

# The Fifty

Short Stories

By

Steve Rubin

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*The Fifty*



*Six Short Stories*

*by*

**Steve Rubin**

**Authors note:** *Thanks for picking up my book! I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.*

*All six stories follow the trail of a 100 year-old fifty-dollar bill.*

*Please feel free to send me email from my website with any comments or questions you might have.*

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## *The Way to St. Louis*

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Their walk home from school usually took forty minutes; nearly an hour if the weather was bad but the brothers didn't mind because attending school, and walking to and from it, were the only things beside maybe a tornado that kept them from having to do endless chores. Probably half of the boys they knew didn't go to school at all or had stopped by the sixth or seventh grade because their Mas and Pas also had seemingly endless things that always needed to be done, and that was solely outside of planting and harvest times, just the months in between. The walk itself wasn't so bad, unless it started raining, or a hard wind kicked the dust up. Sometimes the dust blew so hard you had to pull your shirt collar up over your face to just barely see and breathe and still at times it was damned hard to do either. When a dust storm happened the boys would plod along the road's edge, heads held low as they shuffled along, no discussions about baseball or any of the girls at school or what life might be like right now in a real city, a place neither boy had been. Dusty days almost always meant heat too, oppressive heat so dry it hurt your head and your chest and could make your nose bleed. Their uncle Ned, who looked after their Ma some since Pa took his fall, bought them each a new pair of shoes come spring if their old ones were too worn or had become much too small. The brothers figured they were pretty lucky; some boys they knew didn't have shoes at all. Despite almost two year's difference in their age, and the difference in their height, the boys wore the same size shoes. Clem, the older of the two, short for 'Clement' but only his *Memaw* ever called him that, was a mostly shy, wispy-will of twelve years old (*and five months, he'd tell you*), light brown hair, and often as many pimples as freckles. Terrence, his younger brother, was shorter by a couple of

inches, hair a bright shock of orange, and nearly as many freckles as clear places of pink skin on his cheeks. At times, often when he thought about things hard one side of his mouth and his lower lip would sag and droop a little but he never seemed to notice or if he did he never commented on this. Terrence walked funny because one leg was shorter than the other, or one leg was longer than the other, they could never remember which. Clem used to poke fun, telling Terrence: *if you was to walk out in a field by yourself you'd walk 'round in big circles forever.* Terrence wasn't really sure if this was true but he stuck beside his brother anyway, just in case it was. They brushed against one another comfortably as they went. Clem looked out for him the best he could, around bigger boys.

One day, when the wind was blowing lightly and the dust and heat were low, they were arguing about baseball and whether or not *Babe Ruth* was the best hitter ever when a small fox ran across a culvert and disappeared into a cornfield.

“Hey Clem- a cat! Did ya see it?”

“Not cat, *kit*,” Clem corrected. “Kit. It's a baby fox.”

“*Nah uh.* I seen it. *Cat.*”

Clem put his hand on his brother's shoulder. “You seen it. *We* seen it. Seen the same thing. I seen a kit fox.”

“*Nah uh.*”

“C'mon,” Clem steered his brother into a field of high corn, all of it taller than Clem and he was near six foot; well, five-foot nine anyway, but he'd grow to six foot eventually -at least- like Pa. Clem made a wedge with his arms, his hands pressed together in front of his face, and the stalks peeled apart like saluting soldiers. Terrence followed close behind.

“But *Barberu*,” he pronounced it as one word, “he could be *da* pitcher too, so he's better.”

"We're talking 'bout who's the best *hitter* ever, best of all time. Bein' a pitcher don't have nothin' to do with bein' a hitter."

"Hey Clem! We gonna get lost? Gonna get lost in here? I cain't see my way."

"Just follow behind me. Hold onta m' shirt if you want."

"Nah," Terrence said, because he was ten-years old now and ten-year olds didn't hold onto their brother's hand or the tails of their brother's shirt. But then he did grab on anyway, and did relax some. Terrence had been with Pa when Pa had had his fall. No one was really sure what had happened to Terrence; the plow wound up on top of Pa and Terrence was sitting on a rock sucking at his thumb when the *Wheatons* happened by and heard Pa's moaning and screaming. Doc said he couldn't find anything wrong with Terrence, but their other *Memaw* who was still alive back then, said that maybe Terrence: *had got a rung bell* -or something, meaning his head, and that all manner of strange things had happened to men and animals alike that got 'rung bells'. Since the accident, Pa spent most of his time in bed, and Terrence was just a little...off.

"I reckon' I know where the den's at. I'll show ya. Bet ya there's pro'lly a few of 'em in there."

After what felt like hours of never-ending stalks, the sky feathered slowly back into view. Clem looked up toward the bright blue and the thin clouds. Some dust blew and momentarily stung his eyes. He wiped his mouth automatically on his shirtsleeve and wished he hadn't forgotten his kerchief at home.

Terrence hurried to keep up. "Where we goin' to now?"

They walked side-by-side out along the space between the *Wheatons* and the *Platts*, the *Platts* having the biggest farm that Clem knew about anywhere in the county, along to a gradual rise and a small copse of old mesquite and cedar where there sat perched a really old graveyard, and a spot where a homestead had been before it likely burned down like so many others in the days before the fire brigade.

"Why's the boneyard say them? Say 'Platt'? Wrote on it?"

"I reckon' this is their hillside," Clem replied. "They own it. Now, hush up if you want to see them kits. Pretty sure the den is just yonder."

Terrence was slowly beginning to realize that Clem often glamorized things or told outright fibs in order to distract him from asking all of his questions. Clem did enjoy the solitude of his own thoughts mostly but he'd overheard *James Wheaton* talking at school and *James* was telling *Terry Blanchard* about the kit foxes he'd seen and where he'd seen them when *James* and his Pa had been out hunting for possum or the like.

"Ssh," Clem whispered and motioned with his hand, then bent down and crouched low behind some bushes and a mound of rocks.

Both boys raised up slowly to barely peak over the thorny bramble. "That's it over there. See that hole 'neath the rock?" Terrence nodded excitedly. They held their breath.

Terrence started to get dizzy so he breathed first. "I don't see 'em, Clem! Don't see nothin'." He blurted a bit too loudly.

They stood despite having been hidden for only a matter of moments. Clem said: "Me neither. Maybe the one we seen is still coming back. Pro'lly with its Ma. We kin sit. Wait in the graveyard for a spell. See if he comes back. We kin see 'em from in there." Clem pointed.

"I dunno, Clem," Terrence began to worry his hands. "C'aint we stay back behind them bush instead?"

"Don't be a sissy. Nobody's been put in the ground in here for years. Not since we been alive, that's for sure. Probably since before Pa's been alive even." Terrence didn't really see how that mattered, but Clem rarely called him 'sissy' and he sure didn't want to hear it again. Clem hopped over the worn and mostly grey picket fence that hadn't seen whitewash in years. The fence was surprising intact and relatively stout. Terrence walked around and opened the squeaky iron front gate that had long



ago stopped closing all the way. There were maybe twenty markers in all, mostly simple crosses, and five stone markers all embossed with "*Platt*" and carved with various angels and oak leaves, the stones interspersed between some smaller mesquite bramble that surely appeared over the years and neglect. The etchings had lost their fight to time and weather and were nearly flush, some filled with a fine moss or mold nearly black in color. The largest was an obelisk taller than Clem that stood majestically over plots for the husband and wife, the original homesteaders. Clem sat along the base, the shady side cool enough in contrast to the sharp sun that it almost made him shiver. Terrence fidgeted with his hands and finally sat tentatively on top of a smaller marker beside.

"We kin still see that den from here. Betcha a nickel we might see 'em come right out of the corn, and then go right down into the hole."

Terrence said quickly: "Don't got no nickel." Then, to be sure he wasn't unknowingly agreeing to some sort of wager, he quickly changed the topic: "Them foxes, they ain't scared 'a ghosts from the boneyard?"

"Aw, ain't no ghosts in here. You seen any? No. I told you." Clem stood and turned and rubbed at the face of the obelisk. "Now, look here. Says that *Benjamin Platt* was buried, here on this spot, in eighteen fifty-three. There aint no stone like this, granite I believe, anywhere 'round here, so someone had to carve this stone and then bring it here on a cart, or maybe a train even, from far away. From a real city pro'lly, like *Kansas City*, or maybe *St. Louis*."

"We ever gonna get to go to one? To a real big city, Clem? Like Pa said we could? He said he'd take us. One day he'd take us."

"Yeah, we will," Clem said, believing his words but realizing that it may be without their Pa when they did.

"Will the doc fix me all up then?"

“Yep,” Clem said with somewhat edgy confidence, parroting what their deceased *Memaw* had also told him which was that places like *New York* and *St. Louis* had docs who knew how to do all kinds of things that their doc in *Twin Forks*, Arkansas could not, or would not, do. Clem knew this cost money and he was pretty sure lots of it. So he and Terrence had been saving every penny they could get their hands on for as long as he could remember. Right now, as of today, they had seventeen dollars and sixteen cents, a fortune, stashed carefully in a tobacco tin, beneath a rock out behind where the old outhouse used to sit, a rock so heavy it took them both to raise it just a little bit. Clem had seen a fifty-dollar bill – twice – and a hundred-dollar bill once when he and Pa were bringing some grain to market. All the men at the barn seemed to take note of the hundred dollar bill but tried to look like they weren’t when it was changing hands. As far as Clem knew, a hundred dollars was the most money you could have. This made fifty dollars seem somewhat attainable but it would take a long time, maybe even most of their lives. They’d get the money, Clem was determined, but more and more he was hoping that the city doc could fix his brother’s ‘bell’ first, even if it meant Terrence always walking with a limp. Clem didn’t tell him this because he figured Terrence might not understand, because truthfully *he* didn’t understand and merely parroted what he’d heard about ‘*rung bells*’ if somebody should ask. Clem figured he might have to look after his brother forever, even after he was married and had his own place, like over at the *Kendricks*’ where they had his friend *Huey Kendricks*’ crazy uncle *Nate* living with them for all that Clem could remember. Nate had mostly grey hair despite being reportedly in his twenties, and walked around all day in his bare feet and a filthy, moth-eaten robe. Most folks chose to walk on the other side of the street when they saw Nate Kendricks. Terrence wasn’t ‘crazy’; he was just a little bit off.

Terrence was pattering on about ‘*Baberute*’ and stealing glances for the fox kits, but also for any ghosts that might be lurking behind a marker or bush despite the high, bright sun. Clem folded his hands on his belly and crossed his legs; his best pondering

position, leaning his head back and watching some lazy clouds decide which way to blow.

"*Hey Clem! There he is! Lookit!*" Terrence whispered a little loudly and as Clem followed his brother's finger he caught just a glimpse of the fox kit as it spied them then turned and darted back into the corn.

"*Ssh. C'mon,*" Clem moved as quietly as he could around the back side of the graveyard, keeping one eye on the exact spot he'd seen the fox kit poke out from, dipping down low to move under some mesquite branches, stopping just inside the empty back corner of the graveyard where the tree and weed cover was at it thickest. He bent a couple of branches back out of the way despite the noise so they wouldn't get hit in the face, then motioned for Terrence to sit on the ground just behind the fence where Clem knelt behind him. They stared out toward the hole beneath the rock. After about five minutes, suddenly, there was a strange sort of noise, not really a bark, more of a queer cackle, followed by another, and Terrence's face broke into a broad smile. First one, then two, and then three kits popped out of the hole followed by an adult, probably their Ma who was making most of the strange sounds. This prompted the fourth, missing kit to appear from the cornfield, still tentative and casting a glance in the direction of the boys then apparently not seeing them before trotting over and sidling up to its mother. Terrence simply could not contain himself and stood and climbed over the low picket fence. He tripped on his way and spooked the foxes back into their den before he's snuck two steps. Clem wasn't real sore; he was just happy to have seen them.

"*Aw,*" Terrence could not hide his disappointment.

"What, did ya think they was just gonna let you grab 'em? Bet their Ma would've bit ya good if you'd 'a even tried."

Terrence went over to the hole and squatted low with his knees spread, trying in vain to see down into it.

"You ain't gonna see 'em. C'mon. Let's go." Clem moved away.

Terrence waited for one last desperate second then sprang up and hurried after his older brother.

Clem went along a trail that lead through a thicket but didn't seem to have been travelled upon in a long, long time, moving weeds and branches out of the way, bending some so they wouldn't snap back and catch Terrence harshly.

"Hey, Clem. *Whassat?*"

Clem was hungry now and wanted to get home so he could have something to eat before they set about their chores. Slightly peeved, he stopped and turned on his heel. "Huh?"

"*Lookit,*" Terrence had stopped and had his back to the trail so Clem backtracked a few paces to see what the boy was pointing at.

"What is it, Terrence? Let's get on home. I'm hungry. Ain't you?"

"Yeah, Clem, but *lookit,*" Terrence pointed earnestly to an opening in the mesquite. Clem came up beside him and looked where Terrence was pointing, through the small but thick copse to a mini hill and an indentation in it.

*What the heck?* Clem thought, moving past Terrence for closer inspection. He'd never been on the particular trail which he figured was still on *Platt* land, or maybe shared space with the *Wheatons*. Moving closer the boys came upon an opening in the hill, a small cave nearly invisible behind thick overgrowth.

"How'd you see it?" Clem asked, and they both approached timidly, highly interested but wary of what might be living inside. There were *Javelina*, wild pigs that sometime grew to deadly size, as well as an occasional panther or bobcat. But nothing had been moving through this overgrowth in some time, at least not from this side. Clem pushed through the thick brambles, trying not to get cut or scraped and to do his best to stamp some aside to make a path.

"It's a cave, ain't it?" Terrence stated the obvious.

“Too big for a den. ‘Less there’s ‘a elephant ‘round here...”

“No *ediphants* here,” Terrence agreed boldly, but then how did he know for sure?

Clem added: “‘Cept in the circus. Maybe one of ‘em done escaped.” Clem’s attention was focused on the cave. He pressed into the opening and the boys stopped still.

“It’s dark, Clem.” And it was, far too dark to explore; and far too dangerous. “*Lookit* here,” Terrence was in a mood more inquisitive than wary. He took a step to the edge of the cave pressed tightly behind several tall bushes. There were signs that there had once been a door or some kind of concealment blind attached but the make-shift hinges had been taken or disintegrated already and left only discolored outlines and a few slats of crumbling wood.

Clem leaned in and looked more closely. Then, he looked around, moving dirt and groundcover with his shoe. But he kept being drawn back to the cave. “We need to bring us a lamp. C’mon, let’s get on home. We know where it is now; here, close it back up. We kin come back later with a lamp.”

“Kin we come back over *t’night*?” Terrence was nearly breathless with anticipation.

“Don’t know ‘bout that.” Clem was pretty sure that *he* could sneak out after dusk without his Ma knowing but he didn’t know if Terrence could keep quiet about it or make a silent escape but he wasn’t about to exclude him from the adventure, especially since Terrence was the one who noticed the cave in the first place. “What would we tell Ma we’re goin’ to do? She’d worry plenty, pro’lly even tell Pa that we snuck off.”

“We could come back ‘round after school?”

Clem thought about this, stealing glances at the black shape. It seemed to shimmer in the shade of the hot sunlight. “It’d be too dark tomorrow too then, just like today. We’d have to bring a lamp to school,” he noted mostly to himself. This just did not seem realistic.

“*Nah-uh*. We could...we could take one lamp *inta* them bushes...an’ then go ‘n get it again on the way home, on the way to school tomorrow!”

Clem started, a little shocked at Terrence’s prescience. That *would* work as long as they weren’t seen by one of the neighbors.

They hurried home, Terrence actually walking ahead a few times; babbling endlessly now not just about *Barberute*, but mostly guessing about what might be in the cave. The whole time they’d been doing their chores all Clem would think about was the cave. He didn’t expect to find anything inside because it was obvious that someone had used it a long time ago, and whoever that had been, probably someone’s grandpa when he was their age was his guess, whoever that had been undoubtedly took everything interesting with them whenever they decided it was no longer useful or fun. Heck, they even took the hinges and door or blind cover, or whatever had been attached at the entrance.

Yet still...

Clem made sure he got some matches from the school storeroom since in his excitement to get the lamp he forgot to take some matches from home. There were six or seven boxes strewn near some old lamps that never got used since the electric lights had been installed and after he tested a couple to be sure they still lit he helped himself to two boxes and secreted them in his britches pocket. It didn’t feel like stealing because no one ever used them anyway except in an emergency when the electricity didn’t work. He kept fidgeting in his seat during instruction and drew suspicious looks from some of the boys who, like Clem were always starved for anything remotely interesting to talk about.

Clem knew that Terrence had trouble keeping secrets. There was the issue of whose land the cave was on. There were no issues of trespass; farms were too big for fences and half of the valley was kin one way or another. But if word got out about

some secret discovery Clem would bet that someone would try to lay claim to it, some adult, or one of the local toughs, and he and Terrence would be on the outside; heck, that's what he'd probably try to do if one of his schoolmates had found a hidden cave on their Pa's farm. He and Terrence generally kept to themselves, but their neighbor Jeremiah sometimes came around and walked with them on the days when he went to school, which were rare. Here he was today, having caught up with the boys luckily just after they stashed the lamp in some bushes. Now Clem had the added problem of whether to include Jeremiah in their discovery which really wasn't much of anything right now other than a hole in the earth that likely hadn't been visited in a really long time. They could cut back through the corn and lose him there but such mischief would be difficult with Terrence in tow and might result in Jeremiah getting sore. He was pretty big, a lot bigger than Clem, and anyhow Clem didn't want trouble. Clem could tell that Terrence was also thinking about similar matters and what to do about them when the afternoon bell pealed and thirty or so kids poured from the schoolhouse and into the play yard. Just as they met in their usual spot near a big willow tree they were saved as Jeremiah's Pa was waiting to take Jeremiah somewhere other than straight home so Clem and Terrence waved to him as he climbed up into his Pa's truck then they quickly scampered off before any other boys got ideas to follow.

"You got them matches?" Terrence asked for the third time. Clem didn't answer him and unknowingly quickened his stride, the pace already a little hard for his brother and his mis-sized leg to keep up.

"*Whaddya* reckon's in there, Clem? In the cave?" Terrence asked for the thirtieth time.

"Told you that's what we're gonna find out." Clem answered patiently.

They got back to the bushes and looked around, twice, for someone watching, before retrieving the lamp. It was one of those mining lamps with a tin plate behind the wick housing to block the wind and direct the light. Clem hadn't had need for one in a

long while but he was able to get it lit on the second try then turned the high, smoky, dirty flame down to a settled glow and held the lamp into the cave. Terrence was again more excited than scared and pushed right up against Clem.

"Stand back some. Don't break the lamp; could cause a fire. Grab ahold 'a my shirt."

Okay, Clem.

"Darn hard to see anything at all in here. Watch it for cobwebs, spiders. Pro'lly be some scorpions too," Clem added but did not mention the most likely problem: snakes; rattlers; because Terrence was deathly afraid of them and Clem wasn't too far behind. They crouched a little, not because the ceiling demanded it but because there were all sorts of ancient cobwebs and dangling roots, a fine dust and dirt on everything, dust motes suspended in the air. Clem moved the weak light beam slowly from side-to-side. They went in about fifteen feet where the tunnel widened into a space big enough to fully stand in, maybe ten foot square. Clem held the lamp toward the ceiling then leaned his head back and sniffed the air. "There's fresh air back here from somewhere. Kin ya see where?" Terrence had been breathing air the whole time and couldn't hardly see the walls let alone the air so he didn't answer and pondered the question. Clem said: "Yeah, there's a crack up in there, see it? Must be lettin' in the air," Clem brought the light back down and began a closer inspection of the space.

"Clem *lookit!*" Terrence moved quickly past him to a small, crudely fashioned bench and a broken produce crate. There was dripped wax all over the side of the crate and the bench had some things carved into the top. Clem set the lamp on the bench and both boys squatted down for closer inspection.

"Says: '*Jacob wuz here*'." Then: "This here says '*Merry Mike*'. An' over here this looks like '1878'. I bet it's old man *Platt*, the old grandpa what died, heck, when you was 'bout three."

"If I was three then you 'as four." Terrence grasped some math.



"No," Clem patiently reiterated, "I'm seventeen months older'n you. So, sometimes I'm one year but sometimes two. I was five when he died if I remember right."

Terrence wasn't really interested in math. "Why would he come in here?"

"If he come in in 1878, well then he woulda been younger, maybe our age now, like I said yesterday. That's why maybe it hadn't looked like anyone been in here in a real long time. All the cobwebs an' all. Pro-lly, he come in here like a fort. I bet he coulda had a fire, for light and in the wintertime. See the lamp smoke goes up through that crack in the ceiling? The crack where we could feel the air come in."

"So he would go to sleep in here?"

"I dunno. Maybe. A fort's like a place to go'n meet with your friends, hide out if he had to. Maybe from some Indians or something."

Clem regretted saying 'Indians' right after it crossed his lips since it was another one of Terrence's favorite subjects, from the first book he'd ever read (sort of) without any help: "Little Indians," by *Mabel LaRue*, but Terrence was busy looking in the dim lights through the swirling dust motes, frantically around the bench and the dust-covered dirt floor for something, for anything of interest. There were some old newspapers in one corner that were in surprisingly good condition, and some old rope which was not.

"This ain't nuthin' but trash," Terrence held some of the rope up with dismay.

"Here's an old bottle," Clem bent and picked it up. "Take it. We'll throw rocks at it on the way home."

Terrence took the bottle grudgingly. He looked into every corner and cranny one last time then started kicking his toes into the ground, then back and forth with one foot. A frustrated gouge appeared. "Ain't nothing here," he repeated his dismay.

"What, did ya think was gonna be in some old cave? *Blackbeard's Treasure*?" Terrence didn't know about this. All of the beards he had seen were black except for

Mr. McNerny who had a red one but Terrence thought it might be from some barn paint.

"Who's got 'a treasure?"

"Ah, nevermind. Look, we could come out here some. Make this to be our fort. Then no one would know. Light a fire in the wintertime, when it's cold. Here look, ashes. Old man *Platt* must've been out here some in the winter."

"I guess," a somber Terrence kept grudgingly gouging the dirt with his toe.

"Better quit that. Gonna wear a hole in your shoe."

"Yeah," Terrence agreed, but he kept on doing it.

"C'mon," Clem grabbed the lamp and headed for the entrance drawing darkness like a blanket in his wake. Terrence turned to follow then stopped.

"Wait, hey Clem! Hold up! I seen something."

Clem stopped walking and turned with the lamp, illuminating his brother's freckled, cherub face somewhat brightly against the dark background. Terrence was pointing behind them back into to open space and shaking his hand fervently.

Clem took two steps back into the space and held the lamp aloft casting eerie shadows licking the walls "Ain't nothin' here, Terrence. We done looked everywhere."

"No, there, down where I was rubbin'." Terrence darted back a few more steps and disappeared into the darkness alone- *shocking*. "Ow," Terrence cried out and Clem heard him stumble and hit the ground, hard, as he must have tripped.

"You okay?" Clem reached him with the light as Terrence was standing back up. Dust and dirt were swirling everywhere.

"Yeah, but c'mere. *Lookit*," Terrence squatted over the gouge he'd made and clawed at the hard packed dirt with his fingers, ignoring any pain as it ground into his nails. Clem set the lamp down right next to Terrence and knelt. The younger boy was digging feverishly. Suddenly there was the flash of silver, dirt covered yet shiny in the

dim light and against hard-pressed dark soil. Clearly visible in the flickering lamplight. The edge of a coin.

"It's a dollar! It's a dollar, Clem! *Tole* you I seen somethin'!" Terrence squealed then quickly deferred to the bigger boy who set the lamp off to the side as he dropped onto his knees and worked the coin free.

"It's a half-dollar." Now Clem was excited too. He rubbed the dirt off and held it to the lamp glow.

"Wow, wow, lemme see, *lemmeseeit!* Hey Clem!"

"It's yers, Terrence. You found it fair 'n square." Clem handed him the coin. "Don't lose it, though. It brings us up, almost to eighteen dollars in our savings."

"Ain't half 'a dollar," Terrence examined the piece more closely, near impossible in the dim light. "Aw, it don't look right. We got them other ones. It ain't real."

Clem was still excited. "'A course; it's real silver. Caint you tell?" But the more he looked at it the less sure he really was. It sure *looked* silver but Terrence was right, it wasn't like a regular half-dollar.

"Maybe there's some more," Terrence dropped back down and started clawing so hard that Clem knew he'd better stop him before Terrence worked his hands bloody. But, maybe there was more, *maybe a whole trove!*- so Clem knelt down beside him and dug too.

After five minutes and a couple of split fingernails, blood mixing in the dirt, Clem gave up. "Stop now. C'mon. And we'd better fill it in, to be sure in case someone tracks us in here or something."

"Fill it?"

"We'll bring back in a shovel maybe or something. We're took too long already as is. Ma's gonna see we're all dirty and we hadn't even started our chores. Look at your britches." Clem held up the lamp. The flickering light didn't fill the room but it illuminated Terrence's face which was a hodgepodge of emotions. They filled in the

hole just enough with their hands but still had trouble pulling themselves away. Clem moved first and the sudden darkness finally overwhelmed Terrence's interest and he followed his brother out of the cave.

"Kin I see it?" Clem motioned for the coin as the two walked along.

Terrence tried to fish the half-dollar from his britches pocket while they were walking but this didn't work. In fact he stumbled and skinned one knee pretty good. "Ow!" He cried out.

"Yer okay. Give it here."

Terrence handed him the coin then tended to his scrape, flicking tiny pebbles and sand through the hole in his britches from the now oozy red. A little trickle of blood flowed down his shin. He hurried to keep up.

"1802. It's 'a old one. 'S why it looks different, I'll bet. But see here- says: *United States of America.*" And: "*Half Dol.* That mean's half-a-dollar. Means its got less silver in it than a dollar. You have a silver dollar, it has as much as two of these, see?"

"It don't look right," Terrence was beginning to think it wasn't much treasure at all and Clem still wasn't entirely sure; he'd never seen one that looked like this one but then he'd seen some different dimes and nickels. As long as it said: *United States of America*- he was pretty sure it was a real coin; and he was almost certain it was struck from silver. Maybe it wouldn't be worth fifty cents any more. That could be a problem. But he felt that it had to be worth *something*. Then Clem began to imagine them returning the next day. Who was he kidding? That night he and Terrence would risk it for sure- and then what if there *were* a lot more of them hidden in the cave floor. His mouth dry, his excitement soured at this possibility as newfound wealth on such a scale could never be kept from others, certainly not Ma with whom they would want to share first thing anyhow but then neighbors too, boys at school. No one had ever found treasure around here; just yesterday they'd sat for half an hour just to see some fox kits and they'd worked to keep that secret. News of buried treasure would carry to

neighboring towns. Maybe big cities. Also, it wasn't their land; it wasn't even their Pa's land which in and of itself would have been complicated. The *Platts* and the *Wheatons*; one of them could claim deed to the cave, or maybe it lay on the borderline between them and then there would be argument, a dispute, the kind that could become a feud. Clem already learned that about arguments surrounding money. As he got nearer to home, all of these possible drawbacks were making his head hurt and his assurance of a night time visit wane. But Clem kept it all to himself. There was no calming Terrence completely but Clem had never mentioned the possibility of returning at night so after school the next day was what Terrence assumed was their earliest option and he was still excited that it was he who had thought to hide a lamp in the bushes. Clem was thinking about how they could walk half to school with a shovel too without being noticed, and how to keep Terrence quiet and keep their Ma from any further speculation until they figured it all out. Terrence couldn't help himself and, despite stern looks from Clem, babbled something about buried treasure, Ma as usual didn't pay Terrence's babbling much mind.

They settled on a spade, what Terrence called an '*ants shovel*' and stashed it in the same bush where they secreted the lamp. During the day, both boys were chastened for inattention by their teachers, Terrence more than once (but this was not unusual) and Clem almost slipped up during lunchtime when he asked his friend Stanley Winslow if he knew what you were supposed to do about it if you found something on someone else's farm.

“Like what?” Stanley had asked and Clem, who hadn't thought that far ahead blurted: “I dunno. Like money maybe...or something else,” and just like that he was backpedaling. Clem quickly told the boy he'd found some arrowheads and thought maybe he saw an old tomahawk that might be worth something so that's why he asked but the boy still eyed him suspiciously when he walked away. Clem was starting to feel

a little guilty about the half-dollar; just in and of itself it *was* a lot of money. But, then again it was so old that if someone’s grandpa, who was probably already dead, dropped it playing in a cave when he was a boy, could his descendant family really lay claim? They could if there were lots of half dollars. They could if there were more. How many more? Maybe they would just find one other, or a quarter, or a dime. Heck, it was worth any of the trouble they’d suffered or would for a penny. After a day’s pondering he settled arbitrarily on two dollars. Clem luxuriated in the thought of a two-dollar minimum they would have to unearth before he would feel compelled to tell Ma, and then hope for the best, hope for some kind of a reward if it was a lot more that they dug up. He looked at his brother as they hurried nervously away from school. How would any further discoveries remain secret when Clem himself had all but slipped up and told the *Winslow* boy earlier today? After nearly twenty-four hours of wild speculation Clem feared only ‘*Blackbeard’s Treasure*’ itself would satisfy Terrence, and only then assuming it was too big for the two of them to carry out once they’d found it.

“Hold the light now, Terrence. I’m better at digging,” Clem took the spade and dropped to his knees. “Don’t let it swing, so I kin see. And don’t burn none ‘a my hair. Or yers.”

“I won’t, I won’t- promise! C’mon, Clem, dig!”

The flame flicked and danced shadows on the cave walls as the lamp swung every time Terrence fidgeted which was often. Both boys gasped with every ping of the metal spade against what turned out to be rock as the hole grew very slowly from the shallow impression left by Terrence’s toe dragging the day before to a hole big enough to fit a small pail inside. Then a large pail. Clem coughed some from the swirling dust.

Frustrated, Terrence lurched forward. “Lemme dig it.” In his haste to grab the spade Terrence almost dropped the lamp.

“You drop that lamp we ain’t gonna be able to see’n get out ‘a here.” Clem scolded. “Give it here,” Clem took the lamp and handed Terrence the spade. “Go

ahead,” he was getting frustrated. Terrence took it in both hands and began driving it down from above his head into the hole. Debris flew. “Easy there, don’t be breakin’ that spade. And don’t rip your britches no more neither. Ma’ll be plenty sore.”

Terrence was hardly listening. *Clink, clink, clink* –dirt and rock flew.

Ten minutes later, with the hole now large enough to fit a milking stool Terrence seemed to lose interest as quickly as the excitement had come on. “Ain’t nothing but dirt’n rocks, Clem,” he wiped his nose on his arm, smearing a black streak across one freckled cheek.

“Still got the half a dollar. You ever find a half-dollar before?”

“Uh uh.”

“It’s a lot. Makes almost eighteen we got, savings. All *tole*.” They began to fill in the hole but then walked back toward the blinding sunlight without filling it to flush.

Clem extinguished the lamp and both boys blocked the sun with their free hands as they left the cave and their eyes adjusted.

They ambled along. Clem asked: “So, if we got eighteen all *tole* then how much more do we need to get to fifty?”

“Dunno, Clem. Don’t do maths so good.”

“I know,” he put his hand on the smaller boy’s shoulder. “Just try. You know how much fifty is, right?” Terrence nodded. “How ‘bout like this. You know what five is, huh?”

“Yeah, five is this,” Terrence held up his free hand, fingers spread wide. “*One-two-free-four-five.*”

“Okay. So now, what’s ten then?”

He dropped the spade and stopped walking. “Ten? Ten’s this and this, right?” Holding up both hands, fingers spread wide, then he bent and picked the spade back up. As they wended along the back trail the boys didn’t take notice of the figure that moved in behind them. Stanley, the boy from Clem’s class, who eyed them as their

shapes got smaller, then he followed the tracks and went to the mouth of the hidden cave.

“Should we go look for more ‘a them caves?” Terrence asked as they came up on their road. “Maybe another’s got a half-a-dollar?”

Clem scoffed. “Cave wadn’t so great. I mean, it’s cool inside ‘n all, but we’d hafta have lamps or make fires and someone would see if we was in there all the time. And that there lamp oil costs money.”

“But maybe there’s more *half-a-dollars*. I’ll do diggin’.”

“Half a dollar? What’s this now?” Stanley called out spinning both boys around. Clem reddened somewhat as if he got caught by an adult at some mischief. Surprisingly, Terrence looked more annoyed than anything else.

“Hi, Stanley” Clem said. “We was just talking, is all.”

“Nah, you ain’t. I seen ya been in that tunnel back there. I seen ya.”

Clem crossed his arms. “So what? So what if we went in? Ain’t your place. What’s it to you?”

“I reckon’ ya found somethin’ what’s worth half a dollar,’s what I think. Might go have me a look. Awful dark in there though. But maybe I’ll go on home ‘n get my cousin and me a lamp and come back and have a look around in there.”

“Jerome’s a *shitterbox*,” Terrence spat, clearly not enamored with Stanley’s cousin Jerome or the prospect of maybe having Stanley and Jerome return with their own lamp and find some coins that he and Clem had somehow missed.

“He’ll whup your ass good, retard,” Stanley shot back and made Clem squirm a little, friendly enough with Stanley but wary of defending Terrence here as he was fearful himself of Stanley’s cousin Jerome, a big, sometimes mean and rowdy boy, and unsure of Jerome’s reaction to Terrence’s mentioning.

Clem said: “Terrence don’t mean nothing. You know.”



Stanley let it pass. "That where ya found that *Injun* stuff you was talkin' 'bout? Ain't no *Injun* stuff worth no half a dollar, not even a good tomahawk. Heck, we got arrowheads and all all over out at our place. Ain't worth no penny even."

Now, Terrence was confused. "What *Injun* stuff?"

Clem decided to come clean before some wild rumor started and spiraled out of control. "Okay. Lookit, we found a half-dollar. Well, Terrence did, but not in that cave, just walking around near it. Show him, Terrence." Terrence fished the silver coin from the front pocket of his britches. He was surprised when Clem said he could hold onto it like that instead of immediately putting it into the cigar tin and hiding it with the rest of their money beneath the heavy rock that it took both of them to lift.

"That ain't no half a dollar," Stanley said, eyeing it suspiciously. He reached out for it but Terrence reeled it back in. "Lemme see it. I ain't gonna take it. Lemme look at it," he outstretched a hand.

"It's okay," Clem told his brother.

"This ain't real." Stanley looked it over. "Don't look right."

Clem took the coin back and made his case. "'Cause it's old. See, says from 1802. More'n a *hunnert* years."

"Yeah, I seen it. Well, maybe. Ain't that the *Platts* what own that tunnel anyhow?"

"I tole you, he found it walking. We was just lookin' around that tunnel. It's cool in there outta the sun. We might make it *inta* a clubhouse. If we want."

"Did ya ask old man *Platt* if ya could?"

"How do you know it's his anyhow? Could be *Wheatons* what own it. Ain't no one what's been in there for a real long time, that's fer certain."

Stanley scratched his head and stared at the coin as he didn't know for sure. "Oughta go 'n' ask Matt Duggan's grandpa. He been to work at that bank what's over in *Barling* for a long time. Bet he could tell you that it ain't real."

"*Is too real,*" Terrence blurted.

"Don't matter how old it is," Clem added, but truthfully he wasn't certain.

"Let's take it an' see grandpa Duggan then."

"Caint go now. We got chores."

"Yeah," Stanley looked down somewhat dejectedly as he had them too.

"Maybe later on though," Clem offered.

"Yeah. Okay. See ya."

"*See ya,*" both boys said in unison as Stanley turned off the trail and headed west toward his Pa's farm. Clem thought the boy gave up a little too easily, not demanding to see exactly *where* Terrence had unearthed such fortune. It washed over Clem how lucky they might have been for only finding the one piece, and the fiasco that might have been if they were hauling '*Blackbeard's Treasure*' home when Stanley found them. Letting his mind run, he nearly giggled with the idea of *Platts* and *Wheatons* shooting it out over some bump of dusty land as if it suddenly became the sole source of water in the county, wild greed causing otherwise kin-like neighbors to engage in mortal combat. Could start another old-time feud Clem had heard some things about, people hating one another for no reason but their last names, over a long period of time. Then, suddenly fear grabbed him- what if Stanley was right and the half-dollar *was* too old and wasn't worth anything? Their good fortune proved as folly, what if? Then it would be just another day of chores, or of school and chores, or church and chores, all totaled two more wasted days gone by. They wouldn't have their eighteen dollars and three cents, only seventeen dollars and fifty-three cents, and would be set back that much further from their goal of fifty dollars saved.

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The *Little Red River* ran about a half mile from their farm in *Twin Forks*, in the township of *Greenwood*, specifically. Sometime back when their *Papaw* had first settled here he dug a little culvert from the side of the *Little Red* a couple of feet deep and maybe three or four wide that naturally widened in the springtime or after a big rain but normally the water just ran an inch or so deep right down its center. It allowed them to grow the peach trees that lined one side of the back field. The trees were as a last line of defense, behind which was just plain land, dry, flat and dusty straight into Oklahoma and east Texas, seemingly on forever after that. Pa had said numerous times that if it weren't for that culvert they probably would have had to pick up and move on years ago, unable to properly irrigate the rotating fields of cotton, corn and wheat, or the constant water demands of the peach trees. Tending to the peaches had become exclusive domain for Clem and Terrence after Pa's fall. It was heavy, laborious work, the fallen fruit alone an enormous attractant of animal and vermin, and Clem particularly took offense to the smell of rotting fruit on the ground. Terrence still found frolic in *practicing his pitches* as, pretending to be the 'Babe' he lobbed often damp or downright dripping peaches out into whatever was growing nearby, confident that between harvest time and the tilling for replanting the pits would go unnoticed. Clem found no such joy anymore, although when he was younger and out with Pa he'd been known to toss at least a couple himself. Terrence would often have peach juice running down his throwing arm by the time the boys were done with the raking or picking or pruning or sitting around for hours with their air pump rifle killing rats, armadillos, squirrels and possums, sometimes unlucky birds if they just plain got bored. Clem was glad that Terrence seemed to enjoy the pruning, which often involved climbing up into a tree beyond the reach of their ladder or keeping one foot precariously balanced on the topmost rung. Clem did not like heights. For some reason either as a result of his age or the accident

Terrence scampered up the tallest trees and hung, often by one arm, with no trepidation. Pa had bought a *Ford* motorcar for driving to town but not a farm truck; nor had he replaced the tractor which had broken (apparently beyond repair) when it rolled over on top of him. Clem and Terrence had to use the old cart and a mule to haul with, which meant they had to walk along side, making the mile or so back to the house seem nearly as long as the three mile walk to school. Pa’s taking to bed also meant the boys had to handle much of the constant repair work to the fencing and the sties, replacing building siding or roofing lost to high winds and the like, often without the help of their Uncle Ned.

“Terrence, clean them filthy hands. Floor’s getting sticky from your mess.”

“Okay, Ma.”

Terrence turned back and went outside to the barrel that had diverted culvert water always running through it. He scooped out a pot full and poured one on each hand away from the barrel like Pa had shown him so no one would have to drink any that went back in, then he went to splash some on his face just in case Ma sent him back for that too which she often did. Terrence dropped the pot full into the barrel in his haste to get back inside when he heard his Ma say to Clem: “What’s this ‘bout ya boys diggin’ over at the *Platts*?”

“Who said?” Terrence burst out as he rushed in, letting the door slam behind him which for some reason annoyed Pa now no end and often elicited a loud moan or garbled rebuke from his bedroom, which in fact had been moved into the old sitting room on the first floor to accommodate him after his fall. In lieu of a wall or double set of doors they hung a couple of old bed quilts which did little to keep everyone from hearing everyone else’s business. Had it been Clem burst out like that Ma would have issued a reprimand or certainly a stern look but she’s been badly beaten down in the useless fight to correct Terrence and his outbursts so she turned back to Clem and put a

hand on her hip. Ma was a strong woman though not a particularly large one. More like average one might figure. But she'd been lifting hay bales and kept up with five brothers when she was a girl and was often known as a woman to speak her mind regardless of the surrounds.

"Never you mind where I heard it. Ya'll been diggin' out there or not?"

Moments like these put Clem in a difficult position. Normally one to tell the truth, he was becoming aware as he got older that there were different *kinds* of truths and different levels of lies, fibs and deceptions. Skirting a question where the answer was irrelevant to the inquiring party was often better than long drawn-out explanations or subsequent lectures. One problem was that Terrence didn't seem to understand this and had been known to blab the actual 'truth', often at inopportune times.

"Not really, Ma," Clem began, casting quick eyes to quiet his younger brother as they helped Ma set bowls of steaming food onto the table.

"Now what'n the hell does that mean? Either ya'll been diggin' or ya ain't?"

Terrence could not keep silent "I 's diggin' in dirt with my toe!- with my shoe. Found half a dollar."

"What's this?" Ma was confused. She had fixed Pa a plate so she strode off then returned and took the boys' hands at the table for grace.

Clem decided there was no risk in coming clean; they hadn't found enough to warrant mention nor had they dug a hole large enough to be a problem considering they had filled it back in pretty good and it was in an obviously unused cave.

"Terrence was just digging 'round with his foot 'n we found an old half-dollar in a cave up near *Platt's* old boneyard."

"Boneyard? Ya mean graveyard?"

"Yes'm. Graveyard."

"We looked for some ghosts," Terrence said, spooning food onto his plate and shoving some into his mouth with his bare and still not too clean hand. Ma's eyes were

more red than usual and her strong shoulders rounded a little in the back. Out of exhaustion if nothing else she was going to let the topic pass, and would have if not for mention of half a dollar. A half-dollar was a day's pay for a lot of folks in these lean times and she wasn't sure if she liked the idea of the boys having that much money to waste on who knew what. She knew they'd been saving but she didn't know for what, and she had no idea how much they'd managed to put aside. She only knew that on times when they'd gone to town and maybe one of their *Memaws* gave them each a dime or maybe a quarter that neither of them ever returned with requisite merchandise to match their funds. They were good boys and she didn't fret much, but knew that Terrence could often be more than either she or certainly Clem could handle.

"Ya'll found half a dollar in the graveyard? Where was it, sitting on a marker..."

"No! No, I found it when we went *inna* the cave. I 's digging with my foot 'n I found it in the ground."

Pa spoke some slurred words and made some gurgling sounds. Ma wiped her mouth, stood and went past the hanging wall of quilts to see what he needed.

Clem leaned forward. "Don't talk so much, Terrence. Last thing we need is Ma tellin' the *Platts* we was messin' 'round in their boneyard, or takin' the half-dollar."

"*Boneyard*," Terrence repeated between joyous mouthfuls.

"I'm bein' serious. Ya want Ma to take it from ya?"

"No!" Terrence's hand instinctively went to the front pocket on his britches despite the fact that they'd put the old coin neatly in their cigar box under the heavy rock so it wouldn't fall out and possibly be lost again. The last thing Clem needed was for his brother and him to be retracing all of Terrence's steps with lanterns in dark futility when the half-dollar inevitably fell out somewhere during the day.

"Well then just let me do the talkin'. Let me answer her questions about what you 'n me done."

"Ain't gonna lie to Ma is ya?"

"No, I ain't gonna lie to Ma but it don't mean we gotta tell her all 'bout everything." Clem went back to his supper when Ma came back in with Pa's plate to add more pork meat from the stew. She was mumbling below her breath and her face looked like it might just slide off beneath her eyes. The boys didn't think much about it because except for in the dead of winter near everyone was tired and sore who worked on a farm. She took the plate into the makeshift bedroom then came back and had at her own food with vigor.

After a few minutes of farm-related dialogue, Ma put two fingers to her temple and closed her eyes, then said: "What am I forgettin'. Oh yeah, now what was this down at the *Platts*?"

Clem flashed a look at Terrence that he hoped his Ma didn't see then quickly said what he'd been rehearsing in his mind: "Wadn't nothing, Ma. We just went in this little cave that's hidden back in them hills behind the graveyard and Terrence found half a dollar in the dirt. But it's old so maybe it ain't even worth nothin'."

"Lemme see it. Come on, give it here." Ma held her hand out first to Clem then quickly to Terrence who again instinctively reached for the front pocket of his britches then seeming to remember Clem's words fumbled badly trying to pretend he didn't hear. "C'mon, Terrence. I'm ain't gonna ask a'gin."

Panicked, Terrence looked to Clem then spat: "Don't got it, Ma," which was indeed (and thankfully) the truth.

"We got it in our savings, Ma," Clem continued.

"*Savings*," Terrence breathlessly concurred.

"Yer savin's, huh?" Thankfully, Ma had never asked much about their savings, assuming it probably hovered around a dollar or maybe two depending on how much hard candy the two boys snuck in. "Well, don't be messin' 'round in their graveyard is all. Sure as heck don't need no more headaches 'round here."

"We won't, Ma."

"*We won't*, Ma." Terrence parroted.

Clem asked: "Was it wrong that we didn't tell the *Pratts* we found it? Near their place?"

Ma stopped with dinner and thought for a second. "No, but you're right to ask me. Ask y'self what would you'd think if someone was snooping 'round here 'n found your money. Wouldn't want 'em to keep what's yers."

"No, Ma."

"*No!*" Terrence added.

"But," she went on, "I doubt much they knew it was there, where ya'll found it, 'specially since ya'll said it was old. Someone pro'lly just dropped it, years back."

They ate for a moment. "Your Uncle Ned'll be 'round tomorrow, take the peaches to town, so you boys caint go to school 'til Thursday."

"We goin' to *Fort Smith* then?" Clem asked, happy to have the subject changed even if it was back to talk of more chores.

"I 'magine. Why's that?- don't ya like *Fort Smith*?"

"No, I like it all right. Just wonderin' is all."

Later, after Clem cleaned the table and washed the dishes by himself (sometimes Terrence helped but mostly he made a bigger mess and didn't clean them proper) the boys sat up in the hay window in the barn and watched as the last of the day's sunshine tried in vain to hold on to the horizon.

"Reckon we could see to *St. Louis* all the way from here?" Terrence asked as he did almost every night when they sat up here, pronouncing it: '*Saintlooz*'.

"On a clear night pro'lly," Clem answered how he almost always did. "Got streetlamps in *St. Louis* so that all the motorcars kin tell where they 's going when they drive around at night."

"Pa'd said there could be a glow?"



"Yup."

They would sit for hours and look out over their fields to the *Winslow's* farmhouse and then to other farms beyond. Just past the river was really all that they could see that was familiar. Lots of moonless, clear nights they swore they could see a dim halo hovering way off in the blackness, but it was probably just wishful thinking, in the direction where the sun was when it came up which was where they knew *St. Louis* generally to be.

"T'morrow right after morning chores, before breakfast though, we oughta get your half-dollar 'n take it with us with Uncle Ned to go to *Fort Smith*. The bank what Stanley was talking 'bout it's over in *Barling*. If m' memory serves right we go right through there on the way, on the way to *Fort Smith*." Clem had already begun to work out a way to get to go to the bank without rousing suspicions or inquiries from their Uncle Ned. Uncle Ned usually smelled of liquor and often slurred his words even during the daytime. Once, on the way back from town, he'd driven the truck that he'd borrowed from the *Brewsters* to move the crops right off the road, on a sunny day with no other motorcars or trucks around! Clem meant to tell Ma about it even though they were on their way back and the truck had been empty so nothing was lost and no one had gotten hurt, so at the time he'd thought: *why did she need to know?* It wasn't a lie not to tell every little thing that happened, especially if it was nothing bad that happened. Once before, on a trip with their now deceased *Memaw* she had given the boys twenty-five cents apiece and Uncle Ned had asked Clem if he could borrow a dime for a bottle of beer but what he really meant was to *have* the dime because Clem never did see that dime again, and he sure didn't want Uncle Ned seeing a whole half-dollar and getting any similar notions.

"'Less go 'n git it now!"

Clem shook his head. “Uh, uh. Too dark. We’d need to take a lamp along. Then maybe someone would see. Ya know how easy it is to tell someone’s comin’ in their motorcar or their truck from far off on account ‘a their lamps.”

Terrence didn’t really recall this but he grudgingly agreed anyway then woke up half the night worrying about the matter.

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Loading peaches was hard and heavy, messy work. No matter how you tried not to let any bruise or tear, some always did, and then those were only good for canning which meant they brought twenty cents on the dollar. Clem realized that the older he and Terrence got, and the more they grew, Uncle Ned seemed to move more slowly, and spent an awful lot of time tinkering with the truck and such right at the times when the loading was being done. Terrence never complained about any of the chores, and despite being shorter than Clem by half a head he was every bit as strong, maybe even a little stronger, although Clem would never admit to this. They would alternate with one boy in the truck bed taking baskets from the other on the ground, much harder on whoever was on the ground because they had to lift the basket that weighed as much as forty pounds up above their heads. When Terrence was in the truck bed Clem had to keep one eye on him, watching for him to become distracted or tire. When the baskets started being dropped rather than set down, then they would switch places. If Terrence ever tired from lifting heavy baskets above his head he never said so. They tried to load it all before sun-up to keep all of the flies at a minimum. With peach juice often coating their arms up to their necks, flies could be a real bother. Today they worked even more quickly than usual and Clem hoped that neither Ma nor Uncle Ned took notice as they might then expect it to be a new standard. Clem and Terrence had to retrieve the coin, confirming that it was still worth half a dollar would be a relief, before Uncle Ned decided he was ready to travel, usually at first light. Clem’s plan was to tell Uncle Ned that Ma needed some molasses, and that he and Terrence would go to the mercantile which was right next to the bank. It being late in July meant it would be plenty warm early in the day.

It was downright hot and the flies were hard at work by the time they drove into *Barling*. Clem was banking on Uncle Ned wanting a cold soda pop to drink, or, more likely, a cold beer (or three).

"We won't be a minute," Clem said as he hopped out of the bed of the idling truck, Terrence right behind.

"Boy's want a soda pop?" He pronounced it '*sodee parp*'. "I reckon' I'll get me one. Be my treat."

Clem smiled inwardly. "Okay, sure. Thanks Uncle Ned."

"*Thank ya Uncle Ned.*" Terrence chimed in.

The boys moved quickly across the street, watching for motor cars or trucks which often ran recklessly between the horses, mules, people, dogs, wagons and carts. '*Sherman M. Smith: Mercantile Goods*' was fairly busy and quite a bit larger than '*Main St. Mercantile and Tannery*' in *Twin Forks*, their usual haunt. Clem grabbed onto Terrence's shoulder.

"Caint be lookin' at everything on the shelves and caint buy nothin' extra, ya hear? We don't got that much time and we ain't spendin' none 'a our savings."

"*But...hey Clem!*" Terrence mumbled, positively mesmerized, eyes glued to the corner of the store that was stocked with licorice, hard candy, marbles of various sizes, toys, dolls and even trains. Clem found it plenty hard himself not to indulge, especially on the much larger selection of marbles than were available in *Twin Forks*, but he drew his breath and stayed on task. They bought the first fat bottle of molasses they saw with the twenty cents Ma had given them, took the three cents change, and then stole back to the storefront for a quick glance outside to the street to be sure their uncle wasn't idling there before darting out the door and nearly banging rudely into a women who was coming into the mercantile. The tipped their caps and apologized then moved quickly over to the bank next door.

Tiny bells chimed as they entered the ‘*Barling Bank*’ maybe a bit too quickly, both short of breath, drawing a stern look from a woman behind the counter.

“Somethin’ I can help you with?”

Clem took off his cap and Terrence quickly did the same. Clem said: “Uh, yes Ma’am, we ‘s tryin’ to find Duggan- uh, Mister Duggan. Grandpa Duggan. Ma’am. Please.”

“I see. And whom should I tell him is calling?”

“Call ‘im?” Clem began to fidget. “Uh, no Ma’am, we don’t got no telephone. We was hopin’ just to ask him a question. -‘Bout something.”

Sensing that they were not up to any mischief, the woman softened. “Well, what’re your names?”

Both boys answered at once then looked sheepishly at one another. “I’m Clem, ‘n this here’s m’ brother, Terrence.” Clem repeated slowly.

She looked them over more closely. “Hello Clem and Terrence. Now, do you know Mr. Duggan personally?”

“Uh, no Ma’am, we...my...well, our friend Stanley, Stanley Winslow, he’d said that Matt’s grandpa worked at the bank here. In *Barling*.”

“Matt...Duggan?”

“Uh, yes Ma’am, Matt Duggan. He’s from *Twin Forks*. Back from where we’s from.”

“Well, our Mr. Duggan is quite busy at the moment.” Clem began to fidget again not liking the sound of this as he was only affording them a couple of minutes before his Uncle Ned might come looking for them, asking questions. “Maybe I could answer your question for you?”

Clem motioned to Terrence that it was okay and he fished the coin from his britches and reluctantly handed it to his brother who held it with both hands and

turned. "We found, well, my brother, Terrence, he found this in the ground. Says right here: 'half a do.', that means dollar..."

"I see," the woman smiled.

"...and, so, we was wondering, since it's old, is it still worth somethin'?" He hoped it was still worth half a dollar or near to it.

The woman took the coin and gave it a quick glance before handing it right back to Clem who after a pause glumly handed it back to Terrence. "Yes, it's still worth half a dollar. The value is determined because it's made from silver. It will be worth fifty-cents today, tomorrow, or a hundred years from now, just the same."

Now that it was confirmed, the boys were ecstatic but held their glee in check, although truthfully Terrence wasn't really paying much attention. As long as he had the coin in his pocket; that was all that mattered.

Just then, a door opened at the back and two men dressed very fancily in long jackets and black top hats emerged and strode out from the bank. Another well dressed man moved behind the counter, wearing a suit and tie though no top hat on his white, balding pate.

"Oh, Mr. Duggan. I believe these two boys are friendly with your grandson?"

"What's this now?" The older man said, walking over.

The woman turned. "Was his name Pat? Pat Duggan?"

"Uh, no Ma'am, his name's Matt."

"Oh *Matthew*, yes, I have a grandson by that name who lives in *Twin Forks*. That where you boys are from?"

They both said: *yessir*.

"Well, what brings you to *Barling* and our fine bank?" He rested his hands on the counter, then thought quickly, stood back and motioned for them to follow him over to the door behind an iron gate that kept customers away from the vault. "Would you boys like to see the vault?"

"*Oh boy! Oh boy!*" Terrence had wanted this since the first time he had been in a bank and Pa explained to him what the vault was used for and that therefore no one was allowed in, and now he hopped up and down excitedly. Secretly, Clem was thrilled too but since he was older he just nodded his head as if he'd been in plenty of vaults before and followed, gripping his cap tightly to his chest. Mr. Duggan led them into the vault and explained how it opened, proclaiming that it was strong enough to stop any bullet, and nearly any sized bomb.

"I suppose if you built a big enough bomb, it would blow up the vault and probably take the whole city block with it," Mr. Duggan said in answer to Terrence's excited query about: *even a really, really big bomb?*

"Now, what was it you boys had come all this way to ask me?"

Clem was already satisfied with the woman's answer; that their find was real and still worth half a dollar, and he was becoming desperate about their being gone so long but he didn't want to be rude to such an important man. He was about to explain it all when Terrence whipped the half-dollar from his pocket and held it forth. "*It's a half a dollar. Found it unner the ground. We dinna know was it still worth nothin' since it had been buried in the ground.*"

"I see." Mr. Duggan seemed extraordinarily patient with Terrence who was known, quite frequently, to rub adults the wrong way (lots of kids, too).

"Kin we put it in your vault? (Terrence pronounced it: '*bault*'). Fer... so..so... no one'll steal it from us?"

"Well, you could open a passbook account with us and deposit it. We keep all of our customer's deposits safely in the vault. Now, you said it had been buried for a long time. I'm not sure what you mean by that. May I see it?"

Terrence looked to Clem who nodded his okay. Terrence handed the man the coin. "Let's see what you have here. Oh, an '*oh-two*', very nice. *Very nice*. You boys say you found this coin?"

"Uh, yeah, he..."

"*I did!*" Terrence shot out. "Dug it all up with m' foot. With m' toe!"

"I see. Were there...more of these? I'm sure you gave a good look, no?"

"We dug more," Terrence explained, looking toward the ground and mimicking digging with his foot. "And...and then brought over 'n ant shovel 'n a lamp to see into the hole."

Clem began to sweat, not wanting anyone else to hear mention of the name 'Pratt' and prayed Terrence was through blabbering. Clem quickly said: "It's called 'spade', Terrence. We dug 'round with a spade but that was the only one there."

"I see." The man looked at the coin closely again. "Would you boys wait here for me for a moment please? I don't want to speak ahead of myself. I will be right back." Mr. Duggan got his hat than strode from the office with their coin, leaving the boys somewhat speechless. Was he taking it from them? Wasn't that stealing? Maybe he was going to deposit it into his big vault although Clem didn't remember formally agreeing to this. Clem's instinct was to just run back outside and find Uncle Ned if Mr. Duggan hadn't taken their half a dollar with him, wherever he'd gone. They'd get hollered at now or worse from their uncle for being late, wandering off. But fifty cents was just too much to lose. The foreboding made Clem sweaty on his neck and then in his palms. Terrence seemed to pick up on it. "Hey Clem! He *tookit!* *Tookit* with 'im! Is he gonna put it in the big vault?"

"I don't know, Terrence. *I seen him, too!* Been sittin' right here the whole time, Terrence."

"Is we in trouble? Is he gonna go 'n tell where we found it at?"

"I don't know, Terrence. Sure hope not." Clem began to worry even more. They were trapped in the bank, trapped in Matt Duggan's grandpa's office, and now without their half-dollar.



Five minutes later, the balding, white-haired man shuffled back in and hung his hat on a hook on the door. “I’m sorry about all of this secrecy, boys, but I didn’t want to go garnering false hopes on your part.” Neither boy had an idea what any of that meant. Clem was more focused on Mr. Duggan’s face, on his manner, to try to tell if they were in any trouble and if they were, how bad. The man looked serious, a lot more serious than he had earlier when showing them around the vault. Serious, yes...but angry? It didn’t seem so. “I took your find over to a friend of mine who runs an antiquities shoppe. My hunch was that due to its age there might be some collector interest.”

*Interest.* Clem wasn’t sure but he thought that meant paying somebody extra money, like being assessed a fine. Could Mr. Duggan have seen one of the *Pratts* here in *Barling*? Did they just speak about it?

“In any event, what you boys found is worth rather a lot of money.”

“It’s a *half a dollar!*” Terrence blurted, dismayed.

“You’re right, son. But you see, this particular half-dollar that you found was minted by the United States government more than one hundred years ago. They didn’t make very many to begin with, not like today, and most of them probably got melted down or shaved for their silver at some point in time. That makes this one *rare*. And rare means that there are not very many of them in existence, or sometimes things that are one-of-a-kind.” Mr. Duggan asked Clem: “How old are you, son?”

“Uh, thirteen. Almost thirteen, sir.”

“And you boys are here on your own from *Twin Forks*? Did you come by automobile?”

“Uh-uh. Not really...” Clem was about to explain about riding with Uncle Ned aboard a borrowed truck from a farmer from *Smithville* when Mr. Duggan kept on.

“Well, I guess you certainly seem responsible. It’s just with so much money at stake...”

"That half a dollar ain't all 'a that much. We got more'n...we got more'n eighteen dollars savin' back at home. Our savins'," Terrence repeated.

Clem just didn't see all of the fuss over the boys having half a dollar at their ages. Boldly, he said: "We take money places sometimes for our Ma and our Pa, for the farm, sir." Fearing a loss, Clem was nervous now and finding it difficult to sit still.

"Okay. Fine. Well, I can tell you that your coin is worth thirty-five dollars. You've been offered thirty-five dollars for it. What do you say about that?"

Both boys were thoroughly confused, Terrence of course more so. *Thirty-five dollars?* What was this? When had there been any mention of such an amount for anything? Clem wasn't sure what it cost to buy an automobile but it couldn't be much more than that. Terrence should not have been spouting off about their savings either. But the man was a banker which meant that he could be trusted with complete secrecy for such important matters.

"Uh, I don't know, sir. We don't have that kind of money for nothin'. Like m' brother said, we got more than eighteen in our savin'."

"What? No, no, I'm not sure that you understand." Mr. Duggan smiled. "Okay. Let me ask you this," he reached into his pocket and produced a shiny new silver dollar. "What would you say if I offered to trade this silver dollar for your half-dollar? You would make the exchange, would you not?"

"Yeah," they said in unison.

"Why?"

"Cause yours is bigger. Yours is more. Yours is a dollar," Terrence said confidently, unaccustomed (and happy) to grasp math in such practical terms.

"Okay, so generally bigger is better. There's twice as much silver in this dollar coin as in your half-dollar. Do you follow me so far?" They nodded. "Now, what if I offered to trade your same half-dollar for this," he reached into his pocket and removed several folded bills, selecting a ten-dollar note. "What say you then?" Terrence didn't

know about this. Clem was fairly sure of what to say but was confused over what he was starting to fear was going to result in their losing the half-dollar, and with the mention of this *'interest'* who knew what else. And there was still their being late to return to their uncle Ned to contend with. Mr. Duggan continued. “It’s just a piece of paper with ink and design. There’s no actual silver in it, am I right?” He didn’t wait for any response. “It has *value* because the government places ten dollars worth of silver into their vaults when they print it so we all agree that this piece of paper is the same as ten of these silver dollars,” he held up the thick coin. “Just easier to carry in our pockets than ten coins would be.” He weighed the coin in the air in his palm. “Heavy, right? Okay? Now, let’s just say that when men fancy things that are not easily available they will offer to pay more than what the object is *actually* worth, in an effort to obtain it over another man who wants to obtain just as badly. A glass of water is free, am I right?” They nodded. “But, if you were in the desert, and you were out of water, and very thirsty you would certainly pay a nickel for a glass, would you not? A dime even? Your half-dollar? Or your entire eighteen dollars in savings if you were on the verge of dying of thirst?” Terrence could not comprehend why anyone would pay for water you could get out of any river or creek, and truth be told he was more than ready to just get back into the truck bed with the peaches and forget about all of it. He dangled his feet back and forth below the chair. Clem likely would have grasped what Mr. Duggan was saying if he wasn’t still so afraid of losing their half-dollar. “Because your coin is so old, and there are so few of them, the men who like to collect, who like to own this sort of thing...the *value* of this particular half-dollar to such a collector is thirty-five dollars. Then, if another collector decided that he wanted to own it for himself he might pay that man thirty-*six* dollars whereby the first man would get an extra dollar, which is called ‘profit’. This is why people collect items of value; for some to enjoy, aesthetically, or with the hope that the value will increase and they will then be able to sell them at a profit. Now, since you boys found this treasure...” Mention of the word ‘treasure’ and

surely the soon to be ensuing questions on behalf of the *Pratts* got both boys too flustered to pay attention any longer. Both stood, somewhat rudely, readying to flee.

"Uh, our uncle, Uncle Ned, he's waitin', waitin' on us, in the street. On the truck. With them peaches. He's gonna be sore." Clem motioned toward the street. Ignorant of social protocol, Terrence leaned over the desk to retrieve the half-dollar from Mr. Duggan who was reluctant to the point of actually wresting the coin back from Terrence before the boy could retrieve what was rightfully his.

"Wait for just a moment. Please. Okay. Let us make this simple. I am prepared to give you boys thirty-five dollars in exchange for your coin. I'll give it to you in silver coin if you'd prefer."

"Thirty-five of them?" Terrence couldn't comprehend this. "Them big ones?" Terrence asked.

"If you would like. Might be cumbersome...might be...heavy. Bulky. Hard to carry. Too big for your pockets. Which is why I could give it to you in paper notes."

"It's the same," Clem whispered, their turn in fortunes for whatever the crazy reason suddenly dawning as a literally breathtaking, dizzying possibility. Mr. Duggan stood and strode out to the counter without waiting for an answer.

"Clem, what's happenin'? What's happenin' to my *half-a-dollar*?"

"Hush up," Clem responded, maybe a bit too harshly, and then gave Terrence a reassuring squeeze on his thin shoulder. "We're gonna get it back and then some I think. I'll explain it all later, when we're by ourselves." Telling him they would discuss it when they were alone always placated Terrence because no one understood him like Clem did; and Clem always explained things several times over without even hollering, if need be. "I'll get ya two of 'em. I promise," he whispered just to be sure.

Mr. Duggan came sauntering back into the office holding several bills. He began to count. "Okay, here is five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty, thirty-five dollars.

Now, are you boys sure you’re used to handing this much money? You said something about having an uncle nearby?”

“Uh, yes sir, no sir,” dizzy, Clem licked at his painfully dry lips, the office and its high ceiling suddenly feeling like they were collapsing, shaking, feeling more constrictive than the *Pratt’s* dark cave where the coin was found. “We’ll be just fine, Mister Duggan, sir, thanks.” Clem reached out and somewhat clumsily took possession of the stack of seven five-dollar bills. “We gotta go find our uncle.”

“But...where’s my *half-a-dollar!* Hey Clem!” Terrence waved his hand as Clem dragged him quickly from Mr. Duggan’s office and then from the bank.

“We gotta go find Uncle Ned. Quick like, c’mon. And don’t say nothin’ to him about going to the bank, Terrence, don’t say nothin’ about being in the bank. *Nothing!* I’m being real serious here, okay?”

“Okay, okay, won’t talk ‘bout the bank but why we gotta give ‘im the *half a dollar?* I found it in the dirt!”

“I tell ya all later. I promise. I’ll get ya two of ‘em to keep, later. How ‘bout that?”

Terrence paused. “Promise? Two of ‘em?”

“Promise. Now, here’s Uncle Ned. Let me do all the talking.”

Uncle Ned had two cold bottles of beer in one hand and cold two bottles of soda pop in the other, tiny droplets of water reflecting prismatic, dancing colors from the piercing sun. He handed one each to the boys. It seemed that Uncle Ned may have already polished off another beer or two while Clem and Terrence were supposedly in a line waiting to pay at the grocer’s, but this worked out okay because he didn’t seem to notice their absence and Uncle Ned didn’t say anything at all he just waited for Clem to set the molasses onto the front seat beside him then climb into the truck bed with Terrence and the peaches. With an oily belch and the small pop of a backfire the peach-

filled truck rolled out of *Barling*, piloted a tad unsteadily by occasional farm-hand (and pretty regular drinker) Ned Skinner.

In the truck bed, Clem was still in a state of shock. Ten times in the first five minutes he found himself reaching into his pocket to feel, to confirm that while they were out the half-dollar he indeed had thirty-five paper dollars in hand, and he kept looking back behind them as the town of *Barling* drew away to finally just a small dot, expecting Mr. Duggan or maybe the police to be hot in pursuit, whatever mistake had just occurred surely to have been corrected by now.

*Thirty-five dollars.*

Nearly twice what they had amassed already, saved over years of working and scrimping and denying themselves of momentary, visceral pleasures in lieu of their long-term plan.

“*M’ gosh,*” Clem exclaimed suddenly, drawing Terrence’s attention away from looking at the homes and farms and goings-on that flipped by as they reached the outskirts of town.

“Wha’s’matter?”

Clem knew he should keep quiet until they were back home, in the safety of the hay loft or out in the peach groves, but his recent conclusion simply could not be kept silent.

“Terrence, we done it! *We done it!* I just added up.”

“What’d we done?”

The hard-running truck and the blowing air made enough noise that Clem was confident that their Uncle Ned could not hear. He kept his voice low to be sure. “See, that coin you found, the half-dollar, because it was so old, remember? More’n a *hunnert* years. Said: ‘1802’, r’member? Well, on account ‘a being so old it was worth a lot more than half of a dollar to Mr. Duggan because he wanted it and it was so old. So Mr. Duggan traded us thirty-five dollars for it. Them seven, five-dollar bills? That’s what

we was doing back at the bank. All 'a that money ya seen him countin' out, it ain't for Pa and Ma, it's ours, for *us*. For our savin'. You *unnerstand* how much seven, five-dollar paper money bills is?"

"Yeah, Clem, I seen it. I know to count seven."

"Okay, well let's see your adding then. How much is it: eighteen dollars and three cents and thirty-five dollars then?"

"Uh..." Terrence really wanted to get the answer right but eighteen was a strange number to be trying to add up without actually seeing peaches to count maybe or even numbers on a slate but truthfully even that would have been challenging, and thirty-five was more than he had in fingers and toes.

Clem stole a glance at the back of Uncle Ned's head as he seemed to be singing something to himself and happily drinking his beer. "I'll tell ya. Then later, and ya gotta keep quiet. I mean it! Caint say nothing to nobody! Not to Uncle Ned, not to Ma yet neither, none of them boys in town, nobody! When we get back home later we'll go get our savings an' I'll show you it all then. Okay?"

"Okay." Terrence said cheerfully, really not very interested anymore. He turned back around and leaned on a side rail, his arms dangling in the breeze. Then he turned back suddenly. "Hey Clem! What about them two *half- a-dollars*? Like ya said you was gonna get me at the bank?"

Clem sighed. "I will, Terrence. I told ya; when we get back. Don't worry none. I promise."

"*Promise*," Terrence parroted. Satisfied, he turned back around.

Clem looked off into the distance but fretted over their newfound bounty. Something *had* to be wrong. But if it wasn't, it had not only vaulted them to their goal of fifty dollars more quickly than he could have ever imagined but also changed the amount of their find at the *Pratts* an amount a touch greater than the self-imposed two-dollar threshold he'd set for continued secrecy.

Twice, while they were unloading the peaches Terrence almost could not contain himself. Had he divulged their secret to Uncle Ned, Clem really wouldn't have blamed him or been all that sore; Clem was still dizzy himself, weighed heavily by the notes in his britches pocket now stuck together in a sort of pressed lump from all of his perspiring. He was worried that they might fall apart from the dampness, maybe be ruined. And he just couldn't see how they'd keep it a secret forever, at least from Ma. Truthfully, he knew by the time they returned to *Oak Street* at the edge of *Twin Forks* that even if it meant surrendering all or most of their bounty telling Ma might be better than the burden he was now carrying.

"Hey Clem. We go ta the schoolhouse t'morrow? And then...then after the school kin ya give me them two *half-a-dollars*?"

"T'day's Saturday. So t'morrow's Sunday, and we ain't got school. We got church on Sundays. Right?"

"Church." Terrence thought about this. "Kin we get 'em after we go to the church then? *You promise!* 'An 'member ya said ya'd tell to me all secrets too! Up in the barn."

"After supper. Now, wash up. We pro'lly ought go an' swim. Get real smelly unloadin' them peaches."

Clem looked down at Terrence. Terrence's eyes were almost a powder blue, and with all of his freckles and near constant, silly grin, Clem could see why other boys often called him a 'circus clown'. Clem playfully mussed the boy's already mussed up hair. "C'mon. I'll tell Ma that we're goin' then I'll race you. Go'n get the soap, 'n git a couple 'a towels to dry off with." Terrence had grown to the point where a race was really a race and although Clem was dog-tired the excitement of the day kept his adrenaline up.

"Okay, Clem. A towel 'n a soap." Terrence nodded.



Terrence went off toward the barn and the clothesline and Clem went to the kitchen to look for Ma.

Ma was in the makeshift bedroom with Pa. She came out and seemed to be agitated about something. Or maybe it was just another day.

"Go'n wash up. You know ya caint sit at my table smellin' like that."

"Me 'n Terrence are gonna go for a swim. We'll wash up down at the river."

"Well, don't you dawdle. Ya'll should be plenty hungry I'd imagine."

"We are. I am, Ma."

"Well, git to it then. I could use some help with supper."

"Yes, Ma," Clem said but then didn't walk off, his cap in one hand held tight. He stood kind of stupidly, squeezing the wad of bills through his britches with his other hand, self-consciously checking that they were still there and he wasn't coming out of some long, strange dream.

Ma left the room for a moment, muttering something, and then furrowed her brow when she returned. "You got somethin' to say, son? Spit it out. Does the cat got your tongue?"

Clem fidgeted, working his cap with both hands now. "Uh, see, when me and Terrence was over 'round the *Pratts*..."

"The *Pratts*?" Ma spat venomously. "Hadn't we already been over that, Clem? Ya'll didn't got back over there after I told ya'll not to?"

"No, Ma. I *swear*!"

"You and your darn brother. Sometimes, I swear sometimes I think ya'll'r gonna put me in 'a early grave. Now, go on. *Go*. Shoo. Be back in fifteen minutes 'n help out with supper. Terrence too."

Clem fidgeted for another moment but couldn't form words. He nodded and ran gratefully from the kitchen carelessly letting the screen door shut too hard then sped

down the path to the back of the barn and right past Terrence who was squatting down and examining something on the ground between his feet.

"Hey. *Hey! Hey Clem!* That ain't fair! No *heas...no heasstarts!*" Terrence leaped to his feet in chase then promptly tripped and fell. Standing, he went to start again and then realized he'd forgotten the soap and towel. He turned and stomped his foot down in frustration. Then he walked back, bent and retrieved the items, turned and started walking real slowly down the river path. Clem suddenly appeared, slightly out of breath.

"Will ya c'mon? Thought we was racin'?"

"*Ain't fair!*" Terrence started to cry, quickly working himself to sob. "No *heasstarts.*"

"Sorry, Terrence. I'm sorry. We'll race later. C'mon. But listen, we gotta go wash up fast so we kin go ta the savings b'fore supper, 'n Ma wants us both to help her out. Here. Give it here. C'mon." Clem took the towel and the soap and steered his brother ahead of him. Wiping his face on his filthy shirtsleeve, Terrence walked too fast and stumbled but righted himself before he fell.

"T'morrow after the church. Them two *half-a-dollars...*"

"I promised, didn't I?" Clem stopped and spun the smaller boy around holding Terrence's shoulder with his free hand. He looked at him sternly. "Don't I always keep promises?"

"Yeah, Clem."

"Then why ya gotta ask me the same thing over and over when I already said that I promise?"

"I dunno, Clem," Terrence wiped his nose on his sleeve again, still running a little because of his crying.

They got to the edge of the river. The *Little Red* was low and still a kind of brown due to the summer months where hot winds blew so much dirt around. Clem looked

around carefully, twice, while Terrence stripped off his sweat-soiled britches and filthy shirt. Leaving them where they dropped, he jumped right in. Clem pulled his shirt up over his head, washed both shirts perfunctorily then walked over to a bush where he took the shirt and then his carefully folded britches and hid them cautiously beneath it, noting the bush as his clothes could not be seen.

"Uh, oh. *Hey Clem!* Think...I done *loss* the soap. Caint find the soap!" Terrence bent over in about a foot deep of the slowly moving water, feeling around blindly in the silty flow.

"Don't fret none. Just use the sand for now. Ya know how. Scrub good then let's git," Clem cast a last nervous glance toward the bush that secreted his britches and shirt then bent himself and began scrubbing with handfuls of the fine sand that lined the river's edge. Terrence kept hopelessly feeling for the lost piece of soap which was probably a hundred yards downstream already. This time of the season the river was thin enough at their swimming spot that on a good day Clem could almost throw a rock all the way across it. Trees were sparse but bushes plentiful, thick enough that you couldn't see around the bend from their side but you could see for a mile or more in the other direction where the river flowed past. It was part of a big, rolling loop of about three miles where if you set a raft or boat in upstream to float down you could ride the slow current for nearly an hour and then wind up at a game trail with only about a quarter of a mile over land to cross to get back to where you started. Sometimes when the boys were bored on rare days where no one had anything for them to do they would take their fishing poles and wade across the river then walk over to the bend where they could lash some wood together into a makeshift raft and float and fish until the current gently brought them back around the loop and home. There were a lot of boys in the area but like Clem and Terrence they were usually kept busy so when Clem first heard the sounds of boys fooling around he thought it was his paranoia getting the best of him. Terrence was still yammering on about losing the piece of soap while half-

heartedly wiping clumps of dripping sand across his scrawny stomach and arms while he searched with the other hand.

“*Ssh,*” Clem admonished. “Ya hear somethin’?”

“Hear what, Clem?”

“Thought maybe somebody was coming. Hurry up now, we gotta go ‘n help Ma with supper.” Clem suddenly had a powerful need to race to their savings spot and get the thirty-five dollars safely into the cigar tin and under the heavy rock as fast as possible. Inwardly, he cursed himself for not doing it first thing even at the expense of a scolding.

Unmistakable laughter from tomfoolery sent a chill up his back despite the hot summer weather. Familiar laughter, of his friend Stanley Winslow as he appeared suddenly at the bend, not fishing but just floating along with his older brother William and his cousin Jerome, of whom neither Clem nor especially Terrence cared for much as he was very big for his age and a known bully. He wasn’t very smart and made up for it in brutishness.

“Hey, there’s Stanley!” Terrence pointed, then realized their friend was not alone and lowered his hand slowly with a bit of concern. Terrence remembered he might have called Jerome a bad word the other day and hoped that Stanley hadn’t spoken any of it. Both boys were still wearing their undershorts, and as Clem swiftly rinsed off and moved quickly to retrieve his hidden clothes he thought for a moment that the other boys might just continue on a little further and stay to the other side of the river where the crossing trail was but then Stanley waved and started paddling over towards them. His brother William, who was three years older, stayed to the right, clearly not interested in stopping to talk to the much younger *Wilcox* boys. Jerome was loudly recalling some boastful story that only got louder when he noticed Clem and Terrence, and then he seemed to fix a steely-eyed glare, especially at Terrence who was now also hurrying to get his clothes back on.

"Where ya'll goin'?" Stanley called out.

"Uh, we gotta help Ma," Clem answered.

"With the supper," Terrence blurted, and Clem wished he hadn't as Jerome was now within earshot and not likely to let something like that pass.

"What're ya'll, *gurls*? Ya ever help yer Ma with supper, Stanley? *Dudn't* your sister do it?"

"Don't got no sister," Terrence stated, a nervy tenor apparent in his voice.

Jerome glared. "Ya say somethin' retard? Got somethin' to say *dummy*?"

Terrence retrieved his clothes and was trying to pull them on clumsily while edging closer to Clem who was himself trying to dress and avoid the situation lurking before them. Despite being only thirteen, maybe fourteen, Clem wasn't sure, Stanley's cousin Jerome was already bigger than their Pa, and already had the wide shoulders and muscular arms of a grown man. And plenty of belly. His pug nose made boys think him pig-like but no one their age or size would ever say so out loud. Clem had heard much older boys taunt Jerome before with pig calls.

Jerome always had his mouth half open, waiting for someone to say something he disagreed with or had a strong opinion on which seemed like just about anything you might say, if you asked Clem. The weight of the sweat-pressed wad of bank notes in the front pocket of his britches felt impossibly heavy and now somehow seemed destined for disastrous exposure and even possible loss though an amount so great could be attributed rationally only to Pa and the farm as no boys their age would ever possess such a sum and Clem didn't figure Jerome would ever dare to bully from an adult. It was an impossible sum of money. If Jerome got wind he would surely take it from them at first. Clem could imagine the trouble and felt light-headed with the thoughts.

Jerome stared at Clem. He had a small, poorly constructed raft that barely kept him afloat but it was so hot out it was preferable to be mostly submerged anyway. He

paddled over to them, climbed off his raft and then stood next to Stanley. “Stanley said ya’ll found ya some coins. Think they might’ve been some coins I done lost.”

Stanley was in a difficult position, being friends with Clem but having to spend a lot of time with his cousin because his Ma made him, a known bully who really wasn’t much fun to be around. Stanley had been on the receiving end of the bullying plenty of times if Jerome was in the mood and no one else was around, and he had no interest in getting involved with whatever was transpiring so when Clem looked quick to him in a nervous way Stanley turned his head and suddenly found some loose binds on his raft which needed his immediate attention.

“Didn’t find no coins.” Clem croaked, trying in vain to keep his voice from wavering. “Terrence...Terrence found him a half-dollar, ‘n old one. Don’t know even if it’s real.”

“Lost me a half-dollar. In them coins I just said I lost. Mine was ‘a old one too. Lemme see it. I’ll tell ya if it’s mine.”

“Don’t got it; he don’t got it no more,” Clem finished pulling on his britches and would swear he could feel Jerome staring at his bulging pocket. “They got it in the bank in *Barling*.” He told the truth here.

“Callin’ me lyin’?” Jerome held his raft from drifting away with a length of twine and took another step up the bank closer to Clem and Terrence. Even though he was standing in the water below them he still seemed taller, and definitely menacing.

Clem’s mouth dried up. He’d been in fights before, a couple of scrapes, really more wrestling matches, and always fair. Even in a fair fight he was no match. Jerome would do what he wished and both boys knew it.

Clem unconsciously patted his palm against his pocket. “Ain’t got it. Took it to *Baring*, took it to the bank. Saw Mr. Duggan, like Stanley said.” Clem directed a nod at Stanley who acknowledged the comment but did not respond.

Jerome furrowed his brow. The story seemed plausible. "Well, ya got any other coins then?" He turned his attention to Terrence. "How's 'bout you *retard*?"

"Don't got no *half-a-dollar*," Terrence mumbled.

Clem could tell by the look on Jerome's face that the bigger boy didn't really like how this was unfolding but then didn't seem real interested in finding a place to tie off his small raft either, to maybe cause more trouble, to force Terrence to empty his pockets or the like. Jerome scowled then pointed a thick finger. "See ya at the schoolhouse. See ya after the school t'morrow. Better have it back by then. What I lost anyhow. More'n a half-dollar, too." He turned and knelt on the weathered boards that were bound as his raft, sinking to nearly his waist, and then paddled across the slow-moving current to where Stanley's brother had already made land. Sheepishly, Stanley flashed a little wave then climbed onto his raft and followed Jerome across the river to the trail.

Clem looked at Terrence. Neither one liked this development as Jerome didn't go to school so his behavior there wouldn't necessarily come under their teacher's thumb. Both boys hurried to finish dressing, and then hurried down the path back to their farm.

"Hey Clem! What 'bout goin' to the saving? Them two *half-a-dollars*? Ya promise."

"We'll have to go out later. Ma's gonna be sore if we don't git back 'n help out. 'Member, don't say nothin' 'bout goin' to the bank or the thirty-five dollars, nothin' of it! Or it'll all get taken 'n then we caint git ya the two half-dollars or go to see the big city doc like we always been plannin'. Promise now."

"*Promise.*"

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"Hope you boys didn't cause yer uncle no grief."

Terrence was worked up from the day and the recent altercation, thinking probably he didn't want to go to school tomorrow, forgetting again that he wouldn't have to because of the day. "So... 'n then Uncle Ned... Uncle Ned got us two 'a dem *soderpop*. Got m' own, Ma!"

"That's nice, Terrence. How long did it take ya'll to unload?"

"Only maybe two hours, Ma," Clem said.

"I'm getting' *mus-cles*, Ma. Uncle Ned said. *Lookit*," Terrence held his arm up, bent to show his arm muscles. Ma smiled thinly then turned back to Clem.

"Did yer uncle stop at any saloons? Have a bottle with him? Bottle fer sippin'? Like a whiskey bottle?"

Clem sure didn't want any questions asked about what they were doing in *Barling*. "No, Ma, I don't think. And I'd 'a seen him. He maybe drank a bottle of cold beer when we got... when he got us them soda pops, like Terrence said."

"Didn't have no whiskey in the truck?"

"No, 'n we coulda seen 'im."

"*We could see 'im*," Terrence chirped.

Miraculously, they made it through supper without either boy saying anything about the bank or the money. Ma seemed especially distant, lost in heavy thoughts, rising almost robotically to tend to Pa when he gurgled or grunted or occasionally spoke a few words that were coherent.

Just as they were finishing, *Mrs. Winslow* and one Stanley's *memaws* knocked on the back door. Clem was actually glad to see *Mrs. Winslow* carrying a bottle of homemade wine because he knew the adults would sit on the front porch awhile, this despite of the



fact that normally it irritated him to see his Ma get even a little soused. He didn't understand why most adults seemed to like to drink alcohol. He knew from when he was younger that it had been illegal by the President but that some folks still did it. Tonight though he was glad because it gave Terrence and him the chance to disappear for a half hour or so after they cleaned up from supper.

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Checking for the umpteenth time that no one was about, with Terrence low to the ground and lifting with all of his strength they moved the boulder aside, brushed the dirt off and lifted the cigar tin from its recess in the ground. Terrence had recently tired with the whole notion of their savings as gathering that much money to make a trip to a big city seemed about as possible as flying to the moon did, and he'd begun to pester Clem to buy more hard candy or soda pop regularly, then grumbled about wanting to maybe also buy special marbles or some other toy that could reduce their savings by a dollar or more if Clem wasn't cautious. *Don't ya wanna get fixed by the city doc?* -Clem would sometimes ask in exasperation, and while he considered the question Terrence would often shift side-to-side, testing his mis-sized leg, though Clem meant fixing his rung bell.

"Okay," Clem laid his kerchief on the ground and carefully removed first the bills, two dollar bills, then the various coins from the tin. He then took the pressed wad of five-dollar bills from his britches and began separating them carefully. "See Terrence, these here, these ones from the bank today, they's five-dollar bills. So for each one 'a them you kin git five 'a these..." he held a five-dollar bill between his fingers then a dollar bill up then held up a silver dollar. "Or, you kin git five 'a these. They's all worth the same, for buyin' things with. So whatever you wanted to buy, if it cost five-dollars you could trade 'em for one 'a these, or five 'a either 'a one 'a these. *Unnerstand?*"

"Yeah, I *guesso*. But what 'bout them two *half-a-dollars?*"

"Terrence, pay attention now. I'm gettin' sore. This 's real important, okay? Say what if somethin' was to happen to me like what had happened to Pa? Then you would be the only one who knows where our savings is hidden at. Now 'member how yesterday, heck, just this mornin' we had, we had what, eighteen dollars and then thirty-three cents more? 'Member?"

"Yeah, Clem. We counted up eighteen when we put in them coins what *memaw* gave us."

"Right. Good. Well, see now that half-dollar you found in the dirt, well, a normal one would be worth same as this," he held up a newer half-dollar then pointed to the other coins. "Same as two 'a them quarters. Or five 'a them dimes. Okay? But the one you found was real old, like more'n a *hunnert* years, so that means the banker *Mr. Duggan*, he traded us all of them seven for it 'cause he wanted bad to have it, 'n he's a rich man. Thirty *five* dollars. Ya see?"

"Yeah, Clem," but Clem knew he really didn't. Terrence saw a grasshopper and watched it take flight.

Clem carefully laid all of the money out in separate piles, and then he counted out loud to fifty-three dollars, thirty-three cents. Sobering, as he carefully placed the money back inside of the tin Clem almost told his brother that now they would make plans to visit a big city, *St. Louis* more than likely, but caught himself, knowing that he would have to plan the trip by himself and only tell Terrence that they were going at the last possible moment if it was ever to be kept between them.

Terrence chased the grasshopper through the wheat.

"G'night, Terrence."

"G'night, Clem."

"If I die in the night before I wakes up," Terrence was mumbling but Clem knew that Terrence was so tired that he couldn't stay awake for more than a few minutes after

they lay down from their long and varied day. Terrence could never remember his prayers properly but seemed fascinating with the prospect of ‘dying before he woke’ and always seemed to remember that line muddled in with whatever else came into his mind. Normally he ended his mishmash of prayers by thanking god for Ma and Pa, and then, particularly: *my brother, Clem* -but tonight he drifted off immediately. Clem was exhausted himself but he still had a few things to work out in his thoughts as soon as possible before he slipped up or Terrence told someone and their great fortune was jeopardized before they could go see about getting Terrence fixed. Clem still could not believe that they had *fifty dollars savings!* Clem figured he had to come up with a way to have Uncle Ned take them to *St. Louis*; at better than four hundred miles a trip that took upwards of five days. There were only a few times of the year where it was even possible to be gone for one week let alone two and this was mainly in the wintertime when travel could be bitterly cold and even slower going than usual in spots where there was ice or snow. And while Clem was allowed to operate the motorcar on short trips into town, on errands to the mercantile and such, he knew there was no way Ma would allow it gone that far for that long without Uncle Ned driving, and she’d be nervous of that because of his drinking. And then she’d be suspicious of how they were paying for all of the gasoline necessary for such a long trip. Clem had no idea how much gasoline would cost for such a journey. These were real problems.

Clem was fidgeting so badly his stomach hurt. It felt like the time he drank two bottles of some homemade sarsaparilla from the county fair and was so jittery that his lip quivered for half an hour, like Terrence’s lip did sometimes, only real fast. It was a very still night with no wind to move the branches or rattle the leaves on the giant sycamore trees that kept a part of their farmhouse in perpetual shade. Nights like these sound carried so well that Clem and Terrence could sometimes hear the Winslows or the Drakes if they were out on their porches, maybe singing and playing some songs, drinking alcohol more than likely. When it was dead silent you could clearly hear the

sound of the train, the Frisco Line that ran between San Francisco, California and St. Louis, Missouri, with stops for water, coal or passengers at forty-one depots along the way, including the next town over from Twin Forks: Stillman, Arkansas, where Clem could hear the faint sounds of the train’s brakes and then the blast release of steam. He’d never been on a train before so neither had Terrence.

Snuggling under the bed sheet, Clem allowed himself a thin smile and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

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Three days later they got to the station nearly an hour before the train was scheduled to arrive, assuming it was on-time which it rarely was. Clem knew that Terrence hadn't slept more than a wink because every time Clem looked over to be sure that Terrence was sleeping he saw that he wasn't. Clem had been a little worried about being seen loitering at the depot but only a little as there were often kids playing, or sometimes hobos about, and generally people paid them little mind if they weren't causing a stir. Ma had been dumbfounded when Clem showed her just one of the five-dollar bills, simply not believing that the boys could have saved that much money without having stolen any of it but she never thought her boys' thieves, just that somehow, probably Terrence, had made a naïve error and taken some money from someone when they weren't looking. She asked Clem repeatedly about it but all he said was that they'd been saving every bit they could since when he was five and repeated about finding a whole half-dollar just last week. Clem had pled with her to let them just ride the train over to St. Francis and back, just a few hours, well, one day total with the wait for the return train once they got there. He chose St. Francis as a fictitious destination because it was the only place beside St. Louis that Clem knew with 'saint' as a part of the name thinking that if Ma heard Terrence babbling about 'Sainloos' as he called it she wouldn't think a thing. He wasn't even sure if the train went there when he brought it up but figured correctly that Ma then didn't know either. She had refused to let them go, saying she didn't want to discuss it and why would the boys spend more than three dollars, the cost of two tickets, all of that money, on something so frivolous and so short-lasting? Since when're ya'll so interested in trains? -was the last thing he remembered her saying on the matter before he decided that if he and Terrence were going to make their way to St. Louis they would have to do so without her blessing.

After two days of planning out best he could it was time to go. So far the morning had gone smoothly, the one hitch being a couple of boys from town who tagged along when Clem and Terrence hopped down from the ride that ironically Jeb Pratt, one of the Pratt cousins, had given them in the back of his harvest truck when he found them happening along the road. With almost everyone recently to harvest, the town boys also had idle time on their hands. Terrence simply could not stop his wondering out loud (and loudly) about various concerns and questions he had regarding trains and how they operated. The three town boys themselves had never actually ridden on one either, one boy said he'd been allowed up into the conductor's seat while the train was stopped but they all doubted this was true, so the Wilcox boys' possible pending adventure was enough at least initially to warrant some tagalongs on the slight chance that it wasn't a wild, speculative dream or outright fabrication.

After about twenty minutes of waiting and seeing no tiny steam plumes in the distance, the three town boys figured on something better to do with their precious off-time and wandered away.

After deciding to take a train, when Clem's casual inquiries at the depot confirmed that, while expensive, passage costs were well within their means his spirits soon sank as he knew that Ma would find out about their deceitfulness, someone in town would surely tell when they came up missing. But after he thought about it for a while he realized that this would be a good thing for once they'd gone Ma wouldn't worry about ill fortune having found them as she would assume they were gone to St. Francis safely on a train as they'd discussed and then she could set about working up a suitable punishment for their rarely displayed insubordination. The sky was blue and bright and painful to the eye; the dry, biting wind of the unusually cold September day cleverly finding every hole Clem had in his coat, in his britches and his wool cap. He held his coat tight to his heart and stood pressed against the sunny side of the depot while Terrence could not stop from darting repeatedly out to the tracks to lean over to

check if he could see or hear the train coming. Clem warned him not to touch the cold tracks, and in the wintertime to never, ever, lick them (or any other metal if someone dared him to) as Clem knew from personal experience the unpleasantness of doing so. When he wasn't checking the tracks Terrence was trying to climb up onto anything he could to crane his neck, sometimes hold a hand over his brow as if he were a lookout on a top-mast of a ship, then call down that he thought he saw something, the steam! -only to realize it was just a mirage or stray cloud until finally his excitement moved Clem from his spot in the sun as there could be no doubt.

“It's...them trains 's here! Here's them! Them trains!”

They'd watched the trains before, many times, to see who got on and off, to look at strange faces through the windows, but never before were they about to become some of those faces in the windows themselves. It took only a few minutes to arrive from the farthest point they could see it but it felt like hours; the tiny plume and puffs, the cracking and creaking and shrill squeaking and rattling growing louder until even screaming themselves they could hear nothing else and finally the steel behemoth was upon them, threatening to devour them like a giant, iron whale if they got near to the tracks. They'd come to the depot sometimes as the other boys had done because trains never ceased to enhance limited entertainment options near Twin Forks but this time knowing they would purchase their own tickets and actually ride the train like every other passenger made it almost suffocating.

“Terrence! Terrence, go 'n git your bag!” Clem called out as Terrence was already firing questions in heated discussion with the conductor who had just helped a local, Mrs. Spatsky down the small ladder. Mrs. Spatsky glared at Terrence who paid her no mind, then glared at Clem who tipped his cap and shied away. Clem was sure Mrs. Spatsky would have Ma's ear at church on Sunday, if not sooner, something about Ma's 'hooligan' sons running amok.

“Can I help ya’ll?” The conductor, he had his name: ‘Munroe’ –stitched across the breast pocket of his vest, a tall, slender man with a wispy mustache who had to lean over a bit to talk to Clem as Clem nervously approached, carrying both bags. Clem handed Terrence’s sac to him and told him to hold it, and then turned to the man.

“Uh, we...m’ brother Terrence ‘n me, we’re gonna ride to St. Louis. We got our money, see?” Clem held out the thick wad of now carefully folded bills.

“Goodness. Ain’t gonna cost ya that much to ride to ‘St. Looie’,” Munroe took off his cap and scratched the side of his head, then his sharp eyes darted around, grateful that this was not a bigger, busier stop. “What’re ya’ll boys doing wit’all that money? Don’t be showin’ it around. Come on. Come with me,” Munroe motioned the boys up the small run of stairs, Terrence tripping due to his excitement and skinning a knee through a new tear in his britches but he hardly noticed, despite the dampening, warm spot of blood. Clem took one last look behind them, at the small, weathered depot then the shops and church that edged the town; and then farther back to the west and the edge of *Twin Forks* where he knew his Ma might come looking for them and soon realize they were gone. But they’d get to *St. Louis* and find the doc who would fix up Terrence, and then Ma wouldn’t be sore when she saw that Terrence was fixed up. Maybe, not even walking funny anymore, too. Munroe led them to two seats right next to his conductor’s station and motioned for them to sit. Clem set his sac down and sat politely with his hands on his lap but Terrence merely dropped his sac to the floor and quickly stood on the seat to look through the window, fidgeting with it, trying to get it open so he could see better.

A huge blast of steam was released then Munroe yelled: *All aboard-* and picked up the small step ladder as the heavy train jerked and groaned and started to roll very slowly forward. Clem couldn’t contain himself and since no one had hollered at Terrence for standing on the seat to look out the window, Clem took the empty seat one row behind and did the same thing though being taller he only had to kneel to see



through the glass. In the distance *Twin Forks* was gone completely before their breathing slowed, then quickly on through *Smithville* which at two miles was as far north as they had ever been without a truck or motorcar and had no depot. The train had only a few passengers in their car. Clem knew there were several cars all connected but in the excitement he hadn't noticed how many were for passengers and how many were boxcars or haulers. And, of course the engine and the caboose. The passengers looked *well-to-do*, especially the three women who were dressed as fancy as Clem had ever seen at church and it was a Monday. The men all looked like bankers or businessmen except for two hard-looking men whose suits and caps were worn threadbare. They sat bearing fixed scowls in the car's rear.

Cold air rushed in as Terrence got the window down. Munroe came over and slid the glass closed. "You'll freeze the other passengers, son. Now ya'll're going all the way to 'St. Looie' you said, am I right?"

"Yes, sir," Clem reached into his britches again. Munroe looked down the car and decided he didn't like the look of the two gentlemen who sat in the rear and hadn't said two words to one another or to anyone else since they boarded nearly an hour ago.

"Well that'll be a dollar and eighty-five cents for each of you. So if you're gonna pay for your brother there, I'll need three dollars seventy cents, for two tickets to 'St. Looie'," he began punching out the appropriate spots on two thin strips of paper. When he saw Clem holding up the fat wad of money again preparing to count he motioned and held his hand down. "Why don't you boys come see my station?" He focused on Terrence. "Bet *you'd* like to see?" He said loudly.

"Yeah. *Yeah*," Terrence shook his head eagerly. "Kin I blow the whistle?"

It was very cramped in the small booth. Munroe showed them the emergency brake and the bell and telephone he used to get the engineer's attention, and he let them each hang far out the window and wave to the engineer who waved back through the reflection off of a mirror.

"You boys travel by yourself before?"

"Uh, yes sir," Clem said.

"On a train?"

"*Nossir*," Terrence blurted. Munroe smiled.

"I didn't think so. Now, ya have to be careful with all of that money. What are ya'll doing with all 'a that anyway? Not really my business, but..." Clem was used to answering adults honestly so he went ahead and started to tell Munroe why they were going all the way to *St. Louis* but Munroe cut him off before Clem shared too many details about the tractor accident. Terrence could not pull himself away from the window despite the biting cold as the wind rushed by, the train now rolling along at nearly fifty miles an hour. "Well, that's mighty noble, son. I sure hope the doc can help ya. How much have ya'll saved?"

They had left Terrence's two half-dollars behind in the tin so he wouldn't lose them but had the rest of their savings in Clem's pocket. "We got fifty-six dollars 'n seventy-two cents.

Munroe whistled. In another lifetime when he was young and drunk most of the time, and broke and riding the rails he might have relieved the boys of their money himself, through cards or maybe even strong-arm. But he was sober now and loved his steady job as conductor so the thought was fleeting. "Tell ya what. Why don't I give ya'll a fifty-dollar bill in exchange for fifty dollars of your one dollar bills and five dollar bills. That way you can hide it safe somewhere, in your shoe or somethin', and you won't have to worry about someone seeing all that money you have and thinking to take it from you. There's a couple of unsavory types riding the back of the train might take it from you and just laugh, who knows, toss you off the train for fifty dollars. That's near as much money as I make in a month," he mumbled under his breath. Clem had planned on turning in for a fifty-dollar bill himself when they got to *St. Louis*, figuring that banks there would have plenty of bills that large, and having just dealt

with Stanley’s cousin Jerome recently he didn’t like the unsavory reference to the two men. Munroe took out a zippered pouch from inside of his vest and Clem saw a small, hidden pistol. Stealing and deceit were alien to Clem and Terrence but they knew enough from being on the wrong side of Stanley’s cousin Jerome that there were bad people who would rob you of your money if they got the chance. Munroe took a brand new looking fifty-dollar note from the bag and waited while Clem carefully counted to fifty out loud, muffled enough by the whipping winds, Terrence now back in the small booth rubbing his cold ears and paying some attention as once again his brother was doing something with their *‘saving.’*

Munroe handed Clem the fifty-dollar note. “Good, now put that somewhere safe and never take it out where anyone can see. If someone asks do you have any money you tell ‘em no, then if you have to you show ‘em your coins. So you pay three dollars seventy for the two return tickets and you’ll still have enough to buy any food and such. I’ll leave you here for a moment to hide the bill then go back to your seats and enjoy your first ride on the *‘Frisco’*,” which was the name of the train. Munroe left the booth and Clem folded the crisp, new bill four equal times and stuck it in his stocking foot, and then put his foot back into his shoe. He liked the idea that now he could feel the fifty dollars safely with his foot without having to check his pocket time and again.

A moment after Munroe went back to his duties Clem and Terrence went back to their seats. No one seemed to pay them any mind, but Clem cast an extra glance at the two men in the back before he settled in. After a minute of listening to Terrence exclaim: *hey lookit that!-’n that there!* –Clem took his sac and went to the row behind.

The speed was awesome. Clem doubted that Pa’s motorcar went half this fast. Over the flat land they could see farther out, across vast farms, hues of different shades and colors clicking smoothly past. Clem reached into his sac and took out a folded paper map he’d purchased years ago to see how far *St. Louis* really was from *Twin Forks*. He unfolded a piece of a kerchief and took out a sliver of lead, then marked off the first

town they'd passed through, *Smithville*. The next town was *Oden* and it had a sign but no depot. He figured to track their passage all the way out and back. *Hope, Malvern, Benton*, the small towns, most without depots, ticked by. Then *Little Rock* appeared and both boys jaws dropped in awe.

"Issit 'Sainloos' Clem? We there? We there?!"

From the outskirts Clem was going to comment but wasn't himself rightly sure. He'd forgotten to ask Munroe how long the trip took. He could see buildings six-stories tall; he'd never seen one taller than three and often the third floor was just a façade. But they'd only been gone for about two hours. Clem consulted his map. "Must be *Little Rock*, Terrence. It'd be *Little Rock*, I'd bet."

"*Little Rock*," Terrence agreed, his pressed nose and rapid breath repeatedly fogging the freezing glass and causing him to wipe it clear with his forearm.

Clem had Terrence come sit beside him and showed him on the map as the train began to slowly decelerate, screeches and jerking, making it hard to stand or kneel on the seat when the train took the turns. The boys looked everywhere. Besides the handful of buildings that they could see, buildings which were more than three stories tall, the depot itself was bigger than any building in *Twin Forks*, bigger even than the bank in *Barling*. There were lots of people about, with lots of folks dressed like some here on the train, many of the men with long coats and top hats smoking cigarettes from extended, tapered holders, some of the ladies hats resembling overstuffed fruit bowls. Their train car was suddenly nearly full, every seat, mostly people but also Clem saw several seats taken up with hat boxes and luggage that he imagined was too fancy for the rooftop or racks with the other valises. There were some other children on board now, two separate families by the look of it, both well-to-do. One group had three young girls and one boy, the girls all dressed like miniature versions of their Ma and a tiny boy of no more than three dressed in a suit and tie exactly like his Pa. Then, two girls who looked older than Clem sat across the way, travelling with their Pa and

maybe one of their *memaws* who kept scolding them both for being fidgety, and then one for smiling at Clem. A man with a monocle, a long, droopy mustache and a very stern expression sat behind them and was reading a newspaper, making a point to snap it loudly as he turned and smoothed out each page. He had some sort of spot, ‘*from their livers*’ on one cheek like their *memaw* had on her hands. Clem could tell that the man was eying them pretty carefully, probably wondering who they were and why they were travelling alone. Maybe worried that they might be ruffians intent on stealing from him should he doze off or lose attention. Twice Clem caught Terrence looking at the man queerly; his long mustache and discoloration undoubtedly garnering the boy’s attention, so Clem pinched Terrence’s knee just hard enough and whispered that it wasn’t right to stare.

“Now, ‘member to stick close by when we get to *St. Louis*. Don’t need to be gettin’ lost.”

“Okay, Clem.”

“An’ try not to be talkin’ to nobody neither. Ya heard Mr. Munroe, to be quiet about havin’ our saving, having our money. We saved all them years for to getcha fixed up by a big-city doc and we’re gonna need all of it. ‘Member, that’s why we’re goin’ on this here train.”

Terrence was paying little attention to Clem and more on everything else, but less so what was flying past the windows outside. “*Gurl. She’s purdy,*” Terrence said it a little too loudly and Clem was grateful for the racket that the full train made between the clanging and the passenger chatter so the girl who smiled didn’t hear his brother’s blurt. Clem was doing his best to sit proper, to appear as mature as possible. Clem had to inform Terrence on several occasions to wait to talk about the girls at school or in town until they were alone as it could make the girls uncomfortable but apparently as these were strangers Terrence must have forgotten this lesson. Clem cast a quick glance

and saw the girl pretending to mind her *memaw* but instead stealing looks at both he and Terrence, stifling a giggle at the younger boy’s innocently clownish grins.

The train picked up speed and *Little Rock* quickly became just a dot behind them, as *Twin Forks* had.

The boys thought that *Little Rock*, Arkansas was big. Nearing *St. Louis*, Missouri the train got past the outskirts which feathered in for miles and into a long, strange tunnel, not one through a mountain like the one that they’d already been through but one that dipped underground and into the *Union Station*, serving twenty-two different railways, the largest in the world. Munroe told them that the station: *handled more’n one hundred thousand passengers each and every day*. Clem wasn’t sure but he thought that might be more people riding trains into and out of *St. Louis* than there *were* people living within the entire State of Arkansas, as the train finally jerked to a stop and the other passengers quickly stood and gathered their things and disembarked. The girl across the aisle was smiling at both of them as her *memaw* shuffled her along, and the *mustachioed* man with the monocle eyed Clem directly as he took his top hat and walking stick and strode past. For all of his planning about how to get here, Clem had no plan once they arrived. They sat in their seats, frozen.

“Time to go, boys,” Munroe began walking along with a hand broom and dustpan, lightly cleaning all of the seat rows. “How long ya’ll gonna be staying in ‘*St. Looie*’?”

Clem said: “Well, we need to go to see the doc. Like we told ya. About Terrence.” The boys shouldered their bags and stood side-by-side. Clem put his arm around his brother.

“Lots of doctors here. Got one in *p’ticular*?”

“Uh, no, sir. Don’t know how many there’d be.” He actually just assumed there would be only one but that he would be a very good one, one of the best, like Pa always

said. *Dumb, Clem* -he berated himself. Only little towns like *Twin Forks* had just a single doc. "Well, you might start at the *City Hospital* then. It's some miles south. Down on *Lafayette Avenue*, runs right out there," Munroe pointed arbitrarily as they were still underground. "If you can't find it, *jes'* ask someone ta point you to '*Lafayette*'."

They thanked Munroe and slowly left the security of the train, Terrence holding on to the back of Clem's coat and Clem inching his way toward the open lobby, maneuvering through the incredible streams of humans moving in a chaotic fashion that approached from all sides and angles, people chatting and gabbing, some with stern, serious expressions, others laughing, drunk maybe, carefree. Clem, his brother by his side, suddenly felt very, very small. He took a breath and pushed down on his stocking foot, the folded fifty-dollar bill still pressed snugly (and safely) beneath his right foot. The train station itself was massive, made almost entirely of stone with an ornate ceiling above the lobby that Terrence noted was: *high as the clouds*. Had the boys merely spent a night there and then returned home it would have been by far their greatest adventure and undoubtedly the envy of most of the other *Twin Forks* town boys. Clem stopped for a moment to take it all in. Here there were twenty ticket windows with passengers lined in front of each, instead of one window when they boarded in Arkansas. There were vendors of every kind selling newspapers and cigars, produce and hot foods, flowers -though why would anyone pay for something you could just go and pick? -and shoe shines for gentlemen. Smells wafted that were exotic, unknown, and Clem began to salivate and realized they hadn't had anything to eat or anything to drink since they'd left *Twin Forks* early that morning.

"Clem, I'm hungry," Terrence said, timely.

"Ya read m' mind," Clem steered the boy over to a side where there were men and young men, some boys selling fruit and some selling bread rolls and some offering cooked meats that Clem couldn't quite place. They gravitated to a vendor who had something that looked like sausage frying in a pan, but these were thin and of a

different color than Clem was used to. He stopped to watch as another man made a purchase but Terrence simply couldn't contain himself and let go of Clem's coat then sped around and went right up to the vendor, dangerously close to the hot cooking pan.

“*Careful,*” the man said in English but with a heavy accent of origin that Clem had never heard before. The man leaned over and a little too gruffly moved Terrence a couple of feet back with a giant, callused hand. They watched as another man handed the vendor a dime and a nickel and took possession of one of the funny pieces of sausage that the vendor handed back to the man stuffed into an equally unusually shaped dinner roll.

“*Hot dogs. Get your hot dogs!*” The vendor called out as he worked, ignoring the boys who rightly didn't look like that had much if any money and unknowingly drew the attention of several vendors as possible thieves due to their loitering. The vendor turned and looked right at them. “What's it gonna be, boys? Can't just stand there blocking the way for regular customers.”

Clem stepped forward boldly. “We'll buy for two, please. One fer us each.”

“Be thirty-cents,” the unimpressed vendor waited until he could see Clem counting out the coins before whipping into action and producing two more bread-filled sausages which he traded for the coins. Clem took a moment to inspect his as they walked away but Terrence was too hungry for any of that.

“*Ow!*” he cried out as he took a big bite, some hot grease squirting out from a hole in the casing and dripping and burning onto his chin which he promptly wiped off on his coat sleeve. Then, he flashed one of his loopy grins and quickly took another big bite. “*Hey Clem! Issa sausage, kinda, I think, but issa dinner roll!*”

“Guess they call sausage ‘*hot dog*’ here,” Clem took a bite of his own and was immediately awash in a flood of wonderful new spices. By his second, more cautious bite than his brother, who despite the burning from the hot grease continued to wolf his



down, Clem’s stomach immediately began to warm. They walked slowly to one side, away from the flow of people who they seemed all but invisible to.

“Clem, I’m thirsty.”

Normally Clem would have had them drink from a water fountain like they had in the town square back home but that simply wouldn’t do here in this majestic environment. “Let’s share one bottle ‘a soda pop.”

“Caint I have m’own? I kin drink it! Like from Uncle Ned!”

Clem was on a high. “Okay. Sure.”

The hot dogs were gone by the time they left the station, both boys licking at their fingers and savoring pleasant memories while sipping on cold bottles of *Coca-Cola*, one apiece.

“Best *dog-sausages* I ever et, Clem.”

“Hot dog, Terrence. And that’s the first one ya et. They call ‘em ‘hot dog’ but that’s just a name. Nobody makes up sausage outta no dogs, you know it. They use ‘a hog like we would. Wouldn’t wanna eat no cooked up dog, would ya?”

“*Uh, uh!*” Terrence couldn’t believe his ears, that his brother would even suggest such a thing.

“Me neither. Was real good, though. Maybe, we kin have another one when we’re on our way back home after the doc.” Clem was aware of every penny he held for them, but now that they were done with their saving he figured it was ok to indulge, at least a little bit. He’d planned ahead, on having to pay for rent on a room for a night for them to sleep in, maybe two nights even while the doctor performed his magic. The rooming house in *Twin Forks* cost a dollar and fifteen cents. Sometimes the doc in *Twin Falls* made you sleep at his house for a day or more, if you were real sick or hurt real bad. Pa was kept for four days after he had his fall. If they were nearer to home they might have slept outdoors but not here in such a big, unknown city.

They walked through the heavy front doors which were nearly always open as people strode in and out. The street in front of the depot was nearly as crowded with people as the station lobby. With an extra wide thoroughfare absolutely jam-packed with carts and horses and cars and delivery trucks it made indoors suddenly seem more manageable.

“Whoa,” Terrence stopped in his tracks.

The commotion was unimaginable; the end of a busy day winding down with people coming and going from the numerous trains and others who lived locally crisscrossing the street on car and truck and foot and horse and bicycle and motorbike. Some vendors were closing up their shops. It was important that Clem take the lead so he drew a deep breath then ushered Terrence down the enormous set of stone steps, nearly bumping into several passersby as the boys made their way purposefully to the street corner where the word *Lafayette* was clearly visible on a prominent street sign that unlike in *Twin Forks* was made of metal with ornate styling and not just whitewash painted on wood. Clem could read okay but he didn’t do real well with words he hadn’t been taught. Terrence was practically frozen from all there was to see and might have no idea if he were standing on the corner all alone. The cross street was *Nebraska* which Clem knew from his state studies so Clem figured the other funny word that started with: *L-a-f-* must be the right avenue.

Now, which way was north?

A streetcar made its way, pushing aside the harried throng who all seemed to be in flow with its pace and moved at the last possible second. Clem had never seen one but he knew what it was from school- like a train and a bus put together- and there were so many different types of automobiles and trucks that he could get dizzy if he tried to watch them all. One time, an out-of-towner had stopped in *Twin Forks* for gasoline in a *Cadillac*, an event told to Pa by *Mr. Winslow* which caused Pa to stroke his chin and offer aloud that he was sorry he hadn’t been in town to see it. Featured

something called a: ‘*straight-eight*’. Pa said it would drive faster than any car or truck we’d ever seen, faster than a train even, maybe even some airplanes I remember thinking wildly. There were so many cars *criss-crossing* this way and that that Clem figured odds were that *some* of the fancy ones, they must be *Cadillacs*. He made a thought to keep his eyes open for one so he could tell Pa if Pa should ask that he and Terrence had seen one themselves. Clem saw two men he figured for constables, again from pictures he’d seen in books. *Twin Forks* had a sheriff and deputy sheriff who wore uniform shirts over their normal britches and had silver stars on their chests (and drawn on ones on their hats). These men here had full, deep blue uniforms and funny looking hats but also wore silver stars and had long, black sticks that hung on one side of their britches, pistols on the other. Clem noticed that they looked at the boys kind of mean. If in fact Clem was paying closer attention he would have noticed a lot of faces on strangers that looked somber, suspicious or angered. Nearly everyone in *Twin Forks* made eye contact, smiled and said: *good day*, or: *hello*. The men tipped their caps.

The constables first caught Clem’s eye because the men were staring at them with suspicion. They asked Clem where they were going and Clem told them the doctor down to the south on *Lafayette* and the constables said that they must mean the hospital and that it was quite some walk and they might ought to ride a streetcar which would take them more than halfway but Clem said they were okay walking so the constable shrugged and the boys set out on their way. Clem assumed, erroneously, that the streetcar cost the same amount in money to ride as the train from *Twin Forks* had, and he wasn’t about to spend another three dollars seventy cents. They were used to walking.

It wasn’t dark yet though clearly headed that way and the boys walked along with their sacs slung over their shoulders, Terrence holding onto Clem’s shirt tail and yammering on about all sorts of things. Clem decided that they better see about a little more to eat for supper and then find a place to sleep. He was aware of other boys

shadowing them from alleyways and rooftops as he and Terrence made their way through the neighborhoods and the most urban part of the city and this reaffirmed his notion that sleeping outdoors was not a good idea in such a big city with so many strangers. Thankfully, they didn't look like much, their clothes old and ill-fitting, bags made from old burlap sacks. Without incident, after two or three hours walking and the last of the sunlight Clem turned in to a building that had a painted sign along the roadway that said: *Rooms*.

“Boy's travelling alone are ya?” The man asked when Clem knocked on the door.

“Yessir. Goin' to see the doc tomorrow.”

“Which doc is that?” Clem didn't rightly know so he told the man they were headed to the hospital further down south on *Lafayette* and the man nodded and said:

“Well, you're on *Lafayette* but the hospital's still a good ten miles from here. You could take the streetcar a good ways.”

Clem nodded politely but he already knew this information and saw that the room would cost them two dollars and twenty cents so additional train fares were even further out of the question. The man asked if they were hungry and Terrence blurted: *yes-* then proceeded to tell the man about eating the dog-sausage before Clem quickly corrected him with 'hot dog'. The man said there was a mercantile that was closed but a saloon next to it which was open and would serve the boys a hot plate for a quarter if they went to the back door and knocked and that the hot plate was probably enough food for the two of them to split just one so after he showed them which room they could sleep in they shouldered their bags and ventured across the way. The 'hot plate' consisted of boiled potatoes and onions and some kind of meat stew. They argued over whether it was meat from a cow or a lamb as they shared it sitting on the small bed they would sleep in afterward, eating with their fingers and passing back and forth one spoon and making quite a mess on their shirts. Terrence especially had food all over his face as well; the excitement of the trip and probable exhaustion made for particularly

sloppy eating. They agreed the stew was only okay, not great like the hot dogs had been, or even as good as Ma's.

"*Caint* forget to bring the bowl back to the man t'morrow 'fore we go, like he said," Clem told Terrence but Terrence had already drifted off to sleep, fully dressed with dinner remnants all on his shirt and face, still. Clem organized their bags, set the empty bowl on the table and took off his shirt and britches before lying down beside his brother who was stone asleep. He tried desperately to stare at the ceiling and reflect on their amazing day and worry a little about Ma worrying but, exhausted he too fell quickly asleep.

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"Clem, m' shoe! *Hey Clem!*"

It was nearing ten o'clock. They had been walking since just after sun up, munching on a couple of hard rolls, the conversation leaning more and more toward seeing the doc. The rows upon rows of bigger buildings had given way to rows upon rows of smaller buildings, apartments mostly, then houses, of decreasing quality and size, then finally farms but only for a little while before the buildings started up again, growing back up in reverse. Clem was pretty sure he could see the congested area in the distance which was where the hospital probably was (he hoped) but the walk *was* a lot more than he would have bargained for had he known. His legs were so tired, and his feet so sore too, that the three dollars seventy-cents he'd (wrongly) figured for the streetcars might have been a worthwhile investment after all.

"Lemme see," Clem stopped walking and set both of their bags down. He'd been carrying Terrence's bag for him after the fourth or fifth time Terrence stopped to gawk at something, or play with a stray dog, and left his bag behind. Their shoes were pretty worn to begin with and now Terrence squatted low and peeled back the front of one shoe showing Clem two of his toes, one of them poking through the stocking, the skin covered black with dirt.

They sat on the pathway and took off Terrence's shoe, Clem inspecting it closely then pulling off the stocking and rolling it over halfway again so there would be some protection for Terrence's toe. "Might be a little tight. We'll look for a cobbler then, maybe. Uncle Ned'll pro'lly get us new ones soon anyway, won't cost us nothing', like he always does."

"Okay, Clem."

Clem shouldered the bags and they started back down the pathway. A lot of the sights and smells of yesterday at the train station and its neighborhood surrounds were

beginning to materialize again as the buildings became taller and almost seamless as far down the avenue as they could see, and once again they drew passing interest from neighborhood boys, vendors and constables.

Clem double-checked for the hundredth time that they were still on *Lafayette* when he froze, now that they were so close suddenly unsure of what to do. For something he had thought so long about since his old *memaw* first brought up the possibility he was woefully unprepared. Really, it was miraculous he'd gotten this far on his own, with fifty dollars folded inside his stocking, now actually standing in front of the *St. Louis City Hospital*. People were shuffling in and out of the multiple doorways almost as regularly as they had at the train station.

Everyone always seems in such a hurry – Clem thought.

Nurses in pressed white dresses and crisp white hats scurried along, shielding from the cold wind, alone and in little groups. Distinguished gentlemen in proper dress, far fewer in number, moved decidedly slower and less concerned with the cold as they ambled up the wide stone steps and went inside. Workers or patients were obvious of every ilk including some with yellowish skin and funny looking eyes that Clem had read were people born somewhere called: *China* -which all that he knew about it was that it lay across the great sea. A strange looking truck painted bright red with a big white cross on the side sped up from down the street, a sheriff's siren wailing, and turned sharply enough that Clem cringed it might lose a wheel or plum tip over then it whipped around sharply and backed up to a loading deck where two men dressed in strange white uniforms came out through wide doors and helped to move someone from the back of the red truck to a thin cart that stood high off the ground on wheels. The men wheeled the person inside on the cart then returned and jumped back into the truck and sped off again. Clem figured it for a big city ambulance; he'd read about them too. *Twin Forks* didn't have an ambulance. If someone got too sick for the doc to manage with the help of *Mrs. Stemple* then the doc would have the sheriff drive the person to

*Barling*, or if someone was bleeding real bad, which happened quite often in farm accidents, the hearse from *Fineman Funeral Parlor* would be dispatched for transport, generally making the already traumatized rider all the more uncomfortable. Clem had only seen the hearse twice; when *Bobby Marchand* got his right arm tore clean off in a reaper and when *Beau Longley* got a grape stake driven through his chest after his Pa's tractor skipped over it and shot it back like a giant arrow, right through the boy who'd been busy sifting onions behind the tractor and certainly not expecting an airborne grape stake shooting like an arrow.

Clem picked the biggest set of doors and ushered Terrence inside, the boys standing off to one side of the hubbub and again feeling rather small but better than yesterday at the big train station. "Take of yer cap," Clem said after he'd done the same. There was an '*Admitting*' window, a word that Clem did not know. He knew that 'admit' meant to tell what you did, but the bank and train station and one of the granaries all had windows like this one so he figured it was where you started.

"Sit over there. There's some books you kin look at fer a minute while I ask 'bout seein' the doc."

"Okay, Clem," Terrence climbed into a chair and then leaned far over to take something to look at from a pile strewn about on a nearby table. There were several other people waiting in the same area, some who looked sickly or had others with them including a few children who were there with their Mas busy trying to keep their kids under control.

"I'm leavin' both 'a our bags. Keep watch on 'em, ya hear?"

"Okay, Clem."

Clem set their burlap sacks down right up against the front of Terrence's chair where he couldn't miss them and took Terrence's cap and set it right on top. Then Clem walked over and stood patiently behind a few people who were already standing in front of the window. He worked at his cap in his hands.



"Yes? May I help you?" A black-skinned woman wearing the dress and hat of a nurse looked down at him. *Twin Forks* only had one black-skinned family, the *Washingtons*, and they were farmers just like everyone else.

"Uh, well, we come to see the doc. Bout m' brother, Terrence." He wasn't sure if he should address her as 'Ma'am', her being black-skinned and all but he would address *Mrs. Washington* or their *memaw* that way if he saw her in *Twin Forks*.

"What's he got? Is he here with you?"

Clem motioned over his shoulder toward the waiting area. "Well, he's got two things to see about." Clem leaned forward to speak a little lower. "He walks funny on account 'a one 'a his legs bein' too short or bein' too long, 'n then our Pa he had 'a accident 'n Terrence was with 'im, an' m'old *memaw* what's dead now said his bell had got rung, I believe." Clem was nervous but proud of himself for presenting everything so thoroughly and thought maybe now was the time to show the fifty dollars but he didn't want anyone to see him having his money in his stocking foot.

"Where's your parents? Do you got parents? How old are you? How old is your brother?"

There were some people behind Clem in line and bored or impatient with their own concerns who all seemed to be paying attention to nothing but the exchange going on at the window. An awful lot of questions asked awfully quickly.

"Uh, we got parents but they caint come over with us on account 'a the farm. We come up on the train from *Twin Forks*. That's in Arkansas. On the train. Me, I'm Clem, I'm almost thirteen, 'n m' brother, Terrence, he's ten."

"So they know you're here? Your parents?"

Clem had an answer ready that wouldn't be a lie because by now Ma and Pa would definitely have heard from *Mrs. Spasky* who had been coming off the train that the boys were headed onto it. And with all of the talk about *St. Louis* and the docs

before, surely by now she would have figured it out. "Yeah," he told the woman, and then he spoke even lower. "I got the money fer it."

The woman busied herself with something off to the side then turned back around and said: "Can you read and write?"

"Uh, yes Ma'am." Gosh, he hope she meant words that he knew.

The dark skinned woman didn't act any different when he referred to her as Ma'am and handed him a writing board with some papers and a pencil. "Go over and sit and fill out these forms, best you can. If you need help with anything wait until you're done then come back and ask me."

Clem nodded, pushed his cap into his back pocket and took the papers back over to where Terrence was waiting.

*Was waiting.*

*"Terrence. Hey, Terrence!"*

His brother was gone.

At first Terrence tried to find something to look at, like Clem had told him to, but then Clem said to watch their two bags also and Terrence didn't see how he could look at a picture book or papers and look at the bags at the same time. Or why he had to sit down; except for his toe hurting he wasn't even tired from all of the walking, and this place, this '*hops-spital*' had all sorts of nice people in it, plus the hurt people who were in the rolling chairs or had come in from the funny red truck he'd seen out front. Well, stuff like this was downright irresistible. Blood and injury didn't bother Terrence none; he liked cleaning the critters he and Clem shot or trapped to eat or for their skins. Made him think of the '*assident*' with Pa though, made his head hurt some and he didn't notice but his lower lip sagged a bit.

Then, a boy who was a little older, maybe Clem's age, who'd been leaning against a wall across the room motioned Terrence over, motioned him to follow, and

then to bring the sacs with him, which Terrence did, following the boy to the edge of the room then around a corner and down a long, shiny white hallway, hurrying to keep up while carrying both sacs.

“You hungry? What’s your name?” The boy whom Terrence had assumed was just bored and there with one of the families now seemed to be much more mature and maybe at the hospital by himself, or maybe even worked here.

“Terrence. *M’name’s* Terrence. I’m ‘a hungry.”

“Got any money? They got a dining hall down the way but you *gotta* have money.”

“Got two *half-a-dollars*.”

This comment made the boy stop for a moment, then look around. He looked squarely at Terrence. “Here, *why’n’t* you let me carry one of them bags for you. We can go for something to eat.”

“*No!*” Terrence admonished loudly, pulling the bags away somewhat aggressively when the other boy reached for one. Clem had been real ‘*pa’cific*’ about watchin’ over their sacs.

The boy, he said his name was ‘*Boo*’, looked Terrence over. The red haired kid was small and looked like some farm hick; dirty, tussled hair, no sense of grooming or style, britches with patches and holes, one toe pushing through a shoe. A little twitchy too, crazy maybe even, eye’s flickering around, lower lip tending to droop. But he looked pretty strong and looked like he might put up a fight or holler really loud if *Boo* simply took the bags from him and ran. He mentioned having a dollar which *Boo* was sure he could acquire easily and without any ruckus if he could just get the boy off somewhere alone, get a deck of cards. Farm hicks were no match for *Boo*. He could take it from him in minutes. *Farm hick* probably didn’t even know any of the games. Besides, *Boo* was hungry.

“Suit yourself. C’mon. This way.”

Terrence followed the boy because he could now smell some of those same new cooking smells he'd smelled yesterday. "Kin we eat two 'a them *dog sausage*? They got *dog sausage* at this '*hospital*'? 'Cause I kin eat one *m'self*."

"Dog sausage? You mean hot dogs. In a bun, right? Yeah, pro'lly they got 'em here but they got better stuff too. C'mon, Terrence. We're friends now, right? Put 'er there." Boo held out his hand which Terrence tried clumsily to shake while shouldering the two bags. "Dining hall's just over here. Hurt your foot? That why your here?"

"Didn't hurt it; it's too short. Or it's too long. What doc says. My brother, Clem... we caint tell."

Boo wasn't really listening but then Terrence wasn't either. They entered the dining room, only sparsely filled as the staff readied for lunch.

"Time is it? Got a pocketwatch?"

Terrence shook his head. "Uh, uh. Ain't got no pocketwatch." Terrence kind of wished he did; he could always tell someone the time as long as the clock had the numbers drawn on.

"C'mon. We can get some eggs, grits, toast'n sausages. Fifteen cents." Boo took a plate from a stack and handed one to Terrence who could only use one hand as the other was occupied keeping the sacs from falling off of his shoulders and onto the floor.

"Get out of here you *rapscaillon!*" An older woman who was serving the food pointed a ladle and a glare at Boo. "I catch you stealing..."

"We got money. *Me 'n my cousin! M' cousin Terrence here.*"

"I got two *half-a-dollars*," Terrence added proudly.

The woman was skeptical. "Lemme see one."

Boo turned to Terrence. "Give one to her. Don't you wanna eat?"

"I'm hungry, already tole you," Terrence agreed. "*Half-a-dollars*' 's at m' house. My brother Clem, he'll take us over there later but I come to see the doc. At the '*hospital*'."

Suddenly angry, Boo spun Terrence around. His demeanor had changed completely and Terrence was suddenly frightened of his new friend. "You lied to me you little hick." He squeezed Terrence's shoulder hard making Terrence drop both bags.

"Ow!" Terrence wailed.

"You leave him alone! I'm calling for the constable," the old woman turned and began to holler. Boo looked frantic for a moment then grabbed the nearest bag he could and ran off. Terrence was too preoccupied with his hurt shoulder at first to notice the theft. Then a couple of nurses who were just coming to the food line and had seen some of what had happened and came over to him.

"Are you okay?" A nurse asked. She had hair nearly as red as Terrence's.

"Squeezed *m'* shoulder, hard. *Hurts.*"

The older woman returned with a constable and began explaining about the theft.

Just then, amidst the minor commotion, Clem burst into the room. "*Terrence!*" He strode over with an angry look then saw that the boy was crying. "Told ya wait by them chairs!"

Terrence was too upset to speak. He waved his arms, his lower lip drooped extra heavily and his head hung low, swaying side-to-side as he tried to speak.

"A boy stole his bag," the serving woman with the constable reiterated loudly enough for Clem to hear. Clem looked down and saw only Terrence's bag. Relief washed over Clem that there was no money missing, just his change of clothes, a book he'd brought along and the map. The constable seemed mostly annoyed by the matter and nodded his head disinterestedly, at one point saying that he knew who they were describing, he'd see about it and that the boy went by the name '*Boo*'. Then the constable walked off without another word.

"Are you hungry? Are you boys here alone?" Another nurse asked.

Clem didn't want to lose his place back in the first line and still had the form papers and pencil lead in his hand. "We ate some this morning already, Ma'am. I gotta go 'n git back in the line, got the forms," he held them up.

The nurses were convinced that they were okay so Clem took Terrence's bag and the boys turned and headed back to the admitting area. Terrence calmed some and absentmindedly took hold of Clem's shirt tail.

"But Clem, that boy...he said we could eat another a' them dog sausage. *Hey Clem. I'm hungry.*"

"Just stand here. Where I can see ya. Then we'll eat something. Promise." Clem stood Terrence off to one side and then got back into the line after it took him nearly half an hour to fill in the three pages of forms the best he could. He had Terrence stand far enough to one side where it would be hard for him to hear what would be discussed at the window.

When his turn finally came, the lady smiled at him a little as she took the forms. "It says here that the patient, 'Terrence Wilcox', who I assume is your brother..."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"...is listed as being ten years old. Now, under 'nature of the inquiry' you left this blank."

"Uh, wadn't sure what it meant, what was meant by that question," Clem replied sheepishly.

"It means: *why are you here?* What's wrong with him? Looks all right to me." The woman could see Terrence standing off to one side of the line, fidgeting with his feet, talking quietly to himself or maybe his hurt toe.

Clem could tell that while they pretended not to, people in the line were again eavesdropping on the conversation and he began to sweat. He repeated: "Uh, well he's got one leg that's longer and one that's shorter but we caint tell which," he said loudly enough for Terrence to *possibly* hear, then he leaned forward a bit and spoke lower as

the woman leaned in as well. "He also got his bell rung bad in 'a accident off the tractor with Pa." He repeated. "Makes him talk funny and stuff."

"I see. Well, sit over there and I'll have a nurse come and get you. She'll take you to see one of the doctors."

Clem nodded and feeling grown up and proud, he stepped out of the line. He went back over to Terrence and said: "We *gotta* go 'n wait for a nurse ta come see us."

"Okay, Clem."

"Did you hurt your leg?" The nurse asked Terrence as she walked the boys down a series of steps and long hallways.

"Nah, it don't hurt none."

"It's always been that way," Clem offered. "Since he was real little."

"I see," the nurse decided not to probe any more. "You may sit here. I'll come for you when Doctor Smithson is ready to see you."

Clem had prepared for this. "Uh, would it be all right if I talk with the doc real quick first please, Ma'am. Before he sees after Terrence?"

The nurse looked at Clem a little oddly but he seemed very mature for his age so she merely shrugged. Clem had told Terrence that he needed to speak with the doctor privately about the fifty dollars and gratefully Terrence did not question the matter.

Doctor Smithson was a short, rotund gentleman with very curly hair, half of it gone gray. He wore a white long coat over a shirt and tie but the tie hung loosely, and had wire-rim spectacles. The nurse led Clem to a set of chairs in front of a large desk that was piled with papers and samples of human bones that were made from clay or something, like the ones Clem had seen when his teacher taught them the sciences. He was busy reading something and did not look up. "Thank you, Myra," he mumbled. After what seemed like forever, he set the papers he was reading down, adjusted his

glasses and picked up the forms Clem had filled out earlier. "Hello...Terrence? I'm Doctor Smithson," he extended a chubby hand which Clem shook somewhat awkwardly.

"I'm Clem...short for Clement. My brother, he's Terrence."

"Okay," Doctor Smithson scratched his head and read quickly down the form. "What can I do for you?" He stared intently through the spectacles and was clearly a bit harried.

Clem explained the situation about the 'rung bell' again, best he could, and Doctor Smithson nodded his head and seemed to follow what he was saying. "Well, let's have a look at him. I must ask, since you're here by yourselves, how do you intend to pay?"

Clem knew he could trust the doc as you trusted them with your health, and what was more important than that? While Doctor Smithson looked at him queerly he pushed his one shoe off with the toes of the other then he slid off his stocking and carefully removed the folded and now tightly pressed fifty-dollar bill.

"I see. Well, that will certainly more than cover your visit. That's an awful lot of money, young man." The doctor crossed his arms across his chest and eyed Clem suspiciously. "Are you sure it wasn't obtained nefariously?" Clem smartened, reddened and sat back into the hard chair. He had little to no idea of the question but the look on the doctor's face made him nervous. Could the fifty-dollar bill not be real? Had he been taken in by the banker? This seemed unlikely, yet... "Is it rightfully yours?" The doctor's tone softened a bit. "You didn't steal it?"

Far from offended, Clem was relieved. "Uh, no sir. *Mr. Duggan*, at the bank over in *Barling*, he gave it to us."

The doctor now assumed that it was some act of charity on the part of a wealthy banker as the boy looked like a typical laborer who could never have amassed such a



fortune through legitimate means. This made the doctor look more favorably at the situation.

"Well, let's go have a look at..." he looked down his nose at the page, "...Terrence."

Terrence was sitting in the waiting area swinging his legs beneath the chair while he went on and on to a smiling nurse about things from *Twin Forks*. "Thas's m' brother, there," he pointed. "Hey Clem!"

Doctor Smithson took command. "You must be Terrence. I'm Doctor Smithson. How are you today?"

"M' leg don't hurt none. I tole the lady."

Doctor Smithson smiled. "Well that's certainly good. Come into the examination room and we'll have a look at you. How does that sound?"

Terrence looked at Clem then back. "Kin m' brother come? Clem?"

"Of course."

The doctor took them into an examination area while the nurse, Myra, spoke with a couple who just came in, told them to wait, and then followed behind the boys and closed the door. The doctor motioned for Terrence to sit up on the table. Clem put his hand out and was about to surreptitiously stop Terrence's leg swinging before he started but then the doctor came over with a round mirror on his forehead and began looking into Terrence's eyes and then down into his throat.

"Just a quick check then we'll see about that leg."

The doctor cast Clem a flash that Clem couldn't interpret but seemed of worry or possible warning as he finished looking into Terrence's eyes then moved to the end of the table and had Terrence lay back down so he could examine his legs.

After a quick examination Doctor Smithson sat back and said: "I'm going to have you go a see a colleague of mine for a moment. Will that be okay?"

“He means to speak with another doctor,” Myra added kindly when both boys looked confused.

“Okay,” Terrence said cheerfully. He enjoyed all of the attention and wondered if he’d be taller, like the longer leg, or shorter like the shorter one, after the doc gave him some medicine.

The doctor returned. “Myra, why don’t you take Terrence here over to Doctor Wells’ office, please? Clement and I will be right along.” Myra steered Terrence out of the examination room after Terrence got an approving nod from Clem. Terrence took the nurse’s hand. Clem didn’t much like being called Clement but he kept his tongue.

“Your brother appears to have what’s called a ‘*subdural hematoma*’. Most likely from the,” Doctor Smithson returned to the notes, “tractor accident you said he suffered a few years ago. Pressure on his brain can affect his speech, his facial muscles, that sort of thing. I’m not sure what we could do about his leg. It is apparently congenital. That means he was born with it. I’m afraid for now he’ll just have to walk a little funny. Perhaps as he grows it might balance out some. Do you understand?” Clem nodded though truthfully his head was throbbing and he only understood a little. But he trusted the doc because, well, you just always did.

The doctor stood and opened the door. “Shall we?”

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"What happened on your face?" Clem was aghast as he and Doctor Smithson entered another office and heard Terrence asking this of the new doc, Doctor Wells. Terrence was standing next to the tall, thin man with a long, waxed mustache who was also dressed in a long, white coat. Terrence was pointing at a liver spot on the man's face. Clem stood dumbly, frozen to talk. *The man from the seat behind them on the train!* Doctor Wells still had the same stern look he'd had on the train, and when Clem saw into his eyes he thought he saw faint recognition. Terrence continued: "Did ya get kick by a goat?"

"Terrence!" Clem came to his senses and moved quickly to his brother's side. Clem was going to apologize but being in this office with two strange doctors, and two strange nurses, in a big, unknown city made him feel more like crying than trying to be polite.

Doctor Wells said: "It's quite alright. Terrence and I were just getting acquainted. The marks on my face are called '*cavernous haemangioma*' and I have had them since birth. Not unlike your leg, am I right? Your leg has been this way since you were born?" Clem nodded so Terrence did too.

The doctors spoke quietly between themselves for a moment then Doctor Smithson and Myra went to the door.

Doctor Smithson said: "I have another patient to see about. Come back to my office after Doctor Wells has had a look at you, okay? You're in fine hands. Doctor Wells is one of our hospital's finest surgeons."

"Hops-spital," Terrence concurred. Doctor Smithson smiled. Doctor Wells did not. The boys nodded again as Doctor Smithson left.

"Now," Doctor Wells went behind his desk to read the forms and some notes that Doctor Smithson had written then came back around affixing his own round mirror

to his head. “Follow me please,” he led them through a couple of sets of doors to another examination room, this one larger than Doctor Smithson’s. There was some strange looking apparatus sitting on the countertops, and some things attached to a chair. Doctor Well’s nurse was an enormous woman nearly as tall as the doctor himself and maybe twice as heavy.

“Let’s have a look, shall we?” Doctor Wells had Terrence lie back on the table, and with the big nurse hovering Terrence looked nervously at Clem for a moment before lying all the way down. “Yes,” Doctor Wells went on as if he was orating, “I believe I saw you two gentlemen travelling alone by train.” He glanced at Clem for confirmation.

“Uh, yes sir. We came from *Twin Forks*.”

“*Twin Forks*? Missouri?”

“No, sir. *Twin Forks* is in Arkansas.” Clem didn’t really feel right about correcting the doc.

“*Ar-kinsaw*,” Terrence nervously concurred. He was fidgeting extra with his hands, and the big nurse tried to gently get him to release them and lay them by his side.

“Have you parents? An aunt or uncle maybe? Someone who looks after you?” The doctor bent to peer into Terrence’s ear. Terrence giggled.

“Parents, yes, sir. Ma and Pa. And our Uncle Ned, he comes ‘round a lot since Pa took his fall.”

“I see. And they sent you here alone? You must be very mature boys.” Clem was relieved not to have to tell the tale he’d conjured for *why* they’d come by themselves, so it appeared to be complete with Ma’s blessings. The doctor walked around to look into Terrence’s other ear. This time, Terrence did not giggle and seemed to flinch a little when Doctor Wells moved his ear around.

“Well.” The doctor moved the mirror to one side. “I am going to perform a procedure. It won’t take very long and should make you feel much better. You’ll go to sleep for a little while and when you wake up you’ll have to stay in bed to rest until I tell you that you can get up. The nurse here will help you clean up, get you ready.”

Doctor Wells and the nurse walked off. Terrence squeezed Clem’s hand. Whatever fun was being gleaned from all of the attention or praise for their maturity was rapidly fading and being replaced with fear.

They sat alone in the room.

“I’m *’scared*, Clem.”

Clem wanted to tell him not to be but the truth was that Clem was scared too. *Plenty*. The nurse had taken Clem aside and quickly explained what the doctor was going to do, trying not to get Clem too nervous but the idea of a doc making a hole in Terrence’s head was downright terrifying. Didn’t the doctor know that blood came out when you got holes in you? And, if too much blood did come out you got real sick or maybe even died? Of course he knew this; he was a doctor! Clem’s throat began to swell and his head began to swim. What if the doc made a hole too big and all of Terrence’s blood ran out of him and he did die? What then? The only thing Clem was glad about was that Terrence didn’t know this himself. Terrence was already real nervous. Clem knew it wasn’t his place to question adults especially a doc. He wished he could talk to Ma on a telephone and ask her if it was all okay but he hadn’t ever used a telephone before and he wasn’t sure how, nor did he know how he would go about having someone tell Ma to go into town where some stores or a few *well-to-do* neighbors had telephones that he might talk to her on. Smiling weakly at his brother, Clem fretted.

After a while, dizzy, Clem had lost track of time, the big nurse and an orderly came into the room and had Terrence sit in a wheelchair. Terrence seemed momentarily preoccupied with the notion of rolling himself around but the orderly told him that it

was his job to wheel him which Terrence still found some amusement in though neither boy understood the reasoning as Terrence could walk just fine on his own. Clem followed as they wheeled Terrence down to another room where the big nurse left for a minute while the orderly had Terrence change out of his clothes and into a strange garment that looked like one of their *memaw's* house coats but was split up the back. The orderly tied it as tight as he could and assured Terrence that no one would see his buttocks, and that he would be lying on his back to ensure it.

“I’ll put your clothes here in this basket and you can get them back later,” the orderly told them both. Then the big nurse returned with a rolling table and Clem helped Terrence to climb on while Terrence kept one hand on the back of the funny dress to be sure it didn’t open up and show the nurse his backside.

The big nurse said: “It’s time to go.” This time she didn’t offer any soothing words but her tone wasn’t mean about it either.

Clem walked alongside of the rolling table, holding tightly to his brother’s also clammy hand. There were all sorts of strange smells, bright lights and myriad sounds that included people in pain. It was quite nearly completely overwhelming. The procession wheeled into an operating room where Doctor Wells entered from a different door and went to scrub his hands real clean in a deep sink basin.

Terrence couldn’t stop himself from propping up on his elbows to take it all in. “You just lie still, try to calm yourself. Everything’s gonna be fine,” the big nurse told him.

Clem nodded in agreement but in his own pounding heart he wasn’t quite sure.

Clem began to shake, and did everything he could to fight it so Terrence wouldn’t notice. The doctor came back over and with the big nurse helped Terrence to move from the rolling table to another table. The orderly then took the rolling table from the room. Clem didn’t really see why there was such a fuss; Terrence could walk fine all by himself, but he didn’t ask any questions and then figured maybe the doctor

and nurse wanted to continue the ruse that they were fixing Terrence's leg in order to make his brother more at ease. The table they moved him onto had leather straps hanging from the sides. Something about it made Clem think of a large, feral dog that was growling just before showing its teeth. Then Clem noticed a tray of tools and instruments the big nurse was arranging- were they all to be used on Terrence? -and he grew so faint that his knees did buckle. Terrence might have noticed them too so Clem quickly tried to draw his attention away.

"This 's what we been plannin' for, Terrence...fer a long time." Clem said low, unable to keep his voice from cracking. "The doc's gonna help ya out, make ya git better."

"You won't even know," the big nurse added. "Doctor Wells is an excellent surgeon, and you'll be fast asleep the whole time. I promise you won't feel anything."

"Ain't tired. Daytime," Terrence said.

"They give ya some medicine fer sleepin'," Clem offered, looking to the nurse gratefully for confirmation. "Like what Pa had. 'Member?" Terrence nodded. This recollection made him feel grown up. If it was okay for Pa then it must be okay for him, too. He calmed a little and stared at the ceiling but did not let go of Clem's sweaty hand.

"Hey, Clem. They got the whitewash put on the roof. Put on the roof *an'* on the wall. Hey Clem!"

Clem looked up and indeed the ceiling was white just like the walls were.

"I'm afraid you'll have to go now." Doctor Wells came over, and then said to Clem: "You can wait just outside. It won't take long. But Terrence here will have to rest for a good while afterward."

Terrence squeezed Clem's hand extra hard and his eyes began to tear up. "Hey, Clem! I'm 'scared. Stay here! *Caint* ya stay here? -*Caint* ya stay with me? Hey Clem!"

Clem was too choked up to speak. He opened his mouth dumbly. The big nurse tried to smile and motioned toward the waiting area, then told him gently to go there.

Clem couldn't even feel his legs as he moved and his head throbbed as he saw as the nurse closed the door to the operating room, watching the last look of tear-streaked fear and utter loneliness on his younger brother's panicked face.

He did as he was told and sat in a chair. Then, for the first time since he'd ventured away from *Twin Forks*, Clem Wilcox put his head in his hands and cried.

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When Terrence opened his eyes all he knew was that he had no idea where he was and that his whole head hurt, plenty, but especially on one side. For a moment he blinked and stared at the unfamiliar white ceiling. The noises, the murmurs, some wails, echoed through the large room that was bigger than the one in church and rowed with cots, all of them with patients resting on them. Terrence slowly raised his head and tried to get his bearings then saw his brother fast asleep in a chair along the wall. *Hey Clem!* -he wanted to call out! But no sounds came, and his lips were dry, very, very dry, to the point of cracking, and he was pretty sure he'd never been so thirsty in his whole life, not even after a whole day picking peaches. A new nurse, a tall, thin, older dark skinned woman came over and gave Terrence a sip of water then began asking him how he was feeling when Clem arrived behind her rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Terrence's head was wrapped in bright white bandage and unconsciously he began pulling on it; the nurse scolded him not to. Clem could see a spot of blood on one side of the white gauze. It was not a very big; heck, he'd seen worse from scraped knees, and he was greatly relieved that Terrence didn't lose too much blood through the hole, and that he was still alive.

“Head...*hurt*,” Terrence rasped with some effort past his split lips.

The nurse told him to lie still; that she would go get Doctor Wells. When she wandered off, Clem wondered first about Terrence really being all right, and then how



was he different. "Don't ya move 'round none. 'N like the nurse says don't touch yer head. Wait for the doc ta come."

"Thirsty."

"Lemme see if I kin git ya some more water. Don't move, 'n don't touch yer head none though, ya hear me?"

Terrence nodded but was still real groggy, like right after the tractor accident with Pa. He let his eyes slowly close.

Clem looked around and found an orderly with a tray of glasses and a pitcher and was returning with a glass of water just as the nurse came back in with Doctor Wells. Doctor Wells saw Clem and held up his hand.

"Let's have a look before we give him too much to drink. The anesthesia can make him sickly in his stomach." Doctor Wells placed his monocle over his eye and sat on one edge of the cot, then looked first at the bandage and then into both of Terrence's eyes. "Terrence, how do you feel?"

For a moment, blinking, Terrence again seemed unaware of his surroundings. "Head *hurt*," he mumbled. "Hey...Clem..."

"Can you move your toes for me?"

Terrence's attention got diverted toward his feet. "'M leg...too long...too short." The actual difference had never been visible to either boy.

Doctor Wells said: "Let's have you sit up." The nurse moved over and helped Terrence to sit. For a moment Terrence acted as if his head weighed a hundred pounds and he began blinking rapidly. Clem thought that Terrence might go faint like he'd seen his neighbor *Mrs. Lorentzen* when she got the letter telling her that her husband had been killed in an accident in the Army.

Clem watched over the Doctor's shoulder, gripping his cap in front of him, squeezing it hard. Something *did* look a *little* different in Terrence's eyes, maybe? And

Clem waited for his brother’s lip to start to droop with his concentration at any time but for some reason it didn’t.

“You’re doing fine. I want you to spend the night here and I’ll have another look in the morning. And then we can see about sending you home. If your head hurts the nurse will give you some medicine that will help you to sleep. You have a few sutures beneath your bandage -stitches; please don’t pull them out.”

Clem nodded thanks as Doctor Wells moved off and the thin nurse helped Terrence to lie back down. Clem was relieved, encouraged even, but an extra night away from home was expensive; the cot for Terrence in the large, communal room alone cost four dollars per night; it said so on a sign on the wall. Clem fretted over how this would be paid as the doctor’s surgery would surely cost them their fifty-dollar bill, and then there would not be enough money left for them to pay for the train ride back to *Twin Forks*, two tickets. Clem had no idea how they would earn money in *St. Louis* and earning the kind of money it took to buy train tickets anyway would take them weeks or more. By now, in the event that Ma hadn’t heard about their boarding the train she would be powerful worried, and likely even more powerfully mad. It had already been two days that their chores hadn’t been done, and now with the overnight stay a guaranteed third. Clem figured glumly that the two dumb goats and the five dumb pigs were probably making a bunch of ruckus about it that Ma had to bear.

The large communal room was noisy all the time and neither boy slept much. Patients were moaning, sometimes screaming or hollering out. Many, when they could fall asleep, snored loudly, like Pa. And there were always lights on too: dimmed some at night but still bright enough for the nurses to move around. Sleeping in a chair didn’t work too well so Clem had taken Terrence’s sac and a blanket and made a pallet on the floor beside Terrence’s cot, between it and the wall so he wasn’t really in anyone’s way. This way he could keep an eye on his brother and make sure he didn’t pull at the

bandage, or sewing stitches that held together the hole that Clem had let the doctor put into his little brother's head.

"Ain't bleedin' none no more," Clem told Terrence the next morning after gently lifting the bandages aside anyway to have a quick look. "The doc stitched ya up real good. Jest pro'lly have a scar under yer hair when it grows back. Won't even be able ta see it."

"Like them's with Pa?" Terrence had been fascinated with the several scars Pa bore which too were supposed to be hidden once his hair grew back but in Pa's case they were too big and never quite were.

"Nah, Terrence. Ya jest got ya a little one. Maybe about like the size 'a the tip 'a my little finger, maybe. Ain't like Pa's. Pa got all cut up."

Terrence considered this by looking at his own little finger. Heck, he got cuts bigger than that practically every day. He seemed a little disappointed that it wouldn't show like Pa's. Clem was once again surprised not to see Terrence's lip droop as it normally did whenever he was thinking about something real hard.

"Reckon' I'll be able to run faster? Fer at baseball? *Hey Clem!*"

"I hope it. Now tell me, private here before the doc comes back 'round, can ya I don't know, hear me any better?" Terrence looked at him queer but Clem asked: "I dunno, can ya remember anything what's different?"

"Differen'? Like, 'memberin' what?"

A nurse came over as Clem was getting flustered, worried that they had just wasted their life savings on his brother who was never going to have a normal leg and wasn't any different in his rung head. The nurse again asked Terrence how he was feeling, had a quick look under the bandage herself and then declared him fit to go. She told them to go back to Doctor Smithson's office, the first doc they'd seen, and pointed the way.

"Well, let's have a quick look at you," Doctor Smithson had Terrence sitting on the edge of a table. He took his rounded mirror and looked in both of Terrence's eyes then his ears and then into his mouth before a quick glance under the bandage. "I'm going to have Myra put on a lighter bandage. Then have you come back in three days so we can remove the sutures."

"The sewin'?" Terrence asked. Doctor Smithson smiled.

Clem began to gulp. "Uh, sir, we was gonna go back on the train today, still, if we could. If we have the money left fer the two tickets."

"Oh, that's right. You said that you don't live around here. Well, I'm sure your local doctor can remove them for you. See Myra about paying your charges. Good day, gentlemen." Doctor Smithson strode off and after a moment the nurse, Myra, reappeared. She motioned them over to a desk where she sat and had some more papers. Clem already had the fifty-dollar bill carefully on-hand, in his front pocket and liked being referred to that way by the big city doc.

"The charges, for the hospital, are eleven dollars, twenty cents..."

*Wait, what? This was too good to be true...*

But, then she went on: "...for Doctor Smithson, the charges are six dollars..."

*Still...six plus eleven...*

"...and, for Doctor Wells, his examination fees total twelve dollars..."

Clem was adding best that he could so quickly. *Eleven, plus six, plus twelve...*

"...and for Doctor Well's surgical procedure the charge is forty-five dollars."

Clem sagged, the knowing without arriving at the exact amount that they were woefully short. Nurse Myra wrote something quickly then looked up at the boys who were standing side-by-side. Even Terrence seemed attentive. She kept on talking smoothly. "Now, if you're indigent," she could tell by their puzzled expressions that they didn't know the word. "Indigent. Poor. It means that you don't have much money..."

"Uh, no Ma'am. We got some money," Clem rocked on his heels then quickly remembered the math. "Problem is we got us a fifty-dollars and maybe a little some more but we still gotta git tickets back to *Twin Forks* on the train. 'An some more food to eat too, 'fore we get back ta our farm."

"I'm hungry." Terrence agreed, always hungry it seemed unless he just et.

Myra thought for a moment. "Well, I need to go speak with the doctors. I'll be right back." She strode off.

"S'matter Clem?" Terrence turned to face him.

Clem sighed heavily. "Well, see, all-tole, well, paying both them docs is *more'n* what we got. With the fifty-dollars. More than the fifty-dollars."

"I could give *m'* two *half-a-dollars*?"

"Yeah. Yeah ya could, 'cept they's back in the tin at home, 'member? And it still ain't enough to add 'em all up."

"Wha's gonna happen? Ain't *m'* leg gonna stay fixed up?"

"Terrence, I done told ya, yer leg fixin's gonna take some time to fix. And, thing is, Ma needs us back but I'm *figurin'* we might need to stay on here, stay on in *St. Louis* so that we kin work 'n pay our earning to the docs." Clem looked down and said mostly to himself: "'Cept, then, what about Ma 'n Pa."

Terrence nodded his head solemnly too. He seemed to understand. He wiped his nose on his shirtsleeve. Truth was, he missed Ma and he missed Pa, missed sitting up in the barn window, missed sleeping in his own bed and looking out the window at the sky at night, smelling all of the sweet, familiar farm smells while he tried to stay awake and talk to Clem before always falling asleep too soon. Even though he often complained about it he guessed he missed looking after the goats and pigs too. But not chores involving peaches, or baling hay. He sure didn't miss those. "How many long would we have to stay?"

“Until we could earn up at least maybe five dollars savings, I Reckon’,” Clem could not hide the somber nature of the report. They both knew that meant being out away from *Twin Forks* for a long time.

Both boys looked at the floor and waited for the Myra to return with the bad news.

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"Hey Clem! Lookit! That's where we was walkin'! Other day!" Terrence was pointing and had his face hanging out the window of the number thirteen streetcar. They were able to board after only walking for about ten minutes, and the man who took their nickels said they could get off right near to the trains. Clem figured even if it cost more than seven dollars total, like the train did, he still might have paid in order to avoid all of the time spent walking, but only one nickel each! How could this be? He was feeling real grown up, real proud.

Somehow, both of the doctors decided not to make them pay any money. Clem had no idea how this miracle occurred or why and was so light-headed from the switch from fear over having to stay in *St. Louis* for months, maybe longer, alone, to being sent on their way with a good part of their fortune still intact. Only the eleven dollars and twenty-two cents for the hospital and cot fees left his pocket. Sadly, the fifty-dollar bill itself was gone but nearly as suitable consolation there was one twenty-dollar bill which they had also never owned before. The twenty-dollar bill was carefully folded and inside one stocking but Clem carried the rest of the paper money and coins in his britches pocket, real careful. Terrence was excited about riding on the streetcar and pointing out everything as they were going much more slowly than while on the train and were stopping nearly every block. Clem was excited for the ride but also looking forward to getting back to *Twin Forks*, to Ma and to Pa, and even to the school. Ma might be sore but she sure wouldn't be when he handed her the twenty dollars deciding that the remainder would go back into the tin but twenty dollars was a lot of money for Ma too so maybe she wouldn't be too sore. Maybe he'd even take a dollar, no, two, and let Terrence buy candy, toys and marbles with it.

Clem looked at his brother and they exchanged a smile. He wondered if Ma would notice that Terrence’s lip no longer drooped when Terrence was thinking real hard.



## *The Route*

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The desert dust tasted like the blackboard chalk Willie remembered sometimes getting in his mouth. A long time ago when he and that Wilkins boy, now what was his name? - Herbert? -No, Hubert, when Hubert Wilkins and himself, William Tanner, were routinely kept after class, often for smacking the chalkboard erasers together and amusing themselves while they clouded the front of the room. They would leave not only white dust in their hair and on their clothes but a fine layer on the heavy, wooden swivel chair the teacher often sat in thereby giving the class something to snicker about every time the teacher decided to then write on the board and show off a powdered sugar frosted backside. That was a long time ago, better than forty years. Please forgive Willie if he isn't quick to remember the boy's name, specifically. Willie Tanner has no idea why half of the thoughts he has ever popped into his mind, but they do. He only tastes the fine, red, desert dust at all because his air conditioning had broken the week before. And he'd spent all of his money, like he usually found some way to do, which made him call Butch about every other month and agree to do another run, just like Butch knew that he would. It was Willie's job when he chose to call Butch and take it, which was, like Butch expected, about every other month, because it pays four-hundred dollars and that goes a heck of a long way in 1962. Plus, Willie isn't even positive that what he's doing is illegal although he knows Butch's reputation. Butch is always on one end of the trip, to see Willie off, then there when he returns, opening the trunk and removing a bag or bags. Black bags like a doctor's only about three times the size, identical to the ones Willie had gotten glimpses of several times previously when he pulled up to the service docks behind *The Sands* casino in Las Vegas and some hard-looking guy pressed into a suit would open the trunk of Willie's car with a key he

already had and remove the bag or bags then another guy would set one or two in, smooth, like a pit crew, two taps on the trunk after it closed. Then Willie would slowly make the long loop around the back of the hotel past all of the service vehicles and employee parking and meld into strip traffic to make his way back to I-15. Part of the agreement meant that Willie could no longer use his trunk as the two keys were kept by Butch and whomever it was that came out of *The Sands*. Willie was in the habit of driving cautiously, even if he was just driving cash he was pretty sure it was against the law or why did he make four-hundred for a trip he'd only be paid one hundred for and that's if he was driving his rig? Willie didn't mind the repetition; normally, with his rig there'd be at least a half day's layover for unloading and then re-loading but here it was just a guy with a bag or two guys with two bags and he was back on his way.

He'd been feeling a little melancholy lately and the damn broken AC certainly wasn't helping him to think straight, more making him wish real hard for a 'sixer' of *Coors* beer bottles floating in a watery bucket of ice as it was at least a hundred degrees out which meant on the pavement a hundred twenty-five, easy. Fry an egg up on the hood, hot. In fact, the chrome strip along the top of the open window was hot enough to burn skin; he'd found that out when he'd gone to flick his cigarette butt out and pressed his forearm down hard against it. His car, a 1950 *Plymouth DeLuxe* drove like a dream. But today it was riding like a very hot dream, and it forced him to keep the windows open fairly wide and keep a big jug of now tepid water on the floor beside him for hydration.

Today, for some reason after having made this trip from Brooklyn to Las Vegas at least forty times over a nine-year period that he could count, on the way back instead of heading north on I-15 to I-70 East then north at Route 1 Willie decided to take the southern, more scenic route along the southern rim of Utah, dipping into northern Arizona then making its way up through *Monument Valley* and *Moab*, Utah. No one, not

even Willie himself could ever fully explain his actions but it was nearing six p.m. and here he was still licking powdery hot desert sand from his lips and keeping his eyes peeled for a clean-looking motel.

Butch hired Willie because he was steady and dependable. Now, it was a good thing no one was following him or they might think he was trying to run off with the loot. Loot, or whatever was inside of the bags anyway.

"Just don't stop nowhere ya might get the cah boosted," Butch had told Willie when he'd first started the runs, saying 'car' with a near Boston accent. "You lose the cah you owe for what's inside my friend and I'm tellin' ya right now you don't got that kind of dough." Every other run Willie had done he made his first stop back around Green River, Utah where there were four motels on four corners of the one intersection in town that featured stop signs. And the police station/city hall was within shouting distance.

*Perfect.*

Then, the next night always at the *Motel 8* in *Steubenville*, Ohio, or maybe in *Plainview*, Ohio if there was bad weather and it slowed him down. Butch was adamant: "*Don't need no fuckin' heroes so don't be drivin' all night an' gettin' in a wreck. Or pulled over by the fuzz. 'What you're gettin' paid for.'*"

So, why was Willie taking the scenic route?

He knew the travel time couldn't be all that different; a few hours here or there just meant one fifteen-hour day instead of a twelve.

"Pardon me, Ma'am. I mean to see about a room." Willie held his cowboy hat humbly in his hands and tried to use his best 'Southern gentleman' inflection. He was a tall man, better than six-two, thin with most of his hair, cut just above the shoulder, turning gray from what was a light brown. When he wore a mustache as he was now people said he looked a little like *Clint Walker*, from the TV series *Cheyenne*. Truthfully, only one person

had told him that specifically and it was a very drunk woman who herself looked a bit like *Clint Walker's* horse. Willie still probably went to bed with her if she'd been willing, he couldn't quite remember as that had been during his binge-drinking days. Well, his fall-down-drunk binge-drinking days which had mostly ended a nine years back when he started making the runs. Willie knew enough about Butch and his crew to know that he would become real dead, his body unceremoniously rolled into the ground somewhere if he screwed up, and drinking a lot tended you in that direction. He always took a room out front. Then he could back the *Plymouth* up right in front of the door as travelers often did to get at heavy luggage, so if anyone tried to break into the trunk or steal the car outright he would certainly hear it. The car was very non-descript; if it got stolen it would be just pure dumb luck. Like having a tractor-trailer, like the one Willie usually drove, drift across into your lane and catch you head-on. *Dead; an act of god; something like that.* As was also his custom he left the curtains partially open, and a window too if the weather permitted. The '*Dew Drop Inn*' was a bit seedier than a motel where he would usually stay, but the gas jockey at the filling station told him it was the only show in town, unless he wanted a boarding house which the kid said he wouldn't recommend as it was mostly full of Mexicans, most of the time. What sealed it was the kid told him that the next services weren't until *Moab*, Utah and that was better than a hundred-sixty miles from *Kayenta*, Arizona. As it was already nearing nine p.m., Willie thought that all things considered he'd be safer if he stopped and got some rest and then got back on the road with the morning sun. *Kayenta*, (*pop.* 970) featured the '*Dew Drop Inn*' motel along with a little general store on one side of the feeder road, then a service station, a hardware store, grocery and two restaurants, a diner and a Mexican place, on the road back behind. Willie had seen a scattering of little houses and maybe a sign of more back into the low hills. The sun was all-but gone when he'd pulled in, yet not dark enough to see any mass of twinkling lights. What he didn't like, as he sat on the bed with the TV on low, the static-filled signal trying to pull a signal from

*Albuquerque*, was not just the poor reception but the fact that despite the very limited flow of traffic on this scenic off-route there were still enough vehicles at now nine-thirty on a Wednesday evening that it gave him pause. For one thing, he had New York license plates which stood out if one looked, and might draw interest from some bored locals.

He had his gun out, a revolver. He kept it oiled, in perfect condition but hadn't fired it in years. He set it on the night table then carefully laid his hat on it. Where he could still get to it quick if he felt the need, which he hoped he never did. Four hundred was good money, great money for driving, but it wasn't worth getting killed over or spending his life in prison for shooting someone else. He'd done two years for smuggling moonshine when he was a young man during Prohibition and that was more than enough to set him straight about the penitentiary.

'*The Honeymooners*' was doing its best to become watchable on the tiny TV and as Willie sat and ate the two sandwiches he's bought earlier, chewing contemplatively, he realized with the next car that drove by a little too slowly for his liking (or imagination) that he would likely be up all night and might as well drive on. But he'd paid nine bucks for the room and wasn't about to draw attention to himself by going back to pester that nice woman for a refund. And, fact was you couldn't fall asleep at the wheel and then wreck a motel room. Why hadn't he just stayed on I-15 North to I-70 East, where he would right now be eating his sandwiches while watching '*The Honeymooners*' clear as a bell from the TV station in *Grand Junction*, Colorado, at one of four motels on the corners in *Green River*, Utah? *Scenery tomorrow better be damned worth all these crazy thoughts and added stress* -he told himself.

He finished the sandwiches and washed them down with a warm sarsaparilla, wishing for a cold one, the funny tasting drink back in vogue of recent, then stared through the opening slit in the window shades at the trunk of his *Plymouth*, focusing specifically on the keyhole for which he had no key. He'd owned the car for going on

seven years. Knew how sturdy and durable it was, the trunk specifically, how it would take a good crowbar and a lot of noise to pop it open should someone try to break into it but again the car didn't look like much so why would there be anything of value in the trunk? But Willie had been a punk once and he knew that the teenage boy's mind bored easily and that sometimes boys did the deliberately illogical just for something to do or the plain thrill of it.

He strummed his fingers on his outstretched thigh and caught a glimpse of *Jackie Gleason* over the tips of his cowboy boots; he hadn't yet bothered to take them off which too was a bit odd. He would change into more suitable northern clothing as his run moved into that territory, though he would admit that the pointy-toed boots were damn comfortable once they got broken in. He knew his *Plymouth* inside and out, enough to know that the air conditioning compressor was shot and that it cost nearly a hundred and twenty bucks for a new one, which was why he'd spent the driving day being so damn hot. Knew the engine, the drive train, had even changed his own brake pads when needed. If he was low on cash like he usually was, if he was gambling, which was most of the time. He also knew the interior, the dashboard; the seats. The fact that when the back seat was removed there was a funky-shaped opening cut out into the trunk, not big enough for a human to climb through, at least not a man of his size, but probably large enough to reach through and slide a bag or two through. In more than forty drives he'd never even really considered it. For one thing he suspected they were full of cash, at least in one direction, but which direction? For another, maybe there was something else inside one of those bags, something that he might not want to see.

His fingers strummed methodically, thumping slowly on his leg.

One thing was for sure: he wasn't going to sleep a wink in here or even take a shower to freshen up and get all of that red dust off of his skin and hair, not with the bag in the trunk and all of these cars driving about.

The inane, cackling, canned-laughter jarred from the TV and made him think about turning it off. He checked his watch again.

Standing, he pulled on his lightweight jacket, took the revolver and slid it into a pocket and went out to his car.

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The bags, there were two, sat on the bathroom floor in front of the sink while he showered. The door was open halfway to let the steam out. His revolver sat on top of the toilet. After forty runs, inevitably you do a lot of thinking, and Willie knew it wasn't outside of possibility that a rival gang, or Mafia family, or even casino employee might have seen the exchange once too often and figured that whatever it was in the bags must have considerable value attached to it and followed. He never pulled in at the same time and always on random days but he knew that all of the caution in the world didn't stand a chance against bad men or bad luck. When he was a young man, after his wife of only three years died suddenly of disease, he'd joined his brother Rufus on long liquor runs from Tennessee to New York in a *souped-up Ford* delivery truck that could outrun any state police or sheriff's cruisers had they ever drawn an eye. It was moonshine mostly but also some rum that came from somewhere else, one of the islands he'd heard someone guess, or maybe from Canada. He didn't care a lick where it came from as long as they could get it to Rufus's contact in Manhattan, 'Fat' Jimmy Smoot who really wasn't fat at all but Willie never thought to inquire about this. They'd gotten pinched on one of the runs, Rufus had some bad luck, and Willie always thought that somehow someone had tipped the cops because it was rare for runners to be carrying rum unless it came down from Canada and he heard one of the 'coppers' ask another about it before they'd even opened a single cask to check and see.

Sliding the flowered, water-stained shower curtain aside he rechecked that his revolver and the bags were as he'd left them then closed the curtain most of the way and quickly finished scrubbing off the road dust with some cheap smelling soap.

Dirty work meant good pay generally commensurate with the risk, unless you were an idiot or a psychopath who did risky things for free. Guys like that didn't get regular gigs, good gigs, like this one. And this *was* a good gig. He got to drive alone, never saw anyone or was seen with anyone shady except unavoidably for a few minutes on both ends. If only Willie didn't like the ponies so damn much he could probably be as good as retired by now instead of being fifty-two, driving a semi for a living and still making likely illegal cross-country runs on the side.

He had drawn the drapes and slid that near-useless chain lock on the door, then propped the chair up under the doorknob before he got into the shower. With his hair still wet he set the heavy bags on the floor between the bed and the wall, and his revolver back on the nightstand, this time without the cover of his hat. He stood for a while staring through the gap in the drapes off into nothing, the now nearly deserted highway, the desert beyond, then turned off the TV and lights. Rubbing his head with a towel, he organized his valise, boots and clothes. Then he lied down and somewhat surprisingly fell quickly asleep.



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Willie always woke with the sun. Unless he'd been on a bender and up all night. He didn't seem to need as much sleep as most men and he was eager to make some driving time. He thought about keeping the bags out of the trunk and setting them on the back seat next to his valise. Then he went as far in his mind as to imagine running into Butch out here in *no-man's-land* and explaining that he thought it best to keep them where he could see them. He frowned at these, the thoughts. They reminded him that like a child he didn't even own a key to his own car trunk and would have to remove the back seat again to replace the bags which was a tiresome task. Certainly Butch and the men at *The Sands* knew that if Willie wanted to he could bust the trunk open anytime with a pry-bar; open the bag or bags; see what was inside. Take off. They trusted him with it because they knew he wouldn't, would never act so crazy.

Still...

The morning was desert-cool with a low, low fog that nestled the sagebrush and covered both sides of the roadway with fat drops of dew. His *Plymouth* seemed to love this particular combination of elements and rolled along smooth and easy; the sun was nowhere near high enough yet to cause heat distress so having the windows down just a bit let him draw in the sweet, cool air, let it flow through his hair. He'd refilled his water jug and was still clad in the western attire. He figured the drive to *Moab*, the next town on the map, would take about three hours. He could fill up again on gas and get some food there.

The monuments began to appear in the distance, feathered in as the soon-to-be-burning sun slowly rose and chased the fog away, replacing it with hot, dry air that would ripple up from the black asphalt and create a colorful mirage. Willie drew his breath and settled in with focus, both hands gripping the oversized steering wheel.

He'd given up on trying to listen to anything on the radio other than an occasional farm report and those were sporadic at best. Really the scenery, particularly this scenery, was the prior reasoning for the detour. The giant red spires and wind-worn rock formations that played every trick on the eye the light could conjure stood as sentries to a valley entrance that he knew from his limited days of schooling was all once undersea, millions of years ago. He was mildly interested in this sort of thing, and the petroglyphs he'd heard about where you could walk right up and see just off the road. But in his mind's eye he could see Butch pacing, waiting for him behind the noisy auto body shop, Butch wondering why Willie was late. Butch fearing the worst: that this runner, Willie Tanner, was not going to show. Worse still that there would be no news of an accident, a theft, or even an arrest, which meant a hunt would begin that would last as long as Butch and his thuggish associates were breathing. Willie shook the image from his head, all-but ignored the rolling scenery and monuments, and focused on the pock-filled asphalt lane just to the right of the very faded (and mostly missing) painted centerline. He drew his brow across his forearm then his forearm across his pants, and reached for his already tepid water jug. He had a nasty little scrape on his left wrist, more of a gouge really but it being mostly bone there it didn't bleed too badly despite the missing skin. He'd gotten it putting the bags back into the trunk after once again removing the back seat, scraped his wrist good with the weight of one of the bags as he strained through a bad position to push it back toward the front of the trunk, debating his story if asked as to why the bags ended up in a strange position, settling on a tale of a deer jumping out in front of him and almost wrecking the car. The pain made him angry; he was a grown god-damn man, doing god-damn serious, responsible work. 'Was the reason the bags were taken out to begin with, not to break trust by trying to open them (he had noticed spinning, three-digit combination locks atop each) not to open them by any means and run off with whatever was inside, no, they were taken out so he could keep his eye on them, his gun over them, keep them *more* protected than

they would have been sitting overnight in his trunk at the '*Dew Drop Inn*' in *Kayenta*, Arizona (pop. 970) right near the scenic highway. Had Butch been the one who'd originally told him about *Green River*? Told him it was the best place to make his second overnight stop on the way out, the four motels with the police station and city hall just across the way? Willie honestly couldn't remember; it was a long time and a lot of drinks ago and none of it had ever mattered a lick until this trip where he'd had this wild hair come on, a 'Rufus' hair you might call it if you knew his brother. This wild hair distracting like the real kind if yours was long enough (his was) where it could get wet on the forehead and fall in a hot, heavy and salty clump to direct a drip of sweat right into your eye. Which was how he remembered that it was salty, the first time it happened on this particular run, yesterday, as it did again just now. He brushed the wet hair away, hooking it behind his right ear.

The windows were halfway down now. Some hot dust and sand swirled in and some of it caught his wrist, and stuck painfully in the oozing sore.

"*God-damn it,*" he spat aloud and wished he'd wrapped his wrist with something back in town because out here was nothing except sand and sagebrush, and in the slowly closing distance some mesas and spires, the occasional car or truck headed in the opposite direction. He imagined he could fasten a makeshift wrap, a bandage from a piece off of one of his shirts but then the shirt would be ruined. He rotated the hurt wrist slowly a couple of times and gave a quick examining glance to check that there wasn't any actual sand or the like sticking to the damp and sticky, reddish-white.

Grabbing an apple he'd saved from yesterday he bit into it and carefully chewed, watching the road unroll before him over lazy little hills, climbing slowly, straight as his eye could see into the distant, dusty haze.

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Despite an overwhelming urge to stop and look for the petro glyphs, and stop for lunch at what looked like some good Mexican food, the parking lot being full of cars as Willie passed through *Moab* just near lunchtime, he opted instead to buy a couple of sandwiches and a cold *Nehi* (grape) then kept driving. The newly paved highway, I-70, was only about forty miles away, at which time he'd be back on track and damn-near on schedule.

He was doing just as the day was: fine. The temperature cooling down as he moved northward and gained some elevation. The eastbound portion of I-70 climbed slowly into the mountains and then not so slowly once it got over the top. The goal was to make it past Denver and into Kansas before the second overnight stop, which of course depended on the weather as freak snowstorms were known in the *Rockies* in every month including July and August and could really slow his speed or shut things down completely. The weather forecast was good; he'd even listened to a couple of those boring farm reports on the radio to confirm. The fact was it was damn hot by mountain standards too, probably better than seventy degrees at the top of the pass where the permanent snow fields and he guessed maybe even some glaciers were melting like mad. He always made adjustments to his carburetors to compensate for the altitude when he got to the base of the mountains, the town of *Glenwood Springs*, Colorado, then returned them back to normal just past Denver. He liked a particular truck stop on the westbound side because it had great coffee, clean restrooms and a diner attached with large picture windows so he could easily watch his car if he felt the need for a sit-down meal.

Sometimes, bad luck doesn't make itself quite so apparent immediately but festers, a relatively innocuous event that, if left unchecked, could lead down all kinds of paths,

one more unsavory than the next. Willie didn't fancy himself a criminal; he had a normal job as a long-haul trucker he'd kept for better than twenty years despite any bad bouts with inebriants, and to look at him you wouldn't see him as the criminal type: the fidgety eyes, the hard, coiled bodies ready to strike at the tiniest perceived slight. Loud, boorish commentary meant to intimidate or often attract those of like-mind who found physical confrontation necessary and often regular sport. No, the soft-spoken, tall, reedy man would not catch your eye that way which was just how Willie liked it. What he liked far less, as he supposed when he first began to think about it later, was that the bad luck was started by his stomach from the wafting smells from the diner's chimney that earlier had him sitting inside and munching on a juicy cheeseburger and crinkle-cut fries, still with a firm eye on his Plymouth. What he'd liked far less too, *bad luck piece number one*, were the two men who got out of a really nice *Pontiac*, a *souped-up* rig with probably better than four hundred horsepower he figured. Shiny, candy-apple red, almost daring the cops to put chase. Brand-spanking right from the showroom new. Didn't like the two men at all by his eye. Didn't like the way either man held himself, moved. Then, luck be he knew one of 'em, too. The swagger, the near disregard for flashing the .45 automatic in the shoulder holster while pulling on a sport coat. Bull-thick necks and oversized arms. *Bad luck piece number two*: the goons, one *Johnny Carvelli*, he from *Staten Island*, Willie recalled, and an unidentified associate, they had the same nose for the food and were coming inside. *Bad luck piece number three*: the associate noticed Willie's *Plymouth* and the New York plates as they ambled through the lot, pointing a chubby finger indicating such and drawing Johnny's eye. When he'd seen the man at Butch's shop Butch acted deferential in a manner which Willie knew was reserved for those higher up the pecking order. This generally also meant they had at least some brains, and gathered and retained some information, unlike the thug pointing the chubby finger who looked like he was just kept around as muscle.

Willie made it through his lunch. He felt Johnny’s eyes on him several times as if the man was sizing him up, or maybe trying to place him. Both big men turned so blatantly when Willie somewhat cautiously passed their booth, on his way to the cashier, that to not turn and nod as he did could possibly be perceived as a show of guilt or fear. So he nodded, made eye contact that said somewhat respectfully: *I know who you are* –to Johnny. Then Willie kept on moving. He paid his bill and left the diner. That had been three hours ago, and as he neared the top of the mountain crest at *Loveland Pass*, Colorado, and while the *Plymouth* was doing forty-five and purring like a kitten, Willie’s stomach was in knots. He had no reason to be nervous; he didn’t know what role Johnny played in what part of the organization and it was unlikely that Johnny knew anything about the run. Probably, he was just out for a drive. But this didn’t feel right to Willie, not this far from Brooklyn, and not with a goon behind the wheel. Willie noticed that the *Plymouth* was still coated in red, desert dust. He would run it through a car wash before he got back to New York, but had Johnny noticed it too? Maybe wondered where the car had been? Had Willie imagined the man taking extra notice beyond the license plate? Even still, even with moving the bags inside last night for safe-keeping, Willie had done nothing wrong. He didn’t see how being cautious could be construed as ‘wrong’. He’d been on the west side for gasoline and lunch; if they’d watched him leave they would have seen him get back on the interstate eastbound. Of course by then if he had been up to no good, which he wasn’t, he would have known they’d be watching and gone back to his expected route just to be sure. For all they knew he was going to take the next exit that had an overpass and head back west. But...why? He’d done forty-six runs; why would he suddenly up and run off with whatever was in the trunk? Of course Johnny had eyeballed him; whether he knew what Willie was doing all the way out here or not. So he’d looked at a car with New York tags that had some red desert dirt on it. *Big deal.*

Willie gripped the wheel and hardly noticed the awe-inspiring mountains as he whipped past.

He shifted down to low gear and stayed to the right after summiting the pass as the long, slow grade could really get you picking up speed, more speed than he was comfortable with under any circumstances but especially on a run. He might have used his flashers but didn't want any police thinking he might be breaking down. As he broke through first some clouds and then finally the eastside of the mountain range he could see Denver down below him sprawling out on the edge of the vast American plains, the highway like a twenty-mile long kid's playground slide gently leading right into the center of the urban mass and then right on through it past the other side, seemingly on forever.

One bag going to Vegas; two bags coming back?

That was right, wasn't it? In various glimpses over the years, when he *did* see something, wasn't that usually it? Drugs going out, cash coming back? Cash coming out, drugs coming back? Stolen stuff, maybe watches or jewelry, or something instead of drugs? Exchange of human heads or arms, who knew with some of the mob whackos. None of his business any way it shook.

None of his business at all.

*Steubenville or Plainview, in Ohio, they were usually the other overnight stopping choices, about a hundred miles apart, two hours driving. Focus.*

*Johnny may have already called Butch. Told him he'd seen the runner Willie, and that the man seemed nervous. And that the man's car was practically coated in red desert sand, like he had taken a secondary highway or possibly a dirt road, not the direct, regular, safe and reliable route that had worked without a hitch nearly ten years to date. The guy probably already busted open the trunk, went through the bags. Probably made a u-turn and headed back west after he saw Johnny at the truck stop diner. Butch was probably headed over to try to find Willie's*

*brother Rufus to see what Rufus knew about Willie's sudden breakdown that was going to wind up getting him killed, and maybe drop the debt for whatever Willie stole in Rufus' lap since it was Rufus who first introduced Willie to Butch. All sorts of things could be coming. All sorts of bad things.*

Willie took a breath and settled back in. Nothing was going to happen as long as sometime tomorrow he pulled into *Butch's Auto* and Butch took his two bags out. Willie of course certain of there being two bags on this return run since he'd removed them last night. *Heavy, too.* He had no idea how much cash would weigh, or human heads for that matter. Little three digit combination locks on top of each oversized doctor's bag untouched; nothing forced, nothing amiss. Another pat on the back and his four hundred, plus expenses. Then, Willie would probably go straight to *Belmont*, to the horse track. Or over to Gladys' first for some drinking, and maybe some sex, and then over to the track. Chasing that '*Mega-Pick*', first five winners that paid out like a hundred grand, or maybe even that once-in-a-lifetime *trifecta* that paid out at like ten grand per and he was holding twenty chits. Like all gamblers he knew if he cared to think about it that most of the time he just went home drunk and mostly broke, or drunk and completely broke, maybe one in twenty with a boast loaded for the guys at *Pete's Tavern* where he liked to drink when he wasn't at the track or at work driving his rig. Driving the big rig all day for a hundred bucks which after taxes and expenses netted him roughly sixty-three, a little better than six-dollars an hour. Enough to pay for his crappy apartment, some food and subway tokens, not much else. If he could just get lucky, *really* lucky, just one time at the track...then he could take a vacation maybe, take Gladys with him. Buy a little house up in *Queens*. He didn't love Gladys, not like he'd loved his dead wife, but it would be nice to have someone to go on a vacation with. A house in *Queens* would be two steps up from his efficiency in *Brooklyn* that rattled every time a train went by, which was all the time, pretty much day and night.

*How would Butch ever find him if he had the money to disappear?*



It was the first time he'd ever had the thought. The *real* thought. Like that. What if he actually did it? What if he simply pulled over in a rest stop, took out the rear seat and opened up the bags with the big knife he kept under his seat and cash spilled out everywhere, maybe even a hundred grand.

Maybe more.

He could just keep driving. There was nothing in that crappy apartment he couldn't easily replace with nicer things. Rufus would be all right. Rufus was tough, a lot tougher than Willie. Willie could torch the *Plymouth* but make sure the plates were okay, somehow, so the police would report it. Torch it bad, Butch might think he'd died. But guys like Butch never trusted anything, especially if it cost them money. Barring Butch witnessing Willie actually burning to death Butch would come after him. And what if it *was* human heads or limbs or some other worthless mob crap? Then what? Then he would be on the lam without any money, with the maybe two-hundred something bucks he had on him right now. Then he would be caught and dead for certain, within a week.

Willie shook his head hard, trying to shake free these bad notions and stay on course. Do his job, get paid.

Maybe he wouldn't go to the track at all. Take the money he earned for the run and start to save. If he saved all of it he could have maybe five-thousand by next year, more than enough to get into a small house in Queens. He'd have to stop drinking though too, binge drinking anyhow because not only was it expensive but it always led to him gambling.

Always.

Hell, he could remember going on benders in places with no track or casino where he'd look for some dice games on the street, or poker just about anywhere, hell cockroach races if someone was staging them and guys were taking action.

He checked his watch and wiped some extra-fine red dust off with his thumb. No way was he going to make either *Steubenville* or *Plainview* tonight by nine p.m. No way.

Willie pulled out his road map.

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The *Howard Johnsons*, 'HoJo's' colloquially, with its orange painted walls and blue-painted roofing, Willie figured was probably the very first and furthest west of these possible stops that would appear more and more frequently the further northeast he travelled. Usually found on much busier sections of highway, he pulled off I-70 at *Springfield*, Ohio and into the *HoJo's* parking lot. It looked pretty new. The gas jockey at his last fill-up said it was the only reputable place for at least another hour so Willie figured it being nine-thirty already, and him needing to be back on the road by five-thirty a.m., just after some breakfast, he figured he had no choice. Sleeping in his car, even for a little while at a rest stop, was inviting trouble from a nosy state trooper, or some criminals looking for an easy roll.

He also didn't feel as if he had much choice in the matter when he asked the motel desk gal if there was a liquor store nearby after he got his room key as he was still agitated with having bumped into Johnny Carvelli, or, in truth, more agitated that he ever took the different route to begin with. He felt pretty keyed up and figured a little nightcap was just what he needed for restful sleep.

*Also a first on forty-plus runs: any alcohol at all.*

As he drove over to the store his mind was acting up like it did sometimes when he went on a bad bender, or pushed it and drove his rig for thirty hours straight, hopped up on 'black mollies' (amphetamines). He'd already made up his mind to buy just one of those little bottles like they handed out on the airlines. *Maybe, just two*. Not even a 'little pint', no sir, no way. The notion of picking up a fifth like he would if he was headed over to Gladys' just oh-so-faintly entered his mind.

He selected his whiskey, scotch, top-shelf since he was about to get paid. He took the two little bottles and began to head toward the short line at the counter when he saw his reflection off of a mirrored *Budweiser* advertisement, saw his mostly gray (and

somewhat thinning) hair and the two little bottles in his hand, looking like tiny children’s toys, like a young girl would buy for one of her doll houses. Better than fifty-years old and still under someone’s thumb, like some schoolboy trying to sneak a smoke from his old man’s pack to go hide and puff in the bushes.

He glanced up onto the wall and saw the fifth of the good stuff on the top shelf glowing proudly and it laughed him, mocked him, as if even it occupied a position and held a status that Willie himself would never achieve.

Willie frowned deeply. He tried in vain to think everything through but the thoughts were starting to come too quickly.

His heart pounding and part of his soul tearing, Willie went to return the two little bottles, his eye locked, for now, on the nice little pint up on the shelf beside them.

Then, in a flash moment where thankfully foolishness was trumped he set one of the smaller bottles back and with great resolve strode to the counter with just the other, waited his turn and paid the fifty-five cents.

He got back in his car with his little bottle and drove back to the motel.

Again, the bags were in the room.

The rationale in his mind had changed very little; it was impossible for Willie to park anywhere near the room they’d given him as the motel was nearly full and he had no better choices, none on ground level. The surrounding area was much busier with traffic than where he usually stayed. He had no idea where the police station was. He went through the same motions as he had the previous evening and the two heavy bags again sat side-by-side between the bed and the wall, his revolver on the nightstand, again beneath his cowboy hat. He was sitting on the bed with his cowboy boots still on, legs crossed, watching *The Honeymooners* again, the volume low and the picture quality good, over the pointy tops of his booted toes. Really, the only difference from last night was the highway noise he could hear despite the heavy curtains, the newness and

maybe nicer quality of the bed and room. And, the fact that he was sipping a fine, scotch whiskey, from a tiny little bottle with the screw-on cap, sipping being maybe even too forward of a word.

Dabbing.

The liquor heated his tongue immediately as it rolled with smoothness across, then a sharp, biting little thread, a tiny one that eased down his throat and into his stomach, drawing heat tightly behind in its wake. He even got that little burning sensation in his eye that you get the very first time you try whiskey, probably from the vapor fumes, and this struck him odd. Could he even remember when he'd taken his first sip? No, he could not. He took another one here, a tiny one, just enough to coat his tongue, as if doing shots from the tiny cap.

Making it last forever.

The little bottle seemed to swell, felt big, heavy; felt the full, near-hand-filling fifth-size for a moment when he drifted off, somewhere else, somewhere dark, until suddenly *The Honeymooners* came slowly back into focus through a brain fog. If he didn't know better he would tell you that he felt near black-out drunk. He spent a minute reviewing every detail of the run to be sure he hadn't had a couple with lunch maybe, or picked up a cold six-pack, or had a bottle stashed somewhere in the car. No, no, no, he couldn't get to any of these. It was just an extension of his already off-mood, the god-damn detour; the fact that he just violated another unwritten rule by going to the liquor store at all, even for just one tiny little nippy bottle. Even when driving his rig, unless he had a down-day on the turn-around which was rare he never consumed any alcohol while working. If for some reason Johnny Carvelli had followed him all the way back to here, to *Springfield*, Ohio, and seen him buying liquor, he might be on a payphone as fast as he could find one, calling New York, and might then intervene. *If* Johnny Carvelli had followed Willie *and* knew about the run.

The TV was changing to the local news, a station out of Cleveland. The little bottle, only a couple of ounces, was stone-empty. Normally, it made one tall shot.

*Willie was sliding into a really dark place. But why? Why? The thing was, he couldn't stop the slide if he cared to.*

He contemplated a return to the liquor store, for reinforcements. That would mean packing up the bags through the removed back seat and placing them into the trunk, again, just to drive the three and a half blocks. He'd re-skinned his wrist retrieving them earlier tonight then cursed himself as his head was so muddled that he couldn't remember the order the bags were in as they were slightly different looking in wear and color. He hoped this didn't matter.

He stared at the bags, stoic, yet like the fifth of whiskey on the top shelf in the liquor store somehow alive, and far superior to him. Worth, actually, far more than his life, no matter what was inside.

Everything in the world, everything in the room, everything in all various periphery visual and otherwise were blocked out with singular focus, painful eyeball-throbbing focus as the two bags spoke to him, smugly reminding him that they were in charge. That they were worth more than his entire life. His brow furrowed painfully.

*Behind door number one is one hundred thousand dollars in cash, all unmarked bills. Behind door number two is a severed head, maybe a couple of fingers. Could be dog excrement; wouldn't matter for you. Still trumps your life.*

Suddenly, he didn't remember going out to the car, or moving back up the flight of stairs that reeked heavily from the kind of cleaner a motel or bar uses to cover up any other reeks that might have been laid down during a business day, or night. The faint smell lingered in his senses, stuck to the inside of his nose, and he was perhaps a little short of breath but then just as suddenly here he was back on the bed in front of the TV, this time with his large hunting knife turning slowly in his hand and all of his attention and focus back on the bags which maybe had stopped grinning and seemed a little less

sure of themselves now that he was armed and he could, rather easily if he so desired, slice them into unrecognizable pieces before the local news went to commercial break.

His head still throbbed but with a slower, much deeper resonance than when he was merely 'tying one on', throbbing deep down into his gut.

Down into his soul.

Setting the knife on top of the blanket beside him he took the first bag up from the floor and set it stoutly beside him on the bed.

*And stared dumbly into blankness.*

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The first bag seemed very nervous now; sweat beading up along the top where the chrome metal-wrapped lines intersected with the three-digit combination, just below the double leather handles. He held the knife delicately, uncertainly, like an unsteady surgeon, and moved it slowly along the crease, not touching the sharp tip, careful not to touch, staring so hard at two-eight-three, the numbers showing, that he swore he saw them tremble as if they wanted to roll themselves into the correct position before the thick, sharp blade came down hard with its worst. There *was* sweat on the bag; it came from his forehead, and then down his nose. He wasn't really aware of it. Daring a first toe over the precipice to no return he took his thumb and slowly spun a number a few clicks, one way then the next. If he stopped himself, if he stopped the knife from doing its worst, everything would have to be exactly as it was. For all he knew the number showing, two eight three, had some coded meaning.

*He rolled the last number back to three, 2-8-3 back into place, and once again picked up the knife.*

He'd bought it at a pawn shop maybe twenty years ago, kept it oiled fairly well, not like his revolver though, didn't use it very often. It was a hunting knife; said so right on the blade. He didn't quite know what that meant. He was a city boy. Did men jump from trees? Or, blinds behind bushes, and stab things with it? Was it used for skinning? He didn't think so; those were specialized knives. For some reason it was heavier than he remembered it, a seven-inch blade that now seemed almost too heavy to hold with just one clammy hand while he levitated it perilously over one of the bags. The bags showed some wear and tear but nothing like the gash the knife would make if he even dropped it, accidentally. There was absolutely nothing else in his trunk, not even a tire iron which he kept in the back seat (though he had no spare tire).



The heavy knife hovered slowly above the crease, back and forth, to and fro, a predator on a leash, straining.

If it was cash he'd simply drive off, to Mexico, or Canada maybe; he wasn't a real fan of hot weather, and his white skin would stand out a lot more down south. If it was anything but cash, or something easily fenced which seemed implausible, he would have to torch the *Plymouth* anyway, and still stay gone. No money, no car.

How many times would he go over it, these same things?

The knife, with a mind of its own made its way back slowly as if searching for just the right spot to wedge into, to pop the bag wide open.

*May as well just snap the latches clear off; what the hell did it matter?*

Then, the sharp blade stopped just to the side of the handle. A bead of sweat dripped from somewhere on his face down onto his wrist and snaked slowly around, down onto his hand. Blinking, he looked at the sweat trail, somewhat stupidly. Then, he set the knife back down on the bed.

He couldn't say how long he'd been sitting in this mild fugue state but the local news had given way to *The Lucille Ball Show*.

He tried to suck one last dab from the tiny little whiskey bottle, tried to force his tongue into the tiny opening, but it had given its all a long time ago.

He guessed that he was tired, maybe a bit more so from having had the tiny nip. It was nearly eleven o'clock and time for him to get to sleep. He carefully folded his western clothes and put them into his valise, removing the slacks, dress shirt and worn sport coat that made him innocuous and non-threatening as he drove further into the northeast, and then numbly took a shower without moving the bags or bothering to take his revolver into the bathroom. He dried himself off pretty poorly, pulled on sticking underwear and socks and sat on the edge of the bed.

*Stared at the bags.*

Then Willie stared at his left thumb as it started spinning numbers, two eight three it started, just like the engine size, but then what did it matter because had anyone been watching all of it unfold alongside Willie himself they knew he was going to pry open the bag and then the other regardless of what he found in the first.

One just had to have cash inside.

*Had to.*

He chuckled nervously, unconsciously. Deep down he knew that he would never win, at the track or anyplace else, never big enough anyway, and he'd be doing damn runs forever, well into his sixties or as long as they let him, to offset the short money he made at his real job. He stared at his thumb as it stopped rolling at triple zeroes then watched abstractly as for some reason both thumbs pressed on the release catches. Then Willie watched in amazement as the release catches both clicked open.

My, oh, my my.

*"Fucking goombahs,"* Willie spat aloud, into the air. As if it was their fault that he was now one simple step from completely opening their bag, finishing the job, invading their property. *Breaking the final rule.*

If he touched nothing, took nothing, he could just have a look, settle that part of the fuss right here and now, then close it up right and roll it back to two-eight-three. Didn't matter if it was cash, drugs or body parts, or watches, jewelry, whatever. Just a slow, cautious peek then snap it back together, snap the catches snug and spin the digits carefully back to two-eight-three. *Just like the engine size.* Set them back in the trunk facing forward. Or, was it backwards? Or on their sides, and blame a deer?

He let the breath go he didn't realize he'd been holding and took the first bag to the bed, turned and began to open it.

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In the end it wasn't really luck, good or bad, that almost got him caught. Willie didn't have any forethought that he might be caught at anything as he *thought* he'd only looked in the one bag and then quickly closed it up again. He'd remembered to take his car through a carwash to get what was left of the red desert dust and sand cleaned off. Maybe he had a taste of his brother Rufus in him. Maybe that's what this whole deviation from the route has been about, just channeling his '*inner Rufus*'. No; if Rufus had ever thought to rob a man Rufus would have just robbed the man, any consequences be damned.

By the time he got to Pennsylvania, Willie had it all worked out in his mind, taking only fifty-bucks with him to the track, putting the rest into a savings account, try some moderation rather than any life changes that were too radical. Maybe he'd arrived at fifty because he had it on his mind despite telling you if you asked that he didn't register exactly what was in the one bag he was pretty sure he'd looked into and Butch would tell you if you ever had reason to inquire (and Butch had reason to respond) the runs with Willie were always the same: one bag filled with half a million in hundreds heading out, two bags with a quarter million each in fifties coming back. Kept the federal boys off the count marking bills at the casino, and Butch's operations in Brooklyn too as the feds were always marking certain large-denomination bills to see where they turned up. Some *Mafia* guy thought it worked, so eight guys like Willie who didn't know one another from *Adam* had made a near-caravan between the east coast and Las Vegas for years.

Willie rolled into *Butch's Auto Body* actually an hour ahead of schedule. He'd driven faster than he probably should but here he was, as always unscathed. One of Butch's

'yard apes' saw Willie's *Plymouth* and yelled over the screeching din to the boss who shifted the stubby cigar in his mouth and moved the phone to the other ear so he could half-stand and crane his neck to see out the office window, confirming that it was his runner, Willie.

As usual Butch came out and went straight for the trunk, and normally would then disappear inside for a few minutes, five maybe? -counting? -and then return and hand Willie his envelope with the four hundred inside, the entire exchange smooth and often conducted in silence. Sometimes though Butch got into the car with Willie; sometimes he just had Willie roll down the window and dropped the envelope on his lap. Today was a window job and as Willie rolled it down Butch jerked his thumb and said: "Better zip up your suitcase there, boss. You're spilling out your cash."

Willie spun around in confusion and there it was, stuck to the front of the back seat right below his valise, from static electricity caused by the polyester plastic seat covering: a fifty dollar bill. Willie had about two hundred dollars with him left over from the run and that was in his wallet, and all twenties and smaller. Butch just laughed, and slapped Willie on the shoulder before disappearing back through the metal doors into his shop. Willie licked his lips and tried feverishly to remember exactly what was inside of the bag that he thought he'd opened; now, exactly, what he might have done? He knew he hadn't taken anything, he'd checked his pockets, he was positive of that, but did he handle any? Count some of it? Count all of it? Had he piled it on the bed in stacks? Had he actually blacked-out? From just two ounces of whiskey? That was not even worth considering.

Strange, very strange. And gave Willie a peck of worry right up until he got back into his car after a stop at the liquor store and took a good pull from the fifth of top-shelf whiskey at which time the warmth kicked the fading vestige of fear off somewhere else (for now). He chose to believe that the fifty had blown in on a wind, never

considering that later on the Brooklyn count might be fifty dollars short, and Butch might remember the fifty in Willie’s back seat, and put some things together, and...

Willie shook some sense into his head. How could any scenario that Butch or Johnny Carvelli or anyone else conjure up conclude with Willie stealing fifty dollars? *Only* fifty dollars? Surely the count had been off a little before. Why would any man risk his life for fifty dollars? Every man’s life was worth more than that. Willie stared at the fifty in disbelief, as if it was from another planet, another world. It was an older bill, nearly as old as he was: ‘*Series 1933-C*’. It was still in perfect condition.

With Gladys in the car beside him and both their bellies afire from the now missing three-quarters of the fifth of top-shelf scotch whiskey, Willie realized his first trial of his new system of taking fifty to the track and saving three-fifty in the bank had now magically doubled to one hundred.

Magically.

Right about the time one of Butch’s guys was telling Butch that he’d been through it twice and it was fifty light, and Butch was already into his fourth beer and really couldn’t be bothered yet still might remember it later and give it some serious thought, Willie Tanner went to the window at the *Belmont Horse Track* and set the whole found fifty down on a two-eight-three trifecta, like the engine size, with two and eight being long-shots. A crazy bet. But, on house money.

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It paid four-thousand three-hundred thirty-two dollars per one dollar ticket, a *Belmont* record. A couple of long-shots on top, times fifty for a total of two-hundred sixteen-thousand dollars. The two-eight-three trifecta. In the fifth.

If Butch meant to find him and ask him about that fifty he'd spotted in Willie's back seat, maybe question him hard, well now Willie would be plenty hard to find.

Because Willie Tanner had made his last run.

## The Bet

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Elizabeth Durban didn't believe in luck. She'd never been to a racetrack before and stood off to the side of the betting window for fifteen minutes listening to seasoned gamblers and degenerates cut their spiels.

Yeah, gimme two by ten, the fifth in a tri-box, the four, seven, eight, right, then box the one, seven, nine in a quinella for the sixth.

When it came her turn she confidently stepped in line, fidgeting with her five dollars, her last five dollars until Friday's paycheck, a full three days away, and bet the number two horse in the fifth to win, two dollars, because she'd watched as the horses were paraded and number two was cute. Also, she liked its name: *'Royal Discretion'*.

She held her ticket tightly in both hands and moved out of the clubhouse and meekly down toward the rail, trying to keep distance between herself and the crowds, aware that despite what she felt was her homely appearance there was always a man or two that would take an interest in her, or take her to bed even if she'd allowed, and around the track with its despair and alcohol there would be more than one or two especially since she was alone.

Her dumb brother David had dared her to go.

"You're twenty-seven years old, Elizabeth," he'd admonished her over lunch at her favorite organic restaurant. "You don't drink. You don't smoke. I'll bet you've never even gambled. Bet? Gamble? Get it?"

"Funny. And I have too, David," she'd plead. "It was a gamble just moving up to New York. To work at the theater."

"Not what I mean," he pretended to enjoy his vegetarian chili, but chili should have meat in it, and lots of it, he felt.

So, just like that the very next week here she was standing at the 'rail' while they loaded the horses into the starting gate. She bet on '*Royal Discretion*' because she liked anything to do with royalty, the '*Crown*'. It was the long-shot of the field, which Elizabeth only partially understood meant that it wasn't likely to have a chance at winning but then she'd only wagered two dollars. One of the '*railbirds*' she believed they were called (which just meant '*degenerate gambler at the track*' in plain English) an older man explained to her that the number two was going off at twenty-five to one and that she could have bet the horse to 'place' or to 'show' which meant that if the horse finished first, second or third she would win some money, just not as much. *She wasn't really at the track to win anything* -she wanted to tell the old man, *-really only to place a bet and then save the chit as proof*. But, she had to admit it was a *little* exciting, her eyes on the number two horse: '*Royal Discretion*' as she noticed that the massive, glistening animal seemed more calm than most of the other horses and let the jockey walk it right into the starting gate without much fuss. She liked the colors too: purple checkerboard, that the horse and jockey were matched in.

People were smoking everywhere, cigarettes and cigars, and drinking alcohol. It was 1962 and she thought it all, the smoking particularly, was also dumb. Clearly unhealthy, but then so many did it, and nearly everyone at the track it seemed. She thought to keep this particular opinion from her brother lest he insist that she take that up as well; her first and only cigarette was when she was sixteen and her first and only alcohol, a *Pabst* beer, well, part of one, when she turned twenty-one, were equally unpleasant memories. As the horses were almost all in the starting gate she took one last look around, a slow three-sixty. Of the thousands of people who were milling about like drones in a beehive, almost all of them were about to be disappointed, with only a few elated. There would be fifteen minutes break and then the sixth race would wind it all up, and start it all over again.



Near Elizabeth, a tall, thin man who for some reason looked like a cowboy missing his hat stood next to a slightly pudgy lady who wore way too much make-up. Both appeared soused, the lady more so. Elizabeth wondered what their story was as he looked sort of like a guy you might see on TV. The lady with him was nondescript except for her drunkenness which made her seem to totter. They appeared to be a couple of some sort but were not acting affectionate. Just drunk. Although the man had a sharpness to his eyes that contrasted the booze.

Then, there was some subdued commotion, a bell somewhere, and an overhead announcement blared: *And they're off!*

The race began.

It was hard to see what was going on as the horses went around one turn then even further away a second, all twelve horses in a pretty tight bunch. Elizabeth wondered lightheartedly if the jockeys were chatting about dinner and the weather. Then, as she looked across to the other side of the track a few of the horses seemed to be pulling slightly ahead. She saw the number three in the lead with the number eight behind it and then the number seven. Her horse, the number two, she could tell by the purple checkerboard colors, it wasn't in the way back but nearer to that than the front. People started screaming. Louder. Then out of nowhere the two seemed to speed up dramatically and by the time they turned the third corner it was now with the other three horses that were running faster in a group. The tall, thin man near her was jumping up and down, pumping his fist in the air and cheering as were a lot of people, while the pudgy lady with him was sort of excited too but also looked like she might vomit. *'Royal Discretion'* was running really hard now and as the group came around the last turn Elizabeth felt out of place being so quiet so she screamed: *go 'Royal Discretion'!* *Whoo!*—at the top of her lungs and even shook her fist high in the air but no one noticed. Dirt flew from the horses' jack-hammering hooves and she would swear she could feel the ground and maybe even the grandstand shaking. She couldn't really

see the number two in the bunch and then almost too quickly the horses were upon her as she stood near the finish line and in a blur she saw purple up near the front and then everyone was screaming, well, some still were. From her periphery she'd noticed the majority had seemingly lost interest before the lead pack of horses came around the final turn. She heard the announcer say in a very drab voice: *Photo finish* –and didn't know what that meant but the tall, thin man and his drunk lady friend were now *both* looking like they might vomit although when Elizabeth briefly caught the thin man's eye he was more stunned than flat-out drunk and she saw that he was shaking and had suddenly moved right next to the lady and seemed ready to embrace her. Elizabeth heard the man mumbling something and watched the couple as they walked back toward the clubhouse, like jittery zombies when the announcer came back on and said: *'Royal Discretion' by a nose in photo-finish, followed by 'Terrence's Pride' to place and 'Wilfred's Cha-Cha' to show. Fifteen minutes 'til start time for the sixth.*

What did 'by the nose' mean? She heard *'Royal Discretion's'* name first- did *'Royal Discretion'* win? Well, this was sort of embarrassing. She moved toward the clubhouse debating whether to place one more bet on the next race so she didn't look like a complete square, and then go home. She had to admit: it *was* kind of exciting. The old man who had been talking to her at the rail before the race walked by her and glanced at her queer, grumbling something about the 'damn two' but she'd already forgotten what number the pretty purple horse had been. She stood near the window and decided to make one more bet, then she'd have the dollar left for something to eat on the way home when she noticed the tall, thin man with the glazed, dizzy stare being led with his drunk lady friend by a security man and wondered if they were being escorted out merely for being too drunk or if there was some other sort of trouble.

Elizabeth got into a line and began to study the names on the board for the sixth race, almost not believing her luck as the number seven was named: *'Princess Bounty'* –the second reference to royalty, so her mind was set. But, this time she figured to use the

term 'show' like the old man had explained so she might look less like a rube. She heard several conversations in a loud buzz, about something called a 'four-thousand dollar trifecta' but didn't know what that meant or why everyone was talking about it. She waited in line then heard the man betting in front of her at the window mention the trifecta again with a whistle and the window gal who normally looked utterly bored even seemed a bit animated. Elizabeth was still holding her first betting ticket in her hand when it was her turn and she said: "I would like to bet on '*Princess's Bounty*'. Please. Third place. Two dollars," she handed the money across.

"Like this," the window lady said patiently, "two on the seven in the sixth, to show. Okay?" Elizabeth nodded but didn't really understand, and didn't really need to as like the liquor and cigarette she was quite sure this would be the last bet she would ever make.

Elizabeth asked: "What does '*by their nose*' mean if you don't mind my asking?"

The counter woman glanced at her quick to be sure she was serious. "Means it edged out in a photo finish. Sometimes even with the photo they end in what's called a dead-heat. Tied. When that happens they split the win."

There was more commotion and Elizabeth turned and watched along with almost everyone there as the tall, thin man and drunk lady were now being escorted through a door marked: *Authorized Personnel*. She couldn't imagine what they'd done.

The window gal saw Elizabeth watching and leaned forward a little as if she couldn't help but gossip. "That man just hit the biggest trifecta in *Belmont* history." Elizabeth wanted to know what that meant and was going to ask when the window gal saw the other chit from the last race, after Elizabeth briefly set it down so she could move the new ticket she'd just purchased to her left hand and pocket the first one for David. The window gal, probably assuming Elizabeth wanted her to throw it away reached out and snatched it and before Elizabeth could politely ask for it back, without looking dumb or irritating the line of people behind her. The woman looked at it and stuck it into a slot

on the countertop, then took a fifty-dollar bill from the drawer in front of her and slid it across the counter.

"What's this?" Elizabeth was dumbfounded.

"First time here, honey?" The lady smiled as now the line behind Elizabeth seemed to be watching the exchange with some humor. Elizabeth nodded and turned red. "See, the horse you bet to win in the last race won. And it was a long shot, paid twenty-five to one. You had a two dollar ticket so that's fifty bucks."

"Fifty-dollars?" Elizabeth was nearly faint and clumsily took the money and folded the bill quickly and slid it into her purse, almost dropping the new betting slip in the process. She moved away from the window to gather her breath.

*Fifty-dollars?* That was nearly what she earned in an entire week at work! Now numb, she went back outside to get some air, the horses being slowly led out from under the grandstand as they readied for the next race.

*Wow. Wow. Wow!*

Moving a discrete distance away from the temporarily thin crowd and appearing to look at the horses, Elizabeth opened her purse and carefully unfolded the fifty for closer inspection. It was a bit older, 'Series 1933-C'. It wasn't often that she had a fifty or a hundred; who ever needed to carry around so much cash? Despite being older and looking slightly different the bill was in good shape.

The next day Elizabeth went on an audition for the lead in a *David Mamet* play 'Oleanna', a two-man play which normally she never would have wasted her time auditioning for. She auditioned a few times a month but always for minor roles or as an extra just to keep the SAG card (*Screen Actor's Guild*) she'd gotten for appearing in a small independent film a few years back. That night she got a call past nine o'clock which irritated her as all of her friends and family knew her to be an early riser but this call was okay.

"So. I'm Carol," she told her brother David when they met for coffee.

"What?" He sipped his coffee.

"*Oleanna*'. It's a..."

"...*Mamet* play, yes, of course. I know it."

"Well...I auditioned for it yesterday. Got the call last night. "

"Dear god, not after eight I hope." She smiled at his remark. "That's great. No, that's more than great. That's incredible. Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"When does it start?"

"We start rehearsals next week. Opens July fifteenth.

"Oh, and also, I almost forgot," she reached into her purse. "Coffee's on me." She unfolded the fifty dollar bill and made it do a little dance side-to-side on the table top.

"Fifty bucks? Why are you carrying..."

"...*Because*," she drew the word out. "I won it at the horse track yesterday."

David smiled. "You don't say."

## Cracker

---

The bus, the number fifteen, dropped Darryl Williams off at the corner, about a mile from where he lived, as it had for the past six years. It had begun to storm a little, enough to make you zip up your jacket if you had one on, turn up your collar maybe, and made the *much-in-need-of-repair* sidewalk all the more necessitate a wary eye. He'd just gotten off of work; his last day at the garage. Next week he would begin his new job, on a counter at *Sinclair Auto Parts*. Three locations in the tri-city area. Darryl would work at the main location which was only a short walk- less than half a mile- from his house. Darryl knew cars.

His uncle, who was also named Daryl but with only one 'R', used to fix all the cars in the neighborhood from a little two-car garage behind his house, and young Darryl spent almost all of his free time there, listening to the chatter between his uncle and his uncle's friends, watching while his uncle did every kind of repair to every kind of car, young Darryl's job to repair flat tires when they were simple punctures. The area where he lived, in *Clemmons*, South Carolina meant a lot of 'beaters'; vehicles that had their best days far off in their rear-view mirrors. Daryl often got paid in barter. For some pretty girls and single mothers who struggled, Darryl knew his uncle often worked for free. His uncle wouldn't say anything, wouldn't want to bring shame to anyone, so he would say things loud like: *I'll catch up with you later on that-* if someone was around. "*Little D,*" his uncle used to call him, "never do you no harm, 'be nice to people. Most people, anyhow."

Daryl was his Ma's brother. Darryl hadn't known his father. Uncle Daryl took care of his family and was the only man that Darryl knew who owned his own home.

"You get older, you start up with a woman," his uncle told him more than once,

“you do right by her. Don’t need more kids like you and your cousins runnin’ around without no daddy. Be plain too hard on their moms. You keep your place clean, whatever it is, even if you livin’ in a box. Your shop too, you ever have one for yourself. Then you look out for your wife; look out for your kids; nieces, nephews, folks in your neighborhood, whoever needs you to. That’s what you do. That’s what you do, in this life.”

Darryl worked as a mechanic until he got married but could only get hired on at service stations and quick lube places because he had no formal certification. When he finally got married to his girl Charlene he started working on getting his G.E.D., his high school equivalency diploma. He’d dropped out; not because he wasn’t smart enough, he was nearly a ‘B’ student, but he dropped out because he had steady work with a wrench and his Ma needed his paychecks. He had two of his cousins who stayed in the duplex apartment with him and his two sisters, and just his Ma looking after all of them. They didn’t talk about his father. Then after Charlene got pregnant with his first boy Darryl Jr., and then William Henry the very next year, Darryl knew he needed to earn a bigger paycheck than a wrench could provide. Charlene was real proud of him and this mattered. He only had a couple of friends and they would have ridden him pretty good about even getting the GED to begin with, then even more for caring what his wife thought about something so foolish, especially at his age.

*Forsythe County* was mostly black and Hispanic, and while firmly nestled in the Mid-Atlantic a lot of the townships had a big city, back-east-like aura of cold dread, of generations of poverty, of violence and crumbling infrastructure. Darryl credited his uncle with keeping him off the streets, and away from the local punks and fledgling gangs.

Darryl checked the mailbox then climbed the small rise of stairs. He loved his family but was glad that Charlene had taken the boys somewhere and the house was quiet when he got home. He'd received a holiday bonus just before he left the garage, his first ever. Two hundred dollars- nearly a week's pay. Four crisp fifty-dollar bills. And a handshake and pat on the back for doing his job well for six years.

Sitting on his bed, he recalled one afternoon, years back, in mid-summer. Darryl knew it had been summer because he had been over at his uncle's shop early when he otherwise would have been at school; and mid-summer because it was near ninety degrees before ten a.m. There were two fans in the shop, a big, industrial, standing unit his uncle had received in barter that Darryl suspected might have been stolen from some office building or the like, and a small unit that sat and rotated on his uncle's neatly organized desk, pointed carefully away from the papers stacked on the desk's other side. When he wasn't fixing simple flat tires, his main duty, Darryl generally sat on an old metal stool that stood in front of his uncle's desk along side a chair that usually had one of his uncle's friends parked in it as it was placed strategically in line with the smaller fan. From atop the stool, Darryl could see down into the engine compartment when a hood was open.

'Fat' Freddy Wilson was sitting in the chair and prattling on about some barbeque he'd eaten on a trip to Kansas City, full of: *Lord have mercy-* and other hyperbole, and Uncle Daryl kept talking about a place he'd eaten at in North Carolina that would put it to shame. Both places that seemed worlds away from Clemmons, South Carolina, the only place young Darryl had ever been. For some reason the argument got a little heated; maybe it was the ninety-plus degree morning, and Daryl began waving the wrench he was using emphatically and pointing it right at Fat Freddy, arguing whether it was ribs or brisket that defined whether a place warranted acclaim, what roles chicken and sausage played, and, well, what role actual rolls played too. Uncle Daryl was just a normal sized man with a bit of a paunch, some muscle from



always working with his hands, but he wasn't scared of anyone that Darryl had ever seen, and was even known to venture into the neighborhood to break up a fight when necessary.

There was a loud clap, a gunshot, Darryl had heard them before, and his Uncle hit his head on the hood when he started from the noise.

“*Goddammit,*” Uncle Daryl was not one to cuss much (but accepted it in shop banter) nor inclined to use the Lord's name at all, except in church on Sundays.

“Who's shootin'? Someone shootin'?” Fat Freddy forgot about the barbeque argument and with effort got up from the chair.

By the third, echoing clap Uncle Daryl was rubbing the back of his head and moving with Fat Freddy toward the street, Darryl close behind. “Backfire's all, I suspect,” Daryl said.

A white sedan, might have been a Cadillac, sat steaming. Cars like it were few in Clemmons, and none were in the condition of this white one. Darryl wasn't certain that it was a Cadillac and not some other type, just certain that it looked brand new.

“Kind 'a car's that?” Fat Freddy asked, nearly out of breath after just walking across the garage.

Daryl scratched his cheek. “I believe it's an 'LTD'. Definitely a Ford.” They watched as the car rolled to a stop on the far side of the corner heading away from the shop.

“Should we go an' help 'em?” Darryl asked.

His Uncle was still rubbing the growing knot on his head when a man climbed out of the car wearing a dress shirt and tie, then he drew a white handkerchief from his back pocket to mop his brow.

Uncle Daryl turned around and went back inside. Darryl took one last look toward the broken down car and turned to follow.

"Man can find *hisself* help somewhere else," Fat Freddy muttered, taking up the rear.

"Why you mean?" Darryl asked. "Nobody knows how to fix cars better'n Uncle Daryl."

"Not for no honkey-ass motherfucker."

Uncle Daryl, who was back under the hood, poked his head up carefully and flashed a stern look. "*Whyn't* you shut your mouth, Freddy."

Darryl retreated quietly to the stool but listened in, really having to pay attention to hear over the music from radio that was always on in the corner. He knew the man in the street was white; he'd seen him. He had one white teacher at school. He knew the word '*honkey*' meant '*nigger*' but for white people; he'd heard that and '*cracker*' used a lot at school and in his neighborhood but never from his Uncle who often assisted the minister at church and was a man people often came to with their problems. But Darryl had never seen a white man in his neighborhood before, except for the police, maybe a fill-in mailman. There were few white kids at his school but there were some that were Mexican who were more like brown white people and spoke kind of funny and Darryl knew there were bad names sometimes used for these people too but he didn't see why.

"Why didn't you help fix his car?" Darryl pressed.

His Uncle came around the car to get another tool. "He can come see me, he needs my help. That door over there is open, ain't it?"

"How he know you fix cars? You ain't got a sign out front?"

"*Little D'*, you so *hell-bent* on helping that white man *whyn't* you walk yourself 'cross the street and see if he want any first? Maybe he just overheated."

Darryl wasn't real sure about that but now Fat Freddy with his big fat mouth was looking on so Darryl hopped down off the stool and trotted out the door.

The wall of extra heat slammed into him and he raised his arm to shield his eyes, focusing again on the man with the white car who despite the steaming hadn't even

bothered to raise his hood and paced with somewhat of a panicked look to him. He spotted Darryl.

“Young man! You there!”

“Uh, yeah. What?”

The man waited while a couple of cars rolled past then came closer. “Can you tell me where there might be a payphone?”

“*Piggly-Wiggly* got one, down that way over there.” Darryl pointed down the street.

The man shielded his eyes. “I see. Do you know how far it is from here? Can you walk there?”

“Can if I want to. Take maybe twenty minute’.”

This prospect in this heat seemed to agitate the man. “Well, what about you? You live around here, could I borrow your phone?”

“Don’t have one. Don’t have no TV neither.” The man looked at him angrily and Darryl shirked slightly, the man trying to determine if Darryl was being disrespectful and purposely troublesome. “My Uncle. He got one.” Darryl motioned back behind him.

“Well good then. Let’s go see,” the man came all the way across the street and followed Darryl back to the garage.

“Well, perhaps I don’t need to borrow the phone at all. I seem to have a bit of trouble with my car,” the man said, looking at Fat Freddy who jerked his thumb toward Uncle Darryl then crossed his thick arms across his massive torso and leaned back into the chair, keeping his eyes on the stranger.

Uncle Darryl barely looked up, which young Darryl thought was kind of rude. “Seem’s to be the trouble?”

“Not sure I could tell you. Cars aren’t my thing. Can you have a look at it for me? I really need to be somewhere.”

“After I finish with this we can have a look. My nephew will let you sit on that stool while you wait.”

“Can’t you just stop what you’re doing for five minutes? I’ll pay you. I don’t know -it might just be a simple wire or something. I know nothing about cars.”

“Heard you the first time.” Uncle Daryl went back to work and it was clear the discussion was over. The man started to say something but saw Fat Freddy looking at him cross-wise and let his mouth close.

“Could I use your phone to call for a tow truck then?”

“Local?” Uncle Daryl asked in more of a statement. “Suit yourself. Phonebook’s on the cabinet over there.”

The man went to the cabinet for the greasy phonebook then picked up the filthy shop phone with two fingers and used the end of a pen he had in his shirt pocket to dial. “Yes, hello, I need a tow. My car is having some sort of malfunction.” Darryl wasn’t sure what this meant but he knew the man’s car wasn’t running. The man held the phone away from his head with his fingers as if it was radioactive. “I’m sorry, what’s the address here?”

“At the shop?” Darryl asked but Uncle Daryl quickly said: “Tell ‘em go Third and Chestnut, in Clemmons.”

The man spoke into the phone some more and then hung up. He strode from the garage without another word which Darryl thought was also rude after the man had used his uncle’s telephone for free.

Later, Darryl patched another tire, wiped his hands on a dirty rag and got himself a drink. Once a week, or maybe twice, he splurged and bought a bottle of *Coke*. Cold, slippery and glistening, from the loud, humming cooler, a small, upright one with the word “*Coke*” written vertically on both sides where you dropped your coins through the slot and then pulled a bottle free toward you through those rubber roller grippers,

where you think the bottle might break but it never does. Darryl loved that: *aaah* - sound the soda pop made when he popped off the cap with the bottle opener that hung from a filthy, knotted string, then that first gulp, so cold and bubbly that sometimes it hurt up behind his eyes and made him pinch his nose but by the second drink he didn't mind. Then he would sip it slowly, savoring as many drinks as he could, and it made him feel kind of grown-up as more often than not the men who sat around the shop drank beer or *Cokes* themselves, except for Fat Freddy who was always bugging Uncle Daryl to borrow the thirty-five cents required by the machine. Some of the men smoked cigarettes, and one guy named Ricky, Darryl thought Ricky might be smoking marijuana because he had funny cigarettes that didn't look or smell at all like the others. His uncle didn't smoke and barely drank more than a beer or two that Darryl had ever seen. Darryl wasn't too interested in smoking, but the thought of a beer or two definitely piqued his young interest.

“Why you don't like white people?” he asked his Uncle while they were closing up, Darryl leaning on a big push broom that was as tall as he was.

His Uncle, who today was having a beer, took a swig and set the bottle on his desk, wiped his mouth on his arm. “Who says that?”

“That guy whose car broke. Who borrowed your telephone.”

“Don't bother none with Freddy, with what Fat Freddy says.”

“Wasn't that. I know them words. Just seemed like you didn't like him, but then you didn't even know him.”

“Didn't like the way the man spoke to me is all. Ain't I got rights...ain't I got the right to refuse service to someone? I don't feel like working on their car?”

“Yeah,” Darryl shrugged his bony shoulders.

Uncle Daryl finished some paperwork and stood. “C'mere for a minute.” He led him to the garage door which had already been shut. He lifted it back up and took the boy outside. “What you see here? Look around?”

"I dunno."

"Trash. Lots of trash, and garbage. Half these folks don't bother even mowing their grass if they got any. Refrigerator breaks they just throw it out in their yard. That man, that white man, wear a suit and tie during the day like that, drive a new car like that, he don't live around here. Prob'ly 'round from Charleston maybe, something like that. Then I'm supposed to stop what I'm doing, what I get paid to do, how I earn my living to go look and see what's wrong with his car right now, right this very minute 'cause his white ass said so? You see any white people out here? You know any? You *friends* with any? No, didn't think so." He steered the boy back around and drew the door closed again. "White man ain't no friend of yours, ain't no friend of mine. Places you go..." He scratched his head. "Matter of fact, I'd bet you right now I take that old Chevy over there drive it over into *Lockwood* maybe, something like that, I'll bet you your whole week's pay I get pulled over first cop I see just 'cause I'm driving that Chevy and my skin is black. No other reason. By a black cop too, they work over there. Damn '*Toms*', enslaved by the white man and they don't even know it 'cause they has *theyselves* a badge and be carryin' a gun."

"I ain't bettin'," Darryl wanted to be sure he didn't get his Uncle heated on something that wound up costing him any of his pay.

His Uncle seemed momentarily lost in his thoughts, then said: "Yeah, it's Friday too. Payday for you," he reached into his pocket and took out his wallet, carefully counting out six dollars and handing them neatly to his nephew. "Hey, so what's that make now? How much you got saved?"

"Fifty. Fifty-two after today. And then I got some more, some change too."

"Fifty-two dollars," his uncle whistled. "A tidy fortune, a man your age."

Darryl beamed at being casually referred to as a man. "All right I go now? Try to get by the bank 'fore it closes."

"Sure can. See you Sunday then, at church."

Darryl said goodbye and took off, running the four blocks toward his Ma’s apartment then cutting through an alleyway that was a shortcut. He skipped up the stairs into the room he shared with two of his cousins who thankfully were off somewhere so he could get to the old cigar tin where he kept his money and a key that he’d seen a mailman drop downtown that he kept but didn’t know what it was for. He slid the tin out from behind the dresser and spilled the money out onto his bed, counting it twice to confirm that he did indeed possess fifty-two dollars (and some change) then put fifty very carefully into his front pocket leaving the rest in the tin and placed the tin back behind the dresser. He’d been waiting for this day for a long time. He always spent some money on candy and baseball cards, or maybe a comic book so the thought of saving fifty dollars had been very consuming.

He got to the bank just before closing, grateful that none of the neighborhood kids had noticed how furtively he was moving, ever cautious of being confronted and in one bad moment losing what he’d worked so hard to save to a group of kids or a bully. He waited patiently for the teller to free and the lady looked down at him with a bit of contempt but then he forgot that he just came from work so he was still plenty dirty and probably didn’t smell too good either. He said: “Could I have a fifty dollar bill please?” He had his money out so that she could see it and know that he was serious.

“Let’s see now,” the woman warmed slightly. “What do you have? Do you have fifty?”

“Yes,” Darryl said and began counting the money in front of her. She took it and recounted it herself very quickly, then opened the drawer next to her and set his precious savings carefully into each slot then reached in and removed a fifty dollar bill. An old one. *Series 1933-C*.

“Here you are.”

“Thanks...thank you,” he took the bill and folded it carefully then looking around dipped quickly down and slid the folded bill into his sock. He stood and nodded somewhat sheepishly at the woman who had warmed and offered a smile.

“Be careful with that much money. What are you going to do with it?”

“Save it.”

“You could open a savings account here. We would issue you your own savings book and you would get some interest.”

Young Darryl wasn't sure about a savings book but he knew he didn't want anyone to know about his money or have any interest in it at all so he said: “Uh, okay,” but then he quickly left the bank anyway and hurried home.

Darryl took his dirty work shirt off, dropped it into the hamper, then took the stepstool his youngest son Jamal still used on occasion to access things in the medicine chest and went to his closet, still having to reach his full length to fish his hand around blindly, removing first a small, fire-proof lockbox and then a loaded handgun wrapped between two oily, blue shop rags. He thought soon his oldest Darryl Jr. might be tall enough, come snooping around, a gun was a powerful draw, but then he'd raised him right, respectful, and when the time came Darryl would simply talk to him about it as he did with most other things. Darryl noted and chuckled a little that he still even owned one—he couldn't imagine ever shooting anyone, but there was plenty of crime in the neighborhood and Darryl knew that he *could* shoot it if someone tried to harm his family. Nevertheless, he always took the gun out when he took the box down, using the key from the retractable chain on his waist to open the sturdy lock. There was a smell to it when it opened, probably, he figured, the cash being locked up airtight because money, especially worn bills, did have a nasty smell to them. Who knew what was rubbed into them? These most recent additions, the four fifties, were fresh from the bank, sequential serial numbers he noted before taking the gold colored, heavy-duty



business envelope from the back of the box, and unwrapping the thick rubber band with his left hand so he could spread the growing pile apart with his right until he came to the fifties, carefully snugging the sharp new ones in between. He was about to set the envelope back in its spot in front of some legal papers and some jewelry (most of which did not need to be in a secure place but it made Charlene feel better to have them under lock) when he took the fat and heavy envelope back out, removed the rubber band and opened the top flap. Tucked back in the corner, folded as it had been the first day back when he was nine was that first fifty-dollar bill he'd ever saved, managing to make it here into his thirties without ever having been spent. It was for his boys' college educations, as was the now more than six thousand dollars that was nestled in the envelope along with it. Only an issue of extreme nature would ever get him to spend any of it ahead of time, if someone's health required it and even then probably only a serious, life-or-death type concern. In his mind college represented life and death for his boys, a real life anyway. His boys would know a different life than he had, would have limitless futures; college educations or trade school; and a skill like auto repair to fall back on. The lockbox also held his copy of his ASE certificate (*National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence*) which had gotten him his counter job. He reached into the envelope and took the folded fifty. He thought he'd have a talk with his boys.

They sat at the supper table while Charlene was finishing something on the stove.

“This was the first fifty dollars I ever saved, from mowing lawns, and fixing flat tires at your Uncle Daryl's after school, when I was a little younger than you,” he pointed to Darryl Jr., “and a little older than you,” to William Henry who they'd taken to calling 'Jamal'.

“I could go and work,” Jamal said.

“I know you could,” he squeezed the tiny boy’s protruding shoulders. “But I want you to go to school. Next year you will. And you’ll do good too, just like your brother. You’re both good boys.”

Charlene called in: “The best. All three of my men.”

“See then? Always listen to your *Moms*.”

“What’s that there?” Charlene motioned to the folded bill while she set two large bowls of food on the table.

“I’ll tell you. Come on, let’s say grace,” they took each others’ hands.

They served the food and had some daily banter before Charlene gingerly lifted the folded bill and moved it aside so she could set something down. “This for me? A tip for all of my fine service?”

“You know can’t put no price on that,” Darryl said.

“Aw, you’re sweet,” she leaned over and kissed his cheek. Darryl ate some more food then wiped his mouth on his arm and leaned back with the bill, unfolding it and holding it to the light. “This was the first fifty-bucks I ever made. -Ever saved. Been saving it for the boys.”

“You saved it all this time?”

“Yup. *Matter-of-fact* it was the first thing I put into their college fund. Why I brought it out was I wanted the boys to see it, see how important it is to save your money, not spend it on any damn thing.”

“I got fifty dollars,” Darryl Jr. said.

“You do. And what will you do with it?” Charlene asked.

“Saved it,” Jamal chirped in.

“Probably I’ll save it,” Darryl Jr. said. “But I might want to buy...maybe I’d buy me a skateboard or a new bike sometime.

“I want fifty dollars. Can I have it, Daddy?”

“This one’s special, not for spending. Bet I’ll keep this one forever. Give it to my first grandson maybe.”

“You don’t have no grandson, Daddy,” Darryl Jr. said.

“Of course not. Not yet. One day you boys will get married and then I might.”

He turned to Jamal and lifted the tiny boy onto his lap. “You can get your own fifty dollars by working and saving, just like I did. Maybe your Uncle Daryl would teach you boys how to change tires.”

“Not now, honey. I wouldn’t want them walking over there. This neighborhood ain’t like it was when you were a boy.”

“Ain’t that bad,” Darryl had worked really hard to be able to buy his own home, their home. “Guess there’s a few bad dudes.”

“You ain’t asking around then ‘cause I heard about some people getting robbed in broad daylight. ‘Specially near that old field you always go to. Don’t you see those gang boys sometimes on that court?”

“I tell the boys who to stay clear of. And they don’t mess with me none. They know I ain’t got no money and I don’t do no drugs.”

It was a busy day at the parts store, his third month on the job. Darryl ate his lunch at the desk behind the counter; he knew by the looks from some of the long-time guys that it made them look bad but he didn’t care. He was grateful for the job and knew the owner appreciated a hard day’s work. Most of the customers were from surrounding neighborhoods, mostly black, some Hispanic, most of whom he didn’t mind but some, maybe gang-members, came with an attitude he could do without. He wasn’t about to be openly disrespected, but he didn’t need to endanger himself or his family either, and a lot of those bangers were indifferent to life, death and the penitentiary. Sometimes as part of customer service, but usually reserved for old dude and women, they would come out from behind the counter and maybe check something out on someone’s car,

help them install something simple, be sure they were asking about the right part, something like that. Darryl wasn't much of a flirt but on rare occasions such as this afternoon when an honest to goodness knock-out came in asking about wiper blades he was quick to give a glance through the front window and grabbed what he was pretty sure would fit her make and model and led her outside. Darryl could see a couple of the other guys stealing looks through the glass, busting on him, making faces at him which he tried his best to ignore. He finished installing the new wipers and led the woman back inside, holding the door for her proper-like, motioning her toward the register, wishing her a nice day.

Later that afternoon, when it was slow and Darryl's shift was almost done a white pick-up pulling a large, covered trailer pulled into the lot. Darryl watched lazily as the driver tried to park without blocking too many spaces.

“He gonna hit the curb,” one of the other counter guys said.

“Gonna block the whole damn lot,” Darryl said. “Watch -he wanna wrench on his transmission out there, something, I'll bet.” Despite the signs indicating customers were not to work on their cars in the lot they never made a fuss about little things, changing a spark plug, a bulb or a wire.

Wiper blades.

Finally parking where other cars could move around him, the man climbed out of the truck, a pretty good-sized guy with blond hair cut in a crew-cut, dressed in a tie and shirtsleeves. Wiping his brow, he entered the store. *Definitely not from the neighborhood.* The man bought a wiring harness for taillights on a trailer, then a small toolkit, the kind you leave in your car for emergencies.

“He gonna wrench,” the counter man repeated and Darryl snorted in agreement but really he didn't care.

After a few minutes the man came back inside, rubbing dirt and a little bit of grease from his hands onto a paper towel. Looking around and seeing that Darryl was free he approached the counter.

“Help you?” Darryl asked.

“Yeah, was wondering if you could come out for a sec and connect the harness while I hold up the tongue. Damn thing’s pinched underneath it. Otherwise I’d need a floor jack.”

“Not supposed to do repairs in the lot.” Darryl said, looking down as if he was busy with something.

“Just for a minute. I’ll give you a couple of bucks.”

“Sorry. Can’t do it. Beside’s,” Darryl looked at the big clock above the door, “I’m off now.”

The man stared at him for a second and Darryl stared back, then the man looked around to see if anyone else was free before muttering under his breath and walking to the aisle that had floor jacks for sale. “Shoulda bought wipers I guess,” he said, just loud enough.

Darryl scoffed at the comment, maybe a little louder than he should have, loud enough for the man to hear. They exchanged a hard look then Darryl relented. Last thing Darryl needed was some white asshole complaining about him to the owner.

The man bought a cheap floor jack and exited without further fanfare.

“He right, you know,” said the other counterman. “I’d ‘a helped him out he had tits on him like that dime.” Darryl chuckled at this.

They watched as the man tried to jack up the trailer without getting his clothes dirty, then laughed out loud when the idiot did something to his foot and hopped around cussing, in obvious pain. “Dumb ass,” Darryl quipped. He turned to the manager. “I’ll see you tomorrow, *Hoss*.”

Darryl took the small cooler he used to carry his lunch, punched out at the time clock and headed out the side door for the ten-minute walk home, ignoring the man with the trailer.

Darryl took the small run of stairs at his house two at a time. He was feeling fine. There was still enough daylight for an hour or so outside with his sons, probably his favorite time of day, any day. Most often they would walk a few blocks to the park, to the old ball field that wasn't used for formal games any more but still had a home plate and pitcher's mound. He had four or five old baseballs and a bat; each boy had their own glove. Along the way he'd talk to them about their days, teach them things about the neighborhood, who to watch out for, where to steer clear. Clemmons and the surrounding towns were typical lower-class neighborhoods but Darryl and Charlene made a nice little home in the middle of it; their immediate neighbors' all long-timers who kept up their own yards. There was a small store on the corner toward the highway where Black and Latino mixed and Darryl was pretty sure was the place to go to get your illicit drugs, maybe even a gun or something, whatever. Heading west led to a wooded area through which a shallow brook ran, water of questionable purity given the presence of heavy industry in the area, Darryl thought always a peculiar smell. Both north and south saw nothing but small houses, track homes, duplexes and then four-plexes as far as you could see, tiny yards or none at all, the old park which abutted the odorous wooded area the only break in the patterns.

They played for about thirty minutes with Darryl hitting grounders then flies then pitching to each boy until they got solid hits, for Darryl Jr. until he hit a home run. Then they picked up their gear and headed home, first through a tight alley then a side street. Jamal was tossing the ball up and catching it in his glove, like he always did, then losing one while he wasn't paying attention and having it roll under a car, as it often did. Usually it would roll to the curb but this section of street was pretty flat. Darryl

took the bat from Darryl Jr. and got down onto the pavement, the irony of crawling under yet another car despite being free from the garage was not lost on him.

“Over there. Behind the wheel,” Jamal instructed.

Wiping dirt from his knees, Darryl handed the boy the ball and they started off again.

As they walked along the main street Darryl saw the white pick-up truck from the auto parts lot pulling the large, covered trailer stopped at a light. As they walked by he glanced at the man through the window. The man looked hot and really pissed off, and recognized Darryl and made a flippant little wave and muttered something Darryl couldn't hear because the window was closed. He sensed a racial overtone.

“Huh? You say something?” Darryl barked and the window started to go down but then the light changed and horns started honking. The truck and trailer pulled slowly away before any words were exchanged. *Or worse.*

“What's wrong, Daddy?” Jamal stopped tossing the ball.

“Nothing, boy. Just some cracker asshole,” Darryl was worked up. He rarely cussed in front of his sons.

“What's 'cracker' mean?”

“Means 'white boy', stupid,” Darryl Jr. said.

Jamal didn't like being called names. Usually his Dad would put a stop to it.

“Why you mad, Daddy?” Jamal asked.

“Ain't nothing.” They started walking again and turned off the busy road. “Saw that man earlier. Before. At work, is all.”

They turned down a side-street then another. Darryl looked around, Charlene's fears about bad dudes in the neighborhood running through the back of his mind. It was run-down but most of the people who lived here were older, some younger guys who looked wrong, probably were dealing or robbing but they'd never paid Darryl any mind. His boys though...he was very protective, he didn't think overly so. Tough with

them when he had to be. Damn, sometimes the crap Charlene spit out of her mouth could be downright annoying. He started looking more cautiously down the alleys and driveways as they went.

Jamal lost control of the ball again. Because he was still hot, Darryl was getting a little annoyed with Jamal, and something felt wrong...*damn, Charlene, why don't you just shut the hell up?* He went to kneel and was about to tell Jamal to stop tossing the damn ball when suddenly there movement from the corner of his eye, someone big moving furtively, dangerously. Then a crashing sound, not loud enough to be a car wreck but much too loud to be nothing. Darryl was alert but lying on the ground, extending his arm with the bat and trying to nudge the ball into an opening when he heard a second noise, followed by the strangest sound he'd ever heard, a kind of *mewing* laced with terror from Darryl Jr., followed by a deep, throaty growl, deep and guttural, somehow damp and nasal too, at the same time.

Loud.

Righting himself, flicking tiny pebbles and sand that had embedded into his hand and forearm, he stood, expecting to see a really big dog.

Darryl was suddenly face to face with a wild animal. A black bear. A really big one, better than four hundred pounds. Darryl stopped breathing. The silken, jet-black, rolling mass of fur was maybe thirty feet away apparently having been rummaging in some nearby trash bins. Wild animals like this were extremely rare in this part of 'The Carolinas', not that having them around more often would have made Darryl or anyone else better equipped for an altercation, at least not without a gun, a very big gun, and even then...still. Darryl was holding the baseball bat and unconsciously transferred it slowly to his right hand, motioning strangely for the boys to move away with his left, young Jamal now fully aware of the situation and making different, odd, terrified, mewling sounds as he and his brother hugged one another trying to become invisible and meld into the street with the inanimate parked cars, straining against their instinct



to run to their father, hug him with all of their might and close their eyes until he made the nightmare go away.

“All right then. Easy,” Darryl tried to talk soothingly but the massive animal began snorting, drool dropping from its lip and swinging its head from side-to-side, agitated, alternately focusing on the boys as they slinked away and the man with the bat who while very nervous still stood his ground. Darryl didn’t realize the bear had been foraging down a dead-end alleyway and that they were now inadvertently in its path to freedom. None of it mattered when the bear charged.

“Daddy!” One of the boys, he didn’t know which, screamed in impossibly even greater terror.

Time, for Darryl, slowed to a near-halt. He was aware that he brought the bat up with both hands and swung it with every bit of violence he could muster, connecting solidly with the side of the bear’s head as it was on him. There was a sickening, cracking sound, of the wood as the bat splinted.

The bear did not slow, not even a little.

“Daddy -Daddy!” Jamal shrieked, a blood-sharpened wail.

*Oof...*

Darryl had been hit before but never like this. Not even the car wreck he’d been in felt like this.

Time stopped completely in a surreal flash, an ice-cold slice of reality that impossibly included a rampaging black bear.

*Oof...*

The air flew from Darryl’s chest in solid mass, leaving behind only terror-filled void. He was aware that he was flailing his arms, doing his best to fight, to protect his boys, and felt one of his hands make contact with the animal, probably in the chest given the animal’s size, then the bones in his hand shattered but he didn’t recognize it because another utterly powerful and stunning blow sent him straight down on his

back, his wind now completely gone, stars like thick gnats buzzing his face and ears. He felt blood running freely from his mouth and thickly down his neck but only because it was warm. Beaten, he waited, almost calmly, for the finish. But it did not come. Only the knifelike-sharp, wailing, whimpering pleas from his sons reminding him that he was still breathing at all, still alive. Trying to stand he got to one knee before falling brutally on the side of his head, his face pressed to the cool, hard pavement, head like a thousand pounds of lead, his skin embedded with sand, his eyes now pointed directly toward his sons who were clearly exposed in a pathetic and frivolous attempt to disappear near a wrecked car that sat propped up on blocks in someone’s driveway. Darryl Jr. had the tiny Jamal grabbing onto his leg and he tried to act bravely but then humiliating wetness spread through his crotch as it had Jamal’s minutes earlier and Darryl Jr. shook so hard that his bones hurt.

Darryl simply couldn’t move. His mouth flapped weakly, lips dry and also coated with road sand as he tried to summon the strength to call out, to try desperately to distract the animal back onto him and away from his boys for a precious moment but all he did was spit up bloody phlegm and make pathetic gurgling sounds heard by no one.

Then, from the edge of Darryl’s periphery there was movement. He rolled one eyeball then the other toward it, all that he could muster finding it hard to even breathe. A man moved, unsteadily but with great purpose, into the chaos, coming right at him, a face that Darryl knew but at first could not place, a white face that Darryl figured could only turn the worst situation imaginable into something beyond any description. Some white neighbor probably out to holler about the racket. The man’s foot was dragging a little- that’s right, now Darryl’s electrified memory momentarily cleared, he’d seen him drop something on his foot at the auto part store parking lot, hard enough that Darryl figured he’d probably broken something at the time. Darryl and his co-workers had shared a laugh. Why the hell was he here? Come now to dress Darryl down for almost

having words in traffic minutes ago? *Not me! My boys!*- Darryl tried desperately to shout, to motion any way, to point!- but the white man wasn't paying attention and was in some crazy, foot-dragging way now moving *toward* the massive, jittering animal as it was was down on all fours circling in front of the wrecked car and closing on his cowering boys.

*What...the hell...is he...doing...here?!*

With a flick of an eye the bear noticed the new man moving along the side of the road. First growling its displeasure the animal then pushed a heavy steel trash bin out of its way and in the direction of the newcomer with such force that the iron box flew off of its rollers and crashed onto its side with an earsplitting clang, spilling green and white bags full with trash all over the sidewalk.

*Ungodly, impossible strength.*

The man kept moving though, almost robotically, kept looking at the bear but then looking at the frightened boys too, edging closer, noticeably grimacing with each negligible drag of his injured foot. He stopped before the boys and the wrecked car where Darryl Jr. was bravely trying to shield his little brother the best he could.

Lifting his head, Darryl tried in vain again to scream: *My boys! Please! Get them to safety! Please! God, help me!* The white man was probably from the city, here about the bear, maybe had it in that trailer with him: *maybe let it loose-* Darryl thought crazily, with disgust as he simply could not keep his head from dropping and slapping into the sidewalk again, hard. Stars started to swirl everywhere again in his periphery. Paralyzed and about to lose consciousness, Darryl could only barely watch in horror as the bear was about to kill his children.

The air was pounding, the street alive with adrenaline. The white man somehow calmly turned and looked at Darryl Jr. and Jamal. Jamal was utterly spent and slumped in his brother's arms. Then, without warning, the man turned his back on them and motioned his arm in a manner trying to squeeze the boys in behind him. He tried to

stand tall. Just then the bear stood all the way on its hind legs, maybe eight feet tall and released a curdling roar, air blasting from its massive chest on fetid breath with continued otherworldly power behind it. It was at least a foot and half taller than the blond haired man and so heavily fractured with dense fur and thick muscle that the man and the two boys now hidden by him from Darryl’s view seemed to be swallowed up, dwarfed in a dark, terrifying shadow cast by the beast. Darryl, and anyone else who was watching the horror unfold, assuredly including the blond haired man himself knew that he was about to die. Straightening even more, in sheer defiance the man squared his body, raising shaky fists in front of his now quivering frame. He would die with dignity. The man stood proud, almost asking for death, his lips cake-dry, skin greased in anticipation, his eyes locked on the pale-yellow, flickering orbs of the giant and nothing else, ignoring the sight of the bared teeth, the massive paws and four-inch long, inch-thick, razoe-sharp tapered nails.

Without warning, the bear dropped lightning-quick to its forepaws and came at them. If the twenty second scene was a surreal flash for Darryl then the final killing charge was a snap-shot of hell. The heavy, leaden mass of brute muscular strength, deadly nails and sharp teeth moved like an alley cat and was on the man in less than a second. The man managed to throw one viscous overhand right that might as well have been a passing breeze before he was hit.

*Oof...*

Stunned, he fell dumbly to the ground.

*Oof...*the bear was on him hard.

He instinctively tried to curl into a ball while the bear bit and tore repeatedly at his head and back and then hit the man so hard with a swiping blow that it lifted him up and knocked him three times over, a blood-soaked rag cast to the ground in a frantic operating theater.

Fully ignoring the boys now, the bear moved again and bit into the man’s lame foot, whipping the man’s entire body back and forth through the air like he was a child’s rag doll, the nauseating sound of cartilage separating and bones breaking mixing in with the sweet smell and sickness everywhere of blood-soaked clothes pressed against pavement. Darryl knew that the rampaging wouldn’t stop; he knew that in a moment he was going to have to live the worst possible nightmare of all: watching your children die in front of you.

Then, just like that it was done.

Its face ringed savage red with blood and its dead yellow eyes rolling the bear simply snorted twice as if emphasizing its case then slowly ambled off as if nothing had happened. For a brief moment there was utter stillness, silence, as if the street itself didn’t know what to do, then the whimpering and crying from the boys began to join with the wet, bloody gurgling from their father. The blonde haired man made no sounds or moved at all.

House doors opened and closed; sirens rang far in the distance; some neighbors came timidly from their homes. Darryl was all the way up to his hands and knees, panting heavily, erratically, trying to figure things out when the first police car raced up, followed by another, and then the first ambulance. The white man lay in a motionless lump, blood oozing freely, seemingly from everywhere, most of it red, some of it so dark that from the distance it looked almost black.

The last thing Darryl remembered was a lady cop rushing to his boys, hugging them safely, lifting Jamal up and carrying the boy while two EMTs tended to him and tried to stop his bleeding.

He saw two more working on the lifeless form of the other man as Darryl’s stretcher was loaded into the ambulance. Then everything went dark.

The first thing Darryl recognized was his youngest, Jamal, curled up on a chair beside his bed, the dim hospital room blinking into clarity, darkness around the blinds indicating the 2:37 he saw in LED blue coming from the clock on the sideboard meant a.m. not p.m., which explained the relative quiet and the dimness of the hospital room. Very slowly piecing things together he tried to sit; propped on an elbow. Charlene and Darryl Jr. were asleep on the next bed over. *Thank the Lord!*- his boys seemed fine. Lying back with a deep sigh he stirred Charlene who managed to move over to the bed without waking Darryl Jr.

“Hey baby,” she whispered and held the side of his bandaged face gently, kissing him lightly on the un-bandaged cheek. His lips were dry, cracking.

“Water,” he mumbled and she reached for a cup with a straw protruding from it and helped so he could drink. He took a few sips and moaned.

“Let me go find the nurse. Tell her you’re awake. You’re going to be fine. You got two broke ribs and then lots of cuts is all. Some of ‘em’s deep. They kept you here ‘cause you also got concussion which was why you been passed out.” She moved silently from the room.

Darryl groaned again as he tried to shift his body.

“Daddy?” Jamal stirred in the chair. Darryl held his hand out best he could and the boy stood and took it then nearly jumped up and began hugging him hard. Despite the pain in his ribs, which was great, he held the tiny boy close.

“You alright, Daddy?” Darryl Jr. asked and swung his legs over, rubbed at his eyes then came to his father’s other outstretched hand.

Jamal said: “Watch it, he got broke ribs.”

“It’s okay son,” Darryl whispered hoarsely, but then coughing made the pain too great so the boys instinctively stood back. Charlene came in with the nurse. Both moved quickly to the bedside.

“Don’t try to sit up for a while,” The nurse said. “You’ve got a lot of stitches.”

“Boys...boys all okay? Alright?” He rasped.

Charlene said: “Boys are fine. Just plenty scared is all. They seen the whole thing.”

Flashes of the attack started coming back to him, the overwhelming sense of helplessness; the incredibly powerful blows, and the repeated deep, lashing cuts. Then the image from street level, the side of his face so impossibly heavy as he lay hopeless and beaten, the white man who put himself between unimaginable horror and Darryl’s boys, who placed himself willingly in front of an unbelievably gruesome death to only *maybe* save the boys, buy them enough time to run. Did he even know that the boys were okay? That he’d saved them? Could he tell that he had saved them before he died?

“The man...white man...”

“They got him here too, down the hall,” Charlene said as the nurse finished reading some gauges and fluffed the pillow behind Darryl so he could halfway sit up. “He’s in a bad way, tho. Lot worse off than you. They say probably he gonna die.”

“Saved them...saved the boys...I wasn’t...*couldn’t*...”

“Shh,” Charlene came and took his hand as the nurse left the room. The boys moved tentatively close. “Baby, that shit was crazy. You lucky to be alive. You did all you could. Wasn’t no stopping that thing. Even the man from the paper, he said so. And the boys, they’re fine. We can all just pray for that man.”

Darryl nodded, and again despite the intense pain he hugged his boys and his wife to him. Then, for the first time in his life he prayed for someone other than his family.

A week later, Darryl went to knock even though the door was open. Inside looked similar to what he’d awoken to last week: a hospital room with family hovering heavily around a man covered in bandages and attached with myriad tubes to humming equipment. Balancing his weight with a cane, Darryl went to knock again when a

woman who seemed to be the man’s wife saw him and motioned him to enter. Darryl waited for a moment, somewhat unsure of himself, his good leg not feeling too sturdy itself.

There was a silent exchange. The woman gathered a young boy and girl and shepherded them from the room. Darryl made direct eye contact with the man for the second time in his life but only to the man’s un-bandaged eye which was rheumy and splotched with red. He really didn’t know what to say so he just stood for a minute thinking maybe the man was tired, maybe he would drift off to sleep, Darryl could come back later. But then the man seemed to be motioning him over with the un-bandaged fingers on one hand, just a tiny flicking. Darryl moved closer. The man was pointing to the water so Darryl reached for it then realizing the man could not lift his arm Darryl offered him the straw. After a few sips Darryl set the cup back onto the tray.

Somberly, Darryl mumbled: “You...I need...I need to thank you. You saved them. Saved my boys’ life.”

The man nodded, best he could, mostly with one eyelid.

“Bravest thing I ever seen. Don’t really know what to say about it.” They were still for a moment, only the rhythmic sounds of the equipment and occasional release of pressured air breaking their peace. “Can’t ever repay it, never. Never could. Could fix your car for you, free of charge, your pick-up, you ever have a problem with it. ‘Bout all I could offer.”

Again the man made the slightest nod of recognition, then suddenly did seem to drift off to sleep.

Darryl stood for a minute. He leaned over and squeezed the unconscious man’s hand, feeling suddenly very self-conscious himself, checking to be sure the man’s wife and children had not returned to the room. He stood for another minute, then went to leave, paused and turned back. Taking his wallet from his back pocket, he removed a carefully folded bill from the back of it; a fifty; the old one, series 1933-C. Darryl placed



one corner of the tight-pressed bill carefully under a vase of flowers beside the man's bed and quietly walked from the room.

## The Hero

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Cal Tracey knew he'd been in an accident, apparently a bad accident, but not much else. In and out of consciousness, the last couple of times he came to he saw his family, Judy and the kids, Brenna and Jaron, standing by his hospital bed. He hurt, a lot, sure, but worse was in his narcotic, foggy brain, that he couldn't pinpoint exactly *where* he hurt although he was aware of bandages –many- and a heavy cast weighing down his left arm. He also had an as-yet-undiscovered cast on his left foot where it had broken in multiple places, crushed. He was barely aware of his arm at all. He would learn in the coming days that the foot had first been broken earlier, before the accident, when the car trailer he'd been pulling behind his buddy Danny's pick-up truck had fallen off a jack stand while he was fixing the running lights. During a brief stop at an auto parts store, on his way from North Carolina to Georgia and '*Rusty's All American Hot Rod Show*', an annual event that drew a tremendous crowd, in part because of its timing and proximity to a local NASCAR race at the '*Augusta International Raceway*', an event which itself drew more than one hundred thousand fans. In the trailer he had his '*1969 Mustang 428 Cobrajet*', a now impeccable beast of a car he'd spent nearly a decade in his part-time-with real money- restoring. Cal had more than thirty-thousand bucks in parts and paint which meant he needed to get at least fifty-thousand for it to remotely justify the hundreds of hours he had into it, and to assuage Judy and the kids for all of the crap they'd had to put up with and stuff that they'd missed out on due to his ten year obsession with the car. He took up their entire two-car garage for one thing, so Judy had to park the old *Plymouth* on the street, no further damage really possible to the already weathered and beaten-down sedan, but it meant that she had to carry everything from the car up the walk and the three stairs into their three-bedroom tract-home they'd been

forced to downsize into when Cal lost his good job four years ago. Cal rode a motorcycle almost every day; there was space in the garage for it too. The *Mustang*, Judy had long ago tagged it the 'snake' partly because the engine logo plate affixed to the lower rear of each front quarter panel featured a fanged rattler coiled and ready to strike but Cal felt too because she had just gotten sick of the thing being around and taking up so much time, space and money.

"You can't even drive it," she'd complained during several different stages of its ten-year journey, half of that spent up on blocks. It started out a beat-up but running fourteen-hundred dollar buy from a guy named 'Rocco' at an auto body shop. A guy who had bought it himself for that same amount six months earlier fully intent on restoring it but never found the time to get started and had to look at it every day sitting there in the corner of the lot, gathering dust and looking like a junkyard dog that could no longer patrol viciously and just slept all day in the dirt-packed shade. So, when the sandy blonde-haired guy in the beat-up *Plymouth* stopped by a second time to ask if he would sell, the body-shop guy relented, deciding that he was happy to see it go. Cal would have corrected Judy from 'can't' drive it to 'won't' drive it eight years in, as once he got it painted it only had the interior left before the car could be considered 'cherry'. It was mechanically perfect but Cal wouldn't risk a dent or a ding...or a 'key-job' from some jealous asshole when he popped into a store to grab some beer or smokes or something.

Best just to leave it in the garage.

He tried to explain to her that it was painted, and Judy knew the nine-grand *that* cost meant that she would spend at least another year smelling the fumes back-drafting through a rust hole in the *Plymouth's* floor, and she could forget about any kind of real vacation that summer, too. A real vacation at this stage of Cal's downward spiral from insurance executive, and annual trips to Florida or twice to Maui, to restaurant manager

for a local joint, meant that even driving to the beach and renting a cabin for a few days was probably not in this summer’s cards, not after a nine-thousand dollar paint job.

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They’d met at college where Cal’s illustrious high school football career was supposed to proceed smoothly on to this next level, as in on to college and then on to the pros. It wasn’t *that* far-fetched of a dream; he was fast, the fastest kid at his rural high school, ‘*Fisher Heights*’, and had sure hands that never dropped anything he could touch. He was highly recruited by multiple Division One teams, settling on *NC State* (North Carolina) because it meant that he could live at home for the first year; well, at the home of his aunt and uncle who lived just outside of *Raleigh*. Judy had also attended *Fisher Heights* but was one year behind and such a ‘*plain-Jane*’ as her mother used to say that Cal had no idea who she was despite the fact that she’d always had a schoolgirl crush on the lanky wide receiver. She knew she wasn’t the only one; he was a ‘*dreamboat*’. Then Judy matured, blossomed, and enrolled in *NC State* herself despite being accepted with full scholarship to multiple schools of considerably higher academic standing, because she was obsessed with Cal Tracey and knew he was ‘the one’ if she could just get his attention. Once she was out of the house and living in the dorms she could dress in ways that showed off her recent curves without drawing her mother’s stern disapproval.

“How’d you know I was from the *Heights*?” Cal had asked, after her cleavage and tight blue jeans caught first his eye and then his time at a local *two-step* joint one night during Judy’s first month there. She explained that she was a year behind him but had gone to *Fisher High* and that everyone in *Fisher* and the surrounding towns knew who he was and had watched him play.

Soon after she got his attention, and then all too quickly (and stupidly) Judy became pregnant with Jaron. Cal and Judy were married during his junior year, two months after she gave birth. Cal loved her and seemed to like living with her but still the focus was all on football, and in an increasingly troubling light. No one worked harder during practice; no one studied more game film or left more out on the field than Cal Tracey. Problem was he wasn't on the field during games as much as he would like and if he couldn't showcase his skills he knew he'd never get drafted, and then he would have to try to talk his way into a walk-on tryout with any *NFL* team that would grant him one, an avenue with a one-in-a-thousand success possibility at best. *Fisher* was a predominantly white area; in fact there were only two black kids in his grade, fraternal twins. Cal was pretty good friends with one of them, *Chili-Ray Cornwell*, and had known him and his sister *Lisbeth* since grade school. They'd hung out more when they were younger but when Cal gravitated to sports, specifically football, Chili-Ray, even with his size and strength was never really interested despite the coaches and Cal's and his other friends' pleas. A couple of times Chili-Ray tried to explain the difficulties of being the only black kid on a team but Cal wasn't much for serious talk like that. Now that Cal was at *NC State* and up against some of the best high school players from all over the country, and especially at his position, wide receiver, it was Cal who was the minority; there were fifteen wide receivers, though only five really got any playing time, and Cal was number five. He was the only white guy out of the fifteen. He caught his share of locker room needling about the color of his skin, and how it meant he couldn't jump high. Or dance. Or run *all* that fast. *Pretty fast for a white boy* was the mantra. No one in any town around *Fisher* had beaten Cal in a footrace or a sprint since he was eight years old; now, he was faster than only a couple of guys at his position, scrubs really who were probably only on the team to try to get girls. Hard work and good hands only went so far, and for a while he became increasingly bitter.

“Fucking Tyrell,” he said to Judy one night at supper, noting the best receiver on the team. Judy didn’t particularly like foul language but planned on taking up that battle next year when Jaron started to talk. “He’s lazy. Stupid. Fucking parties all the time. Smokes dope sometimes before practice even, with fucking Jamal, then walks around bragging about how stoned he is when coach can’t hear.”

Judy had already learned to exercise caution when engaging Cal about football. He was normally fairly soft-spoken, mostly gentle and generally kind. Football made him into something different; something highly aggressive. Sometimes mean. She knew he was jealous of a few of his teammates and their natural athletic abilities because he trained every way imaginable to try to run faster and jump higher, ate right and abstained from cigarettes and alcohol, but seemed to have hit his peak. They’d even discussed trying to obtain anabolic steroids but both were fearful of the illegality and possible health risks and now that he was a dad Cal knew he couldn’t risk an arrest or some debilitating injury brought on after being hopped-up on drugs.

As Judy slowly watched the slipping away of Cal’s dream she knew that poor Jaron would be pressed to play and pressed to excel at an early age and if he wasn’t interested or simply wasn’t up to the task, well, she hoped they had another son soon who would be.

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At the hospital, it wasn’t until the third full day of coming in and out of consciousness that Cal could speak and focus well enough to try to learn about the accident. What he thought he was hearing didn’t make any sense. He heard Judy say something about the trailer breaking, some things about ‘beer’ though even in this state he could swear that he remembered being sober, and proudly, for some time now, then the word ‘attack’. Had he suffered some kind of heart attack or seizure, and then wrecked his buddy’s

pick-up? *And* the trailer with his beloved *Mustang* inside? What he wanted to do was ask about his car but things were still moving too quickly and too erratically in his mind for him to focus and then make the words. He heard the word 'hero' mentioned by Judy and Brenna, and then by one of the nurses- did someone pull him from the wreckage? Save his life? Rescue him? He vaguely remembered some strange man being in his room and hovering near the bed. Was that the 'hero'?

If he wrecked the *Mustang* there was no way he'd get insurance money to fully compensate him. It worried him, and he was struck inside with a nervous laugh: that he could muster up this thought when he was having trouble even following half the words that Judy and the kids were speaking.

"The...car..." he mumbled.

"Danny picked it up last week. Right when it happened. Don't worry, the 'snake' is fine," Judy squeezed his hand and both felt uneasy senses of relief. Cal figured his buddy Danny would be plenty pissed-off having to drive half a day to tow his wrecked pick-up truck but something about Judy's tone didn't make sense.

"He...it...drove?"

"Ssh, Cal, everything with the car and trailer are fine. Danny took the train down and drove them both home the other day when you were still unconscious. You'll just have to go down to the show again next year." Almost uncomfortably with more mention of the car, a palpable calm came over them both.

"Daddy, does everything hurt?" Brenna, his seven year old daughter seemed fascinated by his injuries, while Jaron his teenage son sat in the background and played obsessively with one of those new hand-held electronic video games, keeping an audible run of beeps and dings peeling in the background.

Cal had trouble lifting his right arm, only badly bruised but stuck full of tubes and wires, and three ribs and his sternum were cracked but he forced himself to gently touch his daughters head. "Yep. A...whole...lot," he rasped.

"Bet you'll have lots of scars. *Lookit* this," she lifted up the dress Judy had made her wear for church (and now hospital visits) and showed him one of her knees, skinned and scabby.

He tried to smile then drifted off into a semi-conscious fog.

*So, Danny's pick-up couldn't be that bad off if it not only still drove but was okay to pull the car trailer behind it the two-hundred eighty miles that his buddy would have to travel back to Raleigh. It suddenly dawned on him that he wasn't in the Raleigh hospital.*

He opened his eyes. "Where..."

Judy could sense his question. "We're in a town called *Simmons*. Still in South Carolina. The docs don't want to let you move for at least a couple more days. And then there's talk about flying you back to Raleigh in a helicopter."

Cal nodded slightly at some things as she spoke. Tiny flashes, images. Like spreading playing cards out on a table face up then quickly shuffling them around. And still very little stuck around long enough for him to get a good grasp or to string several thoughts together.

"I took the kids out of school because your ma wasn't feeling so well and I didn't want to leave them with her for an entire week. Or more. We were all so scared, and they wanted to see you, especially when they heard the news. We've been here for four days already."

"Four...?" Cal was shocked; he thought he had been out only maybe for one night.

Judy took his hand and Brenna quickly raced to the other side of the hospital bed and took the other, as Judy said: "Honey, you were in a coma. You took more than four hundred stitches. They were sure," she choked up then drew a deep breath," they said you would probably not make it through that first night. All of that blood."



This didn't make any sense and despite the relaxed worry over his car and his buddy's borrowed pick-up truck he just didn't see how both vehicles could be 'fine' with him so bad off.

Flashes of the strange man in his room came back to him. *The hero?* Cal remembered him more clearly, the man standing near the bed like a close friend or family member would do. He remembered the man briefly taking his hand the way his wife and daughter were now. He remembered the man was thin and black.

"Who... man..."

Judy smiled but didn't want him to keep straining himself talking. "*Ssh*, rest Honey. Unless one of those damn reporters got in here you probably mean Mr. Williams. Darryl Williams. They were his two boys..."

Suddenly Cal was washed over with a tidal wave of nausea at the mention of two boys. *My god* – he thought before he nearly lost consciousness again – *did I almost kill someone? Was I drunk on beer? Did I run somebody down? Two young boyus?* He carefully measured his breathing as he fought desperately for the memory. The man, the black man who was in his room...it was tense, Cal was alone and could barely move...but Cal wasn't fearful; it was something else. Anger? Was he angry with the man, not the other day in the hospital room but somewhere else? Some other time? He fought back toward consciousness and tried to focus intently on his smiling wife.

"What..."

"*Ssh*," Judy admonished again. "You rest. There's plenty of time to talk about it later. We're going to go have some lunch so you get some rest," she leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. Brenna vaulted herself upward using the side rail and kissed him hard on the cheek; Cal hoped she didn't see him wince when she pressed against his side. "Come on, Jaron," Judy's tone momentarily took the teenager from his game.

"See ya, dad," Jaron said with mild interest and followed them from the room.

Cal slept through the rest of the day but it was an especially troubled sleep, and not just from his wracked body.

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Cal dreamt; a vivid dream, satisfying sensorially, almost real despite its choppiness. *Cal saw the man who had visited him in his hospital room, this Darryl Williams, in an ice cream parlor, severely dressing down two young boys. Others in the shop didn't see or didn't appear to care. Cal went to say something, to intervene, but his left foot seemed glued to the floor and he fell when he tried to walk. The man, Darryl, turned from his loud diatribe to look at Cal and smile, then laugh, laughter that grew louder as Cal angrily tried to stand, ready to make the man stop through threatened physicality, through actual violence if necessary, if the man did not stop laughing at Cal or yelling at his own sons. Suddenly, Darryl began to grow to enormous proportions and became the size of a small house, utterly terrifying the now frozen Cal Tracey, his left foot still cemented to the ice cream parlor floor. Then, like that Darryl was gone. Cal looked down at his foot and saw that he was now barefoot and that his left foot was no longer stuck. Dumbfounded, he went to say something to the boys, to ask if they were all right, but they merely smiled at him and strode from the store licking giant ice cream cones as they went. Double scoopers, too.*

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The next day, Judy was carrying on animatedly, something about a hero and every news outlet in the state clamoring for an interview, even the *Associated Press!* With a jolt, something snapped. Cal's body, despite the rapid healing, was locked down tight, paralyzed, as if there was no way his mind was going to let his eyes or body distract him for even a moment from the film it was about to run.

Finally, he remembered it all.

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*He'd noticed the taillight when he stopped for gas and thought he'd heard the rear latch clanging around so he figured he'd better have a look before he pulled back into the heavy, interstate traffic. The taillights were working just fine when he left North Carolina, but now the one on the left wasn't working at all. Cal was always pretty particular and the last thing he needed was some idiot ramming him from behind and damaging his trailer and car, or getting pulled over by a state trooper and fined. There was very little sentiment left toward the *Mustang*. There had been plenty at first when he bought it, when he worked for *Safeco Insurance* and they lived in *Pine Cove* and had a three car garage, but after his downsizing he had no room in his living space or his shrunken portfolio for a fifty-thousand dollar toy. Now, it was strictly business, the car no different than if he had been hauling around fifty-thousand dollars worth of soy beans or fifty-thousand dollars worth of gold. Without a ridiculously expensive rider no insurance company would insure it for more than liability and as he never drove it since he'd restored it, it made little sense to lay out money for that. He was a cautious driver anyway and didn't mind staying in the far right lane.*

First chance he saw where there looked like a shopping strip-mall, just over the border into South Carolina, in a ratty little town called *Clemmons*, Cal turned in to '*Sinclair Auto Parts*' and drew his long rig up near the middle of the mostly empty parking lot as he took up three vertical spaces. The lot was cracking in more than a few places and the building looked like it hadn't had new paint or even a refresher in a decade or more, the kind of place in the kind of strip-mall that had long since seen its best days, where you could see a tumbleweed or empty beer can blow across the hot and sticky asphalt and not pay either much mind. What Cal sometimes referred to as '*the black side of town*'. As he was parking he saw a man, a store employee judging by his

name tag and striped shirt, helping a woman install new wiper blades. He didn't usually go for black girls but this one was a knockout, damn fine, dressed nicely too, professional looking. He could tell that the man was casually flirting with the lady and that his presence outside meant that the store was probably used to people ignoring the ubiquitous sign not to work on cars in the parking lot and would often help out if it was something simple and quick which most parking lot repairs usually were.

Cal got out and had to lie down on the hot asphalt while he followed the taillight wires that ran beneath the frame, finding a kink and a split where a rock must have hit, just behind the rear wheel.

“*Shit,*” he burned the back of his arm on a spot of hot tar, angry because it hurt but also because tar was a bitch to get off. Maybe the parts store had some of that heavy-duty orange hand cleaner in their bathroom that he could use.

Cal walked across and entered the store. He bought a new wiring harness for the taillight then a small toolkit, the kind you leave in your car for emergencies.

Heading back outside into the brutal heat, made more stifling being reflected off the black asphalt, Cal wished he'd bought a can of soda pop or cold lemonade. Or a cold beer or six-pack a part of him thought but that part no longer had a say in such matters as Cal had been 'on the wagon' for going on nine years now, ever since Judy first got pregnant with Brenna and had it out with him over what he guessed probably was a bit of regular, excessive consumption, at the time. It was the only time she'd ever threatened to leave him and while he didn't take that seriously her vehemence did mean that it meant a lot to her so he just stopped altogether instead of merely trying to tone it down. Still, there were times, hot, sticky times like this, his arm throbbing a little from the tar burn, where he regretted having made that decision. Looking in the bed of the pick-up, hoping to find a piece of cardboard or a drop-sheet to lie on, Cal opted for newspaper. He figured to get his work shirt and tie dirty and in need of dry cleaning

but he really wasn't in the mood to change clothes over something that would take five minutes to fix, ten minutes tops.

Like most car repairs, again especially those undertaken in a parts-store lot, fifteen minutes later Cal was sweaty and dirty and had one hand that was bleeding from slipping with the cheap, Japanese-made pliers and grinding his fist into the sand-strewn asphalt, leaving a small patch of bloody skin on the ground, some sand and tiny twigs adhering to the wetness of the fresh wound. The triple-axle trailer weighed nearly sixteen-hundred pounds; nearly four-thousand with the *Mustang* and all of its *accoutrement* nestled neatly inside. Then, Cal found a second source of trouble when he went to crank the trailer up off of the hitch.

After a few more frustrating minutes Cal went back inside, rubbing dirt and grease from his hands onto a paper towel. Looking around and seeing that the man who had helped the good-looking woman was free, Cal approached the counter.

"Help you?" The man asked.

"Yeah, I was wondering if I could get you to come out for a sec and connect the harness while I hold up the tongue. Damn thing's pinched underneath it. Otherwise I'd need a floor jack."

"Not supposed to do repairs in the lot." The man said, looking down as if he was busy with something.

"Just take a minute. Come on. I'll give you a few bucks."

"Sorry. Can't do it. B'side's," the man looked at the big clock above the door, "I'm off the clock now."

Cal stared at him angrily for a second and the man stared back, then Cal looked around to see if anyone else was free - they were all suddenly preoccupied - before muttering under his breath and walking to the aisle that had the floor jacks for sale. "Should of bought wipers I guess," he said.

The counter man scoffed at the comment, maybe a little louder than he should have, being an employee, loud enough for Cal to hear anyway. Then he seemed to back off. The counter man thought that the last thing he needed was some white asshole, some 'cracker' complaining about him to the owner. Frustrated, Cal bought a cheap floor jack and exited without further fanfare.

"Motherfucker!" Cal screamed violently finally freeing a sentiment that he'd felt for the better part of the last half hour as the cheap floor jack shifted when the wheels gouged into the scorching, putty-like asphalt and the jack stand that was holding the end of the trailer shifted onto Cal's left foot for an instant before shooting out and skittering off violently to one side, but not before breaking several bones in his foot. Cal was tough and generally good about dealing with pain but the cumulative effects of the stinging sweat in his eyes, the counter man's attitude, the throbbing now in his foot as well as his arm, and the heat reflection made him want to grab the biggest wrench he could find and 'go to town' on the *fucking trailer*. Hobbling, he tried to walk it off but deep down Cal knew that he'd broken something; there were a ton of tiny bones in your foot. He might have grabbed that wrench and gone back inside with really bad intentions if he'd been able to see all of the counter guys laughing at him through the slightly tinted front plate glass. Thankfully, he could not.

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Another hour and fifteen minutes; another skinned and bloody knuckle and Cal was on his way, moving slowly into traffic, grateful that his buddy Danny's AC worked well as it was, on high and all of the vents pointed right at Cal's sweaty face. His foot was throbbing so painfully that the full-body clenching from it was actually hurting his jaw and giving him a side-stitch but thankfully it was his left foot so he could still drive. Cal thought about going to the emergency room but wanted to make time. For a minute he

flashed back and felt as if he was watching the scene unfold below as he hovered above; his now sweat-stained and filthy work shirt; the blood from two places on his right hand; the burning hot tar stuck to his forearm; then the floor jack slowly digging into the pavement, like pushing your fingers into a fresh-from-the-oven uncooked tray of brownies. Then the jack stand slipping and shooting out to the side and catching the top of his left foot as it tore violently by. He imagined that the counter guys in the store were having a good laugh, a good old laugh at dumb old ‘whitey’ hopping around the parking lot like an idiot, a guy with a dress shirt and tie, probably some executive hauling some toy around worth more than a year of their pay, so yeah, that would be real funny.

*Fucking pussies* –he thought, for some reason working himself into an even greater rage. He thought the ‘N-word’, a word he only remembered using once in his life, in public, by mistake when he was a teen while waiting for the school bus with his friend Chili-Ray. The bus, driven by a black woman, was late, as it often was which meant they’d get to school just before the bell and wouldn’t have any time to hang out. Chili-Ray had said: *fucking bitch. Whore’s always late* –and Cal just let the word slip out in his heated agreement before both he and Chili-Ray realized what he’d said and Cal’s jaw dropped. So Chili-Ray punched him pretty hard in the shoulder because they both knew that he should, and that was the end of the matter. Now, with his foot and his head... and his jaw and his side now throbbing, Cal thought that if he had seen even one of those *motherfuckers* laugh at him he would have gone in with that wrench and given them all something to think about.

He turned on the radio and tried to distract himself from the pain, thinking he might actually have to stop at a hospital when like a bad scene in some horror movie, as he crept slowly along in traffic he saw a couple of kids with baseball mitts and a bat walking down the sidewalk with a thin black guy who turned as if he could read Cal’s mind and looked right at him, and *god-damn if it wasn’t that cocksucker from the auto parts*

*store, and god-damn if that black motherfucker from the auto parts store didn't look right at Cal and smirk a little before turning down some alleyway or side-street.*

In a darkening, all-encompassing rage that made Cal temporarily forget about his other pain, he quickly turned on his blinker and looked for a way to take the first right.

And go after the man.

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The hospital in *Pitman*, North Carolina was quiet. They'd driven Cal all the way there in an ambulance. Judy figured correctly that it was much less expensive than a helicopter. He'd been here two days now with maybe another week to stay. Cal's brother, and Danny, had stopped by often, lingering to head off the ever persistent reporters who made increasingly more feeble attempts for an interview they were assured would not be coming until Cal was back on his feet. By then the news would probably have moved on to something else.

One late Sunday afternoon, Cal's priest stopped by. He pulled up a chair and sat for a moment, neither man speaking. Then Cal began.

"I'm no hero, father. Everybody wants to think I am because I almost got killed.

"But, fact of the matter is I went looking for that guy, was going to confront him. Broken foot or no broken foot, baseball bat or no baseball bat.

"Two little kids wearing their ball gloves, just walking with their dad."

"Yet you saved them. Saved all of their lives. What do you call that?"

Cal shook his head from side-to-side, slowly. "Can't remember much about it, to be honest with you. I remember getting out of the truck. Looking for the man. And then when I saw him...it was surreal. Like I had already gotten to him and beaten him, beaten him bad. With that wrench or something. Way worse than he ever would've deserved, for looking at me wrong, or maybe even laughing when I busted up my foot.



I thought for a minute I might've been drunk; you know, I'd fallen off the wagon, and maybe tuned this guy up, hit him with a wrench. And right in front of his kids. Most humiliating thing you can do to a man: beat him down in front of his family. Beat him down, in front of his kids."

Cal was silent and hung his head low. The priest said: "And then?"

Cal loosed a huge sigh. "Then, I really can't remember. Only that I saw those boys. They were just scared...scared little kids. Had nothing to do with any beef between me and their dad. And then...that maybe...maybe I'd been drinking again, and in a blackout rage just beat a man near death just because he looked at me funny. Or, laughed at me when I broke my foot. Beat him right in front of them. Two boys no older than Jaron, my son. Too much. Too much to handle." Cal shook his head slowly from side to side and buried it in his hands.

"I remember all I could think of, in that flash, that instant, was making it right by them, right by those kids. To keep 'em from being scared.

"Then, five days later I wake up in a hospital. And people are trying to tell me that I'm some kind of hero. That I saved the two boys, and probably their dad too, from getting mauled by a bear. A black bear. "

"So, you're not perfect? Yet you participated bravely in what must be considered an act of god, and three more souls are still alive today because of it."

Cal stared off into space. "I ought...maybe I ought to tell the news why I was on that side street to begin with. How it took me five minutes to find a stretch long enough to park the trailer, then how even with a messed-up foot I still went looking for a man. With bad intentions."

"Yes, you could. But are they not separate issues? Does one negate the another?"

Cal hadn't really thought about it like that so he did now. After a moment he said: "I guess I see your point."

The priest leaned back to re-cross his legs and replace his folded hands gently on his knees. "Let me ask you now. What burns in your heart? Is it anger still? And did you feel god working through you when you put yourself between that rampaging bear and the two frightened boys? Remember, you also could have easily been killed.

"Can you still feel god now?"

Cal thought some more. "Father, I honestly don't know. It's just blank from right after I saw him, saw the man lying on the ground and bleeding, then his boys on the other side of the alleyway holding each other, scared. I mean literally shaking, the older one holding the littler one from falling to the ground. I was so mad...I can pretty much remember being real angry, right up to that point, angry and confused as to what had happened. What I'd done. And then...it's like the movie projector just shuts off and skips a reel. And I wake up in the hospital all bandaged up."

Both men looked out through the window to tall sycamore trees that surrounded the hospital. The priest said: "So. Can you imagine if this man or another looked at you wrong today, or maybe even laughed at your misfortune..."

Cal jolted, hung his head and waved his hand quieting the older man. "I believe I am all done with violence, Father. When you said that...about god...all I could think about was the image of those two scared boys. I think one of them even wet himself.

"I'm not much of a religious man, just Easter and Christmas, for church. And only then, if I'm being honest, only because Judy wants to go.

"I can't tell you I felt god in that alleyway. But I sure felt something. Something greater than my stupid anger. Can't say I don't feel a little of it still.

"Don't feel angry. Can't imagine ever getting so angry that I think to use my fists, not ever again. Just can't imagine it."

The two men looked back out at the trees and the gentle wind that rustled them.

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They brought Cal home the following Wednesday. He was stretched out in the back of the *Plymouth* so Jaron and Brenna had to sit in the front seat with their mom. They were all somewhat surprised, Cal included, that he didn't get irritated when he had to negotiate the three front stairs with his crutches and without putting any weight on his left leg.

"C'mere, boy," Cal motioned Jaron over and leaned on his shoulder. "Big enough to hold up your old man, aren't ya?"

"Sure, Dad." And with some effort as Cal outweighed him by at least fifty pounds, Jaron helped Cal into the house.

They got him settled onto the couch, where he could see out the window to the front lawn and the street, and also see the TV. Judy set about to get dinner started and then came into the living room carrying a tote bag from the hospital in Raleigh. "Here are all your cards and letters." She fished things from the bag and started setting them on the side table near Cal who gave them a cursory glance and then forced a weak smile. "Oh, and I almost forgot. That man, Darryl. I'm pretty sure he left this that afternoon. No note or anything. Strange." She handed him an old, very tightly pressed and folded fifty-dollar bill.

A strange wave of deep emotion washed over Cal. Judy was still talking to him from back in the kitchen but his head was throbbing hard and he couldn't hear as he stared at the bill. It had a look like it was kept in the back of a man's wallet forever; two vertical lines evenly spaced from accumulated dirt cut it into sections like a comic strip when he unfolded it. An old bill. Series '1933-C'.

What was the significance? Was it a lot of money in this Darryl's world, and his way of trying to help out? Was it some kind of street thing, a '*black thing*' maybe that Cal did not understand? All he knew was that something about looking at it wasn't sitting

right with his gut. He took out his own wallet, folded the bill the way it had been and slid it safely in the back, making a mental note to maybe contact that Darryl and ask him sometime. Give it back to the man.

Cal drifted off into a restless sleep with Judy still talking to him from the kitchen.

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It was the first day he dared to have a look at it, his third day back home and the first time Judy had gone back to work and left him home alone. He would have wheeled himself but with his left foot still in a cast and his leg protruding stiffly from the wheelchair he worried that he might bang into something, maybe hurt his foot some more, or knock something over. So he waited all day, half-watching mindless TV, ignoring the constantly ringing phone, stealing the occasional glance at the door to the garage, thinking about what rested behind it; until just after Jaron and Brenna got home from school. Then, he asked Jaron if he would mind wheeling him around for a few minutes.

“I will! I will!” Brenna dropped her backpack and raced around but Cal held up his hand.

“I think I’d like to keep the speed limit below fifty, *Sweetie*. And you need to take *Missy* for a walk. Please.” Brenna pouted for a moment and Cal thought she might put her fists on her hips like her ma but then she kissed him and grabbed her backpack and moved quickly away.

“Where you want to go?” Jaron set his own backpack down on a dining room chair and took the handles behind the wheelchair.

Oh, I don’t know. I thought dancing in the attic maybe, if you don’t mind all of the steps.”

For a fraction of a second Jaron thought that his dad might be serious but then he smiled and started wheeling him from the living room. "Be kind of hard to haul you up that ladder."

Cal smiled. "Feels pretty good to move around after being in that damn hospital bed so long, I'll tell you that."

Brenna called from the background: "Bye dad. Taking *Missy* over to the park," and Cal heard a door slam.

"Park sounds like a pretty good idea. I'm not keeping you from anything, am I son?"

"No. It's cool," Jaron steered them toward the front door.

"Whoa, watch the leg," Cal cried as Jaron almost accidentally clipped the doorjamb with Cal's extended leg.

"Sorry!"

"No worries. No worries."

Jaron pulled the door shut behind him, then the two of them sat still for a moment looking at the three front stairs. They hadn't seemed like much to Cal when Judy had to climb them, carrying groceries and the like. Now, they might as well have numbered five hundred.

"Guess we better go through the garage," Jaron said, and turned Cal around. Jaron didn't know that Cal was afraid of the garage, afraid to see the *Mustang* sitting there, still all snug and safe, and pearly glistening. The truth was Cal was just ready for it to be gone, so Judy could park the old *Plymouth* inside. And the money would make them both breathe a little easier as Cal's workman's comp insurance would only cover his salary for a year, and the docs had no idea how long it would take for Cal to recover. He also knew he'd only get top-dollar if he took it to a big show and there was no way that was happening anytime soon. The garage had only one step to navigate but Jaron was extra cautious in the uncomfortable silence as he carefully maneuvered the heavy

Cal and wheelchair away from the *Mustang*. Then, the right front wheel on the wheelchair caught a jagged little crack in the cement floor and the chair kicked hard left ramming Cal's cast-covered foot and the wheelchair footrest into the rear quarter panel of the impeccable car.

Jaron audibly gasped as did Cal; the boy only worried about the car at first, Cal inwardly too, but then a bolt of pain shot up his leg and he had to bite down and grip the armrests and squirm not to cry out.

"Sorry Dad! *Sorry!* The floor! The chair's heavy..." If Cal had been healthy, Jaron would have been shirking from the awaited explosion. None came.

Cal lifted his hand as he got his breath back under control. "Son...son...it's okay. It's okay. It's just a car."

*Just a car?!* –Jaron wanted to scream in a wild mix of terror and confusion as did a remote part of Cal's brain.

"*Sorry, Dad. Sorry!* Did I hurt your leg?!"

Cal put his hand on the boy's arm. "It's fine. I banged it twice already myself. 'Why I wanted you to wheel me around.'"

"Sorry!"

"It's okay," Cal stole a quick look at the nasty little dent and scratch on the otherwise flawless paint, then settled back into the chair as Jaron hit the button and the garage door began to slowly rise. Pushing even more cautiously Jaron got them outside and was about to close the door behind them when Cal stopped him.

"I got a better idea. Let's drive to the park. That way we can avoid all those cracks in the sidewalk. Wouldn't want to break your mother's back! -or mine!" Cal laughed.

Jaron shrugged and turned Cal back around. "Ma won't be home for a while, you know."

"So we'll take the *Mustang*. Haven't had it out for a while." Cal hadn't actually driven the car in two years.

Jaron had fond memories of several often fast rides before the final paint job.

"Okay," Jaron replied with measured caution, then: "How's your leg gonna fit in?"

"I'll just lean the seat way back. Lots of legroom in the '69." Once again Jaron started to roll him but Cal stopped him. "No. You drive."

"Me?" Jaron gaped in disbelief. "I don't even have my license yet," he stammered, waiting for his dad to laugh it off and tell him he was just joking.

"We're only going a few blocks. You'll be fine.

"And son...it's only a car."

They leaned the passenger seat halfway back and with some effort got Cal inside. Jaron's hand was shaking but he fought it and with one slight turn of the key the massive engine awoke as if it was still warm and made its throaty presence beastly known. Jaron looked carefully over both shoulders then eased the car into reverse.

"Just take your foot off the brake and let her roll," Cal instructed as their driveway had a slight downgrade.

"Would you let me drive if this was a standard?" Jaron asked as they drove slowly down the un-crowded street.

Cal laughed. "Not on your life."

They drew some looks as the shiny, pearly car rolled by, and Jaron was ecstatic but kept it to himself when his buddy Michael, who was shooting hoops on the basketball court, caught sight that the *Mustang* was not only out but that Jaron was behind the wheel.

"Swing around the fountain. And then we can go find your sister."

Jaron was a little disappointed as the fountain Cal mentioned was barely working and off to the side of the park that was becoming rundown and tended to be where some

homeless congregated, often cooling off with the weak fountain water during the hot summer months.

Jaron asked: "So, have you talked to that man yet?"

Cal shook his head. "No. Your mom tried to call for his number but the hospital wouldn't give it out. I suppose I could call all of the Williams' down there but that's a pretty common name."

Cal frowned. "I'm not sure he really wants to talk to me anyway..."

"But *Dad?! You saved his life! His boys' too!*"

Cal held up his hand. "I know son. Believe me I know." Cal shifted painfully in the seat. "Being honest, there was a little more to it, son. The man and I sort of had some words earlier that day. Didn't think much of it at the time." Cal sat a moment, reflecting. Jaron slowed the car even more. Cal continued. "World's strange sometimes, is all. Had a long chat with Father Neal about it. It was violence, son, or thoughts of it anyhow, that put me in that alleyway to begin with. That's what I'm telling you."

"But then it was good that you were there. You saved their lives!" Jaron pulled the car over to the curb.

"Right."

They sat for a moment then Cal waved his hand, motioning for Jaron to drive some more. "Might as well not waste gas idling. You know you're the only one besides Danny and me that has driven this car? And Danny drove it way before it was cherry."

"It's awesome. I think you should keep it. Drive it around every day."

Cal smiled a little at the thought.

After a moment, he said: "Go on over to the fountain, will you?"

A few more people took notice of the slow-moving, shiny car.

Cal saw a man with a shopping cart full of his possessions, a man that he'd seen before. A rail-skinny black man who was somewhere between a rough thirty and sixty years old. Cal always thought that the guy looked a little crazy, and in the past Cal



never had given him any more mind than wanting to roll down his window and tell the guy to ‘get a job’.

Struggling, Cal squirmed in his seat, trying to get into his pocket, to his wallet, then rolled down the window and motioned the man over. He handed him the tight-pressed fifty-dollar bill. “Good luck to you, brother.”

The man took the bill with his lower lip drooping in disbelief.

Jaron looked at his father a little oddly, but said nothing and continued to drive slowly around the park.

## The Run

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I once interviewed a rock-star who described making a hit and then performing it on-stage as feeling like you owned the world. Not in a greedy, egotistical way, more a sense of complete, mutual awe, of majesty: *utter humanness and pure love connecting with cosmic energy*- I believe he said. He said that when a hit comes to you, when you're walking around, or taking a 'schvitz' and maybe the tune starts in your head, or the poem which would become the lyrics, and you feel it then, a tingling, a sensation: *this is hot*- and you start to work it out on the piano or guitar, and then when you actually cut it and: *hear it tight*- for the first time, that's when you get the rush. But *live*- and I thought this was interesting- he said it didn't have to be in a packed stadium: *doesn't have to be (expletive) Wimbley*- as long as there were at least a couple hundred people and they were all really into it. That's all that mattered. Then you'd get the real rush, the: *full body rush*- as he called it that not only allowed you to play that same hit over and over night after night but to actually enjoy doing so.

I've been a reporter in some capacity for eleven years. My name is Dan Tillman. I started in 1984 as a sports-desk gopher/copy-guy for a TV station in Denver, and then caught on with a local free 'art rag' as a reporter and assistant editor. I was on the sports-desk writing copy for the first five-years but also doing research and occasionally some typesetting, yes, actually done on a computer way back then too but still took some work unlike today where the software basically does it for you. Not a whole lot of 'rush' in my world. I couldn't even imagine the *Holy Grail* of the 'full body rush'.

One day when I was feeling particularly crappy, broke and stifled in my low-paying world, I took the last bill out from my wallet besides some singles. It was older than the rest, a 'Series 1933-C', a fifty, from a time when the paper and ink seemed

somewhat richer in color and definitely higher in quality. At first I thought it might not be real and that I got burned with a counterfeit since it looked different from the others, but closer examination showed that it was just older and had extra stuff printed on it like a bank's name. *Probably sat in some old lady's drawer for the better part of her life* -I thought. I walked into a casino, 'Diamond Lil's', and right up to the first blackjack table I saw and played the whole thing. This ensured I would either double my money or crap out, either outcome nice and fast. I rolled it over for five straight passes, sixteen-hundred dollars, before giving back two-hundred, then getting the hell out of there before I gave it all back. I kept the old fifty aside and it became my lucky rabbit's foot, my talisman, folded precisely into fourths the way you fold a brochure and tucked snugly into the back of my wallet. I've used it to do some coke a couple of times.

I've always had an analytical mind and as I sat night after night and monotonously entered data, sports score after score, often right up until press time at 1:45 a.m., I began to notice trends in the number of articles I saw on say a particular football team, and how the betting line seemed to be affected. Also, a lot of those cheesy: *Dial '1-800 Sure-Win' for your pick of the night, a guaranteed winner!* -ads ran in the back of our paper. So, I developed a 'system' and found a guy named 'Buddy' (unlikely his real name) who took bookmaking action from the back of a dive-bar named 'Drake's' down in 'LoDo', the nickname for lower-downtown Denver where the nighttime action is. I wasn't earning very much at work so I couldn't afford to bet heavy but with my fourteen-hundred dollar head start started with my lucky fifty, damned if my 'system' didn't start working. After the fifth week I was pulling in more in an envelope from *Buddy* than I was from the newspaper, and spent much of my off-time reading, calling those stupid hotlines and crunching numbers even more. I thought maybe I was feeling some of that rock-star 'tingling' -when a team I needed to cover a spread scored the meaningless points that got them over and got me paid- and one time I believe a short 'full body rush' when I went for it and bet a block of five games which pays twenty-five-

to-one on top of any line, and I had laid down half a yard- five hundred bucks. Paid out *twelve-and-a-half G's*. I counted the cash right when I got into my car, a stupid idea in ‘LoDo’ at night, then counted it again when I got back to my ratty (but *soon-to-be-distant-memory*) studio apartment. I even tried to put the whole fat roll in my front pocket, carry it around like some gangster, but this apparently only works in the movies, or maybe if you’re really fat and have appropriately large pockets. The interview with the rocker was three years prior to that first big win, but I remembered his words and his description clearly as I turned the roll over and over and felt an incomparable sense of power.

My hot streak. Forever to be known as: ‘*The Run*’. Guys down at *Drake’s* tagged me ‘*Biff*’ after the ‘*Back to the Future*’ movie character who stumbles across a future sport almanac left behind accidentally from a time machine, and obviously can’t lose. For a while I worried about getting mugged, especially after a cocktail or seven, but I guess I bought the degenerates enough drinks and hot wings on good nights so they couldn’t bring themselves to roll me. Plus, most of them had learned by week two to try to see what I was doing before game time and maybe get down a little on their own.

I was their fucking hero.

I can handle myself okay for a guy in his late thirties; I played outside-linebacker in high school. But cruising around late at night and half *in-the-bag* with a thick wad of cash was a recipe for trouble. My new problem, if you could call it that, was that ‘*Buddy*’ the bookie was okay for maybe a couple of hundred bucks a game but I got the feeling that he hadn’t laid-off much if any of my action early on in the streak and therefore had taken the pounding himself. ‘*Laying off*’ means passing a bet along to a bigger bookie while paying less ‘juice’, a bookie who can afford to pay if the bet hits, leaving the smaller bookie safely in his financial comfort zone. Smart bookmakers choose their clients carefully and then they try to lay all of the action off on someone bigger, living off the ‘*juice*’- the term, usually ten percent, is the bookie’s cut of your winnings for

taking your bet. They keep one-hundred percent if you lose. Small time guys pay the bigger bookie less, maybe five-percent juice so if they even out the bets they can't lose money. 'Buddy' maybe wasn't that smart and after two weeks of my hitting like mad and rolling it over every night he took me to meet one of his 'guys', a Chinese dude who sounded like he was from New Jersey and spoke like he wanted a part on *Miami Vice*. He told me to call him 'Charlie' as in 'Charlie Chan' but I doubted that this was his name any more than 'Buddy' was called that at first communion. 'Charlie' assigned me a client code, told me that he already knew where I lived and worked. Not sure if I remember making 'Buddy' being privy to these details but it all seemed reasonable. Settle-up day was Monday, without fail.

'Charlie' lasted for nearly three weeks, often muttering under his breath in Chinese or Mandarin or something about how I was 'killing him' as he walked away after handing me a big, fat envelope stuffed full of cash.

I couldn't lose. I was hitting nearly seventy-five percent of my plays.

I got passed up the line, again, this time to a guy named 'Mush' which may have been his real name and whose affect was straight out of *Mafia Central Casting*. By now I was on their radar, betting 'dimes' per game (a thousand bucks). 'Mush' assured me I was the last guy I needed to meet and that he could handle any and all of my action and he hoped that I wouldn't go anywhere else.

It's impossible to have a 'system' to bet team sports unless the fix is in, and the fix is never in, at least not for small time punks like me, so I'm pretty sure they had me checked out six ways to Sunday to be sure I wasn't 'connected', maybe to some big-time rival.

For five weeks straight I hit nearly seventy-percent of my plays and kept rolling it over. I had parlayed my initial fourteen-hundred bucks from the old fifty-dollar bill at 'Diamond Lil's' into almost half-a-million dollars.

*One half-million.*

*Green, cash dollars.*

That much cash, I'd never seen anything like it outside of a movie, and no movie could convey the smell of it, or the filth it left on your hands after counting it, nor the worry and foreboding that nothing this good could last forever, or what if you got robbed? Or, what if there was a fire?

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By Monday morning, in week number nine of *'The Run'* I am seriously thinking about quitting work. Don't get me wrong, I like to write.

Sort of.

Let me clarify: I like to write out interviews I've conducted if the interviewee is compelling. I've been getting mostly dull assignments lately, stuff tied in with politics, one sort of interesting piece on a corruption charge but it's November and that means college football is in action and this means there are a ton of games. Let me tell you, when you're up nearly a *half-a-mil* of house-money it is damn hard not to go crazy with it, crazy like laying ten dimes -ten grand- on some wild 25-1 parlay. I mean, what the hell, like I wouldn't be *nearly* as happy with four-hundred- ninety thou? Way I've been going, I'd probably hit that too. Having this much cash...everyone says: Yeah, *I'd like to have that problem* –but you know you can't declare it because it is technically illegal (all right, just regular illegal). I have been tempted to fly out to *Las Vegas* and park my ass in a sportsbook. It's funny, I never broke any law before, not counting personal consumption drug-use, and no one feels like they're breaking any laws by betting a couple of bucks on the *Superbowl* in some office pool even though *technically* they are, (that word again) but when you have nearly a half-million dollars lying in various shrink-wrapped stacks on your bed, even if it's not stolen and no one, as far as you know, is trying to kill you for it you still know it's illegal. And you have to find something to do with it or you know in the end you'll wind up gambling it all back.

I have a brother-in-law named Ted. He’s married to one of my three sisters, Monica, and they have a couple of kids. Monica is the oldest, I’m the youngest. My two other sisters are ‘floaters’. One is a yoga instructor who catches on with boats and winds up on exotic islands where she’ll hang out and teach for a week or a month or a year then sends me a postcard from somewhere else. The other is a boozer, and heavy into coke and meth, and only calls when she’s in trouble which used to be all the time until about three years ago when she dropped off the map. Possibly incarcerated. Possibly dead, though I wouldn’t bet on it as of the four of us she’s by far the toughest.

So, Monica’s husband Ted is a contractor. Residential homes mostly but he also does small commercial, like six to ten unit strips and stacks. He has a good business; they live up in *Boulder* in a house that until recently I wouldn’t have dreamed of, and I actually spent a couple of summers in his employ swinging a hammer as a side-gig when I first got started at the TV station. I have a pretty good idea how the business works. Ted is a ‘*Churchie*’. an incredibly straight-shooter, but almost every business that can has a skim to save on taxes and I know a lot of guys who would never dream of taking a hotel towel who think nothing of drawing good pocket-money from the till before ‘*Uncle Sam*’ gets his taste. But, like most successful, church-going businessmen, Ted sees dollars first.

“Gambling? How much?”

“A lot,” I took a sip of lemonade and leaned back into a comfy lounge chair, looking up at *The Flatirons*, the distinct mountains outside of *Boulder*. My sister Monica lit a cigarette and settled into her own chair with her smoke and a glass of iced tea. I’d decided to run my idea by her first.

We grew up lower-middle class; dad had been a truck driver before dying from lung cancer at forty-nine, and mom a substitute teacher who died herself at fifty under questionable circumstances, probably suicide. Monica had taken a real liking to the trappings of *Boulder* where homes averaged more than half-a-million and every other

car was a high-end import. I thought their kids, my nieces, were spoiled little brat-snobs, but that's for another day.

"A lot, like five-grand?"

It was always interesting to see what was 'a lot' of money, for me, the lowly writer to have in his possession, coming from someone who lives in a million-dollar home and probably has five-grand in change under the cushions of one of her sofas.

I smiled thinly. "More like five-hundred."

Monica scoffed dismissively then took a long draw off of her skinny cigarette. I don't think many people smoke in *Boulder*, it being all outdoorsy and all. She was about to make a crack about how no one's time was worth discussing over five-hundred dollars while trying not to be *too* pretentious when she seemed to process rapidly and then cocked an eye. "Five-hundred *grand*?" I nodded once. *Mr. Cool*. "You won half-a-million dollars gambling? Are you freaking kidding me?"

"Nope."

"Where? How? *Vegas*?"

I told her about my roll. Monica doesn't impress easily. And, believe me this is not exactly found money, I did earn it, but she acted like I'd discovered buried treasure or something.

"So now you have five-hundred thousand dollars lying around? Where is it? Can I see it? What if someone steals it?"

"Calm down. Why do you think I'm here? It's a shitload of money. I have it stashed away at work. They have 24-hour security, and there are always people around."

"Wow."

"Right."

"Well, what are you going to do with it?"



I didn't particularly like having to connect the dots for her. "I was going to talk to Ted."

"Ted? Why Ted? He's no financial planner."

"It's illegal gambling winnings, Monica. As in 'not legal'. As in 'I paid no taxes on them'. If I won it in a sportsbook in *Vegas* the tax man would have taken his bite before I got out of the casino."

"So, you want Ted to sell you a home for cash? Is that it?"

Hadn't thought about that angle but at least we'd crossed a threshold where I figured she wouldn't get pissed off that I would even ask. I thought for a moment about how to put it. "Ted deals with a lot of trades. Not *trading*, what I mean is..."

"I know what trades are, Danny." 'Trades' are your various carpenters and plumbers and framers and electricians. Monica always called me Danny. Thankfully since my folks passed no one else did. "You want us to help you launder the money."

Well, okay then. "Yep."

Monica took a long drag then a drink. "We paid five-point-one last filing." I forgot that Monica did the bookkeeping. "But we'd be saving you from paying six-point-nine. Plus federal of course. If you could declare it. Which, like you said, you can't."

"Obviously, I'm trying not to pay anything. It's more about vouching for where it came from. So I could, I don't know, start a business. Invest, whatever. Legitimately.

"Anyway, do you think I could run it by Ted? I mean, I know it's gambling, but they are legitimate winnings. It's not like it's stolen or drug money or something."

"Boy, I don't know. Let me think about it. I mean, sure, you could run it buy him. I just don't know if he'd be interested. Would save us close to twenty-six thousand." I played this perfectly as I knew Monica would prime the pump with Ted once she did her own math.

"You could buy half of a new car."

Monica ignored me. She tilted her head back in this theatrical sort of way before she smoked. “He won’t be home for a while.”

We sat and drank our drinks and looked at the incredible scenery, *The Flatirons*, the trademark skyline of *Boulder* which looked like a normal run of picturesque mountains until a giant saw blade swung from the sky and lopped off part of the rock face at a seventy-degree angle.

Monica pushed some hair away from her eyes. “So. Let me ask you. This ‘system’ of yours...”

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I drove up to *Boulder* with the hope of securing a means to legitimize my winnings. I left with five-thousand more to gamble, Monica’s ‘*mad money*’ from her sock drawer.

*Great.*

We agreed she would feel Ted out first, and meanwhile there was another slate of games on tonight that old ‘*Mush*’ and the boys were waiting by the phones for ‘*M-two-three-seven*’ (me) to call in his action on. For all I knew, they were riding my streak too. For all I knew, half the bookies on the east coast were. I imagined some real big shot somewhere, an actual *Mafia Don*, or, what the hell, an entire *Mafia* family stewing over the pounding they were taking as at some point there have to be no bigger bookies to lay bets off to. Now, there would be a story; following the trail of my crazy run through ‘*Buddy*’ at ‘*Drake’s*’ bar, to ‘*Charlie (Chan)*’ on up to ‘*Mush*’ and beyond, everyone waiting by the phone for the one ring amongst hundreds or even thousands where the caller, me, identifies as ‘*M-two thirty seven*’ and continues to hit seventy-percent. I could see a couple of casino bosses in *Vegas* talking right now about how I’d been background-checked thoroughly and come back squeaky-clean; how I was just some

unconnected guy on the run of a lifetime, and how like a game of musical chairs at some point I'd go stone-cold and like a snake-whip so would the entire line of guys riding my coattails. How it always went that way. *But we're two months in and the guy's gotta be up a mil or more by now* –one might be saying.

I was betting fifty-grand a night, my self-imposed limit, so if I hit seventy-percent across the board I wound up with like eighteen-grand in profit after paying the 'juice'. Tonight, including Monica's five I would bet fifty-five. 'Mush' and any associates, the guys I'd bet with, knew roughly how much I'd won, just from them. But who knew if I was betting with some rival as well? Basically they knew I was being *relatively* prudent. No way that I could spread say two-hundred grand around in Denver without everyone knowing. I was waiting for an invite to *Vegas*, on a private jet, comped all the way. Then I'd know I'd made it onto the radar of a guy on top. And maybe I could interview him, hang a pseudonym on him. No need for one of those voice distorters or screens in print. I could tell him that I'd spend a weekend living in his sportsbook in return. If I couldn't get the interview maybe I could write a story about the adventures of my good-luck fifty-dollar bill.

Might make a story. Might make some story.

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“So. Explain this to me will you please?”

I met Monica for lunch in *Boulder*, a feast at a place far snootier than my norm as she was undoubtedly paying after I handed her an envelope fat with cash. It had been two weeks since our last visit and her investment had now grown from five to sixteen-thousand, an eleven-thousand dollar profit.

“What? My system?”

"Yes, well that, okay, sure, but also why are you giving this back? If you keep going for a while maybe I can retire."

"Retire from what? Ted's already got you parked in a seven-figure pad, driving a brand new '95 *'Range Rover'*. Pretty good 'ROI' for a month, I think.

"And besides, what about *my* 'problem'? Which, by the way, has now grown another hundred-thou." I said sadly (bragged).

"You made a hundred-thousand dollars in two weeks?"

"No, I made four-hundred-thousand in two weeks. But I gave three of it back." I smiled and leaned back so the waiter could set my salad down. I explained the basics of my 'system'. "So, I figure that there's a whole lot of game-fixing going on by the guys who take all the bets. The guys at the top." I explained about *'laying off'* and paying *'juice'*. "They want as many guys as possible betting the same way on the same games week after week. They let them win a little, like maybe twenty percent of the time, so they keep coming back and forget that they lose some money eighty-percent of the time. So, I track not only the articles but also the quote guys, the 'experts' who offer 'guaranteed locks' on games, you've seen the ads, sometimes for free or for a few bucks, 'just call right now'. It's a little more complicated than that but I chart the general tendencies and then just bet against them. I'm winning about seventy-percent right now which is unheard of for this long of a run.

"Might be my system." I shrugged. "Might just be dumb luck."

Monica was holding the envelope in front of her on the table, tapping it as if she couldn't decide what to do with it. "So, you won't bet any more for your poor, poor, dear sister unless her husband agrees to help you with your money?"

"No, I just figured you'd be happy making eleven-grand. Look, my luck could turn any time and then if you lost all of it you'd be pissed."

"No. I'm a big girl..."

I held up a hand while I finished chewing. "Not so. Everyone gets mad when they lose money. This way you're happy. You can go blow ten-grand without consulting Ted. I'm still happy.

"And, if worse comes to worse, and assuming I don't become some degenerate gambler who loses it all, I can just use the cash for daily expenses." I shrugged. "Bills. Rent. Maybe take some trips and shit."

"Where's your sense of *greed*, Danny?" She smiled and ate a delicate forkful. "Why not go to *Vegas* and try to earn big money. Retirement money. Then quit. I know they take taxes out but what you had left would be legitimate. People win big in *Vegas* all the time."

"Right into the 'lion's den' eh?" I then explained my idea for a story.

Monica scoffed, a little, but warily as I had just handed her eleven-grand so maybe I knew *something*. "Danny, there are guys at casinos who bet millions a night..."

"... Right, they're called: 'whales'..."

She cocked her head. "You really think a head of a big casino would fly you out there?"

"Yup. Because *I* think that *they* think that I'm probably tapped in with one of their rivals. Who's feeding me information and they just can't figure out who it is. Bet they have someone following me right now," I said, half-jokingly, but then both of them turned our heads around slowly and looked like a couple of *rubes*.

"Okay," I continued. "Here's a possible scenario. I have a cousin in some syndicate. Some crime family, that takes in millions of dollars in book every week.

"They have people on their payroll. They have *athletes* on their payroll, and umpires and refs and shit. Okay, so remember fixing games is almost never who wins and who loses. So your average *joe-blow* fan doesn't really think a thing or get all that mad about losing his dough as long as his team wins.

"Let's say there's a line of eight in a football game. The bookies have most of the action on the favorite covering the line, the '*point spread*'. So the team wins, but they only win by a touchdown, seven points..."

"...they win the game but lose the bet. I understand that stuff."

"Okay. Right now I'm on my third bookie because I'm betting fifty-grand a night. That's way too much action for some small-time guy to take because what if he can't lay it off and then loses? Then he has to pay and if he can't he's not only out of business but has a pissed-off, possibly violent guy after him."

"And you think the next step up is the end of the line. A *Mafia Don*, or a casino boss, something like that?"

I shrugged. "I told you, it's just a theory. See, we also don't know how much ancillary action I'm generating either. I mean, you know, people talk. The guys I know down at the bar, they all know. Half of 'em are riding my streak right now themselves. Then they each tell two buddies and next thing you know a thousand guys are making most of the same bets every night."

"And winning."

"Right. Lately."

We ate our meals and chatted about other things.

"So, what are you going to do?"

"Well," I took a toothpick to my back teeth, "I think maybe *Vegas*. Go check out that new pyramid hotel."

"The '*Luxor*'?"

"Whatever."

"What if you don't get the okay for the story?"

"I will."

"Well, you're awfully cocky lately," my sister said as she slid the fat envelope discretely into her purse. "If you do wind up going will you bet for me?"

“I guess. But I don’t want to hear a peep if we lose. You can only roll your profits. I’ll let you know if I go.”

*And yes, I am feeling pretty cocky lately.* And I should be. I guess maybe I should be content; more than content. I’ve never had anywhere near this much money in my life. But I’m chasing that *full-body rush*. And I can’t sing worth a lick.

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In the end convincing my boss on the story idea had been relatively easy especially since I said I wouldn’t need any expense money. Of course, before I actually floated it by her I thought about it for a while then that afternoon instead of calling in my bets I went to the dry-cleaner above which there was some kind of private social club, a place where I’d met ‘*Mush*’ the first and only time in person. You had to walk through the dry cleaner to get to the stairs. That was at night when there were quite a few guys in the club, but as it was just after three in the afternoon, I had to get my bets in before the east coast games started. Denver is two hours behind. This afternoon the dry-cleaner was open as were the stores around it and I wondered if the patrons gave an evil eye to anyone they saw walking up the nondescript stairs to the ‘social club’ or whatever was taking place in the apartments upstairs. Even though it was broad daylight I knocked on the closed door at the top of the rise and had one of those little peep slides move and a couple of dark eyes look me over.

“What?” The man said in a thick, European accent.

“Is ‘*Mush*’ here?” I was suddenly feeling a little nervous as this was beginning to look like a movie scene where some unsuspecting *loser*, played by me, walks right into the lion’s den carrying raw meat.

“What? What *mush*? Who are you? I don’t know you. Have you been here before?”

"Uh, I'm 'M-two-three-seven'." I thought that might help. It did, not because the goon understood me but because 'Mush' himself suddenly had the door wide open and the goon moved off to the side. 'Mush' doesn't look like any kind of *Mafioso* I'd ever seen depicted in film but more like an accountant maybe, a short-ish, thinner guy with thinning hair and a bad comb-over. But he has very intense eyes and an air that often comes from having money but something more, something hard. It shouldn't surprise me, I suppose. After all, he *is* a bookie.

"*Stoyka*. This is 'the guy'." The goon didn't appear to understand but kept quiet, standing off to the side with his hands crossed in front of him, arms bulging. "Hottest run we've seen in a long time.

"Settle up's not 'til Monday, *Sport*. And always at the coffee shop. So what do I owe this visit?"

"I've recently come into some money..."

'Mush' smiled. "Listen to this guy. He cleans my clock something like seven weeks running. Has to remind me."

I smiled back. "You know how it goes." I paused. "I want to go to *Vegas*. Thought you might know someone at a casino, maybe put in a word for me." I waited for a minute to see if he was going to counter with some crap about: *why would he know anyone in Vegas*, but instead he parried with silence so I added: "I want to go to a sportsbook where my cash won't cause any problems."

He snorted. "Cash is never a problem in *Vegas*. The whole fucking place breathes it in and shits it out. Less the skim of course." He paused again so I smiled. "So what, you think your action's gonna get to be too hot for me to handle? That it? I told you it won't be."

"No, I just want to go. Take my girl, maybe. Figured I'd ask. No big deal if it's a problem."

"Lemme think about it. Okay if I let you know on Monday?"



"I'll be waiting for my envelope," I smiled confidently. 'Mush' shrugged.  
"Maybe. You know I do all right."

"Every streak ends sometime, Dan." He said as I turned to leave. Then: "I'll take any action up to ten-dimes per right now, if you decide you want to ride that streak of yours a little harder."

I left without another word.

There was an envelope waiting for me Monday but it was only for six-grand; more than three months salary from the newspaper, but during 'The Run' it almost felt like a bad deal. Usually, this other guy met me at the coffee shop, another wiry guy (as opposed to a goon) but similar hard, black eyes to 'Mush's'. He never told me his name, only grunted: 'Mush's guy' the first time we met, but today 'Mush' showed up with the wiry guy.

'Mush' slid the envelope across the table and I nodded perfunctorily and moved it smoothly into my sport coat while I downed some bacon and eggs. 'Mush' smiled, a sort of reptilian smirk.

"'The Streak' continues. Six 'G's' this week...that would be three large per year. More than most lawyers and docs are pulling but chump change to you, Dan." I didn't really like him using my name as I only knew him as 'Mush' but I wasn't about to make any trouble.

"You too," I added a little ego stroke. "Something to eat?" I pointed with my fork at one man then the other. "On me," I said without any smugness as the two of these guys together felt more than a little dangerous. The wiry guy waved at a passing waitress and said: *can I get some coffee* -but 'Mush' didn't even look up, focusing on me while I forked down my food and deftly avoided his stare.

"You are incredibly hot my friend. I don't know how you're doing it. Maybe you know someone who gives you tips. Makes...suggestions?"

"Nope. Just flippin' a coin," I smiled, staying just above the line of possibly misinterpreted provocation.

The waitress gave the wiry guy his coffee and he poured about five sugar packs into the cup and swirled it with a spoon. 'Mush' went on: "Man could do pretty good, he followed all of your action, past couple of months. Been giving some thought to maybe going to *Vegas* myself. Sitting over your shoulder at the sportsbook, if you didn't have a problem with that."

"Honestly," I desperately wanted to say 'Mush' but wisely thought better of it away from the friendly confines of the 'social club', "I don't know anybody besides our mutual friend 'Charlie Chan'. And a local guy named 'Buddy' who you might know. That's the only two guys I know, in that way, if I understand your meaning.

"That's why I asked you about someone in *Vegas*. 'Cause I don't know anyone there either.

"And respectfully, it might jinx me, telling anyone else my plays. You know almost all of 'em every night anyway," I purposely said 'almost' just to keep him generally honest, thinking I was also betting with other bookies. Guys like 'Mush' loved guys like me because eventually they got all of their money back, usually and then some, a cycle which of course I was going to be the first to break. I was convinced of this so maybe he was picking up on my resolve and it was giving him some pause. 'Mush' tried to bore some eye-holes through my forehead but I continued to politely ignore his stare and finish my breakfast. "You sure you don't want anything?" I asked him again.

"When do you want to go to *Las Vegas*?" He asked, apparently done grilling me. For now.

I shrugged. "Maybe three, four days. Fly out Thursday night, come back Sunday sometime. Depends how hungover I am."

He jumped right in. "My friend Marcus would like you to stay at the MGM. He'll send a plane for you. Over at *Centennial*. Thursday at five-thirty if that works. You'll be at your room by seven, local time. Everything'll be comped."

*Perfect.*

I leaned across and shook his hand, his grip firm despite its boniness. "Thanks. After I clean him out I'll take you up on ten-dimes per starting next Monday."

'*Mush's*' reptilian smile returned briefly. "Sounds like a plan, Dan.

"I like you. Just don't be a *schmuck*. You know what *schmuck* means?"

"I'm a writer. " I slid my empty pate aside." And I didn't figure you for Jewish."

"Yeah. Right. I'll tell you anyway, the context, you know. In this business the *schmuck* is the guy who goes on a world-class run then blows it all on women and hooch and drugs, whatever."

"Or *Vegas*." I smiled, wanting to tell him that really, I had it all under control.

"Yeah, right. Especially there."

I knew he wasn't all that concerned with my wellbeing but more concerned that I would come back flat-busted and he'd never get back any of his cash that I'd won.

They left without thanking me for the coffee. I left the waitress a twenty dollar tip. Now all I had to do was figure out how to interview this 'Marcus' without winding up in a hole somewhere in the desert. If that sort of thing still went on.

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It was surreal. The limo to *Centennial Airport* in Denver, the twelve-seater private jet with just me in it which lived up to all the hype, and got me there in half the time, where another limo whisked me to the *MGM Grand* a six-thousand room behemoth caddy-corner to *Caesar's Palace* .

By the time I got to my room, really ‘rooms’ as I was definitely in a ‘high-roller’ suite, I had it all worked out. How to get an anonymous yet interesting interview about how legitimate, fine gambling establishments might, indirectly, (of course) still have ties with bookmaking; street crime. I waited patiently in the living room, after a shower in an unbelievable bathroom that was half the size of my apartment, dressed in an *Armani* ensemble *sans* jacket, my sleeves rolled neatly just past my wrists.

I was a man of action.

My idea was to subtly get Marcus Wyatt, whose official title was ‘*Operations Manager*’, which meant casino boss, to denounce illegal gambling while propping up the legitimacy and safeguards of ‘gaming’ at reputable *Vegas* hotels (like the MGM). Then, I could masterfully ask a few innocuous questions about what Marcus *thought* might be the state of affairs of illegal gambling and see where it went.

Marcus was surprisingly candid. He even laughed when I told him we could keep his name and hotel out of it. He said: “Your paper has a circulation of eight-hundred fifty-thousand. Town’s got direct service to *Las Vegas* from two area airports. That is why I’m granting this interview.” I nodded but waited for him to speak as he seemed to be waiting for me. I think I read that somewhere; *the guy, who speaks first, loses*. “Additionally, you are here at MGM as one of our premiere guests, and I’m hoping that my accessibility will incline you spend some time enjoying our facilities.”

I wanted to say: *No shit, Sherlock. I arranged for this dance, remember? But the way I’ve been going you may not feel that way by Saturday*. Instead, I said: “I plan to. The hospitality so far has been nothing short of outstanding. But I’m just a nickel-and-dime guy, on an assignment. Your basic reporter.”

Marcus Leaned back into the *Italian-leather* chair and looked out the window to the magnificent view of the *Las Vegas* strip; *Caeser’s Palace*; about a dozen fountains, and more lights than an undisturbed nighttime sky. I put him in his mid-fifties; graying just right, fit in a tennis sort of way, impeccably dressed.

We talked for about ten minutes, he answered all of my questions with ease including some statistical analysis I couldn't imagine he had in his head which made me wonder how much he knew about me and my little excursion long before he ever sent the MGM jet to *Centennial Airport* to pick me up. When I would cross-reference his data back in Denver, I would find that much of it was gleaned from industry analysis designed to shape the perception of politicians in states without gambling as to why they were better off with the established, legitimate hotels in *Las Vegas* and how disastrous it could be for their states if they chose to open their own casinos, or allowed the black-market element of bookmakers to thrive. Very smooth.

We seemed to be wrapping things up as he'd glanced at his watch twice in just a few minutes, then almost on cue an assistant walked in, without knocking I may add although I probably couldn't have heard the door if he did, as far away as it was from where we sat. He whispered something to Marcus who merely nodded but had me fixed in his serious stare now as opposed to his '*politician schmoozing*' affect he'd been sporting while we talked.

He stood to leave and shook my hand, holding onto it for just a fraction too long in a way that only a guy would understand meant something. “Are we off the record now?”

“Sure,” I had already put away the pad and pen and small dictation machine.

“Our mutual friend tells me that you're the guy who's on the impressive run.”

'The guy', not 'a guy'. So, Marcus had at least 'heard some things', if not already lost money to guys on the tail of my 'system'. Now, *this* was the stuff I wanted to string together on-record and like any good reporter I listened but processed feverishly as to how I might include some of it without violating our agreement...or winding up buried out in the desert. Not really, (really).

He went on. “I am assuming when you referred to yourself a moment ago as a '*nickel and dime guy*' that in casino parlance you meant you like to wager five or ten-

thousand per game. Our friend also indicated that you may wish a certain level of anonymity which is something that we pride ourselves in here at the MGM. If you would prefer I could arrange a private room at our sportsbook. Or you could spend your time up here in this suite. However I may be of service please call on me, directly. Day or night." He finally let go of my hand.

"Oh, and my associate, Mr. Roberts, can offer you the services of our hotel safe if you're not entirely comfortable with the safe in your closet." *You mean if my cash won't fit.* "Or, I will gladly provide you with a suitable line of credit. Or convert any cash you might have into chips. Whatever you prefer."

He looked like he was *really* getting ready to leave then stopped and seemed to take on almost a paternal air. "One more thing. A little tale if I may.

"You see, Mr. Millman, right now you're the *dragon*. The dragon kicks a bunch of ass, eats whatever it wants, gets fat. But sooner or later something'll happen. Call it a run of bad luck. Then the *dragon killer* emerges. Picks that thing up by that long tail he's been pulling behind him and shakes him out so hard that his head pops right off. Dragon and all of those on his tail all go down at the same time."

"Nice story."

"Now, you know I don't mean this in any kind of threatening manner. The fact is you know and I know that a run like yours brings in a lot of action. You'd be surprised how much it generates.

"People talk, 'M-237'. Legally and illegally."

"Still off the record?" I asked.

"Yes." He looked out the window again. "Casinos are all about action. Cash-flow. As I'm sure you know. The more people we get through our front door the better we're going to do. It's not the losers that bring the people in, Dan, it's the winners. We actually like winners, Mr. Millman. Love them, especially if they're loud.

"You can print that."

I nodded. He wished me luck and left.

I got up and went to the bar and fixed myself a little snort of single-malt scotch, in real crystal, ice from a sterling bucket, then went to the window and got right up to it so I could see the whole panoramic view. I wondered how many players (suckers) there were in suites like mine all looking out into the electric-lit *‘promised land’*, anticipating their coming fortunes.

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I will admit, in retrospect, *Las Vegas* probably did live up to all of the hype. I’d been there before, but always as one of those players who waited in line for half-an-hour to get into a cheap buffet, popping a few quarters in reachable slots while the line moved at a glacial pace. Blackjack was played at five dollars a hand; no one paid me any mind. Did I mention I only stayed one night? A very long one, followed by a complete day of sleep, then a quick checkout and scurry back home. The MGM was kind enough to whisk me back on one of their jets, only a four-seater, but considering what I left behind in their cage it was a trifling matter.

That night I’d swung by the sportsbook and placed my bets, feeling like everyone in there knew who I was and was eying me surreptitiously but that was absurd. The place was jam-packed and millions of dollars were flowing in a never-ending stream. I spread about one-hundred fifty-thou around on a dozen or so games which was both exhilarating and terrifying, and then hit the main casino floor, armed with a small stack of hundred-dollar chips, fiddling in my hands, and some ten-thousand dollar chips in my jacket pockets.

I played blackjack and poker; I sat at a roulette table for nearly an hour. But craps was where it really got hairy. There’s so much action so quickly there that you can win a lot, or lose it all in a hurry if you’re not careful. Periodically, I checked the sports

scores and by about nine o'clock, I think, all of the east coast games were done and I'd taken a pounding. I imagined Marcus Wyatt on the phone with other casino bosses and *who knew who else* watching as finally the dragon's tail snapped its own damn head right off just like he'd predicted, taking maybe thousands of guys out with its whipping tail. The guy on '*The Run*', me, Dan Tillman, who must have called some action in to at least one other connected guy somewhere, or maybe there was a mole in the sportsbook, who knew, but a whole lot of players with almost identical action also took the plunge that same night. Of course this meant that a lot of other players probably won big that night as my system always involved bucking what I thought were trends, so for the bosses it was likely overall a bad night, further fueling their probable enjoyment over the *dragon killer* slaying the *dragon* that had been whipping them. '*Mush*', back in Denver, either kicking himself because he got down on my action himself and lost, or lamenting my morphing into a *schmuck* just like he'd said where I'd be kicked back down to '*Buddy*'.

I lost one-hundred thirteen and change of the one-hundred fifty-thousand, and during a break from the main casino I took the thirty-seven thousand in winnings out in chips. No one in the sportsbook blinked. As I went back to the main floor somewhat dizzy, and not from booze, I thought that if things didn't turn soon, well, maybe I could enrich my tale by regaling what it was like for one night to be a *real* high-roller, to have people standing around behind you while you played blackjack for a thousand a hand, two or three hands if you felt like it, then spreading hundred-dollar chips all over the craps table like blown, autumn leaves, playing around for nearly fourteen hours straight; getting your clock cleaned while others at the craps table cleaned-up; polite applause when you finally relinquished the dice and left with only memories of maybe that '*full-body-rush*' that came when the luck was flowing and the chip stack was getting really high. Your pockets are decidedly less heavy from the weight of ten-thousand dollar chips. I know the exact time when the last ten-thousand chip was fished from my



jacket and exchanged for measly hundreds. Believe me, no one watches a guy with ordinary, black, hundred-dollar chips, play cards.

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In the end I did write one hell of a story. Even got picked up by the AP and reprinted in all of the artsy rags around the country including the granddaddy of them all the ‘*Village Voice*’. I sold my editor on a little creative license; that my employers at ‘*Westword*’ had staked me fifty-grand to gamble with and the whole piece tied up nicely as I described what it was like to be a king in *Vegas* for one night. Of course, it was actually *my* money that was gambled away, but still ‘*The Run*’ was more than I ever could have imagined. As I mentioned, fiction is not my strong suit. But I had the Marcus Wyatt interview and then frankly I just interviewed myself. And wrote it all down.

*So, what’s it like to fly to Vegas on a private jet and blow fifty-thousand dollars in one night in a casino?* No one ever had to be the wiser about the other ‘issues’ involving the sportsbook. The hook was that ‘*full-body rush*’. The article evoked some spirited dialogue about the power of gambling addiction, which bothered *Vegas* about as much as the surgeon general sends ‘*Phillip-Morris*’ to bed at night, scared.

A few days later I walked out of the ‘*Diamond Lil*’, the first casino I’d gone into, this time *without* the old fifty-dollar bill. The last one in my wallet- again. Had some ‘*Deja-vu*’, to the very start of ‘*The Run*’. This time I was out of there so fast I could have kept the car running.

And while it was indeed the only fifty in my wallet, there *were* plenty of other bills crammed in there, and lots of them featured ‘*Benjamin Franklin*’. I made my way out to my brand new ‘*Ford F150 Crew Cab*’, leather, loaded, and headed toward *Aurora*, a cozy suburb just outside of Denver, and my new three-bedroom house, built by my

brother-in-law, Ted. Paid for with most of half of the cash I'd won before *Vegas*. The half I'd purposely left behind in *Denver*.

'Cause I'm no *schmuck*.

And I didn't need the lucky fifty anymore because my gambling days are over, forever.

Probably.