

Between Trains

A novel

by Lawrence Blair Goral

The White Dog

I remember when the last rhino died, he whispered to himself. He had cried that day. He had been eleven or twelve and believed himself too old to cry but he had cried. It was the first and last time he had cried as an adult. They were tears of rage and mourning for a loss that never should have been.

It would happen when he couldn't hang on any more. Arms looped through the biting rungs, winter in his ragged shirt, tracks motion-smearred beneath his feet.

The failing sun etched fallow croplands and the scurf and stubble of withered harvests.

If I can't get off this train before nightfall I will die, he made himself tell himself. *I will become the last rhino.*

But he hung on.

It was full night on bad tracks and shot springs when the train came into a freight yard and slowed. Lights flared in darkness, and other lines of cars loomed up in the glow of the ascendant three-quarter moon. Part of him wanted to laugh but his face wouldn't; the other part wanted to weep. The train slowed further then the rhythm of wheels on railjoints stayed steady. He untangled knotted arms and shifted. He looked for a stretch free of debris and lowered himself as best he could and pushed out and away. His knees buckled and he rolled then lay there as the train passed, its wind racketing over him.

Then it was gone, diminishing into night. He lay for a time on the solidity of industrial earth, gritty and oilsoaked. Other engines idling in the residual quiet. He breathed and breathed, inventorying his agonies. The train's motion had seeped into him and now rocked him there on the ground. He had to move, though. Men's voices skipped and drifted from somewhere, maybe arguing. He drew himself together and forced himself to stand, shards of ache and gravel in knees and elbows, his tongue grit and leather. A spasm of shivering shook him then lessened. He

hobbled toward a cluster of small outbuildings at the edge of the yards, away from where the voices might be.

They were dark and padlocked but there was a water spigot. He knelt and cranked the valve and a trickle of water hit gravel. He put his mouth to it and sucked, ignoring the foul metallic flavor not just of the faucet but of the water itself. It might be tainted with something—diesel or maybe chlorine—and the cold hurt his teeth but he sucked it down faster than it could fill his mouth, feeling it absorb into his desiccated flesh. When his belly was taut he closed the valve and sat down against the shed's corrugated wall.

He breathed in deep shuddering breaths, his body cramping and twitching from the long hours clinging to the hopper car, from the sudden flux of hydration, from an endless sentence of flight. There were more voices: closer? So struggled up again, wincing at spikes through knees, ankles, hips; trying and failing to quite straighten; and wondering if this was what it would feel like to become old.

He had to get back to a train—one he could climb inside for shelter, and to get beyond this townless yard. There was the lighted cab of an engine at the head of a motley line: boxcars, lumber cars, tankers. A flashlight beam bobbed and swung around it. He scanned for open boxcars a safe distance back.

He crept across the yards in a parody of stealth. The blood was gradually returning to his extremities but his mind remained blunted. He was losing himself in this awful world, shedding by increments: illusions, possessions, finally hope. He would move from train to train until motion diluted him out of existence.

He reached the train's midpoint. There was another on the track beyond, making a narrow corridor. He would at least be less visible, and maybe the cars would slow the cutting wind. He ducked under a coupling, legs protesting the crouch and bend.

On the other side he looked both ways. The engines were to his left; he saw the distant flashlight flare again. He went the other way. The moon was high enough to light the second train and the nearest foot of right-of-way. He moved along the first one's shadow.

Ahead there was motion. There—a white dog sniffing. It didn't see him or hear him or, presumably, smell him. Moonlight sculpted it: slatted ribs, jigsawed vertebrae tapering to tucked tail of strung white beads.

He made a kissing sound. The dog jerked, crouching, then saw him. It ran off a way then stopped, looking back. Its chest heaved once as it whuffed a tentative bark. Behind him, the flashlight must have swung across: the dog's eyes flashed jade.

“Here boy,” he croaked. “It’s okay. Don’t be afraid.”

The dog slipped into darkness.

He went on. He himself could disappear into darkness. A whole world had. Once, he had visioned himself capable of navigating it.

Whereas now he slunk between trains like a starving white dog. His belly drummed with the chemical water.

Down the line something else moved. He froze. Holding his breath, he slid into the alcove between cars and peered just out. The figure was in a column of moonlight, hands on the edge of the open boxcar door, peering in. It was wearing a bulky pack, which might—*might*—signify less danger.

Or not. His coat, his sleeping bag, his everything he owned.

The figure looked over its shoulder in his direction, wary as the white dog. Something happened in his chest.

It was a woman.

She swung the pack off her shoulder and into the maw of the car then sprang up and clambered in after.

He wanted and feared to follow. He waited. He squatted but his knees hurt so he stood again, arms close, breathing into his hands. *I could still die*, he thought. But waited.

After a time a pale bluish light appeared in the gap of the boxcar door. Maybe he imagined it. It was very faint; maybe it moved.

He edged out into the long corridor between trains. He moved cautiously, willing his feet to silence but they crunched softly on the ballast. When he got nearer the light went out. He stopped, breathing, then went on. When he reached it he tried to see in but the blackness was absolute against the moonlit steel. He stood holding himself. He breathed on his hands again.

“Hello,” he said softly, and looked back over his shoulder to make sure no one else was there. “I saw your light ...” but faltered. It was too inane. “Can I come in? I won’t ... do anything.” Which was not much better.

The far rumble of the engines answered, and the wind.

“Hello?” he said again.

“I heard you.” Her voice low and skeptical. Then the light came back on, a tiny blue-white sun. He squinted, brought a forearm over his eyes. He waited. “All right,” she finally said. “I guess you don’t look too dangerous.”

“I’m not. I swear.”

Something between laugh and snort came through but he was too depleted to feel insulted. He hoisted himself up. He banged his knee but got to his feet and squinted down at the piercing light.

“My god,” the woman said, “you’re just a kid.” Her voice came from immediately below the light so it must be a headlamp and she must be sitting. His scalp itched but he restrained himself from scratching.

“I’m twenty-two,” he said in his own defense. “Could you turn that off, please?”

He waited. Felt himself scrutinized, a specimen.

“What are you doing out here on the highline, kid?”

“It’s hurting my eyes.”

The light swung as she stripped it from her head and set it on the floor aiming elsewhere so the interior assumed dimension. He could see her now, a little. She was small and dark and almost as dirty as he felt. Her face fine and angled. Blackish hair necklength and stringy. A dark puffy jacket with stuffing poking through tears on one sleeve. She sat crosslegged with a small book in her lap. She watched him.

“Thank you,” he said.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I guess I’m trying to stay alive.”

“Aren’t we all.” Her voice low and thrilling.

He put his hands in his armpits.

“Christ. Don’t you even have a coat?”

He shook his head. “It got stolen.”

“You don’t have anything.”

“It all got stolen.”

She looked at him then heaved a sigh. “All right,” she said. She reached behind her and dragged her pack into the reflected blue light. She unstrapped a bulky bedroll, considerably larger than the pack itself, pulled it open, peeled off a blanket. “Wrap up in this.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll worry about me. You look hypothermic. Just—here.” She got onto her knees and shook the blanket out and put it around his shoulders. “Cover up.”

“Thank you.”

“Well. At least you’re polite.”

There was no answer so he made none.

“Not,” she said, “that that’ll save you.”

Although maybe it already had.

“What’s the highline?” he asked.

She looked at him, mouth just open. “Really?”

He shrugged, or shivered.

“In a lot of yards the main line is usually higher. Not by much. Maybe it’s just shinier, so it looks higher. I don’t know. Tramps call it the highline.”

He nodded as if it had been obvious.

“Where you from?” she asked him.

“Maryland.”

“Outside the beltway, I assume. So what’s news from the east?”

He shook his head. “Right before I left I heard they quarantined Florida. Marburg or dengue or something—bloody.”

“What—the whole state?”

“That’s what I heard. I don’t know if it’s true or not.”

“CDC, I guess?”

“No—Public Safety Division.”

“Public Safety, not public health,” she mused. “It couldn’t be. It *couldn’t* be.”

Though it could. Anything could. “They’re starting up the draft again.”

“The draft? What for?”

“For the war. I heard there were Selective Service squads picking people up.”

“Did you happen to hear what war?”

She might be joking. He waited but she didn't laugh.

"You know. The one against the Caliphate. How many are there?" he said.

She didn't answer at first. She might be ignoring him. Then she said, looking somewhere past him, "One. There's always only one."

He wondered, suddenly, if he might be seeking solace from a madwoman.

But then her eyes came back. "When's the last time you ate?"

"It was yesterday. Yesterday afternoon. I met some tramps. They gave me something kind of disgusting. And they got me drunk. I think I threw it all up." He didn't know if the last bit would make him sound more of a fool or more of a man but it had happened so he said it.

She laughed a little. "They rob you, too?"

He shook his head. "No. Actually, they kind of saved my ass."

"Do tell."

A fool, then. Because everything he did was, in retrospect, foolish. But had to tell because he'd never really learned how to lie.

"It was one of those Settlements," he said. "The Haven."

"Oh, Jesus. Outside Hamilton City?"

"Yeah."

"You must have been desperate indeed."

"I was hungry. Why? You been—have you been there?"

Her face developed an odd list that he belatedly recognized as a sort of smile, possibly contemptuous.

"I've met their spiritual leader." Then looked more closely. "Are you religious? Because if you are I'll have to watch what I say, won't I?"

"No, you don't have to ... No. I might have been, once, sort of. But no."

"Huh. Then maybe there's hope for you after all."

"Anyway. I ran. When they started closing the gate I guess I realized I'd rather take my chances. They tried to keep me from going. So I left my gear and ran."

"Probably a mistake. You should have waited till morning."

"Maybe."

"But you got away."

"The head guy chased me."

“Really. Pastor Matt himself?”

“Only I made it to a jungle.”

“A jungle,” she mused. “That is so very Steinbeck.” With the wry half-smile again. It made him wish he could see her really smile. As his eyes adjusted to the lightscatter he began to suspect that she was more than pretty.

“That’s what *they* call it. The tramps.”

“I know, I know. Anyway. What happened?”

He was silent a moment, remembering.

“They stopped him. He almost had me. I couldn’t have gone any farther. Then Hardware got really pissed when he found out they had my gear.”

“Hardware.”

“Yeah. He was, not in charge exactly, but everyone sort of acted like he was.”

“Ah. The alpha male.”

He smiled. “Exactly.” Because he knew what an alpha male was though he suspected he’d never become one. She smiled too, if only politely.

But she smiled. With both sides of her face.

“Continue,” she said, or ordered. And made the smile disappear.

“Anyway, Hardware told him my gear better be outside their gate the next morning or that compound could burn.”

“Did he mean it?”

He thought about it. “That pastor sure looked like he believed him.”

“I guess that’s what counts, isn’t it?”

He nodded, though he wasn’t sure if was or was not what counted. “They fed me this—stuff. From cans. But I was so hungry it didn’t matter. And they were passing around a jug of wine.”

“Of which you partook.”

“I guess I didn’t realize how it would hit me. I’m not a drunk.”

“I’m sure you’re not.”

“Anyway, next morning—this morning—my pack was outside the gate but there were a couple guys waiting, too. And when I went to get it they came after me so I took off again and got to a train and here I am.”

She breathed a deeper breath. “Well. I hope you’ve learned your lesson: beware all true believers.”

“In what?”

“In anything.”

But I believe, he heard himself think, that the world didn't have to turn out this way. Waste and carnage weren't always inevitable ... were they?

He wouldn't say that again, though. He'd voiced the thought to Hardware and the others and they'd laughed at him.

“Hello,” she said.

He looked.

“I thought I'd lost you there. You okay?”

“I guess. It's been a hard couple of days.”

“It's been a hard couple of years.” She reached again, dragged a plastic jug. “Thirsty?”

“I found a faucet out there.”

“If you change your mind.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome. So what's your name?”

That she cared enough to ask was enlivening.

“Billy.” Because he'd already learned that last names weren't traded out here. And while he'd thought about changing his for something less boyish that would be a kind of lie and he wasn't yet ready to become someone else or, if and when he was, to know who it might be.

“Billy. I'm Jill.” She offered a slender hand. He took it. It was cool and chapped and the nails were dirtrimmed and it was one of the loveliest things he'd ever touched. He had to make himself let go.

“Pleased to meet you, Jill,” he stuttered.

“Uh-huh. Polite. You realize what an anomaly that makes you.”

He might be blushing. She might be smiling.

“How long have you been out, Billy?”

The enormity of a decision taken before he could possibly know what it meant threatened to swamp him. There had been a home, tenuous though it might have been. There had been parents who loved him and whom he loved in return. Once there had been a sister, since gone—not,

necessarily, dead, but beyond reckoning—and a few remaining friends and the illusion that the hard times might soften. What he had seen and mostly escaped from and squeezed through and snuck past in the time since rendered clocks and calendars moot. He had tried counting days at first. Somewhere after the first week he had lost the number and then had tried to reconstruct it and then had given up trying. His parents might still be alive. They would be worrying. They might be better or else worse off without him: they would have more to eat; they would be short of his stronger hands. Who shivered now in this boxcar, racked with cold and fear and hunger.

“I don’t know. Probably more than a month. Less than two.”

She considered him. She was, in fact, beautiful. Fine lines bracketing her mouth. He could gaze, though that would be staring. And if she was beautiful she was also intimidating.

“You’re lucky to be alive, you know.”

While he wished it had been more than just luck. “I know,” he murmured.

“So what the hell are you doing out here? You seem like a nice enough kid. You’re not stupid. I suspect you’re not running from the law. The draft, maybe?”

“They were mainly picking up street people, I think.”

“So what? Just wanted to see the world?”

He shrugged. “Something like that.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re kidding.”

“Not *sightseeing*. I wanted ... ” but stopped.

“What?”

He shook his head. “It’s stupid. I know it’s stupid. But at one point I thought it made sense.”

“Tell me.”

It was more an order than a request.

“What broke the world,” he said.

“Come again?”

“I told you. It’s stupid.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

From which judgment there might be no appeal. But nor was evasion an option.

“I wanted to find out, see if I could—to understand—how things got so fucked up. What happened.”

After a moment and with some incredulity she said, “What *happened*?”

“Who did this.”

She looked at him. He looked back.

“Somebody *did* this,” he said, or hissed in the outrage that would come bubbling up.

He wondered if she would laugh at him. Hardware and his cronies had laughed, sort of. Though Hardware had gone on to tell him what he only now began to remember. But the look she bent on him, though it carried something of amusement, wasn't mocking. There might even be sadness in it.

“Well,” she said. “Yeah. Things don't happen by themselves, do they?”

He shook his head. “There's an old quote,” he said.

“There are many.”

“But this one. I don't remember the exact words. Some people see the way things are and say why. I see the way things should be and say why not. Something like that. I don't remember who said it.”

“That would be Robert Kennedy plagiarizing George Bernard Shaw. Who dreamed of things that never were.”

“That's it.”

“You have the makings of a fine revolutionary, Billy.”

“I'm not. I just want to understand.”

“Which might be like the dog who catches the car.”

“Pardon?”

“What does he do with it then?”

It was like last night. He'd said then, too: *Somebody did this. Somebody has to know.* And Hardware said: *You really want to know, go on to Arizona. Ol fuck calls hisself Joe the Reaper. Holed up somewheres around Flagstaff last I seen him. He might could tell you, he don't shoot you first. Claims he worked in the last guvment. Claims he was PSD. Then again he might be crazy. But the shit he knows. I'm halfway inclined to believe him.* Then they'd continued passing the bottle and he'd gotten as drunk as he'd ever been though he only had half a dozen swallows because there were no reserves in him against the alcohol. *Ole fuckin crazy-ass Joe the Reaper* Hardware said. It was the last thing Billy remembered before he passed out.

“I guess he won't ever find out if he doesn't at least try chasing it,” Billy said.

“Huh.”

Looking at him in that penetrant way that made him feel naked and somehow lacking.

Then she said, "So what are you chasing, then, in this quixotic quest of yours? Where do you think you're going to find whatever it is you think you might want to find?"

So said, because there was no more reason not to, "I guess I'll start in Arizona."

Her shadowed eyes narrowed, the crease beneath the lower lids just deepening.

"Arizona you say."

A wave of cold swept across him and he found himself almost swamped in a fit of shivering.

"Christ," she said, "look at you. I thought you were warming up."

"So did I," he stuttered.

"You need to eat something."

"I don't want to take your—"

"Just stop. You listen up. Somebody on the road offers you something, you damn well take it. They wouldn't if they didn't mean it."

He let the surge subside. "Last time somebody offered me something it didn't work out too good. I thought I was getting a meal and a place to sleep."

"You mean the Haven? Well, you can't be a complete idiot about it, either." She pulled her pack into her lap and unzipped it and rummaged, then aimed the headlamp in. Light and shadow swung crazily. "Here." She pulled out a ziplock bag opaque with reuse and opened it and passed him something like a twist of tar-stiffened rope.

"What is it?"

"Jerky. It's not very good, but it's protein. Try not to break a tooth."

"Thank you." He took it, the other hand gripping the blanket closed around his neck. He had to gnaw at it to get a piece loose. His salivary glands sprang into overdrive, needles pricking tongue and jaw. It took a lot of chewing before he could swallow it. He wondered if it might not be a little rancid, but it didn't matter. His body wouldn't let him stop. He worried off another bite.

"At least there's nothing wrong with your appetite." She watched him. Then she said, "So Arizona."

He nodded. When he swallowed she held out the jug and this time he took it and drank.

"What kind of meat is it?" he said.

"Beggars," she said. "Spare me from choosey beggars. I didn't want to know."

He laughed a little, shaking, and handed the water back. “Arizona. Hardware told me about this guy. Supposedly he worked for the Public Safety Division. Before the ... whatever it is.”

“The little coup that failed,” she said as if to herself, then leaned slightly forward. “Did this—guy—have a name?” More than casually interested. Some sense of warning itched beneath his skin.

“Hardware said he called himself Joe the Reaper.”

An indrawn breath, suppressed. Then she leaned back. A pallet slanting against the wall behind her, a shuffle of corrugated cardboard against it, made a backrest. Farther down the car, fading into darkness, someone had spray-painted a stylized phoenix: wings spread, beak gaping, serpentine tongue waving. Comic book flames covering its feet, the legend *Phoenix Arising* beneath the flames. Her headlamp cast an ellipse of light across it. She studied him.

“What else did he tell you? This Hardware.”

He shook his head. “That’s all. That he was somewhere around Flagstaff.”

She nodded slightly. “And when you find him? If you find him?”

He shivered again. The cold came in waves, timed to some pattern he couldn’t decipher.

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far.”

“Maybe you should.”

He wondered if it was his fate always to be talked down to. He said, “I thought I was going to die today, you know? I had other things on my mind.”

Her head lifted and drew back in something like surprise. “I’ve offended you.”

“No,” he lied. But wanted it to be true.

“I have. It was unkind of me.”

They remained in silence for a time. Perhaps he had ruined everything. A wave of shivering surged and receded.

“Christ,” she said, “you’re just not warming up.” She dragged her bedroll close again and rose onto her knees. The small book slipped free and she snatched it up and shoved it into the pack. She glanced at him to see if he had seen. Then she spread a heavy canvas tarp with a blanket sewn against it partly on the floor and partly up against the cardboard she’d been leaning on. “Come on,” she said, “sit here. Give me your blanket.”

He obeyed. She would, he understood, always compel obedience. Then she sat close beside him and spread the other two blankets over both of them. She reached across and drew the

blanket-lined tarp from his far side around and brought it to meet her side and then put a couple of carabiners through grommets along its edge, fastening it so they were confined in a womblike layered sack.

And touching: thigh to thigh, arm to arm. "That should help," she said.

"I've never been so cold," he confessed.

"Just be glad it isn't ten years ago. You'd never have made it. We'd be under three feet of snow this time of year."

He nodded.

"Why are you being ... I mean, why are you ..."

"Taking care of you?"

"Yeah."

"Because you seem to need it."

Another rebuke. To which he would not respond, because pettiness was always just beneath the surface.

"And because," she began.

"What?" when she didn't finish.

"I have been helped," she said carefully, quietly, as if stepping between mines. "When I badly needed it."

He nodded. Maybe he understood. Someday maybe he could help someone too. But not yet.

Warmth emanated from her. He shivered. He smelled the smell of her. He could steep in it.

"How long have *you* been out?" he asked, mostly to be talking. Mostly not to think of her right beside him, touching, her animal warmth spreading.

"I've always been out," she said.

"What, you're like a professional tramp? I don't think so."

He felt her turn. He felt her smile. He amused her at least.

"You've seen through my cunning disguise."

"But really. What did you do? Before, I mean."

And felt her smile dissipate. He didn't have to look.

"That would be in the realm of please mind your own fucking business."

Which particular chill had nothing to do with temperature.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to pry."

“It’s all right.” Though it wasn’t. The silence crackled with it.

“Do you want me to go?” he said.

He felt her lift and drop with a silent sardonic laugh. “Billy. Are you out of your mind?”

“I just—”

“Just stop. Look. Sorry I snapped, but I’m not comfortable with my past. I prefer not to go there. I don’t even know you.”

“I know.” He breathed. He drew in the air of her. “But sometimes I get a sense about people.”

“Do you.”

“And I have a sense about you.”

“Already? In all of twenty minutes?”

He nodded.

“And what does this sense tell you?”

“That you ...” but hesitated.

“Go on. I won’t hurt you.”

“But you could, couldn’t you?”

She looked at him. This time he looked back. Her eyes only inches away, her shadowed beauty drawing and pressing like a magnet’s poles.

“Yes I could,” she said softly.

“But you’ve been hurt yourself, haven’t you? Worse than anything you could do to me.”

Her reaming gaze. He would have to drop his eyes but held on. Finally she looked away, releasing him.

“What do *you* know about it?” she said dismissively.

“Nothing. It’s a feeling.”

“Shit,” perhaps contemptuously. “Who the hell *doesn’t* hurt out here?”

“But this is different.”

“Is it.”

“You’re different.”

“From what?”

“From everyone.”

She turned to him again but the look even in the weakening light of the headlamp wasn't angry or penetrant now but sad and maybe tender. Her eyes glistened.

"You have no idea," she murmured, scarcely a whisper.

"But I do," he whispered back.

She drew a long deep breath and held it a moment then let it out slowly through slightly flared nostrils. Her hand slid up between them and lay against his cheek.

"Oh Billy," she said mournfully. "You're a sweet boy." The hand against his cheek electric fire. It moved just slightly.

"It's a long road," she said, more to herself than to him. "It's a cold night. I've been alone longer than I care to ... "

And breathed again in memory or resignation and leaned forward and kissed him gently, her chapped lips, her sour breath that sent his pulse rocketing. Slid her other hand from somewhere so it slipped under his shirt, her cool dry hand brushing his fragile ribs, her tongue still tasting of jerky, and they turned toward each other in the amniotic wrappings of her bedroll binding them together in the darkness, in the cold.

In the night she thrashed and muttered. They lay flesh to flesh from the waist down though she had put her coat back on. She said something unintelligible, angry or frightened, and flung her confined head again and he put a hand on her hair and said, "Jill," and suddenly her forearm was crushing his throat and one knee pinned an arm down and the tangled bedroll held the rest of him helpless.

"Jill," he croaked or tried to croak, "a nightmare."

Her eyes demonic in the moonlight spilling through the boxcar door. Then they seemed to see him and the pressure eased and air rushed in.

Her lips said his name but no sound came.

"It's okay," he rasped.

She released him.

"Fuck. Fuck. I'm sorry. Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

She tried to sit up away from him but the bedroll constrained her. She snaked a hand out and unclipped the top carabiner and flung the slack wide so she could sit facing away. Hand to forehead, rubbing. The coat hanging open, one breast sapphire in the moonlight.

He put a hand on her arm. She froze. “Don’t.”

He didn’t draw it back though.

“I could have killed you.”

“But you didn’t.”

She shot a look of exasperation. “This was a mistake.”

“No it wasn’t. You had a nightmare.”

“You don’t get it.”

“Probably not,” he said quietly. “Lie back down. It’s cold.” His skin tightening with exposure. Pieces of him still wet from their lovemaking.

Finally, perhaps herself persuaded by the cold, she did lie down again but she turned her back to him. Nor did she refasten the tarp. Nevertheless he slid an arm over her and inside the coat. He wanted to cup a breast in his hand but didn’t because he didn’t want her to think that was all he had on his mind but we wanted to at least touch her skin. After a time she moved her hand over his against her belly.

“*I’m* the nightmare, Billy,” she murmured. “Which you’d probably do well to remember.”

He didn’t say anything. He would open his skin and merge with her if he could. But held her in amazement: that this woman whom he might not even be worthy to worship would choose *him*, select *him* ...

... or was she, perhaps, a praying mantis, who would consume him after?

But finally answered, “I don’t believe that.”

“Then you’re a fool.”

And drew her closer, trying to weld them together, their joining the only warmth there was. Whatever she was, whatever she had done, he would never doubt her magnificence. All the losses that never should have been. Someone must be made to pay.

“I dream of things that never were,” he murmured, because he felt more anger and desperation on her behalf than on his own.

“Yeah,” she said. “Keep dreaming. That’s all it is any more.”

He frowned against her hair. He breathed it in. It was dirty. It was perfume.

“You don’t think things will ever get better?”

She laughed, or coughed, or stifled a sob. “Better? Maybe this *is* better.”

“How can you say that?”

“When the machine stops running, it’s just furniture. Something for birds to perch on.”

“You sound like Phoenix.”

“*Break what is broken,*” she quoted.

“Are you?” he asked after a moment.

There was a slight hardening of her abdominal muscles beneath his hand. He felt her breathing, the skin sliding over ribs. Wondered if he had crossed her boundary again.

But, “There have been times,” she said eventually, “that we shared sympathies.”

Frightening and exciting. There had been times when he wanted to share sympathies too. Phoenix used to portray itself as the planet’s champion, riding to battle with the token of the dispossessed decorating its lance. When the last rhino died he’d wished he were old enough to run away and join them. Though it wasn’t clear now that they even still existed.

“Anyway,” she said, “what would better even look like?”

To which he had no answer. He wanted to say something profound and moving to her—that he would rather lie amidst the fires of hell with her in his arms than safe in his own bed at home—but that would just sound stupid.

So asked her, “So you think this is the end?”

She breathed more deeply. She moved his hand onto her breast and held it there. He felt an incipient erection stirring against her but she was just holding his hand, not inviting more.

“*An* end,” she said. “Not *the* end.”

He waited, hanging on the words, reveling in the breast.

“Do you know any history at all?”

“I do, actually,” he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking with arousal. “I was pretty much of a geek growing up. I read a lot. *A lot.*”

“Then think about your human history.”

Which was not precisely where his attention wanted to focus, but he tried.

“Have you ever heard of Ambrose Bierce?” he asked.

“What? What? You know Ambrose *Bierce*?”

“Like I said. I read a lot. I had an e-book and a solar charger in my pack. And my father was a high school teacher.”

“So tell me about Ambrose Bierce.”

“In *The Devil’s Dictionary*. His definition of history is *An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools,*” he recited. “It’s one of my favorite quotes.”

“Apparently you’re more than the sum of your parts,” she said. She pressed his hand against her breast. “But think of the layers of what we call civilization. Each built on the bones of the one before.”

“But there’ve been high points, too, haven’t there. Hope? At times?”

She ignored that. “And every layer thought it was the pinnacle. Every one thought it would last. As if it had won some dispensation.”

“So all this,” he said, feeling himself electric with desire, “was for nothing? We haven’t learned anything? There’s no hope of fixing this?”

“We haven’t completely destroyed the planet yet,” she said. “There’s that.”

He pressed his head against the back of hers. Then he felt her shift; her legs shift; and her hand released his and moved down and took hold of him and guided him into her. She let out a sigh.

He shuddered and breathed faster. She said, “Just be there, Billy. Just stay inside me. Don’t move.”

He would always do what she told him.

He thought he felt her move away. A puff of cold, the bedroll settling back. He might have reached for her but he didn’t actually wake.

The brightness finally woke him, seeping in past the blanket’s edge. He put his head out and looked for her. She sat crosslegged and fully clothed in the long trapezoid of morning light, facing three-quarters away, bent over—writing, by the small movements of arm and shoulder, the angle of head. The dawn prairie beyond her, abraded and sere.

He reached out into the cold for his pants and pathetic shirt. She heard his movement and looked.

“You’re up,” she said. “I was beginning to wonder.”

In daylight she was if anything more beautiful. Not like a cheerleader or movie star or model. But there was a perfection to her he had never seen before: a wholeness; a depth; perhaps a darkness.

“What’re you writing?” he said.

She looked at him, speculative. Finally she said, “My business.”

He nodded. He made himself not apologize.

She tossed the bag of jerky. “Have some breakfast.”

“Thanks.”

He took a piece and ripped a bite and sucked on it to soften it before chewing. His stomach growled. He was gaunt with hunger and brittle with thirst. She might have drained the last moisture from him.

She put the notebook into her pack, no longer covert about it. He watched her. There was an angry red starburst of a scar on one hand. Or maybe not a scar—maybe it was newer than that. He hadn’t seen it in the dark. She saw him studying it.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“Something.”

He chewed. He swallowed. He wanted to ask about the scar but said instead, “What happens now?”

She knee-walked over to him, dropped to sit on folded knees. Put a hand against his face.

“You’re a sweet boy, Billy.”

“I’m not a boy,” he dared to contradict.

She smiled. He wasn’t sure it was a kind smile. She said, “Now I don’t want you to take this wrong, but if you can come four times without a break you’re still a boy. It’s sort of the definition.”

Blood stormed his face while he tried to fathom if it was compliment or criticism. And made himself not drop his eyes.

“Don’t be embarrassed. You’re a lovely lover.”

Which made it better.

“But don’t let it be more than it was, either. We kept each other warm. We gave each other comfort. God knows I needed some. If I took advantage of you I’m sorry.”

“No, I—” but wasn’t sure what. “It was—” and was determined to find a word that would matter. “Rapture,” he said. No, too much—but too late to retract it.

Now she smiled again and he felt like a dog having its head patted.

The smile faded; the delicate chapped lips pursed. Her eyebrows steeped in concern. “Listen, Billy,” she said in a tone that made him want to plug his ears to keep from hearing what must follow.

Then her eyes changed. They were looking at him but with all the sorrow and kindness gone and they deepened and darkened and brightened all at once. He felt his own widen in response, as if she had become something explosive, the timer ticking toward zero.

“Listen,” she said again, or hissed.

“I don’t hear anything.”

Only a sigh of wind, a distant raven croaking.

“Fuck,” she said. She rose and went to the open door, not the prairie side but the train corridor side, and leaned out hanging to the edge. Then she dropped down and he heard her footsteps crunching away on ballast. He scrambled from the bedding into the chill morning and pulled on pants and shirt and went to the door and she was already coming back, head down.

She looked up, her face lines and planes of anger, fluid lips a seam, nostrils flared. He reached down and she gripped his hand and he hauled her up. The exertion swam around his skull for a minute but he wouldn’t fall.

“What?” he said.

“Fuck,” she said again. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. The *fucking* units are gone.”

He looked at her. Her eyes flashed wide at his lack of response. “The units. The fucking engines. They’re gone. They must have pulled out during the night and we were so *fucking* preoccupied ...” She shook her head and laughed a bitter laugh. “Fucking preoccupied,” she repeated.

“Well we couldn’t have caught out on units anyway, could we?”

“They took some of the train along. Some of the cars up front. God dammit. God fucking dammit. I knew it was a mistake.”

Meaning him. Meaning them. He felt an anger surging, and a terror. To direct anger at her would be wrong on so many levels.

But he couldn't quite restrain himself.

"It wasn't," he said simply.

She looked at him, at least momentarily forgetting her rage. He hoped she might smile, feared she might laugh; but she did neither. She got that same look she'd had just before she'd noticed the silence. Seeing him again; caring, if only for this moment.

"Don't think about looking for that guy," she said.

"What?"

"Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

But she didn't say anything. She breathed and breathed, looking at him. Then she squatted by her pack and dug into it and came out with a dully gleaming automatic pistol. He waited for her to point it at him but she held it around slide and trigger guard, showing it.

"So he's dangerous?" he said lamely.

"*I'm* dangerous." She sighed and put the gun back. "Everyone's dangerous. Everything. The world's a nasty place."

"All right. I get it."

"I don't think so."

"I know," he said, anger edging in, "I'm lucky to be alive."

"You're not hearing me, Billy. This isn't about you."

"Then tell me."

Her nostrils flared slightly. "Don't presume," she ordered. "Last night doesn't give you a claim."

"I know. But tell me." Rather a plea than a demand. And it worked: she softened.

She skewed her jaw in contemplation.

"I'm looking for him too," she finally said.

"All right," he said when she didn't continue. "So you know him? You know who he is?"

"I know who he was."

"So who was he?"

She continued struggling with what to say and what to withhold. He watched her hesitate. He hadn't thought her a woman prone to hesitation.

"Not somebody you'd want to know," she said.

"That's not an answer."

"That's all the answer you're getting."

"Come on, Jill." Though it sounded like whining.

"What? Do I owe you some kind of explanation?"

"Well ... yeah. I think you do." Wondering if it would prompt her to take out the gun again. Her eyes narrowed but she didn't reach for the pack.

"*He* won't have any explanations for you. I guarantee it."

"Then if he doesn't have information and he isn't worth knowing, how come you're looking for him?"

"Because," but stopped again. Her eyes dropped. They flickered up at him briefly then down again.

"Just tell me. Please."

"Because I intend to kill him." Then looked up to see his response.

It didn't, for some reason, shock him. Maybe he'd already known, from the first glimpse of the revealed gun.

"All right. I'll come with you. I can talk to him and you can kill him. Win-win." He smiled a sickly smile.

"Oh no," she said. "No no no. That is never going to happen."

"Why not?"

"Because—I won't be responsible for you."

"I'm not asking you to be."

"You don't understand." Her face hardened. She squatted again and started arranging the bedroll for packing. She paused for one motionless moment, then folded one of the blankets and set it aside, resumed rolling up the others. "This isn't a fucking game." She wasn't looking at him now, in fact seemed to be avoiding looking at him.

"I've figured that out."

"You're not coming."

"Jill—you can't tell me where to go."

She didn't say anything. He stood ragged and bereft while she finished rolling her blankets into a cylinder. She strapped it to her pack. Stood and finally did look at him again. She handed him the folded blanket.

"You're right. I can't. But I can sure as hell tell you you're not coming with me. And I strongly advise you to give this up. *Strongly*. There's nothing but misfortune on that road."

"Then you shouldn't go either. You don't have to."

She gazed at him for a long uncomfortable moment, expressionless, then took a step closer and lay a papery hand on his scruffy cheek.

"But I do. It's the road I have to follow."

She allowed him to come with her as far as the spigot. She filled her water jug there. Whatever men he had heard in the night must have taken the last train out. The yard was desolate of life except for the two of them and the white dog skulking in the long shadows of morning.

She left him a few pieces of jerky. They were in his pocket, poking his thigh. He stood between the headless trains with the blanket draped over his shoulders like a penitent and watched her diminish toward the horizon. It was a long time before she disintegrated into the landscape.

Journal: Who We Used To Be

There are clouds, but today will be warmer than it has been. I woke under the wild sky and had to pee and went behind a bush and did and discovered it was light enough to write. Thus I begin.

Just days before we had to run I was wandering the District on foot, restless and premonitory. I think I sensed the coming catastrophe the way a dog senses an earthquake before it happens. I found myself at Dupont Circle, which had become a year-round street market where you could buy or barter for anything from individual cigarettes to fresh produce to bargain basement electronics; and could find ways to offsite darker deals—weapons, drugs, humans. One booth selling cleaned squirrels, tiny pathetic carcasses lifted surreptitiously from a massive ice chest. A swarm of ragged kids haranguing a man more homeless than they. People selling household treasures, household rubbish. I don't know what I was looking for, if anything, just touching things as I passed, navigating the braille of my crippled city; but a young girl dark with Middle Eastern ancestry tugged at my sleeve. Miss, miss, you should come.

I should? I smiled down at her. She was lovely in that waifish way of dark-complected young girls, as if they are still impervious.

My mom has the best stuff. A touch of accent in her wistful or desperate plea. Shadows under her liquid eyes. She looked six or seven, but she might have been older and stunted by privation.

So I let her lead me. Her mother's stall wasn't far: it was, in fact, only a vibrant swath of fabric that might once have been an Indian sari spread on a rickety card table beneath a tree just coming to leaf with incipient spring. The mother was an austere and mournful woman wearing the hijab, and consequently having little business except from other Muslims, who had grown few and fearful in this our national beacon of democracy. She spoke in Arabic or Farsi to the girl and the girl answered. I couldn't decipher the tone: reprimand or praise. It was quiet in both directions. Her cloth displayed a set of men's hairbrushes in tooled and tarnished silver, some copper bracelets, a stack of paperbacks, a solar charger for electronic devices, an old Kindle, an electric iron, a KitchenAid blender, several pocket-sized tins of mints or candies labeled in Arabic, a set of socket wrenches with one socket missing, and a plate of baklava. It glistened. It

was fresh. I could smell it. Behind the table were two cardboard cartons, one filled with more books, one with miscellaneous items gleaned from cupboards or previous trades or scavengings.

She saw me looking. You like sweets, she said.

Not usually. But I love baklava.

You try. She held the plate toward me.

How much?

She shook her head. You try. Then you decide.

It was extraordinary. I almost wept at the rich beauty. An attar of rose in the honey.

The girl said I pick the pecans all in the park.

The woman shushed her.

Truly? I asked her.

She shrugged.

How much for the whole plate? My—I hesitated for the briefest instant—husband will love this.

She tipped her head. Two dollars.

No—that's not nearly enough. I took out a ten. Even a ten wasn't worth much these days. I wished I had something to trade that she might actually need.

She tried to protest and the girl stretched up on toes to whisper in her ear.

I have something else for you, the woman said. She bent to the box of books and rifled through it, rose with a lovely notebook, about six by nine, bound in delicately embossed leather with a brass clasp. Machined brass, not sheetmetal, with an engraved floral border. She handed it to me.

It's beautiful, I said. I opened it. On the first page in a girlish hand with curlicues and flourishes and tiny hearts dotting the Is: *Property of Victoria Hidalgo. This will be the story of my life.*

And that was all. The rest was blank.

I should have been an archaeologist, tracing the fossilized tracks of human sorrow.

I tried to smile and shake my head and give the journal back but she shook her head solemnly and pressed my hand around it.

This is meant for you, she said. It is yours. You will want this in the times to come.

I looked at her for a long moment, her deep eyes darkened and shining with a wisdom born of suffering and a stoicism that would be forever beyond me. Her hand on mine, clasping it to the journal. The girl who was a mirror of the woman in beauty and suffering both watching the two of us. I swallowed. I nodded. I went on my way with the book and the baklava.

This book. This journal. About which she was so right. I might not have wanted it but I might need it. As I discover I must try to write my way through this journey. I've failed at everything else: we tried to do something right, but I am like the well-intentioned homeowner who sets out to fix a leaking faucet and brings the whole house down. So I don't know if I can find peace. I don't think there's even any sense left to make. But something. Something that might approximate healing.

Simon is still asleep. He sleeps the sleep of a wild animal—complete repose, but capable of instant wakefulness. He is at once opaque and transparent; solid; utterly, completely himself; the most grounded human being I've ever encountered. He knows himself. Is a rock of competence, of knowledge, of stability. Is at peace with himself. When he laughs, when he empathizes, when he grieves—when he kills: at peace. He is everything I'm not. My anchor, my center of gravity.

Birdsong rises to morning in this desert borderland between what once were nations but have since become juxtaposed arenas of collapse. The desert masks what lies beyond the horizons, the dryness invigorating and dangerous and languid. Yesterday a roadrunner streaked by. In the moonlight an armadillo came foraging. There's no shelter and we have no tent.

I guess our target value will fade after awhile: we no longer matter, not really, and the Division's resources were dwindling even before we left. So we lose ourselves, refugees in a nation of refugees.

Watching him sleep, wanting to touch the dark lashes on his olive cheeks to see if they're even real, I drift back in reverie to our beginning. Though trite as it might sound it felt more like a resumption than a start. It was in my early activist days—pre-Phoenix—I'd say student activist if I'd actually been a student but I'd already bailed on college in my zeal to save the planet. It had been a day of protests and police skirmishes in both Laramie and Cheyenne over yet another pipeline project and Myriam and I (Poor Myriam: a dark and buxom fiery-eyed true believer who—I learned a couple years later when we'd gone our separate ways—died during a demonstration at a Freedom Party National Convention.) stumbled laughing and gasping and

adrenaline-rushed into a Mexican cantina a dozen blocks from campus that was a regular hangout in those days. The food was mediocre but the atmosphere was electric with fear and pheromones, jammed with students and press, and he was by himself at a corner table writing. By hand. In a notebook. With a pen. He looked up and right at me as if he'd been expecting me or as if I had a light burning over my head and I looked at him and a shock ran through me crotch to thorax. His dark eyes shining under dark brows. Two-day stubble. Not a big man. Not a small man. Contained and intense, poised and relaxed, an athlete's grace but none of an athlete's swagger. Later Myriam would tell me he was okay but nothing special. Feature by feature maybe he wasn't. He made the smallest of gestures at his table and I elbowed Myriam and dragged her that way.

She pulled against my current, though. Paranoia is such an essential component of activism. What's he writing? she demanded. I don't know, I said, we'll ask him. And in a notebook, she said. Maybe he's a Luddite, I said, come *on*.

Myriam didn't stay long. She watched us skeptically. She asked him what he was writing and he said Thoughts. Observations.

She sneered at him. Well if you're like writing a blog or something, she said, shouldn't you be writing on a tablet?

Who said I was writing a blog? he said. Electronic data can go anywhere these days. Or everywhere.

Then what are you, some kind of spy?

Do I look like a spy? he asked, turning to me.

I don't know, I said. What does a spy look like?

Maybe it was our body language. Maybe it was that our eyes hadn't disengaged since we sat down. Myriam looked back and forth between us.

Christ, you two, she said. Get a room.

Which left us alone and me unaccountably shy because that's precisely what I wanted to do so I said I think I could use a beer and he flagged a waitress and said Your friend doesn't like me very much, does she?

Oh, she's a zealot. Don't take it personally.

You're not a zealot, then, he said.

I'm ... I began. Then finished: a *skeptical* zealot.

His eyes bored through. Weighed but didn't judge.

The pipeline? he asked.

I nodded. You have to do something, don't you?

He shrugged. If it makes you feel better.

It should have made me angry but didn't. As if he knew secrets he would only share if I could figure out the right question. I said You're not a student. And apparently not an activist. And clearly not a journalist.

I'm writing, though, aren't I?

In a notebook. Journalists haven't done that in how many decades.

He smiled. Are you asking what I am?

That's what I'm asking.

I'm ... a consultant.

Oh, christ, I said, bracing for disappointment, *really?* A corporate lackey? You're breaking my heart.

He laughed. He had one tooth that wasn't quite straight but his laughter was whole and sincere and his dark eyes flashed with enjoyment.

More like a think tank geek.

We didn't make it through the second beer. By the time we got to his hotel my jeans were steaming and nerve ends so raw that when he took my hand—my *hand!*—I danced on the edge of orgasm. We were still in the hall. I tried to manage my breathing. Flared my nostrils, clenched my jaws.

It was the most magnificent, edgegripping sex I'd ever had. I told him he was an extraordinary lover and he put a finger on my lips and said Don't.

I looked the question.

I'm not, he said. I'm really not. It's not me. It's not you. It's us.

He propped himself up on an elbow. Drew the finger from my lips lightly down my neck and along my collarbone to the point of my shoulder then down the outside edge of my breast. I shuddered.

I'm already in love with you you know, he murmured. It ran through me like current, a physical jolt; tears sprang into my eyes, surprising me. Shocked and embarrassed, I covered them with a hand and didn't move. A tear seeped past my hand and trailed toward an ear.

I'm sorry, he whispered. Was that the wrong thing to say?

I shook my head, then whispered Say it again.

And he did.

We talked for hours. And made love. And talked. And made love again. I told him about my childhood, even, though in the sketchiest of terms.

My earliest act of rebellion, I said. I think I was seven.

Tell me about it, he said.

It was a family affair, I said after wrestling with whether I should, because I'd never told anyone. After my mother died. It was a head-on collision in the middle of the night. She killed herself, or died escaping. One more thing I guess I'll never know.

Maybe we never know anything for sure, he muttered in consolation.

I had a good brother and a bad brother, I went on after awhile. The bad brother, the oldest, my—father's—favorite. Sonny. Sonny crossed a line. There's a story behind it, which I won't go into now. The good brother hit him in the head with a camera.

Ouch.

A digital SLR swung on the end of a neckstrap. Knocked him right out.

I'm assuming he had it coming.

The camera was integral. So was Sonny's twenty-two, and a nest of kestrels the good brother—Alec—had been photographing for weeks. He definitely had it coming. Unfortunately Dad didn't agree. I wanted to run away but Alec wouldn't. So Dad wailed on him. With a belt. The buckle end.

How old was he?

Alec? He would have been twelve.

Jesus.

When he started bleeding I jumped on my dad's back. I tried to claw his eyes out. Mainly his eyebrows, unfortunately. So then he wailed on *me*.

Good god, he breathed.

I didn't cry, though.

Why doesn't that surprise me?

I remember glaring at him when it was done. I remember how it felt. Not the beating, the glaring. He looked at me while I pulled up my pants, waiting for me to cry, and starting to look

scared when I didn't. I said I hate you. I hope you die. I hope Sonny dies. I didn't yell it. I just said it.

Simon waited. We spoke in calm conversational tones but I imagine he could see in my face what it was doing to me. I felt my pulse racing in the remembered fear and fury.

So I've always had difficulty with authority figures, I said, trying feebly for a tone of nonchalance.

He looked at me with unadulterated compassion. Not sympathy. Not pity. And he said I swear I will never tell you what to do.

He sat up into the desert dawn. You're up early, he said. I shrugged. I had to pee, I said. Then it was starting to get light.

We built up a little fire and heated some water and made the last of the instant coffee. Once I disdained instant. Occasionally you still find real coffee but it's generally old and it's always rare and priced accordingly. Writing about that first meeting with Simon brought back painful memories of the days that were. A galaxy of information just a keyboard away. Cell phones. Coffee. For fuck's sake, coffee. How thin the veil between faith and reality.

We followed this road where the old Mexican shepherd we came across yesterday (who shared his stew, bless him—because I know he saw Simon's gun under his jacket but shared with us anyway and despite the gun not because of it) said we'd find the railroad. When I asked him if there were still trains he said Perhaps. He moves with his flock and his three dogs and his pack burro through the hills, indifferent to such things. I asked him which side of the border we were on, because I think we're midway along New Mexico's southern edge, across which could be either Texas or Mexico. He shrugged and said (in Spanish of course) What difference? Don't sleep in the arroyos, he said. And be careful, for soon the rattlesnakes will be stirring. Go with god, he said.

With god, I thought to myself. Not bloody likely.

The tracks were there, shining, suggesting that trains still run, or have done recently. Although one day they will not. There's a grade ahead where something eastbound will have to slow down if pulling any weight; westbound traffic will be hurtling downslope. In any case we've tried west but had to run: we hadn't yet sufficiently disappeared. Aimed for Mexico then heard about an epidemic that sounds like cholera (but could be something else, something

worse), so figured we'd try up toward the Rockies (where Simon has a friend who has a place) before the heat arrives.

Waiting along the grade. We've got this lovely vantage, the desert all broad and lush in its hurried season where the flats hold shards of sky prisoned in the retreating pools, and ripples still whisper down the washes. If more storms come we'll have to be careful of flashfloods (don't sleep in the arroyos, the shepherd said).

So, waiting, I pulled out the journal and began to write. Simon dozing in the thin sunlight, coat snuggled about him because the breeze is still cold, although you can feel, intermittently, tendrils of what will become summer. In our erratic flight I feel a compulsion toward this journal. Maybe I need to understand what drove us finally over this brink and my part in it—if meaning can ever be gleaned.

This crooked crooked road.

This morning, over our stale instant coffee, he asked what I was writing. Our story, I said.

I hope you're at least changing the names, he said.

I'm not at that part yet.

What part are you at?

My family. What I told you about them that first night.

We hadn't discussed them since, though. I think even then he understood how desperately I wanted to sever myself, how difficult it had been for me to reveal the little I did. (Only once, at the beginning of our flight, he asked me if there were anyone I wanted to contact before we disappeared and I said No. No one. There's only you.)

Do you think any of them are still alive? he asked after a long quiet.

Sonny might be. My father—I think. The ones who don't matter.

Alec? he asked very gently.

I shook my head. He reached over and took my hand but didn't say anything.

I sat looking into the fire growing pale with daylight and seeing Alec fading with time. Something had happened in my father's eyes at that moment that I'd never seen there before, and in that instant I knew I'd defeated him. Young as I was, I knew; but it would be years before I understood what that look meant. Because first I had to admit to myself that, at some level, the twisted son of a bitch probably believed that he loved us, that he was a normal human father. And it's so much easier to hate someone you can believe is wholly evil.

Do you think you'll ever see them again? he asked some while later.

There's no point.

You're sure about that.

I hung fire a moment. Then I said There's been enough blood spilled.

All right, he said.

All right, I said.

Later he said Train coming.

I looked west and saw the sparkle of an engine's light rippling. The day had slid toward evening. We hid in a gully and waited for the train to come lumbering up the grade and caught out in a beat-to-shit gondola with the dregs of old aggregate in the bottom. It was not a comfortable ride. The train inched for hours. At one point it pulled onto a siding and stopped for most of the night and when the sky was just lightening a military train thundered past westbound. Shapes of hummers and tanks and other assault vehicles. Half a dozen passenger cars—passenger cars! Meaning troop carriers, though the dimly lit windows were too blurred to let us discern uniforms. I wondered what might have happened in California to warrant such response. We'd been there no more than two weeks earlier and it hadn't seemed particularly worse off than any other part of the country, or of the world. Drier, maybe.

By the time we made the El Paso yards it was pushing noon. We'd heard unsettling stories about the El Paso yards. The train was going too fast to bail safely outside the yards, so we had to wait till it decelerated deep inside then found a place to huddle till dark. Far off the banshee wail and the occasional crash of gravity-induced coupling: a train making up or taking apart. There is, amazingly, still cross-border trade: vestiges of NAFTA, I imagine, or maybe some holdover military cooperation under what we familiarly called the Juarez Handshake. Once some yelling: guttural anger, incoherent through distance, followed by some screams abruptly stilled. Simon looked at me. Other side of the yards, he said. I nodded. Whatever is threatening to cripple me is not precisely fear—but if emotions were species, it would be in the same genus as fear.

A game of lurk and dash through the freight yards then, the ink shadows and saffron glare, the twisted noises of shunting trains and hissing brakes obscuring sounds that might warn us of pursuit. We got out, though, without incident and moved parallel to the tracks through the

smoldering town until we reached the wide desert, still half warm with remnant day, and rejoined the right-of-way. And walked. And walked. And walked.

The moon was swelling red and west when Simon reached a hand and stopped me. I'd been shuffling like an automaton: dangerous, and weak. I depend too much. It doesn't matter that he doesn't mind. It will finish me in the end.

A fire, he said. I looked: small flames with two silhouettes and one firelit face. Voices, raucous, probably drunk. Bonfire voices, maybe even harmless—all things being relative. Let's get a little closer, he said, so we did, quietly as we could. There was the snick of the safety coming off Simon's Glock. I held mine, too. Then he called Hey down there.

They dropped silent, the silhouettes twisting. The one facing us reached a hand toward what must be a weapon.

Yo. Low, suddenly sober.

Share your fire?

A rifle slid into glittering view and the lever action chambered a cartridge in one smooth motion. But didn't aim. Just to let us know.

How many?

Just two, Simon said.

There was a pause while the stranger squinted past the firelight into the dark. Come on then, he said. Hands in sight.

Simon put his 9mm in his waistband behind; I pocketed mine. We raised our hands and moved toward the firelight. The one with the rifle, I decided, while the youngest and most capable, was not sober—nor actually young. The other two, who had been silhouettes, were respectively middleaged and antiquarian.

Y'all armed?

We are, Simon said.

He nodded. At least you ain't dumb enough to lie about it.

Simon turned slowly, to show the butt of the 9mm over his belt.

I guess you ain't fixin to rob us, are you? We ain't got shit.

Though all three were looking at me now, eyes glittering. I looked back.

Jesus, the middleaged one said. A woman.

The old one muttered through a drooping yellowed mustache something that might have been Purty one, too, but I could't be certain. He diction was barely comprehensible, and while it could have been the alcohol, somehow I didn't think so.

Pull up a stump, the youngest one said. This here's my brothers, Bobby Joe—middleaged—an ole Dick. I'm Stan Chesterfield. The third. Now I'm fixin to set down this rifle, so I hope to hell you ain't got somethin cute in mind, cause I'm damned I'm gonna hold it all fuckin night.

All we have in mind is taking a load off, I said. They looked at me. We slung down our burdens—sleeping bags strapped to daypacks, ostentatiously smaller and more upscale than the weathered but well-tied cylinders the three of them leant against.

Where y'all comin from? Stan Chesterfield the third asked.

El Paso most recently, Simon said.

El Paso? Bobby Joe gaped. That's a good twenty mile.

I said It's a sonofabitching twenty mile, if you ask me.

They looked for a long moment. Then Bobby Joe let out a single barking laugh, though his face didn't change much. He is paunchy, with a bit of a double chin, incipient jowls, hounddog pouched eyes bloodshot and pathetic. Old Dick (I still haven't determined whether the "old" is actually part of the sobriquet or just a frequently applied adjective) stepped out of a Remington painting, cowboy hat and all, eyes rheumy, jaws sharp with deep hollows beneath the ears. An eagle nose, the long drooping mustache and shoulder length hair, all appropriately flaxen white (except the mustache stained brown with tobacco and shiny with snot), the faded westerncut checked shirt and blue jeans grimed into an almost uniform semigloss grey. He might have reacted to my comment as well, because the ends of the mustache fluttered up. His head wavered slightly side to side.

How long you been walkin? Stan asked. Stan is a gnome or a gargoyle—hunched with a browned dome of scalp, a large walrus mustache in jet and a beard that appears to get shaved occasionally. His eyes bulge hazel and watery and one gazes off, though I'm not certain which. They might take turns. An enormous pulpy nose that might have been hit a few too many times—or maybe it's just like that. Maybe Jewish, though I doubt he'd own that in these times, in this social milieu. And yet ... there's kindness there, beyond the caricature.

Since just after dark, Simon said.

El Paso's some bad yards, Bobby Joe said, and Old Dick nodded to himself. He wasn't watching me anymore, but gazing into the flames.

We hear.

You hear right, Stan said. Takin a woman in there.

I can take care of myself, I said.

Stan looked at me. I met it. I could feel Simon beside me suppressing his smile.

Stan said after looking at each of us Maybe so. He reached into the shadow and came up with a bottle. Second to the last jug. Y'all want a swallow?

Sure, Simon said and took it, swallowed, passed it to me. I took only a small one, partly politeness, partly exhaustion. It was a cheap sugary wine with an acidic taint reminiscent of low-grade retsina.

You two got any food? Bobby Joe asked.

A hunk of dry salami, I said, and a little goat cheese, if they haven't started to turn yet. Not much, but we're happy to share.

Aw hell, Bobby Joe said. I was gonna offer you some. Dick, whyn't you pass over that can a stew. Dick shot a sullen sidelong glare, but took a pair of pliers from somewhere and reached beside the fire, lifted an old crisco can with something steaming in it. I'd been smelling it all along but wasn't sure exactly what it was.

It ain't the best, Bobby Joe said, but it's hot. It's fillin.

Ain't the best, Stan said. Cause of we made the mistake of lettin that sorry sonofabitch cook it.

Didn't see you offerin to help!

Old Dick muttered something.

I could eat my own leg, I said. I'll give it a try.

I like a woman with spirit, Bobby Joe said.

Shut up, Bobby Joe. Stan said, then turned to me. Who are you two, anyway?

I'm Simon. This is Jill.

You mighta guessed by now we been drinkin since lunchtime, Stan said. Had to, to get that swill Bobby Joe fixed down.

I was dishing some into our bowls, which I'd taken from my pack. I said Meaning no offense—what is it?

Stan said Corned beef hash, baked beans, an pumpkin pie fillin.

And asparagus, Bobby Joe corrected.

Old Dick muttered Fuckin stew my ass.

Y'all are welcome to finish it, Stan said. I'd consider it a favor.

We ate. It didn't take long. Once we washed the flavor away—or most of it—with the marginally less offensive wine, we settled back in a sort of tentative satiation.

Stan, you got the smokes? Bobby Joe asked.

Dude, don't start that again.

What?

You got em, Bobby Joe.

Have not.

Dick? Ain't he got the smokes?

Old Dick glared, nodded disgustedly, looked back into the fire, then spat a long squirt of brown juice hissing into the flames.

Aw hell, Stan. I musta lost em. He turned to me. I swear, we're the three losingest sonsabitches you ever seed.

You can't of lost em, Bobby Joe. You ain't even been up to piss. Which we'd all know cause of that fuckin asparagus. Check your pockets. I swear you'd fuck up a wet dream. Then a shy glance at me. Excuse me.

It's all right, I said. I've heard it before.

Good thing, too, spending the night with the likes of us, Bobby Joe said.

Shut up Bobby Joe. Find the damn smokes. I want one too.

Y'all got any smokes? Bobby Joe asked Simon.

Sorry. We don't smoke.

Good for you. You'll live longer.

You never know.

Bobby Joe looked for a moment, then let out the single barking laugh again.

Hey! he said. Look what I found! He held up a tattered pouch in triumph.

Good for you. Now roll you one an pass it here.

Bobby Joe unwrapped the pouch, removed a packet of papers, began to sprinkle a pinch of powdery tobacco into it but his hands shook, and the tobacco fluttered onto the dirt.

God dammit, don't waste it! Stan said. That's all we got! You're fuckin pathetic.

Go easy on a dyin man, Stan.

Shit.

It's true, Bobby Joe said to me. I'm dyin. Doctor told me.

Don't start, Bobby Joe. Don't pay any attention, y'all. He's pathological.

I ain't pathological, I'm terminal. Don't you remember, Stan? That doctor told me I didn't have but six months to live.

That wasn't even you, Bobby Joe. That was that fuckin cowboy in Midland. And he was a lyin sack a shit, too.

It was so me. He's misremembering, he explained patiently to me.

I ain't doin this, Stan said.

He's in denial, Bobby Joe explained. He's afraid he won't have nobody to push around when I'm gone.

Shut up, Bobby Joe. Listen, I know y'all must be tired. There's some level ground off yonder. This sorry sack a shit's like to be goin on till sunup, now he's got a audience. If I was you I'd get away while you can.

They were still bickering as we took our leave.

We'll have coffee in the mornin, Stan called after us. Real coffee!

It was warm enough that we could just lay out our bags and lay still and aching on our backs. Their voices came around the slight rise of ground hiding the fire: Bobby Joe being himself, Stan berating him, like an old married couple. I turned to look at Simon. He was a shape in the moonlight. I reached and found his hand.

We'll be okay, I said.

He took in a great deep breath and let it out slow. I might have felt him nod in the darkness.

Then it was this morning and I had to pee. Glorious morning, grey and barely cool with the feline breeze caressing. So I snuck back for the journal and found this low rise with a nicely butt-shaped outcrop not too far from the fire's dregs and the mounds of three tramps sleeping—and started writing.

Then Stan appeared. In daylight he was no more attractive but he was maybe less of a gargoye. I hadn't seen him upright till now; I doubt he was taller than five-six or -seven, but he looked wiry as old rawhide.

I can't sleep late when I been drinkin, he said.

Me too.

You didn't have but a sip.

But when I do.

He nodded. You'll have to excuse me.

I nodded. He moved off behind the rise. I could hear the stream striking brittle ground. It went on and on. After it stopped he came back and hunkered opposite me.

That's more like it, he said. I reckoned y'all'd sleep in.

I had to pee, too. Then it was too pretty not to stay up.

He looked around him as if to check my assessment, then back at me.

But you slept all right? We didn't keep you up?

No. But I might take a nap later if we don't catch out.

Good weather for it. Won't sunburn. Not likely to rain, though.

No?

He looked up, scanned the bowl of sky again. Possible, but I doubt it. Then back at me again. Y'all're on the lam, aren't you?

I froze for a moment, tried to cover it. He made a calming gesture with one hand. Don't worry. Secret's safe. Everybody out here's runnin from somethin. Just ... you two are different.

I wasn't sure what to say. I shrugged. Are we? Different how?

He didn't answer directly or immediately. He gazed off in two slightly different directions. You know, he said, I ain't like some a these others—runnin scared when things turned bad. Or takin the road cause you can't cut it in the world. I been living on the highline near ten years, off an on—cause I love it. I love it more than money, more than booze, more than clothes ... hell, I love it more'n sex. I come out the first time doin research for a doctoral thesis—

It must have shown on my face.

Uh huh, he said. You might say my good grammar's a casualty of the apocalypse. I was doin a lexicon of the underclasses, focusing on tramps. Tramps, now—not *homeless*, not the fuckin homeguards pushin their lives around in shopping carts. Tramps. Come to realize you can't

understand the language unless you understand the life. So a two-week field project turned into two months. Two months after that I broke into my advisor's office, laid a stack of field notes and typed pages on his desk with an old railroad spike as a paperweight, stole a stamp to mail a letter to the woman I'd been living with before I set out, took a shower in the janitor's locker room, and caught out before midnight.

You ought to write a book, I said.

Started to ... a couple years back. Then figured hell. Who'd publish it? Who'd read it? Who would give a shit?

Chronicle of the times. You could put it in a time capsule.

He shook his head. Anyway, looks like you're writing plenty. I'll leave you to it. I just figured I'd let you know. I reckon you've seen trouble. You're new on the highline, but you're clearly not what I'd call green. Real tramps, mostly, are all right, if you can sort 'em out from the rest. There's killers an thieves out here, don't forget it, but the real tramps, the dyed-in-the-wool old-style tramps—they'll cover your backside, they'll protect your gear. Wouldn't leave any unattended bottles around, of course. So you're welcome to travel with us. But if whatever you're runnin from starts catching up, I'd appreciate a word.

Thank you, Stan. I'm ... honored. Truly. For now the backtrail looks clear.

He stood, slowly, as if his knees were creaking. You ever feel like sharing I'd love to hear your story.

Someday ... maybe.

He nodded. I'll call you when coffee's ready.

You meant what you said? Real coffee?

Just don't ask where it come from.

Though it wasn't the second to the last bottle after all. Old Dick had stashed a couple more and the three of them started drinking about ten. The overcast lingered grey and heavy but refused to rain. The desert, you could feel, wanted desperately to drink and to bloom. It had rained on the far side of El Paso but not here. It should be green by now, in the quick lushness of April and May, but it's still sere and brown. Bobby Joe did most of the drinking, the rest of us indulging in the occasional sip. Stan kept up conversation with us, intermittently, then would stand and pace, walking to the tracks and looking up and down the line.

God dammit, he kept saying, I want to catch the hell outa here.

Well we ain't goin nowhere quick, Bobby Joe said, so you might just as well get drunk.

You get drunk for me, you sorry sack a shit. *Somebody's* gotta be sober if that train comes.

Midday Simon and I lay down for a nap, depleted from the preceding days. We woke to a pregnant humid sky that still wouldn't rain. Bobby Joe was ranting about something; I guess that woke me, and me waking woke Simon. We got up and returned to the others.

It was so, Bobby Joe was insisting. It was the god damn liberals.

Old Dick was nodding mournful agreement, gazing at the pale flames. The fire was tiny. Bobby Joe was very drunk. Stan appeared sober, although I could smell the winy breath.

It wasn't the fuckin liberals, Stan said.

Was so.

Okay, explain it to me then. You know so damn much.

Dick muttered four or five syllables that might have been Fuckin communists but that might also have been Utter incompetence, though I lean rather toward the former.

Fuckin government took over everything. Regulate this, regulate that, regulate American know-how right into the gutter.

Or onto the highline, huh, Bobby Joe?

Damn right.

So you was like, what, a corporate fuckin raider who got your wick trimmed by government interference, an the god damn heartbreak of it just made you give it all up an go on this spiritual fuckin odyssey?

Well, yeah. *Yeah*, god dammit. I mean, I wasn't no big shot, but I worked for a corporation.

You was a fuckin HVAC installer.

That's a corporation. It was a good job.

You drunk yourself right out of it.

I did not. I fuckin did not. Only they kept hirin all the damn illegals.

So it's the illegals ruint us then.

Everybody knows that.

You're so full a shit, Bobby Joe. You gambled and drunk yourself straight to the gutter. Online horses, online poker, online fantasy fuckin football. To say nothin a online porn. You told me your own damn self.

Then what're *you* doin out here, mister my fuckin shit don't stink?

Stan rolled his oversized eyes. He shook his head. I should know better he said. Never talk politics with a god damn tramp.

Then you tell me, Bobby Joe said. If it wasn't the damn liberals, then you tell me what was it?

Stan held up both hands in angry surrender. I ain't doin this. Y'all can talk politics if you want. I'm goin for a walk.

Well go on then, Bobby Joe said. I'm havin a drink.

Good. Maybe you'll pass out before I get back.

Maybe I will.

Stan stormed off.

When he was well out of sight Bobby Joe said Some people just take theirselves too goddamn serious. It ain't nothin though. He'll be back. He's just drunk.

Old Dick muttered He ain't the one—or something to that effect—and spat.

I think he's just edgy, I said. Waiting for a train.

Well, one might come. Might not, too. I reckon they're gonna stop altogether one a these days.

Simon said, I hope we're somewhere near water when they do.

Bobby Joe muttered something to himself, listing sideways. Simon said, Speaking of water. Is there any around here?

Old Dick grumbled something and jerked his head, vaguely in the direction Stan had taken. Simon and I traded looks.

We should fill our bottles, I said. In case.

We took them—and our filter—down a draw with cottonwoods and smoke trees. A seep emerged from an outcrop where the land seemed to funnel toward it, nourishing a crescent of cattails and a dollop of open water. Stan hunkered on his haunches, arms folded on his knees, gazing across the tiny pond. Reeds around the edges; it was green and parklike and lovely, a secret gem. Although here and there were bottles and cans, leavings of other transients.

He turned, looked at us, turned back. So y'all had enough too, did you?

We thought we'd fill up just in case, Simon said.

If you want to be alone, we can do it later, I said.

No, come on an set. Nice place. Sometimes I just get filled up with that small-minded shit. World's comin apart, and people are still sayin 'it's the liberals'—in a high nasal voice—'it's the conservatives, it's the niggers, it's the Arabs, it's the Jews'—then back in his own—as if finding somebody to lay it on's gonna change a damn thing.

It's what people do, I said.

Or it's god's fuckin will, he finished. He looked at us, each in turn, though he held my eye longer. Y'all know better, though, don't you?

I might have flushed. He somehow knew more than he could know. So I said Did you ever read War and Peace?

Simon shot me a reprovng look, thinking I was mocking our erstwhile host, but I wasn't and Stan knew I wasn't.

Been awhile, he said.

You remember how he went on about the mechanisms of history?

I try not to.

I laughed. Yeah. Well. The basic concept being that the big events aren't really big events at all but culminations of everything that's led up to them.

I was aware in my peripheral vision of Simon's confusion as he looked back and forth between us. We must take our fun where we can scavenge it.

We're living the consequences of a dozen centuries—at least—of really bad societal decisions. And that's all. The particulars are just ...

The parsley sprig on the edge of the plate, he said, with barely a trace of his underclass drawl. And I'd say twenty centuries. Unless you want to track back to the fuckin fertile crescent.

I laughed. He laughed. We both looked at Simon. Simon looked at us.

What the fuck? he said.

Then all three of us laughed. I'll tell you later, I said.

While we refilled our bottles, Stan stood and stretched. I reckon I'll go see if Bobby Joe's still talkin to me.

We followed a short distance behind him. They were already bickering again when we came over the rise, but more amiably than before.

I brought out our meager hoard, started cutting hunks of salami and cheese and passing them around. Old Dick reached into the jumble beside his bedroll and produced a loaf of bread, mostly

intact; he pulled a long thin wicked looking knife—a filleting knife?—from an ankle sheath and sawed off thick slices and handed them around. Very dry sandwiches.

This is some good eatin, Bobby Joe said.

Compared to what you made last night a roadkill skunk'd be some good eatin, Stan said.

Roadkill skunk, Old Dick muttered, and his mustache fluttered. Then he swallowed and coughed.

Silence while we ate. It was a short meal, though. When the food was gone Bobby Joe took a long swallow of wine and passed the jug to Stan. Stan took a smaller one, passed it to me, who just sipped, and I passed it to Simon. Simon looked at it for a moment, then drank, and passed it to Dick. Dick drank, swallowed, spat.

Bobby Joe said in our general direction Well what was it? Was it the liberals, or wasn't it?

Aw, christ, are we startin that again? Stan groaned.

I wanta hear what Simon an Jill say. They're smart. They been around. I bet they've both went to college.

Simon gave me a sidelong look.

It's never that simple, Bobby Joe, I said. The fact is, the big corporations have had more power than most of the governments for years.

Well, I guess that's so, Bobby Joe said.

And there's a little thing called human overpopulation.

Bobby Joe sat up, twisted his head theatrically. Where they at? I don't see nobody here but us.

Y'all're wastin your time, Stan said.

Aw hell, Bobby Joe said, I'm just teasin. I know there's too many people in a lotta places. India an China for one.

And there's the global climate, I said.

Don't mean we're responsible. It's a theory. A theory. Like nobody proved it for sure.

Oh, right, Stan said, that and evolution.

I shrugged. Of course we're responsible. The science is in, Bobby Joe. We all know it.

Bobby Joe hung his head. Old Dick spat into the fire.

I'll tell you what, Stan said. You want to rag on the liberals, but we're headed up yonder for a jobs program. Jobs programs are about as liberal as you can get.

That's different, Bobby Joe said.

How's that different? It's fuckin welfare is what it is. It's government finding busy work for tramps like us an payin more'n *your* sorry ass is worth.

My sorry ass ain't worth any lessen *your* sorry ass.

It is, but that ain't the point. You'll whine about it then you'll put your fuckin hand out, won't you, you get hungry enough.

Besides, it ain't welfare they make you work for it.

Work, shit. Pickin up trash, maybe. Maybe fixin a road that no one's gonna drive on cause there ain't no fuckin gas anyways. It's busy work. It's a joke.

It's work.

It's charity, just with enough work to make it look good. You wait.

You know something, Stan? You got a bad attitude. I don't think I want to go up yonder with you after all.

Maybe you can find a job in air conditioning.

Maybe I can. Maybe I'll just stay here an die. I think I'm gettin worse anyways.

Shit.

Bobby Joe was swaying. He swayed and groped the bottle from beside Dick, uncorked it and drank deeply. A trickle of wine ran down the groove of one jowl.

Ain't that a pretty sight? Stan said. Dick glared at Bobby Joe, then snatched the bottle back and put it on his other side, safely out of reach.

Bobby Joe wheezed laughter, listed further. Aw hell, he said, I'm drunk. I believe I'm falling over.

There's a fuckin news flash.

Train, Simon said.

Stan fairly leapt up, spun to look down the line. We all did—or all but Bobby Joe. And yes, far off down the long barely perceptible slope of desert was a glimmer, a light, brightening and dimming. Stan watched for a long moment.

Y'all pack your gear, we're catchin out. She'll be pullin slow up this grade. I hadn't seen a train with enough units pullin in the last two years. Good thing for tramps like us. He shot a look at Bobby Joe, slumped over and muttering. This oughta be good. Come on, Dick, let's get im ready.

Dick glared down at Bobby Joe. He hauled himself upright, a wizened leathery old cowboy. He kicked Bobby Joe in the rear. Bobby Joe twitched.

Hey! Who's kickin me? Lea' me alone, I'm dyin. Lemme die.

Stan rubbed the bridge of his considerable nose. Then he hauled Bobby Joe off his tousled bedding and began to roll it up. Bobby Joe lay in the dirt.

We went and got our own gear, already mostly packed except for the sleeping bags and groundsheet, and they just needed to be stuffed and lashed to our packs. When we went back Old Dick was kicking dirt on the fire and muttering; the three bedrolls were tied and waiting. Stan was standing looking at the train, still distant, then he looked down at Bobby Joe who was in full snoring mode. He kicked Bobby Joe's foot. Get up, you sorry sack a shit. We're catchin out. He kicked it again. Bobby Joe stirred.

Wha? Wha—he opened his eyes, unfocused, and sat half up, leaning on one arm. He shook his head. Whadya say?

We're catchin out. You better get your shit together.

I ain't goin. I'm gonna stay here an die. Y'all go on.

God damn you Bobby Joe. Get your ass up.

I ain't goin I said!

Dick, help me get im up. He bent and took hold of Bobby Joe's arm, who shook away.

While Simon and I stood watching, uncertain of our roles.

Dick stood chewing, or sucking teeth. He spoke. Leave the sumbitch, he said. And it was too clear, for once, not to understand.

Stan straightened. What?

Said leave the sumbitch.

Stan dropped him, stepped across him to face Old Dick nose to nose. They were of a height, though Stan had fifteen or twenty pounds on him and anywhere from two to four decades.

You gonna help me?

I'm tired a fuckin wi' 'im.

You wasn't tired a fuckin with him that time he carried your gear ten mile while I got you outa lockup, was you?

Old Dick's eyes narrowed. He spat to the side, but his eyes were on Stan.

Help me with him, old man. Before I get truly upset.

Dick bent and straightened with the filleting knife in his hand. I tensed and Simon tensed beside me, but he put a restraining hand on my arm and shook his head just perceptibly.

What're you fixin to do with that? Stan said.

You ain't the boss a me, Old Dick muttered.

You know who I am? Stan said.

I know.

No. You know who I *am*? I'm Stanley Harrison Chesterfield the motherfuckin Third. I got a college fuckin degree, an I *still* spent three days gettin your worthless hide outa stir. I killed two motherfuckin feds in the Atlanta yards for shootin a friend a mine, an he was oldern you. He wasn't worth shit either, but he was my friend. God damn you, Dick, you know better. You know you stand by a man. You think you're gonna do somethin with that piss ant nailfile you go right ahead, but I guess you *don't* know who I am.

The knife had drooped while Stan spoke; now it hung. His head drooped too, and he shook it slightly, looking down. Then Old Dick said the longest, most succinct sentence I was ever to hear him speak:

It's who we used to be, Stan, not who we are.

Stan looked at him for a time, then reached out and clapped his shoulder. Come on, y'old fart. Help me load this sorry sack a shit before we miss this damn train. We been waitin for it long enough.

Stan and I carried all the gear while Stan and Old Dick hauled Bobby Joe into cover near the tracks. We waited until the engines labored past us, then stepped out. The train was moving at scarcely more than walking speed.

Piece a cake, Stan said. All's we need's a empty. Listen up, now. You two head back down a little ways—you see somethin, sling in the gear then get on yourselves. We'll pass sleepin beauty here up to you.

We did. And found an empty boxcar fifteen or twenty cars back; turned and trotted alongside, slung in the gear, swung aboard. Stan and Old Dick were moving now, too, trying to match velocities, and Bobby Joe was half treadmilling, but whether conscious or not it was hard to say. Finally, though, we were all safely on; not long after that the train slowed, nearly stopped.

What's up? Simon said.

Top a the grade, should be, Stan said. She'll be pickin up speed any time.

There was a moment of quiet though we were still moving: a suspension of time, the apogee of some trajectory. In it, there came a retching, belching, bubbling sound, and we all looked to where Bobby Joe lay on some ragged scraps of cardboard. He was vomiting; then he dropped the side of his face down into it, and slept again. Stan looked at him for a moment, then rubbed a hand over his eyes and forehead.

There, Old Dick grumbled. Ain't you glad now we brung him?

House Party

Throwing gravel or stirring it with a bloodied hand, he sat slumped in the leaden universe of train, plain, sky. Two ravens wheeled, oblate specks against the grey. Their low ratcheting calls were the only sound except for air sawing over the prairie. Later they were gone.

In time, like a figure coalescing out of fog, another sound took shape, became discernible, finally distinct. It was rhythmic, whispering like air then crunching. It became close then it stopped, or changed to breathing.

“Billy? That you, boy?”

He opened his eyes. A stocky silhouette against the sky, rumpled and redolent of unwashed flesh, tobacco, old wine breath. A bedroll slung, a rifle held.

He tried to say the name but his voice wouldn't work.

“Fuck's the matter with you? I thought you was dead.”

He shook his head. Hardware unslung the bedroll and, squatting, leaned the rifle.

“Jesus, kid, you look drier'n a nun's pussy. Here.” He produced a two-liter soda bottle and held it to his prairie lips.

Water. All his tissues clamored. He raised his bloodied hand to hold it.

“Damn,” Hardware said. “What the hell happened to you? That's enough, you'll just puke it back out. I ain't got so much to waste it.”

Hardware squatted, knees skewed with one foot flat and one on toes, contemplating. He rubbed a hand down a grizzled face.

“Fuck,” he said. “Fuckin god damn. Maybe I oughta just open up a fuckin daycare.”

Billy's intestines writhed with water. He was very tired. The water felt good but he wanted more. He reached.

“I'll tell you when.” He moved the bottle out of reach. “I don't suppose you've ate, either. *Hell* no. Not since the last time I fed you.”

He moved his reconstituted mouth, but it still wouldn't work. He tried to say *I had some jerky* but it wouldn't come.

“Say what, now?” Hardware leaning just his head. “Hell, don't bother. You're a sorry little fuck, you know that? All right, then. I guess I better find us some food. You watch my gear, all right? Don't let nobody take it, now. Hah. An stay outa that water. Better yet—” he took the

bottle with him. The rifle, too. The bedroll was still there, though, so Hardware wasn't probably abandoning him. He closed his eyes.

He opened them abruptly, throat burning for more. It was a single flat rifle shot with nothing to echo against but the flanks of headless trains.

Something hit beside him. He opened his eyes again. He couldn't tell at first, but Hardware's boots were just beyond. He saw the bottle and reached.

Drinking, his eyes went back to it. It was the white dog. The top of its head was gone. He stopped swallowing water for a minute.

Inside himself he whispered *Here boy*. Outside, he only looked, perhaps wide-eyed.

"I know," Hardware said, "there ain't much to it, is there? Well, beggars can't be choosers, ain't that right."

It was almost evening when the white dog was ready. Hardware had found wood for a fire and a heavy wire mesh grate attached to some cryptic electrical device and produced pliers and screwdriver and catspaw to pull nails and remove screws and detached it and straightened it for a grill.

Billy could speak again, at least, though he was tired and weak with exposure and his head was clouded and his hand hurt. He sat slumped with a blanket around his shoulders. It was the blanket she had left him. Hardware hadn't asked about it.

Hardware poked at the charred carcass with a folding knife. "Pretty damn lean," Hardware said. "Probly give us the runs."

"I don't care," Billy said.

"You say that now."

He shrugged. "I'm so hungry," he said.

"I reckon you would be. It's—what?—three days since you ate?"

He suddenly understood that he didn't want to discuss Jill, that the memory might be his only possession.

"I guess."

“I’m surprised you didn’t freeze the other night. It was coldern a witch’s tit. An you without any gear.”

“I kept walking. I slept during the day.”

Hardware looked. Billy hoped he couldn’t see the lie in his face. He was not a liar, but he lied.

“Boy,” he said, “I don’t know what the fuck you think you’re doin or where the fuck you think you’re goin, but you sure must want to get there bad.”

“I guess I want to find that guy you told me about.”

“What? What guy?”

His heart might have dropped.

“You called him Joe the Reaper.”

Hardware frowned. “I told you about him?”

Billy nodded.

“Aw, hell, I was drunk. I don’t remember shit. But if you say so I guess I did. I don’t guess you’d make that shit up.”

Hardware handed him a haunch.

“Gnaw on that. Sorry we ain’t got no A-1.”

“Thanks. It’ll be fine.”

Hardware smiled, then shook his head.

“It’s fuckin dog meat, boy.”

They ate. The dog, though thin, was bigger than Billy had thought. They were both full and there was meat left for breakfast.

“Damn, I wisht I had a jug,” Hardware said.

With his hunger assuaged, the night seemed colder. Billy shivered.

“I guess you’ll need more’n that,” Hardware said. “You look like you’re fadin. Here,” and he reached into the shadows and passed another blanket.

“Thanks. What about you?”

“I’ll be all right. Least I got a fuckin coat. Don’t worry, I got two more blankets here. I ain’t no fuckin martyr. Sides, it’s not that damn cold tonight.”

“Global warming,” Billy said, and smiled. Hardware looked at him.

“The hell you say.”

Billy shrugged.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m fixin to climb up in that empty. Wind might come up. We’ll sleep better inside.”

Billy nodded and hauled himself to his feet. Hardware did, then walked off a few steps and urinated. Billy didn’t have to. He wished for a toothbrush but it had been taken from him along with everything else.

In the boxcar a match flared and lighted Hardware’s burlwood face in red relief, pulsed bright as he drew the cigarette into life, dimmed to ember. Waved the match out and flicked it away. Smoke clouded around him. There was still scattered light coming in from the darkening but not yet dark sky.

“Smoke, Billy?”

He shook his head, but Hardware wasn’t looking. He said, “All right.” He hadn’t intended to say that, it had just come out, so now he had to. Hardware shifted in the shadows.

“Catch.” He tossed; they lay about six feet apart. Billy caught the tobacco pouch.

He knew how to roll, but not well. He had rolled joints with friends in high school and occasionally after.

“You’re a real pro, ain’t you?” Hardware said, watching.

“Oh, yeah.”

When it was finished he lit it. The taste was strong and burning so he drew slowly and carefully and made himself not cough, not sputter. He let the smoke out. Suddenly he felt like he was turning, like the boxcar was turning, tilting, even though he knew it wasn’t.

Hardware said with laughter in his voice, “You lyin sack a shit. You don’t smoke.”

Billy, revolving, said, “The hell I don’t. I’m smoking, aren’t I?”

Hardware chuckled. “If you can call it that. Don’t burn up my blankets.”

They smoked. Hardware flicked the butt, a minuscule meteor, through the door. Billy, a few moments later, copied. He lay back, spinning.

“Good night, Hardware,” he said.

“Night, kid. Hope you don’t fart big stinkies.”

They lay for awhile in full dark, the moon not yet up.

“Hardware?”

“Huh.”

“You saved my life.”

“Shit.”

“Thank you.”

“Shit. Go to sleep.”

“Cold dog for breakfast. I can’t hardly wait.”

Hardware stood in the boxcar door, peeing out. Billy lay in the blankets. It was warmer still. It was the same car. The car where Jill.

“We could build another fire,” Billy said.

Hardware zipped and turned. He shook his head. “We ain’t got enough wood for but one. I need to do some more huntin before we go anywheres or you won’t make it. You need a couple more meals in you. Me, I got some to spare.” He patted his belly.

“Where we going?”

Hardware sat against the wall, a blanket around his shoulders between back and steel. He rolled a cigarette, then held up the pouch.

“Sure,” Billy said, and caught the toss.

“Well,” Hardware said, “I figger this line’s shut down for the duration. That’s why they pulled off the units. We’re pretty lucky, in a way. There’s a little shithole of a town up the line—oh, twenty thirty mile—at the junction.”

“Junction?”

“With the main line. This here’s no more’n a spur line—well, not a spur exactly, cause a spur just stops an this one goes on through, but it don’t go through to nowhere worth gettin.”

“That makes us lucky?”

“Hell yeah. Coulda been fifty or a hundred miles back. We might could make this little hike in one long day, if you’re up to it.”

“I’m up to it.”

“Don’t talk big. You was a cunt hair from dead when I found you.”

He looked down and smoked. He studied the cigarette, lumpy with a tendril of blue smoke in the still boxcar air.

“After another meal or two ...” he muttered.

“We’ll see. Ain’t no big fuckin hurry anyway, is there?”

“I guess not.”

After awhile Hardware said, “Besides, we gotta get you some gear. Find some trade goods somewheres an stop in at Lennie’s—that’s outside Las Vegas.”

“Las Vegas?”

“Las Vegas New Mexico. No casinos, just Lennie’s.”

“Who’s Lennie?”

“Lennie’s. It’s a place. Well, Lennie owns it. Truck stop.”

“There’re still trucks running out there?”

“Not many. Lenny’s a jew businessman, but he’s good people. Opened him a trading post. An a social club, you get my meaning.”

“Social club?”

“Liquor an ladies, Billy. Liquor an ladies. You get yourself laid yet?”

A rush of fear, because that night was sacred. And because it hadn’t been his first time was able to say, “Hell yeah.”

“You have.” Skeptically. “We’ll get you taken care of.” He heaved himself up. “First we gotta eat. You work on that dog. I’m gonna go see what else I can turn up.”

Hardware checked the load on his rifle, then rummaged in his gear and took another handful of shells, shoved them into a coat pocket.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be, but I don’t want to see nothin but bones when I get back.”

It wasn’t so cold anymore. The air felt humid. He lay down, turned on his back, folded his arms under his head. She had been here with him. He should have followed her despite that she had forbidden.

Hardware threatened him with other women, but people like Hardware could hardly be expected to comprehend that there were no other women. Billy had had a girlfriend once—at the end of high school, before things had fallen this far apart. They had made fumbling occasional love a few times before breaking up. After that he’d had a single encounter with a girl he knew, but not too well—a girl with a ring in her nose and a reputation for being user friendly. He thought he was proving something to himself in the aftermath of his first romance. She was amused at his conventionality. That was all.

Until Jill.

On his departure his mother had pleaded, "Please be careful." Exercise good judgment, she meant: use caution, make good choices. But that world was gone. He loved his parents but they were gone. He was gone, too, becoming someone else. As if watching a movie, he wondered just who he might turn out to be. He was stuck in an interlude between trains. A layover. He would finally climb or leap or sneak aboard another, which would take him where it went. He closed his eyes.

When he woke again the sky was still overcast, the air tepid. It was only March—it should be cold. He rose and clambered down, went off twenty or thirty yards. He looked around to make sure nobody was there, then unzipped and urinated.

The two lines of cars arrowed toward their vanishing point. He walked that way, thinking to find—something. Maybe more wood. Something in another open car. Something. Most of the boxcars were shut, though, and the gondolas and tankers and hoppers were of no use. The line on his left ended first and the world opened up, brightened to a compass-drawn horizon. A line of telephone poles paralleled the tracks, and another, a mile farther back up the line, split off at right angles and vanished into flatness.

He kept walking until the cars on his right ended too. On that side the world was marginally more interesting: there were some barbed wire fencelines, some mild undulations to the tabletop flatness, some scattered clusters of trees. Too far for firewood, though.

But closer were a couple of wooden sheds. He made his way there; he tried pulling the old lapped sideboards off but all he got for his trouble was paint flakes under his fingernails. He gave up and turned to head back.

There was motion in the distance. He shaded his eyes from the vague glare overhead. It was Hardware, something across his shoulders, his arms up and hooked over so his tiny shape looked cruciform and topheavy, plodding at a slow but steady pace.

It was a ten minute walk; he could tell when Hardware spotted him because he stopped and dropped his burden and leaned forward, hands on knees for a few minutes as if regaining breath, then straightened and waited.

On the ground by his feet lay a gutted young pig, two one-gallon milk jugs filled with water, and his rifle. He was flushed and sweaty.

"Good thing you come to give me a hand," Hardware said, "since it's half for you."

“Where’d you get all this stuff?”

“I found us a gold mine, Billy. A fuckin-ay bonanza.”

“What is it?”

“Abandoned farmhouse yonder. Pigs, water, canned goods, clothes—I didn’t spend too much time lookin, figgered I’d get back here then we’d both make another trip. If I’d known you was feelin so damn perky, I wouldn’t a bothered carryin all this crap.”

“Sorry. I was looking for more firewood.”

“Find any?”

“Just those sheds.”

Hardware pondered. “Tell you what. We’ll move our shit over there by em, rip one of em up an barbecue this little fucker, then we’ll head back to that farmhouse tomorrow. But looky here.” He fished a bottle from a pocket. “This time it’s gonna taste right.”

It was barbecue sauce.

The pig was juicier, greasier, than the dog. The barbecue sauce made the insides of his mouth tingle. He craved the fat. In the new dark, he still picked at it even after he was full.

“I looked for some liquor but there wasn’t none,” Hardware said. “Musta been fuckin Mormons or some shit.”

“They just left everything behind?”

“Well—there was one body.”

“What?”

Hardware shrugged. “Not fresh. Couple days, anyway. I reckon he shot hisself. Out in the yard. Pigs was eatin on im. Looked like he swallowed his gun barrel. I didn’t find no gun, though.”

Billy gaped. “The pigs?” he said. “*This* pig?”

“Uh-huh. Don’t go gettin squeamish on me. Ain’t like we cooked his innards. Anyway, hadn’t been robbed, so I reckon he done it hisself. Maybe somebody else took the gun an lit out.” He took out the tobacco. “Runnin low on this. Roll em thin.” He rolled one, then handed the pouch to Billy. Billy rolled his after a pensive moment then passed it back. They gazed into the fire, smoking. He wondered where she might be at this moment. Riding a train? Walking empty

tracks? Or maybe sitting by her own fire, fending off the dark. He remembered the feel of her. The scent.

“I reckon we could hole up there for quite some time, we’re so inclined,” Hardware said. Billy looked up sharply, feeling a breath of panic. Hardware didn’t see, though. But they couldn’t, they needed to go—soon, or he’d never—

Catch up. That was it. Of course that was it.

“Stay?” Billy said, trying with some difficulty for nonchalance. “How come?”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I just want to keep moving.”

“Got the itchy foot, do you?”

He forced a smile. “I guess.”

“Well, don’t sweat it. We’ll stock up, anyways. See how you’re feeling. I get restless, too, I stay in one place too long.”

“Did they still have running water?”

“Hand pump outside. You know, the old timey kind. Like in the westerns.”

“Oh.” He took one of the plastic jugs and drank. Perhaps he had finally resumed his true shape, like a sponge.

He rose and walked into the darkness to relieve himself. When he came back Hardware’s eyes were drooping. He himself was tired, too. He took his two allotted blankets and cocooned himself against the chilling night. It would be only a mild chill again, but it would penetrate by morning. Hardware settled himself with soft grunts. The fire snapped and whispered.

Tomorrow he would see a dead man.

One of the clumps of trees he had seen yesterday was shade and windbreak to the farmhouse. They had walked over an hour after a breakfast of tepid pork. The day was grey and humid again, the air pressing close.

A ranked line of tall poplars bordered the house yard. Billy picked up the first traces of the smell and paused.

“What?” Hardware said.

“Don’t you smell it?”

He stopped. It was gone now. “I don’t smell nothin. My sniffer ain’t what it used to be, though. What is it, that dead sonofabitch?”

“I guess.”

They went on.

“Ain’t you never smelt dead before?”

“Yeah, just not ...” he shrugged. At home, as bad as things had gotten, the dead didn’t remain lying where they fell. Or hadn’t.

Then it was there again. “I smell it now. Hell, it wasn’t nothin yesterday. Must be this warm spell we’re havin. Well, boy, dead’s dead. Don’t matter it’s a possum or a president, it smells pretty much the same.”

As they passed through the line of poplars a slow tornado of vultures flapped heavily up with a noise like clotheslines in the wind. Ravens waited in the trees.

“I wouldn’t look too close if you’re squeamish,” Hardware said. Billy shook his head and they circled round. He had to glance, though, walking. His glance hung, and he stumbled. Then he looked away and caught up. “Seen enough?” Hardware said.

“Yeah.”

There was a broken pane in the back door. They stepped over shards of glass into a mud room, through that and into a kitchen.

The smell had filtered inside, but the kitchen was rich with its own decay. Garbage lay heaped: crusted cans and jars, wrappers, bones, dirty dishes. In the competition of odors, waste was ahead, though it was clear that death would finally win.

“God,” Billy said, “what a mess.”

“Maybe that’s why he sucked a bullet,” Hardware chuckled. “Maybe he didn’t like housework.” He went to the pantry and began rummaging. “Problem is it’s all this canned shit,” he said. “That’s okay if you’re stayin in one place, but it’s a sonofabitch to carry.” He lined up a selection of cans on a patch of counter he cleared with a sweep of his arm: tuna, beef stew, chili, spaghetti.

Billy moved to the refrigerator. He grasped the handle.

Too late, Hardware saw. “No, Billy, don’t—”

A wave of stench that dwarfed the existing one rolled out and pushed him back.

“Well shut it, god dammit, don’t fuckin stand there like a retard!” Hardware cried. Billy held his breath and flung the door, but it bounced and swung back wide. He slammed it again, holding it this time to make sure.

“That was about a dumb motherfuckin stunt,” Hardware snarled. “What the fuck you think you’re doin?”

“I didn’t—”

“I know you didn’t. Maybe you damn well should of. Jesus Christ on a fuckin crutch.”

Billy stood trying not to breathe. Thinking to himself *I knew people who used the fridge for dry goods even after the power went out because they said it kept the bugs out* but he didn’t say anything.

“Aw hell,” Hardware said, “don’t go sulkin. It’s done now. It was too ripe in here to hang around anyways. Let’s go see if we can’t find you some gear an some trade goods.”

They moved through the rooms. Things rustled in the debris. In the living room was a family portrait and a framed picture of a very anglo-saxon Jesus. The family was anglo-saxon, too; the fortyish father pleasant looking, the blonde mother almost pretty if a little on the plump side, the children fair and bucktoothed. Everybody smiled. Everyone was immaculately groomed. It was a professional portrait, with soft light and a dark background and everyone placed just so.

“I hadn’t been upstairs yet,” Hardware said. “Usually upstairs is good—jewelry an such. Hell, it almost smells worse, don’t it?”

Ascending behind him, Billy grunted agreement. Death reeked. Something scurried.

“Rats,” Hardware said. “I fuckin hate rats.”

The upstairs hall was dark, with two closed doors on either side and one at the end. Billy moved to the right and opened the first door. It was a linen closet with a few neatly folded sheets and towels, and gaps on the shelves as if most of what had been there was gone. He heard the door opposite open.

“Aw, Jesus,” Hardware groaned.

Billy turned. The death smell hit him. Rats scattered. Flies buzzed, too. Over Hardware’s shoulder in the brighter room he saw the bloated headshot girl in the bed. Hardware shut the door, plunging them back toward darkness.

“Let’s go, Hardware,” Billy whispered. “Let’s just leave.”

He shook his head. “Not without checkin these other rooms. We come this far.”

“You know what you’ll find.”

“We still need trade goods. I ain’t goin through all this an not even have enough to get my chain pulled for my trouble. Go on, check that one.”

Billy opened the second door on the right. It was a bathroom. Its stench was not of death, but nearly as strong.

“God,” Billy said, closing it. He didn’t look over Hardware’s shoulder at the next one, just waited till Hardware closed it too. “The little boy?” he asked.

Hardware nodded. “This fuckin new millennium ain’t for the faint hearted, is it?”

Billy shook his head. “So I guess we know who’s in there,” he said, gesturing with his chin toward the last door.

Hardware opened it anyway, then paused. He turned. “Ain’t nobody here,” he said. “Let’s check it out.”

Light seeped around drawn blinds. Billy raised one and daylight flooded in. The death smell was secondhand here, not quite masking the miasma of old urine, fermenting leavings of food. Dirty dishes were piled on the floor beside the unmade bed, and dirty clothes drifted in treacherous humps, layered with wadded towels, empty cans, cereal boxes, coffee cups.

“Somebody spent some time here,” Hardware said. He began opening dresser drawers. There were two dressers and a low mirrored vanity table. To the right were two doors—presumably a bathroom and a closet. “Check in there, Billy. Maybe you can find some clothes that’ll fit.”

The first was the bathroom, dimly lit by a narrow window over the bathtub. It smelled like the other one, only more so. He could imagine the toilet. He shut the door. The other was a large walk-in closet, muffled, musty, dark. Clothing lined the three sides.

“Hardware, you don’t have a flashlight, do you?”

“What do I look like, a fuckin Walmart?”

“Well, you have everything else.”

“I ain’t wastin my batteries for no fuckin shoppin trip.”

Billy smiled to himself. He did have one, then. He went and raised the blinds on the other two windows, adding illumination to the wretched scene, and returned to the closet. Women’s clothes hung on the left, men’s on the right. It looked like coats and sweaters were at the back. The ceiling angled down behind them, reaching into deeper shadow. Then he saw, behind the coats, the straight thigh-high edge of something—he parted coats, leaning—a two-drawer filing

cabinet—and began to call out when he saw something else, deep in the shadows to the left of the cabinet, which made him push the coats just further—

“Jesus!” and backpedaled into the room.

Eyes, white-rimmed in the dark.

“What?” Hardware snapped, levering a cartridge into his rifle’s chamber.

“There’s someone there.”

“Move.” Billy did. Hardware sidled near the door, rifle ready. “Come on out, now,” he said into the shadows. There was no sound. He looked over his shoulder. “You sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. Look.” He shouldered past—

“Wait—”

—and hauled at the coats, which had fallen back to fill the space.

First the hand, holding a lidless jewelry box with chains drooping like stray spaghetti; shimmers in the dark, held up as sacrifice. The box shook. Behind it the wide-eyed filthy woman in a voluminous melange of assorted clothing.

“Come on out,” Billy said. “We’re not going to hurt you.”

“How do you know she don’t have that gun in her other hand?”

Billy shook his head. He reached and gently took the jewelry box from her.

“Here,” Hardware said. Billy handed it to him. Then he took the woman’s hand and pulled slightly to encourage her. She drew back, her eyes—if possible—widening further.

“It’s all right,” Billy said softly, in a voice one might use with a frightened dog, musical and senseless. “Come on, now,” he said, “I promise we won’t hurt you, we thought there was nobody left.”

Reluctantly she took her hand back and shifted to her knees, crawling out. She looked up. Billy held out his hand; she took it again and he helped her rise. He led her out while Hardware moved behind her and burrowed in. Billy heard the filing cabinet open and close.

“Do you want to sit down?” Billy said.

She watched him. Her cheeks were gaunt, her eyes sunken. Her lank blonde hair hung tangled and stringy. Her lips were white with desiccation and dried spittle. She wore jeans, two flannel shirts with a man’s sweater over them and a ragged maroon bathrobe over that, the rucked sleeves shiny with wiped snot. Fuzzy yellow slippers on her feet, caked and matted. All

the layers bulked her form, but the angle of her jaw, the wrists protruding from the sleeves, were thin. Starving, probably, though there was still food in the house.

“Why don’t you sit down?” He nodded to her. Slowly, she lowered herself to the edge of the bed, perched but ready for momentary flight.

Hardware emerged. “Hah. Looky here. She had it all the time.”

Billy turned; Hardware was holding a revolver, dangling it by the trigger guard. It was short barreled and silver. He gripped it, flipped out the cylinder. “Three rounds gone,” he said.

He looked back at the woman. She had shrunken back, her mouth open as in a silent scream, horrified eyes riveted to the gun.

“Why don’t you put that someplace she can’t see it?”

Hardware slipped it into his pocket. He picked up the jewelry box from the dresser. He said, “Nothin worth nothin in that cabinet. Papers an shit.” Now he probed through the jewelry box’s contents with a gnarled forefinger.

With the gun gone, the woman closed her mouth. Billy said, “What happened here?”

She frowned. Her eyebrows knitted in pleading. Her lips worked. Billy leaned closer to hear.

“Please don’t rape me,” she whispered in a cracking voice.

Billy shook his head. “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine. We’ll help you.”

“Now wait a minute,” Hardware said.

Billy waved him to silence. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“Don’t rape me. There’s money.”

“Money,” Hardware said. “Hah.”

“Do you want to come with us?” Billy said.

“Hold on there, Billy—”

“You can’t stay here.”

Hardware’s hand gripped his upper arm and turned him forcibly.

“We ain’t doin this,” Hardware said. Now he was serious.

“We can’t just—”

“It ain’t your choice. I found this place, an I found you, an I say we ain’t doin this. Look at her, for chrissake.”

“Well, hell, Hardware, she’s lost her whole family.”

“Uh huh. An how do you know she ain’t the one that done it?”

Billy looked at him, feeling anger, feeling fear, feeling his brief surge of righteous indignation dissolve into uncertainty. He turned back to the woman, rocking slightly, eyes unfocused. She clutched herself tightly around her midriff with both arms, her knees pressed together. Her lips were moving. Billy leaned close and heard her muttering “Don’t rape me, don’t rape me,” like a mantra.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” he said. She ignored him. He reached out and cupped her chin and she froze, eyes snapping to him in terror. “What happened?”

Her eyes began to dart, though the rest of her remained motionless, an animal in a trap.

“Do you want to go with us?” he asked, half expecting Hardware’s intervention again but it didn’t come.

Her eyes came back to rest on him. He moved his hand away from her chin.

“I have to take care of my babies.”

“Somebody already did that,” Hardware said.

Billy straightened. “All right,” he said to Hardware, though he still watched the woman. “Leave her the gun. We can’t steal from her.”

Hardware clamped his shoulder and spun him around, much harder than last time. His face was red, his eyes blazing.

“Now you listen to me. First off, I ain’t takin orders from no young punk whose ass I just finished savin. You hear me? Second, we come for trade goods an we’re leavin with trade goods. Guns is good as they get.”

“We can’t leave her with nothing!”

“She was sittin on it for chrissake! What good is it to her? Look at her, Billy, she’s dead already! God fuckin dammit—”

“If you take that gun I’m staying here.”

Hardware gaped. His eyes bulged. “What—” he sputtered. “What—” He shook his head, turned and paced to the wall and back. “What the—” and repeated the circuit. When he came back he thrust his face close so Billy could smell his sour breath, even over all the other odors. “You’re makin me crazy, boy, you know that?”

“We can take as much of the jewelry as you want,” Billy said. “That’s no use to her.”

“No use to nobody.”

“Gold is gold. Are you saying Lennie doesn’t trade for gold?”

Hardware nodded but not in assent, working his jaw and mouth as if there were something sour inside he knew he would ultimately have to swallow.

“Yeah, he takes gold I reckon.”

“All right then. So we’ll leave her the gun.”

“That’s no good to her neither. Less she comes to her senses long enough to use it on herself. What if she shoots us on the way out?”

“We’ll leave the bullets in the kitchen,” Billy said. “Look at her. She’s not going to shoot anybody.”

They looked at her gazing away and rocking.

“You know,” Hardware said, “others woulda taken everything an fucked her to boot.”

“I’m not others,” Billy said. Then more softly he added, “And neither are you.”

Hardware nodded several times. He took the gun out and emptied the three rounds and three fired shells into his hand, set the gun on the nearer dresser. He held his cupped palm under her nose. He said in the loud slow tones one uses to a deaf person or a foreigner, “I’m leavin these on the kitchen counter. All right?”

She looked at him. He straightened. He turned to Billy. “All right? You happy now?”

Billy nodded. “Thanks, Hardware.”

“Shit. Grab yourself a coat an let’s blow this soda stand. It’s depressin me.”

“I don’t need a coat.”

“The hell you say.”

“Not from here. Everything smells like death.”

“It could turn cold again.”

“I’ll be okay.”

Hardware studied him for a moment. Then he said, “Suit yourself,” and picked up the jewelry box, tipped its contents into his pocket and set it back down. “You ready?” He started for the door.

Billy leaned to the woman again. “Is there anything we can do for you before we go?” he asked.

She looked at him. “Don’t rape me,” she said.

He gazed at her, sadness warring with disgust.

“You comin?” Hardware called from the hallway.

“I’m coming.”

He hurried down the corridor, down the stairs. Hardware was in the kitchen, packing cans into his bedroll. The bullets lay on the counter.

“You’re a piece a work, Billy, you know that?”

“Sorry.” He felt lightheaded, suddenly. Adrenaline had surged and receded like a tide without his even knowing.

As they went out the vultures flapped up again. Others circled. Billy watched them, contemplating a closer kinship than he would have liked.