



DESERT SWING

A NOVEL
by BILL ALBERT

**Act 2 of Harold and Enid's
Palm Springs' Opera**



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Springs' Opera)

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Novels by Bill Albert
And what about Rodríguez?
Desert Blues
Desert Swing
Desert Requiem
Castle Garden
Incident at Mirage Wells

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Trouble In Mind

Harold Abelstein slowly lifted up the shiny straw Stetson in both hands and set it carefully on his head. He adjusted it ever so slightly off center, the same way Little Earl wore his. He stared at himself in the mirror, trying to capture the expression required by the hat. No matter what he did the expression wouldn't come. As always, Harold's look was more startled than cowboy. Cowboys were never startled. He took off the hat, let it drop to the floor and sat down wearily on his bed.

He stared at the mirror propped against the wall on the chest of drawers. The face, that was it. The damn face! Cowboy faces were all high cheek bones, tanned skin, thin lips, and sun-slit eyes. Faces with a hard economy, faces with purpose. Harold didn't need the mirror to know that wasn't him. Fat cheeks, red-haired-white skin, a few big pimples, heavy lips and too-wide-open eyes — that was him. No economy, no purpose. Besides, cowboys were lean and lanky. Harold was overweight. No, Harold was fat. Cowboys were tall. Harold was tall. But tall wasn't enough. Not even close to enough.

It would never work. Never ever. The hat, the boot-cut Levis, the triangle-flap-pocket-mother-of-pearl-button shirt, the rough-out Tony Lama boots, the leather belt and silver buckle, none of it could make Harold into what he wasn't, and whatever that was, a cowboy was not it. Not in this life anyway. So why had he nagged Aunt Enid to take him to Rasmussen's to buy all that cowboy junk?

He shook his head and almost smiled. A weak moment. He supposed you had to have them. Being only two months from sixteen-years old meant you had maybe more than your fair share, more than moments too. Sometimes it was hours, sometimes whole days, if you weren't careful whole lifetimes.

"There you be," the middle-aged saleswomen in the blue and white buckskin shirt had said, beaming at him through rhinestone-framed glasses. "All ready for that first breakfast ride of the season. Lord yes! A real

genuine 24-carat cowpoke. Doncha believe that's just about the truth, honey?"

She winked at Aunt Enid and then cackled loud enough to be heard at least as far away as Indio.

He knew right then. Of course, he had known before as well. One part of him, the careful Los Angeles-big-city part, had known as soon as he asked Aunt Enid to take him that it was a bad idea. But he had told himself that he was no longer living in the City, he was in Palm Springs, at least the rest of his high-school life, and he had to work with that. Anyway, he liked hanging around with Earl, didn't he? At least he supposed he did. And Earl wore that kind of stuff. So? So was that loud-mouthed, buckskinned old woman at Rasmussen's. So was now staring at him unmercifully from across the room.

At least it was now *his* room, he told himself; not Aunt Enid's dressing room and not the room where his grandfather came to die. Still, if he closed his eyes Harold could smell the mist of urine which had enveloped the old man in the weeks before his death. Some mornings he awoke expecting to find the decaying body lying beside him in the narrow bed or the dressing-room wallpaper roses crowding in on him. But the roses had gone and so too had the old man. Both buried. Abe Cohen under the desert sand and the roses under three coats of white paint.

"It's going to be fine, Harold darling," Aunt Enid had assured him as they slapped on the paint. "Just look at it now."

She put down the brush on the side of the can and lit a cigarette. With it dangling loosely in her hand she stepped back to survey their work.

The hot desert air coming in through the open windows quickly dried the paint and as it did the big, fleshy roses began to fight their way to the surface once again. Harold's heart sank. He imagined the two of them painting the room forever, battling against the voracious, unsinkable, paint-eating roses until the walls collapsed inward from the weight, entombing him in a mountain of paint and roses.

She rested her hand on his shoulder, red nails spotted with white. The green scarf holding up her hair was also streaked with paint as were her long, tanned legs and her bare stomach under the tied-back shirt. A perfectly circular drop of white paint clung to her half-exposed left breast. Harold shifted uneasily under her hand, watching the malignant roses,

watching his aunt's too-conspicuous, too-rounded and too-close body, watching her breasts.

"Come on, Harold," Aunt Enid urged after a few minutes, flicking her cigarette out the window. "Let's do it over one more time. They say the third time is the charm, don't they?"

Against all Harold's expectations, it was.

Now he reached over to the far side of the bed and touched the wall. Safely, completely white, with not the slightest hint of roses. Just then the air cooler in the hall gave a metallic bark and spluttered into life. He hardly noticed. It had become one of the constant background sounds of his new desert life.

Maybe if he just wore the boots and the Levis. Surely no one would notice that. He stood up and walked, trying to roll his body with each step as he'd seen Earl and the others do. Even the three short paces from bed to window were unbalanced, and worse than that, he could feel the cheeks of his ass wobbling. Definitely no boots.

"Where are you going, darling?" asked Aunt Enid as he attempted to make his way unnoticed through the kitchen.

"Um, ah stables," he mumbled, face averted, pushing the screen door open.

"That's just fine, darling, but where's all that cowboy stuff we bought for you in the Village? Harold?"

"I... I..." he stammered, and then turned and fled, the screen door slamming with a sharp crack behind him.

"HAROLD!"

Maybelle Earl hated John Steinbeck with a simmering, poisonous passion. She had hated him since 1946 when she first read *The Grapes of Wrath*. Whereas with most people time served to mollify and dissipate such anger, for Maybelle the years had only seen her hatred grow and ripen and blossom into something beyond holding. It was eating away at her as bad as the arthritis that had put her in a wheelchair. Recently that hatred had begun to eat away just as hard at her son's considerable, respectful patience.

“I asks you, what does that Jewboy know about any of them things? What? What give him claim to write down that kinda Godlessness? Shows us folks as nothing but poor and scrabbling no-accounts. What? He come from Oklahoma? You answer me that, Earl Bob. Come on now, you answer me that.”

Her son sat with his long legs straight out in front of him, the heels of his boots balanced on the edge of a brass coal bucket full of firewood. He recrossed his legs, scuffing his boot heels lightly against each other.

“Don’t you mess at that with your boots, Earl Bob. The girl just been polishing her up.”

“Can I get you a drink or something, Mombelle?”

“There were those who didn’t know any better, that’s all. Ragtags they was. Not like us, Earl Bob, not like us at all it weren’t. But, ‘course all gets tarred...”

“Hey now, Mombelle, it’s just a old darned book is all it is. Over again I been telling you that. An old darned book which don’t mean nothing, nothing at all. Come on now, you want that drink?”

“You say!” she snapped. “Ain’t from Oklahoma. That’s just for starters. Ain’t from Oklahoma. And what about that there movie fil-um they done made? Showing all them people like they was nothing but... I just donno what. What about that?”

“What about it?”

“Same thing, that’s what. Same Godlessness, same making fun at us. Where you think that there boy Henry Fonda is from anyways?”

“How should I know? You want that drink now or what?”

“Well, I’d bet my store-bought teeth it ain’t Oklahoma. Or Arkansas. Or even Texas. Wouldn’t be surprised if it were New York. And you know who all come from there? Like all them movie people does. You know who comes from New York, Earl Bob? Huh?”

“Sure, Mombelle, I know who comes from there. Listen now, I got to be getting back. You take care, hear?”

He got up and moved towards the door.

“Ain’t that easy, Junior,” she said wagging a swollen finger at him. “Just ain’t that easy. And what about my drink. Lemonade. I wants a cool glass of lemonade. Like a oven it is. Desert ain’t a fit place for living in at all. Earl Bob?”

“Yes ma’am, sure thing.”

He went into the kitchen. Maybelle propelled her chair as best she could after her retreating son.

“Where’s that Little Earl at now?” she demanded, forgetting John Steinbeck for the moment.

“Down to the stables. He’s working down to the stables. He’ll be home directly to fix you up with some supper.”

He poured a glass of lemonade from the pitcher and put it down on the dining room table near to his mother. Carefully he set the pitcher back in the refrigerator and closed the door.

“Ha! With that big old Jewboy, I bet.”

“Mombelle, that boy, well, he’s fine, just fine. Don’t take on so. People of the Book, the preacher used to say about them. You remember that? People of the Book.”

“Preacher!” she spat, choking on her drink and sending a not-so-fine spray of lemonade over the polished toes of her son’s boots.

“You know what I think to that preacher, Earl Bob? Who was it crucified our Lord? Who was it? Let me tell you something about preachers.”

“Got to be getting,” Big Earl, repeated, as he went swiftly out the front door. “You be good now, Mombelle.”

“Earl Bob!”

Enid Carlson watched as her nephew hurried down the blacktopped road. After he disappeared from view she retied the belt of her terry cloth robe and sat down at the kitchen table. With her long nails she extracted a Salem from its green and white pack and put it between her lips. She didn’t light it. Putting it down on the table she studied the lipstick marks without seeing them.

Back to square one. Just when she thought she had finally established some real contact with him, Harold seemed to be slipping away again. Harold and her life, both of them slipping away. Damn it all to hell!

But she had made her decision about Archie and about her life and that was that. At the time she had felt good about making any decision. Now she wasn’t so sure. Harold didn’t appreciate the sacrifice she had made to keep

the family together. The family — her and Harold! What a laugh. Enid couldn't find enough in her to laugh. Maybe later.

Who was she kidding? She hadn't done it only for Harold. She'd done it for herself. On balance, that was more important. Being Archie Blatt's woman had worked out fine when he came out four or five times a year for short visits. They played golf, made love, went out on the town like a proper couple. It was accepted, almost respectable, except at the Tamarask Country Club where there were too many respectable, unaccepting people from St. Louis.

For most of the year she was free to do what she wanted. As long as she was there for him, Archie didn't ask questions about who she saw or what she did. He simply paid the bills. It had been a perfect arrangement for both of them. But now he had sold the dress business and was moving out to live permanently in Palm Springs with his invalid wife. Enid would be forced into the shadows. No longer almost respectable and no longer free. She would be little more than Archie's bimbo, his floozy, his piece, his stashed broad. Enid decided that she didn't want to be any of those things.

She picked up the cigarette, slowly tore a match from the book, closed the cover and struck the fillet of red-tipped cardboard along the black strip. Holding it an inch from the end of the cigarette she watched the match flame burn down until the weak glow almost reached her finger. She gave out a small puff of breath, enough to extinguish the last of the feeble light and then she let the unburned stub fall onto the table.

"You did right, honey," her best friend Charlene had assured her the day before. "With his wife right here, well it would be, I donno, different, wouldn't it? And poor old Harold orphaned like he was and all. Can't send him away to school over there to Colorado...'

"Arizona."

"Arizona, 'course it is. Well, you can't to that like he weren't wanted or something, just because old Archie can't abide teenagers. No, honey, you did right."

"But what am I supposed to do for rent, for food, for, Jesus, for everything! It's been years since I've had to go out to work, years. And look at this."

She handed Charlene a letter. Her friend held it out at arms length to read it.

“Sure gotta be getting me some glasses. Oh gee, honey, I didn’t realize it was that close.”

When she’d called Archie in St. Louis to tell him it was time to end their arrangement he had been very understanding, told her not to be rash and that they would talk it over when he came out in October. The letter from the real estate agent made it clear that there was nothing to talk over. Archie had shut off her water. No more rent checks. Her monthly allowance was due in a few days and she reckoned that wouldn’t be coming either.

“I’ve got until the 15th of next month to get out or sign a new lease. \$200 a month. I’ve only got \$700 in the bank. What am I going to do, Charlene?”

“Thought you already figured that one, honey. I mean before you...”

“Sure I did. I figured that alright.”

“Come on, honey, don’t get that there look, ain’t like the old Enid we know, is it? Something will turn up. Yu’all just see if it don’t.”

So far nothing had turned up except some unexpected insurance money on her brother-in-law. With it she arranged to send Harold to a private school just outside the town. Maybe they could do something with him or even *for* him. After all, what did she know about kids? Judging by her relationship with Harold less and less.

Enid got up and walked to the patio door. As she opened it the oven-hot desert air slammed her in the face, like walking into a searing, invisible wall. Although she knew it was there, the harsh power of the desert always staggered her.

She made her way quickly through the shroud of heat to the small oval swimming pool which filled up the back yard. Dropping her robe and kicking off her sandals she lowered herself naked into the too-warm water. Enid swam out, then held her nose and let herself sink into the cooler water in the deep end. For a few moments, held and caressed by the water, she forgot about Harold and Archie and the misfortune of ordinary poverty which was about to overtake her.

The moments passed too soon.

Where would they live when her money ran out? She’d have to find somewhere cheaper. Cheaper would mean without a pool. At that moment not having a pool worried her more than not having a regular income or a roof over her head. Where could she escape to without her own pool in which to swim naked any time she wanted?

When she couldn't hold her breath any longer she shot back to the surface and back to the incinerating embrace of the desert air.

*Your cheating heart
Will make you weep
You'll cry and cry
And try to sleep*

As Hank Williams started to walk the floor, Earl Bob Earl III climbed the two wooden steps into the tack room and tossed the curry comb towards the box hanging on the far wall. The comb traveled in a smooth arch, bounced lightly off the wall and fell into the box. He never missed. He had an unerring feel for distance, balance and weight such that he never had to give it any thought. He had the knack, that was all there was to it. His father reckoned as how it made him a first-class calf roper. If it did that was fine by him because there was nothing Little Earl wanted more than being the very best there was. Best roper, best saddle-bronc rider, best bulldogger and when he was old enough, best bull rider. The champion all around cowboy, like Casey Tibbs. Most everything else was so much "having-to-do," as his gran called it, like going to school or cleaning up the tack room or shoveling out the stalls. But he never complained. He never had the notion to complain. A man had certain obligations and that was that. You just got on and did what you had to the very best way you knew how. That was the measure of your own worth. Earl knew his measure pretty well.

He took the push broom from the corner and began to sweep the floor. There were hardly any dudes or boarders at the end of August but it didn't do to let things get slack. Besides, school was starting in a week or so and then he'd have less time for his chores.

*Broken song empty words I know
Still live in my hear all alone*

*By that moonlit path by the Alamo
And rose my rose of San Antone*

The song caught at him and he stopped to stare at the radio. He used to like that song a lot. Recently he wasn't so sure. It was one of those that made his father's ordinary silences more silent. He noticed recently that anything by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys did the same thing. Whether it was *Time Changes Everything* or *Rose of Old Pawnee* or even *My Confession*, Big Earl would set his jaw or get up and leave the room. Fortunately, you didn't hear much Bob Wills on the radio, except sometimes on the Opry. Little Earl hadn't known why his father got like that and, of course, he would never think of asking him. However, a couple of months before his gran had finally explained it to him, that is everything except the part about Bob Wills.

"Your momma, Little Earl, that's what eats at him so bad at times, makes him go all stone-faced like he do. Your mother is to blame on that."

"But she's dead," he replied evenly.

"Maybe so, then again maybe not so," the old woman said, all the time looking at him with her fierce Bible eyes.

"What's that you say, Gran? Maybe not dead? You mean safe in the arms of Jesus, doncha?"

He was used to her funny revival way speaking, so he hadn't cottoned on right off to what she was trying to tell him.

"How old would you say you is now, Little Earl?"

"Sixteen and a half, Gran. You know that as well as I do."

"Old enough I reckon, plenty old enough. Now your daddy, he wouldn't be wanting me to be telling you none of this here, none of it. You hear me, boy? Good. I don't have to be telling you what else then, does I? Well, you sit yourself right there and hold tight. Now you listen close to what I got to say. Your mother, well, she didn't die like you all the time been told."

"Didn't die!"

"No she didn't. Run off is what she done. Plumb run off, leaving you here with your old gran!"

His first thought was that maybe his mother had run off with Bob Wills or Tommy Duncan or one of the other Texas Playboys, but it was nothing so exciting.

“Your own uncle it were, Elvin Joe, may the good Lord forgive him his sins, while your daddy was away over at the Pacific and you no more than this high, no more than. Ain't never seen ‘em since, neither one and that ain't afore time to my way of thinking. Never were a God-fearing man, your uncle Elvin, though I never figured him for stealing off with his own brother's wife. As for your mother, well, ‘til they run off I thought she were nothing so much as a good, sweet natured girl — sweet as honey. ‘Course, I found out how she weren't none of what I'd been thinking, more like black strap molasses than honey. A Jezebel is what she were, Little Earl! There ain't nothing I can do to soften that for you neither. A Jezebel!”

He had a photograph of his mother in a silver frame next to his bed. Thin, pale arms held across her stomach, long dark hair. She was young, shy and smiling. The background was too fuzzy to see where it had been taken. Now he'd have to see her in a whole new way. Not dead. He still couldn't decide whether that made him feel good or bad, so he tried not to think about it. There was nothing to gain from too much thinking about things like that. Besides, you had to play the cards you were dealt. That was the way it was.

“Your daddy he don't want to hear none of them things, of course. ‘She's dead, Mombelle.’ That's all he ever said about it. ‘She's dead.’ Suppose he wanted you to think only good about your momma and I guess when you were a little ‘un that were right proper. But, you ain't no little ‘un no more, Little Earl. You is a man, nearly growed and ready to take on the truth of such things like a man.”

*Think once again of my love, my own
Rose my Rose of...*

If it was anyone it should have been Hank Williams. Cheating hearts, cold, cold hearts, chained hearts, crazy hearts and all those blues — lovesick, moaning, lonesome. honky-tonk and the rest of them. But it wasn't Hank it was Bob Wills.

Earl reached over and turned off the radio. Then he finished sweeping out the tack room.

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I Can't Be Satisfied

As Harold walked towards the stables he felt the sun frying his scalp, poaching the back of his city-tender neck, and he knew that if he didn't get into the shade double quick the heat would soon be scrambling his brains. His head was one huge egg. Boiled eggs. Three minutes, that was all it took, the yolk still runny. Had he been outside for three minutes? Humpty dumpty Harold and never put back together again. Never ever.

"It's hot enough to fry eggs on the sidewalk down there this time of year," his father had complained to Sylvia, his unyielding wife, trying desperately to avoid the trip which was to kill them both and exile Harold from his beloved Los Angeles.

Hotter than that, Harold would like to tell him. Much, much hotter than that. Sunny-side up, sizzling griddle hot, no-air-to-breathe hot. Always. Morning, noon and night.

He turned up his shirt collar and hurried the last hundred yards to the relative safety of the tamarisk trees and the buildings. Maybe he should have worn the damn hat. Harold Abelstein in a cowboy hat? No! He had felt stupid enough the day before when he had been forced to wear it in town. But, without a hat to protect him he might get sunstroke and he didn't want go through all that stuff again, the blisters, the pain, the sickness and the headache, Aunt Enid fussing all over him. He thought about going back for the hat, but didn't.

God, but he couldn't stop hating the damn desert. What a goddamned stupid, dumb, double-dumb stupid place to have to live! The day before it had been 108° in the shade. In the sun? Who knew in the sun. 208° maybe. If you stood too long on the blacktop, which was not more than ten seconds, your shoes got stuck, like in the story about Br'er Rabbit and the Tar Baby. Even standing on the sidewalk you could feel the heat pushing up through your sneakers. Touch a fender, hang an arm out the car window, go for a shopping cart in the parking lot and you picked up third degree burns. There was never a breeze to cool you down, only air so hot it blistered exposed skin and seared your lungs. The glare off the sand hurt your eyes. One false move and sure as hell some kind of dumb cactus, hundreds of different

kinds of dumb cacti, were waiting to stab into you. Aunt Enid had also helpfully warned him about rattlesnakes, scorpions and black widow spiders. If it wasn't so damn hot he might even be able to give some time to worrying about them. There was nothing to do in Palm Springs but hideout until the sun went down and when the sun finally did go down, then there was nothing to do. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

“Wadda you say, Harold, old son?”

“Sure, uh, fine thanks.”

Earl was leaning against the outside of the tack room, one boot cocked behind him, drinking a Coke.

“Wanna a drink?” he asked.

“Yeah that's fine, thanks.”

“Got that little ol' dime?”

Harold pawed at his pocket and came up with a dime. Earl went inside and a few moments later came out with a cold bottle. Harold held it against his forehead before tipping it back.

“So,” asked Earl, “How they hangin'?”

“Fine, sure, good. Yeah.”

“That's OK .”

“Yeah, I suppose so. Maybe a touch on the hot side, kinda, if you know what I mean,” Harold ventured, taking another small sip and holding the cool sweetness in his mouth before swallowing.

“Yep, you bet. Hot enough I reckon.”

They stood there for some time drinking in silence. Harold wanted to tell Earl about his aunt making him go to a stupid private school, but when it came to it he couldn't. Earl would think he was being stuck up or something like that. So, he didn't say anything. With Earl, saying nothing was OK. Mostly Harold liked that.

“Well,” said Earl, draining the last of his drink, “Gotta be getting on.”

“Sure, uh sorry,” Harold replied, quickly swallowing the last of his Coke.

Too quickly. He burped loudly and the bubbles forced their way up the back of his nose. He choked. It was all he could do not to spew up.

“No call for being sorry, partner. Hey, you alright? Sure? Come along if you like. Just going over... Wait up, here's old Sawed-off hisself.”

It was Earl's friend, Garf. Harold sighed. Despite all the cowboy stuff, Harold felt safe and almost comfortable with Earl, but Garf made him

jumpy. Garf *was* jumpy, a little cross-eyed, bandy-legged terrier full to the brim with uncontrolled aggression.

“How they hangin’?” Earl greeted him.

“Shit yes!” Garf shouted at the top of his voice, although he was only a couple of yards away. “Hey, what’s this here? Well, if it ain’t old Colorado Grande? How they hangin’ there, Big Red? Wadda you say?”

Harold hated being called Red. “Big Red” was worse yet. Earl always called him Harold.

* * *

Fountain girl. Secretary. Receptionist. Service Station Attendant — must be good lube man. That let her out. Not a good lube man and never would be. Girls for Frosty Freeze — will train if necessary. Not a girl. Too old. Hotel maid. Cook. No. NO! Manicurist. Not qualified. Waitress at Rolly’s Place. Waitress. Waitress. Waitress. It made her legs ache just reading the word. That’s where she had started out in Palm Springs and she didn’t want to go back to it. Not now. Not ever.

She dropped the ***Desert Sun*** on the kitchen table and picked up her drink. Closing her eyes, she rested the damp glass against her cheek. The coolness was refreshing but after a few seconds the bruises around her right eye began to throb with the cold. It had cost \$100 to get the car towed out of the sand and fixed. Archie had paid for it before he’d flown back East. She set down her glass.

She couldn’t remember a September that had been so unremittingly, mercilessly, unendingly hot. More than one hundred degrees day after day after day. It was too hot for golf. Too hot for shopping. Too hot for anything. Especially too hot to be looking for a job. She crunched an ice cube between her teeth.

Saleslady. That’s more like it. *Saleslady* not *salesgirl*. She had tried being a saleslady once for a week or so at a gift shop in the Plaza. Archie hadn’t approved. His approval didn’t matter anymore. Now she could be a saleslady if she wanted to. How much were they offering? *\$50 a week!* Who lived on \$50 a week? Rent on the house was \$200 a month. She’d spent more than \$50 on one dress she bought at Matthews at the end of the last season. One week, one dress. So much for being a saleslady.

When she had worked at Lockheed during the war she would have been happy to get \$50. But then she was young and sharing an apartment with three other girls. She had also not acquired the taste for golf and tennis and swimming and sunbathing and shopping. All those tastes Archie had allowed her to acquire, even encouraged her to acquire. Her fault though, not his. All the time it was happening, all those seven years, she had found it easy not to think too much about what she was doing. Anyway, didn't they all do it, all those wives at the club? Why was she different just because Archie happened to be married to someone else? Now she was finding out why she was different. She could thank Harold for that. But should she thank Harold?

No, not Harold, his father, Norman. It was all his fault. If only he hadn't made that damn U-turn on the freeway. What kind of nut tries to make a U-turn on a freeway? And he was such a careful, mousy little guy. Worked in a bank for Christ's sake! Straight lines, not U-turns. If only he hadn't done that one stupid thing. It had taken maybe five seconds to unravel her life, to say nothing of killing her older sister. Thank you, Norman.

Trailer Park Manager. Crane Operator. Mother's Helper. \$150 a month.

If anyone needed help it was her, now that she had take on Harold's needs on top of her own. Expecting herself, forcing herself to love Harold wasn't nearly enough to make it work. He was such a stolidly uncommunicative boy. Once in a while there was a spark of contact, like when they painted her old dressing room — his new bedroom — together. But as soon as she moved closer to him he retreated back into mumbled answers, back to sitting in front of the TV, back into his room and back to those damn thumping, moaning, screaming 45 records of his. She had tried liking the music, really tried as hard as she could so as to please Harold. It hadn't pleased Harold and she hadn't been able to convince herself about the it either.

The Dorseys, Sinatra, Perry Como, Vic Damone, the Andrew Sisters, now that was real music. When she put an album on in the living room Harold screwed up his face in pain and fled. She showed no mercy. It served him right.

Nurse. Desk Clerk. Cashier. Check-out Clerk at Mayfair. \$1.85/hr. How much was that? She jotted down the figures in the margin of the newspaper. \$74 a week if she got forty hours, more if there was overtime. Better than a saleslady, but a lot less genteel. Hard-faced, peroxidized women who chewed

gum. She supposed you had give up something to be genteel. \$24 a week seemed to be the going rate.

Again, a twinge deep in her calves. Standing all day in front of a cash register, smiling and tapping out numbers for a non-stop parade of lettuce and lemons, tomatoes and oranges, steaks and corn flakes, baked beans and Ajax, Wonderbread and Bosco. A stiff brown and white uniform under florescent lighting, getting varicose veins, getting fat, getting pale, getting nowhere Thirty-six years old and having to worry what to do with her life, what *not* to do with her life.

But that wasn't enough, she had to worry about Harold as well. She resented that worry and she resented Harold. She felt guilty about both resentments and then resented feeling guilty. Poor Enid. Poor, poor Enid.

Enid wasn't used to feeling sorry for herself. She had hoped at least that feeling would make her angry, make her positive, get her going. It only made her tired. The heat made her tired. Harold made her tired. Even her best friend Charlene was beginning to make her tired.

Baker's helper. Swimming instructor. Doctor's assistant. Dentist's assistant. Waitress. Waitress. Waitress.

* * *

She picked up the book from the table and began to turn to the part she hated the most. The book fell open by itself, as if it knew exactly what Maybelle wanted to read. He had saved the very worst abomination for last. Typical of his kind. It was the sneaky way they did things that nettled her so much. Never out in the open where you could see it plain and honest. No, always hiding in the dark and sliding around and before you knew where you were... Well, before you knew it was... it was... She took a deep breath.

Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. She squirmed closer and pulled his head close. "There!" she said. "There" Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.

"Disgusting!" Maybelle shouted into the empty room. "Downright disgusting, if you asks me! Shouldn't be allowed. Bared her breast?"

Smiling? Know what that means, don't we? Smiling."

She glared at the leather armchair across the room, defying it to contradict her. Having spent a minute or two glaring the chair into submission, she turned back to the beginning of *The Grapes of Wrath*. She would show them all that the book was nothing but a pack of dirty lies, chapter and verse, verse and chapter.

Her tongue darted out between her thin lips and wet the end of the pencil.

"There's another one!" she exclaimed. "Got you again, Mr. Judas Steinbeck! Ha!"

"I says, 'What's this call, this sperit.' An' I says, 'It's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust, sometimes.' An' I says, 'Don't you love Jesus?' Well, I thought an' thought, an' finally I says, 'No, I don't know nobody name' Jesus.'"

What kind of preacher was that? She'd met up with lots of preachers over the years but never one who said he didn't know Jesus. Wouldn't be a preacher then, would he? Quickly she scribbled a note at the top of the page.

There was so much when you read it close to like she was. Of course, he was doing it on purpose. Trying to paint them as Godless, rootless hobos. White trash, that's all Oklahoma people were for him. She knew better. There were some like that, sure there were, but not many. And, they were the first ones, weren't they? The bedrock, the original God-fearing, white native Americans. Not Mexicans or Filipinos or Japs or Niggers or Jews. Real Americans is what they were. Had Jews like that Steinbeck fella fought in the War of Independence? They had not. Had they fought in the Civil War. Of course not. Not the Jews, nor any of those other foreigners neither.

Maybelle and her family had known the Hard Times. She couldn't deny that. Wouldn't want to deny that. But it didn't make her and all her kin the same as those blasted, scrabbling, Godless Joads, did it? No, it did not.

She was proud to be from just outside Magna Carta, Oklahoma. Dusted out in '36, made a widow two years later in California with seven children to care for. Kept them clean, kept them in the Church, kept them fed, kept them respectable. No denying Jesus for the Earls, no naked breasts in some rundown barn and all the time smiling with it. No, sir! None of that kinda carry-on.

It had only taken them four days driving to get to Bakersfield. Quick and easy it was. Route 66 all the way. With the nine of them picking cotton and peaches and anything else that needed picking, they got by just fine. After all, they were used to hard work. Not like those foreigner union people and their no-account strikers. She remembered the preacher saying — that is a real honest-to-God preacher from back home — he said how wearing the union badge was like putting the mark of the beast on yourself. That's what she'd told Earl, but he hadn't wanted to listen. He never did.

"Yu'all won't be finding Salvation over there in the union," he had told them. "The only thing yu'all need to belong to is to Jesus and to the Church. All the rest is nothing but man's vanity."

"Amen, brother!" she said aloud to herself and the well-mannered furniture.

But wasn't that exactly what Judas Stein-beck was preaching? Striking and unions? Communists, the lot of them. Reds. Russkies. She knew precisely where to look.

"Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole."

If that wasn't Communist propoganda she didn't know what was. Out to destroy America, they were. She'd been right about that too. Of course!

"What about them Rosenbergs, Mr. Judas, Mr. Russkie Stein-beck? What do you have to say to that?!"

She waited but there was no reply.

Her breaths started coming in gasps. It always happened when she let herself get too righteously het up. The darn air cooling didn't help, nor did having to sit all day inside the house slumped in a stiff wheelchair. If it wasn't so all-fired hot she could have gone outside. The desert was no place for a sick old woman. But she wasn't about to complain. Never had and wasn't going to start now.

The book slipped from Maybelle's stiff fingers and fell to the floor.

"Tarnation!"

She couldn't reach it from her wheelchair. She didn't try. A few weeks before she had lent forward to pick something up and the chair had tipped over. It was more than an hour before Little Earl came back and found her. She wasn't going to give Mr. Judas Stein-beck the satisfaction of having her fall down. No, sir, she surely was not going to do that.

* * *

"Thought you was buying yourself some boots?" Earl said. "And a hat as well. Goes along with that there shirt and them jeans."

"I sure like that shiny silver buckle you got, Red," Garf laughed. "Win it for roping, did you? Or maybe it were a bronc riding. Which was it, Big Red?"

"Leave 'em be now," Earl cautioned. "Don't pay him no mind, Harold. Boy had shit for brains he'd be ahead of where he is right now."

Garf aimed a hard kick at Earl, who without seeming to pay much attention caught the flying boot in one hand, lifted it up and dumped Garf hard onto the ground. The smaller boy scrambled to his feet grinning.

"Um, well," said Harold nervously, "didn't fit, if you know what I mean. Had to take 'em back."

"What happened to that big fucking straw hat we fixed up for you?" Garf asked, flicking out air punches at Earl.

Harold ducked his head.

"Dunno. Lost it I guess. Something like that."

"Ain't no fucking good, Big Red. Gotta have you a hat in the fucking desert. Shee-it fucking yes!"

"Boy knows that, Garf, just ease up. Ain't no use having one don't fit, now does it?"

Earl rested his hand on Harold's shoulder.

"Can't be riding with us, partner, if'n you don't have them boots. Feet'll keep to slip-sliding right through the stirrups. Just can't do her. And a hat, well I reckon how you know all about having a hat."

Their first meeting. Earl had found him by the side of the road, spread out, hatless and sunstroked and babbling like a crazy person. Just did manage to get him home.

"Yeah, I know," Harold started to say. "I'll..."

“Shee-it! City boy, don’t know fuck from nothing.”

*The cattle are prowlin’
The ky-oats are howlin’
Way out where the doggies bawl
Where spurs are a jinglin’
A cowboy is singin’
This lonesome cattle call*

As Eddie Arnold started in to yodel, Harold flinched and closed his eyes. His lips moved slightly, as if in silent prayer.

“What’s the matter, Red?” Garf shouted. “Ain’t so bad. Ain’t bad at all, come to that. Damn fine cowboy music that is. You just listen the fuck up.”

Earl gave out a short laugh.

“What you need,” he told Harold, “is some musical educating. Ain’t that right, Garf, old buddy?”

“Right,” Garf agreed, absent-mindedly kicking out at the side of the tack room. “Fucking ed-u-cating.”

Harold just about smiled but didn’t reply. He looked down and pawed at the dirt.

Earl couldn’t fathom why Harold was so stuck on nigger music. After all, he was a white boy, wasn’t he? A Jew, of course, he was that too but... Maybe Jews liked nigger music. He didn’t remember hearing anything like that. But then he’d never been so close to a Jewish person before. Earl couldn’t think himself much further along that road. He reckoned how it didn’t matter one way or the other though. He liked Harold well enough to be getting on with. Jingles had been right, he wasn’t like other Jews at the school. For one, he didn’t look like one. For two, he wasn’t all smart-ass talky or stuck-up stand-offish and, unless he missed his guess, Harold wasn’t likely to be so damn smart at his school work either.

He was different, right enough. But he was strong as a damn ox. Once he got the hang of it he could buck a bale as expert as anyone, better maybe. That was plenty good enough for Little Earl, that and the fact that Harold wasn’t always running off at the mouth. Too much talking just got in the way of things.

He tried to explain all that to his grandmother when she started up at him, but all she kept saying was how Harold's kind had crucified Our Lord Jesus Christ and how his kind were out to do down hardworking decent American folks just like they always had.

"He's only a big ol' kid, Gran. Can't see he's doing nothing to nobody."

"Don't you 'big-old-kid' me, Junior. You listen to your gran. She knows what she's a talking 'bout."

His father had taught him to respect his elders and he did. That didn't mean he had to agree with them.

"Sure thing, Gran. I guess. But having his folks being killed like they were and then his granddad up and dying. I mean he's had some tough times just recently."

"Happens," she said briskly. "Sorry 'bout it, 'course I am, but it happens, even to Them it does. Did I tell you about what I were a reading today, Junior?"

Fortunately, he had managed to avoid hearing about her reading.

"Come on then," he said to the two boys. "You wanna stand around all day like a couple a useless dudes, or you wanna get to do some doing?"

* * *

The last couple of times she had been standing at the kitchen window, probably washing dishes or fixing some food. He slowed the pickup as he passed the house. Casually he turned his head. She wasn't there. Why should she be? Could be anywhere in the house. Might even be out.

God damn but he was thinking and acting like a kid! If he wanted to get acquainted he only had to knock on the door, didn't he? Say howdy, ask her if she wanted to go out to dinner with him. It wasn't as if they hadn't met before and those two boys seemed to be getting along pretty good. That was one easy route he could go down. Damn it all anyway! He hated feeling so blamed uncertain and so weak-kneed stupid with it.

Most things for Earl Bob Earl II came down to either a yes or a no. You made up your mind and then you did whatever it was that needed to be done. No looking back, no regrets, just get on with it and do the best job of work you can. No one can ask more of you than that. Too much time thinking and worrying at something never got you anywhere but back to

where you started out from. His father had taught him that and he had taught his son.

She was one damn fine looking woman and that was for certain. And as far as he could make out from what the boy said, although he didn't say much, she was unattached. So why was he hesitating? Maybe it was because she was so unfriendly when they first met at the stables, yelling at him like she'd done and then staring as if he was some dumb, cornball shitkicker sucking at her air and taking up space. He'd had that before from some of those fancy country-club types. But she wasn't like them. No, not really.

He fumbled in his shirt, got the pack and pulled a Lucky out with his teeth. Holding the book of matches in one hand he folded over a match, struck it, bent forward slightly and lit the cigarette. He sucked down a big lung full of smoke until it hurt.

Maybe it was because she was so different from the other women he had known since Ruth Ann had passed on. They'd been cowgirls mainly or ones close enough to being cowgirls that it made no difference. He knew his way around with them. This one didn't talk the same, didn't act the same, probably didn't think the same and sure as hell didn't dress the same. Real nice to look at, but if she was his woman he sure wouldn't want her walking around like that. No sir, he wouldn't want that for sure. Make him damn uncomfortable it would.

"Je-sus, but let me tell you, Earl, them Jewgirls are hot stuff! Wee-hew, but they is! Fuck the damn hair right off your head."

"That's right, Earl. Like Wayne there says, bang you balder than a coot in autumn."

Is that what he wanted? Balder than a coot?

"Jewgirls!" he said, laughing out loud at himself.

He put his foot down on the accelerator. Maybe he'd stop off on the way back from the market.

Stay A Little Longer

Every part of him hurt. He turned on his bed trying to find a spot to rest on that wasn't sore. If only he'd stayed off of Earl's stupid, dumb bucking barrel. There were too many "if onlys" in Harold Abelstein's life. Especially since he'd moved down to Palm Springs. If only, if only.

*Gonna find her.
Gonna find her.
Gonna find her.
Gonna find her.*

Searching, the Coasters, Atco, 1957, maroon with yellow print. It was the flip side of *Young Blood*, but he liked it better. The Coasters had a rough sound to them and both songs were real fine too. Almost but not quite fine enough to dull his pain.

Harold carefully lifted the record off the turntable and slipped it into its wrapper.

Even lifting the weightless 45 hurt his arms and shoulders. Soft city boy for sure. He wished he had stayed that way. You could hide in the city. They didn't have cowboys or bucking barrels or stupid cornball country music in the city. Record stores selling real music, Fairfax Avenue and fresh bagels, chocolate éclairs, dozens of movie theaters, that's what they had in the city. And he missed them all, about in that order too.

Gingerly he leaned over and filed the Coasters' record in the box. It dropped neatly behind the Clovers and in front of the Colts.

He'd only heard of the Coasters the week before and then it was late at night through heavy static when he'd been able to pick up KRKD from LA. The next day he found Dave's Desert Discs, an oasis for a desert-parched R & B collector. It wasn't as good as the stores off Hollywood Boulevard, not as well-stocked, not as up-to-date with the releases, but not having bought a new record for almost three months, he wasn't worried about making comparisons. He dived in head first.

C.C. Rider by Chuck Willis, *I'm a King Bee* by Slim Harpo, *My Girl Friend* by the Cadillacs, the Coasters' record, *Jenny, Jenny* by Little Richard, *Jim Dandy* by LaVern Baker. 89 cents each. He noted down the vital statistics of about a dozen more records he didn't buy. He'd come out of the store feeling light headed.

They took his total to 242. Pretty soon he'd need to find himself another cardboard box. He put on the LaVern Baker and tried another position on the bed. No Jim Dandy coming to his rescue. Better to have been that Mermaid Queen. Fat chance.

The barrel, an old oil drum suspended three feet off the ground and swaying with gentle menace from four ropes, was out behind the stables, hidden in the shade of the tamarisks. The trees served as anchoring points. Strapped to the drum were a red, white and black saddle blanket and a bareback rig. Underneath was a thick pile of straw. From the distant tack room he could just make out the twang of some heartsick or lonesome or broken-hearted or cheated-on cowboy.

"There she is," announced Earl. "Wadda you think?"

Trouble, Harold thought. His stomach began to twist and he knew he'd have to squeeze back a whole crate-load of his nervous farts.

"Come on, Red," Garf urged, pushing him forward. "Try her out, why doncha?"

Harold stumbled a couple of steps and then rooted himself firmly to the ground, his inert bulk easily resisting the smaller boy's efforts to move him. He was very good at rooting and resisting.

"Hey listen guys, I don't, you know, uh, I don't really think so," Harold said. "I mean, I never..."

"Sure, Harold, old son," Earl said. "Don't get yourself all lathered up. Garf here'll show you how it's done, won't you, Garf?"

The boy didn't need any encouragement. He gave a wild yell, ran at the barrel, jumped up, flopped himself over it on his stomach and then, in one smooth move, twisted and turned his body so he was sitting astride.

"You see," he crowed, "easy as fucking farting."

Harold knew about that all too well.

Garf pulled a thin leather glove out of his back pocket and slid it on. He grabbed the leather handle in the center of the rig and set himself.

"Take hold of that there," Earl said to Harold, indicating one of the four ropes holding up the barrel. "When he calls out you start in to pull for all

you're worth. Then let her up and I'll pull. Then you start in again. One of us then the other one. Got that? One of us and then the other. OK? We give him the eight seconds, that is if he don't come off before."

Earl took firm hold of a rope on the other side and nodded to Garf. The boy pulled his hat down low, held up one hand and leaned back.

"Outside!" Garf shouted.

Harold gave a tentative pull and the barrel jerked and bounced softly. Garf whooped, waved his free hand in the air and continually raked the front of the barrel with his spurs.

"Can't you fucking girls pull any fucking harder!," he yelled at them.

Harold yanked a little more firmly at the rope. Earl pulled. Harold pulled. The barrel bucked and rolled. Garf hung on.

"Je-sus! Come on, Red, you big fat fucking pussy!"

He felt the familiar chill of fear snake up his spine. Sticks and stones. Sticks and stones. No matter, names did hurt him. They always had, but he had always walked away. At Fairfax High and out on the street walking the other way, or as Tyrone Price, his one black friend at school, called it, "turning both cheeks" was a much safer move. Harold had no wish to be beaten up and physically humiliated, especially by smaller boys, and invariably they were the ones who called him out. Besides he didn't know the first thing about fighting. This wasn't fighting though. This was holding the rope of a bucking barrel.

Harold set himself, waiting for Earl to finish. He then leaned into the rope and pulled back with all the stored-up anger against every boy who had ever tormented him and, of course, with all his fat, pussy weight. The barrel tipped violently back towards him, hurtling nearly four feet into the air and snatching the rope from Earl's hands. Garf screamed. Harold let go. Unbalanced, the barrel shot forward and sideways like a lopsided slingshot, neatly separating itself from Garf and catapulting him through the air. He turned a complete somersault and slammed into the ground flat on his back, well outside the protective pile of straw. It was just like in a Tom and Jerry cartoon.

"Oh, hey," Harold said, starting forward, "I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean..."

But Garf was up and laughing, slapping the dust off with his hat. Just like in a Tom and Jerry cartoon.

"Shee-it, Red, take more than that to fucking kill me off."

Harold realized that his enthusiasm on the rope meant there was no way he could avoid the bucking barrel. Surprisingly, it wasn't as bad as it looked and he wasn't as inept as he feared. He lasted almost five seconds. Not a whole lot less than Garf had done. And the clanging of the barrel and the boys' shouts had easily drowned out the noise of his farts.

"Say, partner," Earl said as he helped him out of the straw. "That weren't at all bad for a first time ride. Damn good, boy! Make you into a bronc rider yet, I reckon."

"Shee-it, Earl!" Garf spat out. "He were holding on with both hands, didn't do no marking neither. What fucking kinda ride you call that?"

"First time out," Earl replied shortly.

"Anyroad," Garf grumbled. "Ain't no such thing as a Jew rodeo cowboy."

Jew? Jew rodeo cowboy? Hardly a taunt at Fairfax where just about everyone but Tyrone Price was a Jew. Not in Palm Springs though. Here it was a taunt. He also knew from the raw tone in Garf's voice that he was through joking, he was calling Harold out. Eye contact would have been fatal. He didn't know where to look and there was no room to walk away.

Earl laughed and patted Harold on the back. Good old Earl.

"They got room for piss-ant midgets in rodeo, I reckon how they got room for just about anybody who can ride. And I think we got us a rider here. Wadda you think to that, Harold?"

He didn't know what to think. He was glad that Earl was pleased with how he handled himself, but Harold Abelstein — the Rider? The C.C. Rider? He needed more time to figure things out.

LaVern Baker and the Gliders. Behind Faye Adams and in front of Bobby Blue Bland.

He knelt on the floor and pushed his face into the box. breathed in the plastic taste of the vinyl. Where would he be without rhythm and blues? Jew rodeo cowboy? Shee-it to that! C.C. Rider, see what you have done. Yes, yes, yes.

At last Harold found himself a comfortable position. He leaned back, closed his eyes and listened to Chuck Willis.

"BOOM, DA-BOOM, BOOM, DA-BOOM, DA, DA..."

She had given up asking him to turn down the volume. It didn't do any good. It only made him more sullen and her more irritable. And besides, after ten or fifteen minutes he would gradually turn it up again. Putting the most generous interpretation on that, she assumed that the repetitive thumping noise affected his brain so that he soon forgot she had asked him to turn it down. When she wasn't feeling so generous she blamed Harold, not the music.

Reaching over to the bedside table, she dipped pieces of Kleenex in her glass of water. She balled up the sodden mess, shaped it into two small cones and inserted them into her ears, pushing until they shut out most of the noise. Only a faint thudding reached her now, almost like a heartbeat. Tomorrow she'd have to remember to go to Ramon Drugs and get some real earplugs. Every night for the last three weeks she had been reminding herself of the same thing. Every morning her daytime life started again and she forgot to buy the earplugs.

Annoyance and pity. Pity and annoyance. She was driven back and forth between them like an emotional tennis ball. It had been like that since he had first arrived. How long was it? Mid-July? A little over two months. It seemed as if he'd been there forever, eating up her space, eating up her food, eating up her life. Annoyance.

"Thwack."

Pity.

Poor Harold. Poor darling. He had come home that afternoon looking as if he'd been beaten up. His cheek cut, a bloody scrape on one elbow, his clothes covered in dirt and stinking of horse manure .

"Bucking barrel," he said, smiling sheepishly.

"What, darling?" she asked in some alarm, reaching over to pick the straw from his hair.

He leaned away from her outstretched hand.

"Bucking barrel. You know one of those things they use to practice on."

"Practice? Practice what?"

"Bucking, you know, like in the rodeo. Bucking, Aunt Enid. Bucking."

"Bucking?"

"Horses, bucking horses. Don't you know about that? Rodeos I mean."

"No, darling, I'm sorry but I do not know about rodeos or bucking or horses or horse bucking or bucking barrels for that matter. How did you get yourself like this?"

“Fell off a couple of times, that’s all. I’m OK.”

He tried to push past. She blocked his way.

“A couple of times? You mean you actually let them do it to you, whatever it was they were doing to you, a couple of times? Harold,” she tapped the side of her head, “what’s going on up there?”

“Nothing, I mean, you know.”

“Ha! Ha! Nothing is right. Darling, do you know what you look like? Huh? A bad accident is what you look like. Which is like nothing to how you smell. A couple of times? Jesus! Harold Abelstein, I just...”

“It’s alright, Aunt Enid. Only a little bump or two, that’s all. And it was, well, I guess it was almost sort of fun, if you know what I mean.”

“Some sort of fun!” she exclaimed. “Come here, darling. I want you to look at something.”

She grabbed his arm and pulled him across the room to the full-length mirror by the front door.

“Here. You look at this. Huh? Does that look like a load of fun to you?”

Soberly Harold studied his reflection. After a moment he started to laugh. They both laughed. Enid had enjoyed that. It almost outweighed having the smell of horse manure in the living room.

“Let me put something on that elbow, darling. You wait there.”

It had been her day for cowboys one way and another. A few minutes after Harold went to have a shower, Earl’s father arrived at the back door.

“Yes?”

“Hello, Mrs. Carlson,” he said, standing outside the screen door hat in hand. “You remember me? Little Earl’s pa... father.”

“Sure,” she replied, “Of course I do. What can I do for you?”

“Nothing really. Say, mind if I come in for a minute, Mrs. Carlson?”

“Enid, please.”

“Sure thing. Do you mind?”

She did. Earl reeked of horses and sweat. The smell was worse than Harold’s. She pushed open the screen door anyway. They stood in the kitchen. She didn’t invite him or his stable stench any further.

“How’s the ankle?” he asked, idly slapping his hat against his leg.

“Ankle? Oh, yeah, the ankle. It’s fine, thanks.”

“The boy told me about the car and all. Sure sorry about that.”

“All fixed up now. What exactly can I do for you.”

“Get that eye when you went off the road, did you?”

“Yes I did. Getting better now though.”

“Glad about that. Good that is. Care for a cigarette?”

He held out a pack of Luckies.

“No thanks, Mr. Earl, I only smoke the menthol ones.”

“ ‘Course you does, I mean you do. And it’s just plain Earl. No Mr. to it. Some folks call me Big Earl, being as how Little Earl is also called Earl, if you catch my meaning. Sort of confusing, I guess. Comes from my pa, who was also called Earl. Then it was me they had to be calling Little Earl.”

The last time they’d met it had been at the stables, on his ground. He had been so damned cowboy laconic it had driven her crazy. Like some kind of second-rate Gary Cooper. Now that she thought about it, he did look a little like Gary Cooper. A tall, sharp-featured, handsome man, that is if you liked that cowboy sort of look.

She didn’t. She knew that behind the good looks, cowboys, especially those Okie cowboys — and he was one of those without a doubt — were mostly ignorant hayseeds whose idea of a good time was getting drunk and kicking each other senseless, which probably didn’t take them very long considering what they started out with. If that didn’t do the job they could always go home and sleep with their sisters or even their mothers. She thought that probably explained quite a lot. If the drinking and the fighting and the incest didn’t slow them down then they might put on their white sheets and burn a cross or lynch a colored person or both. If there wasn’t a colored person handy, they might have to settle for a Jew like that poor Leo Frank. And they smelled bad.

During the war the plant had been full of slow-talking, slow-moving, slow-thinking Okies just in from picking cotton in the valleys. She’d heard that some of them hadn’t even seen a flush toilet before, let alone used a proper bathtub. She could believe that too. Mostly they seemed polite enough, but on the whole they kept themselves to themselves.

Not that she was prejudiced against them. No, of course not. She wasn’t that kind of person. Wasn’t her best friend, Charlene, from Oklahoma? And didn’t she say the same things about Okies? Besides, Big Earl was a man and it was the men you had to watch out for. Charlene was always saying that.

Big Earl. Big Earl? Typical. Well now that Big Earl was on her ground, his cowboy laconic had been transformed into a kind of nervous loquacious. She smiled sweetly at him.

“... also told me about your father passing. I’m real sorry to hear about that too. ’

Suddenly, as if he had lost the thread, he stopped talking.

“Listen,” she began, “I don’t mean to be rude or anything, but...”

“Sure thing, honey, sure thing.”

Honey?

“It’s just that I wondered if you sorta might like to come out with me on Saturday for dinner. We could go...”

“What’s that?” she croaked.

“I said, I wondered...”

“No!” she blurted out. Then in a more controlled voice, “No thank you, Mr. Earl. I appreciate it very much. It’s very nice of you to ask me, but I’m afraid I have another engagement on Saturday night. But, thanks anyway.”

“ ‘Course you do,” he said. “Sorry to have troubled you. Maybe some other time.”

“It’s no trouble.”

He put his hat on and gave her what she took for an appraising smile.

“Well, that’s that. I guess I’d better be moseying along. Be seeing you.”

He stuck out his hand. He had big hands, deeply tanned with long, almost delicate fingers. The veins stood out prominently. She thought of Archie’s small, smooth hands, covered in dark hair. More like paws they were.

She removed one of the Kleenex plugs. Harold’s noise had stopped. Thank God. She threw both plugs onto the table and lit a cigarette.

If she got that checkout job at Mayfair she might as well go out with a damn Okie cowboy. All the other girls would be.

*No matter how I struggle and strive
I’ll never get out of this world alive.*

Little Earl prodded under the batter-covered steak with the spatula and then flipped it. He pulled away as the hot grease splattered up at him.

“Ha! How many times I told you not to do it like that?” his grandmother admonished sternly. “You ain't working in some ten-cent hash house.”

“Yes, Gran,” he answered.

He turned the second steak more carefully, watching his grandmother watching him. A sizzle this time but no spitting fat.

“That’s better,” she humphed at him. “Watch them potatoes now. Don’t let ‘em boil over. Make a mess of the stove that will.”

Cooking was a woman’s job. Everyone knew that. But for the last few years his grandmother had been too crippled to cook. His father offered to hire someone, but although she didn’t mind having the Mexican girl in to clean and help her with her private bathroom things, Maybelle Earl wasn’t about to have a stranger in her kitchen. Little Earl was, therefore, obliged to learn to cook and learn under the most constant and exacting guidance.

It was strictly a family thing and although he didn’t try to hide it, he never talked about his cooking. His friends knew but never teased him. It was another of his many commitments. Most of the other boys had chores to do at home but none had Earl’s grown-up responsibilities. They set him apart. Despite, maybe even because of the cooking, those responsibilities earned him respect. He accepted that respect without giving it too much thought one way or the other. That was all of one piece, for like his father, he was doer, not a dreamer or a worrier.

Recently, however, Earl had caught himself slipping. Not as far as actual worrying exactly, rather a kind of “mulling over” was how he liked to think of it. Mulling over the story his gran had told him about his mother. Every time he looked at the thin-armed young woman in the photograph next to his bed, it started up a whole parcel of unfamiliar feelings he couldn’t find a home for. The simple questions were a tad easier to handle, so he went after those. Where was she? Did she ever think about him at all? Did he have brothers and sisters somewhere? If he did, would that also make them his cousins, like the other twenty or so he had who lived up in Bakersfield and Fresno and Glendale? Brothers and cousins, cousins and brothers.

And what about his father? He’d always told his son how important it was to be one-hundred percent straight and honest. A man’s word is his bond and all that regular stand-up stuff. Now Little Earl knew he had been telling him just about the biggest lie there was to tell. It was that which really shook his foundations. All that kind of messy-family, skeleton-in-the-closet stuff was for the low life honky-tonkers that Hank Thompson and

Hank Williams were always singing about or the high-life Hollywood people with their low-life ways who came down to stay at the Racket Club. Not the Earls. No way. But there it was nonetheless. Big-time skeleton-in-the closet rattling its bones, big-time messy-family stuff, lapping up against him slow and quiet like sand blowing across the dunes.

“Where’s the gravy at?” his grandmother asked petulantly, as if he had forgot it on purpose.

He went back into the kitchen and fetched the pitcher.

“Pour her on for me. Please.”

She watched eagerly as the brown liquid filled up the spoon-shaped indentation in the mashed potatoes.

“I sure learned him how to make the gen-u-wine article,” she said after biting into a hot biscuit. “Don’t you reckon, Junior?”

“Uh-huh. I reckon so,” his father answered not looking up from this plate.

Little Earl knew when to circle carefully around his father and it was surely one of those nights. A night to be walking without his spurs. Black and towering quiet the old man was if he’d heard Bob Wills music playing somewhere. Maybe worse than that even. His “dead” wife worrying at him again? His grandmother wasn’t making things any better. She didn’t know anything about walking lightly.

“You ain’t eating, Earl Bob. What’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing, Mombelle. I’m just fine now.”

“Fine? That’s good chicken-fried steak waiting there on your plate. A few years back we’d have to work in the fields a month of Sundays to put something like that on the plate.”

“Don’t fuss so, Mombelle.”

“Even then, even after picking ‘til our backs was broke we never had nothing like that. Fine looking piece of meat. Boy cooked it good too.”

“I know that right enough.”

“Seven of you and none of you ever missed your dinner. No, sir. Never a one missed. I saw to it, I did.”

“I know that, Mombelle,” he said in a too-quiet, too-even voice. “Just leave her be now. Please.”

“I’m only after saying, Earl Bob, only after saying is all. Ain’t no need to sass me.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry.”

Little Earl sure didn't like it when his father and grandmother went for each other like that at the dinner table.

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There's Going To Be A Party

Harold dreaded going to the supermarket with Aunt Enid. She flopped about in her short-shorts and loose halter top. Everyone stared. She paid not the slightest attention. As she bent down to get a can of baked beans off a bottom shelf or reached up to dislodge a box of corn flakes from a top shelf, substantial areas of her tanned flesh yawned dangerously away from the restraining, straining cloth. Harold watched. Repelled and enthralled. Embarrassed for her, embarrassed for himself. And all the time she talked loudly, calling him, calling anyone — checkout girls, box boys, other customers, other customers' small children trapped in shopping carts — calling them *DARLING* in a voice so loud and piercing that it made the ketchup vibrate in the apparent safety of its bottles.

Nonetheless, thinking back, he was on balance pleased he had allowed Aunt Enid to talk him into going with her a few days before. It was on the way back home that he had first spotted Dave's Desert Discs. Just a quick shot through the car window of the sign. The name, two musical notes and a large black record. The store took up half of a one-story fake adobe building on a short cross-street between Indian Avenue and Palm Canyon Drive. He couldn't tell if it was open but when he got home he decided to risk the fifteen-minute walk back into town.

The prospect of buying records was exciting enough and the fear of sunstroke strong enough to make him wear his new hat.

"Howdy there, Tex," Dave called out as pushed open the door. "How are you be-bopping today?"

Perry Como was singing *Round and Round*.

Apprehension fluttered in Harold's stomach. Not a good omen at all. Then he saw Dave and he felt there might be some hope after all.

Dave, who Harold soon found out was not Dave but Benny Sparkle — although he was never convinced that was his real name — was the first black person Harold could remember seeing in Palm Springs. Early twenties maybe with a pencil mustache to make him look older. Sober Joe College clothes, thick glasses and, leaving aside the jive expressions, carefully spoken. Not at all like Tyrone Price or the never-saw-the-sun-paler-than-pale white guys with cigarette ash and breakfast down the front

of their shirts who ran the side-street record stores in Hollywood. Still he was a black man. That had to be good news.

“Country’s over there,” he said, pointing to the racks at the back of the store. “Got the latest. Webb Pierce, Johnny Cash, Marty Robbins, Jim Reeves, Red Sovine. Anything you want, you only have to ask, man.”

“Thanks,” he said looking urgently around the small store. “Uh, listen, have any recent releases, you know, of R&B stuff?”

“R&B?” Benny laughed. “R&B? Surely not. What kind of self-respecting cowpoke cat listens to that?”

Harold took off his hat. He ran his hand through his hair.

“Not really a cowboy, it’s the sun you see. Uh, too hot...”

“Too hot is right, man. Red Hot!”

Harold wanted to come back with “Doodly squat” but stopped himself. After all, even if the guy was black, he didn’t really know him.

Red Hot, Billy “The Kid” Emerson, Sun, yellow, 1955. That Harold did know.

“Never knew it could be so hot for so long. Hey now. Rock and Roll, is what you’re after, right? Here we are. Dig this. Pat Boone, Paul Anka, The Crickets, Elvis Presley, Dion and the Belmonts, Sal Mineo. Let’s see what else we have for you.”

He began to flip through the long wooden box of 45s.

“Please,” Harold said desperately. “Don’t you have any real R&B, the real, genuine stuff. You know like, um, Howlin’ Wolf or maybe Elmore...”

“Howlin’ Wolf!” Benny exclaimed in surprise. “Hey, man, you’re not jerking me around, are you? For real. A down-home, down-beat rhythm and blues man? I can dig that. A-mazing! You know how many people I’ve had in here asking for Howlin’ Wolf or Elmore James or even the Fat Man, who is as near as you can get to what white people think they want to hear from R&B? You know how many?”

“No.”

“Not a single one. Mind you I’ve only been open a week or so. Bought this place in the summer.”

“From Dave?”

“No. Cat’s name was Howard Krebs.”

“What about Dave?”

“I don’t know anything about Dave. Why? Think I should change the name of the store?”

“Donno,” replied Harold. “Dave’s Disks sounds sorta alright to me.”

“That’s what I figured and everyone knows it, don’t they? I had to pay for that. The name. The goodwill. You know the kind of thing I mean?”

Harold didn’t know and didn’t care what the man called his place. It had turned out to be a mirage not an oasis. A dried up well, worse — a Perry-Como-poisoned well. Why had he allowed himself to think it would be something different in the damn stupid hopeless desert? Perry Como and country music and Pat Boone and Deon and the fucking Belmonts. White kids’ teenage love crap. Mush. Not that he was prejudiced. He’d liked Presley, at least at first when he sounded a little black and a little bad. It was a genuine sound, like he meant it, like it was somewhere he came from. But after Harold saw *Love me Tender* that was the end of that. As for the rest of them, well Harold wasn’t about to waste his time or his money.

“Howlin’ Wolf,” Benny shook his head. “Well, I’m sorry but... Hey now, cowboy, don’t look so down in the dumps. Dig this.”

He pulled out another box of records from behind the counter.

“Bought these before I figured out what my market was,” Benny explained. “Bit heavy on the LA labels which are easier to get down here. Care to have a look?”

“Gee, thanks,” Harold exclaimed, his heart jumping. “Thanks a million!”

“You play this for me?” he asked, handing Benny *Short Fat Fanny* by Larry Williams.

“Of course,” Benny said, taking off Perry Como. “You know it’s getting harder and harder to keep these records separate. Rock and Roll and R&B and even country are getting so mixed up nowadays. Who knows anymore? I mean Elvis started out as a country singer, didn’t he? Is he a country singer now? You tell me. **Billboard** has got him on every one of their damn charts. But those you’ve got there are what you might call the real stuff.”

“How come,” asked Benny, “you’re so hot on this ragged-ass black-man’s music?”

Harold explained about his LA neighbor Alvin Harper, the blind vet and Delta Blues fanatic, who had made him listen and had taken him along to those dingy record stores with their unexpected treasures.

“Well, I’ll be damned! Harold Abelstein, I figure you and I are going to get along just fine and dandy, although I must admit to being more partial to the “B” in BeBop rather than the “B” in R&B. Charlie Parker, Diz, Kenny Clark, Mingus. You dig?”

Harold nodded but he wasn't listening too closely. He had noticed with some alarm that Specialty had changed its label. It was still yellow and white but they'd replaced the double wavy lines by a single solid line.

Too many changes. The charts all mixed up with each other, white men trying to sound like black men, black men trying to sound like white men. White men singing black men's songs and trying to sound like white men. And now they were screwing around with the damn record labels. He'd had it all so well under control. You couldn't depend on anything anymore.

"They all like this now?" he asked urgently.

"What's that?"

Harold pointed to the glaringly-new single line. Benny looked uncomprehendingly at the record.

"Didn't notice, man. What difference does it make?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied Harold hastily. "Right. No difference at all."

"Give you a new start, Enid honey. Can't be all bad. Besides might do you some good to get yourself a healthy piece of meat in that little ol' oven of yours."

"Charlene! Do me a favor, willya. Ha! Nice mouth."

"Don't get so la-de-da. He's a damn good looking man. Nice tight ass on him too."

"Good, Charlene. Just wonderful that is. Here I am worrying about finding the rent and all you can think of is a good screwing."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Might take your mind off 'a your worries."

"No it wouldn't. It would, he would, only become another one of my worries. And I don't need any more right now. Besides I don't even like the man."

"You don't have to like him to screw him."

"Charlene, he's an Okie cowboy for Christ's sake! I don't have to tell you what that means."

"Means?"

“Means? Charlene, remember what you yourself said to me about men from Oklahoma? Remember that? Drinking, whoring, fighting, lying, cheating on you, beating you up. And that was, as I recall you saying, if they were having a good day. A good day!”

“Is he actually *from* Oklahoma? I don’t know. Now, me, I *am* from Oklahoma. Proud of it too. Post-war edition, you might say. Not one of your Dustbowlers. Come out with a paid-for ticket on the Santa Fe.”

“Not talking about you, Charlene. Him I’m talking about. He’s a real cowboy with real horse shit on his boots. Not one of those fat guts from the club who owns a horse for polite riding or who dresses up to go on a breakfast ride. Not a weekend cowboy. Full time he is. Just look at him. Listen to him. Smell him for God sake!”

“My folks are still back there, back in Tulsa. Never moved. Jesus, why does everyone think if you come from Oklahoma you gotta be an ignorant, dirt-poor dirt farmer?”

“What would we talk about? Horses? The price of hay?”

“My father’s in dry goods. Of course, not in a big way. But not a farmer. Never has been. Whole family live in the city.”

“Bowling? Rodeos? The price of hay?”

“Had some cousins lived outside Muskogee. Now they were farmers.”

“Can you imagine him at the club? What would the girls say?”

“Sprigs, I think they were. That’s it. Arlene and Wilber Sprigs. Wonder what ever happened to them?”

“And what about Archie?”

“Come on, honey. What is there to think about with old Archie. You said he turned off your water, didn’t you? So what does it matter?”

“Yeah, but you know it... Besides, like I said, I don’t like the damn man. He’s sort of creepy.”

“Because he’s an Okie?”

“Charlene, please. We’ve been friends too long for you to be looking at me like that.”

“Looking at you like what? I just never thought you’d be like that.”

“Come on, Charlene. It’s not Okies as such. It’s this particular one. This particular Okie.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Charlene! Damn it!”

“If he was a Jewish cowboy, would that make it any different?”

“Jesus, Charlene. I don’t believe you’re saying all this stuff. What Jewish cowboy? Who? Hopalong Yossel?”

“I’m just saying, that’s all.”

“Saying that I am prejudiced against people from Oklahoma?”

“Okies.”

“OK. OK. OK’.

“You see! Ha! Ha! O K, Okie. Doncha see?”

“Be serious, willya.”

“Never been more serious in my whole entire pea picking Okie life.”

“Alright, Charlene, alright. If he was a Jewish cowboy, I still wouldn’t want to go out with him. There. Happy?”

“But he ain’t no Jewish cowboy.”

“No. That’s absolutely right. As far as we know he’s not a Jewish cowboy.”

“He’s an Okie.”

“You said you didn’t think he was from Oklahoma.”

“Don’t have to be from Oklahoma to be an Okie. You know we also got us Jews back in Oklahoma. Which means...”

“Cowboy, Charlene! Cowboy, cowboy, cowboy. Jew, Okie, Jap, Armenian, goddamn Bolivian for that matter. Whatever. Cowboy. Right?”

“OK, Enid. I’m hearing you. Still, a good looking man, wouldn’t you say?”

“If you like that sort.”

“By which you mean a...”

“Cowboy!”

“Uh-huh.”

* * *

Little Earl could barely read or write. He could recognize a few words was all, enough to get by with day to day things. He could also write down some words and sign his name. Those four letters had taken a lot of work but he had got so it didn’t bring him out in a sweat every time he had to sign something. He reckoned how he was lucky that his first and second names were the same and that they were so short.

At school they gave him all kinds of tests with blocks, with figures, with numbers, with pictures. He did them easily. It was just the reading and writing that wouldn't come.

He saw the letters right enough and could remember how some words were supposed to look. Most times he could hold on to two or three or even four simple words at once. But like an unsteady tower of wooden blocks, as he worked through a sentence trying to add one more and then one more the whole thing would soon collapse, leaving him staring helplessly at an uncollected collection of unconnected pieces. By the time he was in the 10th grade he could manage to word by word his way through the funny papers and had mastered Dick and Jane.

Damn stupid that was. He couldn't see the point to all the effort he had to put in.

“Run Spot Run. See Spot Run. See Dick Run. Run Dick Run.”

What good did that do anybody? Damn waste of time.

They put him in a special class of what they called Slow Learners. It was confusing and hurtful. If he hadn't been the person he was it might also have been embarrassing. It might have undermined his confidence. It did neither. He knew his worth. He knew that, except for the reading and writing he wasn't even close to being a slow learner. He also knew you didn't need to read and write to rodeo or to drive heavy equipment.

“All nonsense!” his grandmother said. “Don't learn 'em right, that's all it is. Boy's smart as a whip.”

“ ‘Course he is,” his father agreed. “Teachers at the high school told me that. High I.Q. they said. Higher than the average.”

“What's that mean?”

“Means the boy's smart, just like you been saying, Mombelle.”

“ ‘Course he is! ‘Course,” she crowed, twisting her body to find a more comfortable position in the wheelchair.

Little Earl got to feeling restless and itchy when they started in on his schooling. He just wanted to get on and get it over with so he could start living his real life. His grandmother and his father seemed hell bent on worrying at things and holding him up.

“Never have understood it. Boy's smart then he should be able to read. Stands to reason that does,” she said. “Look at those cousins of his, Elaine May's young uns. Elmer's too for the matter. Even them others up there in Glendale. They're blood kin and I love 'em, course I do, but they ain't what

you might call right clever, are they? Wouldn't care to trust most of 'em for the right time of day, let alone with all what you trust this boy with doing. And they can read, can't they?"

"Not that easy, Mombelle. I been trying to figure it out, but it just ain't that easy."

"You tell 'em over at the high school how everyone else in the family can read?" she asked. "All your brothers and sisters, your ma and pa. You tell 'em that?"

"Yes, ma'am. I told 'em and I've told you I've told 'em."

"Don't want 'em thinking there's something adrift among us Earls. You know what they'll be thinking, don't you? Huh? You know full well what that is."

She looked at them in triumph but neither met her fiery gaze.

That got her off on the old familiar song, a song she could find her way to given just about any note for a start up. How some people were always looking down on folks like them because of where they came from and what they once upon a time had to do to make a living. Then, as always, she worked it back around to That Book.

"That's all they can think on every time they hears us talking. Ain't that right? You know that's the truth too."

His father shook his head and stared at his boots. Little Earl tried not to listen too closely or care too much.

"How many of Them teach over there to the high school?"

"Them what?"

"You know what I'm taking about! Them! Them! His people."

"Oh. No way of knowing, Mombelle."

"Communists! That is besides the other. Shouldn't be allowed. Not in these times it shouldn't."

"It's nine o'clock, Gran," Little Earl said hopefully.

"Yes? What's that got to do with it?"

"*Gunsmoke.*"

That brought an abrupt end to all the talk about Judas Steinbeck and about school and about reading. Good old Marshall Dillon.

"You turn that sound up," his grandmother ordered. "And help me move this darned chair 'round."

It was a day or two after that his father sat down with him on the tack room steps and explained why he was going to send him to Date Grove

School.

He didn't slow down or even look as he went by her house.

He'd been wrong. Wasn't the first time. Wouldn't be the last. Just about spat him out of the house. Like those others after all. That's the way she wanted it, fine. Didn't make him no never mind. He was better off without getting himself tangled up with the woman. Anyways, it was shameless the way she dressed, showing off her titties like that. Wasn't right. Screwing around and he was sure to get himself screwed. No danged percentage in it at all. And if his mother found out there would be hell and more to pay and pay and pay and pay. Cowgirls. He knew where he was with them. Yeah, like with Ruth Ann.

"Some knowing that was, old hoss," he said out loud. "Some danged knowing for danged sure."

He pulled the pickup into the stables and got out. The dust from his stopping boiled up and rolled across the top of the truck. He walked though it towards the tack room.

"Hey, Earl," he called to his son.

"Hey, Pa,"

He and the Abelstein boy were putting fresh straw down in the stalls. Her nephew. Never come across anyone looked less like a Jew, big as he was and all that carrot hair. Didn't look nothing like his Aunt either. Slim she was, except up top of course, dark too. Hair, eyes, skin. Damn!

"Howdy, Harold. How you doing?"

"Fine thanks, Mr. Earl."

"This here boy treating you right, is he?"

"Yes, sir."

He never did quite figure out how his son got the other boys to help him with the chores, but he did. Always one or two of them hanging around. Sometimes girls too. Always willing to turn their hand to whatever needed doing. His son was a natural-born leader. That couldn't be taught. You either were or you weren't. Didn't need reading and writing for it. But he knew you did need reading and writing to get on, to run a riding stables and it worried him that Earl couldn't cut it with the book learning. No one had

been able to explain why. Maybe that fancy private school could help out like they said they could. It was worth a try.

“Expensive ain't it?” was the first thing his son had said.

“Not so bad. We been making more than good money with the stables. Don't you worry yourself on that score, Earl.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It's that I been thinking that you only got two more years of schooling and I reckon if there's a chance they can do something for you with the books and all that. You know what I'm talking about here.”

“Yes, sir. I guess I do.”

They were mostly country club out there at the school, probably smart-ass kids with fancy sports cars and too much money, not Little Earl's kind at all. So, he had expected at least some argument from his son. He didn't get one. It was the same when he'd been little and his grandmother had made him take big old spoons of castor oil. The boy hated it, made a face, but never complained. He opened his mouth and swallowed it down. Yes, the boy had turned out just fine. Someone he could be real proud of.

“Come on now,” he said to them. “Put up them forks and I'll buy you both a drink.”

They stuck the pitchforks into a bale and walked over to the tack room. He went inside, put in a dime in the chest cooler and pulled a bottle along the metal slides until it clicked out at the end. It was about time he got in something a little more modern. After all it was 1957. Besides he had to keep up with the other stables in town if he wanted to stay in business.

“Horses come in today, son?” he said squatting down with the two boys in the afternoon shade.

“Yes, sir. First thing this morning. Five of 'em. They brought Mr. Butler's mare in about an hour ago.”

“Brush her down?”

“Yes, sir. Soon as she were unloaded.”

Season was starting up again. Dude string to gentle and get into shape. People bringing in their horses to board. Have to hire on a head wrangler pretty damn quick too. He'd had to fire Slim Peters. Shame that was. Knew what he was doing well enough but wasn't sober enough of the time to do it. An old hand too. Worked the King Ranch down in Texas. Cowboys! He liked them, of course he did. Most of his friends were sort of cowboys or just about sort-of cowboys, but too many of the ones he could get for the

job were the genuine article, real honest-to-goodness cowboys, meaning shiftless saddle tramps who didn't care for taking on responsibility. Couldn't run a business that way. Slim had been good with horses but that wasn't enough. When you ran a stables in Palm Springs you had to be good with people too and tourists were damned hard to please. Slim didn't try with them. Chewed tobacco and spat a lot. Too much cowboy for a dude stables. They wanted something cleaner, like they saw in the movies or on their televisions. He'd have to see to getting someone else straight away.

"You boys going do some riding this evening? Those horses been up to Idyllwild kicking and getting pasture fat. Have to ride that out before we put up any dudes on 'em."

"Yes, sir," his son said. "You game for some hard riding, Harold."

"Uh-huh," the other answered unsurely.

"New boots?" Big Earl asked Harold.

"Um, yes, sir. New."

"You wanna do something with hat. Throw some dirt on it or stomp on it. Can't have my hands looking like no dudes, can we now?"

The boy appeared to be startled, then after a few seconds managed to grin.

No sir, he sure didn't look like a Jew at all.

Big Earl finished his bottle of Pepsi and dropped the empty into one of the small square cells in the wooden box.

Good Old Oklahoma

*Oh, Rock of Ages hide thou me
Hide thou me
Oh, Blessed Rock of Ages hide thou me
Hide thou me
There is no other refuge only Thee
Only Thee
Sometimes I'm weary sad and blue
So sad and blue*

When she was a barefoot girl going to the Church of God in Pine Mountain, Kentucky, Maybelle Earl loved Jesus and knew for a certain fact that Jesus loved her too. That mutual love grew when her folks moved to Oklahoma and when she got married to Earl at the Assembly of God Church in Magna Carta. She'd even stayed strong in her religion when she came out West, although it was hard to find a church or a congregation where she felt at home what with all the moving around they had to do to find work. Mostly they'd gone with the Baptists, as they seemed to be a more respectable class of Christian. Not so much shouting, talking in tongues and such low carry on. It was only when she arrived in Palm Springs in 1944, that she finally lost touch with any particular church. There was a Baptist Church but they weren't the same kind of Baptists that she'd known up near Bakersfield and she never felt really welcome. The Assembly of God wasn't much better. They had a woman pastor. Besides, church going was a family thing and until Earl came back from the war there was no one but her and young Earl. Nonetheless, regular churchgoing or no regular churchgoing, Maybelle still loved Jesus and knew for a certain fact that Jesus loved her too. That was the only reason she agreed to go up to Yucca Valley.

"I hear it's really something grand to see, Mombelle. Uplifting."

"Haven't seen it yourself then?"

"No, just heard tell, that's all."

With exaggerated effort she wheeled her chair closer to where he was sitting.

“Since when was it you was so concerned with the uplifting, Earl Bob? Thought you was more interested in them honky-tonks.”

“You know that just ain't true, Mombelle,” he laughed. “I got me a business to be running. Besides there ain't no real honkytonks in Palm Springs. Gotta go all the way over to Indio to find one.”

“I wouldn't know about that,” she replied tartly. “What you doing there, girl?”

“Nada, señora. Limpiando.”

She didn't understand why Earl Bob could only find her slow Mexican girls. There must be Americans who needed work and who could talk good English.

“What's she saying there, Junior?”

“Nothing, Mombelle.”

“Don't tell me nothing, I might not understand but I can still hear.”

“She said ‘nothing’ in Spanish. She's cleaning is what she said she's doing.”

“Cleaning? Ha! That might be what they calls it over there across the border, but we got us another name for it up here in America. Cleaning!”

“Señor?”

“Nada, Carmen,” he said. “No es importante.”

“Never did know where you learned yourself to talk Mexican, Earl Bob.”

He picked a sliver of straw off the side of his boot and put it carefully in the ashtray on the low table in front of him.

“I reckon it would do you good to get out of the house for a spell,” he said.

“Out into that?” she asked pointing at the window. “It's too hot for an old cripple woman. Can't hardly breathe for the heat.”

“Now, Mombelle, it's always cooler up there in the high desert. Besides, didn't Jesus take hisself off to preach in the desert?”

“Not this desert, He didn't. And what's got you so interested in Jesus all of a sudden?”

“Not exactly interested. Thinking about you, was all.”

“Right nice of you, Earl Bob.”

“Well, we got to go up that way to pick up a couple of horses, so I just thought you might like to see her, that's all.”

“Statues you said?”

“There's a church up there too.”

“Church? What kind of church?”

“Donno. Just a church. Does it matter?”

“Might. There’s churches and then there’s churches, if you know what I mean.”

“Uh-huh. Sure thing.”

“Statues of Jesus?”

“Yeah, Mombelle. Jesus and some of them others too. Fifty or more of ‘em.”

The fierce light went on in her eyes. She gripped the sides of her chair.

“Sounds a lot like Rome to me, Earl Bob! Yes, sir, a lot like them Romanists.”

“Rome?”

“The Pope, priests, Rome, Earl Bob, Rome! Graven images! Romanists!”

“Oh, that. No, Mombelle, I’m sure it ain’t like that at all. Just statues they are.”

“Can’t be worshipping no idols. Pagans do that. Can’t be doing her and that’s flat. Ain’t what the Lord intended.”

“No one’s after asking you to do no worshipping. Just have a look, why doncha? No harm in that, is there?”

“Can’t be too careful. Poison is poison.”

“Only statues, Mombelle.”

She fumbled with something in her lap, which was in fact nothing. It gave her time to think.

“Having to lift me up into that pickup truck, well, I don’t know.”

“You know that ain’t any trouble. Little Earl’ll be coming along.”

It seemed to be pretty important for Earl so she finally agreed to go. What she hadn’t counted on was the big Jewish kid.

“Hello, Mrs. Earl,” he said, climbing into the back of the pickup.

“Hello there yourself.”

Whoever heard of a red-headed Jew? Weren’t no such thing. Maybe he’d been adopted. That was probably how it was. Looked more Irish, which meant Catholic and weren’t they just about as bad as the Jews? Worse maybe. All those bleeding crucifixes and all that bowing down in front of idols. All them statues. Wasn’t Christian.

The pickup bucked violently as it hit a pothole. Harold rose a few inches off the bed of the truck and then was slammed painfully back down onto the hard metal. His Stetson stayed suspended in the air for a long moment and then followed him, landing on his head, falling forward over his eyes and finally escaping from him completely.

“Shit!” he shouted, grabbing for the hat.

He missed. The hat fell off and bounded away across the wildly-careering truck bed. Harold lunged for it just as the truck hit another hole. The jolt sent him sprawling forward on his stomach, the hat just inching from his outstretched hand.

“Hold on, partner,” Earl called over to him, retrieving the hat. “Worse than that damn barrel, ain't it?”

Harold nodded his agreement. He took hold of one of the spare wheels bolted to the inside of the truck and hauled himself straight. Earl handed him the hat.

Up until a few minutes before, when they turned off the main road, it had been going real well. To his surprise he was even enjoying riding in the back of the pickup. Maybe a mite too hot, but as they climbed the steep and winding road up from Palm Springs the wind had cooled to where it was almost pleasant. It had been a smooth ride too, with wide open views of the mountains and the desert. The best part for Harold though was when cars pulled up behind, waited for their chance and then passed them, the people staring over at the pickup. They looked all closed up inside their cars, like hot-dogs wrapped in cellophane. With the horse trailer hitched on the back and their hats he knew those ordinary, day-to-day people were saying things like, “Hey, Larry, look at those cowboys.” His mother and father had been like that — tightly-wrapped finger pointers. But he wasn't one of them anymore. No, sir. Now he was the something special. Exciting even. Him, Harold Abelstein. But those ordinary people couldn't see the “Harold” or the “Abelstein.” They only saw “Cowboy”. He tried to appear unconcerned. Cowboys did.

Cowboys? But, he didn't want to be a cowboy, did he? Even if he wanted to, how could he be? “Never heard of no Jew rodeo cowboy”. For sure that was. More importantly, there was the music. Some county stuff wasn't too bad, he had to admit that, but most of it was pretty damn sick making.

Besides who ever heard of a cowboy who listened to Muddy Waters? Then again, none of the Jewish kids he knew at Fairfax High listened to Muddy Waters either. Or Joe Turner or Johnny Ace or Jimmy Rogers or any of the others. R&B. Nigger music the Jewish kids at Fairfax called it. Nigger music Earl called it. Of course, he didn't know any better, did he? How could he know anything stuck out in the damn desert? No, not the music for Jews and not the music for cowboys. Nonetheless, being asked by Big Earl to ride in the back of the pickup made him feel unexpectedly good and no worrying about music could change that.

“Going to get them horses over in Pioneertown,” Little Earl, had explained. “Them ones we saw a few weeks back.”

‘Oh, yeah, them.’

“Have to stop off in Yucca Valley so Gran can take a look at some Jesus stuff.”

“Jesus?”

“Yeah. Donno really. Some desert crazy lives up there and been making up these statues. Anyroad, my gran, well she's real hot on Jesus and all that good stuff, so Pa thought we might as well stop off. ’

Harold didn't care about Jesus one way or the other but Little Earl's grandmother scared him just about bloodless. The way she sat hunched in her wheelchair her bumpy-crooked hands clamped onto the arm rests like swollen claws and those ferocious little eyes always digging into him. He felt she didn't like him much either, but Little Earl said it was just her way and not for him to pay any mind to it. He couldn't not.

Fortunately, she rode up in the front with Big Earl so he didn't have to suffer looking at her looking at him.

They were headed up a dirt road towards a low ridge. Harold clung on to the tire for all he was worth. Earl, holding loosely onto a leather strap hooked to the side of the truck, was riding the bumps with a steady unstudied ease.

The truck stopped. Harold clambered down awkwardly, his legs and back aching. With the engine off it was absolutely still. Not even a bird singing. All around them were mesquite, scrub, cactus, dozens of tall Joshua trees with all their hairy arms sticking out every which way and white sand, miles of it. Harold looked across to a run of low hills on the other side of the desert floor which lay below them. In front and slightly to the left of the

truck was a crude one-story shack made out of stones with a bright blue roof. Next to it stood a large unpainted wooden cross.

Big Earl stepped down from the cab, took off his hat and using the same hand in which he held the hat he wiped his sleeve across his forehead. Under the shade of his upraised arm he first looked up towards the cross and then squinting ever so slightly, enough to engage the wrinkles at the corner of his eyes, he let his gaze trail slowly across the hill.

Harold watched, his dirt-dry mouth slightly open. He wondered how they learned to do it like that. All the moves so cowboy perfect. Father and son. Were they born like that? Did they learn it somewhere? He imagined a school room full of would-be cowboys arms raised to wipe their brows and shield their eyes. Just so. He laughed out loud. Harold jumped as his own sudden, unexpected noise ruptured the desert silence. As if to complete the job his laugh echoed back down the hill. A raucously-hollow reverberation.

“What’s that?” asked Little Earl’s grandmother sharply from the cab of the truck. “What in tarnation is you laughing at?”

Despite the mid-day heat, all of Harold froze.

“Nothing, Mrs. Earl,” he managed finally. “It just...”

“Humph!” she humphed. “Don’t take much to figure what *you’d* be laughing at!”

Harold couldn’t understand how she knew about the cowboy class going on in his head. He started to laugh again but just managed to hold it back.

“Y’all be careful with that,” the old woman shouted as he and Earl lifted down her chair from the back of the truck.

“Where’s them statues at, Junior?” she demanded of her son once she was safely in her wheelchair.

Big Earl shook his head. Little Earl shook his head. Harold tried to smile hopefully at the fierce old lady, although hopeful was about the last thing he felt. As far as he could see there were no statues of Jesus or of anyone else on that desert hillside.

Earl smoothed back his hair with one hand and put on his hat with the other, tipping the hat back and then tugging the brim down just enough to shade his eyes. No damn statues. He tapped the right front tire with the toe of his

boot. It was getting so you couldn't count on anybody. Even about things like Jesus. Then, of course, there were women. But you never could count on them anyway, except to make your whole damn life a damn misery. That was almost a sure thing. Maybe they'd got the wrong place. Hadn't the sign down on the highway said Desert Christ Park? He cast around once more. Nothing but a little bitty hut and a cross. He'd been seeing crosses one way and another his whole life, until he didn't hardly see them anymore.

The seeing but not seeing was because Earl had never got on any too well with his mother's religion. He believed in Jesus Christ, of course he did, and in God and in the Good Book as well but that was about as far as it went. As a boy he had been forced to go to church with his brothers and sisters, first at the stomping and shouting church in Oklahoma then up around Bakersfield with the Baptists. He didn't take to it at all. None of them, except his mother and perhaps his two sisters did. His father refused to attend any church, but had allowed his wife to do what she wanted with the children. He explained to Earl that he'd just have to put up with it because religion is what some women did and he wasn't about to make his life any more difficult by going against it.

When he could get the price of a bottle his father did a lot of hard drinking. His mother always said that's what killed him. Earl didn't know about that but figured since the old man was dead there was nothing to be gained by worrying at it, especially as that was the story which made his mother happy. Satan and whisky. Jesus and everlasting life.

What had finally stopped him going to church for good was his father dying in '38 and his mother having him buried by the Baptists. It didn't seem right at all. Then a couple of months after the funeral the stick-necked preacher took strong against the strike in Kern County. He'd preached Hell-fire and Damnation. Said that joining a union was a sin against the Lord. Earl was only just gone seventeen at the time, but he knew for certain that the only sin going on was the cotton growers cutting their already miserable wages. He and his older brother Elvin went with the union and they went to jail for it.

He didn't know it at the time, but going to jail was the making of his life. After they got out the Earl brothers found themselves blacklisted as labor agitators. Unable to find jobs in the valley, they had been forced to go to Palm Springs to work for their father's half brother. The old man died two years later leaving the small stables, part to his daughter back in Oklahoma

and the other part to his two nephews. With Elvin gone it now belonged to Earl and his cousin Rita. If he'd listened to those damn preachers he'd still be up there in Bakersfield doing God knows what.

At that moment he figured he could do with being in Bakersfield or just about anywhere except a miserable, statue-less hillside above Yucca Valley. His mother was raising every manner of hell and was sure to keep it going at him all the way up to Pioneertown and then back home. Hours of it yet to come down.

"You mean to say you hauled me all the way out-cheer for nothing? You know how hard it is for a body in a wheelchair to get about in this blasted desert?"

She pointed at the wheels, one sunk inches into the soft sand, the other balanced on a small flat rock.

"See that? Well, sometimes I don't reckon you do, Earl Bob. No, I surely don't."

"I surely am sorry, Mombelle. This fella told me that it was here."

"Told don't cut no wood, do it? Told! What fella? What fella? Always some fella telling. You seeing anything like a statue out-cheer? I sure don't."

The two boys were quiet, scuffing at the sand and studying hard at the view.

"You folks looking for me?"

Earl almost jumped. The man appeared out of the still air. One minute the space was empty, the next he was there filling it. Tall, desert thin and the color of mahogany, with long hair almost down to his shoulders and a small gray-streaked goatee. The red and green silk scarf tucked into his open shirt cut down pretty much on the Earl's first-off imagining of Buffalo Bill.

"Statues?" Earl asked.

The man's face darkened.

"No more there aren't."

"What's that supposed to mean?" demanded Maybelle.

"I've taken them down is what that means, Madam."

"Don't you be madaming me, young fella. I come all this way out-cheer to look at some statues is what I done. Not to be madamed at, I ain't. Though I gotta tell you I don't hold with the graven image, especially of Our Lord, I don't. Romanish it is. Worshipping them so-called saints and their so-called bones. Bad enough without them graven images."

“Let me assure you...”

“But my son here, he was after telling me how wonderful and uplifting they was. That’s what you said, weren’t it, Junior? Uplifting? So I figures no harm in having a look see at it. And now you stand there to tell me they ain't here?”

“They’re here.”

“You just said they ain't. They either is or they ain't. Make up your mind. Which is it? Here or ain't here?”

“I know what I said, Mrs. Ah...”

“Earl, if you must know.”

“Please, Mrs. Earl, if you’ll let me explain.”

He stopped, anticipating an interruption, but she just sat there in her crookedly-beached wheelchair glaring at him, defying any explanation. Earl risked a wry smile. Poor old Buffalo Bill didn’t know what he’d let himself in for.

“You see, I’ve had to take them down because of the Pastor,” he said, waving a hand vaguely in the direction of the hut and the cross. “Man wanted to charge admission! Well, there’s no way I’m going to allow that. My work is here for world peace, not for profit. You know what Jesus said about the moneychangers in the temple, don’t you?”

“ ‘Course I do,” shot back Maybelle. “Wadda you take me for anyways, a heathen?”

“Well this,” he said, stretching his arms wide to embrace the desert surrounding them, “this is my temple. God’s temple. And,” he turned and shouted towards the blue-domed hut, “I’ll have no moneychangers here! No moneychangers!”

Earl had come across lots of people like him before. Either they came to live alone in the desert because they were nuts or they lived so long in the desert they became nuts. They all got that stringy look too. Arms and necks and faces all pared down to the bones and sinews. Like the sun had sucked out all their juice as well as whatever common sense they may have started out with.

“Atomic war, Mrs. Earl. That’s right, atomic war, Armageddon.”

Earl nodded his head, agreeing wholeheartedly with his own assessment of the man, but the man seemed to accept the nod as approval of his mushroom-clouded vision. He smiled and reached out a hand. Earl hesitated before taking it. The hand was as hard as ironwood.

Buffalo Bill squatted down by the side of the wheelchair. His tone became confidential and urgent.

“It will surely come unless we do something about it. Politicians have all failed to do that, haven’t they? The only solution is in the hands of the people of all the world’s religions. If all the masses of the world demanded an end to killing, aggression, hatreds that breed conflict, to oppression of those of different skin or belief, they would have the power to prevent war, the Final War. I figure somewhere along the line we’ve become lost. How can it be that enemies pray to the same god for each other’s destruction? That’s not right. That’s not what Christ taught, is it? No. Love is what he taught. My statues are to remind people of His teachings of peace and love. How can you charge admission for that?”

He stood up and faced towards the hut.

“Only if you’re a miserly charlatan!”

“Communists!” shouted Earl’s mother. And then in a softer more distracted voice, “Sounds like to me anyways.”

“What? No, Mrs. Earl, I wouldn’t say that about the Pastor. Lots of other things maybe, but not that.”

“Not him,” she insisted. “Not him. All that stuff about ‘Final War’ and ‘love and peace’, Communist is what it is.”

“Oh, I see,” said the man, cocking his head to one side to get a different view of her. “I see, I see. Well that is interesting, isn’t it? Come on,” he called out, now addressing them all. “Let me show you what the good Pastor has brought about by his Caesar’s greed.”

It was impossible to push the wheelchair through the sand, so Earl and the two boys carried his mother in her chair. Fortunately they didn’t have to go far. Not more than twenty yards on the other side of a massive mesquite bush they found a D-8 Cat. In front of it dozens of gigantic crisp white bodies had been bulldozed into a large, confused pile, legs and arms stiffened and broken. Like those photos Earl had seen in *Life* of the concentration camps in Germany, except these bodies were unnaturally rounded, unnaturally white, unnaturally well-fed. Some of them had chunks of concrete gouged out of their sides. The rusty skeletons of reinforcing steel showed through the alabaster bone of the concrete. The faces that could be seen were expressionless. Maybe that was because most of them had had their noses chiseled off.

“Jesus Christ!” Harold giggled.

“You hush up with that blaspheming!” the old woman snapped. “Our Lord don’t hold with it.”

“Up there,” said the man pointing to the hill above them.

They all turned as one to look. About fifty yards up the rugged slope, amidst the cactus and scrub was a 10-foot-high statue of Christ on his knees, arms lifted to heaven. Behind him obscuring the way to the Pearly Gates was a thin cockleshell reef of clouds.

“That’s the first one I made and the only one I couldn’t get at with the Cat. Have to leave it I guess. Let him charge his damn admission for that and see how far he gets with it! Ha! I’ll say good day to you all.”

The man swung around abruptly and walked away towards a small trailer set in among a stand of Joshua trees.

They stood there for a while looking at the violated, noseless corpses of the statues and at the supplicant Christ on the hill. There wasn’t much else to be done. After a while they carried his mother back to the pickup and drove on to Pioneertown.

Being Jewish had never concerned Enid very much. Her parents had been second generation and eager to be real Americans, to forget their parents’ strange habits and funny talk. They were concerned particularly with forgetting her father’s parents, who were committed anarchists, and that proved easy as they were both deported back to Russia with Emma Goldman a year after Enid was born. The family never heard from them again. Her mother’s mother was equally obliging about not hanging around and being an old-Country-Jew embarrassment. She had the good grace to die about the same time.

Jewish for the Cohens was a few words of Yiddish and talking about whether to go to synagogue once a year on Rosh Hashanah, and then never going. They were also extremely scrupulous about not celebrating Christmas.

“What kind of Jews have a Christmas tree?” her father had sternly admonished his two daughters with the zeal of Moses denouncing the Children of Israel for worshipping the golden calf.

When they asked about Hanukah her father transformed himself into a fervent anarchist and loudly denounced such things as superstitious bourgeois nonsense.

“Bread and circuses for the workers. That’s all it is. May Day, now that’s one of your real genuine holidays. A worker’s day.”

When Enid asked whether that meant Passover was bread and circuses without bread or circuses, her father refused to be amused.

Although she never felt particularly Jewish and didn’t spend much time thinking about it, being a Cohen announced her Jewishness to the world and she had been stuck with other people making her Jewish. The occasional remarks were easy to ignore. Even changing her name so she could keep her first job in Palm Springs hadn’t bothered her unduly. Like her parents, Enid was a real American. What did Jewish matter to a real American?

So why had she been upset about Harold’s visit to the Desert Christ Park? Why had it made her suddenly feel so damn Jewish? Maybe it was the same reason crosses and crucifixes always made her feel Jewish, although she’d never figured that out either.

“It was sorta neat, you know. I mean this big white Christ thing up on the hill with it’s, his I mean, his arms raised. So quiet out there, Aunt Enid. Spooky really with all those Joshua trees and stuff. You know you could really feel there was something there too. I mean, something *going on* there. Going on more than was going on, if you know what I mean.”

Enid stared at her unexpectedly talkative nephew with alarm and not a little incomprehension.

“I mean, you see there were all these other statues that this guy who made them had knocked down and put in a big heap and they were just lying there looking dead and bashed up pretty bad too. It was like this big Christ guy up on his hill was looking down at them and praying for them or something. Maybe he was angry at the guy for knocking them all down. I don’t know, you could feel something strange was going on there. At least that’s the way it seemed to me. Earl said sometimes Christ took some people like that, even Jewish people. Making them feel like something was going on. I mean, you know Christ himself started off being a Jew, although you wouldn’t know it looking at that statue. You know? So why not?”

“Why not what, Harold?”

“Ah, why not... uh, well, why... I don’t know really. Sorry.”

It was the most she had ever heard Harold say all at once. That and urgency in the telling made Enid uneasy. A big white Christ on a hill? Piles of “dead” statues? Surely not Harold. Too much sun maybe.

“And Earl’s grandmother was all angry, calling it Roman or something like that.”

“Roman?”

“Yeah. And then something about the Communists too. Doesn’t make any sense to me either, but then she’s a cripple, isn’t she?”

“I wouldn’t know, Harold. Anyway, what does that have to do with it?”

“I donno. I thought maybe it made her sort of funny. Oh yeah, almost forgot, Mr. Earl, he said to say howdy.”

“Howdy?”

“That was exactly what he said. He said, ‘Say howdy to your aunt for me.’ ”

“Howdy?” she asked again, looking at him blankly.

“Yeah, Howdy. Howdy! Howdy! Howdy!”

“Harold?”

Harold slumped to the floor laughing uncontrollably.

“Howdy! Howdy!” he shouted between the attacks of laughing.

Enid quickly moved the coffee table to prevent him smashing into it.

“What the hell’s so funny about that?” she demanded. “Harold!”

Harold rolled and beat his fists on the floor.

“Howdy! Howdy! Howdy Doody! Howdy Doody! Howdy, Howdy, Howdy Doody!”

“Really, Harold!”

But she couldn’t resist and soon joined him, sitting on the couch and laughing until her mascara ran, until her sides ached, until she felt as if she was going to pee in her pants, until she didn’t feel so damn Jewish anymore.

We Might As Well Forget It

Little Earl kicked one heel and then the other of his new black and white sneakers against the asphalt and looked off down the long line of flat-roofed, single-story tract houses with their thin front yards pushing sand onto the empty road. At one end, a mile or so away, the mountains rose out of the desert, sudden and sharp and high, silver flecks in the vast flat walls of granite sparkling from the morning sun. Down at the other end of the black strip, sand and mesquite and far off in the distance high pink dunes and behind them the rounded humps of the Little San Bernadinos. About ten days before his father had got him up in the middle of the night to see the Northern Lights silently dancing their colors over those mountains. It was the first time anybody could remember seeing the Lights so far south. His grandmother said it was a sign, but she didn't say of what.

It was still high-summer hot and almost the end of September. Didn't figure at all. Must be at least 80° and it wasn't even nine o'clock. Would go over 100° again for sure. He smiled thinking what his grandmother would say about that. The hard heat didn't bother him like it did most others. He welcomed the way it kept people inside, the way it burned everything clear and clean and simple. When the temperature came down and the seasonals and the tourists started coming back it changed things, like the desert wasn't his anymore. Still and all, it was only then that the stables made any money and there was no way around that.

He unwrapped a stick of gum, folded it and stuck the dry wad into his mouth. He didn't want to wear the damn soft shoes or go to this damn school. He knew what his friends would say. They'd already started saying it. He hadn't complained to them though, as he didn't like whining and bellyaching or people who did. He looked at his watch and then off down the road. Still no sign of the bus.

They'd told him he couldn't drive his pickup in for the first week. That was the hardest thing to swallow.

"We give the seniors priority with the parking," the principal had explained. "But, give it a few days and we'll see if we have the space in the lot. OK?"

“Yes, sir.”

A stiff for sure. Broken-veined red face and chest puffed out like a pigeon. Rocked onto the back of his heels as he talked. Shoes like polished mirrors. Gray hair cut severely short on the sides. An ex-army man and no mistake.

“I’m positive you’re going to like it here with us,” he said as he shook Earl’s hand.

A soft damp handshake. Earl wanted to wipe his hand on his pants but stopped himself.

“Yes, sir.”

“Although we only have one hundred students, we like to think of ourselves as one big family here at Date Grove School. We work hard, we play hard and we turn out first class students. One big family, Earl.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Your father tells me that you’re quite the horseman, Earl. Is that correct?”

“I get by with it, yes, sir.”

“That’s fine. You know when I was younger I played a spot of polo. That was back East, of course. You have your own horse, do you?”

“Yes, sir. An Appaloosa mare.”

“That’s fine. Perhaps one day you’ll show her to me.”

Earl could tell he didn’t mean it. That didn’t matter though. It was only talk. Teachers were always talking.

“Yes, sir. Be my pleasure.”

The school wasn’t like anything he had expected, although he hadn’t had any firm idea of what to expect. The small classrooms, each with its own sliding glass door, were in three long and narrow one-story buildings set in a wide horseshoe arch around a grass playing field. A wire backstop stood on the part of the field closest to the buildings, while at the other end was a small swimming pool and further on a basketball court. More like a damn sissy country club than a proper school.

“We’ll be giving you special tutoring, Earl. Sometimes I’ll be doing it, sometimes Mr. Giddins will teach you. We’re going to work, work, work until we break through with that reading of yours. OK? You don’t appear to be a boy who’s afraid of hard work. Is that correct?”

“No, sir. I mean yes, sir.”

“Good lad. I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

“Yes, sir.”

A country club and sure to be full of rich kids like those that came to ride at the stables in the new cowboy stuff their mothers had bought for them.

At least he would get away from the “Slow Learners” over at the high school. That was about the only plus he could see. That and maybe getting some reading and writing. His friends saw it somewhat differently.

“Gotta be some bitchin’ chicks out there, Earl,” Garf had said. “Just gotta be. Them rich ones under all their fancy stuck up shit, they all want some straight old cowboy dick. Shee-it, fucking yes they do! Be like shooting monkeys in a barrel.”

“Sure thing, partner,” Earl replied. “You know all about that, do you?”

“Monkeys is what he knows about for sure,” Tommy laughed. “You see that girl he was out with last week? Banana bait and no mistake.”

“Shee-it!” Garf replied, grabbing his crotch. “I’d be fucking your mother if she’d come down out of her fucking tree. I know that and no mistake.”

“The only thing you know, Garf, is your little old warty left hand,” Jingles said.

Garf had tried to punch him but Jingles easily smothered the smaller boy’s attack within the indelicate embrace of his thick Aldo Ray arms.

“Did you know something fellas?” Tommy said thoughtfully. “If you sit on your hand ‘til it goes dead to sleep and then beat your meat it feels like someone else is doing it?”

The conversation stopped dead in the water as they had all turned to look at Tommy. The looks varied from boy to boy. Wonder. Disbelief. Curiosity. Respect.

Earl sucked on the now-tasteless gum. He was going to miss having his friends around at school. They made a big difference.

A blue Volkswagen bus pulled up and stopped. A youngish, balding man in the driver seat leaned out the window.

“Good morning to you. You Earl?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right, hop in, Earl. We’re running late.”

The side door slid open. Earl spat out the gum, ducked his head and climbed inside.

* * *

It was much, much worse than he had imagined. A small, hot bus crammed full of noisy little kids.

“What? No. From the sixth grade,” the driver explained. “Don’t get so many your size — age is what I meant to say — riding on the bus. Most drive in their own cars or come with their friends. Shut-up back there! One more word out of you, McCrum, and you’ll get a detention!”

The noise settled for a moment and then slowly started to build again. Harold was sure he heard “fat” and “red” amid the snickering. He ignored it. It was impossible to defend yourself against kids like that, especially when you were so big.

“Mr. Lewis,” the driver said, sticking out his hand.

“Uh, thanks,” replied Harold, twisting around awkwardly in the seat to shake hands. “Harold Abelstein.”

“Well, Harold, when I’m not driving this zoo wagon, I teach biology and rocks. Geology really, but most of the kids call it rocks. Some jokers, huh? I could care less, as long as they do the work. You interested in rocks, Harold?”

“Never thought much about it, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course not, why should you. But out here in the desert it’s quite a subject. Lots of rocks out here. Strata, granite boulders as big as houses, some places you can even see down into the fault lines. The San Andreas runs only a few miles from here. We go on field trips too. I’m sure... Right! McCrum, you’re in Mr. Hills office at first recess. Got that?”

Mr. Hills was the principal or, as he introduced himself to Harold, “The Director.”

Mr. Hills withdrew his hand, Harold wiped his on his pants leg. Aunt Enid shouted silently at him but it was too late to take it back. Mr. Hills didn’t appear to notice, he was rocking back and forth, looking at the ceiling.

“Your Aunt tells me you have quite the record collection, Harold,” he had said.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

From across the room his aunt’s heavy red lips were fluttering a silent, urgent message at him.

“I mean yes. A record collection. Sir, a record collection. Uh, yes, sir, that’s what I have. Collection, that is I have. Of records... Sir.”

He giggled, then felt himself blushing. Aunt Enid had closed her eyes.

“Modern records, I imagine they are?”

“Uh-huh. I guess you could say that. Yes, sir. Modern ones.”

“Well, Mrs. Hills and I have some wonderful records too, although I suppose not what young people like yourself listen to nowadays.”

He gave a mechanical chortle.

Harold had never heard anyone actually chortle before. He’d only read about in books. However, there was no mistaking it once he’d heard it. Half way between a cough and a gurgle, as if the man was doing it only for himself. The mouth moved and the jowls wobbled while the eyes remained fixed and unwatchful. Yes, definitely a chortle.

“Do you play a musical instrument, Harold?”

“No, um, sir, no, I just like to listen is all I do.”

On records, on the radio late at night when he could pick up LA and even stations as far away as Denver and San Francisco, but he had never wanted to get any closer than that, closer than listening. Tyrone Price had once asked him if he wanted to go hear Howlin’ Wolf who was playing somewhere down in the Negro area around Vermont, but Harold had turned him down. He was terrified of crowds he couldn’t disappear into and being well over six feet tall and heavy-set, with hair two shades brighter than Archie Andrews’, there were few crowds of white people he could melt into let alone crowds of Negroes.

Besides he was a serious collector, not an ordinary dumb fan like most of the kids at Fairfax High. They just wanted something to dance to, it didn’t really matter to them what or by who as long as it was loud and had a strong beat. They weren’t interested in the records as records, the music as music. They had no genuine discrimination. Harold had that discrimination because Alvin Harper had tutored him to like his music raw and black. He was always teaching Harold.

“What’s that doddley squat mean?” he’d asked Alvin after they had listened to Billy “The Kid” Emerson’s *Red Hot* for the fourth time.

It was new music as far as Alvin was concerned, a corruption of his beloved Delta Blues, and he didn’t approve of it. Nonetheless, the language was the same and he knew that well enough.

“Doodley squat? Shit, boy, every dumb-ass peckerwood in Mississippi could be telling yu’all that. Sure ‘nough they could. It’s what happens when ya mojo stops working!”

Alvin cackled his high-pitched blind-man’s cackle, the Korea scars wriggling and twisting at his mouth and cheeks. Harold looked away.

“Hey, man, no, I’m just shittin ya. Ha, Ha, Ha. Don’t ya pay it no mind. Doodley squat is just shit, nothin is what it is. Your gal ain't nothin, she ain't red hot, she’s just old doodley squat. Get it?”

Harold filed it away. He wasn’t black, he wasn’t from the South or from even the South Side of Chicago but he was a serious student and he sucked down Alvin’s music sessions like thick chocolate malts, which he also sucked down when he got the chance.

“We have a most excellent music teacher here, you know. Mr. Lintomson offers piano lessons. If you want to we could arrange something.”

“No, really, thanks just the same. It’s listening I like.”

“Well no matter, Harold. There are plenty of other activities for you to do. Singing, drama, sports. You know, I’m positive you’re going to like it here with us.”

“I guess so.”

“Only have one hundred students, but we like to think of ourselves as one big family here at Date Grove School. We work hard, we play hard and we turn out first class students. One big family, Harold.”

Harold hoped to hell not. The only good thing about school was that it wasn’t his family. Family meant no place to escape and, although there were untold dangers at school — mainly from the other kids — he had learned how to negotiate and avoid, how not to stand out, how to keep safe. Now he was going to have to work it all out again. Sizing up the cliques, finding those who wouldn’t bully or tease, those who would tolerate him as a friend, those he could tolerate. And they would be rich kids. He didn’t know anything about rich kids. Yet another disadvantage.

He also noticed that Mr. Hills didn’t say “happy” like most people did when they said big and family right next to each other.

“Don’t be so silly, Harold,” Aunt Enid assured him as they pulled out onto 101. “It’s going to be OK, darling. Wasn’t it a nice place, just like I told you? Didn’t you just love the palm trees and the grass and the lovely swimming pool and that Mr. Hills, well he seemed a very sincere sort of person, don’t you think, darling?”

“I guess.”

As he sat scrunched in the bus seat on his way to the first day of school he wondered how he was going to explain it to Earl. He couldn't. Maybe he'd just have to stay away from the stables.

Then the bus stopped to pick up another passenger.

* * *

“Howdy,” he said touching the brim of his white Stetson.

“Oh, hello there, Mr. Earl,” she replied, looking up, startled.

She smiled broadly, remembering the message Harold had tried to deliver. Howdy, howdy, howdy, Mr. Howdy Doody.

“Earl, just Earl,” he said returning her smile.

“Earl.”

“You mind?” he asked indicating the wooden bench on which she was sitting.

“It's not mine to mind. Please.”

“Thanks.”

He sat down.

“Hot,” he said after a long moment. “Specially for the time of year.”

“Very,” she answered, staring out towards the thick line of tamarisk trees which separated the far end of the playing field from the grove of date palms.

“Can't remember a September when it's been so bad.”

“I suppose.”

“Yep. Sure can't remember a September to match it.”

He was making her nervous.

He was sorry he'd sat down.

She was making him nervous.

She was sorry she'd asked him to sit down.

“You know,” he said, “All them palm trees out there are female. Except for one of 'em.”

“Oh, is that right?”

“Yep. Ain't that something?”

“Yes. That is something.”

“Just that one poor lonely ol’ fella in among all them rows and rows of womenfolk. Some would say how that’d be close to heaven, others more like to Hell. Had a friend said it were from knowing about the date palms that the A-rabs got their idea for them harems of theirs. Just trees, of course, I know, but makes you think all the same.”

She didn’t answer. He took off his hat, pulled a blue and white handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his forehead.

“You see, once a year a man goes to that one tree, that fella-tree, collects up all his stuff, the pollen that is, and then goes to each female tree with it. Has to climb right up to the top and spreads it around. Need mighty tall ladders. Dangerous work doing the dates.”

“Dates?”

“Yep, dates. Like people they are sorta. I mean, you know what I mean?”

Why was he letting himself babble so? Wasn’t like him at all.

Was he trying to tell her something? Was this some kind of a cowboy come-on? Dates?

“You waiting here for someone?” he asked.

“To see the director. 10:15. I’m a few minutes early.”

He checked his watch.

“Uh-huh.”

“You?”

“Yep, me too. The director that is. Just come out from there,” he said pointing in the direction of a wooden sign that read ‘Office’. “Soldierly man if I don’t miss my guess. Straight shooter.”

“I see,” she said, although she didn’t.

“You putting your boy here, are you?”

“Thinking about it, yes. And you?”

“Yep. Little Earl.”

Enid had to stop her mouth dropping open. Why was she sending Harold to this private school if not to get him away from children like Earl’s son? No, not *like* Earl’s son, *Earl’s son*. She wanted Harold to meet children from nicer homes, children who would be a better influence on him, children who did things that didn’t smell so awful. Harold desperately needed a better influence. Harold desperately needed something. Even if she couldn’t give him a fancy home or maybe no home at all, she could still give him some good influences.

Then Earl explained about Little Earl's problem and Enid felt terrible about what she'd been thinking. Then he made her feel even worse.

"He's a good boy, Mrs. Carlson."

"Miss and anyway, it's Enid."

"Sure, 'course, Enid. The best kinda kid there is. Since his mother passed away when he was only so high, there's only been his gran and me, and except for this reading business, which I reckon ain't none of his doing, he's never been a burden, not for a second. Fact is, I wouldn't know what I'd do without the boy, what with the stables and his gran. She's sorta poorly, you know and he has to help tend to her. A real good boy is my Earl."

"I'm so terribly sorry," she said, and she was too.

In an instinctive, comforting gesture she reached out and touched him on the knee. When she realized what she had done she jerked her hand away as if she'd laid it on a hot stove.

"Oh, hey now, don't mean to be making you go feeling sorry. We're all just fine and dandy. Couldn't be better in fact. I want you to understand that it's just this darned reading is all it is."

He stood up suddenly.

He was furious with himself. He didn't want her feeling sorry for him or for his family. Looking down the nose that was, like those damned clean-dressed, pressed-pants social workers in the government camps. He never could stick meddling do-gooders.

She sure did look good sitting there though. White slacks and pink blouse, dark hair tied back, not too much make-up. He liked her better when she dressed like that. It made her look all fresh, like a real lady.

"Excuse me," he said briskly. "Gotta be going now."

She had offended him. That was clear. Sorry to have said sorry, but she couldn't say it again without making things even worse. Why should she care anyway? It wasn't if she actually liked the man.

He put out his hand. She took it.

"So long, be seeing you around."

"Yes. Be seeing you."

"Niggers, Little Earl. It just ain't right."

“What’s that you say, Gran?”

“Niggers. Down there to Little Rock in Arkansas.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s niggers in Arkansas, it was niggers back in Oklahoma too, but out-cheer in California we’ve got to be calling them colored folk. Cul-ard folk. Co-lard folk. Now that don’t bother me none. Niggers, colored folk, whatever they wants it don’t change what they is, does it? And what they is is niggers! And I says it ain’t right.”

“That’s what they told us at school too.”

“What’s that?”

“That it ain’t right to be calling people niggers. It’s derog-something. I can’t rightly recall what. Like not calling people Okies or Wops.”

“Who been telling you that?”

“Mr. Steigal. Takes us for civics.”

“Segal? ‘Course it is. They’re working together, them two and the Catholics.”

“Gran?”

“Ain’t right, wanting to be going to the same schools as white people. Ain’t natural. Don’t you remember me reading to you yesterday from the newspaper.”

“You want these eggs over-easy?”

“Not the way was meant to be at all.”

“Sunny-side up?”

“You know what that Orval Faubus said? No, over-easy and don’t bust them yolks like you did the last time.”

“Right, over-easy it is.”

“Do you know what?”

“Over-easy?”

“Crucifixion.”

“What’s that you say?”

“ ‘Now it starts.’ That’s what he said. Of the South. Crucifixion of the South. And who is doing it? General Eisenhower, that’s who and all them Jews and Communists up there in Washington. Imagine sending in parachute army boys just so a few coloreds can go to school. Eight or nine little pickaninnies, that’s all and what do they got? A thousand soldier boys? Two thousand soldier boys?”

“But there’s coloreds going to the high school here and nobody makes a fuss, Gran.”

“It’s California! They got no notion of what’s decent and American out-cheer.”

“These alright for you, Gran?”

“Let’s see. Yes, they’ll do just fine, Little Earl. You wanna make me some fresh toast? This here has gone all hard and stale.”

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Everybody Does It In Hawaii

“It was just a cup of coffee, Charlene. Don’t make such a big thing about it. We happened to meet when I went out there — before I took Harold — and then he was still there when I came out and so...”

“So you...? Come on spill it, Enid honey.”

“So we went into Cathedral City and had a cup of coffee.”

“Fancy Dan!”

“Right. Give me a cigarette, will you?”

“I thought you was going to quit.”

“I am, I am. Isn’t everyone? Gimme. Thanks.”

“I don’t know how you smoke these things, Charlene? So damned strong they burn your lungs out.”

“Sorry, honey. Those ones you smoke taste like they was candy canes. Besides if you can’t taste it, why smoke it? That’s what I always say.”

“Yeah, I know that’s what you always say.”

“Then why ask?”

“Don’t know. I always do.”

“I know.”

“Than why ask?”

“Hey now, who started in on this? Ha! Weren’t me. Anyways, he ain't so bad, huh? Big Earl.”

“He’s OK.”

“For an Okie?”

“We’re not doing that one again, please, Charlene.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so?”

“And so?”

“Coffee and what?”

“A Danish. Bearclaw it was.”

“Enid! Come on, honey. Give, give, give.”

“Nothing to give. Really. Honest. Well, OK,OK, I mean he did ask me to go to the ChiChi with him.”

“ChiChi, huh? Big time!”

“Sure, big time. God!”

“And you said?”

“OK.”

“OK?”

“ ‘Thank you very much’, is what I said, if you must know the exact words.”

“Better.”

“Thanks.”

“Gotta start somewhere, honey.”

“Nothing is going to start going anywhere. Dinner and a show.”

“So what changed your mind?”

“Changed my mind? Don’t know really. I suppose it’s when he told me about the boy and all that with his wife dying and his mother in a wheelchair, it made things different somehow.”

“You feeling sorry for him or what?”

“Don’t think so. Sorry? No, not really. In touch more, I think.”

“I don’t get it, honey. In touch?”

“Me neither. It just was like that, that’s all. I saw him differently. Not like...”

“A dumb Okie cowboy?”

“No, Charlene, will you give it a rest? No, like a father, like a son. Like someone with troubles. Different that’s all.”

“Boy are you one easy touch, Enid Carlson! Guy gives you the hard-luck soft soap and bang, your ol’ legs open like a pair of well-oiled shears.”

“Legs open? Shears? Jesus H. Christ! I had a cup of coffee with the man.”

“And a Danish.”

“And a Danish. In the Red Tulip Cafe in Cathedral. No, two cups of coffee. Happy? And a Danish and already I’m on my back! And it wasn’t soft soap either. It wasn’t like that at all.”

“Well, don’t worry yourself, old Madam BamBam will tell all! The genuine low down. Read the cards, read your palm, read the stars, read the tea leaves, look into her crystal ball, talk to the dear departed, make the table shake. You wanna another one of these?”

“No thanks. Now just wait a minute, just wait. You know this is really crazy, don’t you? I mean *really* crazy. No? You’re saying no? You mean you really believe in all that junk?”

“Junk? It ain't junk, honey. People come from as far away as, as far as...”

“Cabazon?”

“No, as far as, ah, hell I donno, Banning, Beaumont, Azusa, Garvey, Los Angeles even. Sure they do, just so as Madam BamBam can tell their future.’

“In the middle of the goddamn night as well.”

“Madam BamBam will tell all any time of the day or night!”

“What kind of fortune teller lives in Cabazon? Did you ever ask yourself that, Charlene? Did you ever?”

“Why not Cabazon?” her friend asked. “You got something against Cabazon?”

“I donno, Harold, what do you think to it?”

“I think it sucks!” Harold exploded. “Riding to school in a dumb little bus with a bunch of fucking little fucking kids! Fuck!”

Earl laughed and punched Harold hard on the shoulder.

Harold winced and coughed himself to a sudden stop. Maybe two “fuckings” in one sentence was too much. Before he started hanging around the stables he had never really done much in the way of big-time swearing. It wasn’t Earl. He didn’t hardly swear at all. It was Garf and Jingles who were the real fuck merchants. Fuck this, fuck that. They even managed to stick it in the middle of words. But “fucking” was a wild jump into the unknown for Harold. Both feet. What’s more, the jump seemed to lubricate his ordinarily reluctant tongue.

“In a damn little fucking blue bus like we were fucking kids or something! I mean school is bad enough, right? Who likes fucking school? It’s not natural, is it? And everyone being so damn nice all the time. Teachers, those other kids too. Even that damn Mr. Hills. ‘Did you like assembly, Harold?’ Did I like assembly? Did I fuck! I mean, what kinda fucking school is that? ‘Did you like this’. ‘Did you like that?’ Huh?”

“Rich kids, Harold old son. Rich kids. Don’t know any better I guess.”

“Must be it.”

The boys had just got back from their first day at school and were sitting on adjacent bales of straw out behind the stables under the tamarisks, contemplating the sand and their immediate futures. Nearby someone was

trying to start up a truck. The engine whined but wouldn't catch. Over and over again the starter motor cranked. As the battery wore down the sound became more feeble. Finally it stopped altogether. A door slammed. Both boys followed the unseen battle with a tense concern.

When the bus door had slid open that morning and he caught sight of Harold, Earl's surprise had collapsed into embarrassment before he managed to close his face down completely. It was the first time Harold had seen Earl thrown off balance. They didn't speak until they were out of the bus in front of the school.

"Howdy there, Harold. How they hangin'?"

"Yeah. Great. Ah, not so great really. You know."

"You bet, sure do."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going here?"

"Donno. Same reason you didn't tell me I guess."

"Yeah, well, it's my aunt, you see. I didn't want to, but..."

Before he could explain any more, Mr. Lewis caught up with them.

"Come on, boys. Assembly in five minutes. You know where it is?"

They didn't. He took them down a covered concrete walk that ran along the front of classrooms to a large rectangular room with sliding glass doors down one side and filled with brown metal folding chairs, most of which were already occupied by jabbering kids. Harold and Earl found seats at the back next to identical crew-cut-white-chinoed-madras- button-down-shirted twins, who heartily introduced themselves as Mosley and Manley Brandon. Harold thought they were trying to sell him something.

To Harold the other kids looked pretty much like other kids always looked only a lot less Jewish. There were no black kids. He hadn't expected any.

Up at the front on a raised platform, frozen stiffly between two limp flags, American and Californian, sat about a dozen teachers, all except two of whom were men. Mr. Hills stood up. He was wearing a gray double-breasted suit. His arms hung straight down at his sides. The shine from his shoes carried all the way to where Harold was sitting. He cleared his throat. The room went quiet.

"Good morning," he intoned in flat, somber tones which undercut the 'Good', and seemed to emphasize the 'mourn' in morning. "Welcome back to all you familiar faces and welcome also to you many new faces. We trust you all had an enjoyable summer and we," he half-turned to indicate the

still figures behind him, “we look forward to a most productive, exciting year here at Date Grove School. I don’t have to tell you how fortunate you are to have such a fine, dedicated teaching staff.”

He waited a long moment, searching the old faces and the new faces as if someone of them might want to disagree or stop the wedding.

“We are this very day, the twenty-third of September, nineteen hundred and fifty-seven, entering the fifth year of the school’s life. Our spirit is high,” he declaimed without inflection. “The standards of scholarship and deportment towards which we all have striven have nearly been attained. I am sure that throughout the year to come you will all work hard to be a credit to yourself, a credit to your school, a credit to the community and a credit to your country. I am sure of that. I want you to remember what we always say here at Date Grove School. We work hard, we play hard and we turn out first class students.”

Without another word he placed his hand on his heart and swung around to face the American flag. Everyone else rose, clothes rustling, chairs making muted metallic complaints. All except Harold’s. He stood up too fast, the chair caught on his pants, folded up and then slammed down on the floor with a resonant crack. All the kids turned, some began to mutter and snicker. Harold felt his face going the color of his hair.

“We’ll have less of that,” warned Mr. Hills without turning around or removing his hand from the pledge-of-allegiance position. “Less of that. Deportment! Deportment!”

Harold was off to a flying start.

“So, how did you boys like your first assembly?” asked Mr. Lewis.

Spanish. Geometry. Recess. Biology. English. Lunch. History. Music. Football. A blur of new teachers handing out quiet assurances and fresh new books. The curious thing was that except for recess, lunch and touch football, he didn’t see Earl in any of his classes.

“Special tutoring.”

“Oh.”

Earl swatted at a large slow fly with his hand and missed.

“Special tutoring?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“Why?”

“Can’t read too good.”

“Oh.”

Silence, except for the flies buzzing.

Harold figured he better just shut up for a while. He didn't want Earl not to be able to read, he didn't want him to be off balance. He wanted him to be like he was before. Why then did he feel sort of good about things? He shook his head. Maybe it was the damn heat doing it to him.

"I gotta be getting home to see to my gran," Earl said, standing up.

"OK. Yeah. I guess I'll be seeing you tomorrow."

"Blue bus."

"Yeah, blue bus."

Earl bent down, reached in and tested the water coming from the faucet. He stepped into the bathtub, slid the glass shower door closed and flicked the little chrome doohickey that switched the water from the bath to the shower. A hot spray blasted him in the face. Felt good. He turned around. The water pounded his back. There was nothing like hot water to make things seem right. And they did. Even before the hot water they had seemed right.

She'd said yes. Real nice and friendly about it too. Well, mostly friendly anyway. Not like the last time in her kitchen. He would just forget about that. Sure. Caught her off guard was what that was. Happens all the time with women.

After the two of them had talked a while about their boys and made excuses to each other for sending them to a private school, Enid had asked about the stables.

"Yep. Me and my cousin Rita, half-cousin really, back in Oklahoma. She don't interfere though. Long as the money keeps a coming she's happy."

"I expect so," she replied.

She had really nice teeth. He'd not noticed them before. Even. White. Strong too.

"Looking for a job?"

"Why not?"

"Don't know. I reckoned with you sending the boy to Date Grove and all, you wouldn't be needing something like a regular job."

"Well, I do need something precisely like a regular job. That school money isn't mine, it's Harold's. Insurance money from the accident."

“I see. Tough for the boy, parents being killed that way. I wasn’t but a couple a years older when my father...”

“It was my sister too.”

“ ‘Course it was. I’m sorry. You have any more?”

“More?”

“Sisters? Brothers?”

“No. There was only me and Sylvia. Now there’s only me. Me and Harold that is. You?”

“Lord! I got two sisters, four brothers, enough nieces and nephews to fill a church, that’s not counting all the aunts and uncles and cousins. Well, three brothers really. Not here though. Up near Bakersfield and around LA. Some uncles and aunts up that way as well. And there’s a whole mess more of them back around Magna Carta. That would be in Oklahoma. Never hardly see any of ‘em. Mombelle, that’s what we call her, name’s Maybelle but Dad he was always after calling her Mombelle and we all sorta picked it up from him. Anyways, she goes up to visit them once or twice a year. Never has been back to Oklahoma though.”

Suddenly he could hear himself talking, like he was listening to one of those nervous fellas in a day-time bar telling a story no one wanted to hear about. When he realized it was himself he was hearing he shut up. Running off at the mouth again like some short-measure dumbass. What was it about the woman that did that to him? He busied himself lighting a cigarette.

“What kinda job would you be looking for?”

“Don’t know really. Anything will do, anything except waitressing that is.”

“What did you do before?”

“Before?”

“Before you needed this job.”

“Nothing. I... well... It was...” She put down her cup and gave him a full look. “It’s none of your business what I did!”

“Hey now, Enid. Hey now, I didn’t mean nothing by it. No call to get yourself so hot and bothered. Too hot outside for that.”

At the next table two dusty old guys in red baseball caps sat hunched over their coffee and pretended they weren’t listening.

Damn woman! Like a bear in the springtime. One minute eating out of your hand nice as pie, the next minute tearing off your arm.

“I’m sorry,” she said, reaching over to touch the back of his hand. “It’s just that it’s been worrying me so much, making me kinda jumpy.”

“Hey now, please, don’t be troubling yourself. I understand.”

“Do you?” she snapped. “How could you? OK. OK. I’m sorry. Jesus! What the hell’s the matter with me. The heat. Sure. Have you ever known a September like it?”

“No, can’t say that I have.”

They were back to where they had started.

She leaned confidingly forward across the table. He tried not to notice how her breasts were bunched as they pushed up against the green Formica. The two red baseball caps, now not listening even more intently, hunched more hunchedly over their coffee.

“If you must know,” she said in a loud whisper. “I have had an arrangement with a certain gentleman for a number of years. That arrangement has just been terminated.”

“I got you. Right. Terminated it is.”

When she said “arrangement” he got a sudden erection. It alarmed and delighted him. Like some moron teenager on his first date. At least he had been sitting down and shielded by the table. Now looking at himself in the shower he discovered he had another erection. Like some moron teenager before his first date. Under the circumstances, those being he was seeing her that evening, he decided against jacking off.

“I’m not ashamed either.” Her voice rose. “Why should I be? Most women I know take money from men. It’s called marriage, holy matrimony, wedlock, with the emphasis on the lock. Well me, I didn’t have any of that, no marriage, no lock. What I had was an arrangement. *Had* an arrangement. So, now you know why I need that job.”

“You bet. That’s alright.”

“It is? Thanks a lot.”

“No, wait up now. I’m not making any kinda judgment here. A person does what a person has to do. Ain’t for me to say different. Ain’t for anyone to say different.”

She stirred at her coffee.

“Any luck with the job?”

“Been looking in the newspaper, that’s all. I was thinking maybe a saleslady somewhere on the Drive. But, I don’t know. Pay’s not all that good, you know.”

“If there’s any way I can help, you just have to say the word.”

“Wait just a minute, now. I’m not asking for anything like that.”

“No. No. What I mean is I know a lot of people in the Village. Might be able to put in a word here and there. That kinda thing.”

“Sure. That’s very nice of you, Earl.”

“Well, I’m sorta of a nice kinda guy when you get to know me.”

She laughed, opening her mouth wide and showing off her white, strong, even teeth.

Earl rinsed his body one last time, turned off the shower, opened the door, stepped out of the bath and began to dry himself.

* * *

“Yu’all be careful now, Little Earl!” his grandmother shouted as he lifted her down from the pickup and set her gently in the wheelchair.

He could feel her bony ass pressing against one forearm, her ribs against the other. He turned his head to avoid her old-woman’s false-teeth breath. He figured it was wrong to think that way about your own grandmother. It wasn’t respectful. But every time he picked her up her bones and her breath made it so he couldn’t help that kind of thinking. She seemed lighter than the last time they’d gone out. He thought maybe she was dying. One day she’d break off at the ground like a tumbleweed and drift off on the wind, the same as in the song. He unclicked the two wheel locks and pushed her the few yards from the carport to the house.

“Go on, get them groceries. So hot that milk’ll be boiling and the butter’ll be into a syrup, you leave it out there.”

“Sure thing, Gran. Doncha worry none.”

He went outside and took the three brown bags from the back of the truck. Although he could easily have done the shopping himself, his grandmother insisted on coming. She said he was only a boy. It needed a woman to do grocery shopping.

“Who was that said ‘Hi’ to you in the market?”

He set the bags down on the kitchen table and began to empty them. A dozen eggs, a bunch of celery, mayonnaise.

“Oh, that were Harold’s aunt, that’s all.”

“She belong to that fat Jewboy? Well, I never!”

His father said it was because of how she was brought up and it was too late in the day to change her ideas. That didn't explain much. Jews? Sure Jews. He knew all about that, about them. Sort of anyway. He knew enough. But it didn't add up when he put it together with people like Harold.

"Never seen the like of it! Back home woman like that, well, woman like that'd be horsewhipped right out of town."

"Gran, this is Palm Springs, lots of people wear shorts. It's hot."

"I know it's hot. Don't have to tell me it's hot. You think I don't feel it hot being stuck in this here chair? Can't touch nothing but I gets myself burned. But, right is right, Little Earl. Magna Carta or Palm Springs. Don't matter where. Oklahoma or California. Hot or cold it don't matter. Right is right. You think Jesus is different out-cher? Think God ain't watching in Palm Springs? 'Course he is. Chosen people! Chosen for what? That's what I wants to know. Chosen for what? Walking around in the market half nekked? Writing books about what they don't know nothing about? Go on now, don't stand there gawping, put that butter and milk straight into that icebox."

He opened the refrigerator door.

"How you getting on at that new school?"

Every day she'd asked the same question. He had given her a week of the same answer.

"It's alright, Gran."

"Money it's costing your daddy it should be more than 'alright', Little Earl. More than alright. When I was a girl we didn't have no public school, say nothing to private. No sir. My mother it was learned us to read and write. And when your daddy..."

He didn't have to listen. He knew what she was saying word for word. Read and write. Write and read. At the high school they said it was because of the reading and writing that a thin little man with heavy glasses had come all the way from Los Angeles to ask him questions about his family. He seemed particularly concerned to know if Earl was left-handed and disappointed to find out he wasn't. Two women with a large brown suitcase came and made him fit blocks together and do a bunch of other stupid stuff. After that the teachers didn't bother him too much. All except Miss Robinson, a long-nosed spinster woman who wore funny thick shoes and stank of mothballs. She drilled him every day for an hour until he could

manage all the letters and a few words. But she had left the school suddenly. Some kids said she had died. He never found out any more. The Slow Learners were left to Mr. Suggins, who complained to them about being stuck with “you hopeless dummies” and read out loud from the sports page when he wasn’t trying to keep them from horsing around or murdering each other.

It wasn’t like that at Date Grove. No Slow Learners, just him and a teacher.

“Riding is that it?” asked Mr. Giddins.

“Yes, sir. Rodeo mostly.”

Mr. Giddins was a young guy with a spiky flattop and a thin tie. He taught what they called RR - remedial reading.

“Anything else, Earl?”

“Heavy equipment.”

“Like?”

“Back-hoes, Cats, Euclids, even tractors. You know, that kinda stuff.”

“Good. Say, Earl, has there ever been something you’ve wanted to read real bad? Something like a magazine or a book one of your buddies was talking about and you thought, ‘Gee, I’d like to be able to read that.’ Anything at all?”

“None of my friends is any too big on reading.”

Mr. Giddins brought in a book about horses. They spent an hour or two each day with it, Earl explaining the photographs to the teacher, who obviously didn’t know one end of a horse from the other. Then Mr. Giddins helped Earl do battle with the printed words. He had survived that pretty well. He would probably survive it again. Yeah, the new school was OK, especially as Mr. Hills said he could drive his pickup to school from next week. That would make a whole lot of difference to him and to Harold as well.

“... no account Okies, that’s what, Little Earl. Always will be too. Never trust ‘em. Never. You listening to me?”

“Yes, Gran,” he lied. “I’m listening.”

Keep Knocking

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“I see a tall man.”

Naturally a tall man. They never said “I see a short man.” Madam Bambani wouldn’t have seen Archie Blatt there in her palm, that’s for sure. Enid wouldn’t see him again either. Good-bye Archie Blatt. Good-bye house. Good-bye life.

“A dark man. A sad man. A proud man. A man who will need you too much.”

Madam Bambani lived in an unpainted wooden house with a sagging porch on the what Enid supposed was Cabazon’s main street. In fact, it seemed to be Cabazon’s only street. The house was set back about twenty yards from the road. In front, a weak yellow spotlight picked out an enormous sign of a human palm cut up with lines like a pig diagram in a butchers.

“I see love. I see trouble. I see heartache. A visitor with a dangerous message.”

The house smelled of garlic and something else, something musty which Enid couldn’t quite place. There were candles. Dark curtains. A small round table covered with a red velvet cloth. Outside the wind rattled at the windows, pushed dust in through the cracks between the old boards.

Madam Bambani was an extremely large woman wrapped in random layers of soft fabric. She kept her face averted and said nothing by way of introduction except, “Cross my palm with silver.”

Enid gave her the silver dollar Charlene had given to her.

“Very gypsy,” Charlene had assured her in a too-loud whisper.

“No long journeys. A sudden bereavement. Recently. And another. Also recently. A new life.”

The woman took hold of both Enid's hands, examining them, spreading the fingers, touching the tips. She gently spread the palm of Enid's right hand. Her thick dry fingers caressed the top of her palm right below the fingers.

"Apollo," she muttered. "Mercury, Jupiter."

Her fingers ranged to the sides and base of Enid's hand.

"Upper Mars, Luna, Pluto."

She bent to examine the lines.

"A change is coming. Watch for Aries. Deep water. Very deep water."

"Deep water?"

The woman ignored her.

"I see a good friend leaving but not going away."

Enid and Charlene exchanged glances.

"Illness. Recovery. A long life. The fate line shows a major change coming. Divorce. Possibly. A stony place. An unexpected reunion."

The woman put down Enid's right hand and picked up the left. Another examination. More kneading of palm and fingers.

"You question love. You want to do the right thing. You don't know what that is. You are worried. Sometimes lazy. Ambivalent. Impatient. Loving. Yes. Loving. That is very strong."

Madam Bambani fell silent.

"Is that it?" Enid asked, looking at her still-outstretched hand.

Slowly she retrieved her hand from the table.

"There was something else you thought you wanted?"

"A stony place? Deep water? Aries? Ambivalent? What does it mean?"

"Hard to say. I see these things, that's all. See things in the lines. In the shape of the hands. Shape of the fingers. In the mounts. Indications. Impressions. Possibilities. No pictures. No names. No actual concrete events. Things change. Times change."

"It could be anything," Enid complained. "Deep waters. A river, a lake, the ocean, a swimming pool even."

"Yes. Or no waters at all."

"No waters at all?"

"Yes."

"How could deep waters be no... I see, you mean like deep waters."

"That's right. Like deep waters."

"Aries?"

“The goat.”

“The goat?”

“Astrological sign.”

“That’s just great, that is. We drag ourselves all the way out here to the middle of nowhere at 12 o’clock at night so you can tell me deep waters are maybe no waters at all? That Aries is the astrological sign for a goat. That’s not what I call fortune telling!”

“Enid, please!” cautioned Charlene.

“And what precisely do you call fortune telling?” asked Madam Bambani.

“I don’t know. At least something more than stupid riddles.”

“Life is a riddle.”

“Thank you. That’s very useful to know. Very useful.”

“I did not ask you to come,” intoned Madam Bambani, swishing back a wave of cloth to reveal a beefy, freckled arm heavy with silver bracelets. “And I am certainly not asking you to stay.”

As if from out of nowhere the silver dollar thudded softly on the velvet-topped table. Enid picked it up.

“Jesus, honey!”, Charlene complained as they drove back to Palm Springs. “I mean, Jesus! I mean you don’t go talking to people like that *like that!*”

“What? You think she’s going to turn me into a frog or something? It’s a con, Charlene, can’t you see that?”

“Jesus, honey! A frog? I never thought of that. Don’t drive so damn fast, will you. Damn wind’s coming through the pass like a tornado. Have us off the road if you ain’t careful.”

Charlene was right, the wind was making it difficult to keep the car from hopping sideways across the road. Enid let up on the accelerator.

“Sorry, Charlene. That OK?”

“Better. Leastways I got a chance if she decides to turn you into that ol’ frog before we gets ourselves home.”

“Very funny.”

“Ain't no call to lose your sense of humor, honey. Really there ain't.”

Enid tightened her grip on the wheel. The headlights reflected off the eyes of an animal at the side of the road. A frog? Another one of Bambani dissatisfied customers?

“It’s just with what I have coming at me right now I sure as hell don’t need any more to worry about. Riddles and guesses. That’s all it was. One after the other. Could fit about anything there is, anything there will be.”

“Recent bereavement? Two of ‘em. Remember?”

“Yeah. I remember.”

“A new life, that was right on target, wasn’t it?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“ ‘You question love.’ ‘Doing the right thing.’ What about that?”

“Lucky guesses. That’s all. Divorce? Huh?”

“From Archie. That’s what she’s after seeing.”

“Ha. What about long life? If I die tomorrow, what am I going to do? Demand my money back? Right? Who doesn’t have illness? Tall man? What’s tall? Lots of tall men about. Lots of dark men. Lots of sad men. Didn’t you tell me that she would tell all? ‘Madam BamBam will tell all.’ I distinctly remember you saying that.”

“Yeah, I said that.”

“So?”

“Might be that was all there was to tell, honey. She can’t read more than there is, now can she?”

“She can’t read shit! It’s a con, Charlene, that’s all it is. A con for morons like us.”

“You think maybe it was Earl she was talking about? Tall man. Sad man. All that stuff.”

“No I don’t think it was Earl. I think it was my five bucks she was talking about. No wonder the old fraud works out of a dump like Cabazon. They’d run her straight out of any respectable town quicker than you could say gypsy palmist. Quicker.”

“Can you believe this?” Earl said, laughing. “A fella who’s supposed to make his living doing that and then can’t do it?”

Walter Shyretto had just crashed to the stage for about the fourth time. He smiled hopefully at the few people dotted about at the tables in the ChiChi’s Starlite Room and staggered across to retrieve his unicycle.

“Go back to Italy!” shouted out some charitable soul.

Walter Shyretto shrugged and picked up the fallen unicycle. He spun the wheel, set the machine down and was up. He swayed forward, a look of concentrated terror on his face. There was a single “Ah!” from the patrons as he righted himself, peddled furiously and lurched forward once more towards the edge of the stage. He seemed just to regain his balance and then suddenly he straightened up, spun in a tight circle and was in complete control, riding around and raising his hands in salute. The small crowd applauded impassively.

“Usually better than this, I expect,” Earl said. “The singer wasn’t up to much either, was she?”

“No,” Enid replied. “Not for ‘Europe’s Number One Singing Star.’ ”

Up on the stage Shyretto in full control of his unicycle was now juggling four red and white striped Indian clubs as Bill Alexander’s band played some suitable fast tempo unicycle juggling music.

“I thought this would be a good place,” he said, with an apologetic nod in the direction of the stage.

She laughed. Those great teeth on show once again. Why was he so all-fired interested in her teeth? He wasn’t a dentist or anything like that.

“You come here often?” she asked.

“No. Not for at least a few years I haven’t. You?”

“Well, my friend, you know the one I told you about, he used to bring me here when he was in town. Said it was the only genuine nightclub in Palm Springs, which I suppose it is.”

“I suppose. Not much on nightclubs really.”

“No?”

“No time for ‘em.”

“So why did you ask me to come here?”

“Well, you know I figured it was the kinda place you would like.”

“How did you figure that.”

He couldn’t understand how he could have so damn many left feet when it came to this woman. Wasn’t like him at all.

“Can’t say. Just did that’s all. Sorry.”

“No need to be. I guess I might have figured the same if I was you. Why not? You don’t know me, do you?”

“No. Can’t say that I do, Enid. I stopped figuring on that some time ago now.”

“Some time ago? But I’ve only known you a few days.”

In the half light she looked darker, almost Mexican. Her black off-the-shoulder dress was really something too. He caught men at the other tables staring at her. He enjoyed that. He hadn't thought he would.

"Not you in particular. No. That's not how it is. It's women in general, I guess you could say. Knowing what they're, what you're, thinking about that is. What you're going to do next. It's kinda like with a horse."

"Like with a horse? That's a real nice comparison. Ha!"

"Don't take it wrong, Enid. After my family there's nothing I like more than my horses."

"Well, I suppose I should take that as a compliment."

"You can never be one-hundred percent sure about a horse. They got their own minds, you see. Their own kinda thinking. Most people, even some cowboys, don't know or never bother to learn about that. You see, no matter how many times you been up on her, how much you think you know what she's going to do, you gotta always expect the unexpected. Something they seen a dozen times without any bother, like a pitchfork, a barrel, a hackamore, will all of a sudden spook 'em. No saying why that might be. Happens is all. Never can really know what goes on inside their heads. You see what I mean?"

"Sort of. But I don't know the first thing about horses."

"Never been riding?"

"No. Never have. To be quite honest, Earl, besides everything else, horses scare the hell out of me."

"That's nothing but natural. If you don't know about something, not familiar with it, it can easily take you like that."

"Yeah. So what scares you, Earl?"

"Me? Like with a horse?"

"Yes."

"Oh, nothing like that. No. Nothing like that."

"Then you're a very lucky man."

She tapped out a cigarette. He struck a match, reached over the table with it. There was a loud crash on the stage. Walter Shyretto had broken a plate he was trying to juggle. He had managed to catch the others and was clutching them desperately to his chest as he rode his unicycle forwards and backwards trying to regain his balance. The audience laughed.

"Thanks," she said, blowing out a stream of smoke.

"Maybe you'll let me take you out one time."

“Riding?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t know really. Nice of you to ask. I’ll think about it.”

“Well, whatever.”

A drum roll turned their attention to the stage. Walter Shyretto was perched atop a six-foot unicycle. His assistant, a large-thighed girl in red sequins, was throwing him plates. He had four in the air and was asking for more.

“Say, Earl, if we’d have gone to the kinda place you would like, where would that have been?”

“Right. Well. Don’t know really. Not much for the night life, as I said. Ranch Club maybe?”

“What’s that like?”

“Nothing special. I just know some folks hang out there at the bar. We have a few beers. Chew the fat. That kinda thing. Maybe the next time.”

“Sure. Maybe the next time.”

Six plates, seven plates. Still juggling. Still peddling. Walter Shyretto, “America’s Foremost Unicyclist,” smiled triumphantly at his indifferently astounded audience.

“What you fixing to do with that there pitchfork?” Earl asked Garf.

“What you think? Stick me some of them punks is what. Come on you bastards! Come on!”

“Shut up, will you!” whispered Tommy. “Just shut the fuck up!”

“You shitting yourself or what, Tommy?” Garf taunted, stabbing the fork into a straw bale. “Damn crybaby!”

“Calm down, little man,” Earl said, laying a hand on his arm.

“Why ain’t Jingles here?” asked Tommy.

“ ‘Cause he ain’t,” Tody replied sharply. “That’s all.”

“Sure could use him now,” Tommy said. “Sure could.”

“What’s he gonna do?” asked Tody. “Huh? There are five or six car loads of ‘em, Maybe fifteen, twenty guys.”

“And only five of us,” Harold said bleakly.

“That candy-ass school been teaching you to count, Red?” Garf barked. “Shit!”

“I’m only saying. That’s all.”

“Shit!”

“Tire irons, chains, blades, baseball bats, maybe even blades.”

“Enough, Tody!” Tommy pleaded. “Enough!”

“Lets just stay calm, OK?” Earl said. “First off, they don’t know where we’re at.”

“Ain't going be too hard to figure out, even for them.”

“Shut it, Garf. Second if we stay hid and stay quiet they ain't likely to find us up here hid in the bales.”

“Damn it all to hell, Earl!” Garf exploded. “We can’t be running and hiding from them. Ain't like you at all it ain't. It’s that damn girlie school, ain't it? All them candy-ass county-club bastards making you soft.”

Earl ignored him.

“So,” he continued. “Stay calm and stay quiet. And put down that damn pitchfork, Garf. If we get beat up, we get beat up. You start with that, we is more likely to get ourselves carved up.”

“Carved up?” Harold repeated half to himself.

“Knifed,” explained Tommy.

“Oh,” Harold said. “That.”

He should never have let Earl talk him into going to the SunAir Drive-In again. The first time he’d been lucky. He only wound up doing a lot of puking and losing his socks. Now he was going to pay a higher admission price. In blood and in pain and in humiliation. Maybe even permanent disfigurement. Maybe death. And for what? Sal Mineo in some dumb stupid film and then fucking Pat Boone in fucking *Bernardine*. Carved up for Pat Boone! Chains, baseball bats, tire irons, blades. Pat Boone! At least he hadn’t had to watch much of him; Carpenter and his friends had chased them out onto Highway 111 after only about fifteen minutes. Slamming around in the back of the pickup. Turning off the headlights and losing their cars out by the old airport. And now sitting twenty feet high up in a giant stack of straw bales. Waiting. Was it that first little pig that built his house of straw? Yeah it was. Gobbled right up too. Dumb-ass pig. Dumb-ass Harold. His stomach was starting in again too. He could be safe at home going through his collection, playing his new records. The Coasters, LaVern

Baker, Junior Parker, Elmore James. They never gave him any trouble at all. Dumb-ass, dumb-ass Harold for sure, but maybe not for long.

“Hey look,” said Tommy in a shaky voice. “Ain't that them?”

The five boys peered over the top of their bale ramparts. Below them and about fifty yards away on the road in front of the stables a car had stopped. It was low to the ground so you almost couldn't see the wheels. It looked crawling mean. The driver revved the engine. A throaty roar like some hungry lion on the prowl. He'd obviously pulled the plugs on the cutouts. Harold shivered despite the heat. A few seconds later the car was joined by three others. A pride, a hunting pack roaring for blood.

“Bastards!”

“Garf, Jesus H!” pleaded Tommy. “They'll hear you.”

“So what?”

“It's me they wants,” said Tody. “It's all about Carpenter and my girl.”

“Your ex-girl,” Garf corrected.

“I'll go down there,” continued Tody. “No use you all getting beat up because of me.”

He stood up. Earl pulled him down.

“No one's getting beat up,” said Earl. “Just... Oh, shit!”

The engines stopped. The boys fell silent. A car door squeaked open. Doors slammed. Out of the cars dark figures began to emerge. They seemed to be enormous. They seemed to be carrying sticks.

“Baseball bats,” Tody observed coolly. “Figures.”

“Tire irons,” Garf added. “Hot damn!”

“Hey, why don't we just call the cops?” Harold suggested.

“ ‘Why don't we call the cops’,” Garf repeated in a falsetto. “ ‘Cause that's not what we do, Big Red, that's why. We ain't no squealers. Right, Earl?”

Harold saw his Aunt pulling back the sheet to identify his battered body. He didn't recognize himself. She screamed. He screamed.

“I donno,” Tommy said, “Harold might have something there. One of us could sneak down to the tack room.”

A loud drumming of wood and metal against the road. Harold could feel it pounding and vibrating in his stomach. He farted loudly but no one seemed to notice. He farted again. He was so frightened he didn't even bother trying to squeeze them back.

“Hey Tody Percy!” someone shouted from below. “We’re coming for your ass, boy! Your ass! Coming to stomp all over you. Even your mother won’t recognize you when we get done.”

Harold knew that was true. Hadn’t he seen it already?

“Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!” Tommy repeated over and over.

He was Tody’s older brother and had explained to Harold how his mother expected him to look after his brother. His little brother was solidly-built, pugnacious and immune to any advice, especially from the over-cautious Tommy.

“And you too, Early Earl!” another voice joined in.

“And your tame little dwarf.”

“We’re coming for all of your candy, cowboy asses!”

The baseball-bat-tire-iron chorus became louder, more insistent. Harold farted, louder and longer, like the distress call of some doomed animal. Down in the stalls the horses began to whinny to each other in alarm.

“Damn!” Earl exploded. “We got to get ‘em away from here. Pa will kill me anything happens to them horses. I’ll kill me if anything happens to them.”

Suddenly he stood up.

“Hey, Carpenter!”

The noise from the road stopped. The horses didn’t.

“Hey, Carpenter. How about you and me, Carpenter. You and me, one on one?”

“No, Earl,” Garf said, “No. That guy goes at least 250. You ain’t got a hope in hell one on one.”

“Ain’t none of us got a chance twenty on five,” said Tommy.

“Wadda you say, Carpenter? One on one? Or are you chicken?”

“Why’d I want to do that?” came back the answer. “This ain’t no fucking Western gunfight, Okie boy. You coming down here or do we have to come up and pull you and your girls out of there.”

“Fucking asshole,” Garf screamed, standing up next to Earl. “Come on if you’re coming, Carpenter! You and all your chickenshit cunt-lickers. Maybe you wanna bring your momma. That is if she ain’t still sucking spic, nigger, dago dick like the last time I saw her!”

“That’s it,” said Tommy, putting his head in his hands. “Oh, fuck! That’s really fucking it!”

The figures below started to run towards the high stack of bales. They were howling and waving their baseball bats and tire irons. Harold saw Tommy cross himself. He wished he was a Catholic too. No Jews in a foxhole? Something like that. But Harold had his own way of dealing with extreme crises, at least his body did.

He farted once more, a long, drawn-out wail of anguish that burned on its way out and finally got the attention of Garf, who was standing next to him. Then his stomach heaved violently. There was nothing he could do, especially as it was half full of warm County Club Malt Liquor, the required drink at the SunAir Drive-In on a Friday night.

“Oh, Jesus, Red! Not now! Fucking hell! That’s disgusting! HEY!”

“I’m, sor... I, oh, Ug... Arg...”

Once again he farted, once again he spewed. This time more fulsomely. The other boys leapt out of the way as a voluminous, yellowish gush of liquid was projected out of Harold’s mouth. As if to prove one of Newton’s laws, the number of which he couldn’t remember—not then not ever—Harold staggered heavily backwards, crashing into the top row of bales. One bale came loose and began to topple down the twenty-foot stack.

The boys watched as if in slow motion the bale bounced once, gathered speed, bounced again and caught one of the invaders full in the face. He went over taking two or three others with him. A few moments later more bales followed. Soon the air was filled with shouts, straw and bodies.

Carpenter’s friends had dragged away their wounded and were massing for a second assault when the police sirens were heard. Everyone who could scattered.

Harold was in no position to scatter any more than he had already. He was on his hands and knees. He had graduated to small-scale residual farting and the dry heaves and was a good way beyond caring.

“Now, Gran, you just take her easy. Don’t be fussing so.”

“I ain't fussing. Besides, even if I is, it ain't every night you gets brought in here by the po-lease.”

He’d persuaded Big Jim Douglas to let him make sure the horses were alright before he escorted him home. All the others had escaped by the time

the police arrived. Only Harold and he were there to explain the noise, the riot and the pile of busted bales and Harold was good for nothing but retching up bile.

“It’s not what you might call serious, Mrs. Earl,” said the large policeman. “Boys horsing around is all. Just wanted to let Big Earl know about what happened down at the stables. Make sure these here boys got home safe and sound.”

“Well, for one, this boy,” she said, indicating Harold, “he don’t belong to here at all. Ain’t his house.”

“Abel-stein? Sure I know that, Mrs. Earl. I’ll be taking him home directly, as soon as I’ve had a talk with Big Earl.”

“You do just that thing. Looks sick, if you ask me. You sick, boy? What’s all that yellow stuff hanging on your pants there?”

Harold looked down and rubbed half-heartedly at the encrusted streaks of vomit. A few flakes worked loose and sprinkled onto the carpet. Earl’s grandmother propelled the wheelchair towards Harold, her face purpling with the effort. She stopped a few feet away and waved her claws at him.

“Don’t be doing that, boy! Don’t be doing that! I don’t want your filthy sick all over my clean carpet! Can’t have it! No I can’t have it! You just quit that right this minute!”

Harold’s hands froze a few inches from his side.

“Leave him be, Gran. Ol’ Harold’s had a pretty rough ol’ night and I reckon he’s running on empty about now.”

“That so,” his grandmother said. “Ain’t my business what he’s running on, just don’t want it all over my carpet. Had that Mexican girl cleaning in here today. Ain’t coming in now ‘til Monday. What am I supposed to do about that? You wanna tell me?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll take care of it directly.”

Poor Harold. He was sure one sorry-looking dude. Never seen anyone so white, almost transparent he was. But then Earl had never seen anyone puke so much either. Damn impressive it was. Damn effective too, except for Garf’s new boots of course. No matter. His dad was going to be madder than hell about those bales. Madder than hell about the horses. He’d have good cause too.

“You see, officer, this here boy, my boy that is, he ain’t bad. Not one of them bad bones in his whole entire body. I should know too. Brought him up, didn’t I? From when he was no bigger than that. His daddy overseas.

His mama gone. No, sir. I reckon how it's the company he been keeping lately what does it. Never had no trouble like this afore. Must be the company."

She glared at Harold, who was swaying slightly, his eyes closed.

Big Jim winked at Earl. Earl nodded back manfully.

"Yes, ma'am, Mrs. Earl. Don't you worry none," the policeman said clamping a meaty hand on Harold's shoulder. "I'll see this dangerous desperado gets his just deserts. Just leave it to me."

Harold eyes snapped wide open.

"I knew you'd understand," she said, and turning to look up at Harold. "Serves you right. Bringing your funny ways down here. I told 'em, told both of 'em, but they wouldn't listen to me. Nothing but an old woman, that's all I is. Old woman. Old woman. And now look! Old woman. But Jesus knows, he knows everything, boy. On the cross and he knows. And who put Him on that cross? Who do you think that was put Him up there? You ain't ever going to escape that, no matter what you tries to do, you and all the rest of 'em."

"Gran. Please. Come on now. Nothing happened. Harold didn't do nothing neither."

"Don't you be standing there telling at me that ain't nothing happened, Earl Bob Earl. You don't have po-lease coming 'round if nothing happened. You don't have *That* on my carpet if nothing happened. You don't have Our Lord crucified if nothing happened."

"Sorry, but..." Harold began.

"Sorry? Doncha think it's a mite late in the day for 'Sorry'?"

"Sorry," Harold managed again, head down.

"Beg your pardon, Mrs. Earl," the policeman said, "but do you happen to know where Big Earl is at, right at this particular time?"

"No, sir, I do not know where he is at. He's free, white and more than twenty-one years of age. Doesn't have to tell his ma where he goes to."

"Of course he doesn't. Sorry. Well then, I'd better be getting on. Time's a wasting. Take this desperado home right now."

"You ain't going to put him in the jailhouse?"

"No, ma'am, not this time I'm not."

He pushed Harold toward the door.

"I think he went out to the ChiChi with my Aunt Enid," Harold offered over his shoulder.

“You what!” exclaimed Earl’s grandmother, rising half way out of her chair and than collapsing back like a broken sack.

“Easy now, Gran. Just take her real easy.”

“What’s that you say, boy? My Earl Bob with your aunt? That woman we saw in the market?! The one who were nekked?! Can’t be! He wouldn’t do something like that to me! Never do something like that!”

His father hadn’t said a word to him. But he never did talk about that kind of stuff. Said he didn’t hold with men talking about what they got up to with a woman. Said it wasn’t respectful.

“Yeah,” Harold confirmed as he went out the door. “I’m positive that’s what she said. ‘Going to the ChiChi with Mr. Earl.’ A black dress, she was wearing a black dress. Said she’d be in late and for me not to worry.”

Earl thought Harold was smiling but he couldn’t tell for sure because the light was so bad. Then the door slammed shut.

No Matter How She Done It

When Big Jim brought him home, Earl's dad's Chevy pickup was parked outside. The drapes in the living room were closed and there were no lights on at the front of the house.

"Well," said the policeman, with a wide, gold-tooth grin, "Look's like Big Earl scored there, Abel-stein. Wadda you think?"

He tapped Harold on the arm with his outsized fist. Harold grunted in pain.

"You're too damn soft, boy. Flabby. Flabby body, flabby mind. We don't want that, do we? 'Course we don't."

Harold didn't care. Sal Mineo and then Pat Boone and then stark terror and then sickness and then Earl's horrible old grandmother shouting at him and now an overstuffed policeman talking about flabby. Enough for one night. He only wanted to take a couple of Alka-Seltzer and go to bed. Alka-Seltzer would settle his stomach and then nothing else in the whole stupid Palm Springs' world would matter a damn.

"She's a real good looker, your aunt. You know that?"

Harold didn't reply. He'd heard it before. Always sounded the same too. Low, greasy and threatening, like they were about to take something away from him. He knew he didn't want to lose it, whatever it was.

Alka-Seltzer. He could hear it fizzing in the glass. His nose poised over the glass, letting the bubbles tickle at him. The awful taste but then the relieving burps and finally a placid, just-right stomach. Yes. A miracle it was. Good old Alka-Seltzer.

"A real looker. Lucky old Earl," he said, hitting the dashboard with the heel of his hand.

Harold grabbed for the door handle.

"Where you think you're going to?"

"Home?"

"We're not finished here yet, Abel-stein. You just sit yourself right there."

Harold let go of the handle.

“You’re new down here, so I’m going to give you some free advice. Understand? You look at me when I’m talking to you, boy. That’s better. Now, that Little Earl, he’s a real clean-living boy. You know what I mean? Clean-living. Never had no trouble with him before, just like Mrs. Earl was saying. But, you, you’re down here not more than a couple of weeks and already we got us trouble, Little Earl’s got himself trouble.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Harold protested. “I was just...”

“Shut-up now, boy. Shut-up and listen-up. You know how many times I’ve heard that from smart-ass punks like you, Abel-stein? More than I can count. You know, don’t you, that Quentin, Chino, the Rock, Folsom are packed full of smart guys like you that didn’t do nothing. Sent some of them there myself.”

Folsom? San Quentin? Alcatraz? He’d only thrown up a little. Well, a lot maybe. And of course the farting. But that’s all. He’d even been too sick to help the others push over the bales. Were puking and farting crimes in Palm Springs? God, how he wanted that Alka-Seltzer! Afterwards they could put him with old Chessman on Death Row.

“So you just watch your step from now on. You listening to me? Speak up.”

“Yeah. Yes, sir.”

“Right. I got my eye on you, Abel-stein. Close up on you. So if you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep your nose clean from now on. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

The cop leaned over and fastened onto his forearm.

“And one more thing, Abel-stein, you stay away from my little girl, from my Gloria. I see you hanging ‘round her any more you’re going be wearing the cheeks of your fat ass for earmuffs. Understand?”

His thick thumb and forefinger almost met in the tender flesh of Harold’s arm. Harold closed his eyes and managed not to scream.

Gloria. The blond, chrome-plated mouth from the drugstore who had been so stupidly friendly. Jesus! He’d run into her again only the day before in Dave’s Discs.

“Hey, Harold.”

“Hey, yourself.”

“Whatcha doing?”

“Records, you know. Looking.”

“Let’s see what you got there. Geez Louise, Harold, what kinda stuff is this?”

“R&B stuff. Kinda special. The guy over there gets them for me.”

“Tony Harris, *Chicken Baby Chicken*?”

“Ebb, an LA label. Really hard to get, even in LA.”

“I can imagine it is. And who is this Amos Milburn guy? You know something, Harold? I could worry about you. What’s wrong with Ricky Nelson or Pat Boone or Paul Anka? That’s what I call music.”

“I can imagine it is,” replied Harold, disdainfully.

Gloria didn’t notice the disdain and for his trouble gave him a big metal smile.

“Listen you wanna get a Coke or something?” she asked, attempting what looked like a pout.

Harold made a bumbling excuse and escaped. He had never had anything to do with girls, ever. He had been thinking recently that it might be an idea to start having something to do with them, but Gloria was not his idea of where to start.

“But I never wanted to see her. Honest I didn’t. It was an accident.”

“Why? Something the matter with her? Not good enough for you? Is that it, Abel-stein?”

“No. I just didn’t..”

He released Harold’s arm. Harold could feel the indentation. His stomach was churning again. The Holy Alka-Seltzer was only a few seconds, a few steps away.

“Go on, boy. I’ve had about enough of you.”

“What?”

“I have to write it on your forehead? Get out. And remember what I said. This is your last warning. The next time I won’t be so easy on you.”

Harold closed the car door. The cop watched him until he was inside the house. When he peeked through the curtains a few seconds later the squad car was still there, a dull red glow of a cigarette winking at him from the driver’s seat.

He rushed into the bathroom, opened the cabinet and took out the long tube of Alka-Seltzer. He unscrewed the top and tipped it up. A few white crumbs fell into his hand.

He sat down heavily on the side of the bath. Complete defeat. Beginning to end.

He drank a glass of lukewarm water. It tasted of strongly of toothpaste and Listerine. A few seconds later Harold was on his knees, hugging the sides of the toilet, his mouth opening and closing like a guppy out of water, making loud hooping noises and waiting for his stomach to explode up through his throat, out between his teeth and into the quiet waters of the toilet bowl.

* * *

It was quite a shock. The first uncircumcised penis she had ever seen. Archie had a rather stubby regulation Jewish model. All the other men, Jewish or non-Jewish, Enid had ever seen or been with, while not necessarily stubby had had the same basic-shaped piece of equipment. Earl's penis, however, did not conform to any such model or regulation. Long and thin and pale, with an twiddly bit at the end which looked like the floppy snout of a small albino anteater, although she had never actually come across such an anteater, or for that matter any anteater. When he was fully erect not all the glens escaped from the embrace of the foreskin. It worried her. It fascinated her.

“Your sure some kinda woman, Enid Carlson.”

“Yes? What kind would that be?”

“Donno. The right kind, I guess. Special. Yeah. That's it. A special kinda woman. You got an ashtray hanging around somewheres near by?”

She handed him a glass one she'd lifted from Ruby's Dunes. He laid it on his stomach. Archie couldn't have done that. The ashtray would have slid off. But then Archie didn't smoke.

“You do alright, yourself, Earl.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“That's good. It was OK then? I mean, you know.”

“Fine. It was just fine.”

“That's good.”

“Yes it is.”

Why did they always want to know how it was? Archie asked her the same thing every time. And if she had always told them the truth, what then? So she always gave the same answer no matter how it had been. It

was easier that way. But she wasn't lying to Earl. Generous and patient, even intriguingly hesitant, not at all the slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am cowboy Charlene had warned her about.

She hadn't intended to sleep with Earl. Far from it. Although he was a lot nicer than she had thought and pretty good company and handsome too, she had told herself very firmly that she didn't want any entanglements or complications. Not that a one-night stand meant complications. She'd had them before when Archie wasn't there. Some lasted for weeks. Earl was different though. She sensed that he needed something more from her than a quick roll in the hay and she remembered Madam Bambani. "A dark man. A sad man. A proud man. A man who will need you too much." Could she give him whatever it was he needed too much of? Did she want to?

Enid had been really in love only twice in her life, at least as far as she could judge. The first was when she was nineteen and still a virgin. He was twenty-five and in the Navy. She lost her virginity in the rumble seat of a borrowed Ford coup. He left a few months later promising letters and undying love. She got one letter and then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and she discovered that undying love had its practical limits.

She told herself she would never allow anyone to get so close to her again. It hurt far too much. In 1943 at a USO dance she met Corporal Abraham Feldman. He was the son of a rabbi from Philadelphia. He had dark eyes, curly hair and a smile which made her forget Pearl Harbor. Abraham — he always insisted she call him Abraham not Abe — died somewhere in the south of Italy. After that she decided that love was too risky, for her and for the men she fell in love with.

Archie had, or so she thought, finally solved that particular problem for her. She wasn't in love with him. She enjoyed him, had been fond of him, was still fond of him even after what had happened, but there was no romance, no hot passion that could give her pain. She appreciated that, that and the fact he paid the bills. What could she appreciate about Earl?

"You wanna tell me 'bout your friend?"

"Archie?"

"That his name?"

"That's right, Archie Blatt."

"I see. Uh-huh. Blatt."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, donno really. I mean, you know, about this and all."

He waved his cigarette like a smoking wand over their naked bodies, hers completely tanned, his white but for the neck, face and hands. The smoke serpentine slowly upward. After a foot or two it was abruptly brushed aside by the cold air being forced through the small vent set in the wall over the top of the door.

“Oh, don’t worry about that. It’s not important. It’ll be alright.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“If you were my woman it sure as hell wouldn’t be alright.”

“Well, I’m not your woman,” she said sharply. “And I’m not his woman either. I told you before, our arrangement is over, finished, kaput. Right?”

He lifted the ashtray and put it on the bedside table, raised up on one elbow and looked at her. She crossed her arms over her breasts.

“Hey now, no offense there, Enid.”

“None taken, Earl.”

“Good. That’s good. I just wanted to kinda know where we were, if you know what I mean.”

“Where we were?”

“You know.”

“Sure, I know, I know. I wish I could tell you, Earl. Maybe if I knew where I was, where I will be. I don’t just know much of anything right now. OK?”

He didn’t answer.

“Isn’t this enough?” she asked. “No big questions, no big promises, just this?”

He remained silent.

“Listen,” she said finally, “you want to go for a swim?”

“What about the boy?”

“What about him?”

“If he comes back or something. You know, while we’re in the pool.”

“He’s out with your son, out with Little Earl. They’ve gone to the drive-in. He never gets back before 12:00. Come on, it’ll do us good.”

“Don’t have any trunks.”

“What a shame,” she laughed as she reached over and grabbed his flaccid penis.

They made love again outside in star-bright heat, he kneeling on the top step of the pool she with her legs straight out, toes touching and then not

touching the top of the water. This time he didn't seem so hesitant.

* * *

Earl was in love. At least he figured that's what it must be. She was a fantastic woman, like none he had ever been with. He liked her dark looks. He liked her directness. The way she spoke. The way she made love. Nothing ever totally expected. Some things totally unexpected. She made him edgy and unsure and he liked that and he didn't know why and he liked that too. He knew anything was possible and that the whole thing was utterly impossible. There wasn't much else it could be but love. He knew that much about it.

He sat on the side of the pool, a towel around his waist, his thin, white legs in the water, smoking and watching her swim back and forth, a smooth silhouette against a bright turquoise mat created by the underwater floodlight at the far end of the pool. She had firm, strong arms. Clean, even strokes. Pleasing strokes.

What did he really know about her? A Jewish woman. A country club woman. A woman who took money from a married man. A woman who flaunted herself in public. A woman too damn knowledgeable about love making. What was he getting himself into? Did he care? Should he care? He didn't usually ask himself such questions. Usually he didn't need to.

"You want to hand me over that towel, Earl? Please."

"You bet."

She put her hands on the side of the pool and lifted herself out. Sitting next to him she began to dry herself. The light coming from the churned-up water rippled across their bodies. Behind her, the edge of the same light was caught by the white spiny arms of an ocotillo and far behind that was the solid, dark backdrop of the mountains. During the day they rose suddenly out of the desert floor and marched in overlapping granite folds to the pines of Mount San Jacinto 10,000 feet up. At night there was no such differentiation, just a single massive presence, finally and finely broken along its jagged rim by the bits of the Milky Way. He'd always been partial to those mountains. Day or night. They didn't have such mountains back near Magna Carta. Oklahoma was pretty flat.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked. "Or a cup of coffee?"

“Cup of coffee would be fine. Thanks. Cream and sugar please.”

“I’ll bring the cream and sugar. You can fix it how you want.”

“Sure. That’s just fine.”

She got up, twirled the towel around herself, tucked in an edge between her breasts and went off towards the house. He heard the sliding door complaining as it opened and shut. The rollers needed oiling. He would come around one day and fix that for her.

He liked having things tight and sure, running exactly how they should. Well oiled. There were more than enough unnecessary surprises waiting out there for you without you helping them along by not seeing to what needed seeing to, by not attending to business. It was just plain common sense.

Far off in the night two cars were being pushed through the gears, the drivers quick out of first almost at the same instant then pushing second for all it was worth. Probably kids drag racing down Sunrise.

Enid came back wearing a long terry cloth robe. She put the tray down next to him. They drank their coffee without speaking. It was a relaxed, familiar silence. He settled into it, feeling good. When the noise of the drag racers faded out, the whirring of the cicadas came back to full volume. Their noise was always there so that most of the time you didn’t notice it. He’d never actually seen a cicada. Never thought about it before either. He lit another cigarette. So did she.

“How long has it been since your wife died, Earl. That is, if you don’t mind me asking.”

He was glad for the dark.

“No. It’s OK. My wife. Yeah. Back in ‘44 it was.”

“Oh. A long time ago.”

“I guess you could say that. Sure, that’s right. A long time ago now.”

She paused. And then more softly.

“What happened, Earl? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“No, guess not. Happened? What happened? I’ll tell you what happened.”

No one had asked for details before. The family, all except Little Earl, knew what had happened but went along with his story. Strangers he kept at a respect-for-the-dead distance. Until now. He didn’t want Enid at any kind of distance like that, even though he knew that telling the story would open him up to the humiliation and knife-in-the-guts pain he always felt when he thought about Ruth Ann.

“You know, Enid, I would appreciate it if you’d say nothing to no one about this. OK?”

He waited. She took a drag on her cigarette.

“I won’t say a word, Earl. But you don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

“No. I want to tell you, Enid. I truly do want to. You see, it’s just that I don’t want Little Earl knowing “.

“Knowing what?”

“Knowing,” he said quietly and quickly, “that his mother ain’t exactly dead.”

“Not *exactly* dead?”

“Leastways I don’t think she is.”

“But, you told me she’d passed on, didn’t you?”

“I did. That’s what I tell everybody. And she is dead.”

“But...”

“To me she’s dead.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Why should you. Sometimes I don’t know if I rightly understand it myself.”

He told her as quick as he could, like pulling off a band-aid.

“That’s just terrible, Earl. Just terrible. You know, he’s bound to find out about it some day?”

“Maybe so. I don’t think about that too much.”

“I sure would. Jesus, that’s really terrible. Really.”

He wasn’t sure if she meant it was terrible Little Earl not knowing or terrible that his wife went off with Elvin. It didn’t matter either way. He was still in love with her. He didn’t know whether he wanted to be, whether he should be, but none of that could change anything.

He stood up and pulled the towel tighter around his waist.

“Excuse me for a minute, Enid, will you? I’ve got to use your bathroom.”

Smoke on the Water

Harold looked up towards the mountains. The air was clear, the sun bright against the granite, the specks of mica like hundreds of tiny razor-blade mirrors cutting into his eyes. He still hadn't decided about the mountains. At least they were far away, which was more than he could say about the desert. He leaned on the mailbox, pushed the red flag up and down a few times. It squeaked. Across the road some kind of stupid bird was fluffing its feathers in the sand. Stupid damn thing. Stupid damn desert.

He hadn't seen Little Earl since Saturday night and the big fight at the stable. That was the same night Big Earl, wearing nothing but a red and white striped towel, found him in the bathroom.

"Ain't really the time or the place for praying, Harold, ol' son," he said with a forced laugh.

He tried to help him but his towel came loose. Harold didn't look up. He clung to the toilet bowl. Then Aunt Enid came rushing in and proceeded to flap all over him. Big Earl disappeared.

On Sunday Aunt Enid seemed different than she had been for the last few weeks. Not so worried or touchy. More her old self, like before her car accident and before Archie Blatt came to visit them. She didn't even tell him off for drinking and being sick. She was too happy. She asked him dumb things about horses and then did a lot of smiling out of context. He wasn't sure what was going on but he had a pretty good idea and he didn't like the idea at all. He figured for sure Archie Blatt wouldn't like it either. He blamed the damn stupid desert. It was an unnatural, a crazy place. It made people act unnatural and crazy.

Earl's white pickup pulled up and stopped, gravel kicking out from the back tires. Harold opened the door and climbed in. As always the truck smelled of warm plastic, sweat and horse shit. It had become a familiar, and for Harold almost a reassuring smell. He dumped his books on the seat and slammed the door.

"How they hangin', Harold?"

"Good, I guess."

"That's OK."

“Yeah.”

“Ready for it?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Earl put the truck into gear.

“Outside!,” he whooped, popping the clutch and peeling rubber in front of Aunt Enid’s house.

“I guess,” Harold managed as the acceleration slammed him back against the seat.

Harold grabbed onto the red leather strap above the door and pulled himself upright. Earl’s truck hadn’t been sitting in the sun so he could safely rest his arm on the open window. The warm morning air felt good. No more school bus. No more screaming little kids. If he hadn’t been on his way to school and hadn’t been worrying about his crazy aunt he could almost be enjoying himself.

“Sure enough gave those boys a pounding the other night, didn’t we though, Harold old son?”

“We sure did. I guess so anyway.”

“ ‘Course we did. You bet we did. A good old pounding we gave ‘em.”

“I just got sort of sick, you know, that was all it was.”

“Hey now, Harold, don’t matter how it gets done, as long as it gets done. You know, I reckon how you is coming along just fine and dandy,” Earl said tapping him on the knee with his knuckles.

“For a city boy, you mean?”

“You bet,” laughed Earl, “for a city boy.”

Harold smiled to himself at Earl’s acceptance but the smile never got much further than his thinking about it, because suddenly and like a big space opening inside him he missed Los Angeles and all the good life, the secure life that went along with being there. He even missed Fairfax High. Even missed his parents. Sort of anyway.

Earl made a right on Sunrise and gunned the truck up towards 111. To their left the desert stretched for miles and miles, right over to the Little San Bernadinos. Sand and angry cacti, stringy plants, hostile-looking bushes. Like riding along on the edge of the Wilderness. If you kept looking out there you could forget there was a town not more than ten feet or so to the other side of you. Forget the houses, the people, the swimming pools. Only the Desert. Only the Desert. Any moment that dumb twenty-mule team would appear. A guy in rags begging for water. John Wayne searching after

those damn Indians. Dumb stuff like that. The Desert. Harold couldn't turn his head, couldn't pull himself away. City boy.

Earl reached over and turned up the radio. *Whole Lot of Shaking Going On* was going on. The desert vanished against the sound. He looked to his right. Houses, trees, roads. What passed in the desert for civilization.

Jerry Lee Lewis. A new guy. A white guy singing black. He reminded Harold of Little Richard. Maybe it was the piano or the edge of out-of-control in the sound. No holds barred. Little Richard was just about the best there was or ever would be. Harold sighed and kept his gaze firmly on the houses.

"White but Right," Benny Sparkle had said. "You listen, Harold, and you tell me that's not how it is with this boy. White but Right!"

Harold listened. He bought the record. He bought a few more records.

"Down to scratch is what it is and where it's at," said Benny with a shrug. "Scratch?"

"Bread, man. You dig what I'm saying? The long-green. Mo-la-la. You know, scratch."

He tapped a finger across his open palm.

"Oh, that," said Harold.

"Black music with a white face, man. Worked with Elvis, didn't it? So why not Jerry Lee? Good for them. Good for Dave's Desert Discs. Good for everybody. Do-do-lee Bop, Pop! Do-do-lee Bam, Ma'am!"

"What do you think to this, Harold," asked Earl.

Harold cast a quick look at Earl. The other boy was watching the road, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

"White but right," said Harold after a moment or two.

"White but right?"

"Just something I heard, that's all."

"White *but* right? Hey, Harold, old partner, you got something against white-man's music?"

"No. Nothing like that. It's just I like, I mean, you know, like I told you before, I just like R&B, that's all. Can't really explain it very well. It just, you know, real... sounds real I mean. Not pretty pretty or anything like that."

"Uh-huh. So what's this here?" Earl asked, pointing at the radio.

"Jerry Lee Lewis? Don't know. White guy, black sound. It's good though. Sure. I can dig it."

“Dig it, huh? Even starting to sound like them.”

“Who?”

“You know,” Earl said, waving a free hand toward the radio.

“I just like it,” said Harold defensively. “That’s all.”

At least Earl hadn’t asked about Aunt Enid or anything like that.

Earl laughed and punched Harold lightly on the shoulder.

“OK, partner. Don’t take on so. Ain’t so damn important, now is it? Just music after all.”

He couldn’t expect Earl to know anything about how important it really was, could he? A Palm Springs cowboy, that’s all he was. Wasn’t his fault.

Sun, yellow and white, 1957, flip side *It’ll Be Me*.

“You sure are one strange dude when it comes to the music, Harold. I’ll have to give you that.”

They stopped at the junction with 111.

“See that,” said Earl, pointing to the stoplight suspended on four thin wires over the middle of the intersection. “Only the second one of them things in Palm Springs that is.”

Harold peered up at the three-colored box swinging gently. There must be hundreds, no thousands of stoplights in Los Angeles.

“Civilization,” Harold said wistfully.

“You say what?”

“Civilization. You know.”

“I know.”

He didn’t know. Harold was sure about that.

The light changed. Earl turned left and headed out 111.

“First one was up there in the village in front of the ChiChi. You know, one of them regular ones stuck up on a pole. That one’s been here only a couple of months. Reckon if we ain’t careful they’ll be all over the damn place soon enough.”

Might do something to fix the damn desert, stoplights might. Harold smiled almost out loud and settled back against the seat.

* * *

He usually welcomed the desert's extremes, but this particular morning they worked only at being bothersome to him and he didn't know why. The hot air was choking him, the sun burning at his eyes. He pulled down the visor above the windshield to cut the morning sun. It didn't help much. Up on the left a big sign on top of an open-fronted shed roofed with palm fronds offered:

**FRESH DATES MIXED DATES DATE SHAKES DATE CANDY
DATES! DATES! DATES !**

If there was one thing he couldn't abide it was dates. Even thinking about them brought on the sickly sweet taste. He slowed the pickup, had a look in the mirror, then latching on to the broody-knob he swung the wheel and hung a sharp left off 111.

"Hold on there, cowboy," he warned too late.

Harold grunted as he was slammed up against the door. Ahead of them was one of the blue VW buses. A second or two later only a meager cloud of dust marked the spot where it had disappeared, scuttling between the rows of skinny date palms.

What Earl had wanted to do on the way to school was ask Harold about his father and Harold's aunt. But he'd started on about his damn music and all and then Earl couldn't figure out exactly how to bring it up or even what to ask. It confused him something painful.

After Big Jim took Harold off home his grandmother had ranted on about Deadly Sin and Fornication and some other Bible stuff. She'd started in again on that Grapes Book too, always a sign that things were bad with her and likely to be getting worse. Her color was none too good either — a ripe purple with lots of yellow around the eyes and lips — until Earl was scared she might have a fit or something.

"Don't you be standing there trying to tell me it's OK, Little Earl. Don't you be doing that. It ain't. And it never going be neither. You saw that woman yourself, didn't you? Saw how she was. Well?"

"Yes, ma'am, I did."

"I warned you, didn't I? Warned your father too. But you all mocked me. Didn't want to hear nothing 'bout it."

"Hear, Gran?"

“Hear nothing ‘bout that fat boy.”

“Harold?”

“That’s the only fat boy we got, ain't it? Only the one. Don’t even look like no Jew to me, he don’t. You ain't going sit there and tell me he do, is you? Course you ain't. Can’t do it. Simple as that.”

She paused, bird-thin chest heaving with the effort.

He never really thought about not loving his grandmother, but he had to admit that sometimes she could be a trial. Lately the sometimes was stretching out to more than some times.

“And what’s my Earl Bob want to go stepping out with that hussy for? You answer me that.”

Although he had some pretty good ideas as to why his father wanted to step out with Harold’s aunt, he wasn’t about to let on to his grandmother. They weren’t the kind of ideas you told to old people, especially an old person who was your grandmother and a cripple with the religion on her so strong as it was.

“Well? Don’t just sit there looking like a bump on a log.”

Earl told her that Mrs. Carlson was a nice woman, friendly and all that, but his grandmother was well past any kind of listening. She was a Jezebel, a loose woman and more stuff he didn’t take in. Finally she wore herself out with it all. When he came back from warming up a pan of milk he found her slumped in her chair, snoring and drooling.

She weighed a lot less than a full bale and it wasn’t any bother to scoop her up and carry her to the bedroom. He cleaned her lips and chin with a Kleenex and covered her with a worn-soft patchwork quilt she had brought with her from Oklahoma. Her mouth had fallen open so he was able to ease out her false teeth and put them in the glass by the side of the bed. He hated doing it but his father said if it wasn’t done she might choke to death in the night.

Big Earl came home an hour or so later. He seemed pretty much relaxed so that he didn’t even tell Earl to turn off the radio. He turned it off anyway, just in case they played anything by Bob Wills. You could never be too careful when you had to tell Big Earl bad news.

“You want a beer, Earl?” his father asked from the kitchen.

It was the first time he had offered him a beer in the house. Something was not right.

“No thanks.”

He came through into the living room and sat down in his leather armchair. He pulled off his boots, massaged his stockinged toes.

“Where’s your gran at?”

“Sleeping.”

“She been OK?”

“Yes, sir. Been fine.”

“Good.”

He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke curl up.

“You been out with Harold tonight, son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Drive-in?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know, doncha, that the boy can’t hold his liquor?”

“I know that. Yes, sir.”

“Man should learn hisself how to hold his liquor.”

He paused and then leaned forward in his chair.

“You know, son, I...”

He stopped, hands resting on his knees, eyes suddenly unfocused. They sat in silence. Finally he told his father what had happened at the stables and about the police. Big Earl didn’t interrupt. When he finished the story he looked over at him.

“Them horses alright?”

“Yes, sir, they are.”

“You clean up?”

“Yes, sir, we did.”

“Where was Domingo at?”

Earl had forgotten about Domingo, the old Indian who slept in the shack out behind the stables. Supposed to be the night watchman. He’d let him down bad by not remembering about him. Getting someone in trouble like that was about the worst thing a man could do. He braced himself for his father’s disapproval. He deserved all of it.

“Brooklyn Indians and honest-to-god Indians,” his father said, slapping himself on the knee.

“Pa?”

“Neither of ‘em can hold their liquor worth a damn,” he laughed.

Earl couldn’t have been more startled if he’d caught his father singing *San Antonio Rose*. Something was *definitely* not right, but he didn’t want to

push his luck by asking.

With Harold he had figured the rules about asking questions weren't the same. Still and all when it came down to it he was finding it no easier to talk to him than to his father. He just couldn't find the questions for what was bothering him. He decided he'd have to put it aside for the time being.

They turned onto the dirt road which led through the date grove to the school on the other side. It was darker and cooler in the grove, the desert glare filleted and softened by the colonnades of tall trees. A man with a Mexican hat high up a ladder was putting paper bags around the yellow date clusters. He waved at the two boys in the pickup. Earl figured the man thought they were working men, not kids that went to the rich-kids' school. Forgetting about the taste of the dates, Earl raised his hand and waved back.

* * *

"Light, Charlene. You know, I actually feel light. Like I was floating or something stupid like that. Like I was sixteen or something. Stupid isn't it?"

Charlene rested a heavy-ringed hand on Enid's arm.

"Honey, you is nothing but one lucky dog. Jesus! I haven't felt like that in a coon's age! Big John never was the one for making a body feel light, even when we was courting. Mind you," she said, looking down at herself, "with the body I got that ain't too surprising."

"And I know it isn't going to work out and it doesn't matter."

"Maybe when I was sixteen or seventeen I had that feeling too. Gee. Imagine that, willya. Sixteen, seventeen. I donno maybe before that even."

"I should be worried, shouldn't I? I mean really, really worried. Worried about getting a job. Worried about holding on to this place. Worried about Harold. Worried about Earl. Worried about me, for Christ sake! And I am and I'm not. It doesn't make any sense at all."

"Rufus Carnover," Charlene said, staring out the window into the Enid's backyard.

"And a cowboy too. Now that *really* doesn't make any sense. You should see... Rufus...?"

"Carnover, Rufus Carnover, the first boy I had a crush on. He made me feel all light and breathless too. I was only just fourteen. A few years later

on he got struck by lightning .”

“Killed?”

“Deader than Sunday in West Texas. Never did have much luck with men, that is before Big John, if you want to be calling that luck.”

“What am I going to do, Charlene?”

“And then he was such a poor little ol’ thing, I reckon no one else wanted him.”

“Charlene, please! Help me out, willya.”

“What is it you wanna do exactly?”

“That’s just it, I don’t know.”

“Then don’t do nothing. Let whatever’s going happen happen. It’ll most likely do that anyways no matter whether you worry at it or not.”

Enid lit a cigarette from the butt of her last one.

“And I haven’t even told Harold about Archie and all that stuff yet.”

“No?”

“I mean we just finished painting his room and he seemed pretty happy about that and then he’s started at a new school. I haven’t had the heart to tell him we’ve probably got to move out and find a new place.”

“He’ll live. People move all the time. If they didn’t my Big John would be out of business.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

Enid felt her lightness seeping way.

“You recall when we was working over at the Inn?” Charlene asked, reaching over and shaking Enid’s knee.

“Not something I’m going to forget in a hurry.”

“All those damn fellas trying to grab at you and stuff like that.”

“Eating leftovers standing up in the kitchen,” said Enid with a half-smile. “That mister whatever-his-name-was, telling us how we had to please the customers. Please the customers!”

“Sweating out late nights in that damn jail cell they gave us out back.”

“And paid next to nothing too.”

“Tips. We got to keep those tips. Remember?”

“Great. The tips. You know, Charlene, how some bad times don’t seem so bad when you look back? You sort of forget the bad stuff, only remember the good stuff. Well, the Inn is one time that looks worse. Right now especially it does.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, honey. We had us some good times too, didn’t we?”

“Of course we did. I not saying we didn’t.”

“And look here, I landed Big John and you got yourself old Archie.”

Enid looked over at her friend. When they’d worked as waitresses at the Inn Charlene had been almost slim. Seven married years and two kids had fixed that, but Charlene hadn’t changed.

“Now if you were to get yourself hitched to Big Earl. Well…”

“Hold on now, Charlene. Just hold it right there. One date and you’re getting me married? That’s not what I call a big help, married.”

“You like him, doncha?”

“I like him, but I don’t think I *really* love him or anything like that. Not enough, not in the same way that you mean.”

“What’s all this carry on about light and sixteen if you don’t love him?”

“I don’t know. Haven’t thought much further than just enjoying the feeling.”

“Nothing wrong with that, honey. But there’s also nothing wrong with the other.”

“The other?”

“Marriage.”

Enid didn’t answer.

“You can’t find yourself a job. You need somewheres to live at. So?”

“So?”

Charlene held up her left hand and waved the gold-banded ring finger.

“I don’t want to trade in one pile of troubles for another, Charlene.”

“It don’t have to be like that.”

“No it doesn’t. But one date, Charlene? One damn date? What’s that to go on?”

“How long did it take with Archie?”

“Archie was different. Back then I wanted a quick way out from waitressing at the Inn.”

“And now?”

“Now? Now. Yeah, OK, but marriage is permanent, isn’t it? At least it’s supposed to be permanent. Archie was never meant to be permanent. Archie was a temporary arrangement.”

“Seven years, honey? Seven years sure feels like getting on for permanent to me. It is for permanent for me!”

“He was only here from time to time. That’s not the same thing. Besides, I haven’t even thought about marriage and I’m sure Earl hasn’t either. Probably run a mile if he thought I was thinking about it, which I’m most certainly, positively not. Just having a good time is all we’re doing. Nothing wrong with that, is there?”

Charlene threw up her hands.

“And besides...” continued Enid, her eyes searching for something to hold them.

“Suit yourself,” Charlene said, leaning forward towards her friend. “But if I was you, I’d take a good long look.”

“Besides... he’s not, you know... he’s not *Jewish*,” Enid blurted out.

Charlene jerked back. Both women were silent for a while, not looking at each other.

“Right,” Charlene said. “Well I guess that just about does for that problem. Good old Earl. Good enough to hop into bed with but not good enough to marry. Rough luck on you, Mr. Earl. Now if your name was Earl Goldmanstein, well you’d be alright for sure, but being how it ain’t, it’s just too damn bad.”

“It’s not a question of not good enough, Charlene. Don’t start on me with that poor Okie stuff again.”

“Hey now, Enid honey, it weren’t me, I didn’t start and I sure didn’t say nothing.’

“Be fair. You know I’m not like that. It’s a question of something else, that’s all.”

“What else would that something else be?”

“What else? Just something. Something. I don’t know what exactly.”

She wanted to tell—no more to ask—Charlene about Earl’s penis, but the way things were going she figured she had better not. Maybe save that for another day.

* * *

She’d had a real bad night. That wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for Maybelle. The arthritis had gotten so painful the last few months that every time her body wanted to be turned she had to wake up to do the turning. But it hadn’t been the pain that bothered her as much as the nightmares. Now

with the desert-bright sun pushing through the curtains she couldn't remember much more about them than lots of noise and uneasy movement caught out of the corner of her eye.

She looked at the Baby Ben by her bedside. The faded green and white hands said 7:15. Still half an hour before the girl came to help her out of bed and the second hand was moving extra slow now she was watching it and, of course, she had to go to the bathroom something terrible. Every morning it was the same. She'd tried a bed pan but found it impossible to lift it with her fingers so swollen and twisted into knots like they were.

Waiting for other folks, that was the worst part. Worse than the pain. She could do something about the pain. Take aspirin. Ignore it. Anyway, it was hers, it didn't depend on anyone else, it didn't belong to anyone else. But not being able to go to the bathroom by herself or get out of her own bed or even make a cup of coffee, that got her real low like nothing in a long hard life had ever done. She'd been a person who got on with what needed doing whatever it was, wherever it was. Seven children saw to that. And now, after all she'd done and all she'd been through, to end up as nothing but a useless cripple stuck way out in the middle of the useless desert.

7:18. Still another 27 minutes, that is if the girl came on time. The day before she'd been five minutes late and Maybelle almost wet the bed. She had yelled at her, but it didn't do any good. The girl didn't speak English or leastways any English Maybelle could understand. She had stood there smiling and nodding like she didn't have a care in the world. Mexicans!

Of course, she could always call out to her son or her grandson, but she didn't want them doing for her like that. It wasn't right.

Slowly she turned onto her left side, reached out and took hold of the glass which held her teeth. Halfway between the bed and the table the glass slipped from her stiff fingers, the water spilling onto the bed and the teeth fell to the floor.

"Drat it!"

She pushed herself away from the wet patch and moved so she wouldn't have to look down at her helpless teeth.

7:21. The time was just crawling slower and slower. Old age sure wasn't working out like she'd planned. She wiped at her eyes with the side of her hand.

Trust in the Lord. He will provide. He will heal you and make you whole. And she truly believed that. If only there was a church in Palm Springs she

could feel at home with, a true healing church like she remembered from back in Kentucky when she was a girl. She'd been thinking a lot more about Kentucky recently.

7:25. A car slowing down outside. Was it the girl coming early? Didn't Earl say her brother brought her in from Cathedral City or somewhere like that? The car didn't stop. Another twenty minutes. Maybelle rested her hands on the quilt. She felt the filled softness of the squares against her fingers. It reminded her of home and that calmed her for a time, that is until she remembered about what had happened the previous night.

Earl and that woman from the supermarket, the fat boy's aunt. She'd have to put a stop to it right away, before it got any further along. What if he wanted to bring her to their house, her house? There was no way she could not be hospitable if he did that.

Earl Bob Earl Jr. wasn't too old to be told some genuine home truths. No, sir, he was not too old. But he was mule stubborn, just like his father had been. He even set his jaw the same way, was quiet the same way.

There wouldn't have been this kind of trouble if they'd stayed with their own in Oklahoma. It was coming to California that did it. Promised Land! Garden of Eden! Sodom and Gomorra was closer to what it was, Palm Springs especially. What did they grow in Palm Springs? Nothing. What did they harvest? Nothing. What did they make? What did they mine? Nothing. Nothing. Useless, just like the desert. A resort for Hollywood people. Hollywood people! Useless people. Jews most of them. No shame. No decency.

7:30. She stared across the room to where her wheelchair sat. All hard chrome and red leather, which was really nothing more than fancy plastic. The very latest model Earl had said. The young doctor told her it would make her life better but she knew it was nothing but a rolling prison, a cage on wheels and, of course, the end of her life. It was some time before she gave in and then it was only to make things easier for both her son and her grandson.

Little Earl was a good boy. A dutiful boy. A motherless boy. And she loved him with a fiercely protective fire, which was why it pained her to see him spend so much time with the fat Jewboy. Now he was going to school with him as well. Little Earl and Big Earl. Those Chosen People were after taking her family away from her, hemming her in, surrounding her now that she couldn't defend herself. Her father had said that people were just people

whatever their color or their religion and she couldn't fault that, except maybe for Catholics and Jews and coloreds. All God's people. All made by the same hand. But in Kentucky and in Oklahoma she'd never even seen a Jew or a Catholic, and anyway like should stay with like. That's the way it was and that was the way it was meant to be. The animals went into the ark two by two, didn't they? Two by two. They didn't seem to know about that out in California.

7:32 There was a light knock at her door and Carmen came into the room. She smiled and nodded at the old lady.

“Buenos días, señora. Como está?”

“What's that? You're early, girl. What are you doing early? Well, don't you be expecting any more money and you mind out there for my teeth. Mind out!”

“Señora?” she said walking across the room towards Maybelle.

Roly Poly

“Tackle!”

“Halfback.”

The boy shoved him hard against the metal lockers, slapped his face with an open palm and repeated, this time low and menacing, “Tackle.”

“Halfback,” Harold replied, in what he hoped was a non-confrontational tone.

“Tackle!”

Once again he was slammed against the lockers. He could feel a sharp handle digging into his back. It hurt. The slap that followed wasn't too bad. Not hard enough to make his ears ring like his mother's had done. The worst thing was having to squeeze his cheeks together so he wouldn't let fly the string of nervous farts lining up too close to his asshole, ready to make a dash for freedom.

He could have said “Tackle” and finished the whole thing right then. It wasn't all that difficult to say and he wanted to say it, he wanted to get away from his tormentor and from the too-eager audience of boys crowded behind him. But he didn't say it and he didn't really know why he didn't. It wasn't like him at all. Was he waiting for Earl to rescue him? To ride in on his white horse like the Lone Ranger? Where the hell was Earl anyway?

“Halfback.”

The boy was shorter and weighed much less and even wore thick-lensed glasses, but he was older, an eleventh-grader. More important was the other's tough reputation, his tougher car and, more important than all that, the deadly-assured way Langley held himself, light on his feet and poised like a boxer. He was just waiting for Harold to push him back or to take a swing so he could finish him off. Harold might have been unable to get himself to say “Tackle” but he knew better than to fight back.

“Jesus! You dumb, chicken-shit, fat-assed Kike bastard, you're too fucking fat-assed big to be a fucking halfback! Tackle!”

Once more Harold just stood there, arms at his side, his ass tensed, and let Langley shove him against the lockers and slap his face.

He had more or less stood up with Earl at the “Balefight at the OK Corral,” which was what Tommy called it, surely he would save him now. Isn’t that what cowboys did for each other? But Harold wasn’t a real cowboy or even much of a pretend cowboy so maybe that didn’t count for him.

“Halfback,” he replied as evenly as he could manage.

Langley snarled and drew back his fist. Harold closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable.

It had started that morning in the history class when Langley, asked to recite the first couple of paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence, which they were all supposed to have memorized, began, “Four score and seven years ago.” A few kids smiled but no one laughed or said anything, no one except Harold.

“Hey,” he said, with a half-laugh, half-snort, “that’s not the Declaration of Independence, it’s the Gettysburg Address.”

“Thank you very much, Harold, for that most perceptive insight,” Mr. Meacher said. “Donald?”

“Yeah,” said Langley, “I knew that.”

“The Declaration?” asked the teacher.

“Yeah, the Declaration.”

“Well, Donald, I’m waiting.”

“I sort of forgot to do it, Mr. Meacher. You know how it is.”

He twirled his finger in the air by the side of his head.

“Gets kinda all sort of mixed up. You know?”

“I certainly do know how it is, Donald. You come to see me after school and then you will also know how it is. Harold? Would you like to refresh Donald’s memory for him?”

“Sir?”

“The Declaration, Harold.”

“Oh, that. You bet,” he said eager to please.

“ ‘When in the course of human events ...’ ”

He had wanted to go all the way to “Let facts be submitted to a candid world,” but the teacher stopped him just after he’d finished the bit about the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

“Excellently done, Harold. Very good indeed.”

Harold enjoyed memorizing things. He was very good at it. Declarations of independence, Gettysburg addresses, poems like the ones they had to do

by Robert Frost or by Longfellow, records, record labels, almost anything that needed memorizing.

“You had better watch yourself, Harold,” warned one of the ever-friendly Brandon twins. “That Langley might not have a real good memory but he won’t forget what you did to him in there.”

“And he’s a killer too. If you know what I mean.” added the other twin, wincing at the thought of what Harold had coming.

“Yeah, just look at his car, willya.”

Harold had. A 50-something Olds, metallic blue, spinners, cut-outs, shaved hood, TJ tuck and roll and about an inch off the ground. Someone who drove a car like that had to be trouble, even at a rich kids’ school.

At Fairfax High he had had the sense not to cross guys like Langley. The desert was softening his brain, making him careless. Stupid! Stupid! Just like the stupid desert. Stupid!

He managed to avoid Langley until PE, when Harold was forced, much against this will, to play touch football. Langley was on the other team. At the end of the game the quarterback told Harold to pretend to block and then go out for a short pass. He lined up a couple of steps behind the line, the ball was snapped, he waited, he ran, to his surprise caught the ball and then lumbered, untouched, the few yards into the end zone. His team won. The other boys crowded around and slapped him on the back.

His reign as Date Grove’s football hero was extremely short-lived

“Hey!” bellowed Langley, running over and pushing himself into Harold’s face. “Ineligible receiver! Ineligible receiver!”

“He never was!” shouted one of Harold’s team.

“Halfback!” cried another.

“Tackle!” screamed Langley, his face a crazy shade of red.

Soon all the boys were yelling at each other. All except Harold. He stood cradling the football, watching the brawl boil around him and wishing he were somewhere else. He looked for Earl but he’d obviously figured a way to get out of PE.

A whistle blew. Mr. Hudson, the PE teacher, who was supposed to referee the game but had slipped off to have a cigarette, came rushing over.

“OK, OK, break it up! What do you boys think you’re doing here?”

They all began to explain at once.

“Enough! Enough! Come on! You, yeah you, the new kid, what position did you think you were playing at?”

“Uh, halfback? Yeah, I was playing at halfback.”

“Tackle!” protested Langley. “He was playing at tackle! Who the hell ever heard of a four-hundred pound halfback!”

Everyone began to shout again. Hudson had to blow his whistle two or three times to get them to stop. After some careful and serious deliberation he finally decided Harold had indeed been a halfback.

Now in the locker room and away from the protective whistle, Harold was about to become a dead halfback—a dead halfback who had memorized the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address.

“Come on, Langley,” someone called out, “leave him alone why doncha?”

“Yeah,” another added, “Why doncha pick on someone your own size?”

There was laughter of a not unfriendly kind. Harold opened his eyes. Langley had dropped his fist, but was still staring furiously at him.

“Dumb, fat-assed prick!” he said, “Ain't worth denting my knuckles on your fucking fat-assed Kike face.”

“Halfback,” said Harold.

Langley looked at him in disbelief.

“I should...” he began, then shook his head, turned and pushed his way through the boys and out of the locker room.

Harold relaxed. It was a mistake. The long-suppressed farts took their opportunity to finally make their escape and they did so with a violent rush, overpowering his defenses, echoing like a broadside of grapeshot against the metal lockers and sending the other boys into gales of edible laughter.

“Way to go, Harold!”

“Nice one, big guy!”

Harold smiled. Against all the odds he had more or less survived his second week at Date Grove School. He had also discovered that rich kids were just as dangerous and just as dumb and just as ordinary as ordinary kids. That made him feel a lot better.

* * *

Balance was the most important thing in Earl's young life, but he'd never given it any thought at all. Physical balance took care of itself. It made him the rider he was. It had helped him win himself the 1956 Palm Springs Junior Roping Championship and the big silver buckle that went with it. It

was going to do more for him too. He was confident about that. As for the rest, well he felt that if he did what needed to be done the leftover stuff would more or less work itself out. Recently, however, he had begun to sense that maybe he wasn't working with all the pieces there were to be working with. The first big stone in the pond had been his gran telling him about his mother. Since then things had kept on getting more and more out of kilter.

The past week had been particularly tough, a real 24-career pisser in fact. His father was staying out until all hours with Harold's aunt and not acting normal, his gran was on the warpath morning, noon and night, the reading with Mr. Giddins had got caught up so damn much it was hurting his head and a girl at school had turned him down for a date, saying she didn't go out with cowboys. On Wednesday his horse came up lame, with the big roping at La Quinta just a few days off and now to finish it, Harold, who he'd been trying to talk to all week about his father, Harold was sitting next to him in the pickup looking as happy as a pig in shit.

Earl pulled out to pass a car, missed his shift, and ground the gears. He swung back in behind the slow-moving Buick. Harold glanced over at him.

"No sweat, cowboy," Earl assured him.

"Yeah, no sweat, cowboy," Harold replied.

"Say, Harold, old son, you swallow the canary or what?"

"Wadda you mean swallow the canary?"

"I donno, it's what my gran says when I get a shit-eating grin on my face like you got yourself there."

The grin dropped to be replaced by Harold's more usual expression of faint bewilderment.

"Canary? Donno really. Nothing. Sorry about that."

"No need. I just thought...Hey, Harold, didn't I hear something about you being in a fight with that Langley fella today?"

"Not really a fight really. I mean I didn't actually fight him or anything like that."

"Well, that's what one of them twins was telling me you did."

Harold told him what had happened, leaving out the part about waiting for his help and about the farting.

"Well, I guess you ain't as dumb as you look," Earl laughed. "Big as you is I reckon that Langley would have whooped the tar out of you pretty good."

Important to know when you're beat before you start. Keeps you healthy for one."

"Yeah? You really think so?"

"You bet, 'course I do. You don't wanna be like old Garf, do you? Don't get me wrong, Garf's a good man, but he always wants to be too quick to get his head kicked in. Soon lose what little sense he's got left. Besides, my pa always says the only fight he ever lost was when he slipped and fell going 'round the corner."

"Yeah, he said that, your dad did?"

The canary-swallowing, shit-eating grin had come back bigger than ever.

"You bet."

"What about the other night over there at the stables with those guys?"

"You see me going after anybody?"

"Um, no, not really, but you called out that Carpenter guy, didn't you?"

"Oh that. Yeah, well, sometimes, Harold, sometimes you gotta break your own rules. I mean we'd run outta corners to run around, hadn't we? Backs to the wall, so to speak."

"I guess so."

They drove on in silence for a while, Harold staring blankly out the window at the passing sand, Earl still looking for an opening.

"So," Earl said, "You still reckon the school sucks or what?"

"What? Yeah. I mean no. Well, what I mean is it's better not having to ride in that damn bus with those fucking little kids, isn't it?"

"You bet, partner. And I reckon you won't be saying how everybody's too nice after your run-in with Langley."

"Yeah," Harold replied, the grin slipping back. "That's right too. One thing though."

"What's that?"

"There's no place to sorta hide out like you get at a big place like I went to before."

"Hide out?"

"You know, to be left alone, that kinda thing. I mean back in LA I could just walk out the side gate and I'd be on Fairfax Avenue. I'd go over to Cantors or hop a bus up to Hollywood or walk down to the Farmers Market. Half the time no one knew you'd gone, especially at PE and, of course, no one on the street was going to say anything. But out here, Jesus! You couldn't cut a class out here to save your life, could you? No place to go but

the goddamn desert and besides, right away someone would know you'd gone."

"Oh, I get you. 'Individual attention'."

"That's right. 'One big family'."

"Shit!"

"Shit!"

They passed over the big wash that came down from Palm Canyon and crossed under the Highway 111. Below and to the right was a small riding stables. A few stalls and one corral. Gary Machan ran the place. His son, Ted, was a fair-to-middling roper. Came in third the previous year in the championship. Earl would have to watch out for him at La Quinta.

"Say, Harold, I sorta been meaning to ask you something."

"What's that?"

"Well, it's kinda about my dad. You know what I mean?"

"Your dad?"

"Yeah. And your aunt."

"Oh that."

"Yeah that."

Harold pushed himself up straight in the seat. Once again the grin disappeared.

"Well, they been going out, I think. You know, to dinner and stuff."

"I know that."

"Sure. Of course you do."

"So?"

"So?"

"What I want to ask is... Oh, the hell with it!" he said angrily. "Forget it, Harold. Just forget I asked you."

"Right."

"I guess when you get down to it," Earl said reflectively, "it ain't none of my business anyways."

"I guess so, I mean not."

They pulled up in front of Harold's house. Earl was all tied up in knots inside. He couldn't ever remember feeling quite like that. Almost as if he were someone else.

"What are you doing with yourself tonight, Harold?"

"Tonight? Donno. Nothing I guess."

"Wanna go out to the Sun Air? It's Friday night."

“With all the guys?”

“Yep.”

Harold turned away and opened the door.

“Donno. I’ll call you later on, OK?”

“You bet.”

Then he saw Harold’s aunt standing at the kitchen sink watching them. Her hair was piled up on her head and she was wearing her swimsuit. Even from a distance Earl could see her bright red lipstick and her massacred eyes. She waved. Her breasts shook slightly. Maybe his gran was right after all. Earl raised a finger in greeting.

* * *

“But I’ve never even ridden on a horse before, Earl. I can’t do it.”

“Sure you can. I’ll teach you how to.”

“Before next Sunday?”

“You bet before next Sunday. We got us this afternoon, it’s only about lunch time now. And we got us tomorrow as well and all next week. Plenty of time for learning to ride.”

She took a pack of Salems from the side pocket of her bathrobe. Earl flipped open his Zippo and lit the cigarette. Their eyes met. She smiled at him.

“Thanks. You sure you can teach me so quickly? I don’t want to make a damn fool of myself in front of all those people.”

“You won’t. Don’t you worry about that. Breakfast rides are for the dudes anyways, Enid. Most of ‘em go along just so they can dress up like cowboys.”

“You mean like that Desert Circus thing they have in March?”

“That’s it,” he replied with a tight smile.

He busied himself with lighting his own cigarette.

Every year the town filled up with movie people and others that liked to rub up against movie people, all strutting about in their too-bright Hollywood cowboy gear and their fancy boots and yelling out “Howdy partner” to each other. There was a parade and western-style barbecues with whole calves turning on spits and if you were caught on Palm Canyon Drive

without western clothes you got dragged off to a kangaroo court and fined. Grown men and women whooped and hollered like cowpokes, shot off cap guns and thought it was great fun. It made him want to throw up, but not only did he have to go along with it, not only did he have to wear the same horse's-ass Gene Autry clothes, but he had to grin and say "Howdy partner" too. After all, it was only because so many people wanted to play at being cowboys that he could keep the stables going. He couldn't afford to stand off from something like the Desert Circus. He was a grown man with a grown man's responsibilities to his family, so there was no way he could not make himself act like a complete idiot.

He wondered why the playacting bothered him so much. It didn't do any harm and anyway, he wasn't a real cowboy himself, just a displaced sodbuster from Oklahoma, a Dustbowler. His family had chopped cotton and picked fruit and the only cow he ever had any dealings with was the one they kept for milk back in Magna Carta. He'd never worked range cattle, never rode fence or slept in a bunkhouse or even entered a rodeo. He'd made himself into a cowboy, learned what he needed from his uncle and the genuine cowboys like Slim Peters who worked for him. Maybe he disliked the Desert Circus so much because it reminded him that he was not all that different from those dudes on Palm Canyon Drive. Or maybe it was because he depended on it and other hokey tourist stuff to get on. It didn't tolerate too much thinking about and mostly he didn't waste any time on it, at least he hadn't until he'd hooked up with Enid.

Even now just sitting and talking she was churning his head up every which way there was to be churned up, pushing him to think about stuff he didn't want to think about and other stuff that he figured it was only right to think about, at least seriously, at night. She crossed her legs and he caught a quick glimpse of her secret patch of black hair. If she was aware of what she was doing she didn't show it. What kind of woman did that? Why did he like a woman who would do that? It was Friday and not yet noon! What was that Gene Autry said in his *Ten Commandments of the Cowboy*? The ninth commandment it was. "A cowboy always respects small children, old folks and womanhood." Womanhood, which meant women. How was he going to do that respecting of womanhood with her sitting there like she was? A sudden and painful erection churned him up past thinking about Gene Autry's commandments. He stood up, shielding his thoughts with his Stetson.

“Listen, Enid, I gotta be getting back. Only just come over to ask you about, you know the riding, and I can’t leave old Domingo holding the fort for very long. Kinda wanders if you don’t watch him. He’s an Indian you see. Listen, you wanna come over now or maybe in a short while? I’ll put you up on a horse if you like.”

“I don’t know, Earl, really I don’t. What would I wear? I don’t have a thing to wear. Not a single thing.”

As if to demonstrate she picked up the hem of her robe, showing off her long tanned thighs. He swallowed hard and sat down again, feeling like he needed to sit down.

“Wear? Wadda you mean? Oh, I see, yeah that’s right enough. Wear. Well, you got any jeans?”

“Jeans? Levis? No. Slacks. I’ve got slacks. Would they do?”

“Slacks is fine for right now. We can fix you up with some proper riding pants later on over to Betsy Ross’s. Other stuff too.”

“We can, can we?” she asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Don’t see why not. She’s got everything in her store you’re likely to be needing.”

“I don’t know if I’d really look good in jeans, Earl. I mean it’s not really me, is it?”

“You’ll look like a million dollars, two million dollars,” he said patting her knee. “I guess you wouldn’t have any boots, would you?”

“Sorry, no boots.”

“That’s OK. What size do you wear?”

“In shoes? I wear 7b in shoes.”

“Seven? OK then I might be able to fix you up with something from down at the tack room.”

“Oh,” she said, trying not to sound resigned.

“Come on now, honey. You said you wanted to ride.”

“I know, I know. Just give me a little time, will you? You’re rushing me. I don’t think I really want to be made over as Annie Oakley or Dale Evans. I’m happy like I am, thank you very much.”

Ruth Ann hadn’t cared much for the horses either or for riding. She was always going on about getting away from the dirt and wanting a clean, decent life that smelled nice. He thought she’d settle down, get used to things, especially when she had a little one to look after. Most woman he

knew did, especially those like Ruth Ann who had come out from Oklahoma. He'd been dead wrong about that.

"I'm real happy with you like you are too, honey, but if you want to ride a horse you got to wear the right kind clothes."

Enid stood up and pulled her robe tight around her.

"Would you like something cold, Earl?"

"What about this here we're talking about? Yes thanks."

"Ice tea?"

"Ice tea? I really do have to be going. You wouldn't have a cold beer?"

"No, sorry."

"Ice tea'd be just fine."

She got up and started toward the kitchen. He grabbed her hand. She stopped and looked down at him.

"Now about the riding gear, Enid. Just you imagine for a second if I was to show up on a tennis court or at your golf club dressed in my boots and..."

"And nothing else?" she asked, giving him her wide-eyed, wide-open-mouth-32-teeth laugh.

She bent over and kissed him on the forehead. Her breasts inched out of her robe and brushed both sides of his face. He was a grown man with a grown man's responsibilities and it wasn't yet noon on a Friday but he couldn't stop himself and she didn't try.

* * *

Enid rested on one elbow, twisted a strand of hair around her finger and studied Earl, trying to disentangle her lover from the man lying on the floor next to her with his shirt open and one leg of his pants caught inside out around his boot. If you went for cowboys you got boots and you got horses, it was as simple as that. The bad odors, the broken fingernails, the awful clothes, the breakfast rides—the whole cornball package. And she hadn't seen the whole package yet. There was his family and friends yet to come. At that moment she figured anything was worth it. She even liked his skinny pale legs. She reached over to stroke them.

"Holy cow!" Earl exclaimed sitting, up and pulling at his Levis. "Look where the time's gone to!"

He stubbed out a half-finished cigarette in the ashtray on the coffee table.

“It’s only 12:30,” Enid observed, leaning back and stretching her arms over her head. “We could have some lunch if you want.”

“Where the hell’s that other boot got?”

“Here,” she said, pulling it from under the couch. “Maybe a swim first?”

“Thanks. What’s that you say?”

“I said a swim, would you like to have a swim before lunch? I’ve got some tuna salad in the icebox.”

He stopped one leg in the air, his foot half into his boot. He looked at her as if he just noticed she was there and then quickly looked away from her nakedness.

“Swim? Oh, no thanks, Enid, I gotta run. Jesus, should have been back more than a hour ago! Gotta see this fella, John Burns. I might be hiring him on as head wrangler. Waiting on me right now if I don’t miss my guess. Down there jawing with Domingo. Damn Indian can talk the leg off a dog when the mood takes him, if you know what I mean.”

She didn’t. She didn’t know anything about Indians.

Enid reached for her robe. Naked was fine but not when the man had his clothes on. As she got up and pulled the robe around her she noticed a large circular stain on the carpet where they’d made love. She’d have to clean that up before Harold got home from school.

Poor Harold. He was avoiding her more than usual lately. She figured it was Earl. She had tried to explain to him what was going on but he didn’t want to listen.

“It’s important, Harold. Just give me a minute or two, willya please.”

“Yeah. Sure. I know how it is and all that, but listen, Aunt Enid, I’ve gotta go.”

He had his hand on the handle of the kitchen door but she stood with her back to it so he couldn’t get by.

“Aw, come on, Aunt Enid, have a heart! Please!”

“I’m not married, Harold and Earl’s wife is gone so to speak.”

“Dead. That’s what Little Earl told me. She’s dead.”

“Dead, that’s right, Harold, dead.”

“So?”

“So, we’re going out together, that’s all. He’s a very nice man and I like his company.”

“That’s OK.”

“You don’t expect me to stay home and knit or something, do you?”

“Knit?”

“When you’re older you’ll understand such things a lot better.”

“Yeah, I know I will, Aunt Enid. Can I go now?”

“God damn it, Harold, I don’t need that look from you! Like I was some kinda I don’t know what. Just like your damn father, always... Oh, Harold darling, I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t know what’s the matter with me recently.”

“It’s alright,” he said, eyes down.

She reached over and squeezed his arm. Harold shuffled uncomfortably, his hand firmly attached to the doorknob.

“It nothing bad, Harold, honestly.”

“I never said.”

“No I suppose you didn’t. And, of course, it won’t affect you and me, not in the least, if that’s what you’ve been thinking.”

“What about that guy?” Harold asked suddenly, making positive contact for the first time.

“What guy?”

“You know, that guy Archie.”

“Oh, him. That’s another story, Harold. We’re sort of breaking it off, Archie and I. Our relationship that is. It’s difficult to explain.”

“Can I go now, Aunt Enid?”

“Don’t you want to hear about this, Harold? I thought you said you did.”

“Can I please? Please!”

Apparently he had changed his mind. Enid stepped away from the door.

“What about your son?” she asked Earl.

He was fully dressed except for his hat which he was shifting from one hand to the other.

“Enid, I’ve really gotta be moseying along to the stables.”

“As I recall, Mr. Earl, you had to be ‘moseying along’ about half an hour ago. Can’t you spare me a few more minutes of your valuable time?”

She didn’t mean for it to sound like it did, but Earl heard it like that and narrowed his cowboy eyes at her. She refused to be intimidated, reinforcing herself by thinking of his white, defenseless legs.

“What about your son?” she insisted. “Have you said anything to him about us?”

“What should I be saying?”

“That we’re seeing each other and, and I don’t know, whatever a father says to his son about things like this.”

“I never thought to say anything to him.”

“He hasn’t asked?”

“No,” Earl said, nonplussed.

The hat had stopped moving from hand to hand. He was now tapping it impatiently against his right thigh.

“But he and Harold have become such good friends, they go to school together every day in your boy’s truck. Well, I mean, wouldn’t it be natural if they were a little curious or maybe even anxious or something?”

“Anxious?”

“Well, neither of them exactly has a mother, do they?”

Once again she hadn’t said what she wanted to say. It was almost as if she was proposing to him and the idea of marriage had only flitted briefly across her mind, never stopping long enough to be thoughtfully examined. But how was Earl to know that? He smoothed back his hair and put on his hat.

“Not exactly,” he said, ending the conversation. “I’ll talk to you later on, Enid. You be good now.”

And of course Enid did exactly as she was told.

Never No More Hard Times Blues

Harold rolled over and stared uncomprehendingly at the alarm clock. It was ringing and it said 5:00. From the bed he could see a sliver of too-blue sky intruding into the dark room from under the protecting curtains. The desert was up and waiting for him. Then he remembered why *he* had to get up. The roping at La Quinta.

5:00 was definitely a cowboy time to be getting out of bed and today he would have to be almost a cowboy. Towing a horse trailer behind the pickup, listening to country music on the radio, helping Earl get ready for the roping, sitting on the fence with the other cowboys. Most people wouldn't know that he wasn't exactly what he looked like. Anyway, didn't Earl say he was a "natural-born riding fool"? That had to count for something.

For the first time in his life he had found a physical activity he was good at. He didn't have to catch or hit or throw a stupid ball, he didn't have to show his fat thighs in shorts, he didn't have to run and best of all, he didn't have to win anything. He only had to sit there, relax and let the horse do all the hard work. There was some stuff to learn and some pretty bad aches at first but they soon worked themselves out.

As he did every day, Harold inspected the wall next to the bed, running his hands along it, looking closely, searching for any hint that the roses might be re-emerging to take back the room. Nothing there. Aunt Enid's dressing-room roses remained safely encased in layers of white paint. He was thankful for that.

A door eased shut quietly in the hallway outside his room. A few moments later the front door opened and closed, a faint click as the lock caught. The toes of boots scuffing on the flagstone path, a metallic yawn and then the muted thud of a car door being shut. A couple of seconds quiet before the engine gave a dry cough, another and then caught and went into a rough, cylinder-plunking idle. A hesitant grind into first gear. Slowly the pickup pulled away, a pause as it was put into second and then the sound of the engine growing fainter and fainter. Stillness.

His concentration was broken by some desert bird croaking loudly outside his window. Further away another one answered. He seemed to remember that the birds in Los Angeles had made regular tweeting-bird sounds. He swung his legs off the bed, yawned and picked the dried sleep from his eyes.

Harold had become used to the rasp-throated birds and the ritual of Earl's father's early leaving. After the first few times it didn't wake him but it had not stopped worrying him. Aunt Enid had tried to explain things but when it came down to the details he found that he didn't really want to know. It was as if he was about to be pushed off a cliff and there was nothing he could do about it but refuse to look down. He was very good at refusing to look down. A regular grand master.

He heard his aunt in the hallway, then in the bathroom. The seat being dropped on the toilet, a pause before the flush, water running in the sink, another pause, the bathroom door opening, the flap-slap of her slippers, the bedroom door shutting not quietly enough.

It was 5:10. He'd have to hurry. Earl was coming to pick him up at 5:30. He pulled on his Levis and fumbled with the metal fly buttons. Why couldn't they use a zipper like everyone else? He had assumed it was another one of those dumb cowboy things, but when he asked, not of course suggesting that it was a dumb cowboy thing, Earl's father said told him it was something to do with the Gold Rush and "your people."

"You look at here," he said, pointing to the leather patch on the back of his jeans. "You read what it says there. Well, what does it say?"

"Levi Strauss & Co.?"

"Right. Levi and Strauss, Harold. Strauss and Levi. Can't be clearer than that, can it now?"

It wasn't clear at all, but Harold had nodded in agreement anyway. After that he stopped asking Big Earl questions.

He went to the chest of drawers and took out a new white shirt still wrapped in its cellophane. Earl said he would have to look sharp and had suggested a white shirt. He tore the package open, pulled the piece of cardboard out and then removed the pins. One holding together the sleeves at the back, one at the collar, one at each cuff, one at the bottom below the last button. There would be at least one more pin hidden in somewhere in the shirt waiting for him to forget about it before it worked its way out and

stabbed him. The shirt makers hired a guy to insert random pins. Harold knew that for a fact.

The fabric felt crisp against his skin, like a cool, fresh sheet. Carefully he buttoned it up. The hidden pin remained hidden. Maybe the day would be OK after all. He stuffed the bottom of the shirt into his Levis and buckled his belt.

In the bathroom he leaned on the sink and inspected his face in the mirror. The few orange bristles on his upper lip were not enough to worry about. He could leave the shaving for a couple more days. He brushed his teeth. Brushing his teeth made him think about death. His father's death, his mother's death, his grandfather's death and especially his own death. No matter how clean he got his teeth it wouldn't stop him dying and then it wouldn't matter how clean his teeth were. His grandfather had explained that all to him while he was dying. Harold rinsed and spat and shook his head to clear out the Colgate-clean images of death.

He carried his boots into the kitchen and put them on. They were broken in now, stained by working at the stables and felt like they belonged to him. With practice he'd even been able to defeat most of the cheek wobble. He banged his feet on the floor to get the boots to fit just right.

He walked over to the refrigerator and paused, his hand resting on the chrome handle. He was hungry but Earl said they would have breakfast on the way. He looked forward to that. You couldn't get the same kind of stuff at home and when you did it never tasted the same, especially the hash browns.

He pushed back his hair, put on his hat and went out the kitchen door, closing it softly behind him. It was almost cool outside, the sun low in the East, the bottom half of the big mountain still in the shade. Harold stood at the end of the driveway next to a stringy bush which gave off a strong, sweetly-resinous odor, harsh but bracing. It was the first time he'd really noticed how it smelled.

* * *

As he turned off Ramon into Sunrise he'd seen the roadrunner. It was actually running along the side of the road, sharp-beaked head pushed

forward and moving as if it was life or death for it to be somewhere else in a big hurry. Damn strange looking bird. He'd never seen one in the city before. Domingo said they were a good omen, something about bringing early rains and good hunting. But the old man never did stop talking, and to hear him tell it just about any damn thing was an omen. Dust devils, desert wild flowers in April, a horse with a loose shoe on its back foot, a shadow falling on a chicken, a dead jackrabbit crushed in a bale of hay. Of course, that was nothing but a load of old Indian baloney. Still a good omen was better than a bad one, especially as he had the roping at La Quinta later on.

He was going to *be* just fine. He was going to *do* just fine. If you prepared yourself, prepared your equipment, took good care of your horse, then there was nothing more to be done but go out and do the job that needed doing. He always had a slight flutter in his guts before a roping, but he'd never burned a loop when it really counted. When it counted he was always rock steady, throwing the Hoolihan, just like in the song, one swing over his head and then turning the loop with a flick of his wrist and watching the honda slide down, closing the noose, as the rope floated out and settled over the calf's head. Yes sir, rock steady.

He lent forward and flipped on the radio. Static. He tried to tune in the local station. More static. It was no better when he twisted the knob and the red pointer slid up and down the dial. Hissing and popping, not even a voice or a note of music. Something was wrong for sure. He turned off the radio and banged his palms onto the steering wheel. The tires squealed as the pickup swerved towards the desert. He steadied himself and quickly pulled the truck around. It wouldn't do to get himself all hee-up like some silly girl.

It was none of his damn business what his father did. He knew that. He had tried not to let it get where he'd have to think about it, but seeing him a few minutes before coming into the house with his shirttails out, carrying his boots and half asleep, that had piled Earl real bad, just like coming off the barrel and thumping onto the ground. He pushed the gear stick into third and put his foot down hard.

When he drew up in front of the house Harold was sitting on a big rock, all turned out like he'd never been a city boy in his whole big red-headed life, his cowboy hat tipped back, tossing pebbles at the mailbox across the road. As Earl stopped, Harold stood up, brushed his hands together, walked over to the pickup and opened the door.

“How they hangin’, Earl?”

“Fine and Jim dandy, cowboy. How ‘bout yourself?”

“Fine,” replied Harold, climbing up into the truck. “Hey, I thought Garf was coming along to the roping.”

“So did I. Didn’t show up through. Just be the two of us, unless he turns up later on over to the stables. That OK?”

“You bet,” Harold said with a broad grin.

Earl glanced over at the kitchen window. The low morning sun was reflected like a yellow liquid in the glass but the window was empty — a frame without the picture. He was relieved. He turned away and as he did something caught his eye. Turning back to the window and squinting against the dancing light he saw a pale woman with long dark hair and thin arms. She was smiling at him.

“Hey, Earl, you alright or what?” asked Harold.

“You bet,” Earl answered softly, still staring at the window. “Hey, Harold, do you see over there? Look.”

“See what?”

A breeze pushed at the big creosote bush. The waving branches scattered the light on the window. The dark-haired woman vanished. Earl let out his breath. He wasn’t aware he’d been holding it.

“Earl?”

“You bet, cowboy.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. It were nothing. Let’s get going. Ain’t making no money sitting ‘round here. That’s for damn sure.”

Two beads of sweat rivuletted down the sides of his face. He ignored them, put the truck into gear and eased away.

His father had looked like hell.

“Hey there, son, where you off to so early?”

He had wanted to ask his father the same thing, but held it back because he knew where he’d been and his father knowing that he knew would take such a question as disrespectful, which of course is exactly what it would be. Why should he care if his father saw Harold’s aunt? He didn’t know if he did care. Mostly he’d push away those kinds of thoughts, together with all the other new uncertainties in his life, but then he’d see her photograph by the bed or really look at his father, not like everyday looking, but

looking which saw the lie of the land clear as day, heard it too, and he'd feel like he'd been fish-gutted.

"La Quinta," he replied. "The roping."

"Didn't think that was 'til later on."

"Gotta do some chores at the stables first off."

"Oh, sure thing. Listen I want you to tell old Domingo to put up them sacks of feed. You know what I mean?"

"Yes, sir."

His father had never talked about Harold's aunt, but he'd seen them together at the stables, him calling her Mrs. Carlson and teaching her how to ride as if she were just another dude come in off the road. It didn't fool Earl for a minute and perhaps it wasn't meant to.

"And you get them horses brushed down and saddled up and... You feeling alright, son? You're looking a tad peaked."

"I'm just fine."

"That's good. Want you to do good today. Show them boys that weren't no kind of luck winning that buckle last year. I'll mosey over there to watch if I can. What time you reckon that's actually for real going be happening?"

" 'Bout noon, maybe a little after."

"Wait up. You tell Domingo I'll be over directly. Soon as that girl gets in here to look after Mombelle. We got us a party of dudes coming in at about seven."

"Yes, sir."

As they pulled the truck into the stables, the giant figure of Domingo shambled out from behind the big barn. Eyes deep set in wrinkles under a greasy felt hat, massive sloping shoulders, arms like thick clay pipes. He carried a shovel, a beach toy in his outsized hand. He brandished it at the two boys in the truck and smiled, showing off his rotten reservation teeth. Slowly he started over towards them.

Before he met up with Domingo Earl had expected that big slow Indians would be steady and silent, all grunts and iron-eyed stares. Not Domingo. Not for second. He knew more stories than you ever wanted to hear and when he got going there wasn't a pump handle within a hundred miles that was safe.

Earl figured on balance it was probably better not to say anything to him about the roadrunner.

* * *

Enid took off her robe, settled back naked onto her bed and lit a cigarette. The cooler hadn't come on and the room was much too warm. It was also overcrowded with the bouquet of their recent lovemaking. Underneath were other smells competing for her attention; perfume and sweat and toothpaste and stale cigarettes, and buried a layer or two further down, horse shit and damp leather, although she didn't know whether she was just imagining the last two because those were the smells she associated with Earl. Lying there smoking and trying to make some sense of the jigsaw of odors she was more and more convinced that their relationship would never get any further than the pungent room, the crumpled sheets, the scattered clothing and the weak light filtering in around the sides of the curtains.

Although they had been spending the nights with each other for more than a week, they still had not sat down to breakfast together. At precisely 4:30 every morning, without explanation and with little more than a "Gotta be going" and "See you later," Earl rolled out of her bed, dressed and went home. At least she assumed he went home. The first time he did it she had been surprised. The second time she was worried that she had done or said something wrong. The next day her worry changed to irritation and in the following couple of days that irritation ripened into anger. That morning the anger had blossomed into their first real argument.

"I ain't hiding you away or nothing like that at all, Enid. How can you say that? We've been out in the Village. People been seeing us together. We even went over to have a drink with those friends of yours."

She propped the pillows behind her back and then pulled up the sheet to cover herself.

"So why do you sneak off every morning like someone might catch you here?"

"I ain't been sneaking off," he said indignantly. "Just leaving early, that's all it is."

"It's sneaking off and you know it is," she insisted testily.

Earl didn't answer. She didn't look at him.

"Can't be upsetting Mombelle," he said finally. "That's all there is to it. Just can't be doing that."

"Upsetting your mother? Are you kidding? Your mother? How the hell old are you, Earl?"

He sat up abruptly and pivoted his thin legs off the bed. He reached for his shirt which was draped over a chair.

“I ain’t going to fight with you, Enid,” he said over his shoulder as he stabbed his arm into a sleeve. “We ain’t had one yet and I don’t aim to have one with you now. You just gotta understand, this is something different. This is family.”

“I see,” she replied tightly, still not looking at him. “Of course it is. Family.”

His off-hand exclusion of her hurt, like a slap in the face, and that surprised her. The surprise made her step back and that cushioned the hurt. From what she could gather from his stories, especially the one about his wife and his brother, his family sounded like they had staggered all wild and bloody and incestuous out of the *Old Testament*. *Tobacco Road* would probably be closer to where they came from. Who the hell needed that? She sure didn’t. So why the hurt? Most of the time she felt nothing about her and Earl added up except for the lovemaking. Maybe she would have to settle for that.

He had sat on the bed and began to pull on his boots, once again talking to her over his shoulder.

“She’s an old woman. Set in her ways. Sick too. Crippled up real bad she is. In a damn wheelchair. She don’t have an understanding about such things.”

“Such things?”

“You know what I mean, Enid.”

“Such things!?” she repeated with more than a hint of strident.

She tried to stop herself but it was already far too late.

He turned to face her. In the uncertain light his face was all shadows and she couldn’t make out an expression. She assumed it was ungiving and cowboy tight.

“Enid, come on now. You know what I’m after saying here. For Mombelle it’s only married people who do this kinda thing. All the rest is just so much low down sinning.”

“This kind of thing? What ‘this kind of thing’ are we talking about?”

He stood silently at the end of the bed, an indistinct and brooding figure.

“Well, um, you know... Fornication,” he said at last with a sigh, deep and pained as if the word in four-foot high neon letters was being extracted from his mouth with a pair of red-hot tongs.

“Fornication! So that’s what we’ve been doing is it? Well, I’m glad we’ve got that cleared up. God, Earl, you make it sound so terrible. You figure maybe we’re about to be struck by a bolt of lightning or something? Turned into a couple of salt pillars? Is that it?”

“Of course not,” he replied gravely as if she had posed a serious possibility.

Enid had started to giggle.

“I don’t see what’s so damn funny all of a sudden, Enid,” he complained, clearly annoyed. “Listen now. You gotta understand that for her if you ain’t married it ain’t right and I don’t want to be having to argue with her about it. When Mombelle gets hold of something she don’t let go of it in a hurry. Worries at it like a hound with a bone.”

“That’s fine, Earl. Just fine. Blame your poor, old, sick, old-fashioned mother who doesn’t understand and doesn’t let go of bones. But you know something? You want me to tell you something?”

“What’s that?”

“You’re just the same. You know that? Exactly the same. No different from her. Listen to yourself for God sake. ‘Fornication’?”

“It’s just a fancy word for it,” he said defensively. “Damn it to hell, Enid, what do you want me to call it?”

“Making love would be a start. Making love would be good.”

“Right. Making love. We can call it that if you want.”

“Thanks a lot, but I don’t think so, Earl. I think for you it is Fornication pure and simple. I really do. Fornication and Sin. Sin and Fornication.”

“I never said that, Enid. Nothing like it.”

“No you didn’t actually say it, but I know all about your Code of the West crap.”

“What Code of the West?”

“White hats, black hats. Good guys, bad guys. You might not agree with your mother on the exact wording, but nice girls don’t *Fornicate*, do they? Of course they don’t. Nice girls save themselves for nice boys who can go around sowing their wild oats with girls like me, girls like me who *Fornicate*. So what does that make me?”

“It doesn’t make you nothing, Enid.”

“Exactly. Nothing but a good time girl, a floozy who you’ve got to hide from your poor, sick, old crippled-up mother who doesn’t understand such things.”

“I wish you wouldn’t keep saying that stuff about my mother, Enid. She’s got nothing at all to do with this.”

“If she doesn’t have anything to do with this then why are you leaving? Why have you left me like this every damn morning? Why the hell can’t we have breakfast together like a couple of regular grown ups?”

Suddenly her anger began to melt into self pity.

“Go on,” she shouted at him through the tears, “Go home to Mommy!”

And without another word he did just that. At least she assumed he did.

* * *

He usually liked to drive through the village in the early morning before it got full-up with people. At 5:00 the desert air, as yet unbreathed and unsullied by cars and trucks, was clear and clean. He enjoyed cruising down Palm Canyon and seeing the silent stores, the empty sidewalks. Sometimes he would park for a couple of minutes, smoke a cigarette and just watch and listen. At those times it was as if Palm Springs belonged only to him. But this particular morning he didn’t care who it belonged to and he didn’t stop. In fact, he wasn’t paying a lot of attention to where he was.

It was the old man who brought him back with a rush. Earl’s benumbing thoughts about Enid, at one moment achingly amorous and the next unreasonably hostile were suddenly scattered by a white-bearded face which appeared, startled and impossibly large, in the windshield of the pickup. There was no way Earl was not going to run the man over. He stomped down hard on the breaks and yanked the wheel to the left. There was a loud thud and pickup fishtailed across the road, coming to rest with a jolt against an unyielding palm tree. Earl leapt out of the cab and ran around the pickup to look for the body. The road was empty.

“Son,” a voice called. “I’m over here.”

Earl looked up. The man was standing, apparently unharmed on the opposite sidewalk.

“You want to pay closer attention to the manner in which you’re operating that infernal piece of machinery,” he said in a surprisingly friendly way considering he had almost been run down.

Earl walked over and stood next him. It was Eddie, a guy who lived in a shack somewhere up in Tahquitz Canyon. He’d seen him around but had

never spoken to him. Eddie was one of the neater desert hermits. He wore a white, short-sleeve shirt, a pair of khaki shorts that came just above his knees and a beachcomber-fringed straw hat. He carried a gnarled cane and was barefoot. His face was hidden by a profusely bushy beard and a pair of sun-glasses held together at the sides with inexpertly-applied Scotch Tape. Earl studied him for scrapes or bruises. There were none.

“I thought for absolute sure I hit you,” Earl said, trying not very successfully to keep the shake out of his voice.

“Please don’t sound so disappointed.”

“But I even heard it,” Earl insisted. “I heard the thump right there at the front of the truck. You sure you’re alright?”

Eddie banged his cane on the sidewalk.

“Perfect as precipitation. With no thanks to you, I might add.”

“Hey now, mister, listen I’m mighty sorry about all this. I just didn’t see you there. Place is usually so quiet this time in the morning, you don’t expect no one to be out here.”

“And that, young man, is precisely why I come down at this singularly particular time in the morning.”

“Sure. I can see that.”

“And I, I can see by your outfit that you are a cowboy,” Eddie said with a hearty laugh. “Or at least might be a cowboy. Might be. Might be.”

He cocked his head at Earl.

“So,” he asked, “which one is it?”

“Which is what?” replied Earl, badly confused and still unnerved by the fact that Eddie wasn’t lying in the road dead or at the least badly injured.

“Cowboy or not a cowboy, that was the question.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you’re getting at.”

“In any case, would you not agree at the very least upon that being a legitimate conundrum?”

“A what?”

“Never mind, son,” he said waving his cane at Earl. “Never mind. No doubt it is too early in the day or possibly too early in your life for such deep philosophical speculation. Myself, I place the blame squarely on Palm Springs.”

“Blame Palm Springs? Blame Palm Springs for what?”

“Everything,” shot back Eddie. “That’s right, everything. Just look around you. Go on, take a good look.”

Earl looked across the road. How could you blame Louise's Pantry or the Plaza or the Library for anything, let alone everything? The man was obviously cracked. He supposed that's what you had to expect with a hermit.

"I don't see nothing particular," he told Eddie firmly.

"Of course you don't. And you know why?"

"No, why?" he replied, resigned to being told.

"It's because of what that woman has done to your perception," Eddie explained in a softly confiding voice.

"How...?"

Eddie held up a bony finger for silence. Unwillingly, Earl obliged.

"What she's done to your critical faculties," the old man continued. "To your thought processes. To your judgment. To your understanding of who you are. Of course, any woman will do it to you. One way or the other they all will do it to you. Without quarter, without pity and without fail. Sometimes, although not often, even without malice."

"Do what?" Earl demanded.

"Why obfuscate the senses, of course. With passion and pain. Passion and pain. Always together, like Scylla and Charybdis. The only thing you can do is choose how you want it done. Do you want to be eaten alive or do you want to expire in the whirlpool? That's your choice. Either that or you can leave them alone altogether as I have done. Believe me, son, it is a great deal more predictable that way, and a great deal more restful as well. You think about that now. And while you are thinking about it, learn to pay more attention when you're out driving."

Earl reached into his back pocket.

"Hey, listen, old-timer, about that, let me give you a couple of bucks here."

"Did I ask you for money?" Eddie flared at him. "I most certainly did not! Now if you will excuse me I have an important engagement for which I am, thanks to you, already late."

"I just reckoned..." Earl began, but Eddie was hurrying off, his cane tapping out incomprehensible messages on the sidewalk.

Earl walked slowly back across the road to inspect his pickup. Sure enough there was a shallow dent at the front of the hood, a dent that definitely hadn't been there before. He'd heard the noise of the impact and there was tangible evidence of the impact. But the old man had appeared to

be completely untouched. It didn't make any sense. He looked down the street. Eddie had vanished. He couldn't even hear the sound of his cane. As far as he could see, up and down the length of Palm Canyon Drive nothing moved.

He got back in the truck, lit a cigarette and fought to get his thoughts together. What had the old man said about Enid? No not about Enid, "that woman" is what he said. Who else but Enid? But how could he know anything about her? Maybe he had imagined the whole thing, like a day dream or an elaborate mirage. No, one-hundred percent not. Earl knew for certain he wasn't the kind of person who went around imagining stuff. And there was the dent. Who could imagine an honest-to-god dent?

Except for when he arrived back home from the Pacific, Earl couldn't remember when things had been so out of sorts and out of control. Even the peace of the early-morning village had deserted him. It was Enid of course. She was a puzzlement and no mistake. What was even more of a puzzlement was why he wanted her so damn much. They didn't have anything in common. The more they got to know each other the more apparent that became. Often he discovered they weren't even speaking the same language. And she was a Jewish woman, *a Jewess*, the first he'd gone out with. That had to count for something. Or maybe not. It didn't matter though. None of it mattered. He was in love and there was no excuse for it, no explanation for it and apparently no hope for it. Just like old Eddie—real old Eddie or imagined old Eddie—had said, it was passion and pain all mixed up together and spinning him down into a whirlpool.

He tossed his cigarette out the window, started the pickup and drove off up Palm Canyon Drive. He decided that tomorrow morning he'd take another route home.

Weary Of The Same Ol' Stuff

They parked next to the other pickups and horse trailers on the far side of the small, white-fenced arena and got out. The sun was high, burning almost straight down and Harold had begun to sweat. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve

“Damn hot,” he said to Earl.

It was a completely pointless thing to say. Earl knew it was hot. Harold knew that he knew it was hot and still he'd said it. He reckoned that more than half of what anyone said was pretty pointless. It was the same even for cowboys like Earl who didn't say much of anything. Most words were thrown out just to let people know you were there.

“You bet it is, cowboy. Boil your old *cojones* right out your jeans if you ain't careful. Come on we got to get ourselves moving here.”

They walked around to the back of the horse trailer. Earl pulled out one of the metal pins holding the ramp in place and Harold the other, then they slowly lowered it to the ground. The compact Appaloosa mare was skittish and her hooves cut a sharp echo against the wooden ramp as Earl backed her down. Restless after the drive she pulled hard on the halter rope and tossed her head.

Harold stepped back quickly, keeping well clear. Domingo had told him too many horrible stories about what flying hooves could do to a person.

“After, boy never talk same again,” the old Indian had recounted, his voice like muddy gravel.

He pressed a thick finger to the side of his heavy, pockmarked head.

“Horse caught him here. After, had horseshoe mark. Red, like hot brand. Grunt and dribble water from mouth. Bad. Real bad. After, change name to Twisted Mouth.”

When Earl's dad wasn't around, Domingo spent all his time telling stories in his Indian telegram language to anyone who would listen. Harold had never meet a real Indian before and was, therefore, a perfect made-to-measure victim.

Domingo was a Paiute. It was the first thing he told Harold. He said it was important that the boy didn't think he was one of the local Agua Caliente who, he confidently insisted, were well-known for being untrustworthy and for coupling with dogs. He said he was born in Twenty-Nine Palms and had seen, as he put it, sixty-five summers. He was proud of that and the fact that he had had a cousin or an uncle — Harold was never clear which — called Swift Fox. According to Domingo this Swift Fox was a great and fearless Paiute warrior who had been cruelly murdered by the White Man some forty years before on Ruby Mountain north of Yucca Valley.

Earl told him he shouldn't believe Domingo's stories, but it was difficult not to, especially those endless, graphic accounts of violent, out-of-control horses crushing men's balls or blinding them or crippling them or making them dribbling senseless or simply disfiguring them. As much as he enjoyed riding, Harold reckoned that kind of stuff was all too possible. With Earl's high-strung mare it was more than all too possible.

"Easy girl, take her nice and easy," Earl crooned at his horse, who was still prancing and snorting and showing too much white in her eyes. "We got work to do. No time for this carry-on. Easy now."

He handed the taut halter rope to Harold.

"Walk her around will you, Harold. Talk to her. Settle her down. I gotta go over there and see to getting my name on the list."

"Earl, listen, I don't know about this."

Earl had already walked away. He didn't look back.

Harold was frightened at having charge of an unruly horse that might at any second turn him into another Twisted Mouth or put some vital part of him into a cast and pleased that Earl was so confident he could handle her.

"Easy," Harold whispered urgently. "Please. Easy. Oh, please, horse, please be easy! Easy. Easy. Come on you dumb nag! Please!"

The horse whinnied shrilly and jerked the rope, pulling him off balance. He stumbled but held on and kept pleading with her. Not far away, by the arena, there were a couple of dozen cowboys, some riding their horses, others fooling with ropes or adjusting saddles, some just talking. A few of them turned to stare at the struggle. Harold saw a publicly humiliating disaster rushing at him. So did his stomach. Thankfully the horse was making so much noise that his nervous farts went unheard. The horse reared and pulled back. Harold was being dragged like a reluctant water skier

towards the watching cowboys. It would soon be clear as could be that he wasn't one of them, but just a big overweight, farting Jewish kid, in disguise and in trouble.

Then for no reason the horse stopped pulling and stood still. Harold took a shorter grip on the rope. He walked over as nonchalantly as he could and gingerly patted the horse's flanks just like he'd seen Earl do.

"Easy, girl. That's right. Nice and easy now. Easy."

He was relieved, then elated. He'd done it and escaped without a scratch. Just then one of the cowboys rode by and touched the brim of his hat.

"Howdy," he said.

"Howdy," returned Harold gravely.

"Spirited horse you got yourself there, son."

"Yes sir."

The man nodded and rode on. Harold kept his face cowboy quiet as if nothing special had happened.

He led the horse past a small set of bleachers where a few tourists were settling in to see the roping. He could tell they were watching him. A cowboy and his horse. What could be more natural?

"Good man," Earl said, coming up to them. "That's more like it. Let's saddle her up and get ready."

They walked back to the trailer. Earl hoisted the saddle out of the bed of the pickup.

"Hold her steady for me now, Harold."

Earl put the blanket then the saddle on, hooked a stirrup over the pommel and tightened the front and back cinches. After waiting for the horse to blow he pulled up another notch in each and then dropped the stirrup back on the side of the horse's belly.

"You can do this, Harold," Earl said, handing him the bridle.

Harold's stomach fluttered but held firm. The mare gave him no trouble as he slipped the bit into her mouth and set the bridle in place under the mouth and over the ears and then buckled the head strap. He handed the reins to Earl who was already in the saddle.

"Like you been doing it all your life, cowboy," Earl said.

"You bet," Harold replied, with what he hoped was not too much of a shit-eating grin.

Across the way they were loading the first calf. It bleated and crashed against the sides of the wooden chute.

“Hey, Earl. Hey, Harold.”

It was Tommy, his hat rocking back and forth on his big ears. With him were his brother Tody as well as Jingles and Garf. Harold was not happy to see them. They were trouble and all of them knew for certain he wasn't a real cowboy. Besides, he wanted to have Earl to himself.

“I'd sure like to get me some of that!” crowed Garf.

The other boys turned to watch two teenage girls walk by, their blond hair poking from under their cowboy hats, their rounded behinds filling out their Levis.

“Straight up, partner,” said Jingles, grinning through his broken teeth. “Shee-it boy, those quails' asses is tighter than a Jew's wallet.”

Harold pulled the brim of his hat down to shade his eyes and concentrated hard on what was happening over by the roping chutes.

* * *

Maybelle was so surprised she couldn't find any words at all. She could only sit in her chair in the doorway with her mouth stuck open like a dead catfish.

“Hi there, Mombelle,” the woman said softly. “Mombelle?”

The woman wore an expensively tailored black suit, a black pill-box hat and black gloves. Her brown hair was cut in a short modern style. Her face was hidden by large dark glasses, but Maybelle recognized the voice. That hadn't changed, not one bit.

“Si, señora,” the answer came from behind her wheelchair. “Es la Dona Maybella’.

“Don't you be saying that, girl! Don't you being saying any of that kinda thing! Don't need to have no Mexican names, thank you very much.”

“What's happened to you, Mombelle?” the woman asked concerned. “You have some kind of accident?”

“No, I did not have no kind of accident, none of which is no business of yours anyhow.”

“Can I come in please? It's real hot out here.”

Maybelle didn't answer. With exaggerated effort she propelled her chair backwards, then with an effort which was obvious but not exaggerated she

turned the wheelchair around. Carmen tried to help but Maybelle shoved her aside with her sharp old-lady elbows. Hesitantly the woman followed into the house.

“Now, I know how you probably got a lot of hard words to say to me, Mombelle, and I wouldn’t deny that you got call to say them. But before you go to saying anything, I need to tell you something.”

“That’s where you is dead wrong. I ain’t got nothing at all to say to you,” Maybelle replied, refusing to face the woman.

“I come all the way down from Los Angeles on the train,” the woman implored. “You at least gotta listen.”

Maybelle stared at the heavy gold framed painting of a horse and rider which hung over the fireplace. The horse had flushed a snake near some big rocks. It had reared up and was in the process of falling sideways on top of the cowboy. She disliked the painting. It was dark and threatening. Earl protested that it was painted by someone called Remington, as if that should make some difference to how she felt about it. And it wasn’t even a real painting. Nothing but a copy of a real painting. A fake.

“I’ve come about Elvin,” the woman said somberly.

Maybelle studied the cowboy’s expression. There wasn’t much she could make out, just dabs of yellow and brown paint for his face. The painter seemed to have been more interested in the horse. Its nostrils were flared out, its eyes wide and its teeth red, in a mouth pulled crookedly open by the rider hauling sideways on the reins.

“He’s dead, Mombelle,” she said, her voice breaking. “Elvin, your first-born, he’s dead.”

The woman began to weep quietly. Maybelle forced herself not to listen. After a time the woman snuffled and then took a white handkerchief from her handbag and dabbed at her eyes.

“Señora? Por favor,” Carmen said, motioning the woman to the couch near to Maybelle.

“Thank you. Thank you very much.”

She perched on the edge of the cushions, the hem of her skirt pulled modestly over her knees and waited for Maybelle to say something. Maybelle was concentrating fiercely on the painting.

“Mombelle, please listen,” she said, leaning forward and grabbing on to the back of the wheelchair. “I have to tell you what happened.”

If you were in a wheelchair people took advantage of you. They were all the time talking about you to the person behind the chair and then they never listened to what you had to say. But they sure as sin made it so you had to listen to them. And why not? Only a sack of potatoes you are in a wheelchair. Push it here, push it there, push it anywhere you like. That's all. Who needed to mind about something like that. Sack of potatoes wasn't really anyone anyhow. Course not. Like about the painting. Now if she wasn't so trapped in her damn wheelchair, then she could stand up and pull the painting right off the wall. Right off. Take it straight out to the garage. Hide it away from Earl. Then every time she came into the living room she wouldn't have to see the horse falling, the cowboy falling, the snake coiled ready to strike. She liked the idea so much she laughed out loud at the thought of the fuss Earl would make.

"Mombelle? Do you hear what I'm saying to you?"

A couple of times when Earl and the boy were out she'd asked the girl to take the painting down, but of course she pretended not to understand. It was all because Earl could talk Mexican. That's all it was. Suddenly, like a big light bulb being turned on in her head, Maybelle understood why he only hired Mexican girls. Why hadn't she seen that before?

"I should have seen that," she said out loud. "I sure should have seen that."

"Seen what? How could you know about Elvin? Mombelle?"

It wasn't enough that she was stuck in the wheelchair and hurting all the time from the arthritis. No it wasn't. He had to hire Mexicans so she'd be even more trapped than she was.

"You can sit there and ignore me if you want to, Mombelle, I guess I deserve that. But I know you can hear me. I know you can."

She could have pushed herself away into the kitchen or the bedroom but her hands hurt something terrible. The knuckles felt like they were going to burst. It was about time for her to take her aspirin. Anyway, the confounded woman would simply follow her.

"It was his heart, you see, leastways that's what the doctor said. Died in the driveway right there in front of our house. He went off to work you see, at the carpet store. I mean, he was going off to work. Was the assistant manager there. A few months down the line he'd have been the manager. They all but promised him that promotion. We'd have been fine then. Just fine."

She paused and then getting no response from Maybelle she began to direct herself to Carmen.

“You see, when I looked out the front window about half an hour later the car was still there. I went to see what was wrong and found him lying crossways on the front seat. He was already dead.”

“Si, señora.”

“The doctor told me I couldn’t have done anything more than I did. But I...”

She began to sob again.

In the background of the painting a few smaller cowboys were waving their ropes at a herd of cattle. No one seems to have seen the rider in trouble behind the rocks. Maybe that was because it was night time. Hard to see in the dark.

“For the love of God, Mombelle!” the woman cried out, “we have three children. *You* have three grandchildren. Don’t you even want to know about them?”

She decided that when Earl came home for dinner she was going to tell him she wanted the painting taken down right away and that she wanted someone in the house with her who spoke American. It was her house too, wasn’t it? She must have some rights there. And she was the one who had to stay in all day long while he and Little Earl were out and doing whatever they did. Yes, she would tell Earl in no uncertain terms. The picture would have to go. The girl too.

She smiled to herself. I’ll show them about sacks of potatoes and about Mexicans too.

* * *

He was completely, utterly, miserably, joyously lost and he could think of no way of getting back. In fact, he couldn’t even remember where “back” might have been. There were probably other explanations, but none which for him could account for being on the front seat of his pickup with his shirt off his pants pushed down below his knees, parked in the middle of the desert in broad daylight with a naked woman lying on top of him.

“You want me to get off, Earl? Aren’t I too heavy for you?”

“No, heavy ain’t a problem. You feel real good, honey. It’s the heat in here that’s just about killing me.”

It was only when he mentioned how hot it was that Enid realized they were both running with sweat. She sat up and put the palms of her hands on his wet chest. It was flat and hard with only skimpy traces of hair around the nipples and near the bellybutton. So different from Archie’s pudgy, fur-covered body. She smiled to herself, trying to imagine making love to Archie in back of a car, let alone the front seat of a pickup truck. Where would he have hung up his pants?

“Something funny?” Earl asked.

“No, thinking that’s all.”

“About what?”

“About making love in a pickup truck,” she said, leaning over and kissing him on his damp forehead.

“Does that burlap sack tied to the front of the truck actually got any water in it like it says on it?” she asked.

“You bet.”

“Right. If you’ll excuse me for a couple of minutes.”

She pushed herself off. His little limp anteater came squidging out of her and flopped dead against the inside of his leg. Enid managed to twist herself around and open the door.

“Wadda you fixing to do?” he asked, raising up on his elbows and addressing her departing rump.

“Rinse myself off a little, that’s all. Can’t go to a roping smelling like this, can I?”

“Hey now, wait up a minute. You also can’t be going out there in the all-together like that!”

“Why ever not? Look. Go on look. There’s not a soul for miles.”

He threw his legs up in the air and pulled his jeans on. Then he sat up and looked out the window. She was right. An overhanging rock and four directions of people-free desert.

They had been on their way to La Quinta to watch Little Earl at the roping. He was still thinking about old Eddie and smarting from what she’d said to him the night before. She was glumly silent, resenting her own bitchiness as well as his unwelcome intrusion into her life. It had been their first real fight and it was taking some time for the bruises to heal.

Without a word to her or to himself, Earl had suddenly spun off the highway and driven too fast down a dirt road towards the mountains. Enid sat tight-lipped as they bounced and rattled, refusing to ask him what he was doing. After a mile or so he stopped the truck in the shade of a large granite boulder. They both sat silent, the struggle having been reduced to who could hold onto their silence the longest.

He lost.

“Enid, we gotta get some things straight before we go on with this.”

She sat, arms crossed, refusing everything — him, the desert, his mother, Harold, Archie, her dead father, Harold’s dead parents and her imminent impoverishment.

“This ain’t no good at all,” Earl said. “You got me turned around so’s I don’t know what I’m doing or which way it is I’m going. I gotta know what ... I gotta know if... I mean. Oh shit! I don’t know what the Sam hell I mean!”

Enid tried but she couldn’t not be moved by his obvious, if somewhat incoherent, agony. That she was the cause of it made her feel guilty. It made her feel strong. It made her feel amorous.

“You see,” Earl continued. “I met this old guy up in the village this morning and he told me you were messing up my judgment and other stuff as well. I couldn’t rightly make out all he was going on about. Pain and pleasure. That’s it. He kept saying something about pleasure and pain. And you know...”

“What old guy in the village?” she flared up, the guilt and the amorousness blown completely away. “Have you been talking to your buddies about me, Earl? I do *not* believe that! Christ!”

He grabbed his hat off and slammed it down on the dashboard.

“Damn it to hell, woman! I ain’t told nobody nothing about you. What kind of man does that? You think I’d do something like that? Do you?”

“So, OK. OK,” she said impatiently. “So, if you didn’t say anything to anybody about us then how did this old guy know about me? Explain that if you can.”

Earl pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. He was getting a headache. He never got headaches.

“I don’t know, Enid. I honest to God don’t know.”

When he tried to explain to her what had happened that morning, the sequence of events became so jumbled, so faded and so implausible that he

could hardly believe what he was saying. Why should Enid believe him? In the end the only thing he could do was take her outside and show her the dent.

“What the hell does that prove, Earl?” she said, as they stood surveying the front of his pickup. “A dent is a dent. You could have picked that up anywhere at anytime. Come on, willya.”

She was right, of course.

Enid looked around them. Endless, empty, useless sand. Instead of being stuck out in the middle of a stinking hot nowhere listening to Earl’s insane story she could have been at home lying half-submerged in the swimming pool, a pool she would only have for another ten days or so. Ten days and then where? Out into the wilderness maybe?

She should never have got herself mixed up with Earl. Never ever. You crossed over to the other side of the road and nothing made sense anymore. Over there on that other side they didn’t play by the same rules. A person had to know the rules or you were nowhere. And that was exactly where she was now. There was nowhere, more nowhere.

Earl walked away from Enid, putting the pickup between them. He dropped his hands on his hips and stared off across the desert. To most people it was just flat, featureless sand broken here and there by nondescript bushes and cacti, but if you really knew what to look for, then no two stretches were the same. Rock formations, washes, concentrations of flat leaf, of ocotillo, of cholla, of barrel cactus or of beavertail all marked off different parts as clear as signposts on the highway. In some places the mesquite was stunted, in others where there was more ground water it grew high and wide and became a favorite spot for rattlesnakes. Palo verde didn’t need much water, but you only found black-barked desert willow or spiny smoke tree down in a wash. He had taught himself everything about the desert. It didn’t do not to know your way around. Right then, however, he had no idea where he was. He saw only lots of sand.

“Listen,” he said, walking over to her. “I been thinking about what you said before, you know, this morning. And, well, maybe you’re right about that breakfast stuff.”

Despite herself, Enid couldn’t hold back the smile. Again he found himself admiring her strong teeth.

“Just maybe?”

“Yeah, well,” he said with a shrug. “You know what I mean.”

“And the old man?”

“Him? Oh, let’s just forget about him. OK?”

So, maybe she hadn’t made such a bad mistake after all. You could always teach people new rules.

They got back into the pickup.

* * *

He hadn’t won, but he hadn’t burned a loop either. He was thankful for that. A kid he hadn’t seen before from somewhere out near Beaumont had taken the silver buckle. Of course, it wasn’t as big a buckle or as important as the Championship Buckle Earl had won the year before, but last year was last year. Nobody cared much about last year, least of all Earl. The boy was damn good too. Sure and steady he was. Eighteen seconds. Earl admired his technique. He on the other hand had done only twenty-two. A real poor time, not even close to his best. It hadn’t been a straight run and he’d fouled his pigging string and had to take the wrap much too slowly.

“Horse was fucking lame,” said Garf angrily “Anybody could see that. Moving real slow she was. Can’t win nothing if your horse is lame.”

“And you drew a damn rank calf,” Tommy offered. “Rank as any I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, ran to that one fucking side all the time like his left legs was shorter than his right ones,” Jingles added. “Gone any further out there and he’d been running around in fucking circles.”

Earl didn’t reply to his friends’ litany of excuses. He knew full well why he hadn’t won.

“Just bad luck,” Harold said, as Earl swung the pickup onto 111.

“No,” Earl said shortly. “Just bad roping.”

Although he believed that one-hundred percent and although he never had any time for people who looked to blame their mistakes on others, he had to admit that having his father come along with Harold’s aunt a few minutes before he was up had thrown off his concentration pretty damn good.

He'd watched the two of them amble over from the bleachers and stand by the fence, their bodies sort of leaning into each other. Anyone could see that something was going on between them. If the leaning, almost-rubbing-together bodies weren't enough, then you only had to look at the woman's face. Her eyes were more like the damn calf he was going to rope than the damn calf's eyes themselves. And his father! Jesus! He'd never imagined his own father could work his mouth and lips into such a stupid, half-assed smile. Soft. That was the only way Earl could describe it. No it wasn't. Soft and sticky was more what it was. Not for one minute like his father. Earl had wanted to look away but couldn't.

Seeing the two of them there like they were brought back to him the unfamiliar and unwelcome feelings that had been attacking him since the previous week when he caught Garf at the back of the barn with Crazy Sally Whitburn. Hearing strange noises, he had gone in to investigate. Sally was sitting stiffly erect on a bale, naked from the waist up, blankly staring off into nowhere as if she was waiting for something more interesting to happen, while Garf, eyes closed and grunting like a hog, was slurping and sucking at one of her very large, very white breasts, had his right hand kneading urgently at the other breast and his left hand just as urgently working away down inside his jeans. Earl was shocked into immobility. Despite this outraged sense of propriety he stood and watched. After a few moments Sally glanced up at him. Over the top of Garf's cavorting head, she offered Earl a delicately weary smile, a smile which made him heavyhearted and unaccountably lonely. The feeling had lasted on and off for a few days. Now sitting on his horse watching his father and Harold's aunt and waiting for his name to be called the feeling came back stronger than ever. He didn't understand it, except for the fact that it sure wasn't the kind of feeling that made for good roping.

"How long will it take us to get back home," Harold asked.

"About as long as it took us to get out here," Earl snapped back.

"Right," said Harold, turning away from Earl and looking out the window to take in the passing desert.

He knew he shouldn't be angry with Harold. It was unfair. None of what had happened was his fault. Besides Harold had seemed more pushed out of shape than Earl when his aunt turned up.

"You know Mrs. Carlson, don't you, Earl?" his father had asked.

"Yes, sir. Howdy, ma'am," he said, touching the brim of his hat.

“Why hello there, Little Earl,” she greeted him, her voice swelling easily over the ruckus in and around the arena.

His friends had looked on curiously. Along the fence a couple of cowboys stared. And why not? With her piled-up hair, bright red lipstick, startled-eye-black mascara, tight pedal-pushers and a blouse whose buttons looked to be in immediate danger of popping loose, Harold’s aunt was someone you almost couldn’t not stare at.

“And Harold,” she hooted, “You’re a real early, *early* bird, darling. I didn’t even see you leave the house his morning. Oh say, you do look nice in your cowboy clothes. Don’t you think so, Earl?”

At that point Garf and Tommy and Jingles had started laughing. Harold’s aunt didn’t seem to notice but poor old Harold went drop-jawed and then almost purple.

“You bet,” his father replied. “The boy looks just fine.”

“Oh dear!” she exclaimed suddenly, staring in alarm out into the arena. “Look what that man’s doing to that poor sweet little thing! Earl?”

“What’s the matter?” his father asked.

A roper had caught a calf and was on the ground working his way towards him as his horse backed away keeping the rope taut. As they watched, the boy flanked down the calf and began tying him. It had all been done perfectly, without a hitch.

“That’s what’s the matter!” she shouted urgently, pointing at the offending spectacle.

“Oh that,” his father laughed. “Say, Enid honey, you can’t be worrying yourself about that. They’re used to it. It don’t hurt them none.”

“It doesn’t, does it? You could have fooled me. Having somebody toss a rope around your neck and then you can tell me it doesn’t hurt.”

Luckily, it was at that point that his name was called. He was spared having to listen to any more of Harold’s aunt’s thoughts on the horrors of calf roping.

“Sorry, Harold,” he said, reaching over to punch his friend on the shoulder. “Just don’t you be paying me no nevermind. OK? Must have got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.”

“Hey, don’t sweat it, Earl,” Harold said, returning the punch. “It’s nothing.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right there, cowboy. Nothing.”

“Besides,” said Harold with a half smile, “She takes a lot of getting used to, especially up close and caught out in the open like we were there at La Quinta.”

“You bet,” said Earl.

Talking with Harold like that made him feel a whole lot better.

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Pray For The Lights To Go Out

“Good morning,” Mr. Hills greeted them. “Boys and girls of Date Grove School I want you all to pay very close attention today,”

Every Tuesday at assembly he said exactly the same thing. Tuesday was Current Affairs Day, when Mr. Hills lectured them about some recent key event. They were then expected to discuss it among themselves at recess. No one ever did, of course, except the usual dipshits and some stuck-up twelfth-grade girls who were always cackling together and loudly broadcasting their plans about going to college.

“Remember what we always say. An informed mind makes an informed citizen,” he announced with metronomic precision. “An informed citizens make an informed country. An informed country is one which is safe for democracy.”

Harold mouthed the words along with Mr. Hills. It was easy. Everyone in the school knew them off by heart. In case you forgot you could always read it, inscribed in John Hancock writing and hanging in a black and gold frame at the far end of the assembly room next to the American flag and the portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

In his two weeks at the school Harold had yet to hear anything that he felt was important for him. At the first Tuesday assembly Mr. Hills had told them something about a high school in Arkansas, but that was too far away to interest Harold. The previous Tuesday it had even been more boring. Trade unions. It was about a guy called Hopper and how he was a threat to Mr. Hills’ precious democracy.

“Mr. Lewis, will you be good enough to turn on that machine, please.”

There were murmurs from the rows of kids facing the stage. Mr. Hills glared. The room went quiet. Mr. Lewis walked across the platform to a small red and white box sitting on a metal folding chair. He bent over it and fiddled with something. There was a loud hiss of static and then out of the machine came an extraordinarily ordinary noise.

“Beep, beep... Beep, beep... Beep, beep.”

Mr. Hills, his hands clasped behind his back, rocked on his heels and stared at the ceiling, nodding gravely at each pair of beeps. The teachers ranked behind him sat grim faced, as if maybe a famous person had died.

After a suitably serious period of beeps had passed, Mr. Hills signaled to Mr. Lewis who turned off the machine.

“Can anyone tell me what that is?” Mr. Hills asked. “Anyone? Yes. Good,” he said pointing straight at Harold, who was sitting in the back row.

The kids at the front turned in their seats to stare. Harold’s stomach bucked. He squeezed the cheeks of ass together and opened his mouth to protest that he hadn’t raised a hand.

“The Russian satellite,” said a neatly-trimmed voice next to him.

“Excellent, Mosely.”

“It’s Manley, sir.”

“Of course it is. Excellent.”

“Can anyone tell me what this Russian satellite is called?” he asked scanning his captive audience.

“Sputnik,” piped up the other Brandon twin.

After that Mr. Hills stopped asking questions and went into a rambling talk about how the satellite was a major scientific achievement that posed a terrible threat to the United States and meant that they all would have to put their shoulders more firmly to the wheel in order to protect democracy.

Harold couldn’t see how a dumb piece of junk spinning around the world and going “Beep, beep,” could pose a threat to anything. If old man Hills wanted to talk about threats he should have had a look and a listen to the fucking *American Bandstand*. That was a genuine threat; a threat to Harold’s peace of mind, a threat to decent music and for all he knew a threat to democracy as well.

Harold had seen the first program the day before, soon after he’d come home from school. A load of dumb-looking suit-and-tie Eastern kids dancing and smiling and saying dumb stuff like “I give this record an 85 because it has a good beat and is easy to dance to.” Good beat and easy to dance to! They didn’t care about the music or the records. Morons! Then the MC wheeled on some old black guy in a suit who sang *I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter*. It wasn’t even Rock and Roll for Christ sake!

After watching the show for fifteen minutes Harold had had to turn off the set. He was only almost sixteen-years old. He had maybe a whole life to live though. Was this the future? Fucking Dick Clark? He was so clean cut he made Harold’s teeth hurt to look at him? Just like fucking Pat Boone.

The whole world was going to hell in a handbag and all Mr. Hills could talk about was a fucking Russian ball out in space going “Beep, beep.”

For once Aunt Enid was not sitting half-naked out by the pool and he had been able to get her not only to drive him into town but also give him a few bucks to buy records. A new 45 or two was the only antidote that might help, an assurance that all was not lost forever.

“Wadda you know, wadda you say?” Benny Sparkle called out as Harold walked into Dave’s Disks.

“Howdy,” Harold said, touching the brim of his hat.

“My main Mr. R&B Cow-boy! Hey, I can dig it.”

Harold checked to see if anybody had noticed his well-announced entrance. A couple of other kids in the far corner were flipping through records but neither of them turned around. He pushed up close to the counter.

“You got any new stuff in, Benny?” he asked in a half-whisper. “You know what I mean.”

Benny eyes widened. He glanced around the shop and then craned his neck to peer over Harold’s ample shoulder.

“You in some kinda trouble?” he said, dropping his voice to match Harold’s. “The Feds on your tail or something?”

“No. No. Well, maybe sort of... Uh, but not really trouble. It’s just that I need... I want to see what kinda new stuff you got, that’s all.”

“Right. Just be cool, man. Be cool. Listen, I had a few new records down from LA, but the cat over there bought most of them. All I got left is,” he paused and shuffled through a small stack of records. “All I got that’s for you, my man, is a new John Lee Hooker on Vee-Jay, a Joe Turner on... on... right, on Atlantic and a Willie Mabon on Federal.”

He passed the records in their clean paper wrappers across to Harold. The labels looked just fine. They hadn’t changed them from the last time. Familiar and comforting. Vee-Jay was maroon and with silver lettering, Atlantic had been yellow and black but since the middle of the previous year had then changed to red and black and Federal which had gone from green and gold to green and silver was now all green. He could live with that.

With three shiny new records in his hands, Harold was starting to feel good again. The recent horror of Dick Clark was fading. Then without warning someone shoved him hard in the back. Harold nearly dropped the

records. That made him furious. He spun around to face his attacker. It was Langley.

“Tackle!” he shouted near-sightedly at Harold.

Harold clutched the records to his chest and backed away. Benny came quickly from behind the counter and put himself between the two boys.

“Hey, man,” he said to Langley. “I’m not having any of that bad-ass crap in my store. You dig?”

Langley grinned and threw up his hands in mock surrender.

“No sweat, Benny. No sweat. Just horsing around. By the looks of old Abelstein here, he can dig horsing around. Wadda you say, cowboy? Can you dig it?”

It turned out that Langley was almost as crazy about R&B as Harold was, although he didn’t have memory for being as accurately crazy. When they eventually walked out of Dave Disks, Harold was still regaling an awed Langley with his meticulously accumulated knowledge. Their locker-room fight had been completely forgotten.

Mr. Hills stopped talking and studied each young face in the assembly for smirks, grins or any other signs of levity or inattention. Convincing himself that they had been appropriately impressed by his talk and were fully prepared to take on the Soviet challenge he aboutfaced. A hundred chairs scraped against the wooden floor as the pupils of Date Grove School stood up, put their hands on their hearts and began to recite the pledge of allegiance.

At no time in the Republic’s history was such allegiance needed so urgently.

* * *

“Who was that, darling?” Enid asked Harold as he came through the front door.

“Guy from school,” he said, not meeting her eyes.

“I see. Does he have to make such a god-awful noise? Sounds like his car’s got a hole in the muffler.”

“Uh, maybe that’s it.”

“Does he have a name this ‘guy from school’?”

“Langley.”

“Is that his first name or his last name?”

“Donno, they just call him Langley is all.”

“Harold darling, don’t you... Don’t... No, forget it.”

Harold was jumpy. She knew from experience that direct questions only backed her nephew up into minimally informative monosyllables and she did not feel strong enough for a battle. He looked anxiously towards the hallway behind her. In his hand were three of his little records.

“New records, darling?”

“Yeah. Right. New.”

“Go on, Harold,” she said, patting him on the shoulder. “Go on. We’ll talk this evening.”

“Sure, Aunt Enid. And thanks a lot.”

He ducked his head and made hurriedly for the hallway. A minute or two later she heard the thumping and muffled shouting coming from his room.

She slid open the patio door and escaped outside. The September heat wave had broken and in the late afternoon with the sun nearly behind the mountain the temperature was in the comfortable eighties. She kicked off her sandals, sat down by the side of the pool and put her feet in the cool water. She closed her eyes and waited for her worries to seep away.

She waited and waited and waited. Nothing. Finally and reluctantly she opened her eyes. She decided that she had simply too many worries and they were too painful for the water to cope with. When she managed to think her way around to dulling the edge of one, another would attack her, its demands sharp and insistent. Seven years of Archie and Archie’s money had obviously weakened her ability to cope with what Earl continually assured her was the “real world”.

But Harold was a real-world problem she assumed had been solved. From the few comments she had been able to extract from him, he seemed at least not to dislike his new school. Also, and against her initial misgivings about cowboys, Little Earl had been a good influence on him. Of course, Harold still played his dreadful music but it didn’t matter so much as he was now out of the house most of the time. Seeing him at La Quinta looking almost handsome and part of what was going on there she found herself feeling unexpectedly proud of her nephew. Enid supposed that was partly because the last few weeks had given her a different perspective on cowboys.

The sight of Harold emerging from the rumbling, low-to-the-ground hot rod car had shaken her certainty. What was he up to now? Cowboys might be dirty and stinky but it was honest dirt and an honest stink. They might talk funny but they were as honestly American as Buffalo Bill. None of that could be said about the kind of boys who drove around in hot rods. Long greasy hair, leather jackets, switchblade knives. What her sister, Harold's mother, might have called nogoodniks. Whatever they were called, they were major-league trouble. She didn't have a lot of faith in Harold's powers of figuring out things like that.

She slipped off her trousers and blouse, her bra and her panties and lowered herself into the pool. Taking a deep breath she propelled herself under the water. After two submerged lengths she broke to the surface and gasped for air. Even that didn't help to clear her head.

Enid had worse problems than Harold's impending decline into a full-scale juvenile delinquency. She hadn't heard from Earl since he dropped her off on Sunday afternoon. They were supposed to go to the Dunes for dinner that night but he'd stood her up. He'd never appeared and never called. She had wanted to call him up or walk over to the stables but forced herself not to. It wasn't right for a woman to chase after a man.

Everything had been going so well after they had made up out in the desert. Earl promised to spend the whole of Sunday night with her. She was planning to cook him a big breakfast on Monday morning. He had even said something about meeting his mother.

Had she done or said something while they were at La Quinta or on the way back? Again and again she went over what had happened. Absolutely nothing had happened. It made her very angry. When the anger ran its course she became depressed and weepy. When she got fed up with that she returned to angry.

"I knew I shouldn't have got involved with the damn man. I knew it. I told you. Remember? Do you?"

"I remember, honey," Charlene replied. " 'Course I do. But when all's said and done you got your money's worth, didn't you?"

"Money's worth? Money's worth!, Enid shouted. "What money's worth?"

"Well, let's see, how many times you reckon he's taken you out to dinner?"

“Great, Charlene. You think this is all about peddling my pussy for dinners? For Christ sake, I’m not that desperate. Not yet anyway.”

“You know something, honey? I’ll be damned if you’re not starting to sound like me. Ain’t that a kick.”

“It sure is,” Enid answered sourly. “In the goddamn head.”

Enid didn’t need this kind of aggravation, especially as she had less than a week before she was going to have to move. She hadn’t yet looked for another house or told Harold. Every morning she had promised herself that she would and every morning she didn’t. The real estate agent had been on the phone an hour before telling her if she wasn’t going to renew then he wanted to start showing the house as soon as possible. More in panic than in anger she had hung up on him.

The only good thing that had happened was that she finally found a job. It was as a saleswoman at Matthews, an expensive dress shop in the old Post Office on Palm Canyon Drive. She had shopped there occasionally, usually when they had their end-of-season sale and the manager had recognized her. The job only paid \$85 a week but it was a classy place and if she was careful the money would be enough to keep her and Harold out of a trailer park. It wasn’t, however, enough to pay the rent on a house with a pool. She was actually looking forward to working nine-to-five in the real world but it was proving more difficult to resign herself to being without a pool. Sometimes she just about convinced herself it would be alright. However, at that moment, floating on her back in the water she wasn’t doing a very good job of convincing herself of anything.

“Oh, hi there, Mrs. Carlson. Oh, ah!”

Enid flipped over and swam quickly for the cover of the poolside.

Manny dropped his skimmer and stepped back from the pool as if he’d seen a snake. He stared six feet over Enid’s head and over the tops of the oleander bushes along the back fence.

“Listen,” he announced too loudly, “Maybe I’ll just come back later. OK.”

“You do that, Manny. Give me half an hour.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Carlson.”

She waited until she heard the metal click of the side gate closing then she got out of the pool, gathered up her clothes and ran into the house.

* * *

“I seen him, Earl. With my very own fucking eyes I seen him up in the village.”

“So what if you did, Garf. What does that prove?”

“Proves he’s just like all them others, that’s what. He don’t wanna be no cowboy,” Garf turned his head and angrily spat out the door. “He’s a fucking nigger-music-loving Jew Pechuco!”

Earl laughed and punched Garf hard on the shoulder. The smaller boy winced.

“That’s real good, Garf old buddy. Harold a Pechuco,” Earl coughed out a laugh. “I gotta hand it to you, boy. Pass me that hole-punch willya.”

“So what you gonna do, Earl? Huh, what?”

“I’m going to finish fixing these here cinch straps and then maybe go out and work the mare a bit.”

“No, I mean about Red.”

“Harold?”

“Yeah, about fucking Abelstein.”

“Do what about Harold?”

“About him and Langley.”

“You think I should do something? Exactly what do you reckon that would be?”

“Fucking hell, Earl! That fucking rich fairies’ school’s making you into a fucking, a fucking fucking...”

“Ease up a tad now, cowboy. You’ll be doing yourself an injury if you ain’t careful.”

“Fucking! ...Fuck..!”

Frustration and anger puffed Garf’s face a baffled vermilion. He uttered a final strangled “Fucking!”, stood up and rushed out of the tack room slamming the screen door behind him. Earl watched him go without a word. He knew he’d be back. Earl was just about the only real friend Garf had. No one else had the patience to deal with him. Earl liked him well enough though. The little guy was game for just about anything and he had plenty of sand in his craw.

Earl carefully dipped the leather cinch strap in the coffee can of neat's-foot oil. The leathers got brittle in the desert heat. He had to oil them real good at least twice a year. He reached over and turned on the radio.

It was Harold's white black guy. Or did he say black white guy? Which ever one it was Earl couldn't understand why they were playing it so much on a country station. He also wondered why Harold had hooked up with Langley, especially after the fight they had at school. But that was his business not Earl's. Anyway, he had more important things on his mind than Jerry Lee Lewis or Harold's questionable choice of friends. Two days before he had finally met up with his dead mother.

When he got back from La Quinta his father had been waiting for him in the front yard.

"Don't get down from the pickup, son," he called out as he walked over. "We got to take us a ride."

"Where to?"

"How about Tahquitz Canyon? Maybe walk up to the falls."

"I'm kinda bushed, Pa. Can I go in the house and get a Coke before we go?"

His father was already in the cab.

"Just drive, boy," he said tightly.

Earl knew better than to argue with his father. He backed out of the driveway and pointed the pickup towards the mountains.

Tahquitz Canyon was about ten minutes from the center of the village at the end of a long dirt road which cut across the desert and then led them between increasingly high and increasingly narrow walls of granite. They parked about half a mile up the mouth of the canyon near a stand of thick palm trees. All around were house-sized boulders, cacti and yucca. The shallow creek was shaded by scrub oak and further up towards where the canyon disappeared around a sharp switchback was a patch of cottonwoods.

Without a word his father got out of the pickup. Instead of going towards the falls he walked down to the creek. Earl followed him. In silence they crossed over using a bowed plank that someone had left. A couple of minutes walk into the palm trees and they came to a small clearing where the earth had been beaten flat. On the far side, right up against the canyon wall was shack made from boards and palm fronds. It had been crumpled like a kid's forgotten toy. The roof had caved in at the centre and the corrugated iron door hung on a single leather hinge. Inside were a few beer

cans and pieces of busted furniture. But what really threw Earl was that the dirt floor was inches deep in stacks of loose pages, apparently torn out of books. No spines or covers, just pages. Thousands of them. All different sizes. Some covered with print, others with pictures on them.

Big Earl bent down and picked one up. He read it for a minute or two than dropped it.

“Don’t make no sense at all,” he said, looking around the shack. “No sense at all.”

It was there, standing in the middle of the broken-down shack, his feet buried in piles of ripped-out book pages, that Earl was informed officially that his mother was alive.

He tried his best to look surprised. He was able to stop trying after his father told him she was actually there in Palm Springs and wanted to see him.

His father didn’t make any excuses for lying to him. Earl hadn’t really expected any excuses, but then he hadn’t expected any lies either. Big Earl said it had all happened a long time ago and that it wasn’t right for a boy to think badly of his mother no matter what she did. A mother was a mother. Little Earl couldn’t see his way to arguing with that, but could also see that for his father the telling of it was like pulling out his own teeth. It was damn painful to watch.

“So what about Harold’s aunt?” he asked, the question jumping out blunt and unbidden and surprising Earl about as much as it did his father.

The older man’s faced clouded.

“She don’t have nothing to do with it, Little Earl,” he said brusquely. “We’re keeping that separate and private.”

“Yes, sir.”

They left the shack, walked to the truck and drove back towards the village. As had happened on the way there, not a word was spoken during the return journey.

He dropped his father at the house and then continued on by himself. As he got nearer to the motel Earl felt he was becoming more distant from himself but closer to the desperate anxiety that was clawing at him. He had never imagined he could be so murderously fretful. It made him numb and, as it turned out, that was exactly what he needed.

The Desert Rest was at the north end of town off 111 on Vista Chino. It took him a good twenty minutes sitting in the pickup before he worked out

the courage to go in.

The woman's face was round with too many wide pores and too much powder. The eyes were small and red-rimmed from crying. She had a slight double chin that she tried to hide by continually stretching her neck. The long hair had become short and hair-spray stiff. The slim arms had fleshed out considerably.

A complete stranger. Nothing at all like the photograph or his imaginings. That mother was now finally dead. It was a welcome relief. A welcome release. He smiled gratefully. She returned one which was curious and wistful.

She shook his hand and then hesitantly leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He felt nothing he thought of as motherly coming from her. She sat on the motel bed in her black suit, twisted and untwisted a handkerchief and talked about her other children — his brothers and his sister, who were also his cousins — although she didn't mention that part of it. Nor did she suggest a visit.

As with his father, she offered no excuses for what she'd done. She did mention something about the war and about his grandmother but he wasn't paying very close attention by that time. By that time he only wanted to escape from the motel room.

"I'm sorry, but I've got to be getting back. I still got to feed the horses and stuff like that."

"You're your father's son," she said smiling, "I can see that clear as day."

"Yes, ma'am."

She got up from the bed and smoothed her skirt.

"Well, it was good to have this chance to visit with you, Earl. I'll keep in touch."

They shook hands.

He walked out into the late afternoon. He wanted to feel unburdened and he did, but he also felt unexpectedly heavyhearted. He supposed that feeling would go with time. He would just have to wait. Two days later he was still waiting.

Domingo had come into the tack room, moving so lightly on his feet that Earl, lost in replaying the encounter with his mother, didn't hear anything until the old man was standing right next to him. A torn and crumpled newspaper was buried in one of his hands. Carefully unfolding it, he laid it on the work bench, smoothed it out with his palm and stood back. Earl

looked a question at the big man who in reply stubbed a thick finger at the headline.

“Read,” he ordered.

Earl stared down at the newspaper in quiet panic, hoping for a familiar word. He had made a lot of good progress with Mr. Giddins, but reading outside of school was another matter. All he could make out was a “The” and an “And”. Somewhere underneath was a “with” in smaller letters. Not nearly enough. He looked at the picture below the headline for a clue. It showed a drawing of the earth with lines around it and a little ball in the middle with lightening symbols coming out of it. Then he remembered.

“You bet,” he said with a sigh of relief. “It’s about that Russian satellite thing, Domingo. You heard tell about it? Yeah? Sput I think they been calling it. That’s it, Sput. Going around up there.” He pointed straight up. “Like some damn yo-yo. Making noises too. I even heard them from this recording machine they got over to the school.”

“In the sky?” Domingo asked doubtfully.

“Yeah. That’s right. High up so as you can’t see it from here. Teacher told us it was pretty important though. Something about Communists and stuff like that.”

Domingo stared at the picture for a long while.

“New moon,” he muttered darkly. “Bad omen.”

He carefully picked up the newspaper, folded it and walked slowly out of the tack room. The screen door banged closed behind him. On the radio, Webb Pierce was moaning away about something or other. Webb Pierce was a lot more like real country music.

Earl took a rag and wiped the excess oil off the five cinch straps. When he was finished he carefully fixed them back onto the saddles.

* * *

“There weren’t nobody come, Junior. Nobody at all.”

“Don’t be telling me that, Mombelle. The girl told me she were here. It were Ruth Ann, weren’t it?”

“You calling your own mother a liar? Is that what you’re after doing, Junior?”

“I ain’t said that.”

“If you ain’t than why you saying ‘Don’t be telling me’? Tell me that.”

“But Carmen said she were here.”

“Carmen is it? Ha! I know all about Carmen, I do. Don’t you be sitting there on your high horse thinking I don’t know about Carmen.”

“Know what about her?”

“Enough to be knowing that’s all. Enough to be knowing. Plenty enough.”

“Mombelle, come on now.”

“Besides, how’s she know who it were?”

“So there was somebody come.”

“I didn’t say that. No I didn’t. You can’t say I did. Somebody most certainly did not come. And don’t you be playing them games with me, Earl Bob Earl.”

“I ain’t playing no games, Mombelle. Never have.”

“She don’t speak no English. So there!”

“She understands enough to be getting on with. And she said something about a woman.”

“How come if she understands so much she won’t take down that darned picture for me?”

“What picture you talking about?”

“That one over there?”

“Why do you want her to take the picture down for, Mombelle?”

“Can’t stand looking at it. Never could. You know that. Told you before.”

“That’s Remington, Mombelle.”

“Don’t care who it is. Can’t abide it.”

“OK., OK. I’ll take her down for you if that’s going make you happy.”

“When?”

“Later on.”

“Later on. Later on. You’ll go and forget about it like you always done. I know how you do. Thinking I can’t remember. But I’m stuck in here all day, Junior. Stuck inside all day, stuck in this wheelchair all day. I got nothing to do but look at that picture. I remember right enough. Can’t escape remembering, can I?”

“Ruth Ann, Mombelle. I want you to tell me what she said, why she come.”

“You so all fired interested, why don’t you ask that Mexican girl of yours?”

“I’m asking you, that’s why.”

“What’s that tone for, Earl Bob? Ain’t respectful. Ain’t right to pick on an old sick woman. I raised you up to know better. Ain’t right.”

“Ruth Ann, Mombelle. Ruth Ann. Please. Has something happened to Elvin? ... Well, has it?”

She folded her arms defiantly and stared straight ahead.

“Mombelle, please. The boy will be home right soon and I got to talk to him if his mama has come back.”

“You take that painting down right now and then maybe we can talk .”

Earl hesitated and then walked over to the fireplace and lifted the painting up and off the wall. He leaned it against his armchair and sat down again.

“Now,” he said, “That more to your liking, Mombelle?”

“Tolerable.”

“Good. Now you tell me about Ruth Ann.”

“What about the other one, Earl? The half-nekked Jew woman. I wants to know about her?”

“Half naked what?”

“That’s her. She’s the one. Painted up and half-nekked. The fat Jewboy’s kin.”

Earl sighed raggedly.

“What about her, Mombelle?”

Enid standing naked in front of the truck. Behind her the flat plain of the desert and the pink rounded swells of the Little San Bernadinos. Holding the dripping water bag at arm’s length above her head like a ballet dancer. The water pouring over her body and splashing down into the sand at her feet.

The crow caw of Maybelle’s voice snapped him back.

“You been walking out with her, ain’t you? More too. Staying out ‘til all hours every night. You think I don’t know? Ha! I know. A mother knows. And I know I ain’t raised me up no son to be going off with no nekked Jew woman, with no Whore of Babylon. Chosen people or no chosen people, it don’t do to mix things up, Junior. Don’t do at all. I mean to say even Baptists keep themselves from them other Baptists. So keeping Jews apart from the rest of us only stands to reason.”

“Now you listen here, Mombelle...”

“Worse than that cursed Steinbeck fella. Joads! Joads! Joads! Fighting and scrabbling. Denying Jesus Christ! *They’d* like that they would. Just the same like *They* done before. Denying. Well it ain’t true. And I’m here to tell you it ain’t. Did I show you what I found this morning, Junior? Course I haven’t. Now you listen.”

She reached over to the table and pulled into her lap the thick book, fat-paged bloated from being so well used. Wetting a crooked finger she began to leaf through it.

“Mombelle,” he protested weakly.

She wasn’t hearing him. Finally she found what she’d been looking for. Her face settled into a glow of justified satisfaction.

“You listen here if you want to know what lying tricks They can get up to. Then you might be thinking more careful about all what you been getting up to with that woman.”

Earl let her read. There was no point in trying to hold her back once she got started on the Grapes.

When he was finally able to get away into the kitchen Carmen handed him a book of matches Ruth Ann had left with her. He drove up to the market and used the pay phone.

“I ain’t sorry for what I done, Earl. I want to tell you that straight off. I’ve thought about that a lot over the years and I figured I had to do it. That’s all. I just had to do it. I’m only sorry if I hurt you and the boy though. Sometimes there ain’t no escaping hurt. You know Mombelle wouldn’t talk to me? Only to say she wouldn’t talk to me. Earl? You still there.”

“Yep,” he replied, staring out into the market and tapping his boot against the door of the phone booth.

“Do we have to talk on the phone like this? I mean we’re in the same town, ain’t we? Why don’t you come over here to the motel or I’ll meet you somewheres for a drink.”

“No. I’d rather not do that if you don’t mind.”

“OK, Earl. If that’s the way you want it. I can understand how you might feel.”

“Ruth Ann, did you ever, you know, get divorced from me?” he asked.

“Course I did,” she replied, apparently surprised. “It were down in Mexico in ‘45. Tiajuana. Didn’t you get no papers on that?”

“No, never did.”

“Elvin said he sent them to you.”

“Got lost maybe. Still, don’t make no difference as long as it got done.”

She didn’t say anything for a time. He could hear the line buzzing. Outside in the market was the hollow sound of voices, of shopping carts rattling, cash registers registering.

“It got done, Earl,” she said finally and flatly. “Did Mombelle tell you we had kids, Elvin and me?”

“She didn’t tell me nothing.”

“Well, we do, I do now. Two twin boys and a girl. The twins are twelve years old and the girl’s ten. They’re real good kids too.”

“I’m right pleased for you, Ruth Ann.”

“No you’re not,” she said with a half laugh. “But that don’t matter now.”

She was wrong. He was pleased for her. He was also saddened to hear about his brother. He hadn’t been prepared for either feeling. He couldn’t explain them to himself and didn’t want to argue about them with Ruth Ann. You couldn’t do much of anything about feelings.

Time Changes Everything

Harold reached up and tugged at the brim of his hat, settling it more firmly so as to stop it being blown off. It had been weathered and well-broken in, especially at La Quinta where a calf had stomped all over it, leaving some good dents as well as a scrape of dirt and cow shit. It was as close as damn-it to a cowboy hat as it was going to get. He had become very attached to his hat. He sure as hell didn't want to lose it.

Earl sat on the other side of the pickup, his arm draped across the spare wheel. Between them slumped Domingo, who despite the jolting ride seemed to be asleep, his greasy black fedora fallen over his eyes. They were on their way to Yucca Valley. Harold wasn't altogether sure why, but from what Earl had told him it had something to do with the Christ statues. He twisted around to peer wearily through the dirty rear window. Up in front were Earl's father, his grandmother and Aunt Enid. They didn't look as if they were doing much in the way of talking.

"Big Morongo Canyon," the old man said suddenly, startling Harold. "White man chased him there. Swift Fox he ran with the woman. Only the coyote could follow."

He pointed off to the left. Harold could see nothing but some barren rocky hills, desert and a lot of Joshua trees. Domingo told him the trees were the ghosts of bad men twisted with pain because they were held fast by the earth and could neither wander in the world nor ascend to heaven.

He had heard the story about Domingo's cousin and his battles with the white man more than a dozen times. No two tellings were the same. Earl said you had to expect that with Indians. Domingo had wanted to go with them so he could meet up with some of his relatives who were riding on horseback from Yucca Valley over to Ruby Mountain where Swift Fox had finally been killed and his body burned by the sheriff's posse.

For Harold the trip to Yucca Valley was not a pilgrimage to statues or to graves. It was a way to hang around with Earl, although he wouldn't actually one-hundred percent admit that to himself. What he could admit was that in the last week or so things had suddenly become different between them. Earl wasn't being unfriendly or anything like that. In fact, he

talked a lot more, maybe even too much, but at the same time he seemed to hold himself at a greater distance. Harold couldn't get into focus exactly what was happening or why, but it nagged at him like a throat tickle he couldn't scratch.

Although being with Earl was important, Harold would have gladly found something else to do if he'd known Aunt Enid was coming along. But she turned up at the very last minute, too late for him to find an excuse not to come.

Her car had skidded into the stables, swirling up a dust cloud. She got out and hurried over to where Big Earl stood by the tack room. They began to argue. He'd been too far away to hear. While Aunt Enid talked with her usual embarrassing gusto Big Earl pawed the ground with the toe of his boot, every once in a while glancing over to the pickup. At one point he actually put his head back and laughed. Aunt Enid had then reached out and touched his arm which made Harold think maybe they weren't arguing. Finally she walked over, and throwing a too-wide, too-red-lipped smile to the three of them in the back, climbed into the cab right next to Earl's grandmother.

As far as he knew, Aunt Enid and Earl's grandmother had never met. Given that he could think of no two people on the whole dumb planet who were as difficult and as different, and knowing what was going on between Aunt Enid and Big Earl, and what the horrible old crippled woman thought about Jewish people in general and Aunt Enid in particular, he could envisage little less than a full-scale disaster. Now, as they drew closer to Yucca Valley and the legions of tormented Joshua tree ghosts crowded in more thickly around them, so too did Harold's uncertainty about what was going to happen and what the impending clash would mean for him.

Uncertainty was exactly what he could do without. He had never liked it. He didn't know anyone who did. But the last week had loaded him with more than his fair share. On Monday as he was getting ready to leave for school Aunt Enid had told him that her friend Archie was no longer going to be sending her any money. He knew that because of Big Earl she and Archie were washed up, but somehow had not thought as far as the money angle.

"But it will be alright, darling," she said, brightly. "You'll see."

What he could see was that Aunt Enid wasn't alright. In fact, under her deep tan she seemed pinched, faded and pale. He put it down to the loss of

her meal ticket. That could knock the stuffing out of anyone.

“You feeling OK, Harold? Harold?”

“You bet,” he answered distantly, sitting down heavily at the kitchen table.

It had hit him like a stiff punch in the guts. Her meal ticket was, of course, also his meal ticket.

“So,” she said, rapping the table with her fist. “I’m no longer a woman of leisure, Harold. I’ve got myself a job at a dress store on Palm Canyon. I start on Thursday. What do you think about that? Huh? Your Aunt Enid a regular working girl!”

“Sure, Aunt Enid,” he replied. “Hey, that’s great. Really it is.”

He meant it too. Harold liked to eat.

It was then she told him they were going to have to move out. No money. No house. The old one-two. Harold tried to roll with it but couldn’t.

“I’ve got us a place on the south side of town off Ramon. A nice little house. I’m sure you’ll love it, darling.”

“I like it fine right here,” he protested feebly.

“I know, so do I. But you have to cut your cloth to fit your something or other. You know what I mean?”

“Why didn’t you tell about all this stuff before now?”

“I didn’t want you to worry, darling. There was no point until I had everything settled. Surely you can see that, can’t you?”

“You bet. I guess I can see that.”

It wasn’t that he particularly liked Aunt Enid’s house but he had worked so hard at settling in and was just beginning to feel at home there. And all that painting they did to cover up those dumb roses. It wasn’t fair. What was even less fair was their new “nice little house.”

She had been right about the location and the “little”. That was all.

A peeling green crackerbox house with a rickety front porch and torn screens on the windows. The front door opened directly into a dim living room. The two bedrooms, one off either side of the living room, were cramped with no space for more than a bed and a chest of drawers. The long narrow kitchen was at the back as was the bathroom. There was no air cooler. The back yard was a ten foot square concrete slab and the front yard a jumbled forest of leg-puncturing century plants.

It was a poor person’s house. All their neighbors looked poor and dusty. Enid assured him repeatedly that it was only a temporary arrangement, that

once she got on her feet with her new job they would find another house in a better part of town.

“Sometimes you know, Harold, you simply have to pay a price for your self respect.”

He didn't see what any of it had to do with her self respect and if it did why *he* should have to pay for it. Harold figured he'd paid more than enough in the last few months, but he smiled as best he could and told her he didn't mind.

Aunt Enid started looking a bit better when Big Earl reappeared. On the first morning in the new house Harold found him sitting with her at the kitchen table. When Earl came to pick him up, his father's truck was still parked outside. After that there was no way he could not to talk to Earl about it.

Then on Friday came the final blow. He heard on the radio that Little Richard had abandoned rock and roll forever. He was going back to serving the Lord. And the reason for this terrible waste of a conversion? Fucking Sputnik, that's what! Little Richard said it was a sign from God that he must give up his sinful ways.

He had to admit to himself that he had been dead wrong about Sputnik.

“Crossed here,” rumbled Domingo, as they topped a rise and began to drop down into Yucca Valley. “Then he went over there to the Sawtooths and made for a cabin in the Pipes.”

“What's that?” asked Harold, his thoughts still with Little Richard.

“Swift Fox,” replied the old man.

“You bet,” said Harold, pulling down his hat and turning away to watch the Joshua trees rushing past.

* * *

Generally he didn't care much for riding in the back of his father's pickup. It was like being a kid again and there was nothing to be said for that at all. Having his own truck meant being his own man. Since he was eight years old he'd saved to buy a pickup. Each year his father took him to the showrooms in town to inspect the new models. By the time he was ready, he knew exactly what he wanted and every penny that went to pay for the

'54 Chevy was his. Mowing-lawn money, cleaning-yards money, washing-cars money, Christmas and birthday money all had gone straight into the bank. That money made the truck really his, not like the rich kids at Date Grove whose parents bought them their cars.

He drummed his hand absentmindedly against the side of the pickup. Today he was gladder than hell that he was sitting in the back. He didn't want to imagine what they might be saying, or even worse not saying, up at the front. Mostly he felt real sorry for his father. Big Earl didn't stand a chance, like a rabbit in a snake pit.

Next to him Domingo grunted something that got lost in the wind. Earl nodded, hoping that would be enough of an answer. It was. The old man turned and started jawing at Harold. Good old Harold.

Earl had got used to Harold living just up the road from the stables. Since he'd moved with his aunt to the other side of town he hadn't been coming over as regularly. At school he had started hanging around with Langley. Even drove home with him a couple of times in his custom car. They were always talking about their rhythm and blues music. It was like a secret language they had. Langley called Harold "The Memory Man" and it didn't take long before everyone in school had picked it up.

"It's like, I don't know, if say Hank Williams got up and announced that he wasn't going to be playing country music anymore."

"Well, he ain't going to be playing it no more. The man's dead and gone."

"So it's the same thing, you see? I mean Little Richard, Earl, Little Richard is just about the greatest there ever was or ever will be."

"Like Hank Williams you mean?"

"Except not dead. Although that's not going to make much difference if he's not singing. Might as well be dead. It's just such a fucking waste. Fucking Russians! Jesus!"

Langley seemed pretty cut up about Little Richard as well and the two of them went around moaning about it like a couple of sob sisters for days.

He came pretty close to thinking that Garf might be right about Harold, but then he turned up at the stables on Saturday as if nothing had happened.

"I guess serious would be something like it is," Harold replied. "I mean they might as well be married, if you know what I mean. Especially the last couple of days."

“You think they might actually be doing that?” asked Earl, pleased that Harold was at last talking to him about what was going on. “I mean actually getting married to each other?”

“Donno. What’s your old man say about it?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot. Your aunt?”

“She says I gotta be a grown up about things like that.”

“Things like what?”

“Her and your dad.”

“What the hell does that eat when it’s at home?”

“Beats the shit outta me, Earl.”

At home it was worse than worse. Four-ways-to next-Tuesday worse, with little to indicate it was going any other way but worse again.

He wanted to talk about seeing his mother but had an impossible time finding where to get started. So did his father.

“I guess you saw her over to the motel?”

“Yes, sir, I did. And, well, it didn’t... I mean, I didn’t... She was, well, you know... I don’t rightly understand what.”

“Yeah, I know. It ain’t altogether easy.”

“No, sir, it sure ain’t.”

“You gotta take her one step at a time.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll do that. One step at a time.”

“It don’t do to rush things. Listen, I’ll talk to you some later on.”

There hadn’t been any later on and he didn’t know how to feel about that. Mostly he felt confused.

Surprisingly, his grandmother had been even less helpful.

“But it were you that told me she was alive, Gran. Told me I was old enough to know about what happened between them.”

“Did I? There ain’t no accounting for such things. Too much pain and suffering in the world, Little Earl. You remember that. Too much of it. You raise them up the best you can. That’s all you can do. That and trust in the Lord. Be a good boy now and bring me out a cup of coffee the way I like it. This reading business is thirsty work and no mistake.”

By the end of the week the big weight that had been sitting on his chest had eased off. He’d even been able to set out the framed photograph again, like it was before when she was dead. But everything else at home just kept on getting more and more unreasonable.

“With a Jew, Earl Bob! A Jew! And you knowing full well what that man writ about us. Not to say nothing of all the rest of what they done. A Jew! You hear what I’m saying?”

“Yes, ma’am, I hear you loud and clear. A Jew. That would be two Jews in actual fact.”

“Two Jews? What are you talking about, boy? Two Jews?”

“Well, there’s Enid and then there’s Harold. Two Jews.”

“This ain’t nothing here to be funning me about, Earl Bob.”

“Yes, ma’am. I know that well enough. Let’s not be going on so about it. It ain’t seemly, Mombelle. Ain’t seemly at all, especially in front of the boy.”

“Don’t you talk ‘seemly’ to me, Earl Bob. And this boy, this boy, he’s the one the started it all, bringing that fat Jewboy into my house in the first place.”

His father just marched through it all slow and steady, like one of those Civil War soldiers crossing a battlefield under cannon fire.

When Big Earl wasn’t there to brave the gunfire, which was most all the time, Mombelle went on at him something fearsome about Harold and his aunt. From the way she talked you’d think the world was about to come to a fiery end. He stayed out of the house as much as he could.

He opened his mouth and yawned to pop his ears. They were coming down the hill into Yucca Valley. It wouldn’t be long before they turned off to the park and the Sunday tent revival. Maybe the preacher really would cure his gran, like she said he would. He sure hoped so.

* * *

The prospect was so awful he just had to laugh out loud. At least she was modestly dressed for a change, although that wasn’t likely to cut any ice with Mombelle.

“OK? You mean that, Earl?”

“You bet. ‘Course I do, Enid honey. Why the hell not? It couldn’t possibly get any worse than it is already.”

“It’s been that bad?”

“Yep, that bad. And I don’t reckon this is like actually the very best day to be getting acquainted neither.”

“I’m not here for her, Earl. It’s you I wanted to see.”

“Whatever. But like I told you, we’re taking her off to a tent revival meeting. There’s a preacher coming she reckons has the power in his hands. You know, the curing power. That means she’s burning with Jesus more than usual right now.”

“And that means brotherly love I suppose?” Enid said with a grin. “And turning the other cheek? And loving your enemy as yourself?”

“Not from Mombelle’s Jesus it don’t, especially for you it don’t. You know she’s always saying, it was you who murdered Him?”

“Ah yes, I remember it well. With my own little hammer it was. Last Wednesday if I’m not mistaken.”

“Enid, please. She ain’t going to appreciate that kind of talk at all. You promised, Enid, crossed your heart too.”

“And hoped to die. I know. I know. Don’t worry, I’ll be a good girl. Good as gold—STEIN.”

“Enid!”

“Yeah, yeah, cross my heart,” she said, fingering an exaggerated X on her chest. “See? OK?”

He’d never seen Enid so nervy, so wound-up crazy. He didn’t like it, but no time would be a good time for a meeting between them, which meant that now was as good a time as any.

“Come on if you’re coming,” he said.

They walked over to the truck. From inside the cab, Maybelle’s flinty eyes snapped at her every step. Earl steeled himself, took a deep breath and opened the passenger door.

“Mombelle, this here’s Enid Carlson. You say howdy now.”

“Hello, Mrs. Earl. Very pleased to me you.”

“What’s this, Earl Bob?” his mother asked sharply, ignoring Enid’s offered hand.

“Enid, Mombelle. This is Enid. You know that. Now come on, slide yourself over a touch and make some room. She’s going with us up to Yucca Valley.”

If looks could kill, he thought, Enid and I wouldn’t be but a whisper across a hog’s back.

His mother moved about an inch and a half and then stared straight ahead through the windshield, her face set in a hard mask. Enid squeezed in

gingerly next to her. He closed the door then walked around to the other side.

“Take us a couple of hours to get there,” he said, just to be saying something.

Neither woman took up the invitation and his words dropped down stone dead onto the floor of the cab. He turned the key. The sound of the engine was reassuring.

“Right you are,” he said, putting the pickup into gear. “Next stop Yucca Valley.”

Maybe this will be good after all, he told himself. Lancing the boil. Settling up the account. Clearing the decks. He glanced to his left. His mother hadn't moved except to get even more rigid with anger. Her cheek was jumping and twitching exactly like it did when she was reading the Grapes book. Enid gave him an uncertain smile, all her alarmingly-bouncy energy apparently gone. But then the way she was carrying on Mombelle could have sucked the bounce out of Shirley Temple.

He tipped back his hat and turned right on Palm Canyon Drive and as he did he immediately thought about Eddie. Pleasure and pain and all those fluttering pages filling up the hermit's abandoned shack. What the hell had happened to old Eddie? There was no telling with people like that.

He hadn't gone over to see Enid until Wednesday after she'd moved. It was a run-down house in a run-down neighborhood. Mainly Mexicans and white people down on their luck. It was more back-street San Bernadino than Palm Springs and it wasn't like Enid at all. He felt real bad for her.

At first she was icy cool and kept him standing at the front door for a long time like he was the Fuller Brush man. He couldn't blame her for that. Ruth Ann wasn't her problem.

“I guess I'm sorry too, Earl. It can't have been easy for you.”

Her reaction had surprised him. He wanted to throw his arms around her but didn't. They went into the kitchen and Enid made a pot of fresh coffee. There were brown stains on the ceiling. The woodwork was cracked and peeling. He could see that the backyard looked even worse. Next door a dog barked ceaselessly. For Enid's sake he tried not to notice any of it.

“I'm feeling better now,” he said. “A lot better in fact. Like after all this time it's been finally done with. I didn't realize what I'd been carrying around with me and then when it came to it, you know it weren't really nothing at all. Ain't that something? Nothing at all. Funny how a thing like

that can weigh on you so heavy so you don't know about it until it ain't there anymore. Don't you reckon that's funny as hell, Enid?"

"No," she said, taking his hand putting it in her lap. "I don't think it's funny at all."

"No, what I mean is..."

"What about Little Earl?" she interrupted.

"Little Earl, well yeah, I had to tell him, of course. What with her being here and all. That was the hardest part. He took it like a man, though. Like a real man."

"And?"

"He went over to see her, of course. Over to the motel."

"What happened?"

"Don't know really."

"Didn't he tell you? Didn't you ask, for God sake?"

"Kind of, but it ain't easy for him... you know, for me, for us maybe to talk about things like that. Too much with all the years gone and him thinking she was dead. But the boy will be alright. You can count on it. He's a good one and as tough as old boots."

"Just like his dad," she said.

"Yeah," he said, smiling broadly at her "Just like his dad."

They'd been driving a good twenty minutes and had just passed Whitewater, when suddenly Enid began to talk.

"Did you read the story about that poor little boy back in Massachusetts, Mrs. Earl?"

There was no answer.

"Mombelle?" he said.

"I can hear her," she said, "I'm crippled, not deaf."

"Well?" he continued.

"Well, what?"

"Well, did you read about what Enid said?"

"I read it alright, Mrs. Carlson. Some of us can read pretty good you know, that is when we're not out in the fields stooped over picking cotton."

Enid laughed softly. Earl shuddered and braced himself, but his mother didn't seem to take offence.

"By the way, that's Miss, Mrs. Earl, but I'd like you to call me Enid."

"Little Boy Blue, that's what they called him," said Maybelle.

“That’s the one, Little Boy Blue. Can you imagine, dying in a hospital of... I don’t remember what.”

“Muscular dystrophy.”

“That’s right, muscular dystrophy and no one to visit him on his last birthday because his father is in jail for killing his mother. Imagine that.”

“Don’t know what the world’s coming to,” said Maybelle. “I surely do not know.”

“Well, there’s got to be some good in it, Mrs. Earl. I mean there’s Jerry Lewis doing that television show just for him. With all those stars, Eddie Fisher, Eddie Cantor, George Gobel and even Pinky Lee.”

“Jerry Lewis, that’s right. I read about that.”

“Uh-huh,” Enid said, “And all those cards people sent for his birthday.”

“Pinky Lee,” Maybelle repeated thoughtfully. “Yes, even Pinky Lee.”

They were actually talking. It was going to work out. Earl began to relax. Too soon.

“Ha!” exploded Maybelle. “Don’t you be sitting there, Madam, sitting there thinking that you can be using that poor unfortunate little boy or your Jerry Lewis or those others like him or even Pinky Lee to be working your way around me. It ain’t going to happen. Not in this life it ain’t. Things are how they are and you can’t change them. I don’t care what neither.”

“You mean like you being in a wheelchair?” Enid asked quietly.

“No, not like me being in a wheelchair,” the old woman shot back. “That’s something you don’t know nothing about. Nothing at all. That and the healing power of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

“What I do know,” Enid began. “Is that your son and I...”

Earl cut her off.

“Hey now, you two,” he said with a forced laugh, “Hey now. Take her easy will you.”

“Don’t you be sticking your nose in where it ain’t called for, Earl Bob,” his mother scolded. “You just mind where you’re driving to.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, holding down the smile. “I’ll do that very thing.”

* * *

The wind was strong and gusty, alternately flattening down the taller bushes and then letting them stand upright again. Above them, high on the side of

the hill, was the gigantic white concrete statue of Jesus on his knees, face and arms raised to heaven. It was just as Harold had described it. Enid felt a chill snake down her back. She didn't know whether it was a chill of amazement or one of fright. She decided it was probably both. They stood on the flat near to the parked cars and pickups. Not far away a ramshackle canvas tent had been erected. Its sides snapped noisily in the wind. Over the front of the tent was a sign crudely printed in two-foot high red letters:

**COME TO CHRIST
AND BE WASHED
IN THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB**

She stood with Earl watching the people straggle in. There weren't more than a couple of dozen. Most of them had hard-worn, expectant faces and were dressed in what Enid imagined they would call their "Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes."

"Makes me feel right at home," Enid said to Earl, pointing up at the sign.

"I told you what we was coming here to do."

"You sure did."

Earl's son had pushed the old woman into the tent and he and Harold were now squatting on their haunches in the shade of the pickup, aimlessly tossing pebbles and talking.

Harold. Hopalong Harold. Hopalong Harold Abelstein.

Her sister would have been appalled at her son's metamorphosis, but Enid was coming to appreciate it more and more. He wasn't any easier to talk to but as far as she could tell he was more confident and comfortable with himself. Sometimes he even seemed happy. As long as he didn't see too much of the Langley boy she would be happy too.

She could tell though that he wasn't pleased with their new house. *She* wasn't pleased with their new house. It was a dump, but it was her dump, not Archie Blatt's. She was no longer Archie Blatt's. Free and clear is what she was. Free and clear and poor and without a swimming pool.

But, nothing is for nothing, she told herself. She was having to tell herself that more than a few times a day as she surveyed the price of her new freedom.

“We’ll fix it up, Harold. You’ll see. Get rid of some of this awful furniture. Then a few coats of paint and it wouldn’t seem too bad at all.”

He didn’t look convinced. She couldn’t blame him.

“You mean like when we painted over the roses at the other place?”

She put her arm around his waist, gave him a hug and kissed him on the cheek, leaving a generous lipstick mark.

“We’re on our own now, Harold, just you and your old aunt. We’re going to be just fine, aren’t we?”

“Sure, Aunt Enid, just fine.”

“You going in there?” she asked Earl, pointing towards the tent.

“Nope. Don’t hold with it. Never have. But Mombelle, she reckons on it and so that’s alright. You go ahead if you want to.”

“No thanks,” she laughed. “I don’t think your mother would appreciate that.”

“Maybe not.”

Hand in hand they began to walk slowly up the rocky hillside toward the praying statue. She picked her way carefully so as to avoid the low bushes, the yucca and the barbed spines of the cholla.

“She really believes this man is going to make her walk again?”

“That’s right. You heard her say so. I’ve seen it happen once myself, back in Oklahoma. Preacher cured a man just by putting his hands on him and praying.”

“So you believe it can work?”

“Didn’t say that, Enid. I don’t rightly know. God moves in...”

“... mysterious ways,” she finished.

“That’s right, mysterious ways.”

“And when it doesn’t work, what then?”

“Then we go back home.”

“Just like that?”

“You bet, just like that. What else we gonna do?”

Enid didn’t know whether or not she liked it but she supposed she had to respect the way Earl respected his mother. Despite the fact that the old woman was making his life a misery because of their relationship and the fact that he clearly resented her hostility, he wouldn’t hear a harsh word against her. That didn’t stop Enid from offering them.

“That ain’t altogether fair, Enid,” he said, helping her over a large flat rock. “She’s had a damn tough life. You gotta understand that. Gotta cut her

some slack. Had to raise all us kids when times were awful bad and we had less than nothing more than twice over. Moving around, getting moved on, never enough work and when there was work there was never enough money or enough to eat. It was only her gumption that kept the family together, even before my pa died. You've read that book, *The Grapes of Wrath*, have you? Well, that was us, that was the Earls, right down to the damn ground."

Enid stopped to catch her breath.

"But you said she hated that book. Spends almost all of her time hating it and the guy who wrote it."

"That's right. She does hate it, hates it like poison she does. Always making notes and reading them out. Been like ever since she found out about the damn thing."

"But that doesn't make any sense at all."

"It does to her, Enid. Some kind of sense anyway. Her kind of sense. Besides, I can't see the harm in her hating a book, can you?"

If that was all she hated, Enid thought.

They reached the top of the hill. Enid leaned against a large granite boulder. Her legs ached. She wasn't used to climbing.

The face of the ten-foot high concrete Christ was smooth and passionless, a lot less impressive close up. That made Enid feel a bit better. She looked down and picked out the two boys still sitting by the truck. From the tent came a harsh, imploring voice, now louder and then softer as the sound was carried to them on the erratic wind. Down below was the desert valley, empty but for a few dozen houses dotted alongside an elaborate grid of blacktop roads, obviously laid out with more ambitious plans in mind. The roads seemed to lead from nowhere to nowhere.

"Look over there," Earl said. "Over to the left. That's what I was telling you about before."

Enid followed his finger. She could see a large mound of toppled-over white pillars in amongst the mesquite bushes and the Joshua trees. The "dead statues." Harold said they made him feel as if something strange was going on there. There probably was, but at that moment Enid had other things on her mind.

"So what about your mother and the Jews?" she asked mildly.

"Real nice view from up here," Earl said, holding onto his hat with one hand.

“Come on,” she insisted, “What about the Jews?”

“What about them?”

“You know what I mean, Mr. Earl Bob Earl,” she said, punching him lightly in the stomach. “The Jews, the Jews.”

He caught her hand and held it against him.

“Well, for one, I hear tell how their women can bang you balder than a coot in autumn.”

“Is that a fact,” she said. “Is that an actual fact.”

the end

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