until today, Sister Bradshaw." Blame him. "We wanted you to have a chance to regain your strength."

"It still hurts. It hurts where they did it. But they say I'm going to be all right." She was paler, thinner than on Wednesday. Her gray hair had not been braided, and it made a sparse, ragged circle on her pillow. She clutched his hands. "I don't feel like I'm going to be all right."

"Praise the Lord, Mrs. Bradshaw. That you're going to be all right."

A nurse came in and bustled about the bedstand. Mrs. Bradshaw shrank away from her, clawing at Reverend Colby's wrists with her

crooked hands. She looked up to him, her eyes wide. The nurse turned at the door and said, "Just a minute or two more, then you'll have to leave."

What's she looking for?

"You think it's all right now, Mister? For me? They'll remember me? I'll go to heaven all right?"

Eternal things.

"It's all right, Sister Bradshaw. I have prayed long--"

"Yes, pray for me. Pray for me. That's good."

"And there are many others in the community praying in your behalf--"

"Who else? Who else'd pray for me, Mister?"

"Well, Sister Wilma Klepmann--"

"Oh. Well, I suppose she would."

"Sister Opal, you may be certain that the townspeople will hold you securely in their remembrance. Your generous and bounteous gift--"

"The money."

"--Has made possible a prominent and lasting monument in your memory."

"They'll remember me?"

Knees ache. "Yes. Your holy gift--"

"And I'll go to heaven."

"You will live forever, Sister Opal. You will not be snuffed out--"

"Don't say that!" She writhed on the bed, her teeth chattering in the quick rabbit-like motion.

"Sister Opal, I want to begin, I want the Church Board to begin the joyful process of erecting our new Church--"

"They say I can go home in ten days, Mister. I'll take care of it when I get home."

The nurse came in with a food tray. "You'll have to leave now," she said.

Mrs. Bradshaw trembled as he pulled his hands away. "They make me eat that. They don't give me anything to eat."

Royce. K.C.

"As soon as she gets home, she said. She'll have to shuffle some accounts to get it together, I suppose. But as soon as she gets home. And that'll be ten days or so." His feet were crossed over the end of the bed, hands clasped behind his head. Bugs were clicking against the window screen. It had been a hot, windless day, the Plymouth had seemed to crawl tediously on the way home from Oklahoma City, and he was tired.

Mrs. Colby was watching Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr making love on a Hawaiian beach. Over her shoulder, she asked, "What does Royce think about her giving it?"

"I don't know--"

"Does he even know about it? Did you tell him? I bet not. And I bet she didn't. Royce might not be so anxious to buy you steaks if he knew what you've been talking her into."

How'd she? "Well, it's hers,isn't it? What does he have to say about it?"

"He wants her to give it all to Maybelline, that's what. Have you told anybody about it? Does anybody know about it but you?"

"Well, Wilma Klepmann does."

"Oh, Wilma Klepmann."

On Sunday afternoon he worked with Wilma in the church basement on a drawing of a plaque. They deliberated for an hour on the wording, and then they worked carefully, making several false starts before they blocked out the drawing on a large sheet of construction paper and began shading it in, sitting on the half-size chairs in one of the children's classrooms and leaning over the low table.

"I didn't say anything about Mrs. Bradshaw's gift this morning in my sermon. Do you think I should have?"

"Well, it might encourage others to give--"

"But we don't have the check, you know, and I wondered . . . do you suppose she's told Royce and Maybelline about it? How do you think they'll feel about it?"

"I don't think she has." She worked slowly up the side of the drawing, shading in with short, slightly curved horizontal lines to give depth to the edge of the plaque. She said in a low voice, as if she were ashamed, "Maybe you'd better not say anything about it until you have the check."

"All right." In the dead air of the basement their pencils seemed to scratch loudly, and overhead the church creaked as it absorbed the heat of the day. Through the ventilation window came the high rattling whir of a locust.

"People were different in the church when I was little," Wilma said. "I remember in the revivals, when I was a little girl, six or seven, maybe, I remember in a revival how I got so afraid of the preacher I hid under the seat."

"Yes, I had a similar experience."

"It wasn't just me, because I was little, I don't think. I

think everybody was afraid of him. He had on a black suit, and he would lean out over us up there and yell at us. He had a thin face, like yours, Mr. Colby, and it seemed like he had fire in his eyes. He would preach about hell, and damnation, and going to be with Jesus Christ, and everybody believed him and would come down and repent and cry."

"That is the way I remember it. But they're different now. They have lost the spirit." They're not afraid. Fat cars. Crop insurance.

"Yes. Lost the spirit." She straightened up with a sigh, and then stood up. "That hurts my back." As Reverend Colby turned to look at her, she joined her hands behind her back and stretched. The summer heat was creeping into the basement, and Reverend Colby had removed his coat, turned back his shirt sleeves, and loosened his tie. He also rose, his head coming into the glare from the window at ground level. He squinted in the light, still looking at her. Not fat. Like Grace.

Her short-sleeved gray blouse had a thick double row of ruffles down the front. It was buttoned to the neck, and spots of sweat were beginning to show on it. She stepped toward him, her face turned up to him. "I remember something you probably don't. It was a long time ago, when I was a girl in high school. I went with some friends to a revival at Lost Creek Church--I don't think it's there any more--and you were there, helping the evangelist. I remember it just as clear! You were the tallest man in the church, and you had thick blond hair, just like gold, just as thick as it could be, and after the preaching, when they were giving the call and the evangelist let you

talk, there was fire in your eyes. Everybody said it, afterwards. The girls I was with. 'Did you see his eyes?' they said. And nobody was coming down, but when you helped give the call a lot of people did. All of us did. I did." She was in the shadow, and he could not see her face clearly. "Do you remember that, Mr. Colby? At Lost Creek?"

No. "Yes, I think so. I must have been a student then, at Bramwell. Many answered the call, did they?" At Rollins, the last. Four, five years ago. Nobody. Not one. Now not asked.

"A lot of them. You could feel the spirit." She moved closer to him, so that the small gold-colored barrettes in her hair glinted in the window light, and put her hand on his arm. "Why don't they any more? Why don't they, Mr. Colby? They sit there so bored looking, like they don't care at all, like they don't care about their souls, or being saved for Jesus. It breaks my heart. Why don't they?"

Perfume. And powder. Dusty. "I don't know." He put his hands on her shoulders. "I have prayed, I have searched for the way to them." He gripped her shoulders, looking over her head and out the window, into the bright glare of the parking lot. Weak, she is. "I don't understand them." His voice rose. "They betray their God. They act like they don't need Jesus. The women play bridge in the afternoons. They don't work. They have big cars, and electric washing machines, and dryers. They don't even hang out clothes any more. They don't listen to me. I can't talk to them. I can't get a man to stand still and listen to me. They betray me, the Church! They betray Jesus Christ!" He pulled her against him and her arms came around him and hugged him tightly.

"Oh, yes! They betray you! It isn't right." Her face was pressed against his chest, and he could feel her breath when she talked. Tickles. "They scorn you, some of them. It's so wrong, Mr. Colby!"

When they had at last finished the drawing, she leaned back in the little half-sized chair and smiled at him, shaking her head. "Just like gold, it was. And just as thick as it could be." She giggled. "And your legs were so long!"

Powder on my shirt.

Mrs. Colby stubbed out her cigarette in the already-full ash-tray, scattering ashes on the nightstand. "That's not very smart, being down there all afternoon with Wilma Klepmann. You want people to talk? You already spend too much time with her."

"They won't talk any more about that than about you not coming to Sunday night services."

"They can just talk. Once a week is enough. Too much. Turn it to channel five."

Reverend Colby sat on the straight-backed chair in Mrs. Bradshaw's living room, in the turreted yellow frame house at the far west end of Delaware Street. He had parked the Plymouth in the driveway, in the double row of large cedars that lined it, but a man had pulled up behind him in a pickup and asked him to move the car across the street.

"We got to tear these trees out this afternoon," he said. "There'll be a bulldozer here in just a minute or two."

Reverend Colby crossed his legs and bent forward, clasping his

hands over his knee; then he straightened up and put his feet flat on the floor; then he crossed his legs again and folded his arms.

She lay on the divan, wrapped in a heavy black shawl. The walls were adorned by brownish-gray photographs, staring faces set in black oval frames with curved glass over them. Most of the house was closed off, and the furniture was covered: bulky shapes under yellow sheets and ragged quilts of black and violet and yellow with red tassels in the center of each square. Only the roll-top desk next to the divan showed signs of use. On it were stacks of account books and receipt books, pads of lease agreement forms, and a large loose-leaf checkbook; the pigeon-holes were stuffed with paid bills and canceled checks.

"They wanted to keep me down there another week. I said, 'You're not keeping me here another day, let alone a week.' I told them that, and I made them bring me home. I got too much to look after. I don't like that place down there."

From the kitchen came the clatter of dishes and silverware, and then the door opened and Maybelline Klepmann looked in. "Do you need anything, Aunt Opal?"

"I said I'd call you if I did."

An engine started up outside. Reverend Colby could see a bulldozer being backed off the low bed of a semi-trailer truck.

"Is that the bulldozer? Push this couch around and prop me up so I can see, Mister. I want to see that bulldozer work."

"Mr. Bradshaw's father planted those trees." She watched as the corner of the dozer blade cut through the roots of the cedar nearest the house and pushed it over. Her face was gray, gray as

the flaking cedar bark. The tree was heavily fruited, and the bluish-purple berries fell in a shower as it toppled.

"He planted them in 1901, the year after he built this house. This house was the biggest house this side of Bramwell when it was built, Mister." Her voice quavered high and insistent against the noise of the bulldozer. "Mr. Bradshaw, old Mr. Bradshaw, my husband's father, came from good people in Illinois. They were never farmers. He came here and started this town; he put up the first building in Minnekah. They should've named the town after him, and when they named it Minnkah he bought this corner of this field from my father and built the house here so they couldn't charge him city taxes or make him buy city water. And they never did, either. And they couldn't make Mr. Bradshaw and me pay, either. And I made Royce and all that Minnekah bunch sign papers so they can't ever take this house in, either."

"Royce Klepmann's people never had two dimes to rub together, and there's some say they were Dutch, I don't know. But he's smarter than Maybelline. She's just like her mother Mabel. My papa always used to say to people, Mabel was a year older than me, 'Opal can run a bank or be a lawyer or whatever she wants, but Mabel will have to crank the churn and look pretty.' I always told Royce he was a fool to sell off the family land, land is always there. But that may be smart, cutting it up like that. Some of that land Papa bought for two dollars an acre, and now look what Royce sells it for. I didn't want them to cut these cedars out, but they got to put that street through."

"What made you decide to give the right-of-way to the city, Sister Bradshaw?"

He had to repeat the question because of the noise. A man with a roaring chainsaw was working swiftly along the straight trunks of the felled trees, cutting through the limbs with their fragrant red centers as though they were twigs.

"I suppose I gave them the right-of-way because Royce kept pestering me about it, I don't know. When I was a child, Papa cut down a cedar like that while he was clearing this field. He had it cut into planks at the mill--there used to be one down on the river here--and in the winter he planed them and made me a cedar chest. That chest will be here when I'm gone, Mister. It's upstairs in one of the bedrooms somewhere. It's worth two hundred dollars if it's worth a cent."

Her eyes suddenly dimmed in her gray face, and her crooked hands trembled violently. "Yes, Mister, that chest will be here when I'm gone and forgotten."

Reverend Colby swallowed and leaned forward on the edge of the hard chair. "We must all go, but you will not be forgotten, Sister Bradshaw. You must die to live. That's what the Good Book says. Sister Bradshaw, you will not be snuffed out forever." She closed her eyes tightly. "You will not be snuffed out forever. You will be resurrected. You will <u>live</u> forever." His eyes wandered to the black checkbook on the desk, and he half rose from the chair, his arms spread and his long face jutting above her. "Sister Bradshaw, you will not be forgotten. This community will remember you in their hearts for your generous gift in the name of the Lord to them. Every time they enter the sanctuary you have provided for them, they will remember you."

She opened her eyes. "Yes, that's right. Well, I'll give you that money, Mister. But it'll take a few days. I got some money out at interest that I can get for you."

Sweating. Wet. Outside, the bulldozer was attacking the largest of the cedars. The blade slid upwards along the trunk, breaking the heavy branches, and then the dozer itself reared up against the tree, its treads tearing the dark limbs and grinding them into the red earth. With a splintering snap, the trunk broke over, its roots coming twisted up out of the ground.

"Don't you worry about that money, Mister. I said I'd give it to you. What I say I'll do. It'll be ready in a few days. But you come back to see me tomorrow."

"Come in, Mr. Colby!" Wilma said. Why so loud? "Good afternoon, Mr. Colby!" As always, the door to Royce's office was slightly open, and he heard, or thought he heard, a clicking, perhaps a creaking. Wilma had stood up and moved to her right so that she was between him and the door.

"Good afternoon, Wilma. Is Royce here? I wanted to talk to him a minute--"

"I'll just look . . . I think he stepped out, for coffee probably, just a few minutes ago." She stepped quickly into Royce's office, closing the door behind her, and then came out again and held it open so he could see in. "Yes, you've just missed him." She looked into the office and then closed the door. She took his arm and pulled him toward the yellow lawn chair in front of her desk. "But you can talk to me. Please talk to me."

"He always seems to be gone when I come."

"Well, he's not here very much." She touched the cross at her throat.

"It's funny."

She leaned across the desk and said in a low voice, "Have you been out to Mrs. Bradshaw's?" When he nodded, her eyebrows raised and she said, "Did you get it? The check? Have you got it?"

"No. She said it would be ready in a few days. She said she would have to make arrangements first. But she said not to worry, that she would get it."

"That's good. Did you take the drawing out? Of the plaque? Did you show her that?"

"I forgot. It was so sudden, Royce calling to tell me to go see her. But I'll take it tomorrow. She told me to come back tomorrow. I'll take it then."

"Yes, show her the drawing. She'll like that. Be sure tomorrow." She moved the little cross back and forth on its chain. She was wearing another ruffled blouse, white with long sleeves. <u>If I were to touch</u>? She smiled, looking up to his face. "I was thinking again today about seeing you at Lost Creek Church. You were the pastor there later, weren't you?"

"Yes, when I was at Happy Valley. I preached there on Sunday afternoons, and at Corinth, too. Three sermons. And at Happy Valley again that night."

"It must have worn you out, to preach so much in one day. That must have been hard."

"Yes. But someone must do the Lord's work for these people."

"Oh, yes. And you did." She frowned and ran her fingers down the keys of the black adding machine on her desk. "It must be good to work just for the Lord. Just for the Lord, and no one else." She looked at him. "You lived out there? At Happy Valley? In the parsonage that's still there now?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't it small? Didn't you have children then?"

"There were three children, and the parsonage had two bedrooms. Tiny ones. One child always had to sleep in the living room."

"Mrs. Colby . . . didn't mind it?"

Why ask? "I'm afraid she hated it."

"That must have been difficult, made it harder for you."

"She wanted me to leave the ministry. To find a job."

"Leave! But you couldn't! Ever. Doesn't she know that? I mean it must have been hard, but the Lord expects you to suffer, doesn't He? You said, remember?"

"I'm afraid she doesn't share the same spiritual values as we do." He glanced out the window and then lowered his voice. "May I tell you something in confidence?"

"Please." She leaned toward him.

"She has threatened . . . to . . . destroy our union if I have to go back to a rural church. She says she will not live in the country, without city conveniences, again."

"That's why you want the new church." She was watching his face, trying to look into his pale eyes.

Careful. "Of course not. I believe the Lord wants it for Minnekah."

"But if you don't get it?"

"If I fail, it is in the eyes of the Lord. I am His servant, not the servant of my personal considerations. I am striving for the Lord, Wilma."

"Oh, yes!" She smiled and pressed her hands together, smiling up to him and then looking slowly toward the picture on the wall.

"You better get it quick, before Royce Klepmann finds out about it. If he finds out he'll talk her out of it in a hurry." Mrs. Colby rolled on her side as the movie credits began, bunching the pillow with her elbow.

"What do you know about it?" He was standing at the closet door, straightening the crease of his trousers on a hanger. "All you ever do is watch television. What do you know about it, anyway?"

"I know you're a fool to trust Wilma Klepmann. She wouldn't dare double-cross Royce. She'll tell him about that money. She can't take a chance. She even rents her house from him."

"That's nonsense. He wouldn't fire his own sister." He stretched out on the bed.

"Stop bouncing it. If you don't think he would, then you don't know much. You'd be better off watching television yourself."

When Reverend Colby turned the Plymouth onto Delaware Street, under the sycamores, whose broad leaves already had a tinge of brown in them from the July sun, he had the large sheet of construction paper on the seat beside him, carefully rolled and held with rubber bands. He drove very slowly, and he continually glanced down at the roll. The muscle over his shoulder blade was twitching steadily.

It wasn't until the third intersection that he noticed the changed street sign. Leaping out from a white background were raised, fresh green letters, five inches high on over-sized metal strips, OPAL BRADSHAW AVENUE. When he turned in at the newly graded driveway, the street crew was erecting one of the signs on Mrs. Bradshaw's corner. The graders and bulldozers were several hundred yards out in the stubbled wheat field, carving out the new street.

While Mrs. Bradshaw, grayer than ever and hands trembling badly, watched through the window as the men tamped the dirt around the sign-post, Reverend Colby unrolled the drawing. He stood up, holding it across his body, and moved over in front of the window. His own hands were trembling, too.

"What do you think of this, Sister Bradshaw?"

The plaque he and Wilma had drawn had raised and polished Roman letters. Even the heads of the bolts to hold it to the wall were clearly shown in each corner. It read:

This Church Is Dedicated
To The Memory Of
MRS. OPAL BRADSHAW
Whose Generous Contribution
Made It Possible
"She Is With Her Redeemer"

She frowned. "I was looking out that window. What is it you got?"

"Read it, Sister Bradshaw."

She seemed to have trouble focusing on the drawing. But as she

read she leaned forward, her eyes narrowed, her lips pursed, and then she began to mouth the words, one by one. She motioned him closer and reached out a bony hand to touch the letters.

"That is a handsome sign, Mister." She read it again aloud, nodding. "She-is-with-her-re-deem-er. What would it be made out of?"

"Bronze or brass, Sister Bradshaw. Bronze or brass would be the only things to make it out of. It would last forever."

"Where would they put it? Down in the basement somewhere, I suppose."

"Oh, no. It would have to be in the vestibule, where everybody would walk past it, or maybe on the outside at the top of the steps." Smiling his pained smile, he watched her study the drawing. "We could have two! Why not two? One outside, one inside!" In his excitement he dropped the drawing and threw his thin arms out like a scarecrow's.

"Well, that is a handsome sign." The paper had rolled up of its own accord on the floor. Her eyes wandered back to the window. "You come back on Friday, Mister. I'm going to take care of that business for you on Friday. Leave that sign here. Put it on the desk. And you come back Friday."

"On Friday? Praise God!"

He could not sit still on the lawn chair. He stepped back and forth across the office in his long, scissoring stride, his hands gripped together behind his back, passing through a narrow strip of light reflected from the drugstore window across the street. The light gleamed on his sweating forehead. <u>Go wrong</u>? <u>Nothing</u>. <u>Royce</u>. He stopped and turned to her. "Have you said anything about it to

anybody? Have you said anything to Royce?"

"No. Did you think I would?" She was opening and closing her shiny notary public's seal, watching as the heavy jaws came together.

"No. But he won't like it, will he?"

"No . . . no, I don't think so." She closed the seal on the flap of a letter, opened it, moved it, closed it again.

"Do you think there might be some kind of retribution towards you when he finds out about it?"

She dropped the seal and pressed her hands flat together as if in prayer, the fingers interlaced. "I don't know . . . I don't think so." She pushed her hands apart with her thumbs and fumbled for the cross at her throat.

"Of course not. He is your brother. It is the temple that we must hold uppermost in our thoughts. Neither I nor you must let personal considerations interfere with our appointed task. We must hold Christ Jesus uppermost in our hearts."

"Oh, yes!"

He pointed to the picture. "Keep your thoughts on Him, as I do. Remember that when He gathers us unto Him, when the day of reckoning comes, He will consider that you and I have done in these difficult days." He grasp the edges of the desk, leaned over it, and put his long face close to hers. "You and I must not--shall not--be found wanting!"

"Oh, no!" Her hands shot out and pulled his head down toward her, held him so that his face was against hers, and he had to catch his foot under the yellow lawn chair to keep from sprawling across the desk.

Outside, a car honked, and he could hear voices on the sidewalk. He struggled and finally broke free, and then sat down quickly.

"Not wanting! No! Not you and me!" Wilma said. Her face was wet with tears.

"So tomorrow's the day, is it?"

He tried to shift his legs under the table. "That's what she said. Is this the last of this meatloaf? It's greasy. Why did you make so much? This is four times we've had it this week."

"Three. If you jab me with your knee once more, you can eat it out in the parking lot, grease or no grease. I don't see why it's always so bad in summer. Sometimes I can't even get channel nine."

Smell like parsonage. This one does too.

When a commercial came on, she said, "By the way, you had powder all up and down the side of your face when you came home yesterday evening. Did you know that?"

"I sweat all the time. I must have put too much--"

"If you had any to put. You've been out for a month." She dropped a chunk of butter on her plate, poured molasses over it, and began to mash it with her fork.

"Well, you must be mistaken--"

"Be quiet. If I can't see what's happening, at least I can hear."

I'm still hungry.

When he knocked at the door of the yellow house shortly after one o'clock, Royce Klepmann let him in. "I was just leaving, Mr. Colby. I got to go to the office right quick." He put his head back through

the door. "I'll be right back, Aunt Opal."

"You get right back."

"We're straightening some things out," she said as he sat down on the wooden chair to the left of the divan. "I had some renters get behind while I been sick. I got to show Royce what to do. They think because I'm sick they don't have to pay their rent any more."

"Surely they don't--"

"People try to take advantage of a widow, Mister. I can tell you, I've been through some hard times. When Mr. Bradshaw passed away, I had to be careful. People try to cheat a widow." She looked past him, out the window.

"Yes, that must be true, Sister Bradshaw."

She worked her teeth together. "Renters leave in the middle of the night. They write bad checks. They tear up a house and then they want you to fix it for nothing. Their children break the windows, and I pay the taxes for their schooling. School teachers rent a house from you and move out the first chance they get for something better. And I pay the taxes for them."

"You have had more than your share of responsibility." His eyes wandered to the desk, where the rolled-up drawing of the plaque and her checkbook were lying together.

"I suppose somebody has to take care of people that can't take care of themselves. Take that woman May Goins. I've known her since she was a girl, and she ought to been put in the penitentiary or put away somewhere, always drinking down there at that beer joint. I've had her put in jail I don't know how many times myself. I reckon someone has to take care of people like that. I let her stay in my

apartment building. I guess the Lord means for somebody to take care of her."

She closed her eyes, and her strength seemed to leave her. When she spoke again her voice was high and thin. "Well, I won't have to worry about these things much longer, Mister."

Now. He took the drawing from the desk, unrolled it, and stood before the divan holding it. "Sister Bradshaw, the Lord asks one last good work from you. The Lord requires that before you may rest, before you come unto Him in joy and comfort forever eternally, you must give one last great proof of the goodness of your heart."

"For the new church, you mean." She looked at the drawing and then past him, out the window.

What's she looking for?

"Well, I'm not going to give that money for it."

What?

"I'm not going to give anything for it."

"But Sister Bradshaw, you said--"

Don't call me Sister, Mister. I'm not your sister."

"But you said you would give--"

"Well, I'm saying now I'm not going to give anything. And that's the end of it."

Reverend Colby stared at her, his pained smile foolishly coming and going from his gaunt face. What to say? Eternity? Salvation? Parsonages. Smell like parsonages. Rotting.

Minutes passed, and he became aware that his shirt, soaked with sweat, was sticking to his back. The drawing was at his feet. Mrs. Bradshaw had said nothing more. She was looking past him, out

the window, and she seemed almost to be smiling. The door opened, and Royce stepped in, followed by Wilma. She was carrying a heavy gray ledger book, but one hand was at her throat, holding the little cross. Her face was white, frightened.

Scared.

Betrayal. Betrayal!

He looked to the window, outside to the red scars where the dark cedars, the eternal evergreens, had been uprooted, then to the sign with OPAL BRADSHAW AVENUE on it in bright fresh green letters; and he realized that she too was looking at it, that the old woman was smiling and looking at the spring-green letters singing forever in the parching July sun.

He spread his arms as if in benediction and bent over her like a twisted dry tree. He clenched his fists and bent to her, screaming, "Don't you know they'll change the name of that street when you're dead? They'll change it to something else, whatever they need, don't you know that? You old fool, you fool--"

He could hear Wilma crying, and he felt Royce's plumb arms lock around his waist and begin to pull him away, felt Wilma tugging at his arm, but he bent toward her and screamed, "You fool of an old woman, what you have thrown away, don't you know, don't you know? Oh, God!"

## EARLY SUMMER, LATE SPRING

During the morning, young Grady Burk drove the wrecker truck in with what was left of a Pontiac sedan. He parked it just off the highway, S.H. 217, in front of the white frame house and went inside for a late breakfast.

There were patches of dry grass and sandburs in front of the house, and next to it was a sheet-metal building with a large sliding door and a smaller door over which dangled a car hood with OFICE cut into it with an acetylene torch. Spreading up the sandy slopes behind the buildings were wrecked cars, yellow school buses, tractors, binders, and black twisted pieces of oil field equipment. Giant pokeweeds had thrust poison roots under the rusting junk, and their green berries glistened when the leaves flapped in the wind.

It had been a short haul for Grady. During the night the big gray car had come up the road from Minnekah toward Rollins, passed Burk's Auto Salvage, roared down the long hill to the Cimarron River, and hit the concrete guard rail on the bridge. Now it hung from the wrecker hook, the frame buckled, rear deck popped open, engine smashed back into the passenger compartment. The top had been cut away from the doorposts, and the steering column, the wheel bent down around it like a wilted flower, angled over into the back seat.

* * * * *

Nancy Tucker went swimming with her tall brothers in the pond in Langdon's pasture. Their house was in the southeast corner of Minnekah, the last street, and all they had to do was climb through the barbed-wire fence and run down the green hill. The pond was muddy from the rains, and there were snakes and turtles, but they preferred it to the Minnekah swimming pool. They put on cut-off jeans, Nancy wore one of the boys' old T-shirts, and they had a good time. Sometimes the play got too rough, when the boys threw mud or ducked each other, and Nancy would leave. She was not a tomboy. She was small-boned, and the boys if they wanted to could pick her up and throw her in the water. She had just turned fourteen, and during the winter she had begun to fill out so that by spring she looked womanish, but she ran through the thick sweet grass with her brothers, down the hill past the grazing cows. She played in the pond and sometimes helped the boys catch crawdads with bacon rind tied to a string; but she was afraid of their pinchers and would not touch them.

In April Paul Sanders came up to Minnekah to stay with his parents for a while. He had been roughnecking with Red Man Drilling down in Texas, but the company was between jobs. His parents' house was on the same block with the Tuckers'. It was like the other houses, except that it was set on a little knoll, a bit higher; a wooden porch faced the street, and the house extended straight back with two tracks alongside leading to a dirt-floor garage. Paul had worked for Red Man for two years, since he had gotten out of school.

He could see the blue sheen of the Langdon pond from the back yard, and in a day or two he went down the green hill to join Nancy

and her brothers. At first they resented his intruding, but they got used to him. He was much stronger than Nancy's brothers, but shorter; Nancy admired the way he could swing far out on the rope tied to the branch of the big elm tree before dropping in the water with a tremendous splash. He had shiny black hair that he slicked back over his head with both hands after he dove; his eyebrows were black and heavy, and the long, straight vein on his upper arm stood out rigidly when he gripped the rope. He watched Nancy when she came up out of the water, but she played with the boys and laughed as always.

After a race (Paul almost let her win), he pushed his hair back, watching her come up out of the water, and asked her to go with him to the drive-in movie at Bramwell. His voice was hoarse from shouting in the water games, and he asked her quickly before her brothers reached the edge.

Her father said, "Hell, I don't see why she can't go. Hell, Paul's just like one of the family. He's all right. Hell, it ain't like they're going half way around the damned world." Her father worked in the oil fields, too.

Her mother compressed her lips and said, "I don't want her going out yet. Not yet." But Nancy pleaded, and she finally gave in.

Nancy was shy, but she tried to break the silence on the way to Bramwell, asked about his job, talked about kids she knew. He answered in monosyllables, driving the big Pontiac too fast, whipping it around other cars too closely. At the drive-in he bought two Cokes and poured whiskey in them. She couldn't drink hers because it was too strong. He made her sit close to him and she felt important, grown up. The movie was funny, and she laughed and laughed

at the crazy things the actors were doing on the big screen. Paul finished his drink and then took hers and drank it, too.

On the way back he turned off on a dirt road outside of Minnekah, almost sliding the car into a ditch but righting it with a burst of acceleration, and then onto a pump-station road in a pasture. There were cattle and a few horses grazing together on the dew-soaked grass, and when the gray sedan broke through them the startled horses reared and whinnied and then raced along beside it until it stopped. They circled nervously in front of the car, flashes of white and palomino and buckskin, but when Paul turned off the lights they went back to their grazing. Paul had his arm around Nancy, and he gripped her shoulder hard and twisted her sharply down into the seat. Her head was against the cold metal of the armrest, and she was pinched under the steering wheel. She saw the stars over the slant of the steering column, and she tried to push him away, but she made no sound.

When he drove out of the pasture, the horses and cows were bunched at the cattle guard, staring dumbly into the headlights, and he urged the car against them, nudged them aside, to get out on the road. He drove into town, let her out on the street before her house, and gunned the car away. She was scared, very scared in the darkness, and the wooden support post on the porch felt unfamiliar, but she did not cry. She leaned against the post and watched the red tail-lights disappear and listened to the sound of the car fade out, and then she heard the frogs at the pond, a nighthawk booming over the wet pasture, the flit of a bat's wings above the porch. She did not cry until many weeks later when her mother struck her again and again until she was tired.

Her mother's hand whipped across, burning, hard; when Nancy covered her face she slapped her forearms.

"How long?" she whispered.

"How long?" Her lips in her small tiangular face were pursed and shriveled and dry.

"How long has it been?"

She did not swim in the pond in June and July, in the hot months when the rain did not fall. When she finally came down the brown hill in August, she did not run. She wore sunglasses and a new bathing suit the color of corn plants burnt in the August heat, her hair was longer, and she walked with an exaggerated writhing motion that seemed to come up out of the ground. Her brothers were in the water with Paul, and they shouted for her to join them but she only smiled, not looking at them or away from them, and spread a towel and lay down on it. Small rainless clouds sifted by, tracing patterns on the brown grass and crusted earth, and as the shadows and the light came to her she seemed to move within them.

The pond had shrunk away from the big elm so that the boys could not use the rope any more. They had thrown it up over the branch, among the yellowed leaves. The cows stood in the patchy shade of the tree, their ribs showing, their eyes dull and unseeing.

She knew Paul watched her from the water, but she did not look at him. At last he came up out of the shallow pond to her in his cut-off jeans, and she turned on her side, smiling, to watch him. His feet were muddy, and he kept shifting his stance; he could not match his hoarse dark words to her new light and shadow fullness, her unshared smile. He stammered, and she smiled in his weakness, her

strength. She sat up and began putting sun tan lotion on, bending before him to cover her legs; as he watched her, dark eyes under heavy brows, she held out her arms in turn and kneaded in the clear oil with long strokes, so that her skin glistened in the light. At the top of the hill, her mother stood watching by the fence in the sun, standing among the dry sunflowers in the fencerow. He did not see her mother, but Nancy knew she was there. He did not go back in the water.

He was surprised when she agreed to let him take her out again, and he was nervous as he waited before the house while Nancy and her mother talked behind the screen door, seeing Nancy nod as her mother talked. In the gray car, he was afraid to touch her with his calloused, clumsy hands, and when he talked he was shy and bumbling. As he drove toward Bramwell, driving so slowly they could hear the dry song of the locusts in the withered sumac branches, he looked at her in wonder at her cool sureness, her secret smile.

They were married in September, in the Methodist Church. Paul, stiff in his tight-fitting graduation suit, stood beside Nancy's tall brothers waiting for her, and when she came he could not take his eyes from her, her slenderness and fullness. Nancy's father gave her away as her mother watched behind them, and they were married.

They rented an odd little house at the south end of Main Street, near the foot of the hill where the street suddenly dead-ends and cars must turn around. The house was about the size and shape of a Pullman car, and it was set into the slope, below street level. Nancy's mother helped her gather a few odds and ends of furniture and gave her thriving potted plants of all kinds, flowers with great,

waxy leaves, or heart-shaped leaves that were finely veined, or slender, feather-like leaves of many colors, and herbs such as basil and thyme; and she and Paul moved in.

said the baby Ruthie was going to look like Nancy. Paul and the baby played together for hours on the floor in the narrow, dark living room, the rattling cooler blowing moistly over them. Sometimes both stopped to watch Nancy going back and forth from the tiny kitchen to the bedroom, her smooth, shining legs, the liquid motion of her body, the bright dancing earrings, her gleaming yellow hair swinging soft down her back. She always smiled, but Paul did not understand that smile.

Sometimes young men, Grady Burk and others, honked as they turned around on the street above the house, and Paul did not like that. But Nancy only smiled and moved in her supple rhythm to the music from the radio in the kitchen. She would pick up Ruthie's doll and straighten its clothing, lean it back until its eyes clicked shut, and then whisper secretly in its ear as she watched Paul. He did not like the bright cars honking, and when the baby called to him or grasped his fingers he forgot; and when Nancy lay on the brown couch and stretched and turned, warm and sleepy, round hip rising incredibly from her tiny waist, he forgot the cars. And she would pick up the doll and smile, great green eyes under long lashes looking down at him.

Sometimes when Paul called long-distance Nancy would not be home; then he would call her mother, who would explain in a voice that rustled like straw that Nancy was probably working in the Home Cafe or perhaps had gone for a Coke with a girl friend. So Paul would talk--or try to talk--to Ruthie, now eighteen months old. Paul was afraid of Nancy's mother.

When his drilling crew was between jobs, he came home and Nancy made him take her to the dances at Rollins or Rigton, to the dance halls with their yellow neon signs gleaming in the night. He did not like the way other men smiled at her, and she at them, or the way her swaying body tempered the awkward movements of her tall blond partners, forcing them to yield to her insistent strength. Men whispered to her, he knew, and twice she somehow disappeared with Grady Burk for half an hour or more. But when he confronted her, darkly angry and a bit drunk, he could get nothing from her. She would not explain, she would not be angered. She moved to the music like a breeze-rippled willow and beckoned him to dance with her. And he did, heavy-browed and sullen and stiff, until her rhythm caught him and made him forget everything but her.

When Paul came home in August at the end of the second year of their marriage, driving up from Texas on the narrow highway lined with brown sunflowers, their house was empty. He went to find Nancy at her parents' place, and she told him from behind the locked screen door, Ruthie peeking around her legs, that she had filed for divorce. Later, back in the dark house he called her, crying over the telephone, "Please come home, come on home. What did I do?" He stared out the tiny kitchen window. The flowers in the clay pots on the sill were all dead, the large waxen leaves curled black and stiff, the brown leaves of the basil plant scattered in the sink.

"What will I do?"

"That's your problem," Nancy said.

He could not bear to stay in the little coffin-shaped house, but he kept coming back to it. He called on the telephone, but

Nancy would not talk to him, nor would she come to the door when he went to the Tucker house. When Red Man called him back to work, he refused to go and lost his job. He drank at the bars around town, and he heard that Nancy was going out with other men, Grady Burk and Bud Wallace and even Harley Fultz the night watchman, that she had been seen with many men, ever since Ruthie had been born.

He sat in the bar at Ralph's Junction, just north of Minnekah, and talked to Nancy's father, who said, "You know I'd help you if I could, Paul. But I don't understand her or her mother. I never have. I wish I did. I'm sorry, Paul."

He saw Nancy with Grady Burk one evening, smiling and riding with the tall, handsome Grady in his sky-blue convertible, laughing and holding out her arms as if she were flying with Grady through the shimmering hot August air. That night he drank heavily at the bar at the junction. He sat in the red glow of the bar lights and drank until closing time, and he cursed the bartender and tried to fight him when he was pushed out the red-lit door.

The car threw gravel as it spun out from in front of the bar. Turning onto S.H. 217, it leaned dangerously to the right, tires pulling shrilly at the pavement, then swerved into the middle of the road as it headed east toward Rollins. It was about 1 a.m. The gray sedan whined past the dead weeds leaning out over the road, past the yardlights at the farmhouses that glittered in the night.

He was crying, drunk and crying, hunched darkly over the steering wheel with the wind screaming past the open windows. He was driving down the center line coming over the hill above the bridge. The headlights picked up a blurry white spot on the right entrance of the

bridge, and if he had been going a little slower and had been a little less drunk he would have read CIMARRON RIVER just before the car veered into the sign and the concrete guard rail behind it.

* * * * *

Nancy and her mother backed the pickup down the slope to the little house at the end of Main Street and loaded the furniture themselves, even the heavy mattress, shooing Ruthie out of the way. Her mother hesitated about the brown couch with the stuffing coming out, decided it was worthless, and left it with the beer cans, scattered copies of the Minnekah Beacon, and other trash. She left it for Old Lady Bradshaw, the landlady, to clean out. They made one last tour of the house, looking for anything worth saving. Nancy's mother was nearly as small as she was and wore Capri pants the color of ripe wheat. She had on sunglasses with large slanted teardrop-shaped plastic rims, and she kept them on even in the house.

When they left, not bothering to close the door, they drove out to Ralph's Junction and turned toward Rollins. It was a cool day for a change, and even though the sun was directly overhead the cows were out grazing on the slopes, finding something to eat where the grass seemed brown and dead. They passed a field where a farmer was mowing the purple-blooming alfalfa and leaving it in long, straight windrows to cure, and a farmhouse where an old woman was putting in a fall garden. She was on her knees, planting, and she looked up as they drove by. Farther on, a man and woman stacking cantaloupes and watermelons at their roadside stand waved to them.

Nancy's mother drove the pickup slowly back over the Cimarron River bridge. They had been in to Rollins to the Dairy-Freeze. Nancy and her mother sucked slowly at straws stuck in grape slushes,

and Ruthie, on the seat between them, was making a mess of a chocolate cone and staring straight ahead at the chrome grill of the radio speaker. As the pickup neared the end of the bridge, they looked again at the sheared concrete posts, the traces of gray paint, the broken glass in the puddles of oil.

They stopped at Burk's Auto Salvage. Grady Burk had been acting as a tour guide for the curious all morning, and when he saw who it was he hurried out to meet them.

"They had to cut the roof off to get him out," Grady said. The steering post's what killed him. Went clear through him." Nancy and her mother studied the crushed metal. Grady spat into the brown pokeweed, grinned at Nancy, and strutted around the wreck, pointing out the blown tires, the fragments of the radiator. His hands were greasy, and when he ran his fingers through his blond hair he left black streaks in it.

When her mother wasn't looking, he caught Nancy by the hip and tried to pull her to him, but she spun away and said, "Stop it! Mother, make him stop it!"

"Leave her alone," Nancy's mother said. "Get on back to your work. Do you hear?" Grady backed away and then hurried into the sheet-metal building.

running down the green hill brothers' arms and legs whirling wild the feel of the warm black mud smooth Daddy swings me over his head flying out on the knotted rope kersplash! bike riding under the shady sycamores drinking cold pop the water's cold then warmer than the air sometimes I get goosebumps and turn bluish screaming in the water games and my dolls too oh Mother Mommy

At her mother's command, Nancy held Ruthie astraddle her hip and wiped the chocolate from her face and shirt. Nancy was wearing cut-off jeans, and when she finished with Ruthie, she picked up the baby's doll, tilted it so its eyes snapped shut, and then tucked it carefully under her arm. She took a long pull at the straw in her icy drink.

The clouds overhead looked as though they had rain in them.

"Anyway," Cloy said, "we got him loaded up and I started for town, driving pretty slow because of course they haven't graded the roads out there. I could've gone west to the highway, one-twenty-eight, because Amos's--I mean Mr. Evers's feedlots are only two miles off it, you know, but I drove south instead because I like to go by my place everwhen I can, the quarter I bought off the bank last year. Well, I was driving slow, and I could kind of see the line of his nose against the sheet we put over him--God, he did a job on himself, Ab; it was a mess, I'm telling you--I could kind of see the line of his nose sticking up, and it made me feel funny. It ain't that I ain't used to it; hell, I been hauling dead people around for eleven going on twelve years now, ever since the War, you know that. But it's a little different with Amos Evers, at least for me it is. It's just like this business of bringing old Cantwell over from Rollins to do the work on him; it's the only time I ever had somebody else do it for me since I bought this place, except for when I had pneumonia. I even worked on my Uncle Grady, remember? And on Mary's cousin that was killed in the car wreck, too; but I'm not going to work on Amos Evers. I'm not going in there to see if Cantwell needs help or can find everything, or anything.

"Well, I was driving slow, and I saw the derrick lights on that oil rig on over east--that's the one I was asking Rufus Tucker about tonight at the birthday party. I didn't tell Rufus, but I'll tell

you, I got a couple shares in that hole, and so does Amos Evers, or he did, anyway. He had about ten times as much in it as I did. I learned a long time ago, if Amos Evers puts money in it, you better believe it's going to pay. Well, I could see how the sheet went down over his nose--pour me a little more of that, would you?--and I saw them derrick lights over there, and I got to thinking about how much money Amos--Mr. Evers--has made over the years buying and selling royalty on the side, doing it so easy, you know, leasing it up off these farmers for nothing or next to nothing and then peddling it to the oil companies, or not peddling it really, just sitting on it till they come begging. Most of these dumb farmers never did know, and as far as that goes, don't know now, what their royalty is worth. And that's between you, me, and the fence post, Ab Johnson; I've been buying and selling a few leases myself lately. Well, I got to thinking about all the money he's made that way, and of course you know the land on both sides of that road for a couple miles is his; there's not a green tree left on it, except at the ponds; he's had all the blackjacks and cedars and cottonwoods bulldozed out and filled the gullies full with them, and planted ever inch of it with Bermuda grass; it's just as smooth now, you could see a coyote or jackrabbit a half mile away, except you're not going to see nothing out there but them yellow crossbreed cows of his, and <u>that's</u> nothing but smart either, let me tell you; they'll make more money per pound of feed then anything else; they'll eat that Bermuda grass right down to the ground and under it, if you'll let them.

"Well, anyway, I got to thinking about all that and how he got the distribution here for Red Man Oil by marrying Ethel--

Mrs. Evers--; now, I'm not saying he married her way back when just to get Red Man, though lots of people said it then, but you can't deny he did get it, and it was her old man's, old Cargill's; and I got to thinking about how ever other soul in town and this half the county for that matter owes him money at the hardware store--it's true, you know; hell, even Mary and I still owe him a little on that deepfreeze we got, and on the television, too, and I know what he gets for interest on them installment payments. But I'd got everything tied up in that quarter of land, having it bulldozed off and sprigged to Bermuda grass, and in this old house, moving the funeral business in here and moving us in upstairs, and we needed them things, so I bought 'em on time. All the time thinking I ought to be charging somebody else interest instead of paying it. And I will, too. But I got to thinking about Red Man and the hardware and his renthouses and tenant farmers, the ones he hasn't turned off, and how he's got Larry Starks and a lot of other people working seven days a week for him--damn, what's that old fool doing in there? Sounds like he's tearing the place apart."

"You could just go in and see," Ab said.

"No, sir, I'm not about to go in there, not till he's finished, not till he finishes and Mr. Evers has on that tie and diamond tie clasp, and that brand new green suit Ethel--I mean Mrs. Evers--bought him for his birthday. Do you know what that suit cost her? Pour me a little more of that, would you? Linda Sue told me when she brought it down tonight. They had it tailor-made in Dallas, and they had to order it in January, two months ago. Ethel gave it to him this morning, and he was supposed to wear it tonight. It cost

her three hundred and fifty dollars. Three hundred-and-fifty-dollars. I didn't know you could pay that much for a suit, even if it was gold-plated, by God. Three hundred and fifty dollars. Anyway, where was I?"

"You were going to drive past your quarter, Cloy."

"And I got to thinking about all them things, and about how much money he must be making; you just can't imagine, Ab, how much he must be taking in, and how everwhat he says goes in this town, like when he told the city commissioners to put Harley Fultz on as night watchman, and they didn't want to do it; Harley's daddy Roy being town constable wasn't any reason for it, they said; so he made three telephone calls--that's what I heard, three calls, and you probably did, too--and in half an hour they held an emergency meeting and voted three to two to hire him. And he didn't give a damn whether Harley Fultz lived or died or joined the Marines, he just did it because Linda Sue asked him to. And that's another thing, too: you and me both know it's no secret in Minnekah what's been going on with them two for at least two years now. Birdie Dawes told Mary--don't let this go no further, Birdie'd lose her job certain if it got out she told it--Birdie said they'd be back in that office of his sometimes two-three hours at a stretch, and when Linda Sue'd come out she'd be just as cool and chirping the way she does; but like Birdie said, Wilma Klepmann never spent no more than ten minutes, let alone two hours, when she went back there, before Linda Sue took over her job. And I'll tell you what I think about that, just to be plain damn honest about it, and if you say I said it tomorrow I'll call you a liar--just cover the bottom of my cup while you're at it, would

you? I'll tell you what I think: I say so what? so what the damn hell? Here's a man can do everwhat the hell he wants to, in this town, or everwhere else, as far as that goes, and if he wants to get a little off of Larry Starks's wife without making no fuss about it, so what the damn hell? That's what I think. And who's to blame Linda Sue Fultz, either? Who's to blame her?"

"Starks."

"Linda Sue Starks, I mean. I've known her since she was five or six years old. Who's to blame her? Living out there on that damn red-dirt quarter, they ain't a bushel of topsoil on the whole place--"

"I mean Larry. What about him? He's to blame her, isn't he?"

"Well, maybe so, but if he knows anything about it or thinks anything, he keeps pretty much mum as far as I know, and who's going to say anything to him? Who's going to tell him? Maybe he knows--"

"I doubt it."

"--and maybe he knows damn well what've happened if she hadn't. Amos could've snapped that quarter back up at least three times back in fifty-four and fifty-five, you and me both know that for a fact, and like I say it ain't no secret why he didn't. And Larry Starks ain't the brightest young man in the world either, so like you say maybe he don't know what's been going on, and I say, so what the hell? A man like Amos Evers can do everwhat he wants to, I say; he's got a <u>right</u> to do it, it almost seems to me like. And <u>that's</u> why, don't you see, when I was driving along real slow and come to my quarter out there on that dirt road, it must've been after eleven then--"

Rufus Tucker opened the door and said, "What the hell is going on here, anyway?"

"We're having an Irish wake," Ab said.

"What's that?" asked Cloy. "Pour me a little more there, would you? Help yourself, Rufus. Use one of them coffee cups on the counter there."

Ab said, "Thought you were working graveyard tonight."

"I was supposed to." Rufus spun a kitchen chair around and straddled it backwards, resting the cup with whiskey in it on one of his bony knees. "I was supposed to, but I drank a little too much of Amos Evers's birthday punch and got out of the mood for it. I noticed you was helping yourself there too, Mr. Abner Johnson. That was pretty good stuff, that pretty red punch was. And Mr. Up-and-coming-citizen Ikard was drinking a little of it, too."

"What're you wearing your hardhat for, if you're not going to work?" Ab asked.

"That's to keep Mama happy. She's happier if she thinks I'm working."

"Then she's not had too many happy days in the last twenty-five years, has she?"

"You're one to talk, sitting on you ass down at the cafe while your old lady runs the place." Rufus took a cigarette from Ab's pack on the table and lit it. "What was you going on about when I came in, Cloy?"

"You're right, Rufus," Cloy said, "It was good punch. Everything was good, everything was fine. It was the damnedest birthday party, dinner, everwhat you want to call it, this town ever seen.

Ain't it a shame? It was . . . elegant, by damn!"

"Easy, Cloy. You'll wake up Mary and the kids upstairs," Ab said.

"They sleep at the other end of the house. Let's have some more of that. Why, hell, Rufus, you finished it. You took it all, damn it!"

"I got a pint out in the car. Just take it easy. I'll get it."

"None of that moonshine stuff. None of that poison," Ab said.

"No, hell, no, this come straight special delivery from Arkansas City, Kansas. Why, hell, it's practically legal. I'll be right back."

When they had poured whiskey in their cups from the new bottle, Ab said, "Now, Cloy, get on with it."

"Well, when the doctor'd left--he had the easy job, it wasn't any trick to see Amos was dead--then the medical examiner said he had all he needed, and he left, and then the sheriff took that custom-made Belgium shotgun of Amos's, for evidence, he said, and he left, and then we got him all loaded up, and I started driving for town, driving real slow--"

"He couldn't find his ass with both hands with that fancy shotgun," Rufus said, "He let me go out bird hunting with him on his place last fall, mainly because I got a good dog. I told him, I said, 'Now I know why they call that thing an over-under; you're either shooting over 'em or under 'em all the time.' He couldn't hit the broad side of a red barn from the inside with that thing."

"Maybe not, but he sure hit his head from the inside. Now come on, Cloy."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that. Well, I was driving slow like I said, and come to my quarter, and I could see in the mirror the sheet where it went over his head--"

Rufus said, "Bald as an eagle, the fat old son of a bitch."

"I won't have you talking about him like that in here, Rufus! Hell, man, have a little respect, can't you? He's in the next room."

"He wasn't that old," Ab said, "He's the same age as me, just a week older. His birthday is the twenty-first of March--"

"Damn, Cloy, what's that noise in there? Is somebody in there with him?"

"That's old Cantwell, from Rollins. I wish to hell he'd hurry up."

"His is the twenty-first, mine's the twenty-eighth. We're both fifty years old this month."

"I keep thinking I smell formaldehyde. Is this one of them tables you use, with the gutters on it? Jesus!"

"Be quiet, Rufus. Damn it, Cloy, tell it!"

"So like I said, I got to thinking about all that, about all Amos had and the things he could do and Linda Sue Starks, the way he sort of had a right with her, you know, and--"

"That's what I always hated. That's what always bothered me, the idea of that damned old hog--"

"Stop that, Rufus!"

"--with her, she's so slim and pretty; there ain't but one woman in this town prettier than Linda Sue Starks, and that's your own wife, Cloy, your little Mary, the prettiest and sweetest of them all. But that always made me sick to my stomach, the idea of them--

and I'll tell you something else, it don't make me think a whole hell of a lot of Larry Starks, either."

"Maybe he never figured it out," Ab said.

"That still don't raise him any notches in my book. Is he that dumb? I know he's not the sharpest fellow around, but is he that dumb? Christ! And I'll tell you somebody else that don't come out any too good in this deal, and that's Harley Fultz. Now there ain't no <u>way</u> he couldn't have known, even if he <u>is</u> dumb, and he is, for sure. He's had the night watchman job for--Oh, hell, for a year and a half now, and you can't tell me <u>he</u> ain't seen Linda Sue's car down there late at night, snugged in down there with Amos's behind the hardware; he's seen it, he's got to have seen it; hell, I've seen it there a dozen times myself, just going out to work."

Ab said, "That's a little out of your road, isn't it? The alley behind the hardware, I mean. But just tell me: what would you have him do? The boy Harley I mean; what's he supposed to do about it? Shoot Amos? or preach him a sermon? or spank Linda Sue? She's free, white, and over twenty-one, and a damn sight smarter'n he is; what's he supposed to do about it? He owes his job to Amos, and to Linda Sue, and God knows it's a sorry one, but it's better'n anything else he could get. What's he supposed to do?"

"Well, hell, I don't know--." A short, stocky old man opened the door and came in from the next room. He stopped in front of Cloy while he buttoned a brown sweater.

"All done," he said.

"Thanks a lot, Mr. Cantwell." Cloy weaved a bit as he stood up. "I'll mail you a check."

Cantwell took his hat from a shelf by the door, put it on, and opened the door just as a young man wearing a policeman's cap, khaki shirt, and blue jeans raised his fist to knock. The old man grunted in surprise, then stepped past him and disappeared in the dark.

"Well, hell, come in, come in, Harley," Rufus said, "You're just in time to arrest three outstanding citizens of Minnekah, caught with the evidence, caught with an open bottle of intoxicating liquor. Have a drink, Harley."

"I guess I better not tonight, Rufus." He hitched the heavy cartridge belt and holster higher on his hip and leaned against the door frame, thumbs hooked in his front pockets.

"Wish you'd hang that cap over that big brass badge. It hurts my eyes," Rufus said.

"How are things down at the hardware store?" Ab asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, are Linda Sue and Mrs. Evers still down there? I heard they went straight down there from the birthday supper, soon as they heard. Down to his office, I mean."

"They was still down there a little while ago."

Rufus said, "How's she taking it? Ethel Evers, I mean."

"I haven't seen her, exactly. Larry's waiting out in the car for them. He said she's all right."

"Linda Sue all right too, I s'pose?"

"I s'pose so."

"They wasn't any note by the body out there, was they? Anything Amos wrote?"

"None that I know of. What for?"

"Why, hell," Rufus said, "You know, a suicide note, they call it; something that tells why he did it."

"Not that I know of. Larry says Linda Sue told him the sheriff might decide to call it an accident."

Ab laughed. "Accident? A man goes to his house, picks up his shotgun three months out of bird season, drives out to his hay barn in the country, sits down on a bale of hay and blows his brains out? That's an accident?"

"Well, I'm just telling you what I heard from Larry. Anyway, what's the use of calling it the other? Whose business is it? It could have been an accident. Larry says Linda Sue and Mrs. Evers is going to make old Winkler say in the paper it was an accident, anyway." He hitched his belt again. "And that's just about good enough for me."

"Let me have a little more of that," Cloy said.

"It's good enough for you, true or not," Ab said.

"It's good enough for me. I ain't got no call to say anything different."

"Course you haven't, Harley," Ab said. "Any way, by the time the paper comes out next Thursday the news will be a week old and nobody will care if Winkler does lie about it. Cloy, get on with your story. It's going to be daylight pretty soon."

Harley said, "Larry was sitting out in his car when I drove up while ago, and he was eating something. So I said, 'Larry what're you eating?' And he looked kind of funny at me and says, 'Why, I'm eating some of Mr. Evers's birthday cake, I guess. Linda Sue told me to pick

it up and put it in the car; no use wasting it, she said. But you know,' he said to me, 'You know, them people ate a bunch of it, about half of it. Ain't that funny? Because you and me went in there and told Linda Sue and got Mr. Ikard and broke up that party before they'd cut the cake. Ain't it funny that a bunch of it was gone?' So I said, 'Yeah, Larry, that sure is funny,' and I stood there with him and ate a piece of the cake with him and we talked about it. It is funny, ain't it?"

"Everything was elegant at that dinner," Cloy said, "They had that cake baked in Bramwell, and it was beautiful, in my book. They paid fifty-five dollars to have it baked and layered and iced up like that. Green icing with gold letters: 'Amos Evers, Five Decades in Minnekah, March 21, 1907, March 21, 1957'; that's what it said. That was a beautiful cake, gentlemen. It was elegant. Linda Sue told me it weighed fifteen pounds."

Ab said, "Damn it, Cloy, tell your story. Please tell it. I got to get some sleep."

"Well," Cloy said, "Harley came in to the Methodist Fellowship Hall where the party was and got me, while Larry was taking Linda Sue outside to tell her, you see, so she could break it to Mrs. Evers; they'd just finished serving out the barbecued beef to everybody--"

"Every time you start over you go backwards, damn it. Now pick it up where you stopped at your quarter with him."

"I got to go," Harley said, opening the door.

"What'd you come for in the first place?" Rufus asked.

"Why, I got to patrol, ain't I? I just saw your cars outside and

the lights on, that's all. What're you doing here, anyway? Getting drunk?"

"I'm on my way to work."

"Shit." He stepped out and closed the door.

They were quiet until they heard the engine of the patrol car start and move away, and then Rufus said, "Why'd he do it, do you s'pose?"

"Do what?" Cloy asked.

"Why, shoot himself, what else?"

"I thought about that. There's only one answer." Cloy said; "He must have found out he had an uncurable disease. Something really terrible, cancer or something. That's my answer."

"Oh, hell, Cloy," Rufus said, "You don't believe that. He might've weighed two hundred and sixty pounds and smoked three packs of cigarettes a day, but he wasn't sick. There wasn't anything wrong with him. He ain't spent a day in a hospital in his life. I'll tell you what it was, and we all know it for a fact. He killed himself because of Linda Sue Starks."

"No! No, he didn't! How can that be? Hell, he same as owned her, just like a--car, or something. There's no earthly reason why he would kill himself over her; she was like his slave, kind of. When he said frog, by God, she jumped."

"Not lately," Ab said, "Not for the last three or four months."

"That's right," Rufus said, "Birdie Dawes's been saying they've been hearing a new song back there in that damned old dark office of his. The old son of a bitch has--"

"Don't say that!"

"--has been doing a little begging for his own for a change, Birdie says, and she may talk too much, but she generally knows. She told Ruby he'd call Linda Sue back there all the time, but she'd never stay no more'n two or three minutes. And Birdie said when he'd call her, she'd answer pretty damned snippy, too."

"And her car hasn't been parked back behind the hardware at night, either," Ab said.

"That's a little out of your way, too, ain't it?"

"I heard it wasn't. I haven't been going back there to look."

"Maybe his old lady finally got something on him. He's had her scared to death of him for thirty years, almost. Maybe she got something on him. Maybe she found out about Linda Sue."

"He wouldn't care. That wouldn't make a damn to him."

Cloy said, "That's right. Nobody was going to push him around."

"That wouldn't make a damn to him," Ab said, "She's found out about his little side trips before, and he just told her to go to hell when she said something. You ought to know that, Rufus. Remember what they said about Hellie."

Rufus poured an inch of whiskey in his cup. "Let's don't bring my sister into this. That was twenty-five years ago, in the first place, and in the second place I don't give a good God-damn what she did or didn't do with Amos Evers, anyway."

"What a man he was," Cloy said, "Nobody pushed Amos P. Evers around."

"I don't think Ethel Evers was smart enough to get anything on him, period," Ab said, "It had to be Linda Sue."

There was a knock on the door, and Rufus said, "Come in!" Larry

Starks, still wearing his blue jeans and work shirt from the previous day, opened the door and stepped in.

"Good morning, Larry!" Rufus said. "Have a drink. I bet you could use it."

"No, no thanks," he said, "I was just looking for Harley, and saw your lights. He didn't come by here, did he?"

"He was here, maybe ten minutes ago," Ab said.

"Linda Sue wanted me to find him; I don't know what for."

Ab said, "Say, Larry, it was old man Pritchard, that lives across the road, that found Amos, was it?"

"Yeah, he seen Mr. Evers drive in, and he heard the shot and went over to look. He came up to the feedlots and caught me just as I was leaving for town. I was supposed to be at the birthday supper, but we'd had some calves sick and the vet got out there late. I didn't believe Mr. Pritchard. I thought he was crazy. Mr. Evers'd never been near that hay barn before, so far as I know."

"How's Mrs. Evers? and Linda Sue?"

"She's all right now, I guess. She got pretty hysterical when Linda Sue told her." He paused to push his glasses up on his nose. There was a trace of green cake frosting on his cheek. "You know, I know it's right, now I think about it, what to do when someone gets hysterical, but it sure scared me when it happened. Linda Sue took Mrs. Evers into the church, out of the Fellowship Hall, to tell her, you know, and she got all excited and started to talk real high. She said 'Where is he? Where is he?' She kept saying 'Where is he?' and I said, 'He's not here, Mrs. Evers. He's gone up to heaven.' And all of a sudden Linda just slapped her. She slapped her real hard,

and she said, 'Shut up. Just shut up, Ethel.' She said, 'Just shut up, Ethel, and go get in the car.' I couldn't believe it was Linda Sue talking. I never heard her call Mrs. Evers Ethel in my life. And she told her to shut up, too!"

"Just told her to shut up, did she?" Rufus said.

"Pour me a little more of that," Cloy said.

Ab held his cup out to Rufus, who had a firm grip on the bottle. "But Linda Sue's all right, is she?"

Larry smiled. "Yeah, she's fine, Ab. Ain't she something? She's just as calm. She's something, ain't she? And we just found out this morning, or yesterday morning, I guess I ought to say, about her going to have a baby, too. She's got a head on her, I mean to say. She's way ahead of me, I mean to tell you. Well," he turned to the door, "I got to find Harley. I don't know why she wants him, but you can bet she's got a reason!"

As the door closed behind Larry, Rufus said, "I'll be damned. A new addition to the Starks tribe. That'll give 'em three little ones, won't it?"

"Nobody, nobody ever pushed Amos P. Evers around," Cloy said. He was peering into his cup. "Nobody. She wouldn't of dared said that to Amos Evers's wife when he was alive."

Ab nodded and said, "That's right. Three it'll make." He sipped from his cup and stood up, walked to the window and looked out into the dark. "I believe it's getting a little lighter in the east now. When was it the Evers baby died? The little adopted boy. Five years ago?"

"About that. You better go easy on that, Cloy. You better not put away so much so fast."

"They say it's the only time he ever cried in his life, when that baby died. I didn't see him. If he did cry, it's for damned sure the only time."

Ab came back to his chair and sat down. He pushed his cup over by the bottle on the table.

"That's all I want. I've had too much now." He leaned his chair back. "And Linda Sue's expecting."

Rufus looked at him. "Damn! I'll be damned! You're not thinking that's Amos's, are you?"

Cloy roused up and said, "Of course it is, and I say, so what the hell if it is? Amos P. by God Evers is a man can do everwhat the hell he wants to do--"

"No," Ab said, "It wasn't his. I'd bet on it. That was his problem; that's why he's here."

"Was, Cloy," Rufus said, holding the bottle up to the light and squinting at it, "Was, you mean. He can't do nothing no more. Was. He's in there, deader'n a doornail. I don't see what you mean, Ab. Maybe it ain't his, but that still don't explain to me--"

"Was is right. It was the last chance for the old bastard."

"Don't talk like that!"

"I thought you said he wasn't old."

Ab reached over and put his hand over Cloy's cup. "You better lay off that stuff. Now why don't you finish that story while you're still able?"

Cloy blinked and finally focused on Ab. He stood up, kicking his chair over.

"Where was I?"

"You'd just stopped on the road in front of your quarter."

"So I got out of the hearse--next year, by God, you wait and see, I'm going to have a Cadillac instead of that Pontiac, that damned old purple wreck--I got out, and I walked around behind it and opened the door wide open, and I saw he was wearing them custom-made yellow Justin boots he always has made up, with them green trousers still stuck down inside 'em, and of course they was dirty; seventy-five-dollar boots with cowshit on them, that's Amos P. Evers for you, by God; and I looked out at my quarter, I still owe for most of it, I even got a second mortgage on it, I might just as well tell you; and I thought of all the quarters Amos P. Evers has that is paid for, and many times over, and I thought of his rent houses, and--"

"You told us that."

"And then I told him, by God. I, Cloy Ikard, joint owner with Mary Irene Ikard of Ikard Funeral Home, Minnekah, Oklahoma, by God, told Amos P. Evers several things. I knocked some of that stuff off of his boots with my hand, my bare hand, and then I put my bare hands against the top of the door sill and leaned in over his boots, I could see the line of his nose under the sheet, and I said to him, I said 'You listen to me, Amos P. Evers! This is Cloy Francis Ikard talking to you, and he's going to talk some sense into you, you of all people on the face of God's green earth that shouldn't have to have nobody talk sense into you. Here you been running the biggest store in the state, or anyway in ten counties, for thirty years, and you got Red Man Oil Company, the biggest distributor-distributorship they got, and you own half the damn town, all them renthouses and everything, and you got I don't know how many thousand acres pasture

land with the blackjacks all cleared off and planted to Bermuda grass and them damn big yellow cattle everywhere and the highest-priced registered bull in the county, I know for a fact you turned down a hundred thousand dollars for him and you got him insured for a quarter of a million; you got mortgages on damn near everything you don't already own around here, and you don't never make no less than twelve-fifteen percent on them; you got the biggest house in this town and your wife buys everything she wears in that store, Nieman-Marcus it is, in Dallas, Texas, and you buy a brand new Buick Roadmaster ever year of your life, and that shotgun, that very shotgun you used in that hay barn cost Mrs. Evers, Mrs. Ethel Evers your wife, by God, six hundred and ten dollars, six hundred and ten dollars I know because they showed me the cancelled check at the bank one day; you of all people on this damn earth that ought to know better, that had everything you wanted or could think of to want, that could of had any woman in this town you wanted, Amos P. Evers, any woman at all, by God, the prettiest or the ugliest, old or new, it wouldn't matter, any time everwhen you wanted, even--by God, I'm not afraid to admit it--even my little Mary Irene if you'd wanted, it ain't no secret to me, and there you go, by God, like a common everyday ordinary fool, there you go and get all tied up, all balled up like any damn sidewalk fool over Linda Sue Fultz, Linda Sue Starks, the oldest daughter of that old jackass Roy Fultz, the town constable for Christ's sake, that makes a hundred and eighty dollars a month, I guess I ought to know, I signed the checks when I was town treasurer, yes, by God, Roy Fultz, who comes here from cracker people in Arkansas, from hillbillies that's what they was, and whose brother is night

watchman now and don't even make a hundred and eighty, and you let her get you be the short hairs, how I don't know, by God I don't know how, Amos P. Evers, and you let her get to you and look what you done to yourself, just look! And I got to stand here and talk some sense into you, I, Cloy Francis Ikard, I got to talk sense into you who ain't fit, by God, ain't fit to clean these here yellow boots--"

He jerked the chair up and sat in it, hiding his face in his folded arms on the table.

Rufus said, "Well, Jesus--"

"And I'll tell you something else I did," Cloy said, standing up and knocking the chair over again, "I ate some of that birthday cake of his, too, and I ain't ashamed to say it. I went back down there after I brought him to town, and there wasn't nobody there, and I ate some of his birthday cake and drank some of his red punch, too." He stopped and looked from Rufus to Ab. "I don't feel so good." He went outside, slamming the door behind him.

Rufus picked up the nearly-empty bottle and tilted it toward Ab, who shook his head. He turned it up and finished it in a single nosiy swallow. He fished a cigarette from his shirt pocket, and then a kitchen match from the same place, and lit up.

"Well, Jesus," he said, "Ain't that a lick? Ain't that something? But I'll tell you something, Ab Johnson, just between you and me: I ate some of that cake, too. We was all crowded up against that main table, trying to find out what was happening after Ethel and Linda Sue left, and I saw a lot of people sneaking a piece of it, cutting off a little piece or just taking a chunk with their hands. And so when I

got a chance I did, too."

"I know you did," Ab said. "I saw you. Ain't it a bitch of a life? I took some, too."

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