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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

GO BACK THE WAY YOU CAME:
AN ORIGINAL NOVEL WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
(WRITING IN THE DIRT: A LOOK AT IDENTITY LANDSCAPE
IN THE WORK OF FEMALE NOVELISTS IN OKLAHOMA)

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

JOEY REBECCA BROWN
Norman, Oklahoma
2000

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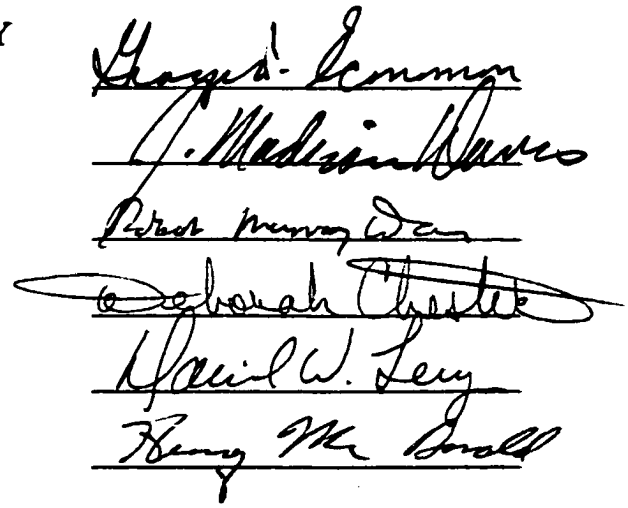

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Writing in the Dirt: A Look at Landscape Identity in the Work of Female Novelists in Oklahoma

Anything can have happened in Oklahoma.

Practically everything has.

Edna Ferber, *Cimarron* 1929

Introduction

In the winter of 1999, I decided to look into the history of Oklahoma writers. Several authors from the state had lately begun to become nationally known, and while I was eager to make contact in whatever ways I could, I was surprised at the reaction the new notoriety our writers were receiving. I had been a student of contemporary fiction for ten years and found the reaction puzzling as I had encountered countless quality, published, creative writers from the state throughout that time. Readers and critics, in-state and out, seemed to be asking "where have all these writers been?" The writers? I wondered, "where have all these readers been?"

In truth, I could not have listed more than four or five Oklahoma writers of national stature, and then only if I stretched the boundaries of that definition beyond the edges of the open prairie. But as a writer whose work had been described as land-based, earthy-crunchy, and "so Oklahoma," I just knew there had to be more of us. After all, Oklahoma is a state of such unique history. It seemed only logical we would have

spawned thousands of writers. And I felt compelled to understand my place among those thousands. I decided quickly to look for non-Native American writers, feeling the Native American Studies movement was doing its best to cover the state's Indian writers. I began what I thought would be a small research project to locate the names of writers like me. I was going read Oklahoma's literary history.

What I found was that Oklahoma had no literary history, not a complete, consistent written history. I had expected the library databases I consulted to spit out titles by the hundreds--well, the tens, anyway. But searching for writers from Oklahoma produced a thin list of about twenty names, one of them Will Rogers, and half of them historians who had never published a word of fiction or poetry. I consulted the databases at Oklahoma State University and Tulsa University when those at the University of Oklahoma didn't yield much more. I was willing to try a wide-open keyword search, knowing I would face piles and piles of mixed titles which would require days of narrowing down. I tried several search combinations. When I still turned up little more, I asked a reference librarian for help, hopefully believing I was just not looking in the right places. The librarian offered several tips, insisting what I really wanted were books by Native American writers--"because that's what we're known for, hon"--and extolling the virtues of the history texts and photographs housed in the Western History Collection. I continued to search under her watchful eye for another hour or so, but when her shift ended, I wasted no time asking the new reference librarian if he weren't absolutely sure there was no better way. The new librarian suggested a couple of search combinations that did yield up a few more names, but wondered aloud several times

why anyone would want to know anything about *Oklahoma writers*. I had entered the library on a Wednesday afternoon expecting to spend an hour, to emerge carrying an armload of local novels, and at least one decent reference guide to state writers. I left with two history books by Angie Debo, the 1939 WPA guide to the state, and a sketchy list of fewer than twenty names. I returned to the library the following Saturday and reluctantly began my wide-open keyword search, which I am still conducting.

I realize this admission casts aspersions on my research skills. But I can assure you, whatever my research skills lack has been further hampered by the absence of any recorded literary history. In the months that have followed my initial attempts, I discovered I was not the first person to become curious about state writers, but as the second librarian I met indicated, I am perhaps the first person to be so curious as to want a compilation. I have found, and am continuing to find, those writers for whom I searched. But I am finding them in places unexpected, and through resources I could never have guessed would be as valuable as they have been.

In these lights it is a reasonable question to ask why I would continue with such a study. I have four reasons. First, I have always been intrigued by the history of the development of certain literatures. My goal in this quest was to uncover the story of the evolution of Oklahoma literature, to see where and why what can now be viewed as a unique regional literature developed and redeveloped as a category and by periods.

Second, I have an interest in certain of the allegedly understudied literatures. Specifically, my affinity is for regional fiction and for fiction written by women. While cultural studies has made the study of what are commonly termed marginal literatures

considerably more prevalent in the last two decades, I still see regional literatures as literatures of study being easily dismissed--particularly regional literatures written by women. Regionalism has always been suspect in literary studies, though, as William Bevis points out in his article, "Region, Power, Place":

> Perhaps this is simply a question of power: 'provincial' means 'marginal.' But if that is the case, we may not infer the cultural inferiority of a 'region.' Why, then, should the term 'regional' seem derogatory in literature, unless one wishes to speak from the point of view of the center of power and indeed serve the status quo? (21)

In this light, it is easier to see how certain groups would want to ignore or disparage literatures which detract power from the center. Nonetheless, the often easy dismissal of women's regionalism is rather perplexing, given that investigation of regional literatures leads one to suspect that women have written, and continue to write, more regional literatures than men (I have yet to perform a quantity study, but an examination of Oklahoma writers confirms this suspicion).

Third, I wanted to perform this initial study because Oklahoma literature, especially the history of it, is woefully understudied. My difficulties sorting through the library database aside, locating texts on Oklahoma literature proved problematic. Many of the people with whom I discussed my ideas attempted to assure me that there is no such thing as Oklahoma literature, and if there is, that it couldn't possibly be worth reading. It does exist, of course, and in an abundance. But what I've found is that the most recent historical reviews of Oklahoma literature are almost sixty years old: Mary

Hays Marable and Elaine Boylan's *A Handbook of Oklahoma Writers* (1939) and the Writers' Project of the WPA's *Oklahoma: A Guide to the Sooner State* (1941). In fact, many of the divisions of the Writers' Project were never completed (collection of Native American oral folklore, for example), and the collected Oklahoma slave narratives were not published until 1996. While the Oklahoma Historical Society, the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, and the Western History Collections of the University of Oklahoma library systems have compiled guides to their manuscript collections, they are incomplete in various ways, it never having been the main intention of any of these organizations to track local authors.

There is also the fact that Oklahoma does have a unique history of settlement, especially the promotion of the settlement. The issue of land ownership has been prevalent throughout Oklahoma's history, and includes the relocation of Indians (and the subsequent restricted access to the land by the relocated). Geographically speaking, very few other states have the diverse topographical divisions arbitrarily encased by state boundaries (Colorado and the southern Gulf states being the others). All of this contributes to what cultural anthropologists Howard F. Stein and Robert F. Hill refer to as "Oklahoma as a bona fide cultural identity system . . . not merely a geopolitical organization" (Introduction, xvi). As a unique cultural identity system, the state thus manifests "distinct iconography . . . largely agreed upon within the state, the region, and the nation" (Introduction, xvi-xvii).

Finally, I am a fiction writer from Oklahoma who employs region in her work. However, it was not until an editor from California commented that my work was "so

Oklahoma" that I was aware how crucial region is to my fiction. I wrote the novel contained here, *Go Back The Way You Came*, with the intention of writing a novel that is as much about this region, about Oklahoma, as it is about any of the characters. As a student of literature, I see real traits which distinguish Oklahoma writers from writers of other regions, even from other writers within the Southwest. As a writer, I see my work as active and willing participation in this association.

My next task then became the construction of a crucial definition: what makes someone an "Oklahoma" writer? Is it birth? residence? topic? or perhaps some of combination of the three? This decision was by far the most difficult part of constructing this introduction. Including certain writers who possess any one of these attributes, but not other writers of the same attribute, at first seemed rather arbitrary and unfair to those I was not including. Certainly being born inside the state boundaries seemed a reasonable enough method of determining whom I would characterize as an "Oklahoma" writer. That is, to a point. Of course, there are many writers born in Oklahoma who have never written about the state, the region, or its peoples, so there were many of those writers I did not feel should be included. Conversely, there are several writers not born in the state who have chosen Oklahoma as a residence, temporary or permanent. And then there are writers who have mined Oklahoma as a topic, but who have never resided here, possibly never even visited (Toni Morrison, author of 1998's *Paradise*, is a recent example).

Even though I chose to look at the work of women writers for this introduction, I used Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as the example for determining the categorization of

what makes a writers an Oklahoma. Ellison's writing doesn't figure Oklahoma as significant to character. So that became my measuring stick: physical Oklahoma--topography, geography, weather--must be used by the writer as significant in the creation of character. In using this as my measurement, I did eliminate some writers, such as Linda Hogan, from this study, but added to the category some non-residents, such as Edna Ferber. Key to this definition is that I intend it to serve only this brief look (and will use a more extensive definition when this study grows in length and coverage).

I am left to sort the various, confusing, and sometimes conflicting terms associated with regionalist studies to determine which will be applied, when and how in this study. The first term of the question is the largest: regionalism. This is a troublesome term as applied to Oklahoma literature because I am not sure in which region I should place Oklahoma; I even suspect that one reason the study of Oklahoma literature is as underdeveloped as it is rests in part on the fact that Oklahoma, due to politics and geography, defies regionalizing. Oklahoma, without question, is part of the West, but many, even I, would place it in the subdivision of the Southwest. But what makes that placement possible, the division of the state by the topographical line separating the Great Plains from hill country, makes the assignment of Oklahoma to the Southwestern region unsatisfying for many. Politically and economically, Oklahoma has often seemed more Southern in nature than its Western counterparts. I will use the term *region* to mean the Southwest, as most associate Oklahoma writers with the Southwest (Native American and Chicano flavoring, the "Dust Bowl" landscape), though I will use it sparingly.

A popular debate in contemporary cultural theory studies is over the designation of *place* and *space*. The nature of the debate of those studies in the late 1990s has rendered these terms political, and as I am not particularly inclined to join in the murkiness of that debate, I will avoid those terms in order to avoid those political debates.

The term which is most confusing and contentious in regional studies is that of *landscape*. Literary studies has been late to welcome cultural geography and the hesitation is understandable. The flexibility the term landscape has heretofore possessed in discussions of literature is significantly moderated by the application of geographical and scientific terms. I am one, however, who sees benefit in applying the (slightly) more stringent, definitely more practical terms of cultural geography to these discussions. As interested as I am in clarifying regional discourse studies, I am more interested in simplifying some of the terms we're using, rather than just inventing more new ones.

Landscape seems the most appropriate of these terms to the purpose of my study. But in light of what I've said above, I have decided to meld two definitions already being used in regionalism: that of Western American literature critic Michael Kowalewski's (which he in part borrows from Barry Lopez) and that of cultural geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson. In combining the principles of the two, what I've arrived at is a definition in which landscape is both biotic and vernacular. It is the natural and the artificial. It consists of more than scenery; it is literally various topographical, geographical, biological and meteorological phenomena, as well as the human constructions added to it and the human destructions subtracted from it. With

this definition I want to clarify above all else that landscape is never blank, and that what appears blank is simply a canvas for the enacting of humanity.

Before getting to the specifics, I must say a quick word about why it is I have selected to discuss only novels written by women. This is by no means intended as a feminist theory commentary. As I noted above, I find the overtly political discussions of region coming out of certain fields to be more befuddling to the conversation than clarifying. Feminist theorists have co-opted the discussion of region in ways that make me a bit uncomfortable, although I find Krista Comer's efforts, in *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women's Writing* (1999), to be helpful in explaining how domestic place can be distinguished from public space. Comer makes a valid point when she acknowledges

> Place, like western nature, enters contemporary representation in female form. Western places, like women and nature, take care of people, feed them, nurture them when they are hungry, tired, or hopeless. . . . places point the way to new beginnings. Through it all, another day can be faced. Life is worth living. (56)

Certainly, the literatures of the American West benefited from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and made clear to many that the West was not all cowboy, not all male, and not all white. The easy answer here is that I am a woman writer, but it is more than that. I believe the texts demonstrate that women are writing Oklahoma differently than are men. But I simply see more literary novels about Oklahoma and by Oklahomans being produced by women than men in the last two decades.

My study of Oklahoma writing looks at the how landscape is used by women novelists. I have found that there are basically three types of landscape literature in Oklahoma. I provide periods of duration alongside these categories, but I admit the limits of the time periods. As we all know, it is never possible to draw distinct lines between modes or subjects of writers. Oklahoma novelists also show a tendency to write back in time, to demonstrate an affinity for producing historical fiction. But I provide the years as general guidelines as, although the fiction I am discussing is bound foremost by spatial concerns, all fiction is bound temporally, as well.

Romantic Landscape Novels, 1929-1955

The category of the Romantic Landscape novel includes the novels which focus on the initiation of family and love relationships (young couple about to be married, just married, or just married and beginning a family) against the backdrop of a harsh Oklahoma landscape. All of the young mothers are in their early twenties. Unlike a great deal of literature of the American West, the preservation of the family is valued over the strength of the individual. These novels are usually set during the land runs or just after, or the officiating of statehood or just before. They are stories preoccupied with finding, proving-up, and surviving the land. The text is scattered with references to survival, desolate, desperate, hopeless, wind-shorn, and "getting by," and less often with references to the future, opportunity, and "getting on top of" the land. In spite of the occasional hopeful glance at the future, the present is exceedingly bleak. The theme of all these novels is that "the land will sustain us only it doesn't kill us first." The

characters of these novels are literally dependent on the land for their livings, and for their lives, and usually suffer horribly for this dependence. The landscape of these novels is that of western Oklahoma and is described as dusty, dry, red, brown, with no description of vegetation or biotic life other than a stray thistle or horned-toad, and the only mention of water concerns its absence. Like a traditional Western, "land [is] defined by absence: of trees, of greenery, of houses, of the signs of civilization, above all, absence of water and shade" (Tompkins 71).

In many ways novels of this time period mirror traditional westerns in their structure. The main characters are often eastern (or northern) newcomers hoping to make a fortune, or at least a living, farming on free land. Greenhorns to both the Southwestern climate and the art of farming, the newcomers are inept at adapting to the harshness of landscape. Those who "make it" do so only after foregoing all pride, losing all of what little money they had, and the death of at least one family member (and often the favorite horse). The newcomer is usually then forced to accept the help of an older, grizzled farmer--usually someone who lived in Oklahoma when it was Indian Territory, possesses uncanny ability to read weather and soil, and has a mysterious past. This past is never articulated but is suggested to have necessitated the man's coming to Indian Territory in the first place. The oldster is a friend of the Indian, and sometimes has a smidgeon of Indian blood himself.

In the novels of the Romantic Landscape period written by men, the hero is always the man of the family, the young husband who rallies the extended family to save the land and themselves. But Oklahoma's female novelists of this period differ

dramatically in their approach to these topics than do male writers. Their novels exemplify the phrase "behind every good man is a great woman." Determining how to survive the landscape does not fall to the grizzled veteran or to the man of the sodhouse, but to the women with faith in the family. In these novels, the young husbands are often alcoholics, morally and financially defeated by the a post-land run boom, the Great Depression, or the Dust Bowl. Unlike women of traditional westerns, who speak little and serve primarily as plot devices, the women of the Romantic Landscape novels fights off adversity, makes the decision whether or not to give up the land, and saves the family.

A second major difference in the approach of female novelists is the way in which adversity is manifested. In spite of the ineffectualness of the young husband, the real adversity the women characters of these novels face comes from Mother Nature. These young wives and mothers often find a formidable enemy in the tornado:

> [Oklahomans] see [weather] as uniquely able to wreak havoc and inspire chagrin. There is a certain martyrdom in the face of stifling summer heat, particularly if record temperatures are set, but the tornado captures the central focus of attention in Oklahoma. (Thompson 22)

Weather, one will note, is never *not* present in the landscape novels of Oklahoma, being an integral element of what some cultural critics term Oklahoma's cultural identity system. "The symbolism of the sky, and of its counterpart, the land, plays a central role in Oklahoma [identity]" (Stein and Hill, "Culture," 219). (Ravaging meteorological events present in the Romantic Landscape novel are no less significant in the novels of

the Social or Bioregional landscape periods.)

Before going further, I must acknowledge to the fact that the novels of the Romantic Landscape period all exist under the specter of Steinbeck, of course.

> Steinbeck's Nobel Prize marks a new beginning in western literary history, for he is the first [writer about regional] to receive canonical recognition of this international stature. Moreover, Steinbeck's acclaim comes precisely at the historic moment when western criticism constitutes itself as an identifiable field of literary studies. (Comer 32)

The Grapes of Wrath and its aftermath was a significant contributor to the cultural figuring of Oklahoma's inferiority complex, present because of the lawlessness associated with Indian Territory and the rampant poverty caused by the Depression. At any rate, *Wrath* and Steinbeck were quick fodder for writers. A cultural duality emerged as

> Oklahoma assumed the symbolic dimensions of *Oklahoma!* with more grace than it had accepted the version of social conditions in the late 1930s presented by *The Grapes of Wrath* . . . .The self-image of the state had been assailed by prose and portraits of Dust Bowl migrants streaming to California. (Thompson 3-4)

While I am not dealing with Steinbeck's novel here because my focus is women's writing, but it is still important to note its impact on other novelists in the state. George Milburn wrote in the *Yale Review* in 1946

> John Steinbeck . . . was content, it would seem to get his information from a

> road map, with ludicrous results. It is evident that Mr. Steinbeck wrote his book without ever having set foot in the State. The eastern part of Oklahoma, which Mr. Steinbeck . . . describes as a vast Dust Bowl . . . is actually a region of wooded hills . . . There is no more beautiful scenery in all America than that of eastern Oklahoma. (9)

Steinbeck did set foot in Oklahoma, at least drove across it, but boomerism aside, Milburn is right in the fact that Steinbeck got his facts wrong regarding the Dust Bowl in Oklahoma. In part, then, Steinbeck's novel contributed to the proliferation of similar stories, but the story of land run Oklahoma and Dust Bowl Oklahoma existed before *Wrath*, and it was the women of Oklahoma who wrote it.

Three of the more significant novels of this period written by women include Edna Ferber's *Cimarron* (1930), *This Much is Mine* (1934) by Nola Henderson, and *Return to Dust* (1939) by Alice Lent Covert. Of these, Ferber's *Cimarron* is the best-known, in part because Ferber had a rather extensive career as a writer, and her novel remains perhaps the most recognizable title by a woman of this category. Set in the pre-statehood days of western Oklahoma, *Cimarron* depicts the life of a young, married heroine, Sabra Venable Cravat, whose much older and more adventurous husband suffers land fever. After she reluctantly follows him from the fertile soils of Kansas farmland to a boom town in the Territory, the narration intimates her fear of the Oklahoma landscape and the dangers which lay within it: "the pitiless glare of the plain" (61); rattlesnakes; savage, dirty Indians; outlaws like Billy the Kid; the red soil which washes away with every rain; and "The wind . . . [which] blows almost without

ceasing in Oklahoma" (63). Sabra is prepared to turn back before they reach their destination.

Throughout the course of the novel, Sabra is horrified by the perplexities of life on the Oklahoma plains. There is shooting in the streets (her husband is the victim of a murder attempt their second day in town), the women don't act "proper," and Sabra's expectancy of a ready water source causes the Cravats to lose their first house. Her son Cim, whom her husband has named for the Cimarron Territory, knows "more about David Payne than Columbus. He was more familiar with Quannah Parker, the Comanche, and Elias Boudinot . . . than he was the names Lincoln and Washington" (60). These are facts which horrify Sabra, and are the seeds of the resentment she comes to feel towards her wayward husband. The Cravats, by opening a newspaper, succeed happily for a short period of time, until Mr. Cravat's alcoholism and restlessness trouble the family. Mr. Cravat abandons Sabra and the children, first to participate in Oklahoma's final land run. But once he sees the Territory as becoming too full of the same people and problems they left in Kansas, he heads to Alaska, the "last frontier."

The most reluctant of the Cravats to venture to Oklahoma Territory, it becomes Sabra's duty to salvage the paper and her family, even as their boom town begins to literally blow away. She realizes the plains are now "in her blood" when she visits her mother in Kansas and misses the "pace, the exhilarating uncertainty of Oklahoma life" (189). As she looks around Wichita, her mind layers images of her life in Osage over what she sees. She comes to understand that her wanting to make Osage more like Wichita would never work; Oklahoma is just too different. On her return she is

> more thrilled to [see] that the scrawny elm, no larger than a baby's arm, which she planted . . . in Osage, . . . than she had been at the sight of the cool glossy canopy of cedar, arbor vitae, sweet locust, and crepe myrtle that shaded the Kansas garden. (189-190)

It is in learning to adapt to the wind and weather, as well as to the strange new human culture, that teaches Sabra, "This lovely flower-like head isn't so empty" (327).

The on-going drought and wind-swept soils which dominate the majority of the novel symbolize infertility, which is why Sabra (like many characters of the Romantic Landscape novels) is obsessed with preserving her family, particularly her son. While farms are already beginning to die (the novel's central time period being thirty years before the Dust Bowl) and people beginning to abandon the land, Sabra longs for more "suitable folk" to find their way to Osage. But they never do. Unable to keep her black and Indian servants from producing a child, (which precipitates the black servant's murder), Sabra is determined her children will marry well and escape. Of course, this happens for neither. Her son marries an Indian, the most distasteful association Sabra has with Oklahoma's land. Her daughter marries an early oil tycoon, trading love for money and social stature. Sabra views both marriages as doomed and signals of her failures, and most significantly, as events which could have happened only in Oklahoma.

Once Mr. Cravat abandons Sabra for the final time, she blossoms as a person, as a survivor, and as the protector and caretaker of the family. She grows psychologically as Oklahoma's vernacular landscape grows in size and type; skyscrapers dot the skyline

by the novel's close. Sabra becomes a congresswoman, accepts her daughter-in-law and son-in-law, and holds her elderly husband's hand as her dies drunk and penniless in the street--the ultimate symbol of an Oklahoma bust. In spite of the fears she still possesses of landscape and its treatment of the family, she eventually accepts it all as unchangeable fact. Ferber does hurry this ending, however, and it is important to note that the predominant view of Oklahoma is one of distaste, discouragement, failure, and racism.

In Nola Henderson's novel, *This Much Is Mine*, the heroine Jo differs from the typical Romantic Landscape heroine in that her fight against the landscape is overtly more about her identity as an individual than it is about protection of family or marriage. She considers herself the daughter of harsh land and an even harsher mother. Neither loves her. When her husband turns out to be a man of ill temper and an ineffectual farmer, Jo determines to turn her children into "real *men*" (262). Jo becomes like her mother, despite her best efforts, harsh and worn-down by the ruggedness of farming the western Oklahoma countryside. She must pull her own plow, do her own seeding, carry water in pails, and care for all the animals herself just to make the barest of livings--and when pregnant, her works continues.

Jo's desire to have a family of her own which thrives off the bounty of the land is troubled by the introduction of a new woman, Wanda, into the life of the man she really loves. But the women form an uneasy alliance, and Jo comes to appreciate Wanda specifically because Wanda reminds her so much of the natural landscape: "[Wanda] played [piano] pieces which sounded like trickling water, or the wind in the trees, or

slow rumbling thunder. These Jo liked. They seemed to break up something tight inside you" (267). Not surprisingly, Jo's mother, a crippled, sun-scarred stroke victim after her years working the land, resents the reminder Wanda presents, and Jo makes a (nearly) conscious vow to became less like her mother.

Jo's efforts at discovering herself are hampered when her lazy husband attempts suicide and her baby is born on the same day. At just the moment when her work is about to overwhelm her, she sees new hope in the landscape: the slow-moving clouds, the way leaves settle in the wind, and the peacefulness the land can have at certain moments. Jo realizes she has missed many such moments because she has always viewed the land as something to struggle against.

In Henderson's novel, Jo's mother is the living embodiment of the harshness of Oklahoma's physical landscape. They are both bitter, mean, and both try to kill Jo. Once Jo fights back, literally, she recognizes freedom. Her mother's death is followed by a thick snow, which lays up river water for irrigation for the coming spring. Jo finally gains strength enough to right her life, to leave her ineffectual husband, and to create a new family on her farm with the man she truly loves.

This Much Is Mine is the quietest of the three novels in terms of its references to the biotic landscape. Character is constructed--in the case of Jo's mother quite overtly--from the land, soil, and weather. But of the three novels I have chosen from this category to discuss, none is more overt in terms of the dire straits characters suffer from the non-human landscape than Alice Lent Covert's *Return to Dust. Return* is a female author's view of Dust Bowl Oklahoma. Because of the poor histories of Oklahoma

literature, I have been unable to determine what, if any, knowledge Covert may have had of Steinbeck's *Wrath*; perhaps none at all, as the novels were published in the same year. But *Return* reads like a determined retelling of Oklahoma's Dust Bowl history: as Thompson suggested in the quote I used earlier, a figuring of a more acceptable, *accurate* image of the state. But in Covert's version, the effort to pat Oklahomans on the back for their spirit and survival skills is a loudly echoing theme. This is typical of Oklahoma's culture, as

> Even when ostensibly forgotten, the Dust Bowl remains a part of the Oklahoma identity, an identity in which being a stalwart survivor is prized above virtually all else. The accursed Dust Bowl image is thus a guardian of that pioneer self-image that contrasts Oklahomans with all outsiders. . . . Many Oklahomans hold this as a negative image, but many Oklahomans reverse it into a badge of honor and distinctiveness. (Stein and Hill, "Culture," 207)

At the novel's center is Margaret, a twenty-two-year-old mother and wife whose family is disintegrating as her farm is blown away. Margaret faces two daily struggles: keeping her husband sober and keeping as much of the blowing, red sand out of her house as possible. She fails at both.

Infertility, as with Ferber's novel, is again the major symbol present in the descriptions of the natural landscape. Margaret's son dies as a result of breathing the red dust, and the only way she can save her unborn child is to travel to Kansas to give birth. Ultimately, Margaret returns to Oklahoma with the baby, but only after a tornado has destroyed her house in Oklahoma. The landscape, scattered with the remnants of the

destroyed house, is a symbol of the rebirth Margaret's life with undergo.

Jane Tompkins, in her book *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, noted how certain western stories make use of harsh landscape as a means of building character, and her assessment can be readily ascribed to the Romantic Landscape novel of Oklahoma:

> The blankness of the plain implies . . . that this is a field where a certain type of mastery is possible, where a person (of a certain kind) can remain alone and complete and in control of himself, while controlling the external world through physical strength and force of will. (75)

The three heroines seem to exemplify Tompkins' explanation to the letter (at least down to the fact that when Tompkins writes "himself," she means it). Her description is of the male-dominated movie Western. And yet, it is difficult for me to find a more appropriate means of describing the efforts of Sabra, Jo, and Margaret to survive. All three are faced with an external, natural world bearing evidence of the massive damage the introduction of human landscape is bringing. They have no control over the heat (and most of these novels seem to be largely set in the summer), the soil, and the ever-present wind. But their mission is to defeat them all, not to be driven off the land regardless of the land's best efforts, and to restore the families that the land has torn asunder. If these characters do not exert will over landscape, I'm not sure I could identify characters who do.

Social Landscape Novels, 1966-1990s

The novels which belong to the category of the Social Landscape are novels in which the characters rely on landscape as a safety net. It is still the family, opposed to the individual, which is the most valued unit, but the families of these novels tend to be older and larger than those of the Romantic Landscape novel. Families have less specific connections to issues of land ownership, but often identify themselves as descendants of land-runners, the residential boom of early statehood, or of Depression/Dust Bowl survivors. Terms used to refer to the natural landscape are considerably less damning than those of the earlier novels; rest, restore, and manage are more abundant, and the novels' major theme is that of belonging and returning to the land. Leaving Oklahoma is often associated with a character's demise (which often comes in the form of alcoholism and/or divorce), and returning to land, and family, is seen as the only possible hope for restoration of character.

In the novels of the Social Landscape references to the natural land are much "greener." Vegetation is directly identified--with the writers naming trees and flowers specific to Oklahoma--and talk of water concerns its abundance and nearness. With the land less of a physical threat in these novels, more attention is given to the way the human landscape has developed, particularly in the areas of speech and communication. Writers are less preoccupied with the specifics of history and are more concerned about inter-family discourse. The natural landscape, then, of these novels becomes a nurturer, a symbol of the salvation of the soul. This is accomplished in spite of the fact that the writers of the Social Landscape novels fully acknowledge the danger inherent in

Oklahoma's natural landscape. Novels of particular note in this category are Joyce Carol Thomas' *Marked By Fire*, Teresa Miller's *Remnants of Glory*, and Billie Letts' novel *Where the Heart Is*.

One of the novels which exemplifies this strange juxtaposition of nurturer-destroyer is Joyce Carol Thomas' *Marked By Fire* (1982). The novel, set in Ponca City, begins in the late summer of 1951 with a tornado descending on the cotton field where the pregnant Patience, Mother Barker and others are working to bring in the last of the cotton. While Patience initially believes "the end is near" (9), Mother Barker prays for nature's intervention. Her prayer works, as

> The tornado picked up speed as it approached them, then turned and uprooted another row of cotton. The branches, leaves, and soft, white downy fibers danced in the vicious and capricious clutch. Then having satisfied its hunger, the tornado suddenly sailed away through the sky. (10)

The women are all relieved, but not surprised. They spend little time discussing the tornado, except to be sure that Patience's unborn child is safe and to comment on the storm's marvelous power. A few days later Patience gives birth to Abby in the cotton field, and the child is associated with the weather event for the remainder of her life.

Marked by nature, as well as the tiny scar from the embers of the fire that boiled the water at her birthing, a second tornado changes Abby's life ten years later. At a summer school assembly as Abby is about to receive an award for being the outstanding student, a tornado approaches, and the principal takes the student body to the cellar:

> Three hours later, they emerged from the dark cellar into the open air. The

> entire student body stood gaping in awe. A giant broom had swept a clean path through the world. There was virgin earth where scattered houses, cars, and cattle had once been. Some structures has been leveled to the bare foundation. (56)

Abby is haunted because of the effects the tornado has on two familiar faces in her world: first, her father, whose business is destroyed while he stands inside it, and one of the women of her mother's circle, Miss Sally. Abby's father blubbers and mutters to himself, is wild-eyed, and cannot be consoled. Late the day after, he boards a bus that Abby knows is leaving Oklahoma and does not respond to Abby's cries for him to stay. By leaving, he is lost. Miss Sally does not leave physically, but she loses her mind. Abby is the first person Miss Sally sees after the storm takes her house, and she forever associates Abby with the storm. While her father's absence haunts Abby metaphorically, Miss Sally haunts her literally.

Although Abby's rape, loss of her voice, and her subsequent recovery (which are dependent on the nature of the region) are the book's central story, the theme of the power of landscape over the individual pervades the novel. The women who visit with her mother say that Miss Sally possesses the spirit of the tornado, which leads Abby to make the assumption that tornadoes are women. She dreams she is visited by a tornado and the force of feminine power is explained to her when the tornado says:

> I am the only storm in the sky. Thunder and lightning comfort me. . . . Yes, I trouble the water. Yes, I walk through flames and I eat fire. . . . I, too, am a child of God. When He created me, He fashioned immortal art. . . . I am the

emboldened dark girl of his heart. (118-119)

At a moment when many have sought escape, Abby chooses to submit herself to the nature of the landscape. Abby learns Mother Barker's reliance on nature, the use of herbs and roots, and the female ability to heal. Mother Barker predicts her own death "on the eve of snow" (149), and Abby is prepared to assume the role of Mother Nature which Mother Barker has previously filled. In so doing this, Thomas employs a familiar theme in women's regional writing. "Regionalist writers across decades and regional and color lines create visionary women, herbalist-healers, not as marginal freaks, but as central to the narratives and to the different perspective regionalism offers" (Pryse 51). In other words, it is a different way of finding a place for the feminine.

What is unusual about the way Thomas, as an Oklahoma writer, establishes landscape is that it is a nurturer, a place of safety regardless of its power and the individual's helplessness to act against it. While characters in the Romantic Landscape novels see habitation as an assault on the land, something to fight for and to fight with, the characters of the Social Landscape novel seek refuge in the landscape. Even in the face of potential death, Oklahoma remains a place of belonging, a home to be quietly sought and internalized.

Another novel of the Social Landscape category in which the destructor-nurturer dichotomy of the Oklahoma landscape is played out is Billie Letts' *Where the Heart Is*. Novalee's need for a sense of belonging is acute. She only *senses* northeastern Oklahoma to be her home, but there are no obligations which physically tie her to place, except that she had no other place to go and liked the people of Oklahoma who offered

to help her. All of this changes when her caretaker/mother-figure, Sister, is killed in a tornado. In fact, the most specific details of landscape that Letts provides are those which build up to and then cause Sister's death. In spite of years living in Oklahoma, the storm still surprises Novalee:

> she hadn't seen the sky begin to darken in the south or the sharp zigzag lines of lightning spiking far off in the west. But later in the afternoon, when she came to the front to work at one of the registers, the storm had moved close enough that she could hear the low rumble of thunder in the distance. (226)

Novalee realizes that knowing home is in acknowledging the connectedness of Oklahomans to the land. One of her customers, a Vietnam veteran who can feel the storm coming in his shrapnel wounds, illustrates this. His ability to sense place only adds to Novalee's disenfranchisement and helps to remind her that she is not from there: "Novalee had never gotten used to the Oklahoma storms herself, storms that often sent them running to Dixie Mullins' cellar" (227).

Letts, like Thomas, emphasizes the power associated with Oklahoma weather by describing the sky "closing in" on Novalee, the only one who seems to feel trapped by the storm. By the time Novalee leaves her job at Wal-Mart to find her neighbors and daughter already in Dixie's cellar, the storm is blowing full tilt. Letts reflects the attitude of the other characters, the sense of peace and acceptance of the weather's ferocity, once Novalee comes to recognize the dark beauty of the natural environment:

> The air was so still that nothing moved, so heavy that even pollen was held to the ground. No stir of leaves, no whisper of wind. The sky, dark and growing

> darker, was green--an eerie shade of green, like light trapped in a bottle. The neighborhood looked abandoned--no life in the streets or the yards. . . . Nothing barked or chirped or crowed . . . nothing called, nothing answered. (230)

It is ironically in the moment that Novalee sees this beauty that she realizes Sister will die before reaching the cellar. In the remainder of the novel, Novalee rebuilds her house on the site of Sister's destroyed trailer and fosters her career in photography, seeking the exact moment and spot for capturing Oklahoma's unique sunrises and what she sees as its violent beauty. Having witnessed a natural act which leads some to move out of state, Novalee takes the step which makes Oklahoma her "place" and accepts Oklahoma for what it is, in spite of her grief for Sister.

In *Remnants of Glory* (1979), the story of Kate's family life in Oklahoma between statehood and World War II illustrate how some Oklahoma writers of this period employ the landscape-as-nurturer scheme without damning the same landscape for its power (although Kate's family suffers a tornado, as well). The adversity which Kate faces is all human and mostly from within her own family. The landscape which dominates this novel is the humanly constructed landscape, literally Kate's house and her family's boarding house in a small town in central Oklahoma. The house is such a powerful entity that Kate feels more independent living there than she would getting married and moving next door, events she delays almost two years in order to nurture her sense of independence. In contrast Kate's sister Essie feels escaping their parents' boarding house, an act accomplished by eloping, is her only hope for independence. But Essie's independence actually erodes over time, as does her marriage, and it is only by

returning to the boarding house to die that Essie achieves the assurance she still belongs in the family.

Once Kate has married and moved into the house next door with her husband, she widens her landscape just enough to include both houses. However, most of the significant action--family decisions about the boarding house, discussions of children and marriage, sick watches--all take place on her parents' porch. It is the place she seeks refuge when a tornado damages her own house, when her husband commits adultery, and when her daughter and then her mother die.

Kate stays, in fact, until she is the only member of her family still living (besides her son in Florida) and her doctor has her committed to an old folks' home. Miller frames the interior of the novel, which spans 1907 to 1963, with two sections set in 1979 and 1980. In the first of those sections Kate escapes the old folks' home to return to the boarding house: "The small, two-story frame house surrounded by the dainty picket fence was prettier than she remembered. The yard had gone untended, though, since she had been away. Already, she planned to . . . transform it into the finest yard in Brady" (9). Her doctor and son are trying to rent the house out in order to supplement the payments to the nursing home, but Kate finds the key in the same place it's been for seventy years. Her family pictures are still on the dresser, her clothes still in their storage boxes. Kate declares her escape to the boarding the "grandest of homecomings" (10).

Kate suffers a mild heart attack during her escape, though, and is forced to return to the nursing home where time becomes unknowable to her. All that is knowable are

the events which took place over the seventy years that the boarding house constituted her landscape. As the novel concludes, the time shifts forward from 1963 to 1980, some months after Kate's heart attack. Numb and withdrawn after her time living in the home, Kate is rescued by Wynona, her husband's former lover. Reluctant to take charity from the woman her husband really loved, Kate is eventually swayed by Wynona's insistence the boarding house is Kate's "place." Much younger than Kate, Wynona reminds Kate how it is Kate originally became independent in the boarding house: "Your pride's not in staying [in the nursing home]" (332). Wynona is the symbol of who Kate used to be: "I'm used to making a place for myself. . . . And I'm not going to make the mistake of holding back again" (337). Kate regains the independence that has been stripped from here by returning to her landscape: the old boarding house.

Miller's occupation with the natural landscape is limited to the naming of plant species, a few mentions of storms and weather, seasons and their passings. The landscape which dominates her novel in small and particular. While Letts and Thomas use wider views of Oklahoma as the backdrop for the playing out of family survival, Miller situates her characters in a narrow landscape which belongs only to this family. In some ways this focus resembles the micro-local descriptions common to the novelists in the Bioregional Landscape category. But the Social Landscape novels are more about the people of the region, ways of speech and communication, as they belong to or can be changed by a particular place. They are born of an era of high-folkism, what Richard White, in *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* refers to "plain folks Americanism." In fact, White identifies Oklahoma as one

place in the nation, along with Texas and the descendants of migrant workers in California, as being the strongest hold of Americanism in the 1970s and 1980s (601). Americanism was essentially religiously fundamental and stressed "hard work as the great equalizer" (601).

These novels are all written in the aftermath of post-Vietnam American, a time in which society passed through a period of great tension regarding the militirization of America (particularly the West). These novels also carry the sense, derived of 1980s consumer culture, that it was once again permissible, even desirable, to yearn for prosperity. In other words, it became safe again to remember the good 'ole days. This seems a way for accounting why many of the novels of the period are historical in nature. Many are set in the same period as the Romantic Landscape novels, but the characters of these later works "benefit" from a softer landscape.

These novels do seem, also, to be an attempt to reclaim the family in the face of consumerism and television as babysitter, and yet they seem to deny the fact of inverse development of the Southwest. These are the decades in which much of the biotic landscape in Oklahoma's neighbors (New Mexico, Colorado, Texas) was being destroyed and replaced by vernacular landscape. Charles Bowden, a Southwest writer, comments on that phenomenon:

> In the Southwest we have dodged the fact of our raw, instant civilization by doting on strands of Native American culture, worshipping conquistadors or long-dead clerics, having wet dreams about former psychotics who were handy with guns, dipping into visions of vanished peoples who left comely stone ruins.

> It is a lot easier to find a good book about Navajos or gunfighters than about real estate developers. Which ones do you think have done more to change the face of the land? (16)

But while writers of the Social Landscape novel ignore these trends, writers of the Bioregional Landscape novel seem to be reacting directly to it.

Bioregional Landscape Novels, 1990s+

The Bioregional Landscape novel is probably best described as hardcore regionalism. These are novels in which the writers speak in conscious and explicit terms of the connection of the human psyche to the land. They are very aware of the fact that, first, there is *interaction* between humans and the land--the relationship is reciprocal. Second, these writers are conscious of how human interaction with the natural region is causing destruction of non-human life-forms, and that the topography is being permanently altered as a result.

The Bioregional Landscape novel is usually set in contemporary times (Askew's novel is an exception), and it focuses on the relationship of an individual (as opposed to a family) with the natural environment. Terms which detail region are ambivalent; the natural landscape is not colored as either violent or nurturing, simply as living and powerful (though its power can never be articulated). These novels are micro-local, more concerned with detailing highly specific biotic characteristics rather than details which relate region to the nation. In other words, writers of this type of fiction are more likely to describe landscape in terms of where rivers meet, the hills end, the distance and

direction the crow flies, than they are to make note of where state boundaries begin and end. The drawing of such lines is viewed as wholly arbitrary and insignificant in characterizing landscape. Therefore, the word Oklahoma is used rather sparingly itself, though authors of this category are hyper-conscious of describing even minute attributes of the physical landscape as a way of familiarizing the reader with the region.

Bioregional novelists root identity in the soil. As Michael Kowalewski writes, "Bioregional 'mappings' of local environments have increasingly involved an interest in metaphors of depth, layering, resonance, root systems, habitats and interconnectedness" (41). That novelists of this particular regionalist vein might be reacting to the proliferation of vernacular landscape is no surprise. As regional theorist David Jordan points out "the essential sense of community that assures each individual a place in the world is once again threatened by technology: . . . machinery . . . electronic communication . . . holes in the atmosphere . . . deforestation" (xv). Indeed, we live at a point in history when we have come to realize that many impacts of vernacular landscape by the human landscape can never be undone. We must now live, or die, by our mistakes.

For clarity's sake, I must note here that bioregional is a term that is applied most frequently to ecological writing, but Kowalewski's definition clearly applies to the Oklahoma novels I describe here as bioregional literature. If anything, Kowalewski has made my job much easier, as I have searched for four years for a word that describes what it is I think my fiction does in its use of Oklahoma landscape, both as character and character building. He asserts that "The most compelling bioregional works attempt to

establish imaginative title to specific American places, to reimagine a ruminous landscape beneath a desacrilized, irradiated, and overdeveloped one" (43). That is my strongest hope for my work.

The novels in this category--Rilla Askew's *The Mercy Seat* (1997), Diane Glancy's *Flutie* (1998), and my novel *Go Back The Way You Came* (2000)--attempt to draw the most literal connections between the natural landscape and the human landscape. All of the novels make these connections in three ways. The first is the novelists' thematic use of movement versus stasis and the characters' underlying fear that natural landscape may possess the ability to change human identity. The second is the theme of land as the originator or regenerator of all life, and the third is the theme that land chooses the people who will live on it (and effectively eliminates human choice). These three themes are intertwined, demonstrating the degree to which these novels show how inseparable human identity is from other features of landscape.

The Mercy Seat illustrates the interconnectedness of the human and natural landscapes in the character of Matt. Matt's family, the Lodis, have fled Kentucky for Indian Territory because Matt's father and uncle have violated gun manufacturing patents and are escaping prosecution. Matt knows virtually nothing of Indian Territory, what she calls Eye Tee, and none of the adults will answer her questions about it. In her mind it is dark place full of dangerous landscape and weather, and Indians who like to "get" children. She senses from the outset of the Lodis' journey to Eye Tee that their lives will be forever altered.

Matt's suspicions are proven true early. She witnesses her mother change,

become haggard and depressed, as the wagon travels southwest from their farm. Finally her mother dies in Arkansas of what would now be termed complications following childbirth. But Matt believes her mother dies of a broken heart caused by being forced to leave Kentucky. Immediately her hatred of Oklahoma becomes strong. She does not know the day or date of her mother's death, an indication of how space has come to override time. Matt positions herself as caretaker of her siblings while her father remains silent and withdrawn. Eventually the family moves on, and Matt reluctantly follows her father to the Territory.

Once in southeastern Oklahoma the Lodi children immediately fall ill with "the fever," and two of the siblings die. Again, Matt is robbed of her need to know time as she is too ill herself to know exactly when her dead infant brother is taken from her arms. Another sibling dies, another brother takes to living in the woods, and Matt's father essentially abandons the children to care for themselves. All of this Matt blames on Oklahoma. Askew describes the southeastern Oklahoma landscape as a presence so powerful it seems almost human. In fact, Askew introduces Oklahoma as a character even before Matt is introduced:

> There are voices in the earth here, telling truth in old stories. Go down in the hidden places by the waters, listen: you will hear them, buried in the sand and clay . . . . stories told in old voices, in the pulse of bloodmemory . . . .One story they tell is about longing, for this is a place of homesickess. The land has become home now, and so very core of this land is sorrow. You can hear it

longing for the old dream of itself. Like this continent. This country. *Oklahoma.* The very sound of it is home. (1)

In some ways Askew could be dismissed by some of simply committing the pathetic fallacy with the ascription of human voicings to the landscape. But her connection here echoes what Kowalewski terms "mappings," a term he co-opts from William Least Heat Moon's "deep-maps," a term meant to capture the "cultural interaction [which] springs from an animistic sense of consciousness within, not outside or separate from, nonhuman forms of life" (Introduction 11). These deep-maps also suggest a genetic connection to the land, something which Askew's work highlights with its comparison of geography to human attributes, specifically the heart:

> The dirt [of southeastern Oklahoma] is not the famous rich red of the Cimarron country, nor the blended sienna and verdigris and salmon of the haunted Deep Fork river bottoms in the central heart of Oklahoma, but a faded yellow brown, dun-colored, dusty in summer, clayey in spring, rock-ridden in all seasons. (103)

In this passage Matt's new home in the southeastern Territory is located away from the heart, mirroring Matt's denial of Oklahoma as her home. The same way the farmers in the novel have difficulties employing the land in their survival, Matt finds no place in the land to plant her own identity.

Slowly, Matt is forced to accept the fact the Lodis are not leaving, and that she must "find herself"--in Oklahoma and on her own. In the same way the tragedies of her life are associated with the natural landscape, so is this acceptance. One of Askew's techniques in showing this acceptance is to catalog details of natural landscape, perhaps to emphasize the unavoidable presence of the land in Matt's life. In the passage quoted below which appears in the novel's coda, Askew again associates the land with the human body:

> the surrounding land gently rolling, the horizon arcing away from the deep mysteries of the Fourche Maline creek bottoms to the broad, meandering sand banks . . . blackjack and shinnery; where the ochre earth begins to darken, taking on rusty hues that will deepen to blood red farther north and west along the ruddy waters of the Cimarron and the Deep Fork. (423)

At certain points Askew uses the term "bloodmemory" to describe the point to which landscape has come to permeate Matt's sense of identity. By the novel's end, Matt knows she will never be able to leave Oklahoma.

Another Bioregional Landscape novel which attempts to draw such literal connections between the natural and human landscapes of Oklahoma is Diane Glancy's *Flutie*. The title character is a girl virtually unable to speak for herself, but she believes that the land around her does speak in the rocks, dirt, and weather of northwestern Oklahoma. The novel follows about ten years of Flutie's life and chronicles her poor,

dysfunctional family, which includes a mechanic father, a drunkard, jail-bird brother, and a mother always in trouble for driving too fast. Flutie remains a small, quiet entity who senses she is the only one aware of how dramatically their lives are controlled by the natural landscape. Flutie believes the land has told her (in not so many words) that the ancient sea which once covered the earth is the source of all life now on the land. She believes the sea's presence remains in tact: "Sometimes Flutie heard the waves in the silence of her room. The sea was her backyard. She felt the summer jumping on her face. The heat was like a foot stepping on her head. She wanted to say, *get off*, but when she tried to speak, the sea knew where she was" (1-2). This realization is associated with fear early in the novel: Flutie's fear that she can never know anything about the rest of the world, the fear that landscape is inescapable, and the fear that she will have to live a life like that of her parents.

Flutie never articulates many of these feelings herself, in part because she feels the landscape is so powerful, has already decided her fate, that her own stories do not matter. She attempts to get her father to tell stories, particularly the stories of his Cherokee mother, but he dismisses Flutie's request to know such unimportant things. This is one of Flutie's first indications that she may be the only one who realizes the importance of the "voices" of the land. Another occurs when she and her friend are struck by lightning but remain unharmed. When no one seems very surprised that she and her friend are fine, Flutie becomes more concerned with their failure to acknowledge the power and presence of the natural landscape:

> But something has slipped. Weren't they always afraid of falling off into space? The land was thin as ice over a pond. Isn't that what happened to Flutie's father's brother and sisters when they walked off down the road? They had the sky and the land with nothing to hold onto. At any time, they could slip off the earth. (22-23)

As Flutie grows into a young woman, she rejects college (in part because she is too afraid to speak aloud in class) and marriage as answers to her uneasiness of identity. She has only three real desires: to visit some place else to see whether a change of landscape will change her; to visit the Great Salt Plains outside Jet, Oklahoma, which is the place she believes the ancient sea drained away; and to study geology. She visits another place when her sometimes-boyfriend drives her across the state line into Texas. Flutie is disappointed to see that the eastern Texas panhandle looks no different than northwestern Oklahoma, and to find that she is unchanged as a result of the visit. A pivotal moment in her life comes, however, when her father makes her brother drive her to the Salt Plains. On this trip she receives some insight as to why she has difficulty talking for herself, as well as an indication of how she can teach herself to overcome that difficulty:

> No wonder Flutie didn't have much to say. The land didn't speak much either. The earth, the sky, the dry creeks, the rows of trees between the fields. There were shades of green from the dark cedars to sun-bleached prairie grass. There were shades of brown from the russet red soil to the pale wheat fields. . . . They

passed the glass mountains and red mesas. Here were the *voicings*, Flutie thought, the tongues of the land, speaking in short bursts of courage before the wind blew the words back into their mouths. (46-47)

The landscape speaks *for* her, she realizes, not *to* her.

Glancy uses a cataloging technique similar to the one Askew uses to emphasize the power of the land, but also as a way of illustrating how Flutie learns to speak for herself by speaking the land. After deciding to return to college, Flutie develops the courage to speak in class by reciting, to herself, the images of the landscape around her parents' home:

> The soil was rusted as if it had been kissed by the salt air of the old sea. She thought of cattle in the field. A house without paint. An abandoned car in a gully. The car was rusting as if the red soil had kissed it also, leaving its stain. . . Telephone lines. Posted warnings. Dirt roads that spread out into the country. Risely Farm. Oil pumps and storage tanks. Red ponds stained red as the soil. . . . She couldn't live on the land behind Vini, up a long dirt road where no one could find her. (102-103)

Although the experience of talking aloud is difficult, Flutie determines that she will do it again, and in the same manner of cataloging, until her reliance on the landscape is no longer necessary. She decides that the way to overcome her dependence is to somehow equalize the powers. In other words, she wants to know as much about the land as it knows about her.

What had been a quiet interest in geology becomes Flutie's means of achieving

this balance. She "read the history of the land, the story of the earth, the explanations of the rocks. How the land got to be how it was" (127). She begins traveling to study more and recognizes the voices she thought existed only in northwestern Oklahoma are everywhere: "Digging in Palo Duro Canyon, Flutie heard the voices of the land. She thought of wind erosion and spatial patterning. She thought of ocean basins and moving plates of the earth. She thought of mapping. But mostly she thought of land formations" (126-127). With her geology book open on her lap, she feels the freedom to give herself over to study of the land, especially the "reckless places of the earth. Even if they weren't in Oklahoma, she could know them just the same" (129).

The cataloging technique exemplifies showing region on the micro-local level. Although Glancy and Askew both make much ado of the fact their novels are set in Oklahoma, the catalogs show very limited pictures of a vast region. The emphatic use of color localizes the description; the reader realizes early these novels are not projecting the typical postcard view of the West (no horses running across the prairie, no tee-pees, no Black Mesa). Instead, the region is detailed in its most basic unit: in the dirt.

In writing my own novel, *Go Back The Way You Came*, I was conscious of establishing natural landscape as a character who is just as significant to the story as any of the human characters. I consider my novel as belonging to the Bioregional category because of its focus on the micro-local elements of Oklahoma. I, too, focus on dirt, wind, and minute descriptions. Stephensville is located in southwestern Oklahoma, and has suffered four years of drought. That coupled with the decline of the oil industry has lead to the steady depopulation of the area. The only people who remain in town are

people who do not seem to be able to leave, and some feel a pressing need to escape the landscape.

Jeana is one character clearly affected by the natural landscape around Stephensville. She is afraid to be on the landscape without a "protective bubble" of sorts: her house, her car, or to be closed within city limits. The open space around Stephensville has become a force which is robbing her of her life: "Daylight and all that open space around town. Seeing all that space in the daylight crushed the air out of her" (71). As is true of the other novels, the force the land represents begins as powerful and grows more powerful the more aware the human characters become of it. Jeana views her sister August as brave, as she envies her sister's ability to wander the country freely and to be satisfied with temporary home after temporary home. Jeana, on the other hand, can't travel more than ten miles from Stephensville, and then only at night, without having a panic attack.

Jeana's acknowledges her fears--"I may get scared of people and roads and space and dirt" (177)--but she doesn't have to deal with them until August fails to return to town to run a fireworks stand, leaving Jeana responsible for August's debt. The stand is located on a country intersection between four alfalfa fields, nothing but open space. Her greatest fear is how to get from he car into the stand without being exposed to the space. With some planning, she manages:

> Finally she backed the wagon right up to the door . . . She left only enough room to open the wagon's hatch. She crawled from the front seat through the cargo area and dropped the hatch door, enabling her to unload her supplies and

blocking the door of the stand so she didn't have to worry about anyone rushing in. (179)

She adheres to her daughter's advice to "stay in that box" for several days, until a lightning fire threatens her. Not only is she forced to leave the fireworks stand, but she has to venture to town and circulate through a throng of parade-goers to find help. Jeana's fear of the natural landscape transforms and is softened by the circle of people around her.

The character most affected by landscape is Wayne. Early in the novel he tells Jeana that while he likes meeting people and seeing what there is to see that he can't think of any place but Stephensville to go: "I've already got this place memorized" (74). But later the same day, in his role as a police officer, Wayne is forced to shoot and kill Clyde, the man who had played a substitute father to Wayne. Following Clyde's death, Wayne's sense of who he is begins to dissolve. When walking home that night, the longest night of the year, the darkness obscures his path. The way home, which he had earlier tried to convince Jeana he could find in the dark, becomes fuzzy. Wayne missteps and falls: "He spilled forward like he'd stepped in a prairie dog hole and rolled to a stop in the bar-ditch and a thicket of stickers. Wayne was lost on his own road home" (97).

When Wayne does eventually make it to his house, he recognizes an urge within himself to move, to travel away from Stephensville. But as this sense that perhaps he is not "at home" seems so unusual to him, he is reluctant to follow that urge. He is visited by a man, whom he later realizes is Clyde's spirit, who convinces Wayne to leave.

Wayne decides to head for Texas to visit his mother, and he packs his dog into the truck. As he travels, Clyde's spirit continues to visit him from time to time, on each visit telling a story about a different place Clyde spent time. Wayne questions him as to what the stories are supposed to mean, if they are stories of places Wayne is meant to visit. But Clyde explains that the places are general, just examples. The real imperative is for Wayne to find his own place. Clyde says to Wayne

> I's a man for many places. Being one man in one place, all the time. Now that weren't for me. Some ain't like that, though. Some gotta be home all the time. Not me. That's what finally drove me looney. . . . The trick is knowing which man you are while you got the time to do somethin' 'bout it. (227-228)

Wayne realizes the something for him to do is to return to Stephensville. He does, but only to find much of the surrounding area destroyed by the lightning fire that claimed Jeana's fireworks stand. The rain continues to fall for a second straight day, causing floods over the soil made impenetrable by four years of drought. Wayne also finds Jeana standing on Main Street, in the open with no protective bubble. In the week he has been gone his town has become reborn. The landscape has remolded itself through its own forces: in this case, the fire caused by the storm. But in spite of the radical transformation of both the human and natural landscapes, Wayne's sense of self returns.

The language in *Go Back* does not draw quite the same overt connections between land and human identity. However, the natural landscape equals identity for *Go Back*'s characters. Wayne's identity is located in the soil, air, and space of Stephensville.

Even Jeana, who had feared the quiet power of the landscape, appears to have recognized her place on the landscape. While the novel does not make clear whether Jeana will be able to travel across the space outside of town alone, it suggests she will be able to exist alongside the space as equal partners.

Conclusion

Examining any aspect of cultural life in Oklahoma proves difficult because of the proliferation of images which exist in the minds of world, the assumptions of the many both in and out of the state, about what the "real Oklahoma" is like. Descriptions of the "physical and cultural landscape" are hampered by cultural misconceptions:

> Visions of dusty, rural desperation; manic boomtowns; stoic, relocated Indians; outlaws as romantic heroes; land runs; cattle drives; agility in the ballet and the backfield, all elevated to the timeless realm of myth, define Oklahoma in ways that make a straightforward consideration of the natural setting, the environmental systems of the state, difficult. (Thompson 4)

At last, the term I have tried most explicitly to avoid: myth. While I do think the Oklahoma literary landscapes I've identified here can, in various ways, be correlated to some overriding sense of the mythological landscape of Oklahoma, I want to avoid making those connections explicit in my exploration. In short, the West has too much mythological baggage.

Stein and Hill refer to this mythological baggage as pyschogeography, a term

Stein has invented to account for the deep, psychological associations individuals form with place. They write:

> Psychogeography refers to the fact that people represent and play out their fantasies and conflicts in the physical and social worlds. . . . We often express who we are in terms of where we are. . . . that sense of whereness is never pure geography but is built from a visual identity and a confluence from the other senses into a whole of what Oklahoma ought to look, sound, taste and feel like ("Culture", 217)

In other words, the pervasiveness of these pyschogeographical associations makes it difficult for even Oklahoma writers to sort through the images, the traditions, the issues of ownership and settlement in spite of witnessing Oklahoma's realities first-hand. "Images are never really images" (230) for Oklahoma writers, as the state has constructed such a unique cultural identity system that Oklahomans' emotions are never merely associative, however; as Stein and Hill point out, for Oklahomans, the obligation to this identity "affects who and what Oklahomans are and become" (233).

I see the overriding theme of this, and most, regional studies as supporting the prediction of Josiah Royce, regarding provincialism. Francesco Loriggio, in his essay "Regionalism and Theory," distills Royce's thesis:

> Mobility, technology, the massification of behavior, the instruments of the states, [Royce] argued, threaten not just the region: being unresponsive to geographical barriers, they threaten the state itself. Without provinces . . . and without provincialism . . . there can be no identity, without identity there is no

loyalty, and without loyalty, the nation ultimately loses its cohesiveness. (19-20) In other words, the protection of regional identity assures us all of our place in the greater, national scheme. After all, we are not of a region until we are first of a group of much larger scale. While on the surface regionalism appears a separatist endeavor, it actually works to adhere the whole. The critical interest in regional studies has likely waxed and waned for the same reasons drives for provincialism have, as well. Industrialization, technology, and war all remind us to consider who we are, to reconsider our most basic beliefs, to claim a place in face of large-scale uncertainty.

As this seems a moment for asking, I claim the most particular of my goals: to try to begin the dialogue on why it is Oklahoma writers write in the ways we do. I never envisioned this introduction or any of the research I've done in the past year as academic in nature. I wanted my father to be able to read this study. Though raised to be a cowboy with all the stereotypical trappings, he is someone who has lived in Oklahoma his whole life, listens intently to the way people talk about land, weather movements, and dust storms, knows how to work horses and cattle, knows the distance from his home to just about anywhere else in the state by how the crow flies, and knows how to divine and taste the soil to find water. He is also an Oklahoman who says he has tried to leave and simply can't. He is one of the many pieces of evidence which lead me to believe that I, like many Oklahoma writers, was chosen by the land, to write about the land, and that on any course my history might have taken, that would fact would have proven undeniably true.

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GO BACK THE WAY YOU CAME

A NOVEL

The road was new to me, as roads always are, coming back.

–Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*

PART ONE

Clear dark spread from the heavens to the water's surface. Johnson grass grew over the path from the bank to the riverbed, and it was all too hard to see. Jake crouched in a copse of wild plum trees where what used to be Highway 53 dead-ended at the old Red Towers Bridge. Jake watched the policeman, the young one, step over the iron chain that draped the bridge entrance. The officer swung a huge MagLite back and forth.

"Damn weeds taller'n a man's head," the policeman said.

Jake squeezed his body in a tighter ball in his hiding place. He knew the officer talked to himself, but just in case, he decreased the odds he might be found. He had stowed his truck on the back road framing the Ledford ranch. Then he jogged the mile and a half back to the river to wait in the thick June air and thicker June weeds for the young policeman, the one with hair like a tv weatherman, to come find Andy in the river.

The glare of the MagLite showed dried-out clumps of Johnson grass and briars, gray in the night, dead too soon from the year's lack of rain. Moths and mosquitos flitted and buzzed through the light's beam as the policeman stood still. Jake knew he thought about the trouble of going down to the water, in the heat and the dark, to look for a boy no one really cared was dead. The quiet thrummed, and Jake tried not to breathe too hard.

"Well," the policeman said and clipped the light to his belt.

Jake heard the shale crumble under the officer's boots and tumble down the bank to water's edge. "God damn it," the man said. Only seconds passed before both the

policeman and his beam of light disappeared down the riverbank

Jake listened to each step the other man took, the crumple of undergrown sapling leaves in his hands as he held on to avoid falling into the river. Jake heard the policeman's breaths gush and grunt, and heard the cars clip over the new bridge two hundred yards down-river as they crossed the Oklahoma-Texas border. He heard cicadas, angry from the dry heat, cry through the grass, heard the drip of his own blood somewhere in the hollow of his body, and Jake heard the way time creaked and ached and limped all around him. Andy had heard it too, Jake felt pretty sure.

No one had talked to Andy Rose when he was alive. And no one had talked much about him once he was gone. When word got around Andy hadn't been seen in a while, that his rusting Chevelle sat out in front of the tiny 1961 Airstream where he lived, door open to all of Nature, little more than a ripple curled through town gossip. The knowledge Andy was dead crept over Jake like a chill the day the old men who drank coffee at the Tip Top drew their conclusion. "Good riddance," one of them had said, and Jake had felt sick.

He didn't know why exactly. Jake had never talked to Andy either, but he had seen that tiny pinpoint of something like purple light, something like a question mark, the one time he had been brave enough to look Andy in the eyes. He had stared at the pale, sickly face and thought a second about giving Andy all the money he had in his pockets. He felt Andy needed something real bad and that money might help. But as his fingers had opened the flap on his camouflage jacket Andy had said, "What are you looking at, asshole?" and Jake had stumbled off the curb and kept going.

Jake's knees hurt. He leaned against one of the trees, and the leaves jingled like Christmas bells in the night. He wanted to exhale hard, blow out all the air he held in to keep himself upright. But it would not help, he knew, and the policeman was still close enough to hear him. The pent-up air prickled along his skin from the inside, and he had breathed in too much space already. Too much of that tight, close air. He closed his eyes.

In a second, the policeman pulled his way back up the bank, and Jake sat up from the tree without shaking the leaves. The door of the officer's black-and-white opened, pouring out so much dome light its beam stopped just inches short of Jake's copse. He saw only the policeman's shadow on the red sand.

"Neville around?"

Static answered the policeman. Jake strained to hear what the radio voice said, but the space and the air and the sounds from the new road rang in his ears.

The policeman sighed long. "Gonna have to get his old ass out'a bed, then. I'm gonna need him down here." He paused and sighed long again. "I got Andy Rose."

Jake wondered how many times the young policeman had said that before. Maybe he had about the time they arrested Andy for spraypainting FUCK US under the Stephensville warrior on the water tower. Maybe he had said it the time Andy ran over Dewey in the parking lot of the Shop N' Go. Maybe the time they chased Andy down to take him to the pen in McAlester for running Dewey over. A thousand reasons existed why the young policeman must have said he'd gotten Andy Rose before.

Jake understood the real reasons. Everyone blamed Andy on the wrong things.

They blamed Andy on drugs. They blamed the boys who drank under the bleachers at football games on beer, and the boy who shot himself in the school parking lot on having no father. They blamed all of Stephensville's pregnant teenage girls on mothers who themselves had been too young, or too old, or who smoked too much and never went to church. They never blamed the town, with all the space around it that squished the life out of you, this place with the open roads that lead to nowhere. All the ancient, crumbling brick pavement. Sulfur from the gas fields. Dry wind pushing you down. How they all got through their days without paying attention to any of that, Jake could not comprehend. He got scared just thinking about it.

"Gonna have to have the county out here, too."

The harder Jake tried to listen the less he heard. Then a tiny mewing sound filtered through the dying overgrowth. It grew closer and closer, covering over the policeman's voice, and Jake nearly panicked at what he could not hear. Then a light-colored, skinny cat peeked around the reeds at Jake. Jake placed the fingers of one hand to his lips and stretched the other hand out to the cat. It purred against his skin.

"I don't know," the policeman said. "Somebody called me. At home. Talked real quiet. I could hardly hear him."

The cat crawled into Jake's lap. He listened to the static warble in the night for several long seconds, then the policeman's radio stopped. The door to the black-and-white closed, and there was no more light save the blue glint of the moon.

Jake had cried when he knew Andy was dead. Not in front of anyone but alone, while he sat on the roof of the old bank and trust building watching the trains go by.

Death made Jake sad like that. He thought about it all the time on account of his father. He wondered now if Andy had trembled at all on the way to the top of the Red Towers. He wondered why it was Andy had tied one of his boots from the top beams. That had to mean something. Jake wanted to know if Andy's hands had grown sweaty the last few seconds he had held on.

Jake, the young policeman, and the hungry cat waited in the dark for the people who would pull Andy out of the river. Jake would sneak out when the commotion started, before the sun came up. He would be home getting ready for work by the time the old men in the Tip Top found out. But for the time he rested in the weeds, smelling wild plums.

Jake didn't talk to Andy Rose while he was alive, but he missed him now that he was dead.

Miss Jessie wanted to give up. She'd done right by Clyde for years. Anybody from her church would swear Jessie was the tower of strength itself. But today, for no reason that should have mattered, she woke up thinking today would be the day she could give up if she wanted to. Like she had a window, open for just a little while. Time enough for the good Christian woman in her to say back to God, *This is too much to ask of one woman*, and she could give it all up and everything would come out in the wash. She ached so that she just about believed all that.

Jessie stood inside her screen door and watched her 87-year-old husband Clyde ride his rusted-out lawn mower down to the mailbox. She'd been keeping Clyde at home for the last few weeks. Lately he'd been worse than usual, far enough gone that Jessie had stopped taking him into the Tip Top for coffee in the mornings. He'd taken to going from complete quiet, slumped over in his chair, to hollering right out loud. She never knew when it was going to happen, and worse, she never knew what he was going to say. Sometimes he'd hear the phone ring when it didn't, and usually he thought it was their youngest son Donny calling for money. It was never Donny. In the cafe he'd yell at people to quit fanning his front door. He didn't make any sense most of the time, and for three days straight now he'd told and retold Jessie the story of how he and his first wife had lived in the back of the wife's mother's store in Burkeburnett, Texas, right after they married. The wife had sold eggs there while Clyde went out to California to make a fortune in fruit farming. He'd only made a go of it for three months before he came home, a poor man poorer still. It was a story Jessie knew well before Clyde had started

telling it. She was his first wife.

He scared everybody at the Tip Top, except for that weird boy Jake. Jake stared with wide, dark eyes. Miss Jessie, well, she felt in her bones that they liked her. She still made it to church every week while Angela Wilkes from the nursing home watched him. Jessie didn't trust Angela, mostly because she didn't know any of Angela's people, Angela being from Indiana. And Angela was so much bigger than Clyde..Clyde crumpled up in his chair like a paper bird. So Jessie visited no longer than fifteen minutes after church, then she went straight to Peckmann's for her groceries and drove back home. Mostly Clyde slept in the mornings, so Jessie figured Angela wouldn't have to wrestle with him any.

The lawn mower scraped hard on the dirt drive when Clyde veered it over the ruts her Galaxy made in the rain last Sunday. A couple of weeks before he'd high-centered it on the edge of the bar-ditch, and Wayne Miller had to come push it off. Clyde had gunned the accelerator till he had run it out of gas, then he stayed in bed sick for days after.

Wayne had sat on the porch with her every evening till Clyde was up and around again. Jessie could not recall a hundred words that had passed between Wayne and her husband in the years the two huddled outside Clyde's work shed. They always seemed quiet to her, heads bent, as they sat in those old metal lawn chairs. They didn't work on anything that she ever saw, and when Jessie would ask what they did, Clyde would say, "Man things." That had satisfied her. A boy who didn't know his own father, and a man who didn't know his own son, they had needed each other, she guessed. Still did.

Jessie had expected that when they reached days like today, when she no longer took Clyde into town, she wouldn't feel so tired. Messing with Clyde was enough, but everybody they saw in town had to make something of them. Trying not to be rude, Jessie supposed, but she hated their pity. When she walked Clyde into the cafe, the post office, the grocery store by the arm, people said, "Morning, Miss Jessie" and then spoke to Clyde in raised voices as if Alzheimer's made somebody deaf. Then they'd pat Jessie, tilt their heads, faces all full of pity, say that if she needed anything just to give them a call. They all put on airs that just wore her out.

As if Jessie would call any of them. As if any of them wanted her to. Sometimes Jessie called Angela, and every once in a while Leena Ann Castle. Leena Ann patted on her sometimes, and years at the nursing home gave Angela the ability to see without seeing. Wayne came without being called, the way she'd expect someone she had practically raised to do. The patters in town didn't know the particulars, that she sat out on her porch every day hot or cold and watched her absent-minded husband circle round and round their three-quarters of an acre on the riding mower Chuck Allen had given him. And that she watched to make sure that he didn't get off down the road toward town; that he finally made it up the steps when she called him to lunch; that she made him let her put the gas in every morning because the thought of what he could do to himself with a gallon of gasoline snatched away any sense of peace she might feel. No, those patters knew nothing about what it meant to be tired.

For a while now Jessie hadn't been allowed to feel her years, the way you ought to get to do when you've raised three children, and had farmed, cooked, cleaned, sewn,

mended, gardened, and canned your way through eighty-three long, long years. At breakfast that day Clyde had been gripey, saying no fewer than fifteen times didn't she think those eggs were too soft. But since then he had calmed down, seemed to have more of his senses about him than he'd had in days. She let him ride down to the mailbox to see if the mail had run without her watching from the porch. Her knees wanted wanting to hurt, and she wanted to let them.

Clyde rode the mower out to the road's edge, a few feet past the mailbox. But he backed up to the mailbox, nice and smooth, as if he had practiced. She watched him take the mail out. He had even thought to shut the motor off while he flipped through the envelopes. He studied each one for several seconds, then put the stack into his back pocket, took his seat and fired up the mower. She decided then not to worry about him today.

Jessie went into the kitchen to put out the tuna salad and cold cornbread leftover from the day before. She poured herself a glass of iced tea and sat down. The house was hot, Clyde insisting that they not turn on the central air as the hum made his nerves jangle in pain. She knew how he felt. They had each waited years for their peace. Jessie put the tea glass against her face for a few seconds before she drank. She listened to the rumble of the mower, heard it bottom out in the ditch as Clyde tried to get turned around. Every one of his moves made her more and more tired. Miss Jessie leaned her forehead on her folded hands and stopped listening.

Stephensville ran like an old, slow, busted-down clock that measured everything in years. Wayne Miller pulled his black-and-white, the only black-and-white Stephensville's police department had ever owned, into a slot in front of the drugstore. Neville had said it was only right Wayne drove the black-and-white since he worked the most hours. In fact, when the town had bought the car seven years before, they'd held a street party complete with a parade in which Wayne, then only six months on the job, had driven the sleek-bodied car down Main and waved at folks who had stood on the curbs. The excitement over the new car built so furiously, townsfolk had immediately started a collection to buy a second police car. So far as Wayne knew, they had almost $300 by now.

Wayne killed the motor and waited for the usual Monday morning events to unfold. Some time between 9:10 and 9:15, four haulers from Irving's Manufactured Homes in Jefferson County would roll by, pulling new trailer houses to the big lot in Oklahoma City. Then Wayne would walk to the bank and cash his paycheck without having to wait in line. When he'd come out, Mr. Holligrieve, who was almost one hundred, would be standing on the sidewalk. The man couldn't take strides longer than two inches, so Wayne never did know how he appeared on the sidewalk out of nowhere. Together they would head to the Tip Top, one of Stephensville's two restaurants. There had been three, until the Sandwich Shack closed down in April. Wayne missed the Sandwich Shack's thick baloney sandwiches, but Ed Snyder said he had no choice once the drought set in. "You know you're trouble," Ed had told him, "when farmers can't

even afford baloney no more."

Wayne and Mr. Holligrieve would pause here and there to talk, if anybody came by on their way to the parts stores or the insurance office. But downtown stood mostly empty. Framed on the east by the railroad tracks and on the west by US 81, downtown consisted of a two block stretch. On the north was the phone office, the drugstore, the fabric store, and the bank. On the south stood the dime store, Handy's Department store, and the newspaper office. The parts stores stayed open only to keep people in truck and tractor parts. Second Street cut Main in half, and by going one block north you ran into city hall, the police station, and Doyal's Funeral Parlor. By going south you ran into the post office and the Tip Top. The rest of town lay west of 81, but consisted only of the school grounds and most of Stephensville's houses. Chuck Allen's Steak House, the other restaurant, and the two gas stations faced 81 in hopes of attracting truck drivers and folks shortcutting their way to Fort Worth. Word had it the feed store would be next to close its doors.

Wayne waited in his car until the Irving trailers rolled by, then he walked up toward the bank. What they called Main Street, the state of Oklahoma called Highway 53. All the stores and light posts stayed draped year-round in a ratty mixture of Fourth of July and Christmas decorations. Wayne remembered 1988, the year he had come home from college to be policeman for his hometown, as being the year the city hired members of the high school football team to climb tall ladders and nail up the decorations. Wayne could not recall, though, why the Christmas decorations went up without the red, white, and blue bunting coming down. Or why no one had ever gone

back up the tall ladders since. No prairie thunderstorm or flatland wind had been enough to bring the decorations down, and Wayne wondered if anyone else even noticed them anymore.

In the bank, Wayne cashed his check. While he waited for his money, the water fountain in the lobby gurgled. The cashier watched *The Price is Right* on a tiny television with giant rabbits ears that sat on the counter next the telephone, and she said "Bye, Wayne," without looking at him.

Cash in his pocket, Wayne stood outside the bank's doors and scanned the street for Mr. Holligrieve. The old man was not to be seen. Over on 81, a semi hit its jake-brake hard but did not stop. An old Chevy without a muffler turned onto Main and drove slowly toward Wayne. It was summer, he remembered, as the faces of two teenage girls stared back at him through the Chevy's windows. He waved.

The bell hanging over Handy's door jingled in the still air, and Mr. Holligrieve emerged. Or tried to. Wayne saw he had hooked his cane through the door's handle and could move no further.

"Morning, Holli," he called and jogged over. He looked both ways even though he hadn't seen more than two cars on that street at one time in years. "You gettin' on okay?"

"No," the old man said. "Just gettin' in a pickle, it looks like." He banged the cane on the door handle a few more times before giving up the struggle. He took a blue bandanna from his pocket and mopped the sweat from his face.

Wayne lifted the cane off the door handle. "Headin' to the Tip Top?"

Mr. Holligrieve shook his head. He breathed hard in the heat, so Wayne pretended to study the red-brick sidewalk a few seconds. When Mr. Holligrieve motioned, they took off like galloping snails.

Getting Mr. Holligrieve off the steps in front of Handy's took more time than anything, and once they had managed the six inches to the sidewalk they paused again for the old man to catch his breath. Wayne saw Holligrieve wore his same green terry cloth slippers with electrical tape around the toes. For traction, he had told Wayne once. As they moved on, one minuscule step at a time, the teenage girls passed by again.

"Hi, Wayne," one called through the car window.

"Yeah, hi, Wayne."

"Morning, girls." He waved, and they giggled as they drove on.

"Got you a girlfriend there?" Holligrieve asked.

"Oh, nooo," Wayne said. "Too young for me."

"Nothing wrong with young. There'll be a day soon enough girls like that won't think twice about you." Holligrieve held his bandanna to his chin to catch the sweat that poured off his face. "I bet that's hard to imagine, a good-lookin' buck like yourself."

"Come on, Holli. Everybody around here knows I don't have time for a girlfriend."

"Well, you ought'a think 'bout doin' somethin' 'bout that." His wrinkles deepened in the sun.

Wayne laughed. "Maybe I will. Some day."

They turned south down Second. Ray Cobb's truck pulled away from the Tip

Top and coasted toward Main.

"Your boss in?" Ray rolled his window down and yelled to Wayne. Ray's radio blared Willie Nelson, but he hollered rather than turn the radio down.

"Don't know," Wayne said. "It's my day off." Wayne kept Holligrieve moving, but they didn't seem to move any further away from Ray's truck which stood stock-still.

"What the hell? Wayne Miller takes a day off? That don't sound right. You believe that, Holli?"

Holligrieve waved his bandanna at Cobb.

"Come on, now, Cobb. If I wasn't out here every day, who'd look after this town?"

"Hell, it don't like you got much to look after no more. We just about dried up, ain't that right?"

Holligrieve came to a slow stop.

"Heard ya'll pulled that Rose boy out'a the Red last night. That took long enough, huh? You'd think with the river down like it is, somebody would'a seen him a'fore now." Cobb honked his truck horn and drove on to the police station.

"Jackass," Holligrieve said.

They crawled on to the cafe. "Hey, does Angela know where you are?" Wayne asked. Angela always gave Mr. Holligrieve a ride to town on Mondays in the nursing home van, but nothing made her madder than his wandering off Main so that she had to look for him.

"More or less. One'a these days I'm gonna get off where she can't get me and

take me back up there." Holligrieve motioned west where the nursing home sat across from the school.

It took two tries for Holligrieve to get up the step, and he lost one of his nasty slippers before he made it. "Yeah," said Wayne, bending to retrieve the old shoe. "Good luck with that."

Jeana sat in her Taurus wagon outside the Tip Top. The sun's glare off the cafe's big windows blanked out the scene the way too much light makes everything dark. She barely made out Carlita pacing behind the cafe counter, so she waved for the third time.

Carlita swung the door open, a pitcher in one hand and a dirty white towel in the other. "Just a damn minute. I ain't got time for you right now. I got customers who come all the way in." She pointed to the dark interior with the pitcher, sloshing the liquid onto her hand, pants leg, and the cafe floor. "Look what'cha made me do."

Carlita slammed the door. The tattered, ancient Fourth of July bunting that had hung over the storefront for years fluttered only slightly in the door's wake. Jeana rolled her driver's window up and cranked the air conditioner up to high. She leaned her face into the path of the air, trying to dry the sweat that beaded up around her hairline. Her nerves clattered in her chest. It was nearly ten, and if she didn't get her Coke by ten her nerves would fly completely loose.

Jeana touched the bow that pinned her hair back for the fourteenth time since she had pulled in. She had put on nice clothes, church clothes even, but when she had gotten to the Tip Top she couldn't get out of the car. And she had promised Doyal she would do it today. He complained almost without breathing about how her phobia ruined their lives and how he had grown tired of people looking at them funny. When she had first gotten sick, she stayed in bed. Then for a year and three months she had not left the house. Now it was just daylight, she kept telling him. Daylight and all that open space around town. Seeing all that space in the daylight crushed the air out of her.

What's crushing you, Doyal would ask. *There ain't out nothing out there for miles.*

That was just it, although Jeana could never make Doyal understand. So Jeana spent most of her time inside, and if she had to go out in the daylight to take the kids to school she stayed in the car. Anyone who wanted to talk to her was welcome to come the driver's window, as long as they came only one or two at a time, and people did without ever saying any of the horrible things about her sickness that Doyal said to her. He complained only slightly less when the Wal-Mart in Duncan started staying open twenty-four hours a day, and Jeana could do most of their shopping by herself. At night Jeana could not see the vast spaces around her as she drove. She had to practice three times, driving to the Wal-Mart and sitting in her wagon in the parking lot, before her heart had stopped threatening to explode on her if she went in. Hardly anyone roamed Wal-Mart at two in the morning, so Jeana had less fear that someone might grab her or run into her. But she kept a paper bag in her purse in case she hyperventilated, just to be safe.

Jeana breathed in deep. 9:52. She stared at the cafe door, willing Carlita to bring her Coke to her. As she stared Wayne stepped into her view. He towed Mr. Holligrieve with him, and they trudged slowly over the door jamb. Wayne had to pick up one of Holligrieve's slippers, and nausea swept over Jeana at the thought of how dirty the old man's slipper must be. They disappeared into the dark, and five seconds later Wayne reappeared. Seeing him wipe his hands on one of Carlita's towels settled her stomach.

Jeana pressed the automatic doorlock to let Wayne in, and as soon as he was in

the passenger's seat, she relocked the car. Wayne buckled his seatbelt, which Jeana always insisted he do, even if they never moved the car when they talked. She knew a car's brakes could give out unexpectedly, and all her passengers would be prepared.

"You look--"

"Like shit." Wayne filled in her sentence too quickly for her. The center of her nerves clattered hard just then as she saw his hand rise. He turned her rearview mirror so he could see his face, and Jeana shrieked.

"No, no, no! Wayne." She snapped the mirror back. She positioned herself in the driver's seat so that she looked straight ahead, hands on the wheel, as if she actually drove. She glanced beyond the car's hood, then quickly up to the mirror. It was all wrong. "Gah, Wayne. I can't believe you did that."

Jeana tried not to sound mad. She tilted the mirror a little to the left, then the tiniest bit upward. She glance-tested again. "It's all wrong."

"Sorry. I forget sometimes just how--" Wayne made believe he balanced something between his palms "--perfect all your stuff has to be."

She took another deep breath. "Don't say it like that. You make me sound goofy. You know I can't help it."

"I know. Sorry," he said again. He tucked arms over his chest so she would know he had no intention of touching anything else. Wayne had been the first person, and for a long time the only person, to believe her when she had first said she was sick. He usually never did the sorts of things that threw her off like that.

Jeana stopped fiddling with the mirror. "Now you really do look like that."

"Like shit?"

"Like that."

"You know, Jeana, you're over thirty now. It's okay for you to say cuss words out loud."

"I don't say 'em 'cause I don't think 'em."

"Ever?"

"Never."

"You mean, you've never once got all pissed off at Doyal and told him--" he looked at the dome of her car like the word he wanted might be up there --"well, that you were pissed off?'

She shook her head.

"Jesus, you're too good for us all, aren't you?"

"Now, Wayne Miller, that'd hurt my feelings if I didn't know you're talking about yourself and not me."

They sat in the hum of the Taurus's air conditioner for a minute. Wayne stared out at the arroyo cactus and yucca plants in front of the cafe. He pointed to them.

"You know, those are probably the only living things in town that this drought hasn't killed."

"You're probably right."

"Except us." He looked at Jeana and smiled, but she thought it was a sad smile. "We're still doing alright."

"So what's wrong with you? Isn't Monday your day off? What are you doing in

town in your good jeans?" Jeana touched the crease pressed into Wayne's Wranglers for just a second because that was as long as she could touch anybody but Doyal or the kids, and Doyal was becoming a problem. "Look at you, you don't even sweat when it's a hundred and five."

Wayne wiped his fingers across his forehead as if he didn't believe her.

"I must be out'a sweat," he said. "Worked all of last night. We pulled Andy Rose out of the river last night."

"Well," was all Jeana could think to say. The way Wayne's face wrinkled in thought worried her.

"Can't believe I didn't think to go look down there. That was just stupid." He punched his hand out as if to punch Jeana's dash, but he pulled up an inch short. Instead Wayne tapped the dash with his fingertips. "Somebody calls me up last night, says Andy's in the river."

"Who?"

Wayne shrugged. "Some guy, I think. Probably somebody who was getting high with Andy when it happened."

Paying close attention to Wayne's words grew difficult for Jeana. She sneaked a look at her watch. Carlita had less than two minutes. "What happened?" she asked.

"Fell off the bridge." He shrugged again. "Hell, more'n likely he jumped. But I don't know." Wayne looked at Jeana. "You gonna make it?"

About then Carlita swung the cafe door open again. She carried a large Cherry Coke in a styrofoam cup, two cherry stems pinned under the lid. She handed it through

the window to Jeana, along with four paper napkins.

"This here ain't no curb-serve," Carlita said.

"Morning, sunshine," Wayne waved at Carlita while Jeana sipped hard and fast.

"Don't you start with me. This one here's already on my nerves."

"How's the number four look this morning?" Wayne asked.

"You want a number two?"

Jeana drew the sweet liquid through the straw until she felt it trickle into the veins in her arms.

"No number four?"

"No Canadian bacon." Carlita sighed hard to let Wayne know he wasted her time. "You want a number two?"

"Number two," he said and held up two fingers.

"And you'll come in and get it," Carlita said and headed back to the Tip Top's door. "I don't got no truck with able bodies needin' curb-serve."

"She hates me," Jeana said. She held the cup up to the light. Exactly half empty. She rubbed her fingers on one of the napkins.

"She just don't understand."

Jeana counted to thirty and crumpled the first napkin. Then she rubbed the fingers of her other hand on a new napkin. "I don't blame her, you know. It don't make no sense. Why I'm this way." Jeana stared out at the old bunting that clung to the cafe's front. Red dirt coated the stripes that had once been white. "I used to be a normal girl."

Wayne laughed. "You wanna be normal like these people around here?" Wayne

pointed to the cafe's dark windows. "Jesus, Jeana, then you really do have problems. Let's see now, in that restaurant we got a three hundred pound woman mad 'cause she's gotta make breakfast, a smelly old man who escaped from the nursing home, half a dozen farmers sitting around drinking coffee 'cause the drought's killing their crops, and a kid rich enough to buy all'a us."

Jeana crumpled the second napkin. "I just wish I could do something."

"What?"

"Work or something. But there's nothing really to do but be a schoolteacher."

"You could work for Doyal at the funeral parlor."

"His mamma does that. Besides, he says that even if all the people left around here died at the same time, there still wouldn't be enough work for me at the funeral parlor."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you."

"Wayne," Jeana took a deep breath. The question always on her mind bubbled out. "If you could go anywhere else, where would you go?"

"I don't know. Never thought about it."

"Think about it, then. Where would you go?"

Wayne leaned forward in the seat. He pulled at the seatbelt straps that stretched across his checked shirt. "No place, I guess. I like to look at things, you know. Drive around and see what there is to see. Talk to folks. But so far, I haven't had a reason to go anyplace else. Besides," Wayne let the seatbelt straps smack against his chest. "I already got this place memorized."

Jake watched the nervous woman in the station wagon parked outside the Tip Top. She made him nervous all the time, but seeing her that morning bothered him especially. He had not slept at all after waiting for the police to take Andy out of the river. By the time he walked from his house to downtown, he was hungry like he hadn't been for a long time. He had asked Carlita if she would make him chili-cheese fries for breakfast, and she had yelled "What the hell?" But she had done it anyway.

Jake felt better once everybody knew about Andy. The farmers who filled the cafe now that they had nothing to do droned about it for a while, one of them saying, "That Wayne's pretty sharp," and then Andy wasn't mentioned again. Jake couldn't decide if that made him happy, but relief softened inside him.

Carlita slammed the cafe door and came inside. She had been in the parking lot yelling at the nervous lady, but she yelled at everybody. "Put'cher eyes back in your head," she said to a couple of new men in cowboy hats. She stood between their table and Jake's, milk dripping down the pitcher, over her fingers, and onto the floor. "Look it," she said to Jake. "They must be new here."

Jake just looked at his fries. Carlita placed the milk pitcher on Jake's table. "This boy here," she said to the new cowboy hats, "could buy all'a us. He's a millionaire, ain't ya, Jake."

"That right?" The cowboy hats chuckled. "He sure does look like one."

"Well, goes to show what you know," Carlita said. She snapped up the pitcher and went back to the kitchen.

Now the new cowboy hats made Jake nervous, too. He held his Army jacket closed in front. The skinny cat wriggled inside, pushing against his hands. But she trusted him, Jake felt. She had stayed quiet and didn't fight Jake though she smelled the milk dripped on the table. He looked through the window again, and the young policeman stood just inches away on the other side of the glass.

The chili-cheese fries in Jake's stomach churned. The policeman and the old man came inside. He watched as Wayne shook hands with just about everyone in the restaurant. They were all saying "good job, good job" to Wayne as he slipped back out.

"Young Wayne needs himself a girlfriend, I think," Holligrieve said. He sat at a table with Cal and McNally, two farmers almost as old as him. They bought Holligrieve breakfast whenever he got away from Angela long enough to eat. "Says he got too much to do to have a girlfriend."

"Well, that ain't true," Cal said. "Looks like with the Rose kid on his way to the grave we probably done had our 'citement for the year."

"Wayne probably don't want no girlfriend. He got him a house paid for, and he's the only person in town be able to keep his job. Long as there is a town," McNally said.

" 'Cept for the banker and the cemetery man," someone added. The farmers laughed.

"Neville gonna have to retire soon," Holligrieve said.

"Yep. That leaves us Wayne." Cal held his coffee cup in the air.

"Git it yourself," Carlita called.

"We ain't gonna miss Neville too much. Wayne's the only one ever done any

work. And as for girlfriends, that don't sound right for Wayne. You know his mamma's crazy."

"Uh-huh," Carlita said.

"She done run off ever other week when he's a kid. Don't think he got any good idea 'bout how to be married," McNally finished.

"Don't know a body who does." They all laughed again except for Jake.

"Well, he had Miss Jessie his whole life." Carlita finally crossed the floor to Cal with her coffee pot in hand.

" 'Cept she's married to that old fool Clyde. And I don't care, Clyde Everett's crazy a'fore he's crazy," Cal said.

"He rode that woman," McNally said. "Never done a lick'a work that I know of."

"It's plumb funny Wayne turned out at all," Cal said. Then he leaned in toward McNally and Holligrieve but said loud enough for the whole cafe to hear, " 'Sides, Wayne cats around Lawton from time t' time, I hear."

The men all mumbled. Carlita took a Coke out to the nervous lady. As Jake watched her drink and watched Wayne talk, the new cowboy hats called to him.

"Hey," one of them said. "How'd you get to be a millionaire, boy?" They laughed.

"Just did." Jake didn't like talking to people he didn't know, and since Jake was shy that meant he didn't talk to many people. His mother always said if he'd keep his hair out of his eyes, people would like him more. "People trust ya more if they can see your eyes," she would tell him.

"Come on, now. You can tell us. You got money on you right now? A hundred bucks? Two hundred? Hell, I bet he's got that million in his pockets right now."

"He's got somethin' in his pockets. Look at 'em holding onto to his jacket. Like he's afraid somethin's gonna git 'em," the other cowboy hat said. "You ain't afraid us, are ya, boy?"

Jake did not look at them. He knew they'd keep talking to him if they saw his face. Strangers would always talk to you if you showed them your face.

"Hey, rich boy."

"You got a problem?" Cal called to the cowboy hats.

"No problem," the first hat said. "We're just talking to the rich boy over here."

"Got that right," McNally said. "Jake's rich, sure enough. His daddy burned up in a oil fire. Whadda ya think'a that?"

Carlita came back in time to hear the end of the exchange. "Do we even know ya'll?" she asked the cowboy hats.

That ended it, and the new cowboy hats slammed money on their table and left. Carlita could end any argument conceivable. "That money can just lay there," she said to the whole cafe. "We don't need no strangers in our business."

"Acted like Cotton County folks, didn't they?" McNally said.

"Amen."

Wayne pushed into the cafe, and everyone went quiet.

"Got my breakfast ready?" He smiled at Carlita. Jake noticed Wayne smiled a lot. Talking, driving, even in the grocery store.

"You think I ain't got better things to do?"

Sweat trickled down Jake's stomach where the skinny cat pressed against him. She turned her body this way and that. She was ready to go. Jake scooted his chair away from the table.

"Ya'll coming to the big to-do downtown?" Wayne sat on a counter stool and spun around so that he faced all the cafe tables.

"What to-do's that?" Holligrieve asked.

"The Fourth of July thing. It's next week."

"Oh, you're referring to the Chuck Allen show," Cal said.

"It's not that bad, Cal."

"The hell you say. You know, there's a reason we ain't had a Fourth of July thingie in years," McNally said. "We ain't got nothin' to celebrate around here."

"Maybe you're right," Wayne said. Now that they were all talking again, Jake thought he could leave unnoticed. He didn't think he'd done anything wrong, and he liked Wayne just fine. Like with Andy, he never talked to Wayne, but Wayne did talk to him. Jake liked Wayne almost as much as he could imagine liking anybody. He liked Wayne as much as he thought people ought to like policeman. Jake just didn't want to have to tell Wayne what he knew about Andy.

"And I'll tell you another thing," McNally said. "This ain't nothing but a way for him to make us all pay for burnt up steaks and baked potatoes at that little beauty show. You know, he calls that place a country club."

"He's trying to get his granddaughter married off. She's gonna be queen at the

beauty show," Cal said.

"Now, how does that work?" Somebody at another table tapped Cal's arm.

"Hell, Chuck Allen pays for the whole thing."

The other old man shook his head.

"Well, there's gonna be singing. Fireworks. And a parade," Wayne said. He stood behind Carlita's counter now where he made himself a Coke in a styrofoam cup. "And the Corum Volunteer Fire Department's gonna sell bar-be-que. Ya'll gotta come 'cause I have to work whether you come or not."

"You know," Cal said. "That Wilson boy with the fire department can bar-be-que a pig, now."

Jake put his hand in his pocket which enabled him to hold the skinny cat to his body with his palm. He walked slowly to the door.

"Hey, Jake," Wayne hollered.

Jake's heart stopped. *I'm the one who called*, he thought, hoping Wayne would hear him but still not ask in front of the whole cafe what he knew about Andy Rose.

"Do me a favor." Wayne walked over with a large Coke and some paper napkins. He put the napkins in a white sack and handed it all to Jake. "Give this to the lady sitting in the car out there." Wayne pointed to the nervous lady. "She's kinda having a bad day."

"Okay." Jake took the items Wayne gave him in one hand. Jake looked at the policeman's strong forearm, his thick knuckles. He smelled like soap, Jake thought, and something else he didn't recognize but Jake thought he'd call flint.

As Jake pushed through the door, Angela passed him. "You coming to work today?" she asked. Even though he didn't need the money, Jake helped serve lunch at the nursing home. He had never missed a day of work.

"Yeah."

Jake approached the station wagon carefully. He didn't know why, but he knew the nervous lady got jumpy sometimes. He held the Coke and sack away from his body as he walked. When she saw Jake, she sat up as straight as a board. Her eyes widened as he leaned toward the window, and Jake knocked softly on the glass because he thought that was the polite thing to do.

She rolled the driver's window down about an inch. When she said "Yes?" Jake barely heard her over the air conditioner.

"Ah, he--" Jake pointed to the Tip Top with the Coke. "I mean Wayne."

She shook her head.

"Well, Wayne said to give these to you." He held up his package. "He said you're having a bad day."

She sat and looked at Jake for a moment through the crack in the window. She wore a pink and gold sparkley hair bow on the back of her head. When she moved, the bow rocked back and forth. The cat struggled inside Jake's jacket and scratched at his skin.

"Okay, then," she said after a while. "If they come from Wayne. But just put them on the dash for me. Okay?"

Jake shook his head. He waited for Jeana to roll the window all the way down,

then watched as she leaned away from the window. Jake had to contort his body in an S-shape to lower the items through the window without touching anything, and balancing the cat became really tough. He felt her claws pulling his shirt.

He sat the cup upright, then leaned the small sack against it.

"Just fine," the lady said and even smiled at him a little.

But just then the skinny cat had all she could take. Her claws sank into Jake's chest, and he let loose a howl of pain. The nervous lady screamed, too, and Coke, cherries, and paper napkins fluttered through the hot sky.

By the time Wayne got to the intersection, whatever had started it all had already happened. They charged across Main without looking for oncoming cattle trucks: the yellow cat, Jake Goodall, and Wayne. In the breath before Wayne's boot took that last running step up the curb and Jeana still cried in the Tip Top parking lot, Wayne knew where he came from. And then suddenly, he did not.

In the space across Second Street, between the fabric store and the bank, an almost solid line of people stretched out. Wayne didn't stop to imagine where they'd all come from, when only minutes before Stephensville had stood deserted. Wayne saw only their backs. Jake slipped through a break in the line, jostling Aleeta Lackey's purse as he did. Someone Wayne could not see screamed.

Three quick shots cracked the air, and the glass of city hall's storefront window fell on the sidewalk like rain. All this Wayne heard as if from the end of a long tunnel. And then Clyde's voice, stronger and thicker than Wayne had heard it in years, cried out to him. "Sonuvabitch," Clyde hollered. "Takin' money out'a my pockets. My goddamn money. Call it city business, but it's my goddamn money."

In the half of the second before he reached the gap in the line, before he placed one hand on Aleeta's shoulder and the other on his service revolver, the tiny hairs on Wayne's neck bristled. He felt a change coming in the weather. He saw a flash on the back of his brain of the hill behind Miss Jessie's house, and the sunflowers that towered over her barbed wire fence. Aleeta said, "He's not talking about his water bill, is he?" Wind whipped Wayne's face and hair as if he drove too fast with his windows down.

Hatch stood stock still inside the shattered window that had moments before closed his city manager's desk off from the street. Hatch's eyes opened like headlights coming on, and he stared right at Wayne.

"You gonna say it?" Clyde hollered. "You gonna admit to being the thief that you are?"

Wayne knew Clyde moved, raised his gun, but he felt it rather than saw it. The only thing Wayne saw was Jake's scrambling against the tree trunk in the yard of Doyal's funeral parlor. Jake held a kicking, mewling cat against his chest. Wayne saw each tiny stripe, each tiny whisker of that cat, and the sweaty, sharp edges of Jake's jaw. His heart pumped once.

And then, nothing. Wayne did not see the way Clyde folded up in slow motion, like a door on an old hinge, over the barreled-body of the riding mower. Wayne did not see the mower curl a gentle right turn and stop against the bumper of Ray Cobb's Silverado. Wayne did not see Neville wave his arms over his head, did not see the blood spill down Hatch's arm, the people who came out of city hall, all the coffee drinkers from the Tip Top run to the narrow side street to gawk.

Wayne stared thirty yards beyond his gunpoint. Wayne saw only the cluster of starlings explode from the live-oak in the corner of the funeral parlor's yard. And then nothing.

Back in the little farm house east of town, Miss Jessie woke up and lifted her head from the oak dining table. Beads of sweat ran down the tea glass and left a dark ring on the wood. She'd forgotten to put a coaster under it. *Where's your memory*? she wondered.

Most of the time I have it, but I don't always have it when I want. Most of the time it's there, sometimes, though, not when I need it. I'm getting as bad as Clyde.

Jessie walked out to the porch, then down the steps, into the yard. Small gray clouds clustered in front of the sun and gave everything around her the look of late afternoon. But she knew it was still morning. At least not far past lunchtime, but things were changed. Jessie felt someone was coming to ask her why. Like somebody would do something like that. Like if you asked them why they'd be able to tell you.

She walked out to the road, stumbling through the ruts just the way Clyde's mower had. She stared down 53 toward town. He was gone, she knew. Then Jessie looked back at their house. A house that looked more or less as if it had just been pitched onto the hill. It slanted into the slope and ached for something to set it right. For fifty years, they had been gonna fix it up. She had believed she was what that house needed, that once she began to move inside it, tend her children, wheat, and fruit, it would pull itself up straight. But it hadn't. And she'd never had the time to do anything about it. Jessie Everett lived in a slanted house, drank her evening tea out on the crooked porch, and every so often felt her porch chair tilt downhill just a little more.

PART TWO

At home Jeana covered her arms in Band-Aids even though her daughter Liddy repeated that she couldn't find even one sign of cat scratches. After that she put Mexican tv dinners in the oven for the kids and laid down on the couch with a wet wash rag over her eyes. She was happy to stay there, to never go out of her house again, to make shopping lists for Doyal, to hire someone to drive the kids. But Jeana wanted to stay home forever.

The phone rang eight times before Jeremy picked it up.

"Mamma," he called. "It's Aunt Auggie."

"Oh, August." Jeana held the phone against her face with both hands. She sobbed.

"Jesus-God," August answered. "What is it now?"

Jeana continued sobbing until her breaths began to shorten.

"You know, you really shouldn't cry like that in front of the kids. They're probably right there in the room with you, aren't they?" August talked fast and always sounded right. It made Jeana want to believe the things she said. "You're gonna give those kids some kinda complex."

"I know." Jeana took a deep breath. She wanted to speak slowly, to tell August everything that had happened. But while she took time to breathe, August stole her moment.

"Guess what. I have news."

August always had news. August always had a new job, and she always called

from some place else. She had called Jeana from Michigan and Florida, and once she even called from Puerto Rico. Even though August was a year older, she and Jeana had graduated high school together. Their mother thought August would behave better at school if they stayed together.

"I'm coming back."

"Where?"

"Back. Back there."

"You're coming home?" Jeana wiped at her tears with the wash rag.

"Yeah, I'm coming back," August said.

"Really?"

"Really."

"No, really," Jeana said. "I need you to mean it really."

"God, yes. Really." August drew the word out like it had three syllables. "I swear, you don't make giving good news any fun."

"I guess it's just too hard to believe after the day I've had." August had left the day after they had graduated to visit her boyfriend, a boy she hardly knew actually, at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls. In the twelve years since, she had never made it home again.

"Whatever," August said. "So I'm in Mississippi now. Jackson. It's a pretty little town." A horn honked in the background. She called from a pay phone. "I'm driving straight there from here. I gotta be there by tomorrow night at the latest."

"Why at the latest?"

"It's a surprise. But if Pap calls you, just tell him to keep his pants on. I'll be getting there soon enough."

"Pap? You called Pap? When?"

"Couple'a weeks ago. I needed a favor, and you weren't home." A truck roared in the distance, and the phone line crackled. Her sister was some place in Jackson, Mississippi, standing in the open, in the twilight. "And what's with that, anyway? I thought you never went anywhere."

"Sometimes I do. But I don't get out of the car."

"You know, I heard about these herbs you could take. Supposed to help with stuff like that. I'll find out what they are and send some to you."

"August, you won't believe what happened." The reality of what Jeana knew bit down on her and pinched hard.

"Try me. I've seen a lot," August said.

"It's Wayne Miller. He's in trouble."

"No way. Baby-boy Wayne," August said, and that was the first time in years Jeana had heard his nickname. "So what happened to Waynie?"

The way she wanted to tell it to August melted. She couldn't think how to say it, how to make August know what it meant to be there in the middle of all this. "He got his heart broken," she said finally.

"Well," August whistled. "It's about damn time."

Jake sat in the cement drainage culvert behind the funeral parlor. He felt like crying, but he wasn't sure why. Sweat rolled out of his hair, down his back. The waist of jeans were wet. He took off his jacket, then the shirt he wore over his t-shirt. It had been at least a couple of hours, and still people came and went down the street, so he didn't feel safe to move. He waited, getting sunburned and feeling sick. The river cat lay in a tiny circle of shade at the edge of the culvert. She panted, and Jake thought he'd read once that panting was bad for cats. He felt in his pockets for something to give her.

The ten dollar bill Jake had withdrawn that morning from the bank was still stuffed in his jeans pocket. He had forgotten to pay Carlita. Every day, except Friday when he took twenty, Jake withdrew a five or a ten--what he thought it might take to buy his breakfast or run errands for his mother--and every day the woman at the bank looked up from her tv and asked if he didn't want to withdraw his money for the whole week. He did not.

The money came because his father had been struck dead by lightning. Jake had no memory of it, except that he had the clippings from four different newspapers, all telling how the oil lease tanks had exploded. A fire ignited and drank six inches of water from Cow Creek as the gas burned. His father's truck, the *OK Oil* emblem peeling from the door, had been left standing, driver's door open, KEBC out of Oklahoma City playing on the radio.

Jake had the edges of remembering. Standing on the green grass at Fairlawn Cemetery, holding his mother's hand, the voice of a tall man saying, "I don't see how

that's the company's fault,"--these were the things Jake remembered.

He wondered what they would do to Wayne. They couldn't take Wayne.

Counting his dad, Jake had known three dead people his whole life. It so happened he'd known two of them in just two days.

Wayne sat in the folding chair in front of Neville's desk so that Neville and Hatch could sit in the only two good chairs they had in the police office while they filled out the rest of their paperwork. The only thought in Wayne's head was that he didn't have a thought in his head. Neville rolled his pen, scribbled quickly on his clipboard form, then rolled the pen on the desktop again.

"That about gets it," Neville said. He kept looking down at the form. "Looks like it to me, anyway. Whadda you think, Hatch?"

The city manager took the clipboard and held it up to the light. "Yeah, yeah, that's about it." Hatch laid the clipboard on the desk and signed where it said VICTIM. "Boy, they don't make those boxes for you to write in very big, do they? Take special glasses to read those forms every day."

"Don't I know it." Neville took the clipboard back and signed in the space marked CHIEF OF POLICE/REPORTING SHERIFF. "We'll have to give copies of everything to the OSBI." Neville finally looked at Wayne. "That's just standard, now. Routine for when a civilian is injured in a police incident."

For a minute they sat quiet while Neville shuffled the forms into a big envelope with the ones Wayne had filled out earlier. "Alright, then."

Hatch shook Wayne's hand. "Real sorry, Wayne. I'm just real, real sorry." Hatch put his fingertips on the Band-Aid on his upper arm like he'd just remembered it was there. Then he gripped Wayne's shoulder, to show he meant what he said, before he left

the dark office.

"Well, we're done here."

"We're done here," Wayne repeated. "Whadda you know?"

"I know we ain't got a lot of experience with things like this, Wayne. It's mostly just paperwork."

"Doesn't seem like enough." Wayne rubbed his eyes. "I mean, when you consider what all happened today."

Neville sighed, sounding tired of the whole thing. "We talked to all the witnesses. And to a person they all told it just about the same. Enough anyway for us to know you didn't do nothing wrong." Neville stood right over Wayne and whispered. "You had to shoot that old fart. He was gonna kill Hatch, yelled it over and over for every soul on the street to hear."

"He was always yelling stuff."

"That might be true, but he wasn't always pointing guns at people when he was doing it. He drew on you, Wayne, right there in front of city hall."

Neville put on his hat. He scooped up his keys from the desktop. Then after a second, he scooped up Wayne's.

"You mighta done us all a favor, you know. I know that don't sound right to say about a dead man. I guess there was probably something decent about him once. A long time ago. But he said too many mean things, raised too much ruckus. Hell, he nearly choked that little dark-haired girl that works at the drugstore. He's been a problem

around here for a long time now."

Wayne shrugged. He watched as Neville dropped one set of the keys in the top desk drawer and then locked the drawer with a key from the other set. "Sorry to have to do that."

"Routine," Wayne said.

"You can keep your box, though," which was Neville's way of saying Wayne could use his beeper. "The only bad thing," Neville said slowly, "is you got to take mandatory time. Just until we get the OSBI stamp on the whole thing. Guess we're gonna have to put Shanie in the car some this week. She'll bitch about that."

Wayne didn't bother to answer. His brain tingled a little, like it'd been asleep. Neville looked around. "Come to think of it," he added, "we're supposed to do another form for your down time, but we'll take care of that later. Think it's time we all got home. I'll drive you out there since you'll be without the cruiser for a while."

Wayne and Neville walked into the blue-black, sweaty June night. Traffic from the highway intersection two blocks away and the click and whir of the bank clock changing numbers were the only noise. "Hardly guess what happened here today, could you," Neville said.

Wayne finally thought, and wondered if Neville understood who he was talking to. "I'll walk," he said.

"You sure?" Neville's wrinkles deepened in surprised. "That's over four miles and it's still," Neville paused while the bank clocked whirred again, "eighty-nine

degrees."

"Yeah," Wayne said. "I'm gonna walk."

Wayne walked west from the police office until Neville headed out toward the high school. Then Wayne turned back toward the corner of Second and Main and looked down the block at the city hall parking lot. Two sawhorse barriers blocked the street at both ends, and he stepped around one of the blockades but stopped just a few feet inside. Cobb's pickup still sat outside in case they needed it for evidence, even though Neville'd told him he could take it home. Plywood sheets covered the broken windows, and a few tiny squares of glass glistened blue in the mercury vapor light. No yellow police tape. Wayne didn't think they even had any.

Clyde's body was gone, too. He knew it would be, but he didn't know if it should be. Before breakfast Hatch would have Duncan Glass Company fixing the windows. Once Cobb drove the Silverado off, the morning crowd from the Tip Top looking on, there would be hardly a sign to show what had happened.

The bank clock clicked 10:30. Dark was only beginning. "Solstice," he said out loud, suddenly remembering the word from a beer party they'd had at the academy years back. A couple of cars barreled down Main, coming into town from the lake. Wayne turned, arms splayed out like Jesus, and waited. But one car then the other rolled toward the stoplight like they didn't notice Wayne or the blockades. Wayne lowered his arms. Humidity settled over him, weighted him, glued the bottoms of his Ropers to the pavement. He thought a while about just standing there, through the night on till

morning. He would be a testament to something. He would put himself back into the scene, and maybe when they all filtered back onto Main Street in the morning, they would all see Wayne and realize what he'd done. Somebody had to realize what he'd done.

Behind him, glass and gravel crunched. Wayne spun around.

"Clyde?" he hollered and his voice echoed down the block. No one was there, and Wayne was ashamed to think somebody might have heard him, standing in the street talking to a dead man. But to be sure he said, "I know you're not out there," a little quieter. He waited, looked beyond the other barricade at the live-oak. A porch light shone a too-bright circle on the funeral parlor's yard. Inside Doyal worked. He worked because of Wayne.

Wayne walked out toward his house on the edge of Star Route. He clipped slowly through the wheat grass and cockleburs in the bar-ditches on US 53. Sweat rolled down his back, dripped from his chin. Wayne sopped up the sweat with the handkerchief he kept in his breast pocket until it was too wet to take anymore, and felt old and overwhelmed like Holligrieve must feel. Every minute or two a car passed, and a few honked. Once Neville's sedan passed by, way below the speed limit. But Wayne kept his head down and walked. Most of the cars turned north at Sears Corner, so once Wayne passed the *OK Oil* lease he had the highway almost to himself. He stepped out of the grass that pulled at his boots and onto the asphalt that stuck to his soles.

On the highway, Wayne had a hard time walking his line. He listed toward the

center line, then back to the shoulder. The stars were slow to fall on the longest day of the year, and now that he was out of the city limits, there wasn't much light for Wayne to guide himself by. He stopped, looked straight up. There was no moon or north star. Wayne thought he ought to drift back to his right, but after ten steps he still wasn't to the road's edge. He looked around for the split-rail fence posts that marked Sears's cow pasture, the ones he drove by every day on his way to town, but they didn't seem to be anywhere. Just about the time Wayne wondered why the highway didn't slope downhill toward his own corner, it did. He spilled forward like he'd stepped in a prairie dog hole and rolled to a stop in the bar-ditch and a thicket of stickers.

Wayne was lost on his own road home. He sat still in the ditch, feeling bruised although he wasn't sure where. He could smell something dead. A possum, a raccoon. It was a big smell, so it could have been an armadillo. The smell grew sweeter and sweeter the longer he sat there. He knew he should go home, but he couldn't think of a reason to when he considered that moment by itself. It didn't seem strange to him that he'd find himself here just now. The turn of the earth that drug out this day, that changed the season, threw off his equilibrium. He had somehow lost his sense of direction when dark fell. But sitting there just then seemed to Wayne too perfect for questions. Who was going to think it strange to find a grown man tumbled over in the ditch on a highway that split alfalfa farms? If no one was surprised at anything else he'd done that day, no one would be surprised to find him sitting in the ditch.

Car lights began as tiny globes atop the hill in the distance. Wayne wiped at his

sweaty face again, then dropped the handkerchief that was doing no good. He held his breath until he felt ready to puke and then shrank back into the yarrow. With a second to think about it, he did not want to be another surprise to anybody today. He did not want to be piled on the list with all the drunks he pulled out of ditches. He was wrong in what he'd done, but there was no sense in hiding. Wayne understood the consequences. He needed everyone else to know that he did.

The two lights grew bigger and bigger as the car closed nearer, until finally they were one giant white light that washed over Wayne and showed the corner of Sears's split-rail fence just a few feet to his right. He had almost passed right by the cow pasture, the one he'd passed so many times in daylight he had believed he could have found it in his sleep. So he had been wrong about that. As soon as the car's taillights disappeared, Wayne crawled out of the ditch. As he did, he must has moved right over the dead armadillo because he smelled it rich and full-on. He leaned on the fence rails for a moment, wanting to be sure he had turned the right way toward his house, then he walked another half mile to his driveway. "I've got this place memorized," he heard himself tell Jeana.

At the mailbox Wayne opened the tiny door, took out the few pieces, looked down toward his hands which he could not see in the dark. It didn't seem too important to wonder what came in the mail that day, so Wayne put it all back. He moved so slowly and quietly that Roadie didn't even notice Wayne until he walked onto the back porch. And even then she made no sound, just followed him as he passed through the unlocked

back door and came out again to the porch with Wayne. They each took a chair, Wayne a folding lawn chair and Roadie the collapsible lounger. He placed a six-pack ring with four beers on the porch, and Roadie laid her head on his leg.

"Let me tell you about my day," Wayne said, and laid a hand on the dog's neck.

But instead Wayne drank down one beer as fast as he could, belched long, and opened another can. He'd thought he could tell it to Roadie. If he could say it to Roadie that meant he could make it into a real story. If it was a story, it was whole, something that began and ended at particular places. And then he could make it make sense. If Wayne could open his mouth and tell his dog what had happened to him that day, then Wayne would have his answer.

Truth was he didn't remember it. Well, he knew the end result. That was the obvious part. But the rest of it he didn't even try to tell. He hadn't replayed one second of that morning, except that was, for those starlings. The only picture he saw was of how the bevy of starlings fanned out of the live-oak in front of Doyal's. And how the light green leaves of the broad canopy had barely moved. How in a snap the leaves turned inside-out, spitting out dozens and dozens of those little birds. How they chittered, beat their wings, floated upward to form the five points of a perfect star. How they froze there, half of a half of a second, against the sky. And how even quicker, the cloud of birds settled back into the treetop, pulled inside the cover of the light green leaves which turned right-side-out again. And how just at the bottom of that clear picture, he saw the line of his revolver's nose.

That was all Wayne saw, and it was perfect in his mind. He looked into Roadie's face. "See, there were these birds," he started. He pointed with the hand that held his beer can to a spot in the distance. Roadie lunged for the imaginary ball, but didn't leave the chair.

"Too smart to run after nothing, aren't you?"

Roadie barked once, ready. "You see those birds, girl?" Wayne whispered and flung the almost empty beer can into the dark. Roadie was gone.

The movement made Wayne feel all the fatigue and ache he'd saved up all day. It made him realize that all that beer sloshed in an empty stomach, that he was truly hungry. It made him realize that his right arm, his trigger arm, hurt down in the bone. Wayne rubbed his arm and felt that his watch was gone.

Roadie bounded back onto the porch with a stick she'd furrowed from the grass.

"You wanna go?" Wayne asked. "Wanna go?"

Roadie placed the stick on Wayne's lap. She paced, ready to head out into the night again, no fear of the dark or the wilderness that edged the 3/4 acre backyard.

For some reason it was just then that it occurred to Wayne how far away he was from any of his neighbors, from town, from the sounds of people living. That had always been the best thing about life out here, and now Wayne felt peace ringing against the dark treeline just beyond his back fence.

Instead of throwing the stick, Wayne dropped it on the porch. Roadie pounced on the stick with her front paws and barked at it loudly.

Wayne shook his head, left the rest of the beer on the porch, and held the back door open for the dog. The house was not too dark for Wayne to see. Without turning on the light he could put his hand to the key rack by the door, the knife he'd left on the counter after buttering his morning toast, the paperwork dealing with that Rose boy's suicide stacked in folders on the table. He picked up Roadie's water bowl, refilled it, and listened a while as the dog lapped from it. With his back to the counter, he tried it again. One reach out and he found his mother's recipe box, the one he kept but never opened. Then he put his fingertips to the soap dish where, before going to work, he'd laid four quarters so he'd know where his newspaper money was come Sunday morning. He closed his eyes and with the energy he had left, Wayne turned himself in a few lumbering circles. He placed his hands on the bread box, the backs of both kitchens chairs. No tripping, no hesitating, no getting lost. He spun a couple more times and knew before he opened his eyes that he faced the pantry door.

Wayne removed his boots and left them by the back door. He'd tracked the smell of dead armadillo all over the floor he'd just waxed last weekend. He had trouble remembering sometimes that it was his house, and even when he did, he took care of it like he believed it was his. He'd come home from college to live in it, a house suddenly empty, looking like someone had just walked out in the middle of doing dishes. His mother's furniture, her towels, even her canned goods still filling it. Actually, she'd put the dishes away before she left.

He leaned against the counter. One muscle then another slid down to its bone

and puddled in his skin. He came loose on the inside, but his brain clicked like a clock. Roadie pushed on his leg, headed toward the hallway. In the midst of all that clicking he thought about that beer can he'd chunked into the yard.

"Just a minute."

He walked through the yard, in the dark, in his socks. Gnats already swarmed, and if he left the can long enough Roadie would get into it and end up vomiting all over the yard. She ran ahead and waited in the spot for him, not giving Wayne a chance to find his own way. Maybe Roadie was the key. When he was home with Roadie he knew where he was, where to go.

"Are you it?" he said kneeling in front of her. She circled, anticipating Wayne's throwing the can again. "You're the same everyday," he said.

He stood, heading for the trash barrel. Roadie traced the square of his yard. Something gray moved out by the treeline. Wayne stared. But nothing moved again, nothing was there. It was possible that a man who hadn't eaten in over a day, had drunk two beers in less than ten minutes, could be seeing things. He turned around, looking over every corner of his lot. His black pickup shone in the starlight, the fence he had built the first fall he had moved in, his mother's flower beds he kept up. The thing was, he'd know this place his whole life. He'd known this house, the distance and direction from town, when the scissortail nested on the creek bed. His whole, entire life. In the dark he knew the yard needed mowing.

Back inside Wayne finally made it to bed. It might have been midnight, it might

have been three. Roadie's bones knocked on the hardwood floor as she lay down. The tired, inside part of Wayne sank into the mattress. He'd left the windows open to the sound of the humid breeze in the trees. He needed to take off his clothes. He didn't feel sleepy. Wayne didn't feel anything.

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Roadie barked. Wayne heard his dog bark to him from the ledge of a very deep hole. Wayne's eyes opened, and he saw under water. The hems of the curtains brushed his head. He put one hand in the air above his head, reaching up to the lip of the hole.

Roadie barked loud, right at Wayne's head. He wanted to push Roadie away, but every one his muscles and joints screamed. He shivered in the heat. He needed to throw up. But Roadie stuck her nose on his face, pulled at his shirt.

"What?" Wayne's voice ground out.

She pushed and pushed.

"What's the matter?"

"She's wanting you to get up. Protecting her territory. You might oughta do it. Sit up, now." Another man's voice boomed through the dark of Wayne's house.

Roadie hustled to the foot of the bed and barked hard enough to bounce the mattress. Wayne pushed himself most of the way upright, groaned under the effort. He looked to where Roadie barked, and blinked about twenty times before he saw the man.

"You gonna call your dog off?" The man spoke softly and grinned. He glanced from Wayne to the dog and made a kissy face. "Come on, now, girl. I ain't here to hurt nobody."

The man sat on Wayne's dresser, one foot on the end of the bed. He held his hands clasped over his raised knee. He looked like Wayne's grandpa, or like some friend of Wayne's grandpa. He was in his late 50's, had that neat, smooth-combed hair that

looked wet, and one of those checked shirts with pearl snaps. Wayne could see those pearls snaps shining like little white stars in the near-dark.

"Come here, Roadie. Here." She didn't come but sat down facing the man. She stopped barking, but growled non-stop and dripped slobber on Wayne's coverlet.

"I waited as long as I could. I knew how tired you was and that you was probably wanting whatever sleep you could get." The man tilted his head toward Wayne as he spoke. He stayed in that position, and looked to Wayne like he was painted in black and white. "You probably didn't even know you was sleepy when you laid down, but I knew it soon as I saw your eyes. I'd of let you lay a while, but there ain't too much time."

"Why?" Wayne said.

"Why?" The man sounded amused, like Wayne had said something funny. "I don't know why. Just 'cause, I suppose."

Wayne thought why again, but didn't say it.

"Anyhow, there's work to be done. Mostly concerns you. Sooner you get started the sooner it's gonna be over with." The man felt his pants pockets. "That's the way with most things, ain't it?"

Wayne put his hand in the long hair at the back of Roadie's neck and pulled himself a little more vertical. He groaned down inside his chest.

"You need a bucket? You oughta be feeling it about now. I figured you would be." The man unsnapped his breast pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes. He flipped a silver Zippo on his leg. He smiled while he smoked and stared at Wayne.

Wayne could hear himself blink. "I don't understand," he said.

"Well, of course you don't. You will soon enough." The grandpa man blew a beautiful stream of smoke that settled thick over Wayne's dresser mirror. He laughed. "Come to think of it, I'm not real sure what's gonna happen myself. I got started on this thing the same time you did."

The man leaned in to laugh at Roadie.

"What?" Wayne said. "What did we get started on? I don't even know--" and he stopped there.

"No? Well, that's all right." The man waved, put his other foot on Wayne's bed. Roadie raged wild again, and Wayne slumped sideways.

"Roadie." He couldn't yell. "Come on, babe." Wayne patted the bed as hard as he could, pretty pitiful in his state.

"That's a good dog you got there." The man pointed with his cigarette. "Somebody dropped her off out here, huh? Those found dogs always do you good. They appreciate all you do for 'em. It's good she ain't no bird dog. You can't trust them bird dogs."

Wayne lay all the way back down. His clothes were hot and tight. He started to untuck his shirt, but his jelly-arms made the job difficult. He tried to think of things he could ask the pearl-buttoned man, but all that came out was, "My God."

"You sure you don't want to erp? You'll feel better if you do. At least for a little while. You might be able to pay a little better attention." The man was on another

cigarette.

Wayne rubbed his eyes with hands. just then it became important to think about breathing. Wayne was pretty sure he wasn't getting enough air to his brain.

"I was in Wolf Point, Montana, one time," the man said. "It was a while back, a' course. Long time ago, before it was nothing. Now, I was never much of a drinker, but I'se with these old boys from Texas, and we got to talking, and a' course there's plenty of beer around. By the time I rolled out in the morning I'd never been sicker in my life. I could see all right to drive, but I just couldn't think right, couldn't clear my head. That's the one that's tough, not being able to see up here." He pointed to his head.

"Once I got out of town, I pulled my truck over and puked my guts all out. Just right there on the side of the road. Didn't worry about anybody seeing me looking like a fool. Then I got back in the truck, I was headed south. And I saw this sky. Huge, crystal clear, perfect sky." He grinned and smoked. "Nobody used to go to Wolf Point on purpose in those days."

"I don't know what that means," Wayne said.

The man shrugged. "Nothing, I suppose. Sounds familiar, though, don' it?" The man said this like it was the first time he had heard the story himself.

"Yeah," Wayne said. "It does kinda." He thought about rubbing his eyes, but his hand wouldn't move. "I swear to God I don't know what's happening."

"You're a lucky man. You don't know that, but you are. There's many a man who'd love to go back to thirty, to have the chance to see what they got and where they's

gonna go. Where they *could* go, which is the thing you wanna know and you don't even know you wanna know it when you're just thirty."

Wayne stared at the ceiling. He was ready for the man to go.

"You got a nice, quiet life. Or had. Everything changed yesterday, not that you'll be able to tell by anybody around here. It wasn't your fault, though, so don't worry none about that. But it set a whole bunch a' other wheels turning. It's gonna change your life."

The old man stood up and smoothed the front of his trousers. Wayne watched him again without lifting his head off the bed.

"So you take care, now."

"I will."

"I know." The man smiled wide. "Be seeing you." He waved, and Wayne noticed that his cigarette didn't appear any shorter from being smoked.

Then the grandpa man with the pearl buttons walked out of the bedroom. A trail of smoke floated near the ceiling. Wayne rubbed his eyes until they made enough tears to soothe his stinging eyes. He left his eyes closed, and in a couple of seconds he heard the back screen door open and close. Politely.

"At least he doesn't slam doors," Wayne said to Roadie.

At that Roadie bounded to the hallway and barked until her sound rang through Wayne's empty house. Wayne just kept his eyes closed and tried to breathe slow.

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Hours later Wayne woke up again. Full daylight flooded his room and burned the top of his hair. He sat upright, propped between the windows over his bed. His legs were sweaty, still wrapped in the Wranglers he'd put on a day and half before. Red mud clotted the pants legs, and the thousands of little burrs he'd picked up walking home still clung to him and his coverlet. He smelled awful.

"Hey, babe," he said from deep in his throat. Roadie lay on the end of the bed. Her ears pointed straight up, and she didn't look at Wayne but in the direction of every tiny sound.

The phone rang. Wayne remembered it'd rung before while he slept. Roadie watched to see if Wayne went for the phone, but when he didn't move neither did she. After four rings the phone stopped. Roadie chomped the air.

"Okay," Wayne said. He ran a hand over her head. They climbed off the bed which today seemed higher off the ground than before. Wayne pulled all the covers, sheets, and pillowcases off. They stank, too, even though he hadn't touched most of them. It was Tuesday. Wayne always washed his bedding on Fridays and Tuesdays.

While he carried his bedding down the hall, his police beeper on the kitchen table beeped. Neville wanted him. Neville and Shanie would be the only people to call him today. Maybe Jeana. She was nice like that. Wayne stuffed all the bedding in the washer and then stripped off his day-old clothes. He walked naked through the house, into the kitchen where he put food and water down for Roadie. Even though Wayne had

missed their usual breakfast time, Roadie didn't eat right away. She paced through the kitchen, down the hall to his bedroom, then right up to the back door again. Wayne pushed the screen open so she could go out, but she wouldn't go. She paced back to the bedroom instead.

Wayne followed so he could get clean underwear. He found the silver Zippo on his dresser. Without stopping to think about it, Wayne slipped the lighter into his underwear drawer and went to take his shower.

-6-

It amazed Wayne how little Clyde Everett had to do with his life that day. He drove his truck to the police office and left Roadie inside with the windows rolled down. She was jumpy, and Wayne thought she acted tired. Normally he didn't leave her in the truck because she liked to wander Main Street, but he had a feeling he wouldn't be in the office long. He scratched her ears as he went around to the passenger side to read the gold lettering on the Ford Bronco parked in front of the office door: Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation.

"That was fast," Wayne said.

Inside the half-condemned building used as the police office, the window ac unit screeched and rumbled so that Shanie didn't hear Wayne come in. She pawed through a file cabinet overstuffed with files, trying to find a spot to cram in another one somewhere in the M's.

"Aahhh," she said when she looked up. "How you doin' today, hon?"

"All right," Wayne said, not loud enough for Shanie to hear him over the ac which didn't matter because she'd already gone back to filing.

"You look pekid. Don't guess you slept at all. Wait and don't say anything. Just hang on a minute, hon." She pulled files out just high enough to read the labels, then shoved them back into the rickety drawer. After nine tries, she found one she wanted and slapped it on the desk.

"Did you?" she said straightening up.

"Did I what?"

"Sleep, sleep. Guess that answers my question." Shanie wore her brown police shirt with her jeans. Usually Neville let them wear what they wanted as long as their badges showed. She was dressed up for the boys from the state.

"They got here fast," Wayne said pointing to the coffee room door. The coffee room was the only room besides Shanie's office and the office where Neville and Wayne had their desks.

"Neville called into the City this morning, and they told him they had some boys on their way to Jefferson County on a homicide investigation. Decided to have 'em just stop off here on the way." Shanie sat in her desk chair and began paging through the file. "You'll be glad to get it over with, I guess."

"I guess," Wayne said.

He watched the air conditioner behind Shanie drip condensation down the dark paneling, leaving a wet trail and what looked like a salt stain. It was the top floor that had been condemned, but Wayne wondered what had kept the whole building upright for so long. All the ceiling tiles sagged, and they'd been trying to raise money for three years to shore up the tornado siren on the roof. Wayne thought they had almost two thousand dollars by now.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"You better go on in, hon. They been here an hour already."

"Yeah."

"Don't be nervous, hon."

"Yeah," Wayne said again.

Neville was in the coffee room with three other men, two about Wayne's age and one older guy. They all wore white button-down shirts and blazers in spite of the heat. Wayne hadn't thought the OSBI would already be here today, and he felt unprofessional in his t-shirt.

"I thought we had him taken care of, but I tell you, that son of a buck was mean as all-get-out," the older one said, and they all laughed.

"Come on in here, Wayne," Neville said. He came over and shook Wayne's hand, something he'd done maybe three times since Wayne had worked for him. "You doing all right today?" He hadn't asked Wayne at all yesterday.

"Oh, yeah. Kinda tired." Wayne looked about half a second at each man's face.

"Well, that's understandable. Have a seat."

Wayne sat at the big table with the two younger OSBI guys. He accepted a cup of Neville's coffee, strong enough to crawl out of the cup on its own. He only half-heard the end of the conversation he'd interrupted, so he didn't know why they all laughed again. He missed their names, too, looking instead at the thick stenographer's notebooks that each of the young men held. On the table lay one of those mini-tape recorders and what looked like a big datebook. It was black leather and had the state seal stamped on it in gold. Both men stood, leaned over the table to shake Wayne's hand, and smiled big

smiles at him. They had amazingly white teeth, and Wayne thought they dressed and looked enough alike they could have been twins.

"Unfortunately," the veteran said, "we all know what we're here for." His name was Pete Dye, Wayne caught that much. He wore the same kind of clothes as the younger guys, but his were newer and more expensive. He didn't take a chair with the rest of them, but sat on the corner of the desk. He wore those supple calfskin boots, and once when he crossed one foot over his knee, Wayne saw the word "handmade" printed on the sole.

"You ready?" Dye asked Wayne. One of the younger ones clicked on the tape recorder, and it all started.

They began by asking Wayne what his whole name was and how to spell it, how long he had lived in Stephensville, where he went to school. When he told about his dad being dead and his mother taking off for Texas, Dye said "I'm sorry to hear all that, son." They asked Wayne about a hundred questions that didn't mean anything before anyone even mentioned Clyde Everett.

How long had he known him, did they ever have any run-ins, did he think Clyde was a troublemaker who had something against him, did Clyde possibly have anything to do with his mother leaving town. Wayne told the truth, which was that Clyde hadn't known who Wayne was for years, but that Miss Jessie had treated him like a son most of his life.

Finally they got to what had happened the day before. Dye said, "Tell it in your

own words," and Wayne did. He didn't know where it came from. He just stared at one of the young guys's little OSBI stars on his lapel, and didn't listen to his own voice spill out all of those crystal-clear details. Telling the whole thing took only about three or four minutes, so Wayne even told the OSBI boys about how the gunshot scared all of those little birds out of Doyal's live-oak in front of the funeral parlor. He didn't talk about how he saw the tree move or about the birds making the star, but he still told it true. But he told it all without thinking about it, and when he stopped, Wayne had forgotten it all again. He looked at Pete Dye.

"You can probably guess that your witnesses all tell pretty much the same story. I usually wouldn't reveal something like that, except this all looks pretty clean to us," Dye said.

The other two nodded. The tape recorder was snapped off, and they all went to stuffing their notebooks into their satchels. The leather datebook went in, too, although it had never been opened.

"The paperwork takes longer than anything," Dye said. "We don't see any problems here, but you'll have to remain inactive until the office in the City makes it all official." They had all stood up and were shaking hands again. "Takes about ten days normally, but maybe we can use the holiday to drag it out a little. Get you some extra vacation time."

Dye winked at Neville when he said it, and they all laughed except for Wayne. The group moved into the front office where the visitors from Oklahoma City made nice

to Shanie who giggled when they kidded her about her neat file-keeping. Then Neville followed them into the parking lot like he was seeing off his grandkids or somebody he had known his whole life. It was Clyde he had known his whole life.

Wayne sat in the chair in front of Shanie's desk. Roadie lay on the floor, chewing earnestly on something she held between her front paws that Wayne couldn't see.

"My dog learn how to open truck doors?" He pointed to the office door. "And front doors?"

"She's a smart a girl."

"Don't give her candy," Wayne said.

"It ain't candy. I'm not stupid," Shanie said. "It's beef jerky."

"Don't give her jerky, either. Those spices and stuff'll make her barf everywhere."

"Wayne, you found that dog in a bar-ditch. God only knows what she lived on till you came along."

"But that's the point. She's mine to take care of now, and I don't want her eating crap."

Shanie just "hmphed" at him. Wayne watched her work a while. She flipped through pages in one file after another, stopping here and there to stamp a page with the date and the SPD seal. Cases were being closed.

"You still have the file on that Rose boy at home?"

"Yeah. I guess I forgot all about it."

"You know it was just a suicide, Wayne. Don't keep thinking you're gonna find something more to it." Shanie paused to check on her own piece of jerky. He was just a druggie kid," she nearly whispered.

"I don't know," Wayne said.

"Well, you have to bring it back anyway." She looked at him with sad lines creasing her face. "It's police property, and well, you know."

Wayne didn't answer.

"We sent flowers, by the way. We didn't have too much in petty cash, so I used a little bit of the siren money. Rhonda used a lot of carnations, so we got a nice big arrangement out of it." Shanie tapped the edge of her desk with her pen to be sure Wayne paid attention. "I put your name on the card."

"Okay," Wayne said. He watched Shanie checking things off a list she had laying in between the files. She checked off everything except the item that read "Andy Rose File." "Watch Roadie for me a minute?"

"Love to," Shanie said. Roadie still gnawed her jerky and didn't notice Wayne leave. The black OSBI truck still sat in the lot, but Neville and the investigators were gone. It was a little after two by the bank clock. Probably he had walked them to Chuck Allen's for lunch. Wayne walked toward the Tip Top. The bright light of summer swallowed Wayne. Twenty-four hours before he had stood on the sidewalk, and no one other than Holligrieve had been in sight. Today Stephensville buzzed. He waited for someone to point at him, yell at him, run from him. But folks driving Main, passing in

and out of Handy's and the parts stores did not even seem to see Wayne. And the ones who did just waved and said, "Afternoon." At the corner Mrs. Hall tried to push the heavy glass door of the fabric store open with her foot while keeping hold of her sacks. When Wayne stopped to hold the door open for her she just smiled at him. "Thank you, Wayne," she said. "Thank you so much."

He looked through the plate glass window at the Tip Top before he went inside. Cal and McNally sat near the door, and Carlita polished the counter.

"Ya'll embarrassed to have me here?"

"Don't be stupid," Carlita said. "I ain't got time for it."

"You just did what you had to do," Cal said. "Nobody blames you for nothin'."

"Why not?" Wayne took the stool closest to the old farmers' table. "It's not like I didn't really do it."

"It's just a matter of time a'fore he run over somebody's kids," McNally said.

"He did run over about half a dozen of my guineas," Carlita said. "Not all at once, see, just one at a time, every so often. I'd catch him out on the road scraping feathers off those front wheels and he'd say 'I ain't seen no guinea!' Him with the blood on his hands." She scooped ice into a red plastic glass. "He was crazy, but he done all that on purpose."

Carlita filled the glass with Coke and placed it in front of Wayne. "Got chicken fry back there," she said.

"Sounds good," Wayne said, even though food did not sound good at all.

"Wayne, I got to tell you. It was all the talk." Carlita gestured to the almost-empty cafe. "They're just a'buzzing over it. Somebody said we ought to put off the fireworks show, but I think it was that old boy from Waurika on his way to the sale barn."

"Don't worry about it, son," Cal said. "Clyde Everett was a son of a bitch. Bitterest old man you'd ever want to meet."

"Like you'd ever wanna meet one," McNally said. "Anyway, Everett's wife been carrying him for years. He ain't been worth nothing since his 50's. She kept that farm running, got all that hay baled and sold every year. And a course you know he tried to cheat anybody he done business with when he did work."

"And hell, Wayne, the son of a bitch *shot* the city manager," Cal yelled.

"Yeah."

"Shot at him," Wayne said.

"It's pretty clear he meant to do him in. Old bastard just too old to aim," Cal said. He clicked his coffee cup with McNally's. "I'll bet you old Hatch pissed his pants." The two men laughed.

"Don't worry, son," McNally said. "Ain't nobody in this town think you done wrong."

"For damn sure."

"There just ain't much going on these days, Wayne," Carlita said. "People want something to talk about, and, well, I guess this seems like something really big right

now. But nobody gonna miss Clyde, and ain't nobody gonna hate you."

Carlita went back into the kitchen. Wayne wasn't sure he trusted these reports. Carlita could talk anybody into any emotion that might make them want to buy pie.

Jeana's Taurus pulled up outside. Wayne put a Cherry Coke in a styrofoam cup and went outside.

"You'll still take a Coke from me?" He stood at her window. Today she killed the engine and rolled the window all the way down.

"Oh, Wayne." Tears ran down her face. "Wayne, Wayne."

"You're not dressed up like yesterday," Wayne said.

"I tried it yesterday. It didn't work for me." Jeana touched the ponytail band on her hair. "Besides, everything's all weird today. I didn't sleep a wink for worrying' over you, and Doyal worked through the night." She rolled her eyes. "I can't believe I'm saying these things to you."

"I'm just glad you're still talking to me." He looked back at the restaurant's windows. "In fact, everybody's still talking to me. Now that's weird."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Okay," Jeana said. Wayne had forgotten her napkins, but she took the Coke anyway. "Doyal said maybe one of Jessie's daughters would be in today. Gloria, I think. You probably know her, huh?"

"Not really."

"Have you been out to the house?"

"Are you serious?"

"Wayne, she's looked after you your whole life. She knows you didn't do this on purpose." Jeana whispered.

"She doesn't want to see me. She can't."

"All right, then. Not another word." Jeana twisted an imaginary key to lock her lips. "But let me tell you this. August is coming today."

Wayne raised his eyebrows.

"Hard to believe? I can't believe it. She called me last night. I haven't seen her in forever."

"Is she coming for real this time?"

"Wayne! You're as bad as Doyal."

"Wouldn't be the first time she's stood you up, Jeana. Why do you even bother with August?"

She looked at her hands in her lap. "She's my sister," she said. "Because I want to. I need her, Wayne. I don't have any friends."

"Jeana." Wayne squatted so they were eye-level.

"You remember yesterday when I asked you where you'd go if you could? Well, August does that for me. She's been everywhere Wayne."

"More like she's been around."

"That, too. Nothing scares her. She's done everything I've ever wanted to do."

"You don't know half the things August has probably done."

"But I know she's done everything, Wayne. She can show me everything."

"Sounds scary."

"My God! You don't even know her." Jeana looked sad and far away. "She's the best friend I ever had."

"Except for me," Wayne said. He thought about the man with the pearl snaps, thought about telling Jeana about his dream.

Jeana smiled. "Except for you."

Then Wayne thought about the silver Zippo he'd slipped off the dresser top into his underwear drawer and decided there was too much about the day before he just couldn't explain. "Well, tell her I said 'hi'."

"Where're you going?"

"I don't know yet."

"You can't go now." Jeana reached out of the car and put her hand on Wayne's. She let go in less than two seconds.

"More like I have to go now."

Wayne walked back to the office after eating half of Carlita's chicken fry. The black OSBI truck was gone, and Neville sat in the front office with Shanie. Neville had pulled in another chair from the coffee room, and Roadie sat on it. She liked to be eye to eye with people.

"See no evil," Wayne said when they all looked up at him at once.

"Them OSBI boys think you done all right, so don't worry," Neville said. "They talked to everybody involved. They went out to see Miss Jessie, even. It's all squared up, no complaints."

Wayne thought Neville could only mean that word in his official capacity. Miss Jessie surely had complaints. "Okay, then," was all Wayne said.

"So, I guess you're on vacation until further notice."

"You gonna go anywhere?" Shanie asked.

"Probably. I mean, I guess."

"You oughta think about it. You could spend the Fourth of July some place exotic."

"Exotic," he said.

"You could go out to California," she said excitedly. "And then you could go up to Bakersfield and see my daughter and my grandbaby. That's what you should do, Wayne." The way she said it was clear that she was decided. "You can go to California."

"You could just go down to see your mom," Neville said. "She probably don't get to see you much on holidays. You call her yet?"

Wayne shook his head.

"You probably ought to 'fore somebody else does."

Wayne couldn't imagine who might call his mother. He didn't know of a person in Stephensville his mother kept in touch with, but that wouldn't necessarily keep one or two gossips from tracking her down with this news.

"You think people'll think I'm running out?"

"Nah," Neville made it sound like no big deal.

"It's okay, hon. You don't want to go to the funeral, do you?" Shanie asked.

"I hadn't thought about that, either."

They talked a few more minutes and agreed Wayne should call in a couple of times, but otherwise he was free for the next two weeks. Shanie insisted he keep his beeper with him, just in case.

"By the way," Neville added, "we put a button on that Andy Rose thing. He's officially a suicide. 'Course, you kinda had to figure that."

Wayne opened the door and Roadie bolted for the truck without having to be called. Not once had anyone used the right words: *killed, murdered*. They all made it sound like he'd done Stephensville a favor. He decided that when he got home he was going to look that word *blame* up in the unabridged dictionary he'd bought when he was in college. Wayne wasn't sure, but he thought that maybe Jeana and the rest of them didn't really know what it meant.

From home Wayne called his mother's house in Long Point, Texas, and the first time got a recording saying all the circuits were busy, to try again. A half hour later the voice said that the number he had reached was no longer in service. He called information, and they knew of no Virginia Miller in Washington County. Wayne packed anyway, telling Roadie, "Just because she doesn't have a phone doesn't mean she's not there." And when Roadie eyed him with suspicion, he added, "There's never any harm in going down to Texas, anyway."

Roadie's bones knocked against the hardwood, and she sighed like she didn't believe him. Wayne had always had a hunch Roadie had come up from Texas. There had been something in her eyes the day he found her, sitting on the side of the road like she'd have stuck out her thumb if she had one. Cockleburs had matted her fur, and she had smelled like swamp water. She had run away, and everybody Wayne had ever known to run away had run away from Texas.

Wayne paced through the house looking for something, but he didn't know what. He packed several pairs of jeans, underwear, t-shirts. He filled a paper grocery sack with dog food and put two bottles of water on top. He checked his truck for his Texas map, then his Oklahoma map to be sure. He put an ice chest in the bed, but he left it empty.

Roadie appeared glued to the hardwood floor. "We're going," he said. She looked at the wall. He sighed. He appreciated home as much as the next person. More so. He wanted to laugh at the thought that nobody in Stephensville could describe the

town without Wayne at the heart of their picture. "I'm right in the big middle of it. Everything. And they don't even see me," he said. He stood a moment, waiting for enough nerve to steel up both him and his dog. "I don't want to, either," he said finally," but we're going."

Roadie rose, her nails clicking on the floor as she nosed open the screen door. Wayne looked through the house one more time, and then he grabbed his boots that smelled like dead armadillos.

PART THREE

Sequins covered every stitch of fabric on Brandy's evening gown. Most of them were red, except for the white star outlined in blue on the left chest. Her mother had Mearline make the dress with just the strap on the left side and no sleeves to draw more attention to the star. That way, her mother said, the judges would get the impression she had a big heart. It was subtle, she had said.

Brandy didn't think the judges would care as much about the star as they would the sausage-casing fit of the dress, and the blue four-inch heels that showed through the skirt's back slit when she walked. If she could walk. Her mother was taking her to the Jeralds's house that afternoon for more walking lessons. Mr. Jerald had directed the pageant since Brandy's Aunt Lynnette won it in 1968, and he'd taught Lynnette how to walk back then. Brandy'd asked her mother how it was a man who'd never been in a pageant could teach girls the right way to walk in heels, and her mother had just said not to ask silly questions. "He's just the best, hon," Lynnette had said.

She put the dress bag inside its plastic bag and hung the bag in the hall closet. She and her mother had cleared the closet out in April to store her pageant wardrobe, so it would not get crushed in her own closet. Other plastic bags hung next to the evening gown--one with her swimsuit, one with her interview dress, and one with the dress she was going to sing in--all blue and all with *"Brandy Sweet"* embroidered in white script. The bags and her shoeboxes all bore stickers reading "Sponsored by OK Oil, Southwest Oklahoma's Country Neighbor." Brandy's mother had hung floral sachets from the closet

ceiling to keep the pageant clothes from smelling like dry cleaning fluid.

"Quit messing with those dresses, and close that door." Brandy's mother swept past with a laundry basket heaped with boys's white socks and underwear.

"I was just looking." She followed her mother to the kitchen where she dumped Brandy's brother's clothes on the table for folding.

"If you keep on just looking you're gonna knock all them sequins off. You can't go down the runway with a big old bald spot on your dress." She folded and talked without looking up.

"That evening gown, Mama."

"What about it?" Her mother stopped folding to put her hands on her hips.

"It's just so," Brandy wanted to pick the right word, "loud. And so red. And that whole flag thing is kinda . . . hokey."

"Brandy Lynnette Sweet." Her mother practically spit. "We been over this and over this. It's gonna catch people's eyes. Besides, it's good to show patriotism at things like this. I talked to the Jeralds, and they said most of the girls are wearing all white. The fact that it's on the Fourth of July is just gonna make you stand out that much more."

"We're already doing Fourth of July stuff."

"Hon, having twelve girls walk around holding little flags while you're all being introduced isn't a real celebration. This way the whole crowd'll be on your side, and trust me, that applause affects the judges." She stuffed the socks in the basket. "I'm just

telling you what you need to know to win this thing."

"Okay, I can handle the dress, but--" she placed a couple pairs of her brother Philip's underwear gently in the basket.

"But, but?"

"Those Woody Guthrie songs, Mama. They're a little hokey, too. The songs with the dress?"

Brandy's mother raised her hand, her way of stopping her children from saying more than her headache could stand. Brandy's mother always had a headache. The daily trick for Brandy was not to make it any worse.

"The program's all set," her mother said slowly. She kept her hand hanging between them, and Brandy stared at the long, glossy, wine-colored fingernails. "It's settled. We can't change it with a week to go. Now," she tugged her blouse over her tiny hips, as if having this conversation with Brandy had mussed her outfit, "just set this stuff on your brother's dresser for me."

Brandy did as her mother said, and listened in the background as the cabinet over the stove opened and closed. That was where her mother kept her headache pills in little brown bottles. In the hall outside Philip's room, Brandy paused in front of the wall of family pictures. Hanging from the dark paneling in all sizes of unmatched frames were photographs of Brandy as a baby. Little bows and barrettes glued to her hair, her mother said, because she didn't have enough hair to hold them in till she was nearly three. There was one picture of Brandy with her dad before the divorce. Next to it rested

a shot of Philip with his dad, David Allen. And there was a picture of Lynnette and her mother that had Brandy's second stepfather, Mr. Castle, cut off of it.

But in the big middle of them all was the photograph that Brandy had looked at more than any other. It was large, 11 X 17 she thought, black and white. It was closed in a wooden frame that had flowers carved in it. She could see through the glass the surface of the photo was cut through with tiny lines and bumps. On that dry-looking paper, her mother smiled down at her. Although she'd never asked, Brandy knew the dress, with the tight bodice and tulle skirt, was gold. The shoes, of which only one toe showed beneath the edge of the skirt, were satin. Diamond drops, and they were real diamonds, hung daintily from her mother's ears. Lipstick painted the lips red. And her mother's thick, dark hair flipped up on the ends in exactly even curls that lay against that smooth, white skin. "Miss Stephens County, 1971," announced the banner suspended from the stage curtain directly above her mother's head.

She didn't pose for that picture, Aunt Lynette had said. "That's just the way, with Leena Ann," she told Brandy. "You can take a picture of her any time you want."

Brandy put the laundry down on the carpet. She pushed her spine up straight, starting by jutting her pelvis out the way Mr. Jerald always told her to do. She placed one foot in front of the other in a ballerina pose, so that her toe would show beneath her imaginary skirt. She cupped her hands in front of her right hip to make a basket for her bouquet. Then she looked straight ahead, wide eyes, and smiled.

It hurt, standing like that. She tightened her stomach muscles, but the small of

her back still ached. She couldn't see her feet and feared she'd fall down having to walk in those shoes. And it wasn't going to be possible to carry those flowers without bumping them from one hip to the other. "Bad form," Mr. Jerald would call it.

Brandy exhaled hard and let her body fold down in it's natural pose.

"What are you doing?" her mother called.

"Nothing."

"Then put those sheets in the dryer, would you, hon?"

Brandy finished with the laundry fast and went to the living room where her mother lay all the way back in Mr. Castle's big leather recliner. She had cucumber slices on her eyes. The cat, a fat old Siamese named Fancy, lay across her mother's lap and glared at Brandy.

"Is our schedule board over there?" her mother asked.

The schedule board looked something like a bulletin board, but it was white plastic. They could write on it with those erasable Magic Markers. On it, Brandy's mother had drawn several boxes and filled them with dates and times. All the information had something to do with getting Brandy ready for the pageant except for three things: Mr. Everett's funeral, which did involve Brandy singing, picking Philip up from the church when the bus got back from camp on Saturday, and going to church on Sunday. "As a family," it said, and Brandy wondered why because they always went as a family.

"Here we go," Brandy said and sat on the ottoman with the board on her lap.

"Read to me what it says for Friday."

"Rehearsal with Delia, 9:00am. Funeral, 11:00am."

"We'll come home to change and roll your hair between then."

"Lunch at Miss Jessie's, after funeral."

"We'll just have to be there all day, I guess." Her mother sounded disappointed. "Did I tell you Grandpa Chuck is gonna sponsor your car in the parade?"

Chuck Allen was Philip's grandpa, not Brandy's. But her mother said Chuck Allen was the richest man in town and could afford to treat her like a granddaughter.

"That's on Monday."

"Those daughters of Jessie's ain't done right by her. Of course, they're like every other girl that's moved off to Oklahoma City. Forgot about what's going on back home."

"Will there be a lot of people there?"

"I just don't know. Nobody liked that old man, but everybody loves Jessie. I imagine they'll be quite a few folks that won't come to the church that'll come by the house." She rubbed her forehead above the cucumbers. "Me, and you, and Lynnette will have to stay for the whole thing. It's a good thing Philip's at camp this week. He'd just be bored and be in the way."

"How did you get to be in Jessie's family?"

"Well, we didn't exactly. Not in the usual ways. She took care of Lynnette and me when our mama got her cancer." She petted Fancy. "Of course, we were already grown then. I was in secretary school, and Lynnette had been married for years. But we

lost our daddy when we were just babies, and we needed a mama to tell us what to do. And that old man was already sick back then."

"Already?"

"It wasn't with his Alzheimer's, but with something else. Seems like he got one thing, then another and just got sicker with everything he got." She yawned. "Jessie's suffered a long, long time." Fancy stretched all the way out and closed his eyes.

Brandy watched her mother fall asleep, her teeny nostrils flaring over wine-colored lips that matched her nails. She knew that under those vegetable slices were delicate lines of black eyeliner painted over brown shadow. Brandy's mother had no lines around her mouth like Jaxxine's mother had. Asleep she looked like the girl in the picture.

Brandy leaned the schedule board against the wall. She tiptoed into the hall and stood under the pictures again. She started to straighten her spine again, but felt too tired to go through with it.

"Baby?"

"Yes, Mama."

"If you're in the hallway, get that box with the blue shoes in it out of the closet."

In the dark in his room at the Holiday Inn in Ardmore, Wayne lay in bed, his eyes closed. He didn't sleep, didn't expect to, but he tried by making a rule that he had to keep his eyes closed whenever he lay down. His eyelids hurt with the effort. A vague glow poured through the slats in the the blinds, and when he finally gave up and opened his eyes, two or three quick flashes of watery, blue light burst through. No sound, just the light, but they were fireworks. He sat up and watched. In a minute the blue flashed again, five times in a matter of ten seconds. Then streams of green, red, and all soft and far away and this time lasting a while. He heard somebody appaud, but he never heard the booming sound of the fireworks.

Wayne opened the blinds, and he and Roadie sat in the two chairs that came with the room and watched. In a second, two little kids bolted by, running toward the bank of rooms on the other side of the pool. Wayne couldn't see in the dark if they were boys or girls, just that they were young, grade-schoolers, and smiling. It was very late, or very early, but Wayne thought that was what summer was supposed to be about. Sneaking fireworks in a motel parking lot in the middle of summer vacation. It beat the hell out of his vacation.

He stared out at the glassy surface of the pool water which glistened in the mercury vapor light. In the night the cyclone fence which surrounded it seemed almost the same color as the water, and when Wayne squinted his eyes it all appeared as one vast expanse of open space. No fences or deep ends to rip you up. Just space to swim

out in.

When he stopped squinting, Wayne saw the man sitting in one of the pool loungers. The gate had been padlocked when Wayne'd checked in, and now his policeman's instinct went on point. He walked outside in his shorts and nothing else, leaving the door to his room wide open. Roadie came close behind. Her nails clicked in the quiet, all along the sidewalk up to the gate which also stood open. She let out a low, continuous growl. The man sat with his back to Wayne, unmoving and peaceful, so that for a moment Wayne thought he might be just some weary traveler who had fallen asleep out there. Then a trail of smoke rose above the man's head.

"Ah, Jesus," Wayne said.

"Ssshhh." The man motioned Wayne over. "Keep your voice down, now. I seen on the sign out front they call this here place a family establishment," the man whispered. "Means they'll call the cops if we get rowdy."

Wayne walked over and looked down at the man in the pearl-snapped shirt. His brain tingled, the way it had when he fell in the ditch outside Sears' pasture. His balance tipped out of whack again, and he sank onto the lounger next to the man's. The metal feet of the chair clinked against the cement, and the man put out a hand to steady Wayne's chair from turning all the way over.

"See here?" the man asked. "This is just what I's talking about. You got to settle down, now. And you might ought'a put some pants on. Don't look good for an officer of the law to wander around in his skivvies."

"Are you kidding me? Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." Wayne rubbed his eyes, looked again. "You just got to be kidding me."

"I was afraid you wouldn't remember. You weren't in too good'a shape last time we talked. I see by your face I ought not to'a worried myself."

"I dreamed all that."

"No."

"I had to have. I was sick."

"Think what you want." He pulled on the cigarette. "But I think you know better than that."

"Je-sus." Wayne sat with his head in his hands, thinking that if he didn't look up it might all go away.

"Looks like your dog is taking to me." Roadie growled.

"She's tired. We ain't been sleeping much."

The man just shrugged like Wayne had said something funny. He patted all his pockets. "I'm gonna need another one here in a minute," he said. "I'd ask you for a match, but I know what you'd say."

"What's that?"

"That you ain't had a match since Superman died." The man laughed, trying to keep quiet, and sounded more like he was coughing. "I love that one. Used to use that one all the time."

Wayne just stared.

"You know, my son never did get that one, either. Guess you boys were too young for Superman jokes."

"I know who Superman is." Wayne's exhaustion was growing into anger. "I just didn't think it was funny."

"All right. Don't have a hissy."

"I know what you are," Wayne said. "You're a figment of my imagination. My conscience, right?"

"Fig-er-ment?"

Wayne was angry, tired, and scared. There was an answer to this. There just had to be. "Yeah, my conscience. My guilty conscience."

"Huh." The man gazed off in the distance for a moment, like he thought long and hard. "This feelin' guilty thing is gonna get in our way."

Wayne laughed. "It's not you," he said to Roadie. "It's not me when I'm with you, it's just me." Roadie pushed her way between Wayne's legs and the chair. She peered around his knee at the man and growled until her bottom lip foamed. She vibrated. "You're just going to be everywhere I go, aren't you?"

That wasn't really the plan. I'm just supposed to tell you you're headed in the wrong direction."

"How do you know?"

"I just know. Your mama's not there anymore, no-how." He paused to let Wayne catch up. "She's all right. Just had another one of those takin' off spells, it looks like.

Just here recently. Like she knew somethin' was coming, ain't it? You'll likely here from her once she's settled down."

"You don't know anything about my mother."

"All right, then, I don't." He looked at the water. "If that's what you wanna think."

"So, you're gonna tell me where to go? Is it Wolf Point?"

"Where?"

"Wolf Point, Montana.' Wayne nearly screamed.

"Oh, that. Nah, not even close."

"Then where?"

"I don't get to tell you that part. You figure that part out."

"You're not really very much help, are you?" Wayne sat back in the lounger and looked out over the motel buildings. In the distance he could see the glitter of the restaurant signs dotting the interstate. For a while he and the man were both quiet, and it was a lot like sitting with Clyde on the slanted porch while Miss Jessie worked in the garden. Except for the signs and billboards, the sound of tractor-trailers coming from the interstate, and the fear he'd lost his mind. If he remembered right, that had brought all of this to an end the last time.

"There is not time of day better for your soul than the middle of the night. I don't care what anybody says." The old man lay back with his eyes closed. "Did I tell you before 'bout coming acrost Arizona? I don't think I did. Boy, in those days that drive was

a son of a bitch. There weren't hardly no gas stations anywhere, and I think I passed maybe one motel the whole length of the state."

He crossed his legs, nestled down into the chair, signaling Wayne he was going to be a while. So Wayne closed his eyes.

"That's my own fault. I got off on one of them little state highways. It was brand new. Hell, Arizona was brand new. I was by myself. Wife's back in Texas. This was long back, way before we had those kids, even."

"Where'd you been without your wife?"

"California. All the young bucks went out to California then. You was supposed o make your fortune and come the hero." The older man laughed. "Your daddy was probably the same way."

"I don't know about that," Wayne said softly.

"No, I don't reckon you do." He laughed again, but sad this time. "Anyway, I got mixed up with these boys outta Louisiana coming through on their way to Bakersfield. Said they's paying folks by the bucket-loads to pick cotton, plums, anything else come up out of the ground. Sounded like a deal to me. Thought maybe I'd end up with my own farm outta the deal." He tapped Wayne on the arm. "I's a businessman, back then. I could do a deal when I had to."

"So, did you?"

The man whistled. "Hell, no. There was Okies everywhere by the time I go there. And Texans, and Cajuns, and Mexicans. You could buy farm hands for a dime a day."

"That doesn't sound like much of a way to make a fortune."

"Well, it weren't. I's there a day 'fore I decided to head back to Texas, but them old boys from Louisiana wanted to stay. Thought they'd go up north to where's there grapes. That was all new then, too, that wine business."

"I don't mean to be rude," Wayne said in the best rude voice he had, "but what does this have to do with Arizona?"

"See, there I was, sittin' in Bakersfield without a ride. Had'a find some way to get back. So I traded an old boy most of my cash, a box a cigars my father-in-law give me for my trip, and a pocket watch for a truck with bald tires. I was a piece-a-shit truck, if you ever saw one. Couldn't drive more than twenty or twenty-five miles at a stretch or it just--" he pushed his hand out in front of him--" coasted to a stop."

Wayne looked out at the hand, the cigarette that never shrank between two fingers. He saw clearly now that the man held up pretty well for a farmer near sixty. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew the man was eventually going to tell him that he'd been a farmer.

"I's months gettin' home. Stopped for a time in New Mexico territory to work on a ranch. Cut hay for folks in West Texas. But Arizona was all right. That was before I ran all outta money, and I slept out on the ground in the desert. Can you see it.?"

Wayne could.

"That's the way men ought to live while they're young. Made Katy, my wife's mama, pretty sore at me most'a the time. She didn't like it that I didn't work steady those

first few years we's married, but I's a boy for doing things."

The man stopped talking for a moment, and Wayne closed his eyes again. His brain still tingled a little, but not like before. He concentrated now on a tiny dot at the center of his mind that seemed it might be full of something if he could get inside of it.

"That sky there," the man spoke so low Wayne almost didn't hear him, "was as purple, blue, and gold as anything you ever saw. At night, I mean. Never black. And it was so clear you could see every point on every little star. Fell asleep most nights tryin' to count 'em."

"Nice," Wayne said.

"Sure was. It's a sky you could look at, and maybe it made you know."

"Know what?"

"Well. Where home was supposed to be. Truth is, I lingered in Arizona longer'n I had to. Can't blame me, though, can you?"

"I don't guess." Wayne's muscles puddled loose under his skin. He felt things slipping past him with the breeze. He breathed cigarette smoke deep into his lungs. "What else?" he asked.

"That's it for now. You do what you have to from here."

"You're where?"

"Manitou."

"Oh, my God. You're in Canada?"

"It's in Oklahoma, Jeana." August's voice rasped through the phone in angry hisses. Jeana thought it sounded windy where August was.

"Are you near Oklahoma City?" she asked

"Umm, just a sec."

Jeana heard the receiver clatter against a counter top or table. There was music in the background. August was in a bar. "I'm close to 183," she said to Jeana. Then "Is that a US highway?" she yelled to someone else. "Yeah. Girl, I just stood out there looking down that road, and there was nothing as far as I could see. Driving on today was just too much for me to think about."

"Auggie, Auggie, Auggie." Jeana used her mom voice. She tried never to do that with adults, but when she talked to August it always slithered out.

"I know it doesn't make much sense. It didn't seem like much of a town to me either. But I got to Dallas, and there was this freaking huge clover leaf thing. You know what those are, right?" August didn't sound like she breathed when she talked. "There were people everywhere, I mean, zipping by me real fast. Then the road Y-ed and in a while it Y-ed again, and I couldn't ever tell if I was in Dallas anymore or not 'cause there'd be all these houses and a McDonald's or something. And then I'd be going along,

exact same road, and I'd be in the middle of all these trees. On a freeway and everything."

"But you made it to Oklahoma okay?"

"Yeah. Just a little while ago I drove past one of those signs: *Welcome to Native America*. That's some hoot." Something clicked against the phone, then again. "I needed to take a break. Rest my eyes."

Jeana waited knowing her sister was about to drop something bigger.

"Okay, so here's the thing," August said. "That surprise I told you about? Well, it's a fireworks stand."

"You're giving me a fireworks stand?"

"Hell, no. Just try to follow me. I got Pap to set me up a fireworks stand out by JoAnn's beauty shop."

"Dina's."

"What?"

"It's Dina's beauty shop now." Jeana talked like someone else, like the words she heard come out of her mouth were someone else's.

"Whatever. So anyway, I was gonna use the stand to build up my cash. I got a whole plan." August sighed heavily. Jeana was reminded of Jeremy faking stomach bug before pre-school. "I'm just plumb give out, though. Gotta take a quick break here."

"You can't take too much of a break. Do you realize the fourth is just--" she counted in her head, "--five days away? Pap must have your stand all ready to go." Jeana

untwisted the impossibly long phone cord, pulled it into the pantry to get away from the noise of the kids's video game, and closed herself into the tiny space. "I mean, August, you must a already paid your money. And the stand is out there. If you're gonna do this, you gotta get here now."

"I do. I just didn't realize it was gonna take so long to get from Jackson, all the way back to Oklahoma."

"Don't tell me it's somebody. Don't tell me you're with some man."

"Then I won't tell you. His name is Dale. He gassed me up just off the interstate, if you know what I mean."

"You are not funny."

"For God's sake, Jeana Lee, you sound so much like somebody's mother. Our mother. 'August don't talk so vulgar, August sit like a lady.' Gah. I can just see all those little wrinkles and creases pinching your forehead together."

"Don't worry about my forehead. My forehead is fine." Jeana worked her body into the space between the bottom shelf and the door jamb. She sat with her back to the jumbo box of trash bags, her elbow resting on the peanut butter. She tried to breathe slowly. That was the only way she knew how to not to sound like a mom.

"I'm just a little worried," she said carefully. "I mean, you must've spent a lot of money on your fireworks. I'd just hate for you to lose all your money."

"Well, it did take most of the money out of both my bank accounts, but this guy told me you can double it like that." August must have snapped her fingers, but Jeana

couldn't tell.

"How much was that, Auggie?"

"$782. But that's okay." She sounded happy. "I'll have it all made up by this time next week."

"You'll be here tomorrow, then?"

"Of course. I plan on driving right through tonight. Soon as I find out how to get there from here."

"All right, then."

"But I do need you to do something for me."

"August, this is the worst possible time for me to be doing you favors."

"I just need you to go meet Pap out at the stand tomorrow and get the keys."

Jeana's heart skipped a pulse. "You know I can't do that."

"Why not? I thought you said you were going out now."

"Driving. I go out driving. I told you, I never get out of the car." Jeana knew well the spot on 53, west of the high school, west of Sears's corner, where August's stand had to be place. Where the highway intersected County Road 192, Dina's beauty shop, just a trailer really, stood back on the northeast corner. On the southeast corner stood a grocery store which had been closed since 1971, and a one-room Adventist church occupied the lot next door. Just behind the buildings, and more importantly, across the highway from the buildings, there was nothing. Nothing but alfalfa, barbed wire fences, sky, and space as far as anyone could see. Jeana grew dizzy just imagining it.

"Are you still there?"

Jeana wiped sweat from her lip. "I cannot do this, August."

"It's just Pap. It's just gettin' the damn keys for me. It'll take you five seconds. You won't even have to get out of the damn car."

Her voice cracked. "Are you sure?"

"I will be there by tomorrow afternoon. Just go out there around ten in the morning. Let one of the kids out of the car to get the keys. This is no big deal, Jeana."

Jeana felt a jerk on the phone cord. "Mom?" Jeremy called.

"I guess I just worry too much," she said.

"All right, all right. Jesus." August spoke to someone in the background.

"Just tell me what the plan is."

"The plan?"

"You have a plan, don't you. When you called the other day you said you came up with this plan--"

"Well, it's not so much like a plan as it was a feeling."

"What?"

"I told you, right, that I was working doing data entry at this place in Jackson? Jewel of the South Realty?"

"No."

"Anyway, one morning I got off the elevator and headed down the hall to the teeny-weeny little office where I had to sit all day, and I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"This big square window that faced the west. I could see all the tops of all the building in downtown Jackson. And, I tell you, that ain't all that much to look at. Anyway, this weird, squirrely feeling came over. Like I didn't know where it was I was standing on the earth. You know what I mean?"

"I suppose."

"So, then I got to thinking about how I didn't remember which direction was which, all of the sudden. That unless I was looking out that window I didn't know which way I was supposed to go. And I did this real funny thing, Jeana." August must have cupped her hand around the mouthpiece and pulled it close to her mouth. Suddenly she sounded so clear to Jeana. She sounded the way that made Jeana want to believe her. "I had to come to complete stop and I put my hands out. Like I was testing to remember my left from my right, you know? I mean, I looked like I'd fucking lost something."

"Huh."

"Oh, sorry. You don't like words like that, do you?"

"I don't care."

"It just got me to thinking about when we was in school and we had to drive over to that football game in Hobart by ourselves. You remember that? And we didn't which way to go out of town to even start. And mama told us we didn't need to know which direction was which to get where we wanted to go."

"I hadn't remembered that."

"So, that's what I'm always thinking, now. That whenever I get to some place where I know right where I am, that's when I gotta go."

"Wow," Jeana said softly.

"Wow?"

"You're so brave, August."

August's deep, rich laugh burst through the phone line and tingled through Jeana's skin. She felt small and faraway. She felt stupid.

"You got such a weird way of looking at things, Jeana Lee. I just do what most people do. Ain't nothing brave about it. You're only thirty, you realize. It's still time to have fun." August paused to chew on something. "You're an odd little duck, you know it?. Nobody stays at home and has babies for a living, anymore."

"Yeah," she said. "You may be right about that."

"Mom?" Jeremy tapped on the pantry door. "Mama, are you in there?"

"Listen, Jeana Lee, I gotta go. My steak and potatoes are here. Besides, I have to pay this guy here for this phone call, and I may have to use something other than money if I stay on any longer." This time August laughed with some man. "Don't worry, hon. I just got a lot strange stuff squishing through my brain today. Just 'cause of being on the road too long. But I'll be right as rain soon as I get there."

"Be careful," Jeana said.

"You know it, hon."

The phone clicked on the other end. A soft knocking came through the hollow-

core pantry door. "Mom?"

"What, baby?"

"Are you in there, Mom?"

"Yes, baby. What is it?"

"Liddy said I can't play the frog game on the videos with her anymore 'cause I'm too stupid to play it right."

"You tell Liddy Mama said to let you play or we're turning the game off."

"Yes, Mom."

The phone cord jerked hard again, and tiny footsteps trailed across the kitchen linoleum. Jeana's body ached from its cramped position on the floor. The top of the peanut butter jar cut into her flesh. But the dark wrapped around her, and she liked the homey way her pantry smelled. She sat still until Liddy and Jeremy's fighting echoed.

-4-

After two hours Wednesday morning practicing walking again, Brandy's mother let her drive the Cougar to the pharmacy. She pushed the heavy glass doors open and glided--per Mr. Jerald's instructions--between the dusty aisles. She let her fingertips glance off the old bottles of peroxide until they'd accumulated a fair amount of crud. The only reason her mother let her come here is that she didn't want her in the Tip Top. "No telling what old farmer in there is gonna grab your ass and drag you to the alley," she'd whisper. Brandy had never seen an old man in Stephensville she thought was big enough or fast enough to grab her, but she did what her mother said. She'd just divorced an old man last year when she'd divorced Mr. Castle, so Brandy figured she knew what she was talking about.

The florescent lights suspended from the spotted ceiling tiles gave her skin a green cast.

She spread her arms in front of her, then to the side, and watched the light play on her skin.

"Look at her. She's practicing her queenly walk."

Jaxxine and Courtney sat packed into a booth at the end of the counter. Brandy pivoted a couple of times, swinging her arms. Then she stopped and did the wave Mr. Jerald taught her.

"You already look like you won," Jaxxine said. "God, they just gotta pick you."

"They don't gotta," Brandy answered and wedged herself in.

"Who else would they give it to? You're the prettiest one." Courtney scooted over to let her in. "Ooo, what's on your hands?"

Brandy reached for a napkin. "What's going on?"

"We've got a plan!" Courtney looked ready to burst.

"It's *my* plan," Jaxxine corrected. "Get a Coke first."

"Where's Rosie?"

"She said we could get our own if we don't make a mess. Just write it down."

Brandy made her Coke and drew a 1 on the green ticket pad.

"Okay, okay," Courtney said. "Here's the idea."

"We're going out under the dam to see the lake lady."

"Gross!" Brandy acted like someone had spit on her.

"Wait. You didn't even hear why we're going."

"I don't care. And when you say *we*, I hope you mean you two because I'm not going."

"Come on, Brandy. We're all three going. Together." Jaxxine was looking irritated that her idea wasn't flying. "Besides, we're going for you."

"Me? What made you think I'd want to do this. That old woman's gross," she said, although Brandy couldn't remember ever seeing that woman up close before.

"You don't wanna know if you're gonna win?" Courtney asked.

"What?"

"The beauty pageant. Gah! What'd you think we were talking about?"

"That's stupid."

Courtney slapped the table and glared at Jaxxine. "That's what I said."

"At first," Jaxxine corrected. "Then you said it was the best idea you'd ever heard."

"Did not."

"Stop, stop. I don't want to go, and that's all there is to it. Besides," she reminded them, "you just got through saying I was gonna win anyway."

"That's just what we think. Don't you wanna know what somebody who can see the future has to say"

"She can see the future?"

"See!" This time Jaxxine slapped the table. "I knew she'd wanna go if she knew that."

"That's just what some of the football players told her," Courtney added. "She doesn't know that for sure."

"She's a witch. I know that for sure."

"You know, Jaxxine, maybe you're right." Courtney sat on her knees on the booth bench. "Maybe a witch is what we need. It's been a lot more like Halloween than the Fourth of July."

"Yeah, I mean that whole thing with Andy Rose. Dying like that."

"He killed himself, Jaxxine."

"Well, maybe he did. But Wayne Miller killed that old man. Everybody saw that.

You can't tell me that didn't happen."

Jaxxine and Courtney leaned over the table like Brandy wasn't even there. "He had to do that. My dad was in the city hall and saw it. He said that old man was plumb nuts, screaming for water and stuff. He said Wayne Miller's eyes got real big and dark, and that he just kinda stood there and stared."

"That's too bad. I always thought he was so good looking," Jaxxine answered. "You know, we talked to Wayne right before it all happened."

"You two don't know what you're talking about" Brandy finally said.

"You probably don't like Wayne Miller anymore, huh, Brandy," Courtney said.

"Why not?" Wayne Miller hadn't crossed Brandy's mind even once since the shooting.

"Well, wasn't that guy in your family or something?"

"I'm just singing at his funeral. His wife is a friend of Mama's. My Mama says they don't have any family here anymore." She drank some Coke and thought about Miss Jessie. "And anyway, you-all are changing the subject. I'm not going to the lake lady's house. That would be one too many weird things for one week."

"It'll be fun," Jaxxine insisted. "Hey, we can ask her if she can talk to Andy for us."

"Why? We didn't talk to Andy when he was alive."

"He might have something to tell us. You know, a message from the other side." Jaxxine wriggled her fingers over a make-believe crystal ball.

"That doesn't really happen," Brandy said. "Nobody comes back to tell you things from the other side. If they did, why haven't any of us heard from our grannies and grandpas?"

"Bbbrrruuu," Courtney shivered. "You guys stop talking about this. You're scaring me."

"Besides," Brandy went on, "what would Andy Rose tell us? Don't get high and jump off the Red River Bridge. Duh! Like we didn't know that already."

"Yeah," Courtney said. "Not to mention he was crazy. Gah, we got lots of those around here, don't we."

"All right," Jaxxine regrouped. "Let's just go to say we went. I don't know of one guy from our class who's ever been brave enough to go. It'll be cool."

"Haynes," Brandy said, naming her boyfriend. "He went with the upper classmen from the football team last season."

"To do what?"

"They wanted to ask her about getting to state. When she found out they didn't have any money, she threw trash at them and yelled cusses."

"Curses?"

"No, Jaxxine. She cussed them out."

"What'd he say she looked like?"

"He said they didn't get to see her. She kept all the lights off in the house and wouldn't let them come up on the porch."

"Come on. Saturday night."

"I'll probably have rehearsal."

"Gah, Brandy. How much are they gonna rehearse you? Don't they give you even one day off?"

"My mama would kill me if she caught me."

"Then don't let her," Jaxxine said.

Without anymore discussion it was somehow decided that Brandy was going to meet the lake lady with Jaxxine and Courtney. She'd tell her mother that she wanted to spend the night with one of them. They both went to her church, so her mother had know she'd be there Sunday morning. The three girls drank from their Cokes in the huge, quiet old building. The light above them hummed and clicked back on. Brandy studied the color of her skin under the light.

"So, what are you singing at the funeral?" Courtney asked.

"How Great Thou Art," Brandy said. "I can do it in my sleep."

-5-

On her way, Brandy parked the car behind the Freedom Hill Baptist Church where Haynes played basketball with Josh Rhine. Haynes was his last name. John was his first. But so was his dad's and his uncle's on his mother's side. And his uncle was already called Little John by the time Haynes was born. Everybody, even his parents, had called him Haynes since he was in grade school.

Brandy sat on the trunk and watched the end of their game. Her mother only let her go out with Haynes twice a week, one of which could be Haynes coming over to eat and watch tv if she asked a couple of days ahead of time. It was okay for them to eat lunch together at school, and they could talk at church or the grocery store. But they were always supposed to be some place public, never parking, but Haynes had found a place he swore nobody else knew about. Her mother said she thought Haynes was a good boy, but she also said boys kept you from concentrating on more important things. Like school, or church, or pageants, Brandy thought.

Haynes came to her dripping sweat. She pulled away when he tried to kiss her.

"I ain't seen you in two days," he complained.

"My mother will pitch a fit if somebody tells her they saw me kissing you in the church parking lot. And you without a shirt on."

"Your mom's not gonna know. Besides, it's not like God doesn't know what we do anyway." He kissed her while he smiled. Josh honked as he drove away.

"How much does Josh know about what we do?"

Haynes laughed and waved as Josh's truck disappeared around the corner.

"Haynes?"

"Not that much, not that much." He looked at the ground. "But he knows I'm not as frustrated as I used to be."

"Haynes!" Brandy slapped at him, but he jerked away. "Now he's gonna think we did it."

"We almost did."

"Almost doesn't count. And he'll tell Jaxxine. God, Jaxxine tells everything to everybody. Oh, God." She covered her face with her hands.

"You're over-reacting. You didn't make this much noise when we did it."

"We did not do it!"

"Okay, whatever. Besides, Courtney and Jaxxine have already done it, you know."

"I know."

"We're like the only seniors left."

"Haynes--"

"I'm just saying. And, hey, it's okay with me if all we're waiting on is for this pageant to be over. That means I only have a week to go." He kissed her again before she could pull away. "It wouldn't do to violate the queen before she's even crowned."

"Just stop talking about his. It's too embarrassing."

"Okay." Haynes sat on the trunk next to her. "Talk about something else."

"We're thinking about going to the lake lady's house."

"What for?"

"Jaxxine wants her to tell me if I'm gonna win."

"You know you are. If Christy Boone thinks she's can win twirling batons, she's as stupid as she looks." Haynes mimicked Christy's twirling with a fake baton, one hand on his hip. "And you're way prettier than anybody else who's gonna be up there."

"Mr. Jerald says those two girls from Empire City are both brunettes."

"So?"

"So, brown hair shows up better under the lights."

"You're worried about nothing."

Brandy looked a long time at Haynes's face. There was something there she loved. His easiness with people, the way he smiled. She wished just then that he had a stray leaf or string of lint in his hair that she could brush away without looking right at him. She wanted to move naturally, like she was as comfortable without thinking through things the way he always was. Instead, Brandy pressed two fingers against his sunburned shoulders.

"Am I right?" he asked.

She shrugged. She watched two small white circles form on his skin where her fingers had been.

"What's the matter" He took her fingers in his hand. "You're not actually worried about this stupid pageant, are you?"

"No. I just don't get what the big deal is. You'd think it was the end of all creation to hear my mama and Aunt Lynnette talk about it."

"Come on. It'll be cool." That was the second time today someone had said that to Brandy about something she wasn't sure was a good idea.

"What's so big about it?"

"Are you kidding? They give you money and stuff. Everybody in town'll see you in your little bathing suit." He kissed her hair. "Come on. You're beautiful. What more do you want?"

Brandy saw the sun neared the pitched roof of the church. She had to go. "I don't know," she said.

"I'd leave the lake lady out of it. She only sees customers at night, and no bunch of girls needs to be wandering around out in the lake woods at night."

Haynes nuzzled her neck while he talked, and took no notice that Brandy sat back. Car wheels crunched against gravel in front of the church.

"Preacher," Brandy said and pushed on Haynes's chest. "I told you we'd get caught."

Haynes reached for his t-shirt and cap where they lay on the grass. "I'll call you tonight."

"I have rehearsal till nine."

"Then after," he said and winked. "Evening," he said as he passed the preacher getting out of his blue Pontiac.

"Evening, Haynes." Brother Jimmy waved at Brandy, paused with his keys in his hands. "Guess it's getting to be supper time." He smiled.

Brandy smiled back, feeling a little sick knowing that Brother Jimmy would tell her mother he saw her with Haynes. Making out in the church parking lot, even.

"Evening," she said as she slipped off the trunk and around to the door. She felt weird in the way that she had for days. Like she didn't want to stay where she was, and she didn't want to go anywhere else. And that she was about to get herself into a whole lot of trouble. She pulled out, headed for Miss Jessie's to pick up her mother.

-6-

On Thursday Brandy sang at the smallest funeral she'd ever sung at. About twenty people dotted the pews in the Freedom Hill Baptist Church including Doyal and Doyal's mama from the funeral home. Brandy' mother and aunt Lynnette sat in the front with Jessie and her daughters, whose names Brandy never heard. There was Brother Jimmy and his wife, and Angela from the nursing home. Some of the rest were people Brandy recognized, but most of them sat in the back where she couldn't see them. Wayne Miller hadn't come back to town, although everybody thought he would. After Brandy sang, Brother Jimmy asked if anyone wanted to come forward and share their memories of Mr. Everett. No one did, not even Miss Jessie.

Brandy's mother had been right about more people coming to the house than coming to the funeral. On the hilltop outside of town, the little farmhouse spilled folks out every door. Jessie took a chair on the front porch, and welcomed every person who came with a hug. A crowd circled her so that Brandy couldn't see her, but from where she stood in the living room she heard Jessie say "You're an old rascal, Marty."

"You need to go out and say your regards," her mother said from behind. "Gawking through the window isn't gonna do it."

"I can't get to her," Brandy said. "She's busy with her party."

"This isn't a party, baby," her mother whispered. Today her nails and lips were done in pink. "It's somebody's funeral."

Brandy's mother picked up wadded napkins from the coffee table, cups from the

floor. She stopped every few feet to chat with another person from Stephensville, some of them from Duncan. She smiled and once touched some man Brandy'd never seen before on the knee. If this was just a funeral, her mother was certainly having a good time.

In a few more minutes, a good part of the crowd from the porch came through the door in search of the spread. Brandy edged closer and closer to Jessie's chair until the old woman put out a hand. "Come here, pretty girl, and sit by me."

Brandy sat and felt the chair trying to tip her out. Jessie talked okra with two women from the church. Jeana pulled up the jutted driveway between the two rows of cars. "I'm sorry I'm late," she called to the women on the porch from her car . "I forgot my food."

"It's not another ham, is it?" Jessie sounded alarmed. She leaned in toward Brandy, "There has to be sixty pounds of ham in there."

Jeana and the okra women all laughed. "Potato casserole and chocolate cake," Jeana said. "Will that do?"

Brandy started to the driveway to take Jeana's food containers, but stopped mid-step when Jeana opened the car door.

"My Lord," Miss Jessie breathed behind her.

Jeana put one foot out, lifted it up, then on the ground one more time. She smiled big, but Brandy heard the case of nerves ripple in Jeana's laugh. "Give me a minute," Jeana said.

They all watched, Brandy standing point, as Jeana sucked in one deep breath, then another. Her left hand flittered in the air until it lit on the car door window. Then her second foot hit the ground.

Just as Brandy thought one of the women on the porch should say something, Jeana scooped up two large plastic containers and hurried the ten steps from her car door to the porch's edge. She thrust the containers at Brandy, who noticed how Jeana pulled her hands to her sides almost too quickly, nearly allowing the cake to tumble to the red sand before Brandy caught it to her body.

"It's buttermilk chocolate," Jeana said quietly, looking at the ground. "My Aunt Maggie, you know, on my mother's side. She taught me."

"Thank you, honey," Miss Jessie said. "I remember your Aunt Maggie. That's sweet of you."

Brandy looked at the woman's face, her wild brown eyes that focused on everything except any of the women on the porch or the heads that now clustered behind the edge of the sheers framing Miss Jessie's picture window. Brandy saw how they all stared, how they all pinned Jeana to a point under the canopy of the sycamore tree, her body quivering as if she tried to balance on the line where the driveway met the yard. Brandy thought Jeana looked so young. She wanted to put a hand out, say something like Miss Jessie had, something normal but nice. She wanted to tell Jeana how sweet she thought she was.

And then Jeana leaned toward Brandy and whispered so softly the hot southerly

wind almost stole her words away. "I'm gonna try to come see you bein' queen," Jeana said.

In what felt like a single second, Jeana's wagon tore backwards down Miss Jessie's drive, clouds of red dust and sun-baked sycamore leaves swirling, and bottomed out as Jeana hit the highway going west toward town. Brandy stood, tingling a little, not sure what she had just witnessed, but knowing it was more than what her eyes took in.

"Well," one of the porch women said.

Brandy felt thousands of unspoken words clutter up the thick air like gnats. So much they all wanted to say, she knew, that couldn't be said just then. Not on this kind of day.

Brandy looked over her shoulder as the heads peeking around the window sheers turned to the buffet and the air conditioning. Her mother winked before she turned away.

"Miss Jessie," said one of the women Brandy didn't know. "I'll just take these on in for you."

The woman, who was round and short and smelled like candied roses, took Jeana's Aunt Maggie's buttermilk chocolate cake and potato casserole from Brandy, who had not yet moved. Brandy looked down to the road again where Jeana's station wagon had disappeared and considered the erratic patterns the scattering leaves cut through the humidity as they fell back to the earth.

"That'll do just fine," Jessie said to the rose-smelling woman. "Now, you-all get

you a plate. Somebody gotta help me eat all that food. I'll sit here a while with my pretty girl."

The okra women went inside, leaving the young girl and the old woman sitting on the porch. Brandy quickly tucked the memory of her moment with Jeana into a corner of her brain and focused back on Jessie. She knew she should talk first, but she couldn't think of good thing to say to a woman with a dead husband. Shot husband. Murdered husband. And a woman who didn't seem too sad about all that, to boot. "You look nice in your new suit," she said finally.

"Thank you, honey. It's a nice suit, isn't it? My daughter brought it with her from The City." She smiled at Brandy and whispered. "She was afraid I wouldn't have anything good enough to wear to a funeral, I suppose."

Jessie leaned all the way back in her chair. "She was right. I haven't been clothes shopping in years. I ain't had nothing that didn't come from Wal-Mart since--" she looked off at the highway. "I don't remember that far back."

"Me and Mamma'll take you shopping any time you want to go. We can drive over to the mall in Lawton some time."

"Now, that'd be something." Jessie's eyes focused off in the distance. "Maybe we could go to the Red Lobster."

Brandy didn't know what to say.

"You ready for the big day?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mama had all my dresses special-made, and she and Aunt Lynnette

have been taking me to all kinds of lessons for forever."

"Honey, your mama's done told me all that." Jessie took both of Brandy's hands. "I'm asking about you, darlin'."

"Then I don't know," Brandy finally said. She studied how Miss Jessie's eyes stayed fixed on one point, but without seeming to see anything. She thought Jessie looked calm, and maybe a little sleepy. She looked like she had nothing much on her mind. "Nobody seems to care very much whether I want to do this or not. But it's kind of a tradition, you know. Mama and Lynnette both did it before their senior years."

"I was there. Both times. Lynnette was always a cute girl, but that Leena Ann. Oh," Jessie put her hand over her heart. "She was a looker, let me tell you. Could stop a clock, is what they would say."

Brandy wrinkled her nose. She wanted to look relaxed like Jessie, but didn't feel it.

"We all just sat there in that auditorium like little statues, and your mama floated up and down that stage. Those tiny little feet hardly touched the floor. Now, I was never one for the fancy dresses and the ear screws and the face powder. Didn't make no sense, the way I had to work from the time I was fourteen. But there's some girls that's just made for all that, and Leena Ann's one of 'em."

Jessie smiled. Brandy liked that this was a good memory for her.

"So, it's a good thing to be Miss Stephens County? I should want to be Miss Stephens County," Brandy said.

"Darlin', if that's what you want to be. Some of us are face powder girls, but some of us ain't. Maybe you want to be somethin', and maybe you want to be somethin' else."

Brandy looked across the yard and highway, and half-closed her eyelids like Miss Jessie. A field with hairy sunflowers spread out beyond the road, and Brandy thought how beautiful the field must be in the mornings, how the sunflower stems would coat her fingers in sap and sting her skin with their tiny needles. She felt the wind lift her hair, as if she ran too fast, downhill, against the wind. "I don't think about what I want to be," she said. "I just think about going. You know? Just going some place. I like it here and all. I mean, all my friends, they talk all the time abut how you can't stay here. 'You can't stay here, Brandy. You gotta go to school, you gotta go see--" Brandy threw her hands up, "I don't know, they're always talking about seeing some big stuff. And they say there aren't enough boys with money here. And that's true, I guess. My mamma," Brandy rolled her eyes. "Well, you know my mamma."

"Oh, honey, do I. She's got some big plans for you, I reckon."

"I just feel like I wouldn't be going nowhere, really, 'cause my mamma's got it all figured out for me." Brandy saw the tires of Jeana's wagon spinning like pinwheels. "I'd have to run away before I could get to be somebody else."

A dark sedan cut through Brandy's line of sight and headed toward Miss Jessie's house.

"Looky, there," Jessie said. "Here comes Wilbert Green."

Brandy waited for the new carload of visitors to start their hugs before she went back into the house. She passed through the kitchen and laid a piece of Jeana's cake on a paper plate with blue flowers on it. When she turned around, her mother snatched the cake out of Brandy's hand saying, "Not this week." Brandy walked out the back door and down the slope of the yard to the row of three pecan trees by the back gate. Her Aunt Lynnette sat on a kitchen towel in the shade, smoking a menthol cigarette. Brandy thought she looked like a model from a 1960s tv commercial.

"Tell your mama, and I'll smack you," Lynnette said.

"I won't tell on you if you don't tell on me."

"Well, I don't know about that. What'd you do that I can't tell on you for?"

"Nothing." Brandy sat on the ground, laid her head on her aunt's lap, and closed her eyes.

Lynnette twirled one of Brandy's strawberry blonde curls around her finger. "You feeling bad, hon?"

"I don't know."

"Well?"

"I feel bad that I don't feel very bad. And I feel even worse that nobody else feels very bad either. Miss Jessie doesn't act like she feels sorry at all. She's making plans to go shopping and eat at Red Lobster."

"Ah, well." Lynnette didn't sound surprised. "These funeral things always turn into little parties. She can't help but be glad to see all these folks. Some of 'em ain't

come around at all for years because of that old man. She's been lonely out here with just Leena Ann, and Angela, and Wayne to visit."

"She does look kinda tired, at least."

"She's probably been cleaning and washing and dusting. Scrubbing up for the this shin-dig."

Cicadas buzzed, vibrating the pecan leaves. More of those hairy sunflowers grew in the field behind the house. A thick, hot breeze rattled all the wild things around them, and a soft spattering of something fell from the pecan trees along Brandy's body. She didn't even open her eyes to see what it was, just laid still. She listened to Lynnette exhale smoke. "Nobody liked Mr. Everett, did they?' Brandy said.

"I don't imagine."

"Not even Jessie."

"It's most likely she was used to him. Used to having her days all be the same. Mostly the same."

"That sounds boring."

"It probably does to you 'cause you're young, and ever day's kinda somethin' new to you, anyway. Least that's how it was when I was your age. But you only do things the first time for the first time. You know what I mean?" Her aunt's voice mixed with summer, and for a minute Brandy forgot to be hot. "And then, well, you get to where you just want ever day to be the same. It's when they're not that you get upset. Cause yourself to forget, to lose things. Things feel like they're outta order."

The image of Jeana, trembling, careened through Brandy's mind as if it ran on rails. "I don't know what that means," Brandy said after a moment.

"Well, hon, there's just somethin' to be said for knowing what every day holds."

-7-

Just after breakfast on Thursday Jeana sped out toward the fireworks stand Pap'd told her stood east of town, just beyond the Adventist church on Highway 53. Liddy and Jeremy carved scallops in the air with their hands, the air conditioner in Jeana's tiny car crippled by over-use, Doyal said. He promised to get it fixed as soon as Miss Jessie made payment on Clyde Everett's funeral. The highway crackled, the tires's black tread sucking the sticky asphalt.

"Mom, watch this."

"I see you, baby," Jeana said even though didn't turn around. She jammed her sunglasses down over her eyes to block out the white sun. That whiteness was eventually going to cook her brain if she didn't watch it. That was one of the problems with all that space.

They pulled onto the northeast corner of 53 and County Road 192. The fireworks stand stood across from Dina's Beauty Shop, the trailer house with the eaves painted pink, and in front of the boarded-up Corum Grocery. Pap sat in a metal folding chair in front of the stand, overalls and cap powered with red dust. Jeana parked the wagon as close to Pap as she could without kicking the chair legs out from under him, and the kids piled out.

"It's orange," Jeana said from the car.

"That's the color she wanted." Pap took peppermints from his bib pockets. "Didn't sound like a good idea to me, either, but that's what she told me to do."

"But it's orange. Fireworks stands are supposed to be red, white, and blue. They're supposed to have firecrackers painted on them." She sat, hands glued to the steering wheel, mesmerized by the tiny plywood shack. "This looks like the sun exploded."

Pap went around the side to open the padlocked door. Jeana watched him go into the sweltering box, shelves lined with bags and boxes in all sizes of fireworks. The fresh paint popped when he unlocked the wing-doors on the stand's front. He propped the doors up with two sawed-off shovel handles. Even with the swift summer wind, Jeana still smelled gunpowder.

"Well," Jeana said. "Looks like a good inventory."

"It's not all that much. Got mostly sparklers and cheap stuff. I had all the plywood and all the time in the world to nail it up." He leaned on the counter while he explained. "Only thing new was the firecrackers and the paint."

"I can't believe it's orange."

"Well," Pap said and just looked through the door at the highway.

"And she paid you for everything?"

"Well, not exactly." Jeana's stomach swirled. "Sent me about $200 up front, but the whole thing come to about $875. Said she'd gimme the rest when she cleared her money."

"Oh," Jeana said. The difference was now hers to pay.

"Happens sometimes. Carlita's son made enough money off one of these once to

get himself up to Stillwater." He shrugged. "A'course, he was in high school, back then."

"I just don't know what to do."

Liddy climbed onto the counter from the outside. Jeremy pulled himself up a few inches and then dropped back to the ground. He tried again, grunting with effort.

"Well, I have to tell, my part in this is over. I wouldn't'a been involved at all if she weren't nearly a niece. And since she gimme some money up front. Some, anyway." Pap leaned over the counter, making a show of whispering to Jeana. "To tell you the truth, I didn't put much stock in her making it back. I mean, she ain't the most reliable of sorts. I don't mean nothin' back by that, now. I know she's yer sister, but ya'll's less like sisters than most I know of. You know what I mean about August."

"I know," Jeana said. And she did. The whole town did.

Pap stepped back. "But, I'm a tired ol' boy. I'm too old to be sitting out in the heat all day. You wanna sit out here all day, young man?"

Pap took Jeremy's hands and hauled him onto the counter next to Liddy. "Yeah. I stay," Jeremy said. Jeremy's face glowed red with his struggle.

"Ummm," Jeana said. "You guys should really get down from there."

"Liddy's sitting up there."

"Everybody get down." She said it louder than she meant to, and her voice cracked against the rustle of alfalfa grass in the open field across the highway.

"You do what you want," Pap finally said. "Here's the key. And I got you a money box." He rummaged through the cardboard boxes under the counter and retrieved

an El Verso Cigar box. It still smelled like tobacco and had a tiny nail in the lid. "Just one of my empties," he said.

"Okay." Jeana put the box on the passenger's seat. "Thanks," she said. "For helping August out, I mean. I'll get you the money as soon as I figure out what to do about this."

"Might as well open it," Pap said. He pointed casually in the direction of town. "Get ya somebody to. You got--" he looked at his watch, "--four days if you get started today."

Pap walked out to his truck on the shoulder of the road. Liddy and Jeremy ran after, chattering. "Are you going to the parade?" Liddy asked him. "Mama said there's a parade downtown. She's not gonna drive us, but she said we could go with my friend Allie if we want to."

"Oh, honey, I guess if Shelia lets me out of the house. She keeps a close eye on her old man."

"Is this all your firecrackers, Pap?"

"No."

"Then whose are they?"

"You ask your mama 'bout that."

Pap climbed in the truck and started pulling out. "You kids be good," he called and waved at Jeana as he drove off.

Jeana looked over at the rows of red, blue, and green-papered packages. "Oh, my

God." She sighed.

"Mama, are these our firecrackers?" Liddy walked through the shack, trailing her fingers just along the edge of the bottom shelf. Jeremy walked half a step behind doing the same. "Pap said to ask you."

"Looks that way," Jeana said. For maybe the first time ever, she hated August's nerve. She tried to list in her head what to do next. She stared out at the alfalfa field. Not one vehicle had passed the whole time they'd been there.

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Doyal yelled. He yelled up one side of the house and down the other.

"This is not a good idea," he said. "This is one of your crazy sister's stupid plans that ain't never gonna work out. You can't make no money off a fireworks stand starting on July first."

"It's June thirtieth," Jeana said. She kept her lips tight when she talked to Doyal. It kept things from flying out of her mouth when he rattled her nerves too much.

"Big whoop. Are you forgetting where Auggie's stand is? You're gonna be more'n six miles outta town, and it's another twenty over to Walters. There ain't nobody gonna be coming by but truckers."

"That's not true. There's the people that go to that little church."

"That's about ten people, Jeana, and they're all around 80." He followed her as she walked from the pantry to the garage to the kitchen. She was on the lookout for supplies.

"And there's the people that come to Dina's--"

"More old ladies."

"--and all the kids that live on the grain farms."

"Are you gonna call 'em on the phone before you leave here? 'Cause that's the only way they're gonna know you're down there. And tell me something else."

Doyal stopped the pantry door with one hand as Jeana flung it open, looking for the box of cheese crackers she had just ventured to Wal-Mart in the dark to buy the

week before. Doyal put on his serious funeral director face. "How are you gonna manage out there by yourself? It ain't nothing but space. What if you get one a those weird dizzy spells, or you pass out again?"

"Doyal, that was eight years ago."

"Yeah, honey, but it was right there in Handy's while you were buying underwear. Everybody in town saw you. People thought you's drunk."

"No, Doyal. You were afraid people would think I was drunk because you don't want me to make you look bad." She snatched the crackers off the pantry shelf and jerked the door from his grasp. "You know, you're the weird one, Doyal, not me. I may get scared of people and roads and space and dirt. But at least I'm not the one with a license to take people's eyeballs out."

She packed the lawn chairs, a cooler full of Diet Cherry Cokes in cans, and the bug zapper from the back yard. When Doyal refused to tell her where his engine light was, she dug through his boxes in the garage until she found it. She wished she'd had one of those little radios to take. She took the whole box of cheese crackers, and what was left of Jeremy's Swiss rolls brought home from church camp. She called one of the high school girls who worked in the church nursery to watch the kids. And before one that afternoon, Jeana was ready to head back to the stand. She backed her dusty station wagon out as Doyal hollered from the sidewalk. "I come home for lunch," he said. "You didn't make me no lunch."

The first trick with the fireworks stand was figuring how to get from the car into

the shack itself. Jeana drove past the intersection a few times, circling around on the highway shoulder, staring over and mapping out possibilities in her head. Finally she backed the wagon right up to the door on the west side of the stand. She left only enough room to open the wagon's hatch. She crawled from the front seat through the cargo area and dropped the hatch door and crawled which enabled her to unload her supplies and also blocked the doorway so she didn't have to worry about anyone rushing in. And if anyone got too close on the counter side, she could just crawl right into her car and drive home. She hated it when people got too close.

Not that Jeana had much to worry about in that regard. The first three hours at the stand passed like a month of Sundays. She'd set both lawn chairs on the cinder floor inside the stand. Pap had worked it so that she could hook into the electric pole outside Dina's for the light and the zapper, and he had already run the extension cord inside for her. She sat in one of the chairs close to the door and kept her eyes at counter level. She saw whatever stray vehicle zipped by on the highway. She could even see the faces of Dina's few customers as they recognized her, their mouths hanging open wide enough for birds to fly in. Each time she prayed no one would stop to talk to her and no one did.

A little before seven Doyal drove with the kids in the back of the car. He left the car and the air conditioner running. The kids had Tip Top cups and dirty faces.

"What am I supposed to do with the kids tonight? We have visitation for the Scarry funeral," he said.

"Who's that?"

"Some old man teacher from down at Waurika."

"And his name is Scarry," she said. "A old, dead, scary teacher."

"You've gotten to be so vulgar in the last few days. I swear to God."

"Do you really think you'll have lots of visitors?"

"More than came to see old Clyde, that's for sure. But that's not the point. I have to be at the funeral home. You know that. What am I supposed to do?"

"Call the church office. They have the names of all kinds of high school girls that can look after Liddy and Jeremy."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Oh, Doyal. Don't be a baby."

"A what?"

"The kids stay with those girls all the time. They love those girls."

"They had to eat hamburgers for supper."

"They love hamburgers."

"Is that your answer for everything today? To tell me who loves stuff."

"If you keep asking me those kinds of questions, Doyal, I don't know what other kinds of answers you expect me to give."

Doyal rubbed his eyes. "That don't make sense at all."

Jeana sipped from a can of Cherry Coke. Jeremy pressed his face against the window. Liddy instructed him how to squish his nose on the glass and he erupted in laughter when Jeana smiled.

"Jeana, come on. August ain't comin'. Everybody knows August ain't comin'."

"I know that."

"So, why are you sittin' out here in this--" he waved his hand above his head, "heat! You're gonna make yourself sick. And I'll bet you a dollar to a doughnut hole you ain't had one customer all day."

"People drive by here all day."

"Old ladies come to get their hair done? Who else has been out here?"

"God, Doyal, you make it sound like I fell off the face of the earth. I'm sitting out here six miles from town. Six miles." She held up six fingers. She wasn't sure why he was making her so mad. Any other day she would have taken any excuse to run home. Any other day, being six miles from her home would set her heart thumping. She looked at her fingers, but nothing looked too intimidating about there being six of them.

Doyal gritted his teeth hard enough for her to hear them from four feet away. He pulled on his shirt sleeve, acting like it was some impossible task just to look at his watch.

"It's five till seven. Visitation is supposed to start at seven, and now I'm gonna have to shower." He patted at the red silt lining his clothes.

"Then you better get going."

"Fine."

Doyal stomped to the car. Liddy pushed the automatic button, and rolled down her window. "Hi, Mama."

"Hi, baby."

"Are you gonna stay with your firecrackers?"

"For a little while longer."

"Are you gonna set 'em off?"

"We'll do that in a few days."

"Are you okay, Mama? You don't have a scared headache, do you?"

"Not today, baby." She did, but she ignored it.

"Okay, then," Liddy advised, "just stay in that box."

Jeremy unhooked his seatbelt and crawled to Liddy's window. "Hi, Mom," he called.

Jeana blew him a kiss. Doyal dropped the car into gear. "Bye, Mom" Jeremy called as the tires peeled out.

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At 9:47 Jeana had made six dollars and forty-two cents. It rattled in her cigar box. She had sold a package of lotus flowers and some smoke bombs to two boys who walked to the stand from a farmhouse down the road. She was glad to have brought her rubber kitchen gloves. They made her hands sweat, but she didn't have to touch the money that way. The boys set one of the smoke bombs off right out on the cinder and bathed Jeana in rancid purple smoke.

Jeana sat in her webbed lawn chair and worked on her last Cherry Coke. Her bones ached from sitting too much, but moving too much brought the fields into view. Even in the dark, she could feel all that space. The dry wind died down after sunset, making the heat worse at night. Mostly she tried to sit still and listen to the bug zapper hum and zap.

"Hey, out there."

Dina appeared at the counter. She had had four different cars come by since Jeana had set up. Jeana must have stared for several seconds.

"It's okay I come here, isn't it? I know you don't like most people, so I won't bother you or anything. Just let me have that chair there."

Dina pointed to Jeana's other lawn chair which rested, folded up, against the lip of the back shelf. Jeana considered the orb of bug zapper light that reflected off its metal frame. Dina was someone she didn't know well, didn't know personally at all. She had been a few years ahead of Jeana in high school and didn't go to church. She smelled like

hair spray.

In a rush Jeana stood, lifted the other chair onto the counter, pushed, and sat back down in less than four seconds. Dina just caught the chair like people threw lawn chairs at her all the time.

"I'm sorry. I just don't," Jeana mumbled. "I just don't," was all she said.

"It's all right." Dina dismissed anything weird about Jeana with a wave. She unfolded the lawn chair into the yellow circle of Doyal's engine light and placed it near the door. She carried an open longneck and a second one in a red coozie. "You know what you need out here? Some Christmas lights to light up the front. Might hide some of this orange."

"Something needs to hide this orange, doesn't it?" Jeana struggled to speak calmly, having to take heavy, nervous breaths. It had been a while since she'd had a conversation with anyone besides Wayne or her family with no car door between her and them.

"How you doing money-wise?"

"I have almost seven dollars."

"You done better than me today. All perms. You can't make any money doing perms."

"I didn't know that."

Dina drank from her beer. "It's all materials. I can only charge about two dollars more than I pay for those perm kits, or nobody'd drive out here."

Jeana finished the last of her warm soda. All the ice in her cooler had melted hours earlier. She had left the package of Swiss rolls floating on top of the water. It helped when she inhaled through her nose. "Why don't you move to town? Your shop, I mean. I'm sure you'd do good in town."

"Not worth the trouble. I like it out here. Quiet."

"Real quiet."

"I thought I'd be scared out here by myself when my husband divorced me. I mean, I got neighbors 'bout half a mile down." She pointed in the direction from which Jeana's only customers had come. "But I didn't know what it'd be like all by myself. Turns out I like it."

Jeana wanted to know Dina's husband's name, to find out if it was somebody she knew. Probably it was, but she decided it was too rude a question to ask just yet.

"I've never lived by myself my whole life," she said. "I got married when I was eighteen, so I never had a chance. My husband's Doyal that runs the funeral home."

"I know who you are." Dina smiled. "I see you driving your kids around town. They're cuties. Gotta be the cleanest children I ever seen."

"Thank you. They're my babies."

"I can't imagine having babies. Ain't nothing about it sounds like a good idea to me." She drank again. "I don't mean no harm, or nothing. I'm sure being a mama's great and all. I just ain't never been able to picture myself doing it. Or having 'em. God, that just seems like it'd hurt too bad."

"I don't know. They knocked me out. I just went to screaming right off with Liddy. Hyperventilating." She looked down at her hands while she talked. She hoped her cheeks didn't blush in the dark. "So with Jeremy, they knew what to do with me when Doyal pulled up." She laughed a quiet laugh that she thought made her sound like a little girl.

"Beer and drugs," Dina said, but Jeana didn't know what to say back.

Off from the west they heard the early rumble of a coming truck. They sat a moment in the dark and waited for it to come. The rumble grew and grew, and in seconds the semi roared past. Cinder, dust, cigarette butts, and bits of paper swirled up around the tires and wafted down on them. Dina held her hand over the open mouth of her beer bottle.

"Nasty," she said and held her nose. "Cattle hauler. How many times today has that happened?"

"Only about five. I try to keep everything clean, dust it all off after they go by. But I ran out of paper towels after the third one." Jeana wiped at the dirt that now covered her clothes. Being dirty made her feel like she'd done something, and she wanted to be brave enough to leave it there. She twisted the loose hair falling from her clip and jammed it behind her ears.

"The only time it's hard being out here alone is when you watch those scary movies. You ever do that?"

"It's not good for the kids."

"I guess not. It ain't good for me, either, but I can't always help myself. And it's always one of those stories where the old, jilted wife comes to kill the new one. Something like that."

"Is there a new wife?"

"Don't know." Dina gazed out into the dark. "I think it's better if I don't know."

They sat quiet for a couple of minutes. Grasshoppers clicked and spit in the wild grasses. The bug zapper sizzled, sizzled, sizzled. Jeana felt languid and sleepy. In a good way. Like she hadn't for years.

"Hey," Dina said, making Jeana realize she was drifting off. "Do you remember Twilight Beach?"

"Twilight?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking about all the stuff we used to do in the summer, and when I was in school we always used to go to Twilight Beach."

"Oh, yeah. I think they closed that down the last summer I was in school after a bunch of kids got sick. They found out the whole lake was full of pee."

"You're remembering the bad parts."

"Well, we were swimming around in other people's urine." She squirmed at the thought. "Gah, I don't want to remember that."

"Like you never peed in the water at Twilight Beach."

Jeana thought for a long time. "Only the one time. I didn't want Robert Lindley to see me walking to the bathroom." Jeana laughed. "Those concrete floors. We never

thought to wear shoes. And there were no doors on any of the stalls. Anybody could peek in and see you do your business."

"Robert Lindley was good looking, huh?"

Jeana smiled. "I sat in the sand for two hours, and then he left with Angel Adams. Didn't even say a word to me."

"Angel Adams?" Dina smacked Jeans softly on the thigh. "Angel Adams that married that Baird guy?"

"You know Angel?"

"I do her hair every Thursday." She laughed. "Don't worry about it. She's really huge now."

Jeana giggled, too, and didn't feel too guilty about doing it. She flashed back to Angel in the blue bikini, Farah Fawcett hair. "Maybe I should have let Robert watch me walk to the bathroom. My butt isn't what it used to be."

"And blue sno-cones. You remember those?"

"Weren't those the ones that caused cancer?"

"You're thinking of red. Those little red candies."

"My favorite things were the smell of cocoa butter and the radio they played over the loud speaker at the concession stand. KC and the Sunshine Band. I kinda like KC."

"You kinda would."

A car came by on the asphalt with the radio blasting out hard music. It drove down past the Adventist church, slowed, and circled around on the highway. It passed

by again, slower, this time with a young, white ass displayed in the passenger window.

"Oh, my God!" Jeana said. She covered her eyes.

"There's what we've been missing."

The driver donutted in the middle of the intersection. The passenger's rear-end dipped low out the widow, almost falling to the pavement.

"Road rash kills!" Dina yelled.

The car squared up with the right lane and sped off toward town, the laughter of the boys trailing out the window behind them.

"That was a sign," Jeana said.

"A sign of what? Stupidity?"

"No. I believe that was a sign from God that I really should have made better use of my butt when I had a good one."

"I don't have an argument for that."

Jeana shook her head, felt as though she'd arrived at a nice realization.

"Well, I think I've seen enough for one night. You'll be back tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I have to go a funeral in the morning, but I'll be here."

"You want my last one?" Dina held her longneck wrapped in its coozie out to Jeana.

"Maybe tomorrow."

Dina walked back to the trailer, and Jeana watched as she flipped lights on and off inside. She would be up till the wee hours once she got home. Jeana wanted to tell

somebody about her day, about being outside for hours, about talking to someone almost face-to-face. She wished Wayne would come home.

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Saturday night, after twenty minutes of begging her mother, Brandy left pageant practice at the country club auditorium in the backseat of Jaxxine's little Chevy. They picked Courtney up at her house, and circuited the drag between the Chuck Allen's and the feed store about a hundred times waiting for dark. They got lucky when Matt Abbott crashed his dad's pick up into the back of a horse trailer on Main Street. The girls stood on the sidewalk with the other high schoolers watching Chief Neville take statements. As they waited for Matt's dad to come down and wail on him, Jaxxine pointed out that they'd just been handed the perfect alibi. "See?" she said to Brandy. "Your mom'll never find out what we did 'cause everybody saw us here. Even the cops."

After twilight the drove slowly toward the lake east of town. The lake lady's house was in the valley at the other end of the dam, but it sat far back in the trees, half a mile or more from any other houses. There wasn't even a driveway that the girls could see, so they left Jaxxine's car parked behind Hoover's Bait Shop. They stood in the moonlight, building courage.

"Who's got a flashlight?"

A good two minutes of argument over who was supposed to bring the flashlight followed. Then the girls argued over whether to slide down the back side of the dam into the valley or to walk straight through the trees in what they thought was the shortest distance.

"Let's just get it over with," Jaxxine said and plunged into the treeline. The other

two went after.

Courtney started whining before they got ten yards. "There's something in my hair."

"It's just leaves," Jaxxine said. "Stop being a baby."

"It's crawling!"

"Shut up!"

Brandy kept quiet and picked her way through the brambles and weeds and whatever else it was that she stepped in but could not see. Enough moonlight shone down that she could follow Jaxxine. But the further they went, the more bickering with Courtney slowed Jaxxine's progress. By the time they managed their way into the flat of the valley, Courtney was in tears.

"I'm not kidding," she whispered. "I'm not going any further. There is something crawling all over me." She stamped her feet, but just for effect Brandy guessed.

"The only thing crawling on you," Jaxxine began, "is about to be me crawling all over your ass. You are ruining everything!"

"You're not gonna scare me into doing this. You said it was no big deal, that we could just walk right up to the house. It's hot out here and smells like dead fish, or something. I've got scratches all over my legs. And this is seriously, seriously creepy."

"God damn it, Courtney. That's it. We're leaving you here." Jaxxine came to where Brandy stood off to the side of the argument. She grabbed Brandy's arm. "Don't move. Stand right here in this clearing where we can see you when we come back. And

if you make one sound, I swear to God, I'll come back and kill you myself."

"Fine!" Courtney sat on the ground in the clearing, and Jaxxine pulled Brandy toward the next row of trees.

"I don't think we should leave her here," Brandy said. "You know she'll wander off and get lost."

"Come on, Brandy. You sound just like her. You're not afraid too, are you?"

She was, but "I just know Courtney," was all she said.

In another minute, in the midst of a bank of blackjacks, all of the moonlight disappeared. Brandy and Jaxxine held hands. They stopped three different times when they weren't able to find holes in the brush. With each time they turned back, Brandy's heart pounded harder.

"We are so lost." Her voice was less than a whisper. She pulled Jaxxine to a stop. "Which way are we going? I can't tell which way we're going."

"I don't know." Finally, Jaxxine sounded scared. They stood in the thicket for several seconds looking up for a sliver of light that might tell them which way to go. "We gotta go backwards," Jaxxine said. "We'll go backwards till we get to Courtney, then we'll come back down along the dam."

"No. If we ever get back to Courtney, I'm going home."

"Guys?" Courtney's voice came from the front. "Is that you guys?"

"I will kill you dead," Jaxxine said. "I told you not to move. What would you have done if you got lost out here, and we couldn't find you?" She left out the part about

how she and Brandy were the ones who were lost.

"I found a path." Courtney punched through the brambles and weeds. "There's a path over there between these two big rows of trees. I didn't go all the way down it, but it looks like you can just walk right up to the house."

Brandy and Jaxxine followed Courtney to her secret path, and the three of them trailed up toward the lake lady's house. "We're getting too close to talk," Jaxxine whispered, so they listened to the spillway move lake water. The path curved softly between the trees, but the closer they got the slower they walked.

Brandy still breathed fast, like she'd run all the way from the car. The canopies of the tall oaks shut out all the light. No breeze came through to stir the leaves, and the sound of their footsteps nearly echoed. Brandy realized the only footsteps she heard were her own.

"Where are you?" No one answered.

"This isn't funny. Answer me right now, or I'm turning around."

"Calm down," Jaxxine whispered. "We're behind you. Just keep walking."

Brandy couldn't see the girls behind here, but she kept walking. She moved slowly, her hands out in front of her so that if she stepped in a rabbit hole she could catch herself. Maybe she stepped in a booby trap. Witches probably kept traps in their yards. She moved slower still. Ahead, against the backdrop of pitch black, was a tiny pinpoint of yellow light. The light spread wider the closer she got. Then it blinked. Twice really fast, then one more time. The light mesmerized Brandy.

"I think we found it," she said and didn't wait for an answer.

She came at the house from a little off to the left, around a gate that leaned with no fence to support it. The house's outline was small, like a cracker box. The rows of oaks came to a stop, and Brandy stepped out into another clearing where she saw the house in plain view. It was edged along the front with a cement porch, and all the windows had eaves. What was left of a picket fence lay on the ground here and there, and Brandy thought the house was likely white in the daylight. It didn't look like a witch's house at all, but like the shacks down by the train tracks. What her mother referred to as the bad part of town.

Brandy tiptoed through the wild grasses, over the broken-down fence, and right up to the house. The yellow light flooded through the screen door and one of the front windows. Brandy stared right at the light, and tripped over the first porch step.

"Who's there?"

Brandy's breathing was way too loud.

"Jaxx? You guys get up here with me right now." She barely opened her mouth to speak.

No one answered. For a second Brandy felt like crying. Then she thought she'd just run backwards. Fast.

Without another sound from inside the house, the screen door swung wide open. A black, shapeless form seemed to pour out the door onto the porch. "I ast you who's there." The form said. "You a little girl?"

"Yes, m'am."

"You come for a reading? You got the ten dollars with you?"

No one had told Brandy she was supposed to take ten dollars with her, but she had that much with her. "Yes, m'am."

"Let's not stand out here in the yard. If we leave this door open any longer, them nasty horseflies gonna fill up my house." The form waved Brandy through the screen door.

Tingling all over, Brandy stumbled her way across the cement porch and into the witch's house. The yellow light that had drawn her in came from two large candles on a small table. They cast their light directly over an old recliner, the arms of which showed thread and foam stuffing.

"I see you like my chair." The woman placed a gentle hand on the small of Brandy's back. "Go ahead and sit in it. My boy's been wanting to buy me a new one, but I tell him I don't need it." She pushed Brandy forward. Brandy sat stiffly in the chair and looked up at the witch.

What Brandy saw was just a woman. She had long gray curls and wore an apron shirt and purple polyester shorts. Her houseshoes were purple, too, but they'd had the toes cut out. She wore no dangle-y jewelry, no dark eye makeup as Brandy expected. Just a face full of soft wrinkles. Brandy thought if the witch had a perm and some clothes from JC Penney that she'd look just like Brandys' Granny Allen.

"Are you the lake lady?" Brandy asked. It occurred to Brandy, since this woman

was obviously no witch, that maybe she had the wrong house.

"I think there's some around town that call me that. That's what my boy tells me."

"Okay, then."

"Okay. So, let's do the business first." The woman patted her hip over her pocket and held her hand out. Brandy pulled the ten dollar bill from her cutoffs.

"I got to finish up my dishes. You sit here a minute."

The woman went into another room so dark Brandy wondered how she could possibly see to do dishes. Brandy looked around the room where she sat. It was neat, she thought, even though the rugs and furniture were all worn. Tables and shelves of all sizes and heights lined every wall. And on all them were stacks of books, magazines, knick-knacks and photo albums. There had to be at least fifty photo albums. It was dark and smelled a little moldy, but to Brandy the inside of the witch's house looked a lot like her Grandpa and Granny Allen's house.

"Now," the woman said coming back into the room "you sit here." She patted the back of a tall wooden chair. "I ain't as young as I used to be."

Brandy gave up the recliner to the woman. She taken off her apron shirt to show the t-shirt underneath. It was white with purple and blue mountains on it. "Live High in Raton," it said along the bottom.

"Of course, I don't know of anybody who ain't getting any older. That'd be something if that was the case, wouldn't it. Should be grateful. If I wasn't old I'd just be

dead." She smiled. "You don't talk much for a girl. I thought girls were big talkers."

"Sometimes," was all Brandy said.

"Did I see you in the papers? My boy brings me the papers every day, and it seems like I seen you in one of them." The woman squished up her face in thought. "Ain't you some kind of queen or something? That's it."

"Kinda." Brandy was calming down, but her voice still sounded small and nervous. "I was Little Dixie Queen once, and I was Wheat Queen last year, and now I'm gonna be Miss Stephens County."

"Are you? Well, how 'bout that." The woman looked pleased. "I bet I saved your picture."

"What?"

"In one of my books." She pointed to the stacks of photo albums and scrapbooks along one wall. "I like the papers, and when I find something in one of them that I really like I glue it in one of my books. I got more of 'em in the other room."

Brandy saw now that all of the books had years written on their spines. She crossed the room drew down the one that said 1994. "There," she said flipping the plastic pages. "That's me."

It was the picture of her from the Wheat Festival, singing on the back of flatbed trailer parked on Main Street. She'd worn a buckskin suit and cowboy hat her mother'd paid Mearline $500 to make. The jacket had little wheat bundles embroidered on it. "I did Patsy Cline."

"Oh, that's good." The woman shook her head. "Folks always appreciate a good Patsy Cline song."

"That's what my mama said."

"You like being queens?"

"I don't know. I guess I do it a lot, but I never really thought about it much." She stared into the flicker of the candles. "I mean, I get a lot of stuff for doing it. My college is all paid for if I go to an Oklahoma school. And my mama likes me to do it."

"Uh-huh."

"Do you know my mama?"

"Well, what's her name?"

"Leena Ann Castle. It used to be Leena Ann Allen, and it was Sweet before that. James was her maiden name."

"Mercy." The woman put her hands on her temples like someone with a headache, but she smiled when she did it. "I reckon a couple of those names sound a little familiar."

They sat in the still of the little house for a minute. The windows all were open, and no breeze moved through the valley behind the dam, but the house seemed a little cool to Brandy. Not one sound from the woods outside could be heard.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," Brandy said.

"You mean about being queens?"

"No, m'am. I mean about the reading stuff."

"There's something you need to know about what's gonna happen to you?" Her wrinkles squished together when the woman talked, and Brandy watched the folds of her soft skin rise and fall. She breathed slow and tried to think hard about the answer to the question.

"No," Brandy said. "I want to go away, to some place else. I want go and come back, and come back different."

"That's easy enough to do."

"How?"

"You just do," the woman said. "That's the most I can tell you. That's more than I ever told anybody else."

"You're not scary at all. My boyfriend says girls shouldn't come out here by themselves, and my friend Jaxxine thinks you curse people."

She laughed. "People curse theirselves. They don't need me to do that. Now," she pulled the table with the candles on it a little closer to her," bring me the one that says 1981. It's my favorite."

Brandy put her album back and took down the one requested. She and the woman paged through it, cover to cover. They read about an Easter egg hunt that took place there in the lake valley, the high school graduation that year, and about a woman in Kansas who threw a frozen turkey at the butcher's assistant at a place called Calbert's Meat Market. The assistant had to have stitches in his head. "They overcharged her," the woman said. "You gotta watch 'em all the time."

They read through 1982 and 1978, going through the woman's favorites in order. Brandy found her birth announcement in the last one. "Leena Ann and Brandon Sweet Welcome Curly-Haired Cherub," it said.

Something slammed against the outside of the house. Brandy allowed the album to fall closed and made a sound almost like a scream. The woman didn't even twitch. The stacks and stacks of the woman's keepsakes heaved away from the wall and settled back in a puff of dust.

"Kids," the woman said. "Drunk, idiot kids." She pushed up from the chair and paused long enough to fit her horseshoes tightly. "You can stay here if you want," she said and went through the screen door.

"Who's there?"

The woman disappeared into the pitch black before Brandy even made it to the door. She peered through the screen, counting seconds. She wished she'd worn her watch. Brandy placed the 1978 album in its proper slot on the shelf. It was four minutes or maybe six before she decided to leave. The woman wasn't in the yard anymore. No one was.

She sensed but didn't see the edge of the porch. The candlelight behind her provided no help. Jaxxine's car was up the hill to the right, she thought, but when she turned that way she still couldn't see. She turned half way around to face the house again, but couldn't see her hands. Another half turn and without having taken ten steps off the porch, Brandy was already lost. "Okay, Brandy Lynnette. No crybabies."

She reached out one arm and smacked into a tree trunk. "Okay, that's not supposed to be there, is it?" No one answered. She hugged the tree. Then she reached out again and grabbed the next one. Like that she worked her way from one tree to another until she came what she thought had to be close to the lake lady's gate. She put her hand out again, but no matter which direction she reached she couldn't locate another tree. Another twenty yards the blue moonlight shone down through a break in the trees. She decided to just go for it.

Brandy let go of the last tree and walked fast toward the light. But when she walked fast, something faster, taller, and ghost-like moved around her. It caused a breeze that tugged at her hair. Brandy closed her eyes and screamed from her toes all the way up. She didn't care if it was the lake lady, the Bogey Man, or the girls who heard. Even Hoover from the bait shop would be fine with her.

Her eyes opened. The gate lay over on the path. Something rustled in the ivy. A scream, softer and shorter than hers, sounded from up above.

Brandy ran. She jumped the broken gate and headed blindly through the woods. Branches, weeds, and stickers stung her skin. She was beyond the path, beyond the house, beyond the moonlight. She ran, straight into a pair of open arms.

"Gotcha!"

"Haynes?"

Haynes collapsed, laughing, and rolled both of them to the ground. "Haynes," she said again but breathless. She struck out in the dark with her fists and landed several

hard punches on his chest and arms before he got her pinned all the way to the ground.

"Hey. Hey! Knock it off." Haynes sat astride Brandy's hips and held her arms down with his knees. "God damn. Why are you hittin' on me? I'm trying to rescue you."

"I didn't need to be rescued."

"Yeah? Then why did Jaxx and Courtney say that witch'd had you in there for like an hour? What were you doing in there, anyway?" He sat up straight and rubbed his chest. "Damn. I think you bruised me."

"Serves you right. What in the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Whoa! Big talk, little girl. You know," he laughed, "I don't think I've ever heard you cuss before."

"Hell!" she screamed. "Hell, damn, penis."

"Penis? God, you need practice."

"You think you're funny? You scared me to death." She turned her hips back and forth.

"That was the plan. We were gonna get ya'll on your way back to the car."

"We?"

"Me and Josh and Matt Abbott." A trace of light framed his face, but Brandy couldn't actually see him. "Man, Matt almost ruined the whole thing, but his dad said he could start his grounding tomorrow."

"I don't care." She couldn't catch her breath with him sitting on her. "Get off me."

"You gonna hit me again?"

"Get off!"

"You know, I oughta take advantage of this here opportunity. I got Miss Stephens County on her back. In the woods, with nobody around to bother us." Haynes's face was now an inch from hers. His breath washed over her face. "Nobody would even hear us."

"Getoffgetoffgetoff!" Brandy pushed as hard as she could, but she knew it was the tone of her voice that moved Haynes. They stood in a rush, kicking up a cloud of dust and leaves.

"God damn. What's got into you? This was gonna be so funny, but you gotta freak totally out." He slapped at his clothes. "This pageant thing is messing with your brain."

Brandy started off walking through the dark. "It's not the pageant. That's stupid. Just stupid."

"Then what is wrong with you?"

"You wouldn't understand." She kept walking even though Haynes hadn't moved.

"Especially since you're being weird and hardly saying anything. Even Jaxxine said you're not right. I can't wait till this pageant's over."

Brandy came up against a wall of vines and felt for a way around it.

"Wait a minute. You're going the wrong way." Haynes came up, grabbed at her

arm, but Brandy pulled out of his grasp before his fingers closed.

"Stop telling me what to do."

"I'm trying to keep you from getting lost."

"I'll get lost if I want to. You-all are always telling me what to do."

"Who all?"

"Just leave me alone, Haynes."

"Fine. Get lost. See if I care." It took two seconds for Haynes to completely disappear into the blue night. For a while Brandy could hear him hacking his way through the brush until finally he was too far away. She pushed on through tangle after tangle, not afraid to be lost anymore. Her blood cooled, her heart slowed, and she maneuvered whichever way the earth seemed to dictate.

After awhile, Brandy came upon the old city wellhouse. That meant she'd walked to the far, wrong end of the dam. She was three or four miles from Jaxxine's car. The story of the wellhouse was that a statue of an angel hung upside down from the roof and that it was bad luck to stand beneath the upside down angel. She looked through the door but couldn't see more than three inches. She put her foot on the step, and glass crunched beneath her shoe. The wellhouse smelled like honeysuckle. Brandy sat on the ground, exhausted.

"Little queen? You out there, little queen?"

The lake lady came from behind her.

"My goodness, but did you get off the path." She reached for a twig that hung in

Brandy's hair. "Did you get hurt?"

"No. Just lost."

"Well, you gotta be gettin' on now. Somebody's daddy liable to call the po-lice on me if you don't get home 'fore daylight."

"Do you really tell the future?"

The woman laughed. "I tell people what they want to know."

Brandy wasn't sure what that meant, but she didn't want to ask. She liked the quiet around them, the smell of the night. She thought how comforting the ground would be if she just stretched out flat and went to sleep. "I'm sorry they were mean to you."

"Don't worry about 'em. Come on, now."

Brandy put her hands out. The woman took them and pulled her to her feet. "I still don't know which way to go."

"That way." The woman spun her around. "Just go back the way you came."

Brandy headed off in the dark again, hearing only her own footsteps. "Lake lady?" she said. No one answered.

-11-

Brandy stood at her dresser mirror adding pink foam rollers to her hair. Her mother thought if they left the rollers in till time to get ready for the parade the next day that they might be able to keep Brandy's flyaways under control. They'd gone to Marlow straight after to church to pick up her parade outfit, a navy blue short set that looked sailor-ish. The parade wasn't part of the official pageant activities, but her mother insisted she maintain the whole red-white-and blue thing. So she'd picked a blue and white outfit for the parade, and a red car for Brandy to ride in.

"You got your daddy's hair." Brandy's mother opened the door without knocking. "The weather says it's gonna be windy tomorrow, so we got to keep it from flying around." She placed her hands on either side of Brandy's head and looked at her daughter's face in the mirror reflection. "We oughta think about a retainer for those teeth before Miss Oklahoma," she said.

Brandy flopped on her bed. "I don't want to go to Miss Oklahoma, Mama. There's all college girls there."

"I don't care. You'll be eighteen by then, and that's old enough to compete." Her mother sat on the bed. "We won't worry about winning it this year. Just practicing for next year."

"This is making me so tired," Brandy said.

"What does that mean?"

"I just feel--" she closed her eyes so that she didn't have to see her mother's

expression. It was bedtime, so her mother's face was free of makeup. Brandy hardly recognized her. "--tired or old or something. And bored."

"It's almost over," her mother said, and Brandy knew she referred to the pageant even though that wasn't what Brandy meant.

"I'm getting a headache, Mama. Will you lay down with me?"

"Just for a minute."

Thunder crackled outside. This storm was foremost on her mother's mind. She would not have that Fourth of July parade ruined. It was going to be a big moment, she kept telling Brandy. When lightning flashed on the window panes, her mother said "Oh, Lord."

"Lynnette says that Miss Jessie's probably happy that Mr. Everett's dead."

"Maybe not happy exactly." Her mother crossed her ankles. Her toenails were painted violet. "Relieved is more like it."

"She didn't love him."

"Oh, baby."

"Why else would you be glad somebody's dead?"

"You gotta understand what Miss Jessie's life has been like. Being married to that man cost her," she waved her hands in the air. "She wasn't free, really."

Brandy waited. She could tell by her mother's tone that she was thinking.

"It's like this," her mother said finally. "Every time you get something, you lose something. Like the good with the bad. You have your sweet time, the sweetest time in

your life, and later you have to give up something you used to really love. Jessie gave up her freedom for a long time. So now she gets her sweets."

Brandy thought about his a long time. Lightning played on the sparkles embedded in her popcorn ceiling. She wondered if what her mother said was true for everybody or just for beauty queens.

"What was your sweetest thing, Mama?"

"When I got you."

"What'd you lose that you really cared about when you got me?" Brandy whispered.

"Oh?" Her mother was surprised. "Nothing, I guess. Maybe some little thing I thought was important way back then. But you think all kinds of little things are important when you're young, then you find out later they're not. Maybe it was something small. Maybe something got lost. It might'a just been the way I used to be."

-12-

Business at the fireworks stand picked up over the weekend. Word got around with some of the teenagers that Jeana's stand was far enough outside town that you could buy your cherry bombs without your mom finding out. Jeana felt a little bad about selling the contraband explosives. After all, she was a mother, too, and wouldn"t want someone trying to make money off her kids misbehaving. But August's bill had to be paid somehow, and Doyal wasn't about to give her the money. When Jeana had packed for her third day at the stand instead of getting the kids ready for their ride to church, Doyal had said, "The Lord's not gonna look favorable on this."

"He'll get over it," was all Jeana had said.

She rode out to the stand early on Monday morning. Being the day before the pageant and the fireworks show, she expected a land office business. Pap had told her he thought the third ought to be her biggest day, especially now with the commotion stirred up over the festival. Chuck Allen saw an increase in ticket sales for the beauty pageant, the Cobbs rolled their flatbed downtown for use as a stage, and Hatch organized a crew of bored farmers to take the Christmas decorations down. Now the tattered red, white, and blue bunting stood out some. The names of all the queen candidates had been painted over the boarded-up windows of the downtown shops, and someone made anonymous donations to the police car and police station roof funds. They both grew by $100.

All this is the wake of Wayne's shooting Clyde. For the first time in nearly a

decade, life breathed again in Stephensville. Miss Jessie waved at folks from her Galaxy. Jeana was walking around out in the open. Almost. The tv weathermen suggested rain lurked nearby, and the Tip Top swirled with talk of weather, weather, weather. Stephensville was happy again, and Jeana knew Wayne would be sick about it.

She sat her lawn chair near the door again. Every day she had parked the wagon a few inches further from the stand, creating more distance between herself and her escape vehicle. She got stronger by doing this, she believed. It also allowed more room for Dina to set up the other chair. Jeana liked talking to Dina, mostly because Dina talked to her like she was normal. She thought how much Wayne would like Dina if he knew her better.

The only bad part about opening the distance between the wagon and the fireworks stand was that the sliver of prairie in Jeana's sight line wavered. The first day there she sat eye-level with the counter. Every night she spent with Dina she forgot more and more to worry about space beyond them. But now, without the car blocking her view, if she turned her head to the right even a teeny bit, a swath of tall alfalfa and creamy sky snuck up on her. She kept having to look away fast and take deep breaths. After an hour she noticed a cluster of about five bois d'arc trees on the near corner of the field, so when Jeana did happen to see too much space, she trained her eyes on those trees. They stood solid and thick, probably the only trees between her and the river. They made Jeana feel safer somehow.

The morning crawled by. Several cars headed east to town and the festival. If

anybody honked, Jeana waved. But around noon the sky darkened. Gray clouds of all shapes and sizes rolled in, and by the time she finished the baloney sandwich she had brought in her cooler, rain streamed outside the wing doors. When the lightning started, Jeana unplugged the zapper and the engine light from the outlet rigging Pap had built. When the wind blew the rain inside, she closed the wing doors. She stood inside the orange shack. Plumes of red dirts sprayed up as the raindrops plunked down. Jeana looked through her tiny entrance door at the summer storm that raged through the alfalfa.

The first of the really big lightning strikes cracked, Jeana closed her eyes. Her fists tightened as the rumbles of thunder flowed one into the next. "I can do this," she said.

The box rocked with the next big strike.

"Oh, no."

Just then, all hell broke loose. She smelled smoke. And when she heard a sizzling sound she looked again to be sure she had unplugged the zapper.

It was the trees. The little cluster of trees that stood alone in the wide fields smoked and sizzled. In the rain, the flames showed blue. "This," she thought, "this is what happens when you get yourself out in the open like this."

The flames cut through the grain and the grass in a zigzag like they knew the direction to Jeana's stand. She ran for Dina's. She pulled the door open and spilled into the front room where Dina and Mrs. Clark looked at her in stunned silence.

"Fire," she said, dripping rain on Dina's tile.

The three women stood in Dina's door and watched as it took only seconds for the fire eat up the alfalfa, pecan saplings, and most of the Adventist lawn. It crackled through the wooden fenceline and the weeds that speckled the cinder.

"Why doesn't the rain stop it?" Jeana asked.

"Rain don't kill a lightning fire," Mrs. Clark said.

Dina dialed the police office, and Jeana listened to her explain their situation. She asked whether they should run.

"They're all at the parade," Dina said. "Shanie's gonna run down and get them."

"The parade. All those queen candidates in their convertibles." She hoped Doyal had taken the kids home at the first sign of rain.

The flames stayed low, never rising more than a foot or so off the ground. Jeana couldn't even see them as they cut through the grass. She saw only the blackening reeds and the smoke that spiraled slowly up.

"This is about to get serious," Dina said.

The fire snaked along the fenceline until it skirted one of Jeana's lawn chairs. Then it slipped under the edge of the orange fireworks stand and disappeared.

"It's gone."

"You think?"

"It ain't gone," Mrs Clark said and dabbed perm solution dripping from her hair with a worn towel.

As if it heard Mrs. Clark's words, the fire set the fireworks to popping. At first the sounds were far away, like sounds coming from a deep hole. Then they heard pinging and pops at a higher pitch. Heavy gray smoke leaked near the ceiling from the open entrance door. There were the sounds of bottle rockets and roman candles crashing futilely against plywood. And finally the constant firing of the bricks of Black Cats.

It took ten minutes, maybe fifteen. Jeana lost exact count, as there was a sudden rush to save Mrs. Clark's hair when Dina realized she was over her time.

"I've got to go get them," Jeana said.

"Get who? Hey, come back here." Dina stood at the pink sink spraying Mrs. Clark's head. "You can't go get anybody out here, and besides, that fire went right under your car. Your car could be on fire, and you not even know it."

"Then let me drive yours."

"What's she doing?" Mrs. Clark said. She held a towel over her eyes as Dina continued to spray.

"It's gonna get the church. And all the houses down the county road."

They argued for ten more seconds before Jeana grabbed Dina's keys off the table by the door and went.

Dina had left the windows rolled down. The rain continued to pound, the sound of it on the charred grain field barely perceptible. She didn't know what she was supposed to do, but she needed to do something. The sight of her fireworks stand, money box and all, smoldering and popping was enough to make her cry. Jeana thought

how it all smelled like burned bread as she drove off in search of the parade.

In town the cars packed every corner lot and curbside slot. When Jeana reached Stephensville's only red light, she saw clearly she wouldn't be able to park any reasonable place. The sawhorse police barricades, which had stood on Second Street where Clyde died, now blocked Jeana's way down Main. She checked the sidewalk in front of the parts store, and when she saw no one there, Jeana maneuvered Dina's little car up the curb, onto the sidewalk. She left the keys inside, so if it needed to be moved before she got back, someone else could do it.

Beyond the red light, the parade went on. The banner over Handy's drooped in the center so that "FOURTH OF" were the only ones that showed. What were left of the red, white, and blue streamers had broken in the centers and were blowing loosely in the wind. Rain dripped from every eave on Main Street, and the smell of wet hay hung in the air. A little girl with blonde ringlets and a red cowboy hat, she thought it was Mary Leaf's daughter, sang on the back of one of the flatbeds while two little boys jig-danced behind her. Jeana walked up on them just in time for the crowd to applaud.

"Folks, let's hear it for the Country Time Kickers." Brother Jimmy stood at the microphone, a see-through plastic rain jacket on over his clothes. While everyone clapped, he glanced down at Jeana with wide eyes. He screwed his eyebrows together. "Next, we have the Blue Mound Spoon Players."

As the spooners played Brother Jimmy came to the edge of the trailer stage. "My, my, Jeana Lee. Bless your heart, honey. Is everything okay? You want me to get

on the mike and call for Doyal."

"No, I'm okay. I just need Neville," Jeana told him.

"Can't hear you." He pointed to his ear while he clapped along.

"Neville. Where's Neville?"

Brother Jimmy just shrugged. "You take now, hon," he said as she picked her way between the stirring bodies and the rows of food and craft booths that lined the sidewalk. Kids with sticky, wet hands grasped at her as she went by. She shuddered a little, but she imagined the rain washed their dirt right off.

"Jeremy's mom! Hey, Jeremy's mom."

Jeana kept going without looking to see whose child said it, but she heard the gasps of all the adults as she passed by. "Yes, it's me," she said aloud without directing the remark to any of the wet, slicker-and-gimme-cap wearing bodies who swam in front of her eyes. When she reached the end of the block with no sign of Neville, she crossed to the north side of the street. In front of the penny-pitch stall she found Shanie.

"We had a fire."

Shanie glanced up like she came face to face with Jeana every day. "I know, hon. That's what Dina told me. But Neville's had his hands full with getting all this traffic blocked, then we had people scrambling through the street in the middle of an electrical storm." She laughed. "It's been a mess."

"Shanie, we had a fire. That whole big alfalfa field went up. It got my whole stand. Everything." She wanted to cry. Then she said, "It's still going. I think the church

might still be burning," to make it sound like she wasn't being too selfish.

"Well, is everybody all right? I mean, nobody was out in it?"

"No. Dina's okay. Mrs. Clark's okay."

"Carol Clark? You can't scare that woman with a sack full of spiders."

"Shanie."

"Well, hon, I don't know what to tell you. I called the Corum Fire Department. They ought to be over any time now, but they're a little shorthanded, too. Half the crew's over here cooking up bar-be-que."

"Then why can't they go fight the fire?"

"They ain't got their truck," Shanie answered, like it was the most logical thing anyone could have said just then. She chewed a piece of homemade caramel. "We need ol' Wayne to come back, I guess. Neville ain't never known how much work there is to do around this one-horse town till he had to do it all by hisself. You don't know how to find him, do you?"

"No." She pushed her wet hair back into its scraggly ponytail. "But I wish he'd stay gone."

"You call Dina, and tell her help's on the way. I'll keep looking for Neville."

Shanie trailed off into the crowd. Jeana was left on the corner, surrounded by children holding baggies of goldfish.

"And now," Brother Jimmy called on the mike. "We'll have the pageant hopefuls. The candidates for Miss Stephens County, 1995." George Strait played over

the speakers as the first car rolled onto Main. It was girl a Jeana didn't recognize, probably one from Empire City. Posterboards bearing the girls' names in glitter that ran in the rain flapped in the breeze. The girls all had someone sitting in the car with them holding umbrellas over the over-sprayed hair-dos and make-up jobs. Most of them wore see-through plastic raincoats like Brother Jimmy's. They waved, tall teeth beaming under the gray sky, looking all of twenty-five. They tossed suckers and Super-Bubble to the people lining the parade route. Jeana peered into the face of Christy Boone, who wore red-red lipstick and seemed to look at no one as she smiled. Jeana shivered in the sultry storm and wrapped her arms around her body. Those girls all looked so far from Twilight Beach.

As the cars exited past the barricade down by the stoplight, Jeana began to wonder where Brandy was. Nine, ten girls had rolled by and no Brandy. And then, where two men from the bank held open the barricades to let the cars roll in, Leena Ann Castle rounded the corner ahead of her daughter's car. Leena Ann wore a yellow rain slicker, a nice one from a catalog, Jeana could tell. She was probably the only person in Stephensville with a real rain slicker and matching umbrella. She walked backwards, looking back at Brandy's car. She motioned toward her head several times.

"What's she doing?"

Jeana stepped off the curb to the edge of the street. A Judds's song now played through the speakers. Leena Ann and Brandy kept coming. Brandy perched on the top of the convertible's backseat. She wore none of the heavy make-up, and her hair in a

ponytail. Instead of one of the theme suits worn by the other girls, Brandy wore jeans and a green t-shirt that read "Falls Creek Baptist Camp." Philip's, Jeana thought; her kids had come home with them, too. No one sat over Brandy with an umbrella or plastic raincoat. She smiled, though, the biggest prettiest smile of all of them.

They rolled closer, Brandy, Leena Ann and the car. Every feet few Leena Ann turned to see where she walked, and Jeana saw the deep lines around her mouth and forehead. She looked like she had a bad headache. Brandy threw candy, too, but while the other girls delicately tossed a few pieces this side and that, Brandy threw great handfuls. She stood up in the backseat, and scooped bubble gum into piles in the street. Kids ran from every direction. The car came to a complete stop to avoiding hitting the kids. One and then another leaned right into the seat, tugging at Brandy's arms. She handed out stash after stash. When she emptied one box, she tossed the empty cardboard into the street and opened another.

"Sit down. Sit down!" Leena Ann stood on the opposite side of the car, but she was close enough for Jeana to see her face. She looked worried, scared, small in a way Jeana'd never seen her before. "Brandy Lynnette Sweet, sit down now."

Brandy didn't seem to hear Leena Ann. In fact, no one did. The crowd clapped and sang to the music. The tiny Country Time Kickers scattered in the street, grabbing candy. Children took their rewards to their parents and came back for more of Brandy's generosity. In a minute, though, her second box was empty. She stood up straight and started clapping, too.

"What are you doing?" Leena Ann hissed. "I can't believe you are doing this. I can not believe you are doing this to me."

Brandy pulled a little girl into the car with her, then another crawled in, then another. They all clapped and danced, tilted back their heads and drank raindrops.

The candy all gone, the kids ran back to the sidewalks. The convertible started up again, Brandy and her new court headed toward the exit barricade. Leena Ann Castle stood stock still in the midst of the wet town party. Black tears streamed down her face.

-14-

Jake walked into the funeral parlor closing the sounds of the parade out when he closed the door. No one sat at the desk up front, so he waited quietly on the rug so as not to track rain everywhere.

In a minute the man named Doyal, the one married to the nervous lady, came out.

"I'm so sorry," he said in a voice that reminded Jake of the guy that did church on tv. "We're a little short-handed with the holiday. Can I be of help?"

The man held his tie between the fingers of one hand while he studied Jake's face. Before Jake could say anything, the funeral man said, "Don't I know you?"

"I need a stone." Jake whispered.

"Beg your pardon?"

"I need a stone. Gravestone." Jake cleared his throat. "For somebody that died. A gravestone. For a friend."

"I'm sorry to hear about your loss." The man reached out for Jake's hand. "May I ask who your friend was?"

"Andy. Rose."

He let Jake's limp hand drop. "I'm sorry. I believe the state handled Mr. Rose's services."

"He didn't get no stone."

"Well, you know it takes some time to get custom made gravestones, and they're

quite expensive."

Jake shoved his hand deep in the pocket of his Army jacket. He pulled the ball of wadded bills out and held them up for the funeral man to see. "I got money," Jake said.

PART FOUR

-1-

Wayne sat in the Roadway Inn restaurant on the edge of Burgheim, Texas. He'd been to the Frontier Times Museum, Cascade Caverns, and the Natural Bridge Caverns all in one day. When he'd made it to Long Point and found out his mother was gone, he'd driven south first. Then west. He saw most of Houston, then Corpus Christi, then San Anton. The big places held no fascination for him, so he'd gone on to all the little places listed on his maps that'd sounded interesting. When he slept, he slept during the day, usually in his truck, parked under a broad treetop at a roadside table. He drove to a town called Cut and Shoot because he wanted to know how a town go a name like that. No one he talked to knew why.

The first house in Long Point he thought was his mother's turned out to be someone else's. He drove to the other side of town and found the house that had been hers. The couple who lived there now told her she seemed fine when they'd rented the house from her, but that she didn't say where she was going. He ate hamburgers and chocolate malts, peanuts in cellophane bags. He wandered, he didn't shave. He went three days without a shower.

Roadie went along quietly, more quietly the longer their trip lasted. She didn't seem to sleep much at all, as far as Wayne saw. She ate less and less every day. By the fourth, she was noticeable lighter and her eyes were bloodshot. Texas, Wayne was afraid, was killing his dog.

Wayne went back to his room where Roadie lay on the bed. He packed his few

belongings, paid his bill, and he and Roadie drove out to another roadside park. They got out and sat at one of the picnic tables. It was almost nine at night, and the sun was starting to set.

A tiny circle of light flared in the dusk, catching Wayne's eye as he stared out at a grove of short pines.

"I've been wondering where you've been," Wayne said.

"Well, see I was waiting for you to get things right. I told you 'fore you crossed the river you was goin' the wrong way."

"That you did."

The man toward Wayne's picnic table and sat onthe opposite bench. Roadie didn't bark, or growl. She hardly bothered to look up.

"So, why didn't you listen to me?"

"Well . . ." Wayne held his hands out like he would if holding out a gift to someone. "I wasn't sure what to make of you. Truth is, the last few days have seemed wrong without you around."

The man laughed a cigarette smoke laugh. "What'da know about that? Maybe now I can set your head right. I got other things to be doin'."

Wayne rested his arms on the table, thought seriously for a moment about laying his head atop them. His road trip wore him out. "Then get to setting me straight. I got other things to be doing, too."

"See, this here's the thing. I don't really tell you the answers. I just tell you when

you ain't got 'em. And you ain't got 'em, yet." He drew deep on his cigarette. "Case you didn't know that already."

"I knew that." Wayne shook his head. He looked off at the dark trees again. "I think now maybe I knew that before all this."

"Ah, don't get off on that trail. You'll never find your way back. If you's always asking what if I had done this, done that. If you twice-guessed every thought you had. Well, you wouldn't get far, would you. Just keep running. Go ahead."

"To where?"

"Where do you wanna go? When I was your age, I went anywhere I wanted."

"Montana," Wayne said.

"Kept it up even after I's married. Hell, I went off more after I's married than before."

"California. Arizona."

"Hell, no. You ain't goin' about this right. It ain't *my* places you need to be thinkin' 'bout."

"Your places?"

"Them's all my places. What you need to be lookin' for is your own places. Where you need to be." He reached across the table and pointed at Wayne's shoulder. "You."

Wayne just looked at the table top. He wanted Roadie to slide over to him, to lay her head in his lap and warm him in the night.

"The thing is," the man said, "there ain't too much time to think about all this. You gotta get on with it. There's this time I was getting ready to head off to the bayou. Some ol' boy used to come in and drink coffee with us told us about these sugarcane plantations. You cut sugarcane by hand in them days." He tilted his head in thought. "I don't reckon they do that by hand anymore. They don't do nothing by hand anymore."

"How is this about time?"

"'Cause I took a little long thinking 'bout it. Truth is, my wife'd had enough of my takings and leavings by then. She hollered one streak and another. I needed a couple a' days to get her settled down, and next thing I know that boat's left. Wasn't a boat, 'course. Thing is that one worked out. That ol' boy cleaned up."

"I don't know why I missed you. You don't say a damn thing that makes sense."

"Never had. Least, that's what most folks been sayin' and thinkin'. Especially lately. That's all right with me, though. I was different and knew it right off. "

"Still doesn't explain why you tell me--this suff. About places. What I am supposed to do with that?"

"I's a man for many places. Being one man in one place, all the time. Now that weren't for me. Some ain't like that, though. Some gotta be home all the time. Not me. That's what finally drove me looney. I don't care what they say happened."

Dark had set in. Wayne couldn't make out much of the man except the outline of his head and the tip of his never-ending cigarette.

"The trick is knowing which man you are while you got the time to do somethin'

'bout it. I figure you got"-- he paused to think up a measurement--"twenty years."

"You're giving me all this hell now, and I got twenty years to get it straight?"

"You learn the lesson now. Then you get twenty years to do somethin' 'bout it."

"Then what? I die in twenty years."

"I don't know 'bout all that. All I'm sayin' is that you get up until then to get where you need to be. Just the right place you have t'be. I'm sayin' it's important to think it all out now. I didn't do that, and I sure got my head screwed 'round." He waited a minute. "Besides, it could be twenty-five."

"How much time did you get to think it out?"

"'Bout the same. I just didn't do it. Had better things to think 'bout. I had a boy that got a bad fever, go behind in school. He had to go to Vi-et Nam, and we never could get along after that. My wife wouldn't a farm, so I got 'er one. Them things took up all my energy, and it was some time in my 50's I knew I hadn't done it right. It's too late by then. Too much to be fixed over by then."

The man, who"d laughed his way through his other two conversations, sounded sad to Wayne now. He sounded small, like he was floating away. He couldn't see the man in the dark, but he remembered as a man in his 50's. A young old man.

"She's gonna give you a watch."

"Who?"

"You got your lighter?"

Wayne slipped the sterling silver Zippo out of his pocket. He didn't show it to

the man, didn't even open his hand. "I have it."

"The watch kinda goes with it. She'll be shy 'bout it. But you take it."

"Who's gonna give me a watch?"

"You understand what you're gonna do, right? Get this worked out, now."

"What did you mean when you said you went crazy in your 50's?"

"Son," the man asked. "Don't you know who I am?"

In the tiny farm house that tilted on the hill east of Stephensville, Jessie Everett took a banana pudding out of the freezer. It wasn't good for her. She had a touch of the diabetes, but it was the food kind, as she thought of it. Not the kind that was bothered by a little banana pudding now and then. Especially not when somebody else had made it for you. Miss Jessie couldn't be happier not to be cooking in the farm house on an evening in July.

She sat in her chair on the slanting porch. The sun melted down over the field of hairy sunflowers across the highway from her house. This had been the first day no one had come to see her in years. Not Angela, whose work out there was done. Not Leena Ann, who was all broken-hearted. Not Wayne. But Wayne was coming.

Jessie was learning to be thrilled again. By food, by being alone. By staying up past what had been her bedtime for so long. By the thought of lingering in the church parking lot come Sunday and going to lunch at Chuck Allen's with Pap and Shelia. By sitting in her chair with nothing to do all day that she didn't want to do. She was finding that she didn't want to do much.

She went to the spare room once the sun had completely set. And she dug out the frutitwood box in the bottom of the closet. It was a box made before they put linings in fancy boxes, so she folded a blue scarf inside. She'd never cared for the scarf, but it made a nice lining. Inside the box she lay three things. First, there was a thank you card that acknowledge the beautiful flowers. She scrawled his name on the outside, in case

he saw all this and wasn't sure that it was really meant for him. Then she set the sterling silver watch on top of the white envelope. It was set with turquoise and had the smallest etchings carved on the ring surrounding the face. It needed cleaning, but even in soft light, she could still make out those etching. It was the Arizona watch.

Finally, Jessie placed a picture of Clyde on top. It was him, some time after Donnie first came back from the service. The picture was black and white, but clear. In it, he smiled, one of the last times Jessie'd seen him do that and not long after she'd stopped smiling herself. He wore his hair combed over, very tidy and wet-looking, and a striped shirt with little pearl snaps. Jessie closed the lid on the box. The latch didn't work, but on solid, old boxes like that they didn't need to. Before she walked away, she opened the lid to touch the watch. At one time, there had been a lighter. It didn't have the etchings, and she didn't know where it'd come from. But it was silver and went nicely with the watch.

-3-

Wayne's truck barreled over the bridge from Texas, north into Stephens County. Roadie hung her head out of the window, catching rain in her face.

"You're liking this, huh?"

She barked.

Wayne rolled his window down and caught at the wet air with his open palm. Lightning silently cracked the sky in the distance ahead of them.

"You really can feel it, can't you? I don't know why I never noticed that before."

Once on the other side of the Red River, Wayne pulled the truck off the highway onto the Oklahoma soil. He stepped out, letting Roadie push him out of her way. She caught the scent of something in the night breeze, then bolted into the brush just beyond the beams of Wayne's headlights. He allowed her to go, knowing she could find her way home from there. He leaned against the truck door and watched fat raindrops splatter the ground. Rivulets of red mud trailed around the toes of his boots and slid downhill toward the river. They must be having floods in town, Wayne thought. He put his hands to his temples, rubbed his stubbled skin, washed his face in the rain.

Roadie bounded out of the trees and barked long. She paused, looked Wayne right in the eyes, then barked again. "I'm coming," he said.

Wayne followed his dog to the brush line, peered into the dark foliage as she nosed around ahead of him.

"I don't see anything," Wayne said, ready to leave Roadie to her investigation

rather than be met by an angry wet skunk. She wended her body between two tree trunks and put her head near the ground. She barked at the top of her lungs.

"All right, all right." Slowly Wayne reached a hand out and pulled down on the branch of a scrub oak sapling. Another lightning strike glowed silver, and Wayne saw him.

"Jake Goodall?" Wayne dropped the limb. "What the hell?"

Jake unfolded his gangly body and they walked out into the headlight beams. Roadie stayed close to Jake's side, sniffing the hem of his jacket. Jake's thick hair was plastered around his face, telling Wayne the boy had been out in the rain for a while.

"What the hell are you doing out here, Jake? It's gotta be two in the morning." Thunder crashed over their heads. "And we're standing out here in the middle of an electrical storm. Come on."

They all piled onto the truck's bench seat, and Roadie wedged herself between the two men.

"Damn it, Roadie." Wayne jerked on the dog's collar to pull her to the floorboard.

"It's okay." Jake's voice was almost too soft to hear. "She smells my cat." He opened his jacket and the skinny yellow cat poked her head into the air, sniffing toward the dog.

Wayne watched the boy dangle his thin fingers between the animals' faces. When the cat bumped her nose against Roadie's, Wayne thought Jake smiled a little.

After a second, Wayne looked out at the narrow ribbon of US 81 that ran on into Stephensville. He could question Jake about why he was hiding in the woods out by the river, or they could just go home.

"Why don't we go into town?" Wayne said finally.

He started the truck and they rolled on. "It's all changed now," Jake said as he watched the river bridge disappear in the sideview mirror.

"I expected it might've," Wayne said.

In another couple of minutes Wayne began to understand how much. He smelled the smoke about two miles before they reached the city limits. None of the street lamps which usually illuminated the drive into town were on. Wayne pulled the truck into Chuck Allen's parking lot and rolled down the window. The rain sizzled and popped in the burned-out wreckage of the restaurant.

"I'll be damned."

Wayne looked west and caught the fractured, hollow edges of the parts store and half a dozen cars in the periodic lightning flashes.

"Damned," Wayne said again. "It got half the town."

"More," Jake said.

Wayne killed the motor and walked out into the intersection of 81 and Main Street. Neville hadn't put out any barricades. Probably they still blocked Second Street, or they were leaned against the wall outside the police office. Neville couldn't keep anything organized. Wayne walked up the street toward Handy's. Flood water carried

debris around his feet, but Wayne couldn't tell what all swept along. Plywood booths leftover from the Fourth of July Festival stood here and there on both sides of the streets, and banners or posters, or something Wayne couldn't quite make out in the dark, flapped from the storefronts in the wind.

Wayne spread his arms out like he meant to catch something and thought about laughing.

"Wayne? Wayne, thank God."

"Jesus. What happened? I mean," he turned around in a circle, wishing he could see more. "I mean, what the hell happened?"

"Lightning." Jeana shone a flashlight beam on Wayne's face and put a hand on his cheek, but just for a second. "It started out by Dina's. In one of those alfalfa fields. Then it struck again out by the high school. There was fire everywhere."

"I don't believe it."

"And everybody was having such a good time."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Pretty much. Best time anybody's had around here in a long, long time."

Wayne took the flashlight from Jeana and lit up her face. "So," he said. "You going to tell me what this is about?"

"Me?"

"You. Doyal know you're out?"

"Yes. And he doesn't like it."

"Do you?"

"So far."

"Okay then."

Wayne clicked the flashlight off and they stood in rain for a few minutes. The smell of the burned remains of Stephensville swirled around them. Wayne slipped the flashlight into the pocket of Jeana's jacket and headed toward his truck.

"Where're you going?"

"Miss Jessie's."

"Now?"

"She's expecting me."

"Now?"

Wayne turned. "Stop yelling now at me and come on."

He knew she wanted to ask more. He did, too. But neither of them did. "Move over, Jakey," was all that was said as they made room in the truck to add Jeana. Wayne drove his nervous crew through the rubble of downtown, swept up hill to Miss Jessie's by the force of another summer storm.