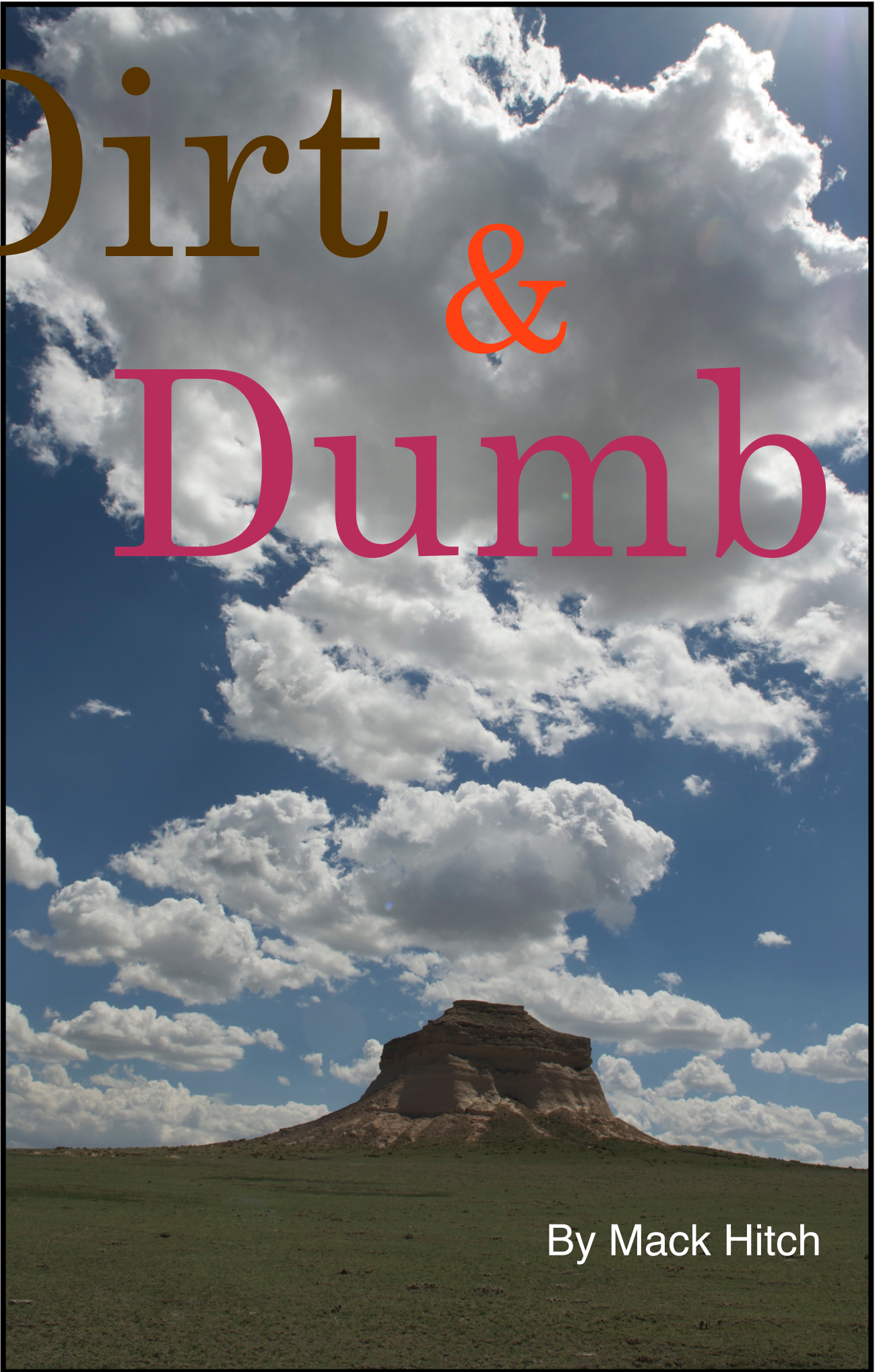
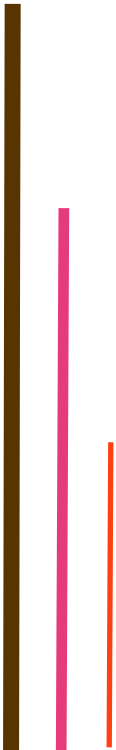


# Dirt & Dumb

By Mack Hitch



# Dirt & Dumb

(The Charlie Waggles Saga)

Once again: To my own Sisyphean tenacity

Novel (97,500 words)  
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## Up Front

When the last of the Cretaceous seas drained from what is now the high prairie of Northern Colorado, little was left to suggest its oceanic past. In fact, to the parched traveler scuttling across this ancient expanse toward Denver, the only suggestion of water is the solitary windmill floating on a distant rise. But proof of this oceanic past can be found. It is in the ineluctable requirement of water for the sexual reproduction of two of its fauna.

Sometimes, atavistically responding to a 60-million-year-old genetic tug, a tiger salamander (*Ambystoma tigrinum*) will struggle across miles of shortgrass prairie to a cattle tank. Here, it hopes to find a summer home and--defying odds that have nearly driven its species to extinction--a mate.

The dominant mammal of this region (*Homo sapien sapien*, v. *self-deludii*) is also dependent upon liquid for its reproduction, but--unlike its amphibian cousin--its quest is not so arduous. In spite of the summer heat and scant rains, the moisture this mammal requires is readily available. In fact, it comes in convenient six-packs.

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## Buzzards

When buzzards can't fly is Glen Gable's favorite time of day. It usually comes early in the morning before the sun has heated the earth, and the air and ground temperatures are identical. Denied their lifting thermals, the buzzards hunker impotently on the prairie, looking like turkey-sized dollops of the black excess from Creation's press.

This is when Glen prefers to take student pilots aloft.

"Aim for those two buttes sticking out of the ground off there." He pointed east to the Pawnee Buttes. Though just 300-feet high, they dominated the northeastern Colorado shortgrass prairie. Jutting from the hazy distance, and with the gray dawn behind them, they might have been the tepees of the gods. "When we get up to them, circle around counter clockwise and then we can head back to Greeley."

His directions were to a chunky, determined blonde haired girl who white-knuckled the half wheel. It was her first lesson in the left-hand seat.

"Easy, easy," he soothed. "You don't have to strangle the thing. In this air you can fly with one finger." He patted her hands until she released the controls, and then showed her how it was done by placing his index finger on the dual control in front of him. "Now, you take it."

When she took over, he went back to staring out his window. Anyone afraid in weather like this would never fly, he realized. This was creamery air--

smooth. The afternoon would be different, however. *That* would be buzzard weather. The thermals would bubble up from the baking earth and their little plane would rattle over the invisible swells like a wooden spoon over a galvanized Maidrite washboard.

For Glen, these morning trips were a near ritual. He had flown this route so many times he could map its topography in his sleep. He knew the rivers. Even those that didn't flow, which was all of them. He knew the ranch houses, the old cattle shacks, and stock tanks. He knew the tall wooden towers the Air Force erected when they put in the Minuteman missiles. He was the first to notice a new windmill or to mourn the felling of an old one.

With just a glance at their water towers, he could tell if the plane was near the community of Keota or Sligo. Though identical, Keota's was rusty and no longer quenched the thirst of the three hangers-on at its feet. By contrast, Sligo was alive. At least it was as alive as a community could be which had seen its last railroad train in 1972. Any hopes townspeople may have held for resumption of service were dashed ten years later when crews arrived and tore out the remaining rails and ties. The clapboard depot was spared as a museum but even that was open by appointment only. As a result, the water tower was the sole surviving symbol of civilization and the townspeople kept it well painted. Nearly encircling its storage tank, a good fifty feet above the scraggly Chinese elms that surrounded its stanchions, was a painted black and yellow tiger salamander. It was the mascot of the Sligo Consolidated School. The graduating seniors, all four or five of them, made sure the date below the salamander was kept current.

Glen had made the same trip with another student pilot two weeks earlier. It had been the Saturday morning after the school's junior-senior prom and he had counted five vehicles driven up secluded draws and parked. Spooners.

He was sure of it. The youngsters were probably wallowing in the back seats like carp in muddy spring ponds. Idly, he wondered just how many babies would be born *prematurely* to newlywed couples exactly nine months and nine minutes after the prom band had played *Good Night Irene*.

He was still wondering as the plane flew over an aerial survey marker. Because he had been half dreaming, it had slid under the plane before he had gotten a good look at it. Glen couldn't remember seeing a survey marker there in the past and couldn't fathom why more surveying would be necessary. And a *red X*? Usually the sheets of plastic the crews nailed to the ground were yellow or white. Large yellow or white crosses. Why red?

"Tell you what," he said to the student pilot who was nervously banking left around the buttes. "Once you get around these guys let me take over for a while. I want to go in lower and have a look at something."

The student pilot, instead of easing into a wide, smooth arc around the buttes, was chopping off corners as if the plane's propeller were a circular saw.

"This butte here," Glen pointed as they passed, "you can climb." The student pilot pretended to listen, but Glen could see she was concentrating on the pedals. "There's foot and hand holds carved into the north side, mostly eroded out, though." She nodded, her hands still frozen to the horns of the wheel. "The west butte can't be climbed, though." He pointed down to the butte they were now abreast, but she glanced at it only briefly. "You get caught up there and you're S.O.L."

When she had finished chopping off the corners, Glen said, "Okay, give it to me." The plane was now headed in the direction of Longs Peak which was just catching the light of the rising sun. "Nice view," he voiced for her benefit,

but she had collapsed into her seat. She was too exhausted to enjoy the front range of the Rocky Mountains, now truly gold in the sun's first rays.

Glen banked the plane sharply left and pointed the nose down. The nearer he approached the earth, the farther the girl pushed back into her seat. "I'm going to take her down to about a hundred feet," he said to calm her. "I wouldn't be fool enough to do this in the afternoon," he explained. "Try this in buzzard weather and you're buzzard bait."

The girl nodded in agreement and glanced at a sticker on the dash in front of her controls. *There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, it read, but there are no old, bold pilots.*

Passing beneath the plane were a row of scrubby Chinese elms and three cattle tanks. The spot was known locally as Three Tanks. Glen wasn't interested in them, however. His eyes were fixed on the section of prairie a mile ahead of him. He could already see the red spot.

"Help me with this," he asked the girl. "See if you can tell what that red thing up ahead is." She leaned as far forward as her harness would permit and peered over the engine's cowling.

As they neared, they could see that it was not just red. It was blue as well. Glen was so intent on the colors that he almost missed what the object was. "Did you see that?" he yelled, lifting the plane and banking into a figure eight to come around. "That was a man's body," he looked at the girl. "Spread eagle. Right out in the middle of nowhere."

Hoping for a better look, he dipped the plane into a steep bank and came in even lower. "He's laying right out there in the middle of a blow out," he noted after sailing over the body again. "Wearing a red baseball cap, too."

Hitch 8

"It's one of those caps with earflaps," the girl corrected. She had forgotten her fear and was nearly leaning out her window. "And he's barefooted."

Glen had noticed the absence of shoes as well, but something else puzzled him. "Was the body grinning?" he asked.

"Like an idiot," she confirmed.

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Angels

The dark cave of sleep in which Weld County Deputy Sheriff Charlie Waggles lay was nearly impenetrable. Nearly. Even so, that great mother of consciousness, the dawn, strained to push the boulder of night from his slumbers.

"Charlie. Charlie," the voice reverberated, but its echoes died in the etheric caverns of his slumber. His ears heard, but his throat only grunted contentedly and his mouth smacked its lips. The lizard brain at the apex of his spine, roused briefly, sensed the stale beer fumes beneath the sheet covering Charlie's head, made no objection, and returned to automatic pilot.

"Charlie," the voice pounded, more insistent. It was outside his trailer door. "Get up, Charlie. We got a real problem."

This time Charlie did more than grunt. His eyes fluttered and he actually tasted the stench that coated his mouth and tongue.

"It's serious, Charlie," yelled another voice from the steps outside. Vaguely, Charlie recognized this voice as Wiley Wentworth's. "A flying saucer's got Banner," he yelled again.

"Came right down and grabbed him," the other voice offered. Charlie finally recognized this voice. It belonged to Harley Tidley, brother of the missing Banner.

With his eyes now open, Charlie could see light penetrating the sheet that covered him. "Hold your horses," he yelled back thickly. Sticky saliva, looking like the baleen of a whale, restricted the movement of his lips. "I've got to get my clothes on." As soon as he said it, he knew it was a lie. He was already dressed. He could tell because his lifeless feet throbbed in his tightly laced

work shoes. Added to that, the star he wore on his leather vest was insinuating itself between his fifth and sixth ribs, and his holster, thank god empty, was the ache in his right thigh.

Joining the pounding on the door, the phone on the Formica sink counter began to ring. And ring. And ring.

"Your phone's ringing, Charlie," Harley called through the door.

With an effort, Charlie thrust the sheet from his face. "I hear it, dangit." He did hear it, but what held his attention was the blurry red face that stared back at him from the sheet he held. It was a grotesque, hollow-eyed, negative image of his own face. It leered at him.

"Danged pistachios," he realized finally, understanding how the imprint had gotten there. "Why do they cover them things with red dye anyway?" He remembered eating two one-pound bags of them on his drive from Scottsbluff, Nebraska, last night. Or was it early this morning? Jarring any attempts to recall were the ringing phone and the pounding.

This time, instead of the door, the pounding might have come from his head. He had rotated his feet to the floor and his hands were trying to peel back his swollen eyelids. When he raised his head, his eyes looked like sewer grates. If there was any sparkle of hope beneath those grates, it came from rusting steel pennies thrust there in childhood. Not even the most mendicant of souls would have found sufficient promise in those grates to probe their depths with gum on the end of a stick.

"This," he rated his hangover, "is the mother of them all." His Adam's apple ground noisily up and down at the words, and his eyelids closed forever over those two rusting coins. Tears mourned their demise.

"I'm coming," he growled at the phone, which still clanged insistently. The pounding on the door wasn't as loud, but its staccato monotony was a water

torture and he rose from the couch to silence it. As he did, he kicked a heavy object and listened to it slide across the linoleum floor. It was his revolver, his grandfather's actually.

Ignoring the gun and the knocking and the ringing, he tottered unsteadily to the sink, his arms out for balance. As soon as the water turned its coldest, he endeavored to wash the pistachio-red dye from his hands and face, but his success was predictable. Reluctantly, he buried his face in his cupped palms, and, with his eyes still wet, he reached for a towel. Again predictably, the rack was empty. In desperation, he searched a pile of dirty--or maybe clean--clothes next to his left shoe. From it, he drew a white undershirt and dried his face. Happily, some of the red came off. He could see it on the undershirt as he tossed it back atop the pile. Now, ready for the morning, he smoothed his thinning gray and black hair back with his still wet fingers and picked up the phone. "Yello," he chirruped brightly and squeezed the bridge of his nose with his free hand to stem the pain. "Sheriff Waggles here."

"Sheriff my ass, Charlie. I must have let it ring thirty or forty times. Where you been?" It was Kandi, the dispatcher at the Ault sub-station.

Before he could respond, the sun exploded through the door and he had to hold his hand to his eyes. Shriveled into black stick figures by the nova of light behind them stood Harley and Wiley. "We're serious, Charlie," one of the licorice figures cried. "A flying saucer took my brother Banner."

"If I had to get out of bed this morning you can too." This voice sounded tinny and distant. It came from the receiver Charlie discovered at the end of his dangling arm.

"Please, Kandi," he raised the phone to his mouth and pleaded. "Could you stop popping your gum? Just this once?"

"Hangover again, Charlie," her voice scolded knowingly. It sounded like yesterday's gum to Charlie. He had seen her answer the phone a hundred times and knew she was probably teasing her hair to impossible heights as she chewed.

"It was a big bugger," Wiley ignored Charlie's phone conversation. "It came right over the top of a hill and there was these little scout ships all around it."

Harley, now sufficiently out of the sun to be recognized by Charlie, nodded at Wiley's words. "And it had port holes," he spouted. "I could see little green men looking out."

Wiley disagreed and pushed Harley in the chest. "They wasn't green. They were black."

"Charlie?" Kandi's voice drew Charlie's mind back to the phone. "Greeley called--got me out of bed if you please--and told me to get a holt of you. Said some pilot had seen a man's body lying out in the middle of a field. They want you to check it out."

"We ran like the dickens," Wiley said. His hand air foiled through space to show their speed.

"But not Banner."

"No, not Banner," Wiley agreed. "He stood there looking at the lights like a silly jackrabbit in the middle of a road."

"Where was it, Kandi," Charlie spoke at last. Even with his hangover he realized he had one problem. Not two. That, at least, was a relief.

"Just a minute," her voice whined sweetly. It meant she had done something wrong. When Charlie heard the hair blush hit the counter, he knew she had already mislaid the slip of paper with the location. "Oh, here it is," her voice came back to the phone. "The pilot, a Glen Gable, said the body was

probably just south of Weld County road 110. And--let me see--probably just west of road 115. Do you know where that is?"

"Sounds like it's about a mile south of Three Tanks Spring--couple miles south of the buttes. Did he mention anything else?" Charlie asked.

"Yes. Said the body was wearing a red cap and coat. And that it was barefooted."

Charlie knew only one adult in northeastern Colorado who would wear an outfit like that, and his brother was standing in the trailer at this very moment ranting about a flying saucer. "I'll get right on it, Kandi. In fact I'm on top of it right now. That's why I was late getting to the phone. Been working on it since long before first light."

"In a pig's eye, Charlie."

"Whatever," his head throbbed anew. He was in no condition to argue. "I haven't got time to trade pleasantries. I've already contacted the man's relatives, and now I've got to get out on the prairie."

When he hung up, Harley and Wiley motioned him to the door. "Come on, Charlie," Harley urged. "We got to find him."

"Don't get your bowels in an uproar," Charlie grimaced, feeling Harley's whine carve through his cerebral cortex. "I know where he is." When he stooped to retrieve his revolver from the floor of the kitchen, the top of his head exploded. "At least I know where his body is."

"Where?" Harley gasped and thrust his eyes into Charlie's face as they both tried to step out onto the porch.

"Were you boys out south of the buttes last night? Say two miles south? Just east of 113?"

"No way, Charlie," Wiley volunteered. He crowded the other side of Charlie as they walked down the steps. "We was a couple of sections south

and west of there. A good two miles. We was in one of the sand gullies that empties into Wild Horse Reservoir."

"Why can't you honyocks drink indoors like everyone else. Always running around out on the prairie like a pack of teenagers." He didn't wait for an answer but instead stumbled the fifty feet from his steps to the five strands of barbed wire separating his trailer from the Sligo Cemetery.

"What the hell you doin', Charlie?" Harley asked, watching the deputy fumble with the zipper on the fly of his khaki *Big Mac* work pants.

"Humph," Charlie snorted. "Haven't you seen two meters of manhood before?" He aimed through the wires and watered a vacant spot between two grave stones. "A little potassium for the petunias," he sighed with relief. "A little nitrogen for the nasturtiums."

Harley protested. "That's a graveyard, Charlie."

"Don't be so selfish, boys. Give a little back to the flowers." His suggestion was timely, so Harley and Wiley bellied up to the wire and added their nutrients to the soil.

While they relieved themselves, Charlie looked back at his trailer. It sat coldly and bleakly atop cemetery knoll. The trailer wasn't skirted and the wind blew under it in the winter and froze him out. The great part about the location, though, was the view. From his front steps he could see the entire treeless valley to the north, including the desiccated town of Sligo. If he squinted, he could imagine the two joined quonset huts of the Sligo Quonset Cafe and Grocery.

To the east were the Pawnee Buttes and the sun. Somewhere out there, on what city people considered waste, lay the body of Banner Tidley. "Come on, you short-strokers," Charlie called over his shoulder. "You going to play with yourselves all day?" He was already headed toward his Jeep pickup but

stopped. "You wouldn't happen to have a Thermos of coffee in your truck, would you?"

Harley and Wiley smiled at Charlie's needs, but they shook their heads negatively as they trailed him to the trucks. They often teased Charlie, but they did it with the care of someone stroking a massive bull's muzzle with a sunflower. It was best done through a stout fence. And, their caution was warranted, for Charlie was a man as big as his legend. His appetites were measured in quarter sections and his capacities in silos. His arms and shoulders looked as if he had spent his youth beating ingots into plow shares. Should an old-timer's nigh ox come up lame, no one doubted but that Charlie could shoulder the yoke and do a day's work in its place. And he wouldn't dwadle either. His arms and shoulders were granite. His feet of clay, so to speak, were below his shirt breast pockets. From the pockets to his waist he looked like an indulgent pastry chef. Because his hips were narrow and his legs nearly atrophied when compared to his shoulders, he had the unsteady gait of a John Wayne. He didn't walk so much as teeter. On those rare occasions when he walked rapidly, he looked like a duck paddling furiously.

As he yanked the door open on his pickup, he discovered his straw cowboy hat on the seat and placed it on his head, smoothing his hair back first. "You boys take your own truck now, you hear? I don't want your dirty feet messin' up my new truck."

Harley and Wiley grumbled but walked to their pickup behind Charlie's in the circular drive.

Before getting into his truck, Charlie reached behind the seat, grabbed a handful of bird seed, and tossed it onto the gravel drive. Then he removed his hat and squeezed in behind the wheel.

He could have sped away and left the boys in the dust, but Charlie felt slow. As he crept down the road, he noticed--as he always did--the prairie. It was immense. It dominated. It could swallow up mountains and had swallowed up civilizations. Rain would help, though. The buffalo and grama grasses were the color of his work clothes. "If they're *Big Macs*, they're durable," he observed aloud and didn't feel the need to explain the comparison.

When he reached the spot the pilot had indicated, Charlie idled his pickup and scanned the prairie. To his left the hills rose gently toward the Pawnee Buttes. The terrain to his right was flat. Even so, he could see nothing in that direction but water-starved vegetation and sand.

Wearily, he stopped his pickup, pulled a pair of binoculars from the glove box and got out to scan the prairie from the road's edge. Nothing suspicious. Grunting, he opened the trailgate and hoisted himself painfully onto the bed of his pickup.

"What do you see?" Harley asked. He and Wiley had pulled in behind Charlie and were staring intently over the prairie, their hands shielding their eyes from the early morning sun.

"I see grass," Charlie finally answered. "It could use some rain." Talking caused a tiny pain between and just above his eyes. He blinked the pain away and when he opened his eyes again he spotted something. Red. Adjusting his glasses, he focused in clearly on the body of Banner.

Harley noticed Charlie's sudden alertness. "Do you see him?"

"Do you know any other grown man who wears a red cap and a red coat?"

"Is he alive?"



Through his binoculars, Charlie could see that the pilot had been correct. Banner was barefooted. He wasn't even wearing his red socks. The body was lying almost a quarter mile from the road, spread eagle in the middle of a blowout--an elongated patch of sand that was weathering into a small dune.

"Is he alive, Charlie?"

As Harley spoke, Charlie saw the figure in the center of the blowout move. Leisurely, it lifted its left hand, scratched its nose, and let its arm fall directly back into the depression from which it had risen.

Charlie lowered the binoculars. "What in the name of fuel oil where you morons drinking last night?" His weary, yellow eyes tried to roll back into his head. "Were you into Bode Road's still again?"

"Charlie, I'm tellin' you it was a flying saucer," Harley heated. "We was drinkin' a little, yes, but that wasn't what did it. It was a flying saucer."

"A big sonofabitch," Wiley added. "Bigger than a house. Bigger than a barn. And there was little scout ships all around it."

Harley nodded. "We ran."

"But not Banner," Wiley said.

Charlie shook his head. "Let's go get him," he relented. The boys helped him down from the bed of his truck and they headed across the field. Luckily, they didn't have to negotiate a fence as this was open range.

Charlie's plan had been to walk out to Banner, hoist him to his feet, cuss him out a little for getting lost in the dark--and for drinking Bode's hooch again--and then have the boys carry Banner back to their truck. That accomplished, he'd make dust to the Quonset Cafe and Grocery in Sligo and drink a gallon of coffee and inhale a dozen or so eggs. He didn't care how they were cooked so long as they were good and greasy.

Those plans evaporated, however, as soon as they reached the blowout.

"Hold it," he extended his right arm to keep the boys back. It didn't look right. Banner looked okay. He was breathing fine. What bothered Charlie was the lack of footprints. Banner lay in the dead center of a blowout surrounded by fine, unmarked sand. How did he get there? Banner was no athlete. He couldn't jump the twenty feet or so to the center of the blowout and then fall flat on his back without leaving marks.

Harley also sensed the eeriness. "He's barefoot, Charlie, but I don't see no footprints." He indicated the sand around the body with his finger but stopped when he pointed at Banner's bare feet. "But there's something."

Charlie saw them, too. Three marks in the sand directly below the heels. Three simple marks. Line. Line. Line. Or maybe One, one, one. Banner might have sat up and made the marks in the sand with his finger, but the other mark Charlie saw Banner couldn't have drawn.

"Don't get too close, now boys," Charlie again cautioned as he skirted the blowout to inspect the disturbance about a foot from Banner's outstretched left arm. It was a circle. A perfect circle about three feet in diameter. Banner could have drawn a circle but not that perfect.

Charlie moved back from the blowout, way back. "Come here," he motioned to Harley and Wiley who trotted over. "Is this some kind of a joke? You got a bet going on, or what?"

"Honest," they both protested. "A flying saucer got him," Wiley continued.

"Look, boys," Charlie closed his eyes and they burned, "I'm in no condition for this. I know you like to play jokes on me, but I'm serious. If this is a joke, tell me now or so help me I'll drown the both of you if I have to drag you all the way to the North Sterling Reservoir to find the water."

"How many times we got to tell you, Charlie," Harley pleaded, and Charlie could see he was serious. "It was a flying saucer."

All Charlie could manage was a weak wave of his hand--a half apology. He then turned and walked back to the edge of the blowout and squatted painfully. The sand around the body was smooth, as smooth as only nature's wind could make it. He checked for telltale brush marks, marks someone might have made while erasing tracks. Nothing.

Grunting, he righted himself and walked onto the sand. Harley and Wiley followed. When Charlie got to Banner's side, he looked directly down into Banner's open eyes. They weren't glazed or frenzied. They were calm. In fact they were focused on the wispy clouds above.

When Charlie's face obtruded itself between the clouds and the eyes, Banner refocused and looked directly into Charlie's face.

"They was like angels, Charlie," Banner spoke quietly and smiled at the memory. "Like angels."

###

Smack Dab

"They floated," Banner's eyes drifted back to the clouds. "They were white and they floated."

"Did they have big eyes and little slits of mouths?"

This voice came from a new face thrust between him and the sky. It was his brother's. "No," he looked back to the clouds again. "They didn't have eyes. And no heads. And no feet," he remembered, his eyes drifting back to Harley's. "They just floated down the hill toward me. They looked like angels."

Charlie reached down and grabbed Banner by the lapels of his red coat. "Angels, my --" he grunted, hoisting Banner to a sitting position. "How'd you get into this field anyway, and where's your shoes?"

For the first time Banner noticed his missing shoes and socks and wiggled his toes to assure himself of their absence. "Don't know," he shrugged. "I put them on."

"These angels," Charlie asked, "what did they say when they got up to you?"

Banner shook his head. "I didn't hear anything. I went to sleep."

"For Cripe's sake, how could you fall asleep with a flying saucer hanging in the air and angels coming at you?"

Banner's red shoulders rose with a listless shrug. "I was sleepy, I guess."

"Look around, Banner." Charlie forced him to look by alternately yanking each coat lapel. "Is this the field you were in last night?"

Banner looked, but his eyes were not focused. He didn't need to answer, though. Wiley and Harley answered for him. "We told you, Charlie, that we

was a good two miles west of here. The saucer came up from behind a hill and you can see this land is flat."

Charlie sighed and placed a chapped hand over his eyes. "Get him out of here." He inclined his head toward the pickups while massaging his temples with a thumb and forefinger. "Carry him out if you have to, but get him out." After they had placed Banner's arms around their necks and drew him to his feet as if he were a bag of feed, Charlie added "And keep your tails off the prairie, at least at night."

He didn't wait for them to finish carrying Banner to the road. He needed a cup of coffee. Several. He was well down the road by the time Harley and Wiley folded the limp body over the still raised gate of their truck and flopped the carcass into the bed.

With the sun behind him and the wind at his elbow, Charlie retraced his earlier tracks over Cemetery Hill and past his trailer. It was the shortest route. Just as he blasted past his naked trailer and crested the hill, he slammed on his breaks. The gravel road and barrow ditch ahead were strewn with bales of straw. They had been stacked on a flatbed wagon pulled by a yellow Case tractor, but the wagon had slipped off the edge of the road and tipped.

As Charlie watched, a high school boy cranked up the tractor and pulled the now empty wagon back onto the road. Immediately, six or eight boys began retrieving the bales and started re-stacking them on the wagon. Seeing Charlie, one of the boys came over to the Jeep to explain.

"Top heavy," he said. "Got off the road a little and it all went over."

"What you yahoos doin' movin' straw for anyhow?"

"Josh's dad," he pointed to a kid, "said we could have it. We're going to sell it at a quarter a bale and raise some money for the school."

"But why--"

The boy was bright and anticipated Charlie. "He bailed it because he thought he was going to sell it to the Adams County Fairgrounds for their horse racing season, but they shut down this year. Straw doesn't improve setting out in a field, so he gave it to us if we'd haul it off."

Charlie thought about it and then asked, "You yahoos weren't out sportin' around the prairie last night, were you? Doin' something you know better than?"

"No, sir," the boy said respectfully. "Most of us drove into Cheyenne last night. We ate dinner and went to a movie."

"And I could check up on that?"

"Of course. They'd remember us at both places."

"What makes you so sure?"

"We," the boy smiled proudly, "got thrown out of both."

"One way to build an alibi," Charlie breathed heavily and redirected his attention to the reloading. "Tell you what," he said to the boy and indicated their pickups, "why don't you load up a bunch of them bales and put them around my trailer--I don't have any skirting--and that way it'll keep a little of the cold out come winter. Besides, it'll make the load a lot less top heavy. Otherwise, you're apt to have to load it all over again."

"It's a deal," the kid stuck his hand eagerly through the pickup window to be enveloped in Charlie's paw. "We'll tell you what you owe after we get them stacked around."

"I'll be down at the Quonset getting some coffee," he nodded and eased the truck forward. "Say," he added as an afterthought, "you wouldn't happen to have some coffee on you, would you?"

"No," he smiled, indicating he had something better, "but we do have some cold Pepsi."

"Hardly," Charlie's face grew more gray. He had his pride. In an effort to lessen the pain, he squeezed the bridge of his nose, but it didn't help. Deciding to live with it, he put the pickup back into gear and eased around the wagon. When he nodded a hello to the boys, his whole head ached.

By the time he left Weld County road 112 and turned right onto the county highway to Sligo, he knew he was in trouble. The pupils of his eyes took turns dilating, and land mines detonated like birthing marshmallows in his brain. To relieve the agony, he alternately covered one eye with a cupped palm. Finally, he made it to the Quonset Grocery and Cafe and pulled up to the sidewalk between it and the Post Office, skipping his usual spot in front of the cafe window.

He had the door of his pickup open and was about to set a foot on the gravel when a phosgene brilliance--like the explosion of an old flash bulb--burst in his head. Its pinkish-white corona novaed behind his eyes and then collapsed into a black hole of blindness. Sweat popped coldly from his forehead. Feeling about, he found the handle on the door, eased it shut, and lay back across the pickup seat. Its coolness was welcome on his wet cheek.

"No more tequila shooters," he whispered and began to wonder if he was going to throw up. Then he wondered what he had left to throw up. Briefly he was cheered by the thought of seeing whatever it was that was left in his stomach eat through the floorboard.

The door on the grocery opened and closed and he heard steps approach his pickup along the sidewalk. The steps entered the gravel and stopped at his driver's window. He didn't have the strength to open his eyes.

"You're a slow learner, Charlie." It was Inez Botts, the gray, nearly cheerless cook and waitress. She often reminded Charlie of an old pair of leather work gloves. They may look worn and wrinkled, Charlie knew, but all

they needed was the right hand to bring them to life. Alone, she had kept the cafe running orderly for over twenty years. "What was it this time, a mescal chug-a-lug?"

"Let's just say I've seen the Elephant, and I'm turning back. Mending my ways. You're lookin' at a new boy."

"That'll be the day they bury you. For real this time, I mean. Meanwhile, here's a carafe of coffee and a cup. I'll set it here on the floor under the steering wheel and you can get to it when you feel able."

"How'd you know?"

"You was late, so I was keeping an eye out for your pickup. I saw you drive in and fall back onto the seat. It's not like it's the first time."

Charlie heard her feet turn on the gravel. "Inez," he panicked, "could you bring me a dozen scrambled eggs and a couple dozen rashers of bacon--greasy as hell?"

"What do I look like, a car hop?"

"Just this *wunst*. Pa-leeez?"

"There's a lot of things I've done for you just *wunst*, Charlie, and--to tell the truth--most of them I've lived to regret."

"What? No curb service? You mean you won't put roller skates on for me? Skates and a little apron and a paper hat?"

The leather of Inez' face softened and the lines eased. It was a look she wouldn't have given him if his eyes had been open. "I'll put skates on for you, Charlie. But I'm not going to bring a China plate and a fork out here to you. You wouldn't be able to work one and you'd break the other. I'll wrap the eggs and bacon up in four or five big tortillas and you can eat it with your hands. And I'll bring a towel along, too. Lord knows you're going to need it."

"You're in my will, Inez."



"Fine, just what I need. A tinny, old trailer and a lot of old tales about what *wunst a was*." Her feet turned in the gravel again but this time she stopped on her own. "Say," she called back through the open window, "a reporter from the Associated Press out of Denver called and wanted to know if you'd found the body. Says it was lying out in a field somewhere. Did you?"

"Yeah, I found it."

"Whose was it?"

"Banner Tidley's."

"Was he alive?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, well," she said as she turned to go, "this town's survived worse."

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Inez was as good as her word. An hour later Charlie lay on the seat of his pickup snoring contentedly. His face was smeared in grease and an empty carafe lay on its side on the floorboard next to an unused white towel.

He didn't hear the next set of footsteps that approached his truck. What woke him was the rapping of a knuckle on the door. "It's about time you picked up your mail, Charlie. It's overflowing the box."

Charlie half sat up and shielded his eyes from the light with a hand. "Con-sarn-it, Gloria. Didn't I tell you to throw away all the circulars and just leave the first-class letters for me? I'll get to them. Can't you see I'm a busy man?"

"These are personal letters," she drawled suggestively and dangled a double handful of them in the window frame for him to see. "And if I'm a judge of handwriting, these are all from women."

"Women?" Intrigued, he sat up and ignored the dull pain still in his head. "Let me see those." He leaned toward the window and grabbed the letters

from Gloria's hands. The one on top was pink. The address was in purple. And the whole thing stank. "Phew," he waved it under his nose before tearing it open.

Gloria hadn't left. She watched the pink envelope and waited for him to open it. "Well?"

"I'll be hornswoggled he spoke to himself, holding the letter at arm's length and ignoring her. He read a little more. "Well, I'll be double hornswoggled."

"Come on, Charlie," Gloria pleaded. "Let me have a peek."

"Here," he handed it to her. "See if you can make hide ner hair out of it."

Gloria took the two pink sheets and began reading aloud. "Dearest Charlie," it began. "Since reading your haunting letter in the *Prairie Companion* I have been unable to sleep because of my concern for you and your quest for a bride to relieve your loneliness."

"What in hell is she talking about?" Charlie roared, forgetting his head and then wincing.

"The *Prairie Companion* newsletter?" Gloria squinted over the letter as if he should know. "It's a singles newspaper. You know, for people in the prairie states. Mostly for older folks--widows and the like. It's advertised in the *North Weld Herald* every week."

"Well I don't read that gossip rag and I didn't write to no singles newsletter."

Gloria ignored him and read on. "She wants to meet you, Charlie. Listen to this: When I picture you in your lonely trailer atop the windswept Cemetery Hill, I could almost cry. When you said that your only meals were beans heated over a hot plate, my heart nearly burst. I could cook for you, Charlie.

The ladies in the church say I make the best chicken and dumpling casserole in the county."

Charlie softened a little.

"Perhaps," Gloria continued to read, "it is not too late to start our lives together and warm our declining years."

"Tar Nation," he yelled, and Gloria stopped reading. "Are all of 'em like that?" He took the next envelope--a blue one with purple ink--and opened it. "My Only Charles," it began, but Charlie stopped. "To the trash," he demanded. "Incinerate." He forced the envelopes back into Gloria's hands. "Burn them," he commanded. "Put them in the trash." He pointed to the barrel beside the flag pole in front of the Post Office. "And if any more letters come for me on colored paper with colored inks, trash can them, too."

Gloria obliged him but protested. "If you didn't want these letters," she called as she dropped them into the barrel, "why did you place an ad in the *Prairie Companion*?"

"I didn't." The effort collapsed him and he lay back on the seat. In an instant, in spite of his vehement disgust and his unuttered threats to dismember whoever had placed the ad, he was asleep. His second rest lasted almost an hour.

"That'll be \$56, Charlie," the voice sounded simultaneously with a thumping on the driver's door. "\$56 for the straw. Two hundred and twenty-four bales."

"Whaa?" Charlie was still nearly asleep, but he understood what was wanted. He labored to pull out his billfold and extracted three \$20 bills. "Here," he thrust them at the face in the window. "You can give me the change next time you see me." With that he plopped back on the bench seat

and returned to sleep, vaguely wondering how the project could have taken two hundred and twenty-four bales."

The next interruption found him feeling better but the company was not cheering. It was Harley and Banner Tidley and Wiley Wentworth.

"Us again," sang Harley, and his eyes at the window widened with promise.

"I thought you boys'd be home sleeping it off. Wasn't last night excitement enough for you?" Charlie didn't bother to sit. He continued to lie back with his wrist over his eyes.

"Oh, no," Wiley shook his head, "we haven't felt better. In fact, Banner says he's never felt so rested. Besides, we're going somewhere you ain't even visited."

"Where's that?"

"To WORK," they chorused loudly and erupted into laughter that threatened to renew Charlie's headache. "Not only that, we're going to Ault to meet a reporter from Denver. Wants to know all about the abduction."

"What abduction?"

"Last night," Harley said, surprised. "You was there. You saw Banner." He indicated his older brother who grinned proudly from over Harley's left shoulder. "Going to tell them about the angels and everything."

Charlie looked at Banner from beneath his wrist. "So, the *Sage of Sligo* is going to speak, eh Banner? Just what are you going to tell him?"

"That it was an uplifting experience." His face remained composed but not his brother's or Wiley's. They bent so double from laughing at Banner's unintended double entendre that they disappeared from Charlie's view.

When Harley reappeared, he plucked Banner by the sleeve of his red coat. "Come on, Banner. We got to get to Ault and meet that Associated Press reporter. He's got to get back to Denver and work the night shift."

"Yeah, did you hear that," Wiley appeared in the window as the others departed. "An Associated Press reporter. This is big time."

"Yes," Charlie answered to Wiley's departing head, "and he's just liable to have enough brains to know what chuckleheads you three are." The boys heard that, but they didn't hear him say "But I doubt it," as he closed his eyes for another snooze.

The next interruption was welcome. It was about noon and Inez came out to see how Charlie was doing. As soon as he saw the half gallon of milk she had set on the hood of his pickup and the whole apple pie she held in a dish in her right hand, he felt much better. Forking the pie from the deep dish and chugging whole milk straight from the carton was much more practical than taking it a slice and a glass at a time.

He was still sitting with his back to the passenger's door and his legs stretched out on the seat in front of him when a working man's pickup pulled to the opposite side of the main street from where Charlie was parked. He glanced out the back window and saw that it was Lauren Ewell. His pickup was beaten up from hauling heavy equipment and from bouncing over god-awful back pastures. When Lauren got out of his truck, he crammed a greasy, tattered straw cowboy hat onto his head.

Charlie nodded his approval of the hat--a man's hat--and tossed the now empty carton of milk onto the floorboard with the empty pie dish, the coffee carafe, the cup, and the fork. He thought of picking up the towel but was startled by Lauren, now at the Jeep's window.

Lauren leaned his forearms against the truck above the window and rested his forehead against the back of his right hand. "Got a problem, Charlie," he said with the ease of someone too weary to play with words.

Unlike many others in his territory, this was a working man and Charlie respected him. "What's the problem, Lauren?" he asked..

"Got a cow down."

"Well," Charlie thought, "I could turn my radio on and try to get Kandi in the Ault office. She might be able to find a vet to send out."

"Too late for that."

Charlie eased his feet to the floorboard and slid in several awkward motions until he was under the wheel. "Something a little out of the ordinary, is it?" Charlie looked at Lauren's faded denim shirt and not into his eyes.

Lauren nodded. "It's a mute."

"A mute," Charlie muttered and shook his head as if he already knew it. "Lord, we ain't had any mutilations out here since the late sixties and seventies. Are you sure it's a mute?"

Lauren nodded wearily again. "The wife and kids said they saw some strange lights out in the back pasture last night, but hell--I didn't believe them." He looked knowingly at Charlie. "You know how my wife is. Goosie as all get out. Had you out chasing the planet Venus ten or twelve years ago, didn't she?" He half chuckled at that but not at what he said next. "I should have listened to my Pa and stayed away from the city girls."

"Eaton isn't exactly a city," Charlie corrected, realizing it was a town of three thousand or so.

"Well, you know what I mean."

Charlie was feeling better. His four or five hour nap had left him refreshed but stiff. "You didn't walk right up to the mute, did you?"

"No," Lauren shook his head. "Once I got a look at it I knew what it was and come lookin' for you."

"Cow or steer?"

"Neither. It was my young bull."

That was a blow. "Did it look like--like what they looked like back then, back when it was happening before?"

He nodded. "Ear, balls, anus, penis."

"See any tracks?"

"None."

Charlie clumsily drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "By any chance," he asked, still avoiding Lauren's eyes, "did you find the bull's body in the middle of a blowout?"

Lauren lifted his forehead from the back of his hand and looked wistfully for clouds. Finding none, he sighed until his denim shirt caved inward. "Smack dab," he nodded and looked briefly at Charlie. "Smack damn dab."

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The Mutt

Charlie jerked a thumb back toward Lauren's truck. "I'll follow you out," he said, "but first I got to water the flowers." His chin indicated a spot behind the quonsets. "Be with you in a minute."

He was gone for more than a minute and was still fussing with the zipper on his fly when he returned to the front of the grocery. Inez saw him and leaned out the door. "Kandi called," she said. "Says for you to turn on the radio in your truck. Wants to talk to you."

Charlie waved the idea off as ludicrous. "I get enough of her when I have to go into the office. Leave me be in peace out here." Still fooling with the zipper, he managed to tug it that last inch and started back to his Jeep.

Inez smiled at his gait. The real movement was in his shoulders, not his feet. "She said you'd say something like that, so she told me to remind you about those two calls you're supposed to make. Something about an icebox and something about a crazy artist."

"What have those got to do with the matter at hand?"

"When was anything out here *not* connected to everything else?"

"You have your point, Inez, but I've got more pressing matters." He nodded toward the pickup across the street. "Lauren here says he's got a mute out at his place. Why don't you call Kandi back and tell her to see if she can round up a vet and send him out this way?"

Inez didn't indicate she would call. Instead she placed her fingers on her lips and spoke against them. "Oh, Lord," she said. "Here we go again."

Ignoring her, Charlie took off his hat, wedged himself behind the wheel, and followed Lauren east out of town. As he passed Inez, still in the grocery



door, he waved but she motioned for him to stop. "Yeah, what is it now?" he poked his head out the window.

"Some woman from Nebraska also called. Wanted to know if I knew you. When I said I did, she asked for your home phone number. I didn't give it to her. Did I do right?"

"They just won't leave me be, will they?" he saluted her with two fingers and drove on. When he turned south onto the county highway, he caught a glimpse of her in the rearview mirror. She still stood in the door. Her hand was up, her fingers half-heartedly wiggling bye-bye.

As he followed the pickup ahead of him, Charlie realized Lauren Ewell's acreage was disarmingly close to his own acre by the Sligo Cemetery. Maybe if he had been listening last night he might have heard something. A glance at the carafe and pie dish on the floorboard convinced him otherwise. He was fortunate he hadn't awakened in worse shape than the mute.

When Lauren turned, it surprised Charlie because the turn was at least a mile from Lauren's spread. And when Lauren stopped to open a gate, Charlie realized they were just a mile due south of his own place.

"When did the Grassland's people lease you this acreage?" he called to Lauren who was pulling the wire gate back so both vehicles could enter.

"Ain't mine."

"You're sneak grazing over here? You get caught and they'll take away the lease you already got."

Lauren didn't answer. He got into his battered pickup and bounced over the prairie for a quarter of a mile before stopping and getting out. Charlie, not wanting to injure his new Jeep pickup, was a few seconds behind.

"I'm not sneak grazing, Charlie. My land is over there," he gestured. "Another mile. This is just where I found him."

Charlie got out of his truck and put his hat on after using it to shade his eyes in order to survey the prairie. The young bull lay on its side fifty yards in front of the trucks. "Let's scout around a little," he said. "See if you can find anything that doesn't look right--besides the bull."

They circled the blowout area slowly, crouching at times and observing some spots from different angles to get the advantage of the light. Charlie knelt beside a tuft of volunteer sweet clover that was offering its yellow fragrance to the prairie air. He hadn't intended to smell it--though he did. His interest had been drawn to one of its stems that angled awkwardly into the wind. This stem had partially risen from where it had been crushed. Charlie could almost imagine a footprint beneath it, but if it had been made by a shoe, it was a shoe he had never seen.

He was wondering what the bottoms of Banner's missing shoes looked like when Lauren called, "Find anything?" Charlie didn't reply. Instead, he simply rocked the front brim of his hat back and forth a couple of times. "Me neither," Lauren sighed and rested his arms by hooking his thumbs into the belt loops on his jeans and letting one hip rock to a side.

"Well," Charlie's knees creaked when he got up, "might as well have a look at the mute." He walked to the blowout and crouched at its edge. It was just like the blowout where he had found Banner that morning, only bigger. "The sand isn't disturbed at all," he said, clicking his tongue to punctuate the fact. "How'd you find it way over here?"

Lauren crouched beside him and pushed his hat back on his head in order to think. "I told you the wife and kids said they saw lights in the sky last night. I thought they were talking about my back pasture, so I drove out there this morning to check. That's when I noticed," and he indicated the bull by dipping his hat, "that he was missing."

"No, looked all over my place and on the land on the other side of my fences in case he'd gotten out somehow. When I didn't find him, I went back to the house and talked to the wife. She said the light--it come on and off, she said, and it wouldn't always come on in the same place it went off--anyway she said it eventually worked its way around to the north before she couldn't see it no more."

The young bull was lying on its right side. "Just like the old days," Charlie pointed. The left ear was missing. "Back then they said it was a sign of Devil worship." He looked at the animal and could almost predict what else would be missing. "Did your wife or kids say they heard anything? Like a helicopter, maybe?"

"No. I asked. They said it was absolutely calm last night. Not enough breeze to flicker a candle. I asked if it was the moon they were watching--you remember the planet Venus thing--and they said no. Said there wasn't a moon at all. Said it was the new moon."

"New moon. Full moon. Don't make a hell of a lot of difference when it comes to yahoos." Charlie took one step onto the blowout sand and stopped. It wasn't the missing ball bag or penis or rectum that stopped him. "That danged circle again," he muttered and walked around the blowout to stand beside it.

"You seen a circle like that before?"

"Yeah," Charlie remembered, though it seemed ages ago. "I found Banner Tidley laying in a blowout just like this early this morning. He said *angels* put him there. Said they came out of a big space ship with little scout ships all around it."

"My wife said there were other lights. They were below the big light and moved around a lot. They blinked on and off too, but mostly they were on

when the big light was off. She said it was as if they were feelers comin' outta the big light."

Flies had already found the carcass and orbited the back of the animal where most of the mutilation had taken place. Trying for a better look, Charlie eased down, placing the knuckles of his right hand to the sand before lowering his haunches. By the time his ample thighs and ankles met, he had spotted the drawing in the sand.

It was between the fore and hind legs and--like the three lines in the sand at Banner's feet--was little more than a child's sketch. The picture was of a hat, a hat with a tall, square crown.

Lauren tiptoed up and looked over Charlie's shoulder. "A stovepipe hat," he whispered as Charlie traced the lines with his finger. "What's that supposed to mean."

Charlie raised his hand and pushed his hat back. He was no longer looking at the bull. His eyes searched the vast prairie instead. "I'm gettin' the feeling somebody's yankin' my chain."

"Aliens?" Lauren suggested.

"Naugh," Charlie scoffed. "What in hell would a Wet want to do this for. If a Wet killed your bull he'd take a hind quarter or two." When Charlie looked at Lauren, who had walked around to the other side of the carcass, he realized he wasn't talking about aliens with a capital *W*. "Oh, you mean *Alien* aliens."

Lauren placed his tongue in his cheek and waited for Charlie's confusion to clear. When it did, he removed his tongue and the leathery crease at the side of his mouth deepened. "You know, Charlie," he said, "there's no blood here."

"Maybe it was done elsewhere and then dropped here. Did you see any signs over in your pasture?"

Lauren shook his head again. "Maybe there's still some blood inside." He took a pencil from his shirt pocket and lifted the skin where the rectum had been. "Nothin' here."

An inspection by Charlie near the front produced similar results. "They got the tongue," he reported. Before he returned his pen to his shirt pocket, he wiped it in the sand. "About how much blood would an animal this size have, anyway?"

"Couldn't say exactly, but a fair guess might be about a pint of blood for every ten pounds of weight"

"What'd this fella weigh?"

Lauren adjusted his hat down over his forehead and then pushed it back. "He hadn't got his heavy muscle growth yet--not near as big as a really big range bull. You know, no twenty or twenty-one hundred pounder." Adjusting his hat hadn't been enough and he had to stroke his chin. "Oh, I'd say he'd go fifteen, sixteen hundred pounds. A real young one."

Charlie worked his own hat and thought about spitting, but didn't. Taking his pen he drew some figures in the sand. "Let's see, we're talkin' 150 pints or so, and any fool knows a pint's a pound the world around. If anyone spilled that much *water* even around here you should be able to find it."

"Like I said, I didn't see anything in my pastures."

"Tell you what," Charlie stroked his nose with an index finger. "We can't do much more around here but mess up the place. Why don't we give it a rest. I'll see if I can get a vet out here. Maybe he could see something we can't. Meantime, just let it lie there. If I don't get back to you in a day or so, you can do what you want with the carcass."

Lauren, still crouching, knocked his hat off backward with a sudden thrust of his forearm. "Shit," he spit, breaking the calm he had held since first finding

Charlie in Sligo. "No rain. No wheat. Range fees going up and cows not bringing a dime even when there is grass. Now this." He cooled as quickly as he had flared and reached back for his hat, gave it a cursory brush, and crammed it onto his head.

"I hear you," Charlie said in a softer voice. "Dirt and Dumb."

Lauren looked up from the bull.

"Ain't but two elements on this earth," Charlie explained. "Dirt and Dumb. Dirt's what you can see and kick. Sometimes you can even make a little sense out of it. Dumb?" Charlie questioned the sky. "Well, Dumb's everything else."

Lauren was still confused.

"Dumb's winning," Charlie explained further. He could see by Lauren's rounded shoulders that he now understood.

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Charlie was in the lead as they left the field and was waiting for Lauren to close the gate when he saw a big new pickup with dual rear wheels and a fresh-painted stock rack slow on the county highway and turn onto their road. When the truck neared, Charlie recognized the driver as the vet from Severance, a tiny community west of Eaton.

"Didn't know you practiced out here," Charlie called as soon as the vet pulled along side and turned his radio and air-conditioner off.

"You're Waggles, aren't you," he said, extending his arm from the truck. "I'm Wolverton," he explained when Charlie took his hand. "Ken Wolverton. And you're right. This is out of my territory, but when your dispatcher called and said you had a mute out here, I just had to have a look. I was in college when it was happening last time, so I could only read about it in the papers."

Charlie was wary. "Can't say the county can pay you--"

"Oh, no, no. Sorry if I misled you. This is just a lark for me. I always wondered if I was smarter than those people ten years or so back."

"You're welcome to a look," Charlie pointed into the field. "Bout a quarter mile straight out. Do what you think you have to do, but make sure you tell me if you find anything I ought to know."

Lauren, still holding the wire gate, had been listening to the conversation through Charlie's pickup windows. "I'll take him on out, Charlie. I'd like to hear what he can come up with."

"Okay, you boys get after it," Charlie adjusted himself in the seat. "I got to head into Briggsdale and fill up my tanks."

Through his passenger side mirror Charlie watched them re-enter the field but lost them as he turned left toward Keota and Briggsdale. The Rockies to the west, he noticed, were quite clear in the early afternoon sun and still carried a promising mantle of snow. But that moisture, he knew, wouldn't find its way onto the prairie. Some of it would get to the South Platte to the east and irrigate a few crops. At least it would irrigate the crops of the farmers who hadn't already sold their water rights to the wheelers and dealers in Denver. The few high clouds between Charlie and the mountains promised nothing but frustration.

"People should have had more sense than to come here in the first place," he sighed to the windshield. "Lord knows," he looked at the miles of vacancy, "enough of them have already found the sense to leave."

As if to offer affirmation, the town of Keota appeared out his left window. Its water tower could be seen from Colorado 14 a few miles distant and many travelers assumed a town surrounded it, but the only things at its feet were a few rusty water hydrants. They hid in clumps of dead weeds in front of empty

lots. In a few years the prairie would win back this town as it had recaptured the dry-land village where he had grown up.

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What had been the Briggsdale Co-op gas station had recently been enlivened by Pointe Ruffner into a roadside tourist trap called *The Pleistocene Park*. Pointe had erected billboards north and south promising caged, living specimens of the Ice Age, all the product of cloning. The antelope and sand hill crane were sure enough genuine, Charlie figured, but he was suspicious of the sabre-toothed tiger and the Imperial mammoth. The one looked surprisingly like an orange tabby kitten with mal-fitting bridgework, and the other looked suspiciously like a baby Indian elephant with an affinity for goobers. When Charlie pulled to the near end of the cluster of buildings to avoid the tourists, he saw the attendant standing in front of an old road warrior of a Buick. It was long and low--too low. What remained of the body was either already rusted through and missing or had jiggled loose and was dangling. The only thing not loose was the tail pipe and it had been wired to the rear bumper.

Ignoring this collection of problems, Charlie pulled to the farthest outside pump and began filling his auxiliary tank. When it was full he thrust the nozzle into the regular tank, set the trigger on automatic, and went into the office.

Upon re-emerging, one fist in a large bag of potato chips, he noticed that the car owner and the station attendant were still talking. Charlie checked the nozzle, topped off the tank, and returned the hose to the pump. He started the engine, but instead of pulling out, he backed around until he was beside the old Buick.

"Got a problem, Bob?" Charlie asked as he pulled along side. Bob faced a skinny, smug-looking man who leaned rigidly away from him the way an old



cedar fence post leans away from a north wind. His blonde hair was pasted back by that same wind. Forty years earlier he might have served as an advertisement for Wild Root Cream Oil. Behind the man stood his wiry, but sagging, wife and four or five kids. Their barbed hair looked as if it could draw blood.

Bob welcomed the rescue and came over to the pickup. "I put an alternator in for them and now they say they're out of money. I filled their tank before they told me about the alternator, too."

"You had an alternator in stock for that thing?"

"No, but I knew one of the old cars junked in Jess's field had one, so I went and pulled it. Now they won't pay."

The man came over and offered his oily hand, but Charlie didn't take it. "Fresh out of money," he smiled and leaned stiffly back from Charlie. "Spent the last in Simkins' Grocery in Sterling on olive loaf lunch meat and white bread." He laid his words out as carefully as if they were tarot cards.

Charlie looked at his yellow hair, plastered against his scalp. His forehead and nose were burned and peeling. He wondered why the man didn't have sense enough to put on a hat. "Your plates say you're from--"

"Houston," the man interrupted. Without his challenging stare, the smile might have appeared sincere. It definitely appeared practiced.

"Well how'd you get this fa--"

"The Lord provides." Charlie could now see that the smile was habitual. The creases at the sides of his mouth were deep and the teeth gritted as if that north wind were blowing them full of fine sand. "I go up to churches and ask for money," he admitted, the smile not moving.

"Where you headed?"

"California. Everything's perfect out there."

"Well, isn't this a little out of your way. I mean California's west of Texas, not north."

"Well," the man said and closed his lips long enough to clear some of the grit from his teeth with his tongue, "I heard Colorado is a lot like California."

"Some places are," Charley had to admit reluctantly, "but what made you think you could leave Texas without any money?"

"I told you, the Lord provides. He works his miracles in mysterious ways." The smile reappeared and froze.

"Danged mysterious," Charlie admitted again, although this time he was looking at the stretched wire of a wife and her barbed children. Two of the kids were making mewling sounds into the trunk of the car, or what would have been the trunk if there had been a lid. "What you got back there?"

"Pure bred pups."

"Oh?" Charlie squeezed out of his pickup, put on his hat as if he were going to meet the governor, and walked around the back of his truck to the trunk of the Buick. Lying on a battery acid-eaten blanket was a suckled-weary bitch being half-heartedly nursed by five dusty, multicolored puppies that should have been weened two weeks earlier.

"Pure bred Australian sheep dog," the man stiffened with his arms at his side and leaned back proudly. "You can't find a smarter dog than an Australian sheep dog." He spoke as if he was confident some of their intelligence had rubbed off on him.

Charlie studied the puppies. One or two of them might have had some shepherd in them--the mother certainly did--but the litter looked as if it might have had three or four fathers. Glancing up at the children and the mother, who had her own smug curl at one side of her mouth, Charlie suspected that the kids' lineage was similar to the pups. "What do you want for 'em."

The man continued to lean back, as if he thought it made him appear taller, and didn't flinch when he said "\$450."

"Four fifty?" Charlie stepped back and turned to look down Colorado 14 to Sterling. "I didn't ask for the car, your wife and kids, all the dogs and a lean on your future earnings." He turned around to face the man. "How much do you want for just the one dog?"

"Four fifty firm." The smugness was getting to Charlie.

"Tell you what," Charlie offered. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll take whatever pup I want, pay Bob here what he thinks you own him, and to boot I won't cite you for begging, cruelty to animals, driving an unsafe vehicle, and being a general nuisance. I also won't impound the car for the money you owe, I won't call back down the route you've taken to get here and find out what else you may be suspected of, and I won't follow your skinny tail from here to Fort Collins."

The rigidity in his back eased slightly, but the man hadn't given up. Only the lowering of his eyes to the star on Charlie's vest indicated a crack in the smugness. "Two fifty. And I pick the pup."

"We'll see," Charlie responded, stomping to his pickup and reaching into the glove compartment. He withdrew a leather-covered citation booklet and started licking the lead on the stub of a pencil he always carried in the right pocket of his leather vest. "What do we have here," he started walking around the car. "Only one headlight that isn't cracked--probably none of them work. Brakes I'm sure wouldn't pass--"

"One fifty."

That did it. No more dickering. Charlie tucked the citation pad under his shoulder and reached for his wallet. "Here," he held up a hundred dollar bill. "This is a hundred. I'm paying a hundred for one pup." He motioned to Bob.

"Come here, Bob. Here's a hundred." He placed it in the Co-op manager's hand. "You take out what they owe you and give them the rest. Then you point them down the highway and tell them not to stop until they get to Fort Collins."

"Why Fort Collins?" The man still hadn't given up. He thought he had some inalienable rights he hadn't abused yet.

"How many times have you been struck by lightning?" Charlie asked. The man started to reply--and the answer appeared as if it was going to be a two digit number--but Charlie waved him off. "You go to Fort Collins because that's finally out of this county and I'll be shut of you."

With that he stalked around to the Buick's trunk and looked at the puppies. They were lethargic and disinterested--five or six hundred miles with the wind blowing past them had shriveled their hopes--but one of them looked up at him with unmistakably pleading eyes.

"This'n's mine," he said coldly and snatched it from its mother by the back of its neck. If the eyes of the weary bitch betrayed any emotion at the loss of one of her young, it was gratitude.

Still holding it by the loose skin, Charlie carried it to his pickup and thrust it through the passenger window and onto the seat. "See you," he called curtly to Bob who was just returning from the office with a handful of change. "If they," and he tossed his head in the direction of the family, "aren't out of here in five minutes, call the office in Ault. Oh, yeah, put the gas on my ticket and add a bag of chips and a couple of Snicker bars. He indicated the giant candy bars in his shirt pockets. They pouched his vest out, and Bob--well familiar with Charlie's habits--had already made a mental note to put them on the tab.

Charlie didn't look at the itinerants. He slammed his pickup door and skidded back onto the highway, heading in the direction from which he had come. The puppy gave up trying to keep its balance in the careening vehicle and curled up into a ball on the seat where a passenger would have sat. Its eyes rested on Charlie, and they didn't blink.

Charlie looked over, saw the eyes, and abruptly returned his gaze to the white stripes on the pavement. "Hundred dollars for a dog." He couldn't believe he had done it.

The dog didn't respond. It simply continued to stare at Charlie. The eyes large, brown, and trusting.

"What the hey you lookin' at. Ain't you ever seen a man before?" Charlie thought about his quip. "*Haven't* you ever seen a real man before?" he corrected himself. The eyes were winning. He had never changed his grammar for an animal before.

"Here," he growled in frustration, "what are you anyway." He reached over with his right hand and grabbed the dog by the skin above its rear and lifted it. He counted the holes. "Well I lucked out on that, anyway," he sighed and relaxed as much as his bulk would permit. "You're a *dog*," he informed the puppy.

For the first time the puppy showed a response. It beat its tail once on the seat.

"A real dog," Charlie repeated. "You got piddlin' little balls, a tally-whacker and everything."

The puppy seemed equally pleased with the news and beat its tail on the seat several times. When Charlie put his hand over its head and rubbed its nose with his thumb, it squirmed in delight and tried to roll over to present its belly.

"Here," Charlie encouraged with his hand beneath its chest. "Sit up there like a real dog. Sit up like a man." The puppy struggled to its feet in the swaying truck and sat properly.

"More like it," Charlie said. It was a good looking dog--one black ear leading to a black blaze down its nose. The rest of its body was white with generous patches of black. The coat wasn't too long or too short. "You'll do."

The puppy seemed happy about the new stature, too, and its tongue lolled out. Its only problem now was that it was too short to see out any of the windows. Just as well, for it wouldn't have understood what Charlie saw when he rounded to the top of cemetery rise. Charlie didn't understand it either. "What in Tar Nation?" he braked his truck. Where his trailer had sat that morning was a stack of straw. "What'd they do to my trailer?"

He pulled the truck slowly past the cemetery and scrutinized the straw stack as he came square to it. It had windows. And it had a door. "Those fool kids encased my trailer in straw--not just around the wheels."

From somewhere they had found two-by-twelve boards and used them as lintels so they could leave the windows and door open and still continue stacking. The tarp was still on the roof and was still held down by old tires. At least they hadn't changed that.

Charlie tried to remember what he had paid them, but that seemed so long ago.

"At least they've given you a home," Charlie told the dog as the pickup came to a stop at the top of the circular drive. He got out and picked the puppy up. "Real dogs aren't house dogs," he informed the pup as he walked to the straw stack. "Any dog worth its salt would be embarrassed to enter a house. And a real man wouldn't tolerate a dog in his house no more than he would take a leak under the same roof where he ate."

With that, he went to the side of the steps and kicked between two of the straw bales until there was just enough room to poke the dog in under the trailer. "You'll do fine under there," he told the dog and went inside. The door was never locked.

Not as much light entered the interior as before the straw, but that had its benefits. "Less light in here the better, eh dog?" he called and stomped the floor with his foot. No answer.

It had been a long day and Charlie nearly crushed the couch when he dropped onto it. The red-stained sheet reminded him of that distant morning--which had been *that* morning--and he searched for his reading glasses to inspect the pistachio imprint of his face. The glasses were where he had left them two evenings before, on the ledge above the couch and just under the window.

He was leaning back on his pillow, eyeing the sheet, and biting into a large Snicker bar when the trailer filled with a sound he hadn't heard before.

"Whiiiiiiiiineeeee."

Charlie, with the aid of his reading glasses, counted the nuts showing in the chewed end of his Snicker bar and tried to ignore the lonely appeal.

"Whimp whim whim whim purrrrr."

Charlie eased one foot from the couch and stomped the floor. "You'll get used to it," he called. "Remember, real dogs are outdoor dogs."

"Wooo woooo woooo, woooooo."

"Maybe he's hungry." Charlie got up and stomped down the steps to the side of the trailer. No sooner had he stuck his hand between the bales than a tongue vigorously began licking his palm. "Come on," he pulled the pooch out. "Maybe just tonight. Just this once."

He carried the dog back inside and placed him on the linoleum floor. Somehow that didn't satisfy the dog because he continued to stare at Charlie even after he returned to the couch. Further complicating matters was the guilt Charlie felt as he peeled the paper from his second Snickers and bit into it because as he rolled his head on the pillow there was the dog--staring at him.

"You wouldn't like it," he told the dog and held up the candy bar. "Medicine," he explained. Quickly, he finished the snack. It hadn't helped. The pup was still watching him.

"I'll get you some food tomorrow," he consoled, but got to his feet anyway. "This is a man's house. I don't keep soft things around for the likes of you. I keep *real* food."

With that he opened the refrigerator door and looked in. Charlie seldom shopped at the Quonset Grocery. Instead he picked up eats where ever he happened to be. It was more convenient that way.

"Here's a half card of Blind Robins he showed the dog. "Picked them up in the Buffalo Bar in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming." The kippered fish, glistening in their individual cellophane wrappers, didn't seem to interest the animal. Charlie plucked one of the treats from the card and tore it open with his teeth. "Here," he said after peeling the cellophane back and biting off half the oily, salty treat, "you can have the rest."

The dog nosed it and turned its head aside.

"Well, how about one of these little cheese and yellow cracker snacks." He pulled the red cellophane strip and the crackers fell into his hands. "Three for me," Charlie spoke around the dry mouthful, "and one for you."

When the dog turned his nose up at that, Charlie plopped the fourth morsel into his mouth.



"Now these you can't refuse," Charlie explained. "All the way from the Corner Bar in Kimball--Atomic Eggs." Charlie wedged his hand into the large-mouthed jar and pulled out a peeled, whitish-greenish egg. He bit half through it and lowered the other half for the dog's inspection.

"No, it's all right," Charlie swallowed dryly. "The yolks on these things is always green."

Maybe it was the smell because the dog turned its nose aside and exhaled sharply. In a human it would have been called a sigh.

"Hey, here we go," Charlie sounded hopeful and reached to the back of the refrigerator. "A nearly full card of Slim Jims." They were pepperoni sausage delights about ten inches long--another traditional bar snack. "There's real meat in these," Charlie promised although when he bit into the treat it felt like cardboard or sawdust and tasted like cold grease.

This time when Charlie lowered the treat the dog actually grasped it lightly in his teeth. It didn't bit, however. Instead it rolled its eyes up pleadingly to Charlie as if to ask "Do I hafta?"

Charlie took it back and pushed it into his own mouth. "This is going to have to be it," he said with finality, pushing items aside in the refrigerator. "The *piece de resistance*." The *piece* turned out to be a couple rashers of beef jerky. Charlie took his with relish.

The dog either approved of this morsel or was desperate, for he took the stick and found a clear patch on the floor to plop down. Charlie went back to the couch and watched the dog as it held the jerky between its paws and worried it with its milk teeth.

When it finished, it looked at Charlie and whined. He had already taken off his clothes and gotten into bed on the couch. "All right," he relented. "You can stay inside just this once--since you're missin' your mama."

The dog seemed to understand and brightened. Maybe it just needed Charlie's voice.

"Just curl up on the floor there," he pointed, "and go to sleep." The dog looked at Charlie and Charlie knew what it wanted. "Not up here. No way. Now you just go over and curl up on one of those piles of clothes on the floor there." One of the stacks was clean, or nearly clean, clothes. The other needed washing--or fumigating.

Acting as if it understood, the dog sniffed one of the piles and crawled atop it and circled around.

"Not that one," Charlie protested. "That's the clean one, I think." He thought about it and wasn't really sure. "Oh, all right," he waved an irritated hand. "Any of 'em will do."

The dog settled down but fixed its eyes on Charlie and whimpered lowly.

Charlie didn't move his head on the pillow. He didn't turn his head. He didn't even open his eyes. "No way." The voice knifed from between his teeth. With that he reached up and switched off the light.

Fifteen minutes later Charlie heard or felt something at the side of the couch. He reached up and switched the light back on. With its paws on the side of the couch and its very large brown eyes on Charlie, was the dog.

"Dag nabbit." He reached over and grabbed the dog by the loose skin behind its neck and hauled it onto the couch. Then he flipped the sheet back and stuck it down under next to his legs. After flipping the light off again, Charlie uttered his final words for the night.

"If you think you're going to suck teat, you're flat out of luck."

With that the chapter of their long day ended to the accompaniment of gentle snoring and the forlorn whimper for a weary mother who was far down

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the road. But the story was not over. Outside, above the trailer, another chapter was unfolding--a Fortean chapter.

That night it rained blood.

###

Maybe rained blood wasn't exactly the correct term. Poured, splashed, or cascaded would be more accurate. Regardless of the verb, Charlie slept through it. Sometime before dawn, however, he heard an "eerrRuff." Because the sound fit exactly into his dream, he ignored it.

"ErrrrRuuuuuf." It was louder this time and didn't match his dream.

Groggily, he pulled the sheet from his face and looked down its eerily glowing length. A movement at his feet reminded him that he now owned a dog. The mutt's head was sticking from the edge of the sheet and its little mouth formed an O.

"Awoooo," it said and rolled its eyes to Charlie.

"It's nothing," Charlie assured the dog, and that seemed to make it all right. "It's just the hot water heater kicking on or maybe the pressure tank on the water well filling."

With that he pulled the sheet back over his head and toyed briefly with the problem of the heater and the pressure tank. Why either would kick on when not being used troubled him, but only for a drowsy instant. The glow that filled the inside of the trailer and seemed to emanate from without was more easily explained. It was the full moon.

"Full moon?" Charlie snapped wide awake. Just as his head rose from the pillow, a light tapping sounded at the door. More surprising than the tapping was the full light. It was no longer night. He could see the prairie out the window at his feet, at least what showed between the straw bales. Also at

his feet was the dog. It sat stiffly erect and slapped the couch with its tail, happy no longer to be the only one awake.

The tapping sounded again. "Sheriff Waggles, sir?" He was being hailed by a strained, reedy voice. It reminded Charlie of corn stalks stretching and complaining in the wind. "Could I speak to you?" it screeched. "My name is Gavin Trust. I'm with the Associated Press." A pause was followed by an agonized "Please?"

Charlie let his feet hit the floor heavily, an indication to the intruder on the porch that he was up. Before venturing from the couch, however, he stretched the skin at the edges of his eyes with the heels of his hands. It didn't improve his vision but he stepped to the door anyway and flung it open. The impact sent the reporter tumbling down the three wooden steps.

"What's a city fella like you doin' way out here?"

The reporter didn't answer. He lay in the gravel at the foot of the stairs clutching a notepad in his right hand. His left held a pen. For an instant, he sprawled in the drive stunned. His disjointed arms and legs, skinny and in need of stuffing, reminded Charlie of the scare crow in the Wizard of Oz. His hair--a corn tassel red--looked like what might have been stuffed under the scare crow's hat.

"I'd like to talk to you, sir," the kid said as he stumbled to his feet, his skinny arms flapping. When he brought them to his side, the man-sized collar on his white shirt spread and revealed his corn stalk-sized neck. Charlie still in his white shorts and white sleeveless T-shirt, ignored him and looked over the top of his head to his Jeep pickup. "What I mean," the kid explained, "is about the man on the prairie and the mutilated bull you found yesterday."

Charlie's face had turned the color of the holes in the mute's hide. "My truck? What's happened to my truck?" He padded down the steps in his bare

feet and hurried gingerly across the gravel. "It's blood." He couldn't believe it. "Someone's poured blood all over my new Jeep."

It wasn't just over the pickup, although that had apparently been the target. It had splashed all about the truck. From the impact craters and the distance to which the blood had splashed, it was obvious it had fallen from a great height.

"Crim-a-netly," he leaned against the pickup and looked at the bottom of his left foot. It was coated with blood-clotted gravel and he hopped to the edge of the drive and tried to scrape the gore off on a sunflower plant. Failing in that, he decided to attend to a more urgent need. "Got to see a man about a small pony," he explained over his shoulder and picked his way gingerly toward the cemetery.

The reporter watched him tiptoe through first the bull head stickers at the edge of the driveway and then through the prickly pear nearer the cemetery. The white boxer shorts looked like diapers on Charlie.

"Aaaah," Charlie sighed dramatically. "A little potassium for the petunias," he explained over his shoulder, always eager to encourage organic gardening. "A little nitrogen for the nasturtiums." His words were hurried, however, as the pup had followed him to the cemetery fence and was trying to imitate him. "Here now," Charlie scolded. "That's no way for a real dog to do it." The pup rose from its squat and looked at Charlie. "Real dogs hike their leg up like so." Charlie tried to demonstrate but could barely get his foot six inches off the ground, and even that required placing his hand on the post for balance. If nothing else, the position did afford him the opportunity to scrape his left foot on the bottom strand of wire.

When he finished, Charlie tiptoed back to the trailer and wiped his foot on the edge of the first step. "Let me get my clothes on, Corn Plant, and I'll be

right with you." He didn't bother closing the door so the reporter had little choice but to listen to Charlie grunt and puff as he bent to retrieve his clothes from the floor and to lace on his work shoes.

"Not the usual uniform," he admitted as he emerged into the light, adjusting the shirt flaps under his vest. "They're Dickies," he gestured to his khaki work shirt and pants. "Get 'em from Monkey Wards. Get most of my gear from Monkey Wards." All that suggested he was a lawman was the leather vest with its tarnished star and the holster and revolver--all inherited from his legendary grandfather.

"I met a Deputy Ford at the Ault sub-station yesterday," the reporter rasped timorously. "His uniform was, er--more traditional."

Charlie only snorted. "If they're Dickies they're durable," he said. And that was that. After slamming the door behind him and crunching across the gravel to inspect his pickup, Charlie tried to scrape some of the blood off the windshield with a stick.

"I'll bet that's cow's blood," the reporter guessed.

Charlie agreed. "About 150 pounds of it, I'd say." He didn't explain where he got the figure, and the reporter didn't ask. He did jot down a note, however.

"Say," Charlie opened the driver's door to his Jeep and took out a handful of bird seed, "If you wanta jaw at me why don't you come on along. I got a couple of calls to make and then I could bring you back here." He tossed the bird feed at the reporter's feet, who danced as if dodging bullets.

"I've got to get back to Denver by three. I work the swing shift."

"They work you sixteen hours a day, do they?"

"Oh no, sir," the reporter's arms billowed as if lifted by a wind. "I'm doing this on my own. The bureau chief doesn't approve of such stories. All he

wants me to do is sit at a desk and find out the price of Idaho and russet potatoes."

"Well now," Charlie lifted his chin in approval. "A boy with initiative. A boy with drive. If you're looking for the unusual to write about, I've got just the story for you. A real Cracker Jack of a story," he promised.

The reporter was hopeful. "Mutilations?" he asked.

"Nah," Charlie poo-pooed the notion. "Something more exciting and important than that. Get on in, Corn Plant," he motioned to the other door, "and we can talk about it on down the road."

"Trust," the reporter corrected. "Gavin Trust."

"Whatever you say, Corn Plant," Charlie said and reached down to grab Dog by the scruff of his neck. He hoisted the pup and plopped him onto the bench seat after moving his straw cowboy hat.

"I talked to the Tidley brothers yesterday," the reporter said as they left the drive.

"You mean Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber?" Charlie wasn't watching Gavin. He was watching the windshield turn from black to red to pink to clear as the wipers and fluid struggled with the blood.

"The one who you found in the middle of the pasture and his brother," Gavin said, also watching the disappearing blood. "And another man, Wiley Wentworth."

"The Boys," Charlie agreed. "You only have to say The Boys. Everyone out here'll know who you mean. If this was the South, their relatives would have sense enough to keep them locked in the attic."

The blood on his side window was too close for comfort, so Gavin rolled the window down. "Did you really do all that they said you did?" He meant the Waggles' legend.



"I categorically deny it," Charlie shook his leonine head until his jowls wobbled.

"Not that other stuff," Gavin snorted, feeling more at ease. "I mean all that stuff in the history books. You know, the settling of the West. Rescuing that Denver socialite from the renegade Indians."

"Not recently."

Gavin smiled at Charlie's self-depreciation. "When I got the job in Denver they made me read a history of Colorado. Your name was all over in it. When this county was a hundred miles wide, all the way to the Nebraska border, you covered it on horseback. Later you switched to a Ford Model T."

"That was my granddaddy," Charlie said simply. "Me and him have the same name."

Gavin seemed disappointed. "You mean you're not the one who learned to swim when your dad threw you in the South Platte River?"

"That was me," Charlie conceded. "And I damned near learned to fly when he threw me out of an airplane a couple of years later," he added. "Might have, too, if the ground hadn't come up so fast."

Gavin wasn't sure if this was a joke.

"We was over North Sterling Reservoir at the time," Charlie explained. "I already knew how to swim."

"What about being thrown out of a drug plane and surviving?"

"Those stories," Charlie confessed, "have been a little exaggerated. One thing they always fail to mention is that I didn't survive the fall," he explained. "Now, what I want to know," he shifted topics, "is are you at all related to that fella who started the whole mute thing back in the late sixties by writing those silly stories about Snappy the Mule?"

Gavin was busy trying to fathom how Charlie survived his own death from the fall, so his answer was slow in coming. "Oh," his tasseled hair flopped as he jerked his head toward Charlie. "You're talking about Snippy the Horse--not Snappy the Mule. No, that guy's long gone. Moved on up to the National Enquirer. His picture's in the office back in Denver, though, and I hear he's in the Associated Press Hall of Honor."

Sitting between them, Dog seemed entranced by their conversation. Either that or he was just happy to be out of the trunk of an old Buick.

Charlie turned north onto I07. "Up ahead," he lifted a finger from the steering wheel and pointed, "is the story I was telling you about. It's an old Indian astronomical observatory."

"Observing what?"

"Stars," Charlie said simply and looked into the daytime sky.

"But it looks like a grain silo."

"Is today," Charlie conceded, "but before the silo it was a deep hole in the ground. The Indians would get down into it and watch the stars. They didn't all build those silly medicine wheels."

Gavin's face twisted. "Why," he asked, "dig a hole to see stars? Why not climb a hill?"

"Anybody can see stars at night," explained Charlie. "These were special stars. Stars you could only see in the daylight."

"What?" The reporter's narrow face could twist into as many shapes of consternation as a rotting apple.

"I'm not pulling your leg, Corn Plant," Charlie assured him. For the first time he noticed the kid's ears and decided that ears was definitely an apt description. "If you can get into a deep enough hole, you can lay on your back and see the stars. But it has to be a deep enough hole. The Indians

considered the stars they could see in the daytime to be especially portentous."

"But it's just a silo, now."

"Yes," Charlie agreed again. "And all the better. When we was kids we used to get down in the bottom and look up. The taller the silo the better. At first we couldn't see them, but after a while--and with the aid of a little astronomer's helper--we were able to see all we wanted."

The object of their interest was a 40-foot silo, the tallest old-style silo in the county. Because of its solid double-brick construction, it hadn't fallen and no one had the energy to tear it down for scrap. Metal rungs, most of them within a small sheltering tunnel clinging to the outside of the silo, led all the way to the top of the structure and down to the bottom inside. It wasn't necessary to climb clear to the top to enter, however, as small openings were placed at intervals beside the ascending ladder. These opening, perhaps ten of them, permitted easy access to the grain or silage within. Wooden doors were fitted into each opening to prevent the silage from spilling out, but the doors could be easily removed from the outside.

"I was thinkin'," Charlie said as he eased the truck to a stop at the top of a rise just abreast the silo, "that this would make a good feature. You know, for the Sunday papers. You could tell how the Indians used their observatories, and you could also give your first hand report."

Gavin, his elbow resting on the window frame, looked suspiciously at the silo.

"A little initiative like this," Charlie reasoned, "might get you away from the daily market reports and into some really interesting stories. You already said your chief didn't like mutilation stories."

"I don't know." The kid's voice sounded as if it were being forced through a colander. "This is my first reporting job. I don't know if I should push it."

"Might even get you on the day shift," Charlie sweetened the prospects. "Leave your nights free. Might do a little butt chasin'."

First Gavin looked out the windshield, then glanced down at Dog--who was inspecting the dash--and finally back at the silo. It towered over the prairie like a giant in a children's story book. "What do I have to do?" he asked, resignation in his voice.

"That's the spirit," Charlie cheered and opened his door. "Just bring your notebook and follow me." Before he left the truck, Charlie reached under the driver's seat and pulled out a pint bottle which he stuffed into his back pocket.

At the fence, he stepped on the lower strand and pulled the next one up so Gavin could easily stoop through. Using his weight, Charlie pushed all the strands down and swung his leg over. "I'll help you in and give you some astronomer's helper," Charlie explained as they approached the silo, "and then wait out here until you're finished. Shouldn't take more than twenty minutes. A half hour at the outside."

Gavin looked up at the silo. The moving clouds made it appear to be falling toward him. "Do I have to climb that?" he asked.

"You could," Charlie said, "but that ain't necessary. Here," he grunted, removing the door from the lowest opening. He twisted the bar that latched the door to the outside of the silo and pulled the door through the opening. "Climb in here."

Gavin looked at Charlie to see if there was a way of getting out of it.

"Quicker you're in, the quicker you're out," Charlie reasoned. "We all have to suffer a little for our art."

The reporter climbed two of the rungs and then placed his legs inside the opening. He could see that the floor of the silo was only slightly lower than the level of the outside ground and that the metal rungs also lined the inside of the structure.

"Go on," Charlie encouraged. "Slide in." He helped Gavin so that he didn't scrape himself on the edges of the bricks. "There's some boards in there. Make a smooth level place and lie down. Close your eyes for a few seconds and then open them and see if you can see the stars. They look a lot different in the daytime. Lots brighter."

Gavin did as instructed. When he lay on the boards, Charlie said "I'll put this door back on to cut down on the lateral light." He re-attached the door and waited outside. After a minute he yelled, "See anything?"

The voice came more from above than from anywhere. "The sky."

"No stars?" Charlie yelled.

"Just clouds."

"Did you take the astronomer's helper in there with you?"

"The what?"

Charlie reached into his back pocket and pulled out his pint of Four Roses. "You're astronomer's helper," he yelled and took a swig. "It's what helps you see the stars in the daytime. All the Indians used it."

"It isn't alcohol, is it?" the distant voice asked. "I'm Mormon."

Charlie peeled the label off and rolled it into a little ball. "No. Not a chance. I carry it in an old cough syrup bottle, though. In fact, it has a little strength like some cough syrups do, but it ain't alcohol." As he spoke, he removed the door from the opening and extended the bottle to Gavin.

He took it, loosened the cap, and sniffed it. "You sure?"

"Scouts honor," Charlie held up two fingers. "Now take a couple of tablespoons' worth and lie down and try it again. If it doesn't work right away, try again. You can use the whole bottle if you have to. I got more at home. Meantime, I'll close the door again and wait right outside here. Play with Dog a while. Just whistle when you finally see the stars. After you do, I'll tell you the whole story about the Indians. You'll be interested. You can even quote me as the authority. Your editor oughta like that."

Still not sure, Gavin tilted the bottle and squinted at the unpleasant taste.

"Lot like medicine, ain't it," Charlie grimaced in sympathy. "Well, let's give you twenty or twenty-five minutes more," he judged after looking at his watch. He then replaced the door, turning the latch so that it couldn't possibly be removed, except from the outside.

Dog was picking his way gingerly among the unfamiliar prairie plants when Charlie picked him up. "Shussss," he whispered and started carrying him toward the pickup, glancing warily over his shoulder at the silo as he went.

At the truck, he placed Dog inside, released the brake, set the transmission into neutral, and began pushing. The truck rolled quietly down and away from the silo. Once they were at a safe distance, he started the engine and roared north.

"Well, Dog," he said--and decided he liked the name Dog--"there's more than one way to skin a reporter."

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When he reached 118, a road that exited only to the left, Charlie stopped his Jeep and pulled a small pad from the left pocket of his leather vest. "This is the road to take according to Kandi," he said and looked at Dog.

Dog looked at the passenger seat and then back to Charlie.

"Don't worry, now. He'll get out all right. All he has to do is climb to the top and then down the outside. And speaking of outside, young fellow, that's where you belong." He slid a hand under Dog's belly and opened the door at the same time. "Real dogs ride in the backs of pickups. And a real man wouldn't have it any other way"

Charlie deposited Dog into the bed and took the left turn onto 118. He hadn't gone very far, however, before he saw a pair of reaching paws and a wet nose reflected from the inside rearview mirror. The paws would climb the blood-stained window and slide to one side, leaving a long wet smear from the nose. Then they would climb again and slide the other way, trailing another wet rainbow.

Charlie tried to ignore the struggle but was having little success. "You're a pickup-truck-bed dog and that's that," he called out the side window so Dog could hear. "A real man and a real dog wouldn't have it any other way."

Dog pretended not to hear. Instead, he struggled for balance on the bumpy road and rocked back and forth like a slow, syncopated metronome. With each sloshing, Dog increased the size and complexity of his wet-nosed art on the back window.

"For Crime-a-netley's sake," Charlie slammed on the brakes and got out. "You're going to make an old woman outta me, ya hear?" Dog, wagging his tail, didn't seem to mind the prospect, so Charlie grudgingly returned him to the cab where he happily resumed his position in front of the radio. He looked at Charlie and smiled. Whatever indignity his master had caused him to suffer was forgiven and forgotten.

Once the vehicle was moving again, Charlie watched the road and looked for the house Kandi had alerted him to. Dog watched the indicator on the speedometer. After another mile, Charlie saw the path that led to the

house on the right side of the road. He remembered it now. The Spencers had abandoned it years ago when they put that double-wide on their wheat acreage up on the Nebraska border. Charlie had seen the house only once or twice since they had moved because it was not visible from the road. Only the gate and a faint path leading over the hill gave indication of former habitation.

How the Abroghast sisters had found the building--resulting in their complaint to Charlie via Kandi at the Ault sub-station--was easy enough. The chestnut-collared longspur, or *Calcarius ornatus* as the ladies called it. A must see for any serious birder in the neighborhood. Formerly, the sisters had escorted their fellow ornithologists to a Minuteman II missile site just off Highway 14, but after one of the birders accidentally rattled the fence around the missile, and after they were quickly visited by two polite but firm young men in Air Force fatigues carrying small rifles and holstered .45's, a new location had to be found. Hence the Spencers' place.

Charlie opened the gate and left it to lie until his return. On his way back to the Jeep he couldn't help but notice the tire tracks in the sand. These weren't the narrow, sedate treads found on the Abroghast sisters' car or even on the heavier Chrysler of Miss Teller. This tread mark was as big as bark on a cottonwood. Maybe a rancher or two had tires with as large a tread, but Charlie doubted it. These were what he called City Mud Grips. The tires found on jacked-up, four-wheel drive vehicles that city people drove, thinking they were cowboys.

Whoever had driven the vehicle had been careful not to tear up the prairie that could be seen from the road, but when he crested the hill, however, he tore up the sod with the abandon of a renegade motorcyclist in an old lady's flower patch. Nothing but torn-up earth remained around the



clapboard shack and Charlie followed the destruction to make sure no vehicles were parked behind.

After making the circuit, he coasted quietly to a stop at the front porch where the offending icebox stood. That was why Charlie had been called to the house--the icebox. To the Abroghast sisters it was an attractive nuisance, a coffin waiting to ensnare children. He noted the old icebox--a refrigerator to city folk--but was more interested in the scrap boards that covered the windows. The boards were old, probably left by the Spencers, but the nails used to affix them to the building were shiny and new.

"You stay here and guard the truck, Dog. Somethin' ain't right." He eased his door open quietly, stepped lightly to the ground, and pushed the Jeep door back in place without latching it. "Doesn't smell exactly agricultural either, if you know what I mean," he whispered, a finger to his lips.

As Charlie eased sideways toward the porch, he pulled his grandfather's revolver and pointed the barrel aloft. Then, he began singing softly and nervously to himself. "Oh, if you ever go to jail in Sli-i-go--" Even as a boy he had always sang while traversing dark roads. Whistling, he knew, was for sissies.

If you ever go to jail in Sli-i-go.

Oh, if you ever go to jail,

And you'd like a piece of tail,

The sheriff's wife's for sale in Sli-i-go.

His first step on the porch produced a creak but no response from inside. Curling his revolver wrist around one of the square four-by-four porch roof supports, he lifted his other foot to the surface and waited. He could hear from inside what passed as music to some. It was the kind of music that

depended more on baggy pants and imagined wrongs than on a tune and coherent lyrics. No singing. Just primal chanting and strutting.

Taking care to step on at least two boards at a time instead of on just one, he inched toward the door. The knob was old, oval, and rusty. It had been a hardware special even when it was installed thirty years before. He started to turn it quietly with his free hand when he discovered that the door wasn't even latched. It had just been pushed to. A gust of wind could open it. Taking this into account, he eased his weight to the right side and placed the gun barrel against the door.

Carefully and slowly, he pushed the door open--first an inch, then two, then a foot. He could have barged in dramatically, but what he saw inside made him more curious than theatric.

The interior of the shack had been gutted. Only one large room remained, along with enough support posts to keep the roof up. Atop several folding banquet tables were more glass beakers, retorts and distillation tubes than Charlie had seen outside of a mad scientist movie. Two centrifugal precipitation carousals whirled, their test tubes rising like weather flaps on tractor exhausts. Someone, no doubt, had carelessly left them running. Black pipe, clamped to the support posts, disappeared into the ceiling. These, Charlie assumed, went to a propane tank hidden somewhere out back.

The music caterwauled from a portable radio hanging from a nail on the wall opposite the door. Leveling his grandfather's pistol, he squeezed the trigger and the radio bounced from the wall and clattered to the floor beneath a table. He hadn't killed it completely, only neutered it. The speakers, now barely audible, grated as otherworldly as the artificial voice box on a former smoker.

Even so, this relative silence permitted Charlie to think. He knew what he had stepped into. It didn't take a drug sniffing dog from a city narcotics squad to figure that out. His only concern was whether he was going to settle for Justice with a capital J or for the lowercase justice.

The one justice, that with the big letter, would require him to inform his superiors, set up a bust, spend hours, days and weeks in depositions. He would have to travel endlessly to Greeley for the court dates, most of which would be postponed. He would be ridiculed on the stand. The defense would convince any jury that a judge would allow to be impanelled that Charlie was lying when he said he was alerted to the building because of a chestnut-collared longspur. "And just how, Deputy Waggles, did you know what a drug lab smells like?" the lawyer would ask imperially and raise his eyebrows to the jury no matter what Charlie's reply.

And the expense to the taxpayers. It would be onerous. Charlie never considered whether there would be a conviction or not. He knew there wouldn't.

It only took a moment to realize that what was called for was justice. It had always worked adequately for him in the past. Acting on this certainty, he surveyed the room until his eyes fell on several twenty-gallon blue drums. The white lettering on them meant little to Charlie, but the liquid inside looked and smelled as if it should be flammable.

Re-holstering his pistol, he labored around the room, bent-backed, pouring the liquid along each wall. That finished, he went out onto the porch and worked his way back into the building, pouring the liquid first onto the steps, then across the porch, and finally under the tables. Realizing a quantity of liquid remained in the can, Charlie tipped it and allowed it to drain.

Closing the door, he returned to his pickup, got in and started the engine. Then he reached across Dog and into the glovebox where he found a butane cigarette lighter. "Be just a minute," he told dog and walked back to the steps. He wasn't sure how fast the liquid would burn, so he turned sideways to allow a sprint to the truck. When he flicked the lighter, the liquid ignited with a nearly invisible blue flame and ate quickly across the porch to the closed door.

Watching it, Charlie backed toward the truck and was reaching for the handle when a muffled whoosh swelled the roof and rattled some of the boards at the windows. Because of the Jeep's engine, he couldn't hear if there were flames inside. Getting into the pickup, he and Dog idled twice around the building before he saw flames lapping from under the eaves and smoke issuing from a stovepipe chimney.

He was about to drive away when he remembered why he had come in the first place. The icebox. He drove again around the building and stopped in front of the porch. Unholstering his pistol, he fired the five remaining shots through the appliance's door, disabling the latch.

"That oughta allow the little ankle biters to breathe if they're stupid enough to crawl into a burned icebox." So saying, he drove back to the road, re-closed the gate, and headed toward his next call. As far as he was concerned the drug lab was history. The fellow in the silo was ancient history.

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The next problem Kandi had been hounding him about was a crazy artist who lived, or was squatting, on a hill along Weld County Road 95. He was slowing to turn on to that road when a big-tired, four-wheel drive Jeep Cherokee wagon left it and headed straight toward him. Even hung over he'd

have know who they were. Holding his arm out the window, he motioned for the driver to ease up and to pull along side.

"You boys goin' on a picnic?" he asked when the Cherokee stopped. The vehicle was jacked up so high the driver was the only occupant he could see clearly but he had already counted four heads. Each head was topped with a backward baseball cap and Charlie assumed the others, like the driver, were also wearing fashionable rings in each ear. When he opened his door and stood on the frame his suspicion was confirmed.

"What do you think you're stopping us for?" This voice came from the front passenger seat. When Charlie found the face he wanted to smile but didn't. It was the first time he had seen a hang dog expression on a supercilious smirk. The kid pouted as if he had just been told he couldn't have his first Porsche until he was sixteen and was going to show his folks real defiance by refusing to tell the maid to push the button on the trash compactor.

Charlie took note of the syringe the boy wore as a left earring. "I was just bein' neighborly," he drawled, dropping more G-endings than usual. "Thought you might be headin' to the buttes. Was gonna advise you on some good eatin' spots. You did bring eats, didn't ya?"

"No, we're not eating," the boy in the passenger seat thrust his pointed chin at Charlie, causing the syringe to wiggle. "What we are doing out here is our business and we don't want or need your help."

This was an important, busy boy Charlie realized. The lad was so important and busy that he couldn't be troubled with the effort of digesting his own saliva. Proving this, he lowered the window on his side and spat grandly.

"A fair honker," Charlie marveled.

"And wouldn't you just be the one to know," the face turned sourly from the open window.

The window behind the driver slid down. "Gee, look," the kid pointed, "the sheriff's truck is all bloody. What'd you do, Sheriff, hit a cow?" He might have said more but the syringe-eared voice in the front seat snarled something at him.

Charlie wondered how the kid knew it was blood. What remained from the night's rain was black and coated with dust. "Don't I know you boys?" Charlie leaned over the top of his door and surveyed the shadowed interior. They grew quiet. "Didn't I run across you poltroons at an unofficial DeMolay picnic one night? A place where you shouldn't a been? Doin' what you should of had better sense than to do?"

"Unless you have a reason to stop us--" the syringe earring started to assert his rights but stopped to stare through the windshield. "Is that smoke?"

Charlie glanced nonchalantly back down the road. "Could be," he smiled and slicked back his hair. He wished he was wearing his hat to show the boys how a man dressed. "Must be someone having a wienie roast," he volunteered. "Maybe you fellas'd like to hurry on up and join 'em? Could be some Jobs' Daughters there, maybe."

They weren't listening to him. The two in front leaned toward the window for a better view of the pillar of smoke. The two in back poked their heads from their windows. Slowly, after seeing the smoke and getting a good idea as to its location, the four sank back into their seats and traded looks with each other.

"Drive on," the kid in the passenger seat commanded sullenly.

"Looks like a big fire," Charlie winked at them as they drove past. "Hope you guys have some big wieners."

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Drinker

Since the other little matter Kandi had been nagging him about was in the neighborhood, Charlie decided to look in on that as well. It was on the way to Sligo anyway, and for some reason his need for coffee was not so great as in past mornings. Why, he couldn't figure.

This second matter had nothing to do with the Abroghast sisters and an ice box. It concerned a verbal assault complaint filed by a county building inspector. Whatever had been said, the inspector took it as a death threat and Charlie was obliged to investigate. The conflict had occurred on Weld County Road 95 just before it crested the hill heading south.

Even as he turned onto 95 from I22, Charlie could see a blemish on the side of the massive hill as it rose to the east and south before him. It was a commanding hill--as commanding as the one on which Charlie's trailer sat--and offered ego humbling views in all directions. The blemish, as he neared, resolved itself into a huge pile of lumber. Old lumber. Even at his distance, Charlie could see that some of the planks were prodigious. The only time he had seen such seasoned lumber before was a load that had been taken from a hundred-year-old mine up near Black Hawk.

The man Charlie was looking for was already down at the road gate waiting. "I knew you'd be along today about one matter or another," he explained lazily and quit leaning against the gate post to approach the pickup. "Which is it," he extended his hand for Charlie to shake through the window, "the terrestrial or the extra-terrestrial?"

This easy casualness in the man had already revealed itself to Charlie with his first look at the barbed wire gate that led onto the property. It had been tossed aside weeks ago as a nuisance, and a tangle of sunflowers grew through its strands. Additionally, except for a single path to the mailbox, the road up to the wood pile almost didn't exist. Not a lot of hustle and bustle in this fellow.

The clothes the man wore would normally have repulsed Charlie, but on *this* man--a man with a child-like openness and innocence--they seemed adequate. The combat boots, Charlie had already noted. But stretching up from the boots were a pair of knee-length hiking socks with tassels at the tops. Above these, and a pair of knobby knees, were hiking shorts held about a narrow waist by red suspenders. Beneath the suspenders was a T-shirt printed to look like a tuxedo. Stuffed into a hole in the printed red carnation was a real carnation.

"You're Westwoman, aren't you?" Charlie asked finally. "Joe Westwoman?"

"If it'll help," the man looked up from his own shoes, his face blushing inexplicably--perhaps realizing the picture he presented--"the middle name's *Drinker*. Nothing to do with personal habits," he explained. "I was named for a distant relative."

"Not for the fellow who dug up all those dinosaurs?" Charlie asked, surprised. "Edward Cope? Ol' *Drinker* Cope? The paleontologist who had all



those run-ins with O. C. Marsh back in the past century?" Seeing how taken aback Westwoman was, Charlie felt obliged to explain. "Dinosaurs is an interest of mine. Found one when I was a kid. But that's not the reason I'm here," he adjusted himself in the seat. "And it's probably not the extra-terrestrial thing either. It's the building inspector. He said you threatened to kill him."

Drinker raised a slow but disagreeing hand. "That is not exactly what *trans-spined*." He drawled the word out slowly as if he were tightening the coil of his wit. "In point of fact, I was offering to do him a service."

"Such as?"

"I simply offered to make his brain pan fit his needs"

"Too large for the brain, was it?"

"Too large and then some."

"Think I know the man," Charlie nodded, "but what was it that put the burr under your saddle?"

"The man wanted to tell me how I was going to take a crap," Drinker croaked. "That's exactly what he did. Said I couldn't do my business in a composting toilet. Oh no. Wouldn't do. He said I had to take mine over a flush toilet. Had to have a septic tank with a zillion square feet of leaching field. Hell, the plans I'd submitted for my fort didn't even include REA electricity let alone a flush toilet."

"There's your problem right there," Charlie understood. "You put in for a construction permit, didn't ya?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"Build," Charlie explained, stepping out of his pickup and putting on his hat. "No one out here bothers with a permit. Build what you want. When the assessor comes around he's happy to add it to the county's tax rolls. That is if

he can find it. For some odd reason new structures out here seem to be built behind something big, ugly, and old. The assessor doesn't spot the new until the old falls down and by then it's so weathered it doesn't often attract notice."

"Just build?" Drinker liked the idea.

Charlie nodded. "*Wunst* a was that a man out here had the freedom to do what he knew was right. Was room for a man to be a man. Now a days--if you let them tell it--a man can only be a man if he has a wall outlet every eight feet whether he needs one or not." He shook his head in sympathy with Drinker. "Goin' to Hell in a hand basket, we are."

"A hand basket?"

"Sure," Charlie crooked his wrist as if he were holding the handle of an imaginary wicker basket. "You know, to hold eggs or a picnic lunch. A hand basket. Little Red Riding Hood had one."

From a tangle of sunflowers and other road weeds a small dog appeared and plopped itself at Drinker's feet. It was a pup about Dog's size, maybe a week or two older.

As Drinker stooped to wrestle with his dog, Charlie asked "How'd you come to be out here? Ain't much here for a man to make a living."

Drinker rose from his efforts. "I don't really work any more. I'm part of the military industrial complex. I design uniforms."

"Money in uniforms, is there? I didn't think anyone actually designed army uniforms," Charlie confessed. "I thought they just happened."

Drinker was busy re-adjusting his greying-blond pony tail by smoothing his hands over his balding head and tightening the band at the back. Without the band he had a curtain of hair that draped back from just above the ears. "Not these armies." His eyes, stretched by the pony tail, widened to nearly fill his tortoise shell rims. "Get in your Jeep and let's go up and have a look at my

lumber and one of my old money making machines. You drive and I'll walk along side."

Charlie agreed, but when he opened the door to his truck, Dog was standing on the seat waiting for him. "Move on over there," he tried to shoo the pup, but Dog was interested in a blur of motion behind Charlie. Drinker's pup.

Noticing his dog's excitement, Drinker came over to the truck and looked through the windshield. "What you got in there?"

"Just a dog." Charlie scooted his hand under Dog and lifted him out and held him above Drinker's pup. "Looks like we got two *just a dogs*," he observed. Dog squirmed impotently. "Wait 'till we get up there," Charlie promised, "and then I'll let you out and you can play all you want with--"

--Heidi," Drinker named his dog.

"Heidi," Charlie told Dog and slid him back to the passenger side of the seat. When he got his Jeep moving, Charlie guided its left wheel into the less used path. Drinker kept to his accustomed trail. "Now what's this about uniforms?"

"For street soldiers in the big cities," Drinker explained.

"Ain't no such animal."

"Street gangs." That said it all.

"They don't wear military uniforms," Charlie protested, taking his eyes from the path ahead and hanging his head out the window to better hear Drinker. "Those honyocks wear--"

"Sports uniforms. Sports insignias. You want to make money today, sell to street gangs. Use the right colors. Come up with the popular lettering. They hold up the liquor stores and peddle the dope, you get the money."

"Nobody makes any real money at that."

Drinker forced a laugh. "I've probably made a hundred dollars in royalties since you drove through my gate. Sports teams today don't give a damn what their uniforms look like so long as they sell to street gangs. Do you think Al Davis really cares if he fills the coliseum or wherever he is now when the Raiders play? Hell no. If anyone shows up, that's just cream. With television and the sale of his logo and uniforms he could play to an empty stadium. Every time you see some idiot wearing a piece of clothing with his logo on it, just remember that the NFL gets eight to twelve percent on the deal. The teams divide the loot."

"You designed the Raider's uniforms?" Charlie was impressed.

"Wish I had," Drinker admitted. "As ugly and as amateurish as it is, I would have gotten one of those eight percents for the first five years of sales. But no, that was before my time."

"Which ones did you do?"

"Wouldn't be right to say," Drinker spread his lips in a sarcastic grin, "but there are more sports than football, you've got to remember." Drinker jogged on ahead and ushered Charlie's Jeep around one of the piles to a parking space. It was next to a 1952 Jeepster, an old classic.

"Now that's what I call a man's car," Charlie crooned and got out of his own Jeep. He walked to the rear of the convertible and placed his hands where the spare tire should have been mounted. Instead of a back seat, Charlie found a 55-gallon barrel, cut in half, its edges rolled in, and filled with pennies.

Unnoticed, Dog made the jump from the Jeep seat to the ground in a single plop.

Drinker placed his left foot on the driver's side running board and, leaning on the chrome door plate, watched Charlie fill his hand with the pennies.

"Somebody's got to pick them up," he explained. "We'd be knee deep in them if I didn't. Have to call out the snowplows in the middle of July to clear the roads."

"You must have a thousand dollars worth here."

"Wrong," Drinker said. "They aren't even worth a nickel. I've tried to get banks to take them, but they contend pennies aren't legal tender. One bank in Spokane called the police and had me hauled out. Made the papers, though, so I guess it was worth it. And it made my point. If they aren't worth anything, why do they make them?"

Charlie let the pennies slip through his fingers and emptied those from his palm that wouldn't. "I don't suppose a fella could even make minimum wage picking up pennies," he considered. "But," he brightened, "think of all the money it would save on having to buy exercise machines."

"Over here," Drinker motioned and walked behind a stack of well seasoned timbers that were easily forty-feet long, eight inches thick, and two and a half feet deep. "Here's what I want to show you. My money printing machine."

Before he followed, Charlie patted the rear of the Jeepster. "Say," he called. "What's become of your spare?"

As Drinker explained, Charlie walked toward his voice. "Guess I took some corners out here a bit too fast," he laughed. "Spun it off. If you find a spare tire sitting out in the middle of the prairie, it's mine. If you find one that's rolled a couple of miles across the prairie and smashed through the side of someone's house, I don't know what you're talking about."

As Charlie rounded the stack of lumber, he found Drinker cranking the wringer handle on an old Maytag washing machine. "Like cranking out dollar bills," he said and continued spinning the rollers. Charlie saw that designs

had been carved or burned into both rollers. "Pour the paint in up here," Drinker pointed to the top, "and crank out a masterpiece."

"A masterpiece of what?"

"Sofa art," Drinker explained and cranked harder. "The longer the sofa., the more turns. The more turns, the more money. After I quit remodeling old houses in Spokane, I became an *ar-tist*." He accented the last syllable of the word as if he were pulling it out by its tail. He couldn't say the word without ridiculing the very notion. "I made beautiful paintings. I went to the correct shows--was juried into the best. At first I thought I was talented, special. But then I started noticing the buyers. They came with tape measures and curtain or wallpaper swatches.

"They didn't want art," he cranked harder. "They wanted something to complement the decor. They wanted it to fit above the *da-ven-port*." His mouth enjoyed playing with that word, too. "Did I cry? No," he stopped cranking and opened the top to remove one of the rollers. "No, I went with the market. I carved designs into a series of rollers and cranked out the art in any length they wanted. If they wanted it wider than the rollers, I doubled the canvas and used two carved rollers, top and bottom. If they wanted it even wider, I'd tape strips together for them. I'd canvas their entire room if that's what they wanted. Wallpaper.

"And then," he pointed the roller at Charlie, "I had an inspiration that made even the muses weep with envy. Why not, my genius told me, let *them* do it." He devilishly narrowed his eyes behind his glasses, his eyebrows switching like tiny tails. "Let them turn the crank, *and--*" he pointed the index finger of his other hand aloft--"charge them *more* for the privilege." Drinker danced around in his excitement, flourishing the roller like a tomahawk. "It was then that I learned where the joy was in art. It was in the cash register. It

was in the art of being able to lower my standards, my tastes, to those of the buyers. I had discovered the *art* and the *joy* of making money. Hand over fist." He was in ecstasy.

Charlie watched him dance, his pony tail swishing flies. "But," he interrupted him finally, "you quit. You're standing next to a pile of wood out here on the prairie." It was almost a question.

"Oh well," Drinker stopped dancing and offered the roller and the palm of his left hand by way of explanation. "Even sex gets old when the pickings are too easy. I got tired of turning *that* crank, so I looked around for another. Designing sports uniforms and logos seemed the obvious next step. Just a new set of people with no taste. It's better in a way, though. Its real beauty is that you don't even have to use your own washing machine. And," he said, replacing the roller into its slot, "you don't even have to stand around and watch someone else turn the crank." He shrugged modestly and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "The money still rolls in, though." Apparently it was a circumstance he couldn't control.

Charlie knew when to stop asking questions and fiddled with his hat. "Lot of *Dumb* out there, all right," he indicated the world in general.

"What we really need," Drinker offered seriously, his hands still in his pockets, "is another flood. That way we could start all over again. Fresh," he said. He looked at the prairie when he said the word.

"You'd be one sure to survive," Charlie nodded toward the stacks of lumber. "You got enough material here for an ark and then some. But that's beside the matter. We got another bit of *Dumb* going on out here."

Drinker pulled his hands from his pockets and gestured to the south. "You're talking about the extra-terrestrial, the lights, aren't you?"

"Then you've seen 'em?"

Drinker didn't say but motioned for Charlie to follow. "Up here," he called and leaned into the hill, obviously preparing himself for a long climb to the top. Charlie followed with his silly duck-rapid, but powerful, steps.

As they climbed, Dog and Heidi cut circles around them with the older Heidi playing the aggressor. It was an uneven contest and the puppy-clumsy Dog quickly grew tired of being bowled over. Nearly on his last legs, he stumbled over to Charlie and begged to be picked up and carried.

"I know how it feels, little buddy," he told Dog as he scooped him from the ground and cradled him in his right arm. "Women. They just won't let us alone."

It took five minutes to walk to the top, but when they were there the view was worth it. In fact, Charlie noted enviously, it made the view from the Sligo Cemetery seem almost puny by comparison.

"You can see why I bought this section," Drinker spun around and walked backward to get a better view of the Rockies. "From here I can see nearly everything."

"And lord over nearly everything as well," Charlie added, realizing why he liked the location of his trailer.

"That too. Maybe that mainly," Drinker considered the possibility for a moment. Then, he turned and walked until he reached a blue tarp that, when pulled back, revealed a sleeping bag, a bottle of water, another bottle containing a liquid that made Charlie rub his mouth with the back of his hand, and a kerosene lantern. "I sleep up here when the weather looks like it's going to remain clear."

Charlie looked at the gear and then up to Drinker. "You're telling me you've seen the lights?"

Drinker nodded.



"Then you got a good look at them?"

"It," Drinker corrected.

"It," Charlie conceded. "Did you get a good look at *it*?"

Drinker shook his head to the contrary. "That would spoil it."

"Spoil it?" Charlie almost yelled.

"It's not often we get a chance to really feel alive." His eyes darted around Charlie's forehead to see if he understood. "I mean *really* alive. So alive that all your senses are vibrating. So alive that you fear you're going to die the next instant."

"You've got my mind over a barrel. What the heck are you talkin' about?"

"I've seen it two nights in a row. It scared the *other brown* out of me the first night and it double scared me last night. Just watching it move along the horizon made me shake." He lifted his hand weakly to point in the direction where Banner was found, then where the mutilated bull was found, and finally where Charlie's truck had been doused with blood. "Say," his hand grew steadier, "isn't that a fire off over there?"

Charlie had long been ignoring it. "Somebody having a wienie roast, most likely," he dismissed the smoke. "What I want to know is what did you do about the light?"

Drinker's eyes and finger were still on the smoke. "I turned my back on it," he said absently, "and sat down."

"What?" His voice rang like the break shot in a game of eight ball.

"I turned around," Drinker re-focused on Charlie, "spread out my sleeping bag, and sat down crosslegged--facing the opposite direction. I stayed that way until Heidi lay down and went to sleep."

Charlie took his hat off helplessly and banged it against his leg. "You mean to tell me you saw the thing and weren't even curious enough to watch it and figure out what it was?"

Drinker pulled the tarp back over his gear. "Let me tell you, Sheriff. If you really want to feel alive, try it. Turn your back on something that terrifies you. Try sitting out on a dark, moonless prairie listening to the wind, listening to the least of noises--to noises that you didn't even know you could hear. Smell things you've never smelled before. Feel the pressure of the atmosphere changing on your back. Is it something approaching nearer, you ask yourself, or is it your imagination? Was that a step behind you? Or was it even a sound that a foot would make? Does your hair always feel as if it is statically charged? Do your eyebrows always flail like tentacles? Is that something touching your shoulder, your ear? Is that a breath?" Drinker let his shoulders relax. He seemed exhausted. "That's being alive," he looked at Charlie and sealed the truth of his statements with a dip of his head and a wink from behind the rims of his glasses.

Charlie had to concede the point. Drinker was crazy, all right. But he was interesting crazy.

"And when all this is happening," Drinker nodded fondly at the remembrance, "have your dog sit directly in front of you--all the while intently watching something just over your left shoulder."

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## Psychic Center

If he could sleep through two nights of excitement, including last night when Dog awoke him to the mysterious glow within his trailer, Charlie figured Drinker had a right to turn his back to the unknown and play with his imagination. Problem was, Charlie didn't know if he could trust the *ar-tist*. Just thinking of the way Drinker pronounced the word caused Charlie to kiss his own fingertips.

When he finally dusted into Sligo, he did what no one in the crowd waiting for him expected. Instead of pulling directly into his accustomed spot in front of the Quonset Cafe window, he drove over the sidewalk and onto the volunteer grass and weeds between the cafe and the cinder block city hall.

"What the hell you going to do about it, Sheriff?" one of the men in the crowd asked after following Charlie into the weeds.

Charlie didn't recognize the voice at all and ignored it. Instead, he busied himself among the white hollyhocks at the side of the quonset and turned on the water faucet. After rising from the hollyhocks with the nozzle end of the hose in his hands, he began washing the blood from his Jeep.

"Do about what?" he asked finally.

"About the lights," the same man said. "People were seein' them all over this end of the county last night. Truman Gillespie even said he saw one on top of the buttes."

Charlie saw Dog looking at him through the windshield and squirted him with the hose. The window stopped the water, but Dog shivered as excitedly as if he had gotten a good soaking. "Well," he spoke while wiping blood from the window with his left hand, "people out here are apt to see anything." After a pause he added, "I didn't see anything last night and I live out that way."

One of the men in the crowd tipped his thumb to his mouth and said, "Small wonder." The crowd behind him laughed.

"But what he means," another voice Charlie didn't bother to identify either called, "is what are you going to do if there's another mute?"

Charlie quit washing the windshield and hood with his left hand and turned his attention to the driver's side of the vehicle. "Now *that* I got covered," he said. His voice was cramped because he spoke as he stooped and his stomach crowded his diaphragm.

"How you mean?"

"I mean if there's another mute," he explained, righting himself, "I'm going to cover this here truck with a tarpaulin before I go to bed."

Two voices, singular in their insistence, cleared their throats from in back of the crowd. So imperial were these voices that the entire knot of men standing at the end of Charlie's Jeep turned. Even Charlie turned toward the two sets of vocal chords and saluted them with the hose in his right hand. The chords belonged to the Abroghast sisters, Clara and Dorothy.

They hadn't ventured into the weeds but stood on the solid, civilized concrete walk as if it were the runway to the Celestial City. Their bearing and tilt of chin ignored the fact that the walk they refused to leave was only a half block long and was the only real sidewalk in the tiny community. Most foot traffic in town was along side the barrow ditches and--where special

consideration had been afforded--over those same barrow ditches on two-by-twelve plank bridges.

"Are you ladies looking for some news on the mutes for the *North Weld Herald*?" asked the same voice that had been grilling Charlie. The question was logical as the Abroghast sisters did provide Sligo community news for that Eaton, Colorado, weekly. Their most recent scoop had alerted the world to the hazards of removing a long-sleeved shirt without first unfastening the cuff buttons. Their case in point had been Carla Beatty's four-year-old grand nephew. This child had managed to get the totally unbuttoned long-sleeved shirt over his head and nearly off his body except for the buttoned cuffs. As a result, the shirt dangled before him but was still attached to his wrists. In utter frustration, swelled by four years of similar contempt from his clothing, Carla's grand nephew had stepped on the shirt, tripped face forward, and dislocated his elbow which had to be reset by a doctor the next day.

All the larger papers had missed the story.

As their report, however, was famous throughout northern Colorado, Charlie held his left hand aloft and displayed the cuff to the sisters. "I don't even button mine," he called to them over the heads of the men. "Couldn't fasten them anyway." He indicated that his wrists were greater in circumference than the cuffs by dousing his wrist with the hose.

"That," Clara Abroghast's voice pierced the morning as neatly as a nail a corrugated sheet of metal, "is not the purpose of our visit. It is the other matter I am referring to. I'm sure your dispatcher in Ault has mentioned it." She *huffed* as if the verb had been coined for her and not for the steam engine.

"Yes," Dorothy, her somewhat more conciliatory sister amended, "we were wondering about that other matter? The attractive nuisance?" Though

her voice was full of concern, her arms--as well as her sister's--were vehemently crossed at her chest, her purse dangling.

Charlie took his straw cowboy hat off and hosed it inside. "I can assure you ladies," he said after scrubbing the leather liner, "that the matter has been taken care of." The finality of his tone refreshed him, but he wasn't about to let the men assembled at the end of his Jeep know what they were talking about. "The children of northern Weld County are once again safe, ladies," he called and turned his attention to the Jeep.

The answer pleased both and they hobbled daintily along the sidewalk to the cafe, taking every advantage of the opportunity to ring their heels triumphantly on the solid concrete.

"That's a pair I'd hate to draw to," one voice from the crowd uttered.

"You ain't just a tootin'," agreed another, "but come down sick and they'll be standin' on your front porch with a covered dish."

"And it'll smell good and taste good, too," added the first voice.

The grunts among the men were near unanimous.

"I'd love to talk to you boys all day," Charlie called as he turned the squeaky valve shut on the faucet, "but I gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"Women and children first," called the voice Charlie had wondered about. "The sheriff's headin' for the throne."

Looking among the crowd, Charlie spotted Bode Road. He had a cold and was mopping his nose with a bandanna just as Charlie spotted him and gave him an ambiguous glance. Then he wedged his frame into the pickup and backed out from between the buildings. As soon as he was on the gravel again, he spun around and parked in his accustomed spot. Inez Botts, standing in the window, saw him and returned to the grill to scramble a dozen

eggs, fry a pound of ground chuck, brown a whole diced onion and a cup of jalapenos, and wrap it all into a half dozen large tortillas.

She'd let him choose the pie later.

As Charlie was sliding out of the cab preparatory to breakfast, he heard a noise from the vacant lot across Main Street from the cafe and grocery. It was the sound of a tractor, an old Case 800 cranking up. Looking at the tractor in disbelief and settling his hat uneasily on his head, he called to the boys around him. "What's Wiley doin' mowing his lots over there so soon after Memorial Day? He got some more relatives comin'?"

"No," Bode sidled up to him as if to get on his good side. "Wentworth's rented both those lots out and the half lot behind the old implement building as well." The building Bode referred to *had* been an implement building years ago. Thirty years ago. And the two huge lots, taking up most of that side of the street, *had* held a hotel and a lumber yard, but that was history. Old pictures. The only action on that side of the street today were the two Domino tables some of the old men had unfolded in front of the near window, the less dirty one, in the implement building.

Wiley's tractor, pulling a Weed Hog, had just moved behind the implement building when a white Lincoln Towncar slid between Charlie and his view. Though the windows were up and luxuriously tinted, he could make out the woman behind the wheel. She was sleek and tautly clean, and--as Charlie could see as she waved her turquoise jeweled fingers above the steering wheel to cool them--what other people would call efficient. She reminded Charlie of a much talked about, much admired, and much valued race horse that had never actually run. Its genes were too precious to jeopardize by having it actually break into a sweat.

"That," Bode nudged him as if he were the only one to see the car that was easily worth more than any two houses in Sligo, "is the woman from Sedona, Arizona. She rented the lots. She says there's going to be a psychic fair here. Says people from all over will come."

"Build it," Charlie nodded a knowing head, "and idiots will materialize."

The trunk on the car popped open without anyone touching it, raising a murmur of admiration from the boys. Almost simultaneously an indulgently slim young man opened the back door of the Towncar and swiveled on the seat until his beaded moccasins, the toes pointed down, rested a foot above the street.

"Ooh, gravel," Charlie heard him protest, but after a barked command from the efficient driver he placed his feet to the earth and tiptoed to the open trunk. He was as effeminate as a neutered house cat.

Bending forward at the hips like a World War II pinup girl, he wrestled petulantly with a wooden display case in the trunk. After extricating it, he negotiated the four or five steps to the vacant lot and stood looking at it aghast. "This grass is damp," he protested.

The lady in the car may have said something because the driver's side window slid half down and then up before the Towncar shifted into gear and glided down Main Street. The gravel beneath its wheels sounded like uncut diamonds rustling in white tissue paper.

"I gotta see this up close," Charlie said, and started across the street. He didn't have to look both ways because most of the male population of the town was behind him. Besides, most anyone who still lived in Sligo considered any speed over 10 miles an hour to be reckless.



By the time the men had crossed the street, the young man had finished unfolding the legs from the display case and was adjusting his wares. "Oh," he folded his hands at his chest, "my first customers."

Charlie monopolized the space in front of the tiny display and the men peeked around him. "What the hey are these?" he asked, picking up a twisted piece of wire attached to some mono-filament fishing line.

"Put your fingers in your ears," the young man ordered, "and I'll show you how the gongers work." He still held his clasped hands to his chest.

Charlie looked from the hands to the face and realized the man wasn't as young as his thinness suggested. Like the woman's, his face too was drawn and what would have been crow's feet were stretched nearly to his hairline. Any disgust Charlie had felt before was now tinged with pity.

"I don't generally stick my fingers in my ears," Charlie looked at the boys. "Never tell what I'm apt to find."

"Here," the man from Sedona slapped the back of Charlie's hand lightly. "Give me the gonger and let me show you how it works." He took the twisted wire and grabbed both of Charlie's index fingers. "Hold them still, now." He wrapped a loop of the fishing line around the first joint of each finger and raised Charlie's hands towards his ears. The twisted wire amulet slid to the bottom of the mono-filament necklace. "There now. Good." He continued raising Charlie's fingers until they met his ears. "Insert your fingers," he insisted, "and bend slightly forward."

Charlie wouldn't have let any man in portions of three states order him about so, but in the effeminate man's hands he felt impotent. He looked at the boys, shrugged, and plugged his fingers in. As he did, the salesman produced a tiny wooden mallet and struck the amulet that now dangled before him. A

vibration, a ringing, a hum not unlike a series of tuning forks rattled his brain. It reminded him of a barbed-wire fence in a hail storm.

"The celestial harmonies," the salesman crooned. "The gonger is the Aeolian harp of the twenty-first century. It attunes the mind to the ethereal vibrations and enables man to tap the universal truths."

"Gave me a headache," Charlie complained.

"It's also," the salesman cast his eyes down shyly, "a sensual instrument of great powers. The brain, you know, is our largest sexual organ."

Charlie huffed at the preposterousness of the statement. "Speak for yourself," he said. The men behind him didn't laugh as Charlie had expected. They were mesmerized by the toy in the salesman's hand. "Now what's this nonsense about a psychic fair? First I heard of it."

"Teresa," the man from Sedona whispered and pointed a well manicured finger in the direction the Towncar had taken, "has unusual powers. She senses movement on a vast scale," he nodded to the men behind Charlie. "The psychic center of the universe," he almost whispered, waving the tiny wooden mallet as if there was something more--something mysterious.

Charlie ignored the mallet and the promise. He was growing impatient for his breakfast. He could smell it, and when he turned he could see Inez standing in the window. Also, he saw a pair of paws clawing at the back window of his truck. Dog was trying to learn what was going on. "What's this," he said impatiently, "about the psychic center?"

"It's moving," the man said, and tapped the air with his mallet to cement the fact.

"To Where?"

The salesman didn't speak or nod this time. He looked Charlie squarely in the eyes, thrust his pale index finger forward, and pointed straight down at Charlie's feet.

"Crime-a-netly Charlie tried to cuss. "Isn't it enough that we have more witches and weirdoes in these parts than a prickly pear has spines? Do we have to start importing foolishness as well?" He looked at the salesman and would have said more but the morning breezes brought the scent of fried eggs and ground chuck to his nostrils. "Say," he asked as he started to turn, "this psychic center nonsense wouldn't have anything to do with UFOs and mutilated cattle, would it?"

The salesman placed a modest hand to the turquoise bejeweled neck of his peasant's shirt. "I," he said sincerely, "am just a disciple. But Teresa," and his eyes widened at the thought of her powers, "Teresa knows many things."

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## Poltergeist

When Charlie at last entered the cafe, he entered in state. The usual sea of hangers-on followed in his wake or parted before him. Behind him, padding rhythmically but clumsily, came Dog.

"Whatcha got there, Charlie?"

Charlie looked at his feet. "Well," he tried to be considerate of the speaker's feelings, "knowing what you fellas keep around your places, I don't suppose you'd recognize a real dog."

"Dog?" a couple of the men scoffed. "Hell, I thought that was a dust bunny blown in behind you."

Charlie conceded Dog's small size but promised "He'll grow some. Going to be a fine dog."

"Dog or dust bunny," Inez called from in front of the grill, "no animals are allowed in my kitchen and all of you boys know it. Now git."

Knowing the limits of his powers, Charlie picked up Dog and took him outside. "You wait right here for me," he told Dog and placed him on a picnic table in front of the grocery quonset. "You can watch me through the window."

Once back inside, Charlie didn't head for the toilet as usual or for his breakfast, which Inez had shoved into the oven to keep warm. Instead, he turned to the left and went into the grocery. "Where you keep the puppy chow?" he asked Marvel Landrum, part-time cashier. She pointed.

Charlie towered down a narrow aisle of the grocery, picked up a couple cans of wet dog food and a bag of dry and was headed up the next aisle to checkout when his progress was blocked by a small girl. She sat on the floor with a two or three-day-old black chick. Alternately she was covering it with her hands and then releasing it. Each time she raised her hands and moved back, the chick followed.

"Look, mama, the baby chickie follows me everywhere I go."

The mama--pregnant, pushing a basket, and towing a diapered toddler--appeared at the end of the aisle. "Yes, dear," she intoned with the disinterest only the weary or ignorant can muster. "It's because the chickie loves you."

Charlie sat his groceries on top of the display case and knelt awkwardly. "Let me see the little fella." He took the chick, covered it with one massive hand, and reached for a can off the bottom shelf of the case. With the mother watching, Charlie released the chick and rolled the can down the aisle. As expected, the chick raced after the rolling can. "Now your little chickie loves corned beef hash."

"Charlie Waggles," the mother scolded. "You should be ashamed of yourself." Charlie couldn't see all of the mother's rage as she was looking around Bode Road. He had come to the end of the aisle to witness the lesson on imprinting.

"Waggles is the name," Charlie admitted. "Don't take it in vain."

The young mother abused the cart in front of her and dragged her other child out of harm's way by disappearing into the next aisle. The little girl on

the floor didn't notice. She was busy transferring her chick's love to a can of garbanzo beans. Because of the mixture of liquid and solids, the can didn't roll as smoothly as the corned beef hash had and the chick was confused.

"Cute'n, ain't she," Bode said, following Charlie to the checkout. "I mean the mother."

"What's so cute about one a laggin', one a draggin', and one a saggin'?" He plunked the dog food onto the counter.

"What's the matter, Charlie?" Marvel began toting up the bill. "Don't you approve of her having one in the oven?"

"Charlie don't approve of any woman having one in the oven," Bode sniggered.

"Ain't so," Charlie muttered. "There was one woman I mightily approved of who had one in the oven."

"Your own mother?" Marvel guessed.

"Nope," he looked out the window to check on Dog. "The witch in *Hansel and Gretel*."

"Oh, Charlie," Marvel tried to smile at Charlie's curmudgeonery, "you just don't understand *young love*." She pronounced the words as Hallmark would imagine them.

"I think I got young love now a days pretty well figured," he countered, watching Marvel drop the two cans and the bag of puppy chow into a sack. "Isn't that when all you have is each other--and food stamps."

"Shame on you, Charlie," she scolded. "How cranky can you get?" she put her hands on her hips. "Now you go in there and get some coffee and get to feeling better." In spite of her words, she smiled at Charlie's back. "You have a good one," she called.

Charlie, almost out the door, turned. "How's that?"

"I said 'you have a good one.'"

Charlie looked at the men hanging in the doorway to the cafe and then back at her. "I do," he admitted to her, but to the men in the cafe he had another story. "Honest, fellas," he protested. "I don't remember showin' it to her."

Charlie was out the door feeding Dog before Marvel's face finally blanched to a shade just lighter than that on a Campbell's soup can. For Dog, this was the first real food since being rescued from the trunk of the Buick. As soon as he finished his experiment with food out of a can, Charlie picked him up and carried him over to his Jeep and plopped him onto the hood. "I'm going inside," he pointed a finger at Dog. "You can watch me through the window."

Dog squatted on his haunches as if to say "Okay."

Back inside, Inez had six breakfast burritos on a plate at his accustomed seat before the window. Charlie tossed his hat onto the chair next to his and was so intent on the burritos that he nearly missed his own chair as he sat. He scooped up one of the burritos with his thick fingers and slid it into his mouth whole. This was what he had been waiting for all morning. He chewed slowly, letting the grease slide down his throat. "Back in a minute," he explained abruptly to no one in particular and headed toward the rear of the cafe, picking up his full cup of coffee as he went. "Got to see a man about a log jam."

Inez refused to smile at Charlie's imagery. "Well, close the door this time so we don't all have to see and hear you breaking it up."

"You're in for a treat," Bode called just as Charlie got to the door. "They've got recycled toilet paper in there now."

"Well," Charlie considered, his hand on the door knob and the cup of coffee to his lips, "I hope if it's recycled they've at least dried it first." With that, he disappeared into the small bathroom and closed the door. He had no more than sat down, however, when he pushed it open again and stuck his head out. "How many times I got to tell you, Inez? Get a new calendar in here. One with pictures. I'm tired of looking at this generic *Eastman Brothers Wholesale Candy and Tobacco* of Sterling, Colorado, calendar. Ain't nothing on this one but numbers."

As usual, Inez ignored him. She did listen close enough, however, to hear him ask himself what day it was and then heard him mumble something about "Must be near the new moon."

Most of the usual morning crowd was sitting around his table when he ambled back, his cup of coffee empty but with Inez refilling it on the fly. "Scooch aside there a little," he motioned to Bode as he sat down. Bode was on the other side of the table but realized that Charlie wanted an unobstructed view out the window. "Where are the boys?" he asked.

Bode shrugged. "Wiley's still mowing his lots."

Charlie knew that, but what he wondered was what had become of Harley and Banner. They, along with Wiley Wentworth, were not on their usual stools at the counter. It was their custom to sit with their backs to Charlie and watch the television on the wall. No one was watching the set this morning, but it seemed content to talk to itself. "Maybe I'm runnin' late," Charlie figured.

"Reason I come in today," Bode talked across the table to Charlie, "is that I need my house spiritually disinfected. You know, like you did last time." He daubed at his nose with the bandanna and stuffed it into his breast pocket. "Them ghosts are really raising a racket. I can hardly sleep."



"Spooks?" Charlie asked after taking his greasy thumb and forefinger from his mouth. "I thought I'd already de-spooked your place."

"That was my old place," Bode explained. "And it worked real well, too. You do a good job. It's my new place that needs the treatment. I'm out on I03 now, two miles south of I12."

Charlie figured. "That's just around the corner from my place," he said. "Why the move?"

"Roof leaked on the old place," Bode explained and Charlie understood. "We tried one night at the new place, the misses and I, but they was real noisy. We've moved back to the old place until you can bust them out of there."

Charlie was considering when he could get to it--ghost busting and water witching were his specialties--when Superintendent Hall burst through the grocery door, turned sharply right, and leaned on his knuckles on Charlie's table.

"We," he hissed with breathless importance, "are missing two of our school buses."

Charlie had a burrito in his mouth and Superintendent Hall had to wait for that to disappear as well as half a cup of coffee before he got a response."

"Buses? How do you lose a bus?"

"It's enough to beat the band," the superintendent admitted and shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "But we *are* missing a big one and a little one. Both Blue Birds."

"I got poltergeists," Bode tried to console the superintendent, but he just looked blankly at Bode instead.

Charlie ignored both and called over his shoulder to Inez. "Inez? You got any pie around here or do you expect a man to starve?" He didn't wait for an

answer. "Gimme haffa that chocolate I saw in the case." What he didn't say was that there was only half a chocolate pie in the first place.

"Sheriff," the superintendent pleaded.

"Hold your horses, Leonard," he tried to calm the superintendent. "I'm working on it." While he was working on it, Inez slid the pie in front of him and he began working on that. "Kids," he said around a mouthful of the dark brown goo, darting his tongue out to get an errant bit of filling. "*Wunsta* was that painting his graduation year on the water tower or stealing a sports trophy and using it for a drinking flagon were enough. But stealing buses?" It was a new one on him.

"Do you know what a new bus costs?" the superintendent leaned more heavily onto the table.

"Shucks, Leonard. They can't get far," Charlie reasoned. "It isn't as if you could bury the things. And besides, the school's name is painted on them--not to mention that gaudy yellow and black tiger salamander mascot you have crawling all over the top and sides."

"The buses *are* distinctive," the superintendent admitted. "We won an award for the design from the American School Bus Association. I'm sure you saw it. The Abroghast sisters got it written up prominently in the *Herald*. The quality of the picture was disappointing, however."

"Look, Leonard," Charlie crooked his finger to bring the superintendent even closer. "I got a little problem here with Bode. If you can help me and him with it, that'll give me time to get started on your problem."

"Anything you say, Sheriff."

"Bode here's got ghosts at his new place, and I need my usual ghost bustin' equipment. You know, the big speakers and the strobes and the tape decks. The music teacher's already gone for the summer," Charlie explained,

"or I'd ask him. You got a key to the band room, and between you and Bode you'll know what I'll need."

"I *am* familiar with the equipment," the superintendent admitted, "and I've spoken to the band teacher several times about loaning it out for non-school functions."

Charlie crooked his finger and brought him even nearer. "I trust we can work together on this matter?"

Superintendent Hall straightened and pulled his suit jacket taut. "I will have the equipment waiting for you on the loading dock in back."

"We'll be obliged to you," Charlie touched the point in the air where the brim of his hat would have been had he been wearing it. "I'll send Bode over shortly in my Jeep to get it. I trust anyway," he looked threateningly at Bode, "that he can drive two and a half blocks on an empty road without getting into trouble."

"I'm good for it," Bode promised, and they both watched the superintendent walk out the grocery door.

"Inez," Charlie called as soon as the superintendent had disappeared, "would you call Kandi at the office and tell her we got a couple of school buses missing out here and to put a bulletin out on 'em?"

"When are you going to give me a badge, Charlie?" she called from the back.

"As soon as you put on them roller skates for me."

"That'll be the second after I see you twirling a Hula Hoop," she promised.

Bode paid no attention to the banter between the two. It went on every morning. "I can't get the holy water this time," he said as soon as Charlie turned from harassing Inez. "That young priest that visits the Briggsdale church about once a month hasn't been coming back."

"Oh?" Charlie was mildly interested as he was in most matters on the prairie. "Reassigned, was he?"

"Not exactly," Bode became more confidential and leaned across the table toward Charlie. "Remember those Mormon crickets we had last spring?" he nearly whispered.

Charlie nodded. "Ate near everything in the county that wasn't moving. Worse than 'hoppers."

"Well," Bode continued his near whisper, "that priest prayed against them."

Charlie jerked back in his chair and chewed on his thumbnail to consider the matter. "You'd think the old ones would at least warn the young ones," he shook his head. "He'd a had better luck takin' a handful of rocks after 'em."

Bode had lost the edges of one of his leased wheat fields to the crickets. "Don't I know it." He remembered having to sew barley along the edges to try and recoup some of the loss. "Anyway, the young priest is too embarrassed to come back."

Charlie fished a toothpick from the right pocket of his grandfather's leather vest. "At least he's got some pride. Not a whole lot of sense but at least some pride."

"But I can't get any holy water," Bode reminded Charlie. "You can't do the de-spooking without holy water, can you?"

"Let me think on it," Charlie chewed the toothpick. "Tell you what," he took it out and pointed it. "Why don't you drive over to the liquor store at Raymer and pick up a bottle of Christian Brothers. That ought to be close enough." After returning the toothpick to his mouth he added, "make it a brandy, why don't ya. Meantime, take my truck down to the school and load

the de-spookin' equipment. The keys are in it. And take Dog with you. I'll be along shortly."

As soon as Bode left, the cafe was nearly quiet. All the other regulars had left to waste their time elsewhere or were across the street standing around the salesman from Sedona. Inez, gearing up for lunch, scraped the grill while the hosts on the television morning show chatted amicably to each other. Charley added to the silence in the quonset by scraping the pie dish in front of him with his fork. He wanted the last of the chocolate pudding.

"You got some more mail," Inez called nonchalantly. She leaned with both hands on the pumice stone, polishing the grill. "Gloria brought it over. Said it wouldn't fit in the mail box." When she reached for the towel to finish polishing the grill, she sneaked a glance at Charlie.

He had stacked his pie plate on top of his burrito plate and the utensils and coffee cup on top of both. "More of those perfumy kind?" he asked, carrying his dishes from the table to the counter.

"Appears so." Her voice betrayed nothing more than the effort it took to clean the grill.

Charlie watched the morning TV hosts and listened for a minute to their efficient but vacuous banter.

"It's not just the letters," she turned, taking off her dirty morning apron and replacing it with a clean lunch time apron. "You got two calls yesterday afternoon as well. And believe me, those ladies were insistent."

"But what do they want?"

"You, Charlie," she picked her words. "Those ladies have all cocked their bonnets for you and they think you're available." After a pause she asked, "Are you?"

Charlie scoffed. "Shucks, Inez. You know I'm a one woman man. Course," he conceded, "I've been wearing myself ragged for years looking for that *one* woman."

"That isn't exactly what I told them," Inez forced a snort, "but they wouldn't take *no* for an answer from me. And I have a hunch they aren't going to take *no* from you either. Living alone on half a section with nothing for company but a creaky old windmill and a nearly dead Chinese elm will do that to a woman."

"But how'd I get caught up in this?"

"I suspect," she busied herself with the mulligan stew steeping on the stove, "that the boys entered you into that Prairie Companions organization. You know, that one that puts out the pamphlet listing all the available country men and women who are looking for mates. I think they call it *Lonely Windmills*."

"Well, believe me, Inez," Charlie reached for his hat, "these ladies are tilting at more than they can handle."

"Maybe," Inez eyed him, "they're tilting at too much if they come in singles, but I have a hunch they're going to come in packs. It's not often a real sheriff, and a legendary one at that, cries out from his lonely trailer atop Cemetery Hill for a soul mate."

Charlie stopped. "You've seen the pamphlet, haven't you?" he accused.

"Maybe I have," she turned her back on Charlie, "and maybe I haven't." She seemed strangely cheered as she went busily back to work.

Charlie's way out was blocked by the sudden entrance of the boys, Harley and Banner Tidley. They were in high spirits and on a mission. "Inez," Harley called. "Can we borrow a couple of tablespoons?"

Each of them carried a quart Mason jar filled with oats.

"What are you Yahoos up to, anyhow?" he asked them.

"Oh, hi, Charlie," Harley called over his shoulder. "Almost didn't see you there."

"Almost didn't see you," repeated Banner. In his excitement he had almost forgotten to show Charlie what he had just bought. "Look at what we bought, Charlie," he held up a gonger with his free hand.

"Sexual prowess," Harley growled and waved his menacingly for Charlie to see.

Banner's face almost split with a naughty grin as he held his aloft.

Charlie might have expected as much. "What ya got in the jars?"

Banner lowered his gonger and raised his jar. "Prairie dog poison."

"Prairie dog poison," exploded Charlie. "What the hell you planning to do with that?"

"Wiley gave it to us," Harley explained. "We're going to put a spoonful down each hole and get rid of them."

"But what do you want to kill those prairie dogs for, anyway," Charlie flushed. "They been over there as long as this town's been here and they was here a long time before that. They ain't hurtin' nobody. And besides, they're not even really on Wiley's property."

"Wiley said that the lady who rented his lots wants them gone," Harley explained in more detail. "She said they were filthy rodents and spread disease. She didn't want any of her customers getting sick."

"Filthy rodents," Banner clutched his jar to his chest.

"Don't give them any spoons, Inez," he called, and she gave him a look as if she'd have known better anyway. "Now you march back out there and tell Wiley to leave those dogs alone."

"He said he had the right," Harley protested. "Some of them have been crossing the road and coming on his lots."

Charlie's first impulse was to brain Harley and Banner where they stood and then to go out and throw Wiley's tractor at him, but he cooled. He remembered the recent deaths of thousands of prairie dogs in Greeley so another unneeded and soon-to-be abandoned strip mall could be constructed.

"Ease off," he told the boys. "Hold off for a couple of days. Go out and tell Wiley that I'll have those dogs moved in a couple or three days. And tell him that if anything happens to them in the meantime, I'll cram him down over the exhaust of his tractor and he can set there like a hood ornament for the duration."

The boys trotted off to tell Wiley.

"Ja ever notice, Inez, what idiots people can be?"

Inez tilted her head to her right shoulder and looked at Charlie as if to say 'Here we go again.'

"If a prairie dog gets a flea that carries a disease, they go in and kill the whole damn prairie dog town. Makes about as much sense as if someone walked in here with a cold, I'd shoot him." The idea was at first preposterous to Charlie. And then he wasn't quite so sure.

"Did anybody ever think of flea and tick collars for prairie dogs?" he wondered. Inez' look put him on the defensive. "What you lookin' at," he defended his idea. "I'd put 'em on."

He sat on the stools Harley and Banner usually occupied and mulled the problem over, worrying his toothpick. "And after you call Kandi about the school buses," he continued the conversation of long ago, "ask her if she can contact that prairie dog sucker and get him out here."

"Prairie dog sucker?"



"Oh, you know what I'm talkin' about," he grew impatient. "The guy that converted a street sweeper into that vacuum cleaner he shoves down prairie dog holes."

He was spared any further explanation by a rapping on the window. Two women filled the view where his pickup had been. One of them was waving a handkerchief. Their clothes looked as if they had been bought out of mail order catalogues, and Charlie knew in an instant--if not who they were--why they were there.

"Oh, Charles," the one waving the handkerchief called through the window.

"Think I'll see how Bode and Leonard are gettin' along loading the ghost bustin' equipment," he called to Inez as he scurried for the back door.

###

## Hammered Puke

Hurrying down alleys wasn't exactly Charlie's style, but he figured no one could see him. In spite of his considerable bulk and short legs, he was making good time--distancing any possible pursuers. He was about to cross the road when a curtain on the second floor of the Sligo Opera House moved. Immediately, he abated his haste and affected a more regal, measured gait. It was so exaggerated, he could scarcely keep his balance.

Even so, he was nearly over the crown of the gravel street and ready to disappear into the Chinese elm lined alley on the other side when a rusting blue pickup turned off Main and honked at him.

"Thought that was you." It was Marvel's husband and Charlie wondered if he had taken exception to the little joke he had played on Marvel--the one about her knowing Charlie had *a good one*. "Marvel told me you skipped out back when those out-of-towners took after you. Kin folk of yours?"

"Don't know what you're talking about," Charlie lied. He was winded from the walk.

"Well, whatever," Dan laughed as if he knew something Charlie didn't. "I just stopped you to let you know that kid got out of the silo all right. I found him walking down the road. He was a little drunk, I think. Anyway, I took him back on out to your trailer and saw to it that he got pointed in the appropriate direction."

Charlie nodded his thanks. "Little early in the morning to start drinking for such a kid, don't you think?" He tisked at the shame of it. "I thought he told me he was a Mormon."

"His name must be *Jack*, then."

"No. It's Gavin, I think. Says he works for the Associated Press. I was just trying to show him some of the highlights out here."

"Highlight hell, Charlie, what you showed him was a hole in the ground." Dan laughed in approval. "You mean that greenhorn fell for the old stars in the daytime routine?"

"Like a high school cheerleader." Both Charlie and Dan laughed and winked as if they knew first hand.

"Well, hey. I got to get," Dan said.

"Me too," Charlie admitted. "Got to get out to Bode's new place and de-spook it tonight."

"Bode again?" Dan's pickup engine revved as if it were eager to go. It was an old pickup and burned regular. "Odd how ghosts follow some folks around so, ain't it?" He idly raced the engine and listened for new rattles.

"Ain't it so," Charlie agreed, and they parted.

After two more blocks of the elm-lined alley, Charlie entered the back of the school property by stepping over the torn down fence. This was the entrance most of the kids in town used as it separated them from the majority of students, the true farm and ranch kids, who arrived at the front door by bus.

Charlie couldn't see the loading dock because a shed filled with combustibles was in the way. Nonetheless, he knew Bode and the superintendent were there. The music coming from that direction was horrible. It was the nasalest, twangyest, guitar-cryingest, self-indulgentest crap he'd heard since he was forced to watch one of the countless country

music award shows on television. When he rounded the corner of the combustibles shed, he was even more surprised to hear that it was coming from his own Jeep radio.

"Hey, Charlie," Bode called, his beaver teeth grinning, "you listen to the good stuff too, don't you? I just turned your radio on and there it was. K-BOY, big as life."

Charlie was surprised to learn his radio worked. He seldom used anything but its cassette tape player. "Yea," Charlie admitted. "Can't get enough of it. If after listenin' to a song a man doesn't feel compelled to scrape his boots, it ain't much of a tune."

The huge speakers and the strobe lights had already been loaded. The superintendent wasn't there, so Charlie assumed he was inside the building getting the drive system on which he could play records, tapes, or even CDs.

"Now you be careful with this," Superintendent Hall scolded as he emerged from the darkened hall into the light. "We use these speakers to announce our football games, and the juniors just used these strobes for their class dance."

Sligo was a powerhouse in six-man football and the junior class dance was always the social highlight of the year, attracting three times as many adults as students. The huge speakers were needed for the football games because most of the spectators sat in their cars with the engines and heaters running. The field, really a patch of dirt, was delineated by a perimeter of half buried automobile tires. Spectators drove up to the field until their bumpers bent one. If a Sligo runner happened to emerge from the cloud of dust and head for the goal line, the horns blared. Should the opposing quarterback drop back to pass, the car lights mysteriously switched on. Though Sligo was

a perennial six-man football powerhouse, the school never won the league's sportsmanship trophy.

The superintendent eased the drive into the bed of the pickup. "I've heard you do this cleaning, Charlie, and I've been intending to inquire as to what manner of sounds you use."

"Bode can tell you," Charlie nodded to him. "He's seen it done before. Least wise he's heard the first of it. I usually prefer the owners go elsewhere for the night. Puts them too much on edge if they stay. Lord, I can barely take it myself, and I wear ear plugs."

Bode had climbed up into the pickup bed. There was no need for it, so he was probably just trying to feel important. "Noisiest, screechiest stuff I ever heard," he admitted, putting his handkerchief to his nose. "I don't know how Charlie stands it."

"Interesting," the superintendent admitted. "Just where *do* you get these sounds? Have to send off for them somewhere? Is there a catalogue that stocks such things?"

"There may be," Charlie said, "but I never heard of it. I just found mine."

"How *do* you find ghost-busting sounds?"

"I found mine up north near U.S. 85. I was sitting there on I22 one day waiting to pull onto the highway as soon as I could make up my mind if I wanted to make a left and go to the cafe in Pierce or make a right and head on up to Rockport for the bull fry. While I was wondering, I saw all this tape out of a cassette. It was on the fence and tangled in the weeds and some of it had blown onto the gravel and been run over. I was curious, so I got out and started picking it up. While I was doing it, I found that it was still attached to the cassette case."

"What did the case identify it as?"

"There was no writing on it," Charlie disappointed the superintendent. "It was one of those blank K-Mart specials with nothing written on it. Anyway, I had a little time--"

"When *doesn't* he," Bode laughed and pushed the bandanna handkerchief into his right rear pocket with his billfold. The superintendent frowned him into silence.

"Anyway, I had a *little* time so I took out a pencil, poked it into the sprocket, and rolled it all back into the cassette. Took a while, what with the twisting and the straightening out of the wrinkles. Had to use my readin' glasses. But I got it done. Once it was finished, I decided to drive into Pierce and see if the new management had improved on the chili. About the time I got there, I pushed the cassette into my radio and started playing it. I couldn't believe it. I figured if it had ever been anything, it had been made by a synthesizer and the sun and rain had distorted it. But that wouldn't answer for the screechin' and wailin' and for the just plain violation of the capacities of the human ear."

"It's as if," the superintendent swallowed, "you were meant to find that tape."

"Maybe," Bode added, "it was brought here from another world."

"My thoughts exactly," Charlie said slowly and rolled his eyes mentally. "But I was still playing it when I pulled up in front of the cafe in Pierce and there was a gaggle of gangly teenagers hangin' out in front. 'Hey, dudes,' one of them called. 'That old man's playing *Hammered Puke*. Cool, man.' And he gave me a *party on* two-fingered Devil's horn sign.. Another of the boys outside the cafe said 'Bitchin', man.'"

"*Hammered Puke?*" the superintendent and Bode asked almost simultaneously.

"Don't know if that's the name of the group or a style of music," Charlie shrugged, "but the kids thought I was the dog's bark for playing it. But the positive thing about it is that it drives the other world even crazier than it does this. Put those sounds together with strobe lights and, believe me, before morning those spooks are beggin' to get out the door. Never fails."

"I've seen him do it," Bode raised his eyes superiorly to the superintendent.

"Yea," Charlie agreed, "and you can see the start of it tonight. I'll be there about the time it starts getting good and dark. Say about nine. You be there with the Christian Brothers."

"I will. I will, Charlie." Bode gave the superintendent another superior look and climbed out of the truck bed.

When Charlie went to open his door, he was greeted by a bouncing ball of fur that sprang happily about the cab like a sporting baby antelope. "Who let this rat in here?" Charlie challenged Dog. "I ought to call the rat catcher and get rid of this nuisance." Dog continued to bounce. "Well, okay. Just this once. You can ride up front. But don't let it become a habit. *Real* dogs, you remember, ride in the back--like stock. That's where you belong. You're just stock. Soon as I fatten you up and the market on rats rises, you're off to the sale barn."

Dog understood every word.

It was still early in the day, so Charlie and Dog headed west. Just after they passed over asphalted 77 which headed toward Hereford, Charlie checked the angle of the sun, wet his finger and stuck it out the window. "It'll be cold," he told Dog, "but not so's our gonads'll turn blue."

It would be a few miles before Dog knew what Charlie was talking about. Meantime, Charlie reached under the passenger's side seat and pulled out a

leather case containing cassette tapes. With Dog watching, he selected one and plugged it into his radio. Dog didn't recognize Aaron Copland's *Billy the Kid* ballet suit, but Charlie did. As they roared west on I20, Charlie sat with his arm out the window. He loved this section. No fences. No ranch houses in sight. Just a cow here and there dotting the brown prairie grass.

A mountain plover, sitting in the middle of the road as they always do--thinking it's a beach--scurried out of the way just in time and Charlie noted in the rearview mirror that two chicks followed her onto the prairie. He looked over to see if Dog had noticed the birds and realized that Dog couldn't see out. As a consolation, he leaned over and rolled down the window on the passenger side. The rest of the way to their destination, Dog rested his nose on the window ledge and smelled everything outside he couldn't see.

When they slowed and turned off onto the prairie, Dog knew something was up. They drove about two hundred yards off the road and when the Jeep stopped and Charlie picked him up, Dog saw what he would see many times in their weekly visits--a beautiful, concrete, windmill-fed stock tank sitting by itself on the prairie.

"Hope you can swim," Charlie said to dog as he carried him over to the tank and lifted him over the side. Since the tank was really a reservoir for several tanks in the neighborhood that it gravity fed, it was huge. It was at least five-feet deep and twenty feet in diameter. "Let's see if you can dog paddle."

He eased Dog over the side and into the cold water. The last things to get wet were his eyes. As they sank beneath the dark liquid--large, brown, trusting and questioning--they were fixed on Charlie. Their disappearance was brief, followed by an explosion of flailing paws and an urgency to touch the clouds with his nose. Charlie pinched the loose skin behind his neck and



walked him halfway around the tank. Once he got the hang of it, and realized he could glance sideways and watch Charlie's straw hat following him along, Dog got to like it. He was even wanting to cut straight across the tank and investigate the water spurting regularly from a pipe on the other side.

"That's enough bath for you this week," Charlie thwarted his exploration. "It's my turn." Dog was lifted from the water and placed in the sun on the engine-warmed hood of the pickup. "You can watch."

Charlie went to the corral-pole fence that protected the moving parts of the windmill from the milling cattle and climbed it. Once up, he balanced on the top rung of the fence and the ample edge of the tank and undressed. With a care he didn't exhibit at home, he carefully draped his white socks, white boxer shorts, white T-shirt, and Dickie pants and shirt over the fence. His high-topped work shoes were stuffed over the upright posts. When finished, he stood on the edge of the tank--his white, massive naked glory exposed to the world--and fell backward into the water. The resulting tidal wave pelted the front of the Jeep--delighting Dog--sloshed onto the mud at the foot of the tank--quenching the thirst of hidden toads, frogs, and tiger salamanders--and cascaded into the fenced in area--watering the stand of un-trampled sunflowers.

Dog was so impressed he stopped licking his hair straight.

Bathing completed, the pair loaded into the Jeep and, instead of heading back to the gravel road, drove straight over the hill on which the windmill sat and down the other side onto trackless prairie. Charlie seemed to know where he was going and headed straight for a gentle, wide gully. The sand was so packed or shallow that he didn't need to shift into four-wheel drive. His destination was a small sand bluff, and he drove up as close to it as he could get.

"Floor time," he told Dog and placed him on the floorboard. Then he scooted across the seat, put his back against the passenger door, and spread his legs out in front of him. It *had* been a day thus far. He'd had to deal with a reporter, he'd burned a possible drug manufacturing lab, he'd made the world safe for children who explored refrigerators, he'd talked to a crazy artist he kind of liked, he'd started work on rescuing a colony of prairie dogs, he'd made preparations to de-spook Bode's new house, and he'd escaped from those handkerchief waving women in the window.

"I've earned it, Dog," he said and reached for a Philip K. Dick paperback book in the glovebox.

He barely found his marked page before he was asleep.

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10

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Adagio

The book was still on his chest, opened to the page, when he awoke. The sun had westered considerably.

"Time to git, Dog," he yawned and dug the heels of his palms into his eyes to massage them. Dog would have scrambled immediately from his nesting place on the floorboard, but he had to wait for Charlie to replace the book in the glove box and slide back beneath the wheel.

Backing out of the draw, Charlie picked a new route over the hill and past the stock tank on his way to I20. From there he headed west to U.S. 85 where he encountered an age old problem: turn right to Rockport and Cheyenne, or left to Nunn, Pierce, or Ault? Weighing in favor of a turn to the left was an insistence from his stomach for the green chili plate at Napolitos in Ault. The cafe was near the Ault Sheriff's Sub-station anyway, and he might drop in for a visit. Give Kandi a thrill. See if the dust on his desk was still undisturbed.

As he roared past Nunn--reducing speed was only an option for those who wished to glance at this blink in the road--he saw three law enforcement cars drawn off the east side of the highway near the railroad tracks. One was a sheriff's car and the others were from Ault and Eaton. Only an emergency would have drawn the vehicles from the two communities. Braking, Charlie swerved over the oncoming lane and drove past the three vehicles to the uniformed officers. They stood in front of the opened door of a box car, their hands on their hips in frustration.

"Whatcha got?" he leaned out the window and asked.

The young deputy, just out of the University of Northern Colorado with a degree in law enforcement, was Grover Ford. As he walked through the weeds to Charlie, it was obvious he was making the effort out of obligation only. "There's six undocumented aliens in there," he said reluctantly, "and they won't come out."

"Wets, huh?" Charlie looked briefly at Grover's starched and creased uniform--the official uniform--before considering the problem. Even then he considered it only briefly before he opened the door and got out. Dog was left to paw the window sill in an attempt to see out.

As they walked toward the train, their shoes breaking the dry weeds, neither spoke until Grover could stand the silence no more. "I tried to get you on the radio," he stammered, "but yours must not have been working." This was the first time he had met Charlie face to face, but he knew all about him. He had learned about Charlie in his courses. In fact, Charlie's name always came up when the instructors mentioned unorthodox, outdated, or outright illegal methods.

Charlie ignored the reference to his radio. "I've been working on that mutilation thing." When he got to the darkened door of the box car, the patrolmen from Eaton and Ault stepped well back to give him room. "What's with the wets?" he asked them, but they didn't answer.

"Deputy Waggles," Grover started cautiously. He had been in charge before Charlie arrived, but the blood--as well as the authority--had drained from his face. "The men in there are not *wets*. They are *undocumented citizens* and are to be treated as such until proven otherwise."

"I see they've trained you well, son," Charlie smiled at the young deputy's spunk. "But there's something I've got to warn you about the law." He was no

longer looking at Grover. He had taken his hat off and was using it to shield his eyes in an attempt to see into the darkened car.

"The law?" Grover tested his luck.

"Yep." Charlie still peered into the car. "It's like a sunflower. You can stand in front of it, and it appears to be smiling at you. The law is like that. But be careful. Sooner or later--usually later--the law'll get around to following reason as surely as the sunflower is gonna follow the sun."

"The point?"

"The point being, son, is that you don't listen to what those who are kissin' the asses of the *Wets* is telling you. Listen to your reason. It's law enough." When he saw that Grover didn't understand, he turned and addressed the cops. "We got an invasion on our hands," he smiled wryly, "and Grover wants to greet 'em with cake and ice cream. Or should I make that *pan y elatos* or whatever?"

The patrolmen smiled back at Charlie but looked to Grover to see if he approved. When Grover didn't respond, but remained stiffly erect, Charlie took over. "Why won't they come out?" he asked the patrolmen.

Both shrugged but one of them spoke. "They told me they didn't have to," the man said. "Said they had rights."

"Rights, huh?" Charlie crammed his hat tight on his head and reached for the door frame. "I got their rights hangin'," he growled as he drew himself up into the darkened box car.

It took him less than two minutes to help the undocumented emissaries of another culture from the box car. Once he had assisted them to the weeds at the officers' feet, he leaped from the car door and assisted in stuffing them like jalapenos into the back seats of the patrol cars.

He was still breathing hard when his Jeep left the weeds near the railroad and reentered U.S. 85. He hadn't said a word to any of the law officers, and it was five miles before he would even speak to Dog. "Beats me why people can't just flat see a problem and handle it."

After that he remained silent while racing through Pierce and would have remained silent clear to Napolitos in Ault if a pickup approaching him hadn't started blinking its lights. Charlie slowed and waited for the pickup to make its move. After coming through the light where Colorado 14 meets U.S. 85, the pickup pulled to the east side of the road and came to an idle beside the caboose in the roadside community park. When the window rolled down to let the conditioned air escape, Charlie recognized Ken Wolverton, the vet out of Severance who had volunteered to help him with the mutilation.

Charlie pulled his small pickup along side the vet's big dualie. "Hey, Ken," Charlie acknowledged his recognition. They saluted each other with two fingers. "Got anything for me?"

The veterinarian nodded. "Yes and no," he leaned out his window toward Charlie. "I found what I pretty much expected. What you saw. Sex organs gone, ear, anus. No blood. The usual."

"Anything not the usual?"

"Again," the vet shrugged as well as he could with his arms out the window, "it wasn't so much unusual as unexpected."

"How's that?" Charlie asked, now leaning out of his window so that they were no more than three feet apart. He had to listen carefully because of an 18-wheeler grinding away from the stoplight and heading toward Cheyenne.

"There was a cut on the bull that was in almost the same location and angle that I might have made if I were doing a C-section on a cow. Of course

this was on a bull and on the left instead of on the non-rumen side. "Still," he paused, "the cut causes me to wonder."

Charlie thought back to the mutilations in the 60's. "Precise cuts? As if they had been made by a laser?"

The vet shook his head. "Not at all. I would have expected that. The C-section cut was clean and surgical, but there was no laser precision or seared edges. It was just a razor cut. But," and he knew Charlie would be interested, "it was different from the other cuts on the animal."

"How's that?"

"The other cuts, even at the ear, were all serrated. You know," his finger made saw marks in the air, "up and down. They looked like little teeth."

Charlie almost smiled at this report. "Serrated, huh?" But it wasn't a question. After searching his cheek with his tongue, Charlie turned as much as he could in his cab and put both elbows on the window sill. "If you were to bring down a bull, you know, one that didn't want to be handled, how would you do it?"

"Out in the field, you mean?"

"Exactly. No chute to run him into. Nothing. Just you and the bull."

"Oh," he thought. "There's several drugs we could give him. Dart him if necessary, but I've only had to do that once. A mean stallion I had to cut," he explained.

"How would you get the blood out?"

"I couldn't. That's the big mystery to me. You cut even an artery on a cow and the animal's heart'll stop pumping before the blood's out. A lot of blood, even dried, would be left."

"Can't be done then?"

"I wouldn't say that," the vet readjusted his outside mirror while thinking. "Maybe if you could trick the heart into thinking that there was still blood to pump, you could do it."

"How would you do that?"

The vet shrugged again. "I've been considering ways, but I don't know. Maybe if you pumped salt water in one direction as fast as the blood was coming out the other you could keep the heart pumping until it was pushing nothing but water." He paused before giving Charlie the clincher. "I found holes in a major artery leading to the brain and one in a vein leading away. Makes me wonder. Somebody or something knew what they were at."

"Holes," Charlie repeated, still oddly pleased with the information. "And then when the water dried up it would leave little more than salt? Right?"

"Probably," the vet conceded, "but then blood's salty. If I checked for that and found salt it wouldn't even tell me much. Even if it was iodized salt, that wouldn't tell me much. Hard to tell what kind of blocks the bull had been licking out in the fields. There's all kinds of mineral blocks. No," he shook his head, "this is beyond me. Maybe if I took some of the liver and heart up to Fort Collins the boys in the vet school would test it for me. Maybe they could find something."

"Could be," Charlie considered, "but I don't want to press you on it. It isn't as if you're getting paid."

"True," he said, "but maybe I'm interested enough. Tell you what," he said after a pause, "I'll give them a try and if they turn me down I'll just let it go."

"Mighty white of ya, Ken," Charlie saluted and pushed his Jeep into gear. "Catch ya later."

Their trucks slid apart in opposite directions and Charlie headed for Napolitos, passing the sub-station first. When he saw Kandi at the



switchboard in the window, he had to stop in the middle of the street and watch. She always reminded him of the painting of a man made entirely out of fruit--oranges, bananas, pears, and so on. Kandi didn't have cheeks. They were plums. Her heavily mascaraed eyes were sliced kiwi fruits centered with dark olives. Her lips bled with the stain of pomegranates. Below the dimpled peach of a chin were Rocky Ford cantaloupes. Large ones. The size that required two smiling migrant worker boys to lift. The remainder of her body would fall into the squash family--giant zucchini, gourds, and pumpkins enough to delight all Halloween kindergarten classes on the shortgrass prairie.

She was patting her teased coif as Charlie watched. After its recent dyeing, it looked like the rose-purple bloom of a bull thistle. It stood straight up, matted, ratted, and awaiting a swarm of bees. When she reached for her brush, she saw Charlie through the window and made signs for him to turn on his radio.

"Park that truck of yours, Charlie, and come in here so I can give you a piece of my mind."

"Why don't you come on out here to the truck, Kandi," Charlie laughed. "The *closer* you get to me the *better* you look."

"Don't pull that one on me, Charlie Waggles. I know you're far sighted."

Charlie laughed. She had heard his joke so many times, she was using it herself in every Karaoke bar she hadn't already been kicked out of. "If you should need me tonight, I'll be out at Bode Road's new house de-spookin' it."

Her initial answer was a hand signal. Then she asked "How much booze is it going to take this time?" Charlie appreciated the question. It reminded him to turn off the radio.

After three green chili plates, one of them on the house, Charlie left Ault for the prairie, stopping first at the gas and grocery to grab a fist full of Snicker bars to keep him company. He never liked the first part of the coming drive. It was through irrigated farm land. He didn't feel really at home until he had crossed Lone Tree Creek and topped the rise to the high prairie. The spring rains hadn't come, and the slanting sun lay pale across the khaki-colored grass and the prickly pear cactus. The slanting rays also reminded Charlie that it was the time of evening when deer appeared from shadowy draws in search of water. He was prepared for them, though. He had installed deer whistles on his front bumper.

By the time he got to his own trailer--he still couldn't get used to calling a stack of baled straw his home--it was full dark. He only slowed to see if everything was all right. Remembering the birds, he braked sharply and was reminded of the sound equipment in the truck bed as it slammed the rear of the cab. Cranking the wheel, he just made the second turn into the circular drive. Instead of stopping, he reached behind his seat and pulled out several handfuls of bird seed and tossed them out the window. "We might not get back early enough to feed them," he told Dog. That done, he completed the circuit of his drive and spun back out onto 112.

A mile and a half down the road, he took a right onto I03 and drove the mile to Bode's new place. He could see the house lights a half mile away, but when he got there Bode was not in the house. He and his wife were sitting in the front yard in his pickup. Bode had turned the lights on earlier in a braver moment and had remained in his pickup since first dark.

"Always did like this house," Charlie told Bode.

Bode got out of his cab only after Charlie stepped out of his truck. "Why's that?" he waved a handkerchief across his nose. Bode's stiff gait caused Charlie to wonder how long he had been in his cab.

"Whoever built the place," Charlie pointed, "had some sense. The main porch is on the back, facing away from the road. The one on this side is just a stoop. I always wondered why people built their houses facing the road when they could face open prairie."

Bode ignored the observation. "My wife's not feelin' well and wants to get to her sisters. Let's get the equipment into the house."

Charlie looked in at Mrs. Road as he carried one of the speakers past. She lifted a languid hand. "Hi ya, Sheriff." Charlie thought *she* might like to spend the night. At least she didn't appear to fear ghosts. And judging by his glimpse of her under the dome light, he remembered why. Her face was insurance enough against most ghosts. But her face never bothered anyone. When she was out in public men never even looked at it.

Charlie assured Bode that his system would work no matter where the ghosts were located in the house, so they set the speakers and strobe lights in the living room. He then moved the most comfortable chair in front of, and exactly between, the two speakers. "And pull that little table over here in front of the chair," Charlie directed Bode. "We'll put the controls on that and when the ghosts come to try and turn the racket off, I'll sprinkle them with the holy water." He made the motion of shaking salt on a bird's tail.

"Christian Brothers," Bode corrected. "And like you asked, a dark brandy."

Charlie took the bottle, opened it, and took a whiff. "It works almost as well as holy water," he assured Bode. "Sometimes I have to give them two or three sprinklings instead of just the one, but the results are the same."

"They won't wreck the furniture, will they?"

Charlie eyed the furnishings. They looked as if they had been bought sight unseen off a truck the way some people bid on unopened boxes at auctions. "Furniture'll be fine," he promised. "I've had 'em turn over a table or two. One time or another they've knocked a picture off the wall. Nothing I couldn't handle, though."

With that, he centered the tape deck on the small table in front of the easy chair and pulled the tape from the right pocket of his leather vest. He held it aloft with both hands as a priest does when consecrating wine or a wafer.

"This little buggerer will do it," he said and pressed the tape home. Immediately the windows trembled. The speakers thundered with the screams of used car salesmen in Hell. They screamed as their heads were shoved under cars supported by teetering jacks, their tongues fed into serpentine alternator belts, their brains poured into transmissions to ease the chattering, their eyes rotated backward to decrease the mileage on their brains.

Bode pressed his hands to his ears. "Enough," he yelled.

Charlie turned the volume to zero and started to console Bode but stopped with his finger to his lips. "Did you hear that?"

"I didn't hear anything," Bode confessed, his ears ringing beneath his cupped palms.

Charlie shook his head knowingly. "If you'd been at this as long as I have you'd a heard it too." Bode withdrew his hands a few inches and waited for Charlie's explanation. "They were moving upstairs. Didn't you hear them?"

Bode, still ready to protect his ears, shook his head slowly. "Maybe it's my cold."

"It came from about over there," Charlie pointed to the ceiling.

"That's a closet up there."

"They like wool," Charlie nodded knowingly. "I'll turn this up even louder and that'll really bring them down. That, plus these lights"--and he switched on the blinding, pulsing strobes--"and they'll be at my mercy. I could *drown* them in holy water if I wanted."

"You let me get on down the road," Bode went to his nose with the bandanna. "The missus isn't feeling well, and I promised her I'd get her to her sister's before it gets too late."

"Sure, sure," Charlie understood. "Didn't expect you to hang around anyway. It's an ugly sight most folks don't care to see. I got used to it when I was a kid. I used to go with my ol' grandpa, you know, old Sheriff Waggles. Boy did we have some nights," he remembered for Bode. "I think ghosts were bigger and meaner then. At least I remember them that way. Course, I remember that house cats came up to my waist then, too."

Bode backed from the room. As he did, he stared at the ceiling. "See you in the morning, Charlie."

"Not too early. I like to sleep in a little after the ghosts have skedaddled." Charlie waited until Bode was almost to his truck. When he opened the cab door, Charlie spun the dial on the system to 10 and the house swelled and shuddered. Bode hurried into the pickup and stared back at the house while trying frantically to get his engine started. Mrs. Road, the dome light still on her face as well as the pulsing glare from the strobes, seemed mildly interested.

Charlie allowed the strobe and noise to continue until the tail lights on Bode's pickup disappeared into the south. Then he doused the lights, reduced the volume, and ejected the tape.

With the tape still in his hand, he walked out to his Jeep and opened the door. "Time to come on in, Dog. Should be peaceful from here on out." Dog acted as if Charlie had been gone an eon. He almost wouldn't let him get several more cassette tapes from under the passenger seat and the bag of dry dog food from behind the driver's seat.

Back inside the house, Charlie poured a double fistful of the dry food on the floor beside the easy chair and Dog went to it. While he was eating it and growling at it like a cat, Charlie went to the kitchen and returned with a bowl of water.

"Now that's you for the night," Charlie told Dog. "I don't want any more out of you until morning. I got some serious work to do."

Exhausted, he eased into the chair and released a sigh that would have caused a trucker to stop and check his tires. "What a day," he said to the walls and raised the bottle of Christian Brothers brandy to his lips. "At least it's going to have a good ending."

So saying, he fished through the tapes in his leather vest pockets, pulled out one, and leaned forward to plug it into the machine. Instead of a setting of 10, he rotated the dial to between 3 and 4. At first there was nothing. Then, almost as if it were his imagination, a string section--somewhere out on a prairie of time--laid its rosined bows across Zephyrs of honey. It was Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*.

Charlie never listened to the *Adagio* without thinking of two things. The death of his grandfather and a lizard climbing a rock precipice. As the music increased in volume and the strings swelled in number, Charlie watched the lizard strain ever higher and higher. When the music ebbed, it rested. When the strings crescendoed, split, and soared to ethereal heights, the lizard reached the summit, spread its wings, and soared. It wheeled with the

freedom of an eagle and Charlie--the bottle of Christian Brothers in his hand--watched it with his mind until, like the eagle, the lizard ascended beyond the reach of his vision.

Somewhere near the third or fourth playing of that side of the tape, when the bottle of brandy was two-thirds depleted, and when no ghosts had bothered to show, Charlie felt the call of nature and went out onto the back porch to water the flowers.

As he relieved himself, he sighed--this time contentedly--and looked into the moonless, crystalline night for Polaris. That found, he craned his neck, hoping to spy Cassiopeia reclining on her couch. She must be above the porch, he reasoned, shaking himself dry. Turning back into the house, he caught a brief glimpse of a glow in the window to the left of the door. It was the size of a silver dollar.

Knowing he was slightly unsteady, but collecting his concentration anyway, he eased over to the window in an effort to discover the origin of the light. Just as he got to the window, the light disappeared. Stooping, he could see that the only thing on the other side of the pane was the back of a chair. As he moved his body to the left of the window, the light reappeared. It was then that he knew it was the reflection of something out on the prairie.

He spun to the east but saw nothing. The sky was black except for the distant stars. Looking back at the window, he found it was blank. "Too much Barber and too little Copland," he muttered and started back into the house.

But, as he again neared the door, the glow reappeared in the window. Ignoring the pane, he spun quickly to the east and there it was. A light nearly as big as the moon. It rolled slowly to the south, never quite clearing the horizon. He couldn't tell the distance. Maybe it was a mile away. Maybe five.

He had just decided to hurry to his Jeep and give it a chase when it disappeared.

It disappeared, but something beneath it remained. From his distance, it looked like a fog, a haze, an indistinctness that swarmed over the prairie. "Maybe if I can flank it," he said and rushed to his pickup.

As he left the yard heading north, the glow reappeared. This time it was above the horizon. He kept it in the corner of his eye or in the rearview mirror on that side for half a mile before it again disappeared. It's not disappearing, he reasoned. It's just going black. Perhaps it has to turn on its lights to move. Maybe it's a signal to something out on the prairie, the something Charlie thought he saw beneath it.

He reached the turn at 112 in no time and was skidding through it to the east when he slammed on the brakes. The road was barricaded. Affixed to the red and white striped barrier was a sign reading **Bridge Out**.

"Of all the times," he muttered and pushed the Jeep into reverse before racing back down the road. He flew past Bode's house. Its lights were still on, but the object on the prairie had dissolved into the night. It was a mile to the next cross road, but when Charlie reached it, it too was blocked. **Bridge Out**.

"I don't remember any flood," he panicked. "And the county hasn't told me about any construction." Thwarted from both directions, Charlie sped back to Bode's house, entered the yard, and drove past the house and onto the prairie beyond. At first he used his lights, but as he neared where he thought the object might be, he slowed and turned them off. When his grill and electric wench nosed a barbed wire fence, he cut the engine and got out.

His trips to the north and south of the object had at least served one purpose. He was sure that the light, whatever it was, was in the near vicinity. No more than a mile and a half behind Bode's house.



The wire squeaked at the near posts when he depressed it and straddled over onto the prairie beyond. It seemed level, but he moved cautiously, fearing a sudden gully or fox or badger hole. When he stopped and listened, he heard nothing. Not even the wind. It was perfectly still. Except for the eerie silence of nocturnal animals and the ominous presence, the peace would have been intoxicating.

Searching the night with his eyes, its velvety closeness nearly suffocating him, he discovered a darker shade of black. It was twenty-five yards away, but as he looked at it his night vision fatigued and the suspicious blackness melted into the ground and was replaced by an indistinct grayness. He thought he saw something similar to his left, but it too proved to be his imagination and the strain on his eyes to make sense from too little information.

Even so, he unholstered his grandfather's revolver and carried it at the ready. He moved forward, but in an alternating, sidling motion. He was afraid to leave his back exposed in any one direction for too long. As he inched toward where he had last seen the light, he placed his feet carefully. Each shoe probed the distance and tested the terrain before he trusted his weight to it. Then he brought the other shoe forward.

Stretching his left foot, Charlie felt a clump of vegetation, probably soapweed, and was just settling his foot to one side of it when it exploded. The projectile hit him inside his left thigh and crashed back to the ground. Charlie wheeled to a shooter's stance and pointed the long barrel of his revolver at the retreating sound.

He wanted to laugh with relief, but his racing heart told him it hadn't been that funny. He couldn't see what the explosion beneath his feet had been, but he recognized the sound of a frightened jack rabbit bounding through the

night. Charlie knew it could see no better than he and that it was bounding blindly into the unknown.

He was straightening from the shooter's stance when a series of small lights floated over the rise before him. Each light searched the ground as if on its own mission. They were eyes or probes. Not knowing what to aim at, Charlie raised his revolver slowly. Simultaneously, almost as if it were pressed out of him, he began to sing quietly through clenched teeth.

"Load her up and bang away, with my eighteen pounder." His voice raised nervously on the repetition. "Load her up and bang away, with my eighteen pounder."

The movement of the lights was slow, cautious. As they neared, Charlie could see that they were attached to something moving in the blackness just behind them.

"For tonight I'll see Mary G."

Angels. Angels without legs. Just as Banner had said, they floated above the ground. What Charlie had thought were lights were beams holding them aloft.

"For tonight I'll set Mary free."

Then it burst into life above him. Terrible in its nearness. Stupefying in its size. It glowed fiercely like the judging eye of a god at the keyhole of eternity.

"For tonight she'll sing Glory Be."

At its windows, he saw the faces, the silhouettes of figures trying to peer from the brilliance of their environment into the blackness that was his. In an instant he saw that the floating figures below and the massive light above were one creature. Cables or umbilicals connected the floating figures to the craft. As he watched, the tentacles writhed. The angels floated randomly. At first Charlie equated the movement to children around a May Pole. Then he

realized he was wrong. It was a creature. A giant Man of War jelly fish and its stinging tentacles were writhing nearer.

But he didn't care. He was on his knees, and he didn't know why. His pistol dangled along his right thigh. When he tried to sing, his words were slurred and he repeated the previous line. "For tonight she'll sing Glory Be," he hissed. "To my eighteen-pounder"

He fell face forward onto the prairie. With his last fuzzy consciousness, he turned his face to the side--the nose already bleeding--and hissed "eighteen-pounder."

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West Butte

"Smooth, ain't it," Glen Gable remarked to the student pilot in the left seat beside him. "This is when buzzards can't fly. It's smooth and calm--like a fishing pond just before the sun comes up.

The teenaged boy in the pilot's seat pettishly rolled his eyes and, in an effort to maintain his pose of nonchalance, draped a single hand over the horn of the wheel. He was doing everything in his power to make this once in a lifetime moment tedious.

"Aim for the Pawnee Buttes over there," Glen pointed, "and make a wide sweep to the right around them." He had seen this attitude in young male students before--testosterone poisoning, he called it--and chose to ignore it. Instead, he watched the earth slide past between the wing and its strut. Cattle tank, he clicked off in his mind. Gravel road. Arroyo. Next will be the hiking path leading from the parking area to the buttes.

Suddenly, he jerked forward until he was restrained by his harness. "Did you see that?" He couldn't believe it.

"Yea," the nonchalant teenager replied and continued his turn with a single hand on the wheel.

Glen reached for the radio mike. "Greeley tower," he called. "Greeley tower." When the voice answered, Glen ordered, "Patch me through to the sheriff's office. They ain't going to believe this."

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From a pleasant, dreamy mist, the morning opened itself seductively to Charlie and his cheeks glowed with the prospects. The aroma of a dewy prairie dawn and the bright chatter of invigorated birds, deepened lines at the edges of his mouth and he almost smiled. One aggravation, however, and this was slight, dissuaded him from lifting his cheeks in a smile. It was the persistent droning of a pesky insect circling just above his face. He thought of brushing it aside with a hand, but when he opened his eyes and saw that it was only a tiny airplane, he decided to ignore it and drift back into the folds of his singular slumber.

Two hours later he still reposed contentedly, but the morning was warming and he felt the sun's heat on the top of his head. Raising slightly on his elbows, he looked about for his hat but couldn't find it. Oh, well, he decided. He must have left it in his truck. He'd get it later.

One matter did concern him, however. It was his feet. He didn't remember putting on red socks. He didn't remember even owning red socks. The shoes resting on the newspaper between his feet also puzzled him. *Penny loafers?* Not a man's footwear at all. He was dreaming, he decided, and retreated to that quiet buzz between sleep and waking that can be so pleasant.

His only real concern came an hour later. That was in response to a noise he didn't understand. His water well compressor kicking on, perhaps.

Maybe it was the hot water heater gurgling again. To investigate, he calmly turned his head to the left and watched a Channel 4 News helicopter rise out of the ground, its camera trained on him.

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In the Sligo Grocery and Cafe breakfast was postponed. Everyone, including the clerk and butcher in the adjoining store, was gathered beneath the television set on the wall in the cafe. Wiley, Harley, and Banner, by dint of their already being on their accustomed stools, had front row seats. No spoons stirred coffee. No knives spread butter across Inez' toast. All attention was directed to the Morning Show as the host in New York City talked by satellite to a Denver Channel 4 reporter on the ground just west of the Pawnee Buttes.

"Would you repeat again, Casey, for viewers who may have just joined us, the situation out there on the plains in Colorado."

"It's this way, Brian," the reporter tried to recount the events of the morning. She, and the satellite truck behind her, were atop the escarpment west of the buttes. "Just before sunrise this morning, an instructor pilot from Greeley--that's about 50 miles southwest of here by air--spotted a man laying on the top of the western most of the Pawnee Buttes."

"Could you," Brian interrupted from New York City, "could you describe those buttes for us?"

"There are two of them," Casey said, "and the picture on the television changed to show them. "Residents out here tell me they are about three hundred and fifty feet high. That's quite tall for this area of Colorado," she looked into the camera. "They really dominate this region."

Brian interrupted again. "How did the man get up there and why is so much excitement connected with this--granted unusual but not earth shaking--event?"

"That's just it, Brian. This butte has been considered almost unclimbable because of its sheer, crumbling sandstone sides. Its sister butte, about a half mile to the east, can readily be climbed by the adventurous. But it's not just that a man is on top, it's who is on top."

"And that is?" Brian tried to hurry the reporter.

"Sheriff Waggles."

A cheer erupted from the men around the television set in Sligo. Inez Botts, however, eyed the set while chewing her fingernails and glancing at a platter of six breakfast burritos re-heating in the oven.

"*The Sheriff Waggles, the Charlie Waggles of the *Ultima Thule* fame?*" Brian asked as if he and all listeners didn't already know.

"The same, Brian. A man who can truly be called a legend in his own time. Sheriff Waggles has been the law out here for decades. His territory is immense. Some of the men out here this morning tell me his territory is in excess of sixteen hundred square miles."

"One man covers that?" Brian responded. "Incredible."

"I have here a representative of the Weld County Sheriff's department," Casey said and gestured for someone off camera to move closer. Finally, she looked into the camera while her right arm stretched out to pull the reluctant figure closer. "And your name is," she thrust the microphone to his face.

"Ford. Grover Ford," he stammered. "Deputy Sheriff Grover Ford."

"Deputy Ford," Casey asked, still holding onto him so that he couldn't slide away, "How do you know that is Sheriff Waggles up there and how do you think he got there?"

"He's not the sheriff," Grover stiffened. "He's a deputy just like me. I know it's Deputy Waggles up there because your people let me ride in your helicopter, and I got a good look at him."

Casey still pinched the sleeve of his short sleeved uniform. "How do you think he got up there?"

"I don't know." It was obvious that was all he would say, so she released him.

"The story gets better, Brian. I have another man here"--and as she spoke Bode Road bumped her shoulder with his--"who says he knows what happened to Sheriff Waggles. Mr. Road?" she offered the microphone to him and he took it.

"Way to go, Bode," yelled the men in the cafe. They would have continued the celebration had Inez not snapped them into silence with her dish towel.

"It was ghosts," Bode said over the television when the men returned their attention to it. After saying that he froze and the reporter nudged him awake. "Charlie was chasing ghosts from my new house about three miles from here last night when he disappeared."

"Chasing ghosts?" Brian interrupted, but Bode couldn't hear and the reporter had to repeat the question.

"Yes," Bode admitted innocently. "It was the usual--strobe lights, loud, screechy music, holy water. You know."

"Have we got another story here, Casey?" asked Brian from New York City. "I mean this thing seems to keep growing?"

"Exactly," Casey took the mike from Bode. "The terrain out here may be simple, but I'm quickly learning that the complexity of its inhabitants is in



reverse proportions." She handed the mike back to Bode and explained "New York wants to know more about Sheriff Waggle's ghost busting."

"Like I said," Bode repeated, "it was the usual. Holy water, lights, and noise. I came back to the house this morning to see if he'd roused them, but he was gone. That was strange because his pickup was there and so was his dog. It's not like Charlie to go walking."

"And that's it?" the reporter asked.

"Yes," he admitted. "Ghosts got him and flew him up there. It's obvious, isn't it?"

The reporter, speechless, took the mike from Bode and faced the camera.

"I'm beginning to see what you mean about complex," Brian helped. "But we'll get back to you out there on the Colorado plains after this," he smiled. His face was replaced by an ad for a feminine hygiene spray.

In the interim, Inez was beset by a dozen orders for breakfast, Wiley vacated his stool--after threatening anyone who tried to take it--and went to the bathroom, and the effeminate fellow in moccasins, a gonger dangling from his neck, carried the carafe about, filling empty coffee cups. When Brian's face reappeared on the television set, the motion froze into a tableau--except for Wiley sneaking back to his stool.

"And now," the television announced, "we return you to that unfolding drama on the northern Colorado prairie."

"Thank you, Brian," Casey said, watching the monitor at her feet. "I'd like to show you now some video we shot earlier. She continued watching the monitor for agonizing moments before her wan visage was replaced by a view of the buttes taken from a great height.

"This is a view," the reporter voice-overed, "of the buttes as they might have appeared to the flight instructor as he flew out from Greeley early this

morning. As you can see, they are quite large and they do dominate the prairie."

To the non-eastern Colorado resident, the view might as well have been of the far side of the moon or of the cretaceous and tertiary periods in geologic time that formed the buttes. The view was empty. Forlorn. Alien.

As the helicopter neared and circled the west butte, a tiny figure--its fist raised--charged and raged silently into the lens. As the camera floated closer, and the figure swelled to fill the television screen, anyone who had ever seen Charlie recognized him instantly.

"Give 'em hell, Charlie," Wiley yelled at the television set above him and raised his fist in solidarity. This fellowship, this brotherhood quickly waned, however, when Inez pushed his breakfast plate up to the button-strained shirt that covered his pot belly.

"That's Charlie, all right," Harley Tidley told the boys. "And look, he's barefooted. Just like brother Banner was."

"No shoes," Banner pointed to the screen and then to his own feet that were newly shod in ox blood penny loafers.

"But where's his revolver?" a voice in back of the crowd asked. The room grew quiet as dozens of eyes narrowed and squinted at the tiny picture.

"I don't see his granddaddy's star on his vest, either," another voice observed. This caused Inez to finish wiping her hands on a dish towel before tossing it onto the sandwich board and coming around the counter to stare at the set.

The view of a dancing Charlie brandishing his fist at the helicopter disappeared and the national television audience again saw Casey, the local reporter out of Denver. "During the break, Brian, a man has come forward with what he says is the true story concerning Sheriff Waggles ."

"But first a question I'm sure our viewers would like to know, Casey," Brian interjected. "Why didn't the Channel 4 helicopter, or any of the other helicopters I'm sure are at the scene, simply land and pick him up?"

"Weight limits, Brian, combined with gusting winds," the reporter responded. "Sheriff Waggles is a rather large man and our pilot and the other pilots simply chose not to chance it, especially since we also wanted to carry a cameraman and reporter."

"That's their professional judgment," Brian said, "and I'm sure they're correct in it, but how is Sheriff Waggles going to get down?"

"Deputy Grover Ford through his offices in Greeley has arranged for a Jolly Green Giant helicopter out of Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming."

"You mean," Brian's consternation grew, "that a local sheriff's office can call in a military helicopter?"

"It wasn't quite that simple, I'm told," the reporter admitted. "The request was at first refused, but I'm told that after a certain dispatcher at the Ault sub-station, a certain"--and she looked off camera for help with the name--"Kandi, called in a few outstanding favors the appropriate arrangements were made."

"This Kandi must be some lady," Brian marveled.

"So I'm told," the reporter said. If she had heard the tumult at the Sligo Grocery and Cafe she couldn't have shifted topics so easily. "With me now is," she tilted the mike to the man now at her side, "Lauren Ewell," the man answered, "who says he knows how Charlie really got up there." She faced Lauren and not the camera. "How did he Mr. Ewell?"

"A flying saucer."

The television quickly flashed to the scene in New York City of Brian collapsing back into his chair and looking at his co-host in disbelief. He

controlled himself and straightened. "Are you strong enough for this?" he asked the co-host. She smiled as if to say 'Why not. This is gold in our pockets,' and he turned back to the camera. "Mr. Ewell, could you elaborate?"

The reporter repeated the question and Lauren tried. "A few days ago my young bull was taken by a flying saucer and killed. They drained out all his blood, cut off his ear and anus and cut off his sex organs, too." He leaned to the reporter and asked--not knowing a national audience could hear--"Can you say sex organs on television."

"I take it," Brian asked, studying the studio floor, "that you don't watch a lot of television out there on the prairie?"

After the question was repeated he admitted the truth. "Some out here have the dish, but we don't. Just the radio out of Denver. KOA mostly for the noon market report."

"But back to the flying saucer," the local reporter correctly narrowed the topic. "What makes you think it was a flying saucer or UFO, as they are called today?"

"My wife and kids saw it the night the bull was killed, but I wouldn't go out and look at it. You know how women are," he said to the lady reporter and immediately recognized his mistake. "And kids," he added. "Well last night when they called me out, I went and took a look. I believe now. It was huge. Hanging in the sky somewhere over near Bode Road's new place. That's Bode over there," he pointed off camera.

"We've already interviewed Mr. Road," the reporter told him. "But what did you do after you saw the UFO last night?"

"I went to bed."

"Bed?"

"Lady, if you had seen what they did to that bull, you'd have stayed home, too. But this morning, soon as it got light--about five fifteen or so--I got into my truck and drove over to Bode's place. Charlie's Jeep was in the field out back and his dog was still in the house with the de-spooking equipment, but Charlie wasn't there."

"Where did you think he was?"

"Couldn't say, but I figured if Charlie was in that house and he saw the saucer he'd go for it. He's that kind of a man. If there's a problem, he's right there in the middle of it fixing it. He doesn't hang back. Not his style."

"A real sheriff's sheriff then?"

"No," Lauren considered. "A man's man. The sheriff part comes second with Charlie."

"I notice you've brought two hats. Why's that?"

Lauren didn't answer immediately. He removed his snug fitting hat and replaced it with the straw hat in his hand. It enveloped his head down to and over his nose. "This straw isn't mine," he said, pulling it off and squinting at the light. "It's Charlie's. I found it in the field out back of Bode's house. Looks like he drove after the saucer as far as he could and then went after it on foot. Like I said, he's that kind of a man."

Casey held the hat up for the national audience to see. "This is Sheriff Waggles' hat," she bragged as if she had a real souvenir. "A," and she looked inside, "big one from the American Hat Company in Houston, Texas."

"A man's hat," Lauren took it back from her. "I'll see that he gets it."

Just then all the reporters and photographers on the overlook turned to a whomping distraction from the north. Even the camera that had been focused on the woman reporter swiveled and focused on the approaching giant

helicopter. It wasn't the Jolly Green Giant as expected. It was an even more powerful craft, one that could lift and transport tanks.

"That Kandi must be some woman," the voice off camera said. But that was nearly the last words spoken as all eyes, even those of the morning personalities in New York City, watched the drama of the rescuing craft.

This helicopter was way too big to land on the butte. It positioned itself over it and the pitch and whir of its giant blades held it rock steady. From its belly depended a rescue cable and safety harness. As the camera narrowed in, the audience could see Charlie still shaking his fist, this time at the rescuing helicopter. He was probably protesting the severe down draft from the blades which nearly swept him off the butte and all but prevented him from grabbing the harness.

Finally, on the sixth or seventh swing past, Charlie managed to grab it and buckle himself in. Instead of drawing him up into its belly, the helicopter rose slowly, lifting Charlie with it. When it had gained a safe altitude, it slanted to the southwest and swung rapidly into the valley below to an awaiting ambulance.

Charlie's fist never stopped shaking at all things in general.

When the helicopter neared the ground and the ambulance attendants and peace officers below had released him from his harness, Brian broke in for "a few words from these good people." The sponsors of the affair.

Two and a half minutes later, an eternity to the men and Inez at the Sligo cafe, the picture from Colorado returned.

"That's about it from here, Brian," Casey smiled, knowing her immediate task was about over. The story was so big that she knew the anchors in Denver--if their contracts were strong enough--would never let her face be seen in connection with this story again. "Word from the ambulance is that

Sheriff Waggles had to be sedated for his own safety and is being transported to the Greeley Medical Center for observation. Three other men were also slightly injured, I understand, and are also being transported to that location. I haven't learned just how they were injured, but I understand it occurred shortly after Sheriff Waggles touched down."

With the real news over, the men in the Sligo cafe lost interest in the television set and let it talk to itself. The effeminate man in moccasins made another round with the coffee carafe, and Inez Botts snapped her dish towel and cleared her voice.

"Anybody here," she called, "in the market for a half dozen breakfast burritos? Half price."

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12

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Colleens

When Charlie awoke this time, he was on his guard. Squinting at first, he cautiously opened his right eye and examined all that he could see on that side of his nose. Flowers. A Memorial Day graveyard of them. Closing that eye, he slowly opened his left eye and inspected that side of his nose. Nothing but flowers.

For an instant he considered the possibility of his own death. What was he lying on or *in*? He wiggled his fingers and felt relieved that his hands were at his sides and not crossed on his chest. Next, he tested the pea-fog-thick odor of dead flowers with his nose and detected an even more oppressive odor--hospital.

The odor he wanted to detect, however, was coffee. Acting upon that need, he sat bolt upright and surveyed his hospital room. Flowers. With a curiosity temporarily overriding his need for caffeine, he reached out and plucked the tiny envelope from one of the bouquets and ripped it apart with his sausage of an index finger. Holding it away from him with the tip of his fingers, he read.

"My dearest, sweetest, most unfortunate of Charleses--" it began and he immediately understood the source of the flowers. He spun the tiny card and it disappeared into the Monetéan wilderness.



In sliding off the bed, he noticed a freshness about his loins and looked down to discover a backless hospital gown. On his body, it was little more than a bib. Grabbing it at the neck and ripping it off, he held it at arm's length. "What in thunder tarnation is this contraption?" he asked it. When it didn't answer, he relaxed his grip and consigned it to gravity. It looked like a facial tissue as it slipped limply to the cold, tiled floor and wadded in on itself.

He kicked it under the bed and began searching the shallow closets in the room for his clothes. In the first closet he found a pair of hospital thongs and slipped them on. "Ain't hardly a man's shoe," he observed, "but these'll have to do until the UFO brings me back my others."

As he reached for the handle on the other closet, a disturbance from the hall stopped him. "How did you get in here?" came a harsh whisper, the kind of whisper that skates down empty, narrow halls. "Through the door," came the less practiced whisper. And Charlie recognized it.

He cracked his hospital room door open. "Harley," he whispered, not remembering when he had been so happy to see one of the Tidley brothers.

"Oh, hi, Charlie." Harley assumed his regular voice and walked toward Charlie over the protestations of the night nursing supervisor. "Radio said you was all right. Just some cactus needles in you. But heck, Banner had them, too."

"How'd you get here. What you doing here?" Charlie didn't know which question to ask first.

"This is Thursday, Charlie," Harley explained as if Charlie should know. "The doughnut run. Banner comes in to get the doughnuts every Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. We just thought since the radio said you was fine that we'd drop by and see if you needed a ride."

The nurse had stood all she could. "Now see here," she walked over. "If you don't leave this instant, I will have to call security."

Harley turned, helpless. Charlie, who was better armed, pulled the door fully open and displayed his nakedness. The nurse laid two fingers to the side of her cheek, glowed like a crawdad tossed into boiling water, and backed away, almost bumping into her counter.

"Guess that's the first time she's ever seen an eighteen-pounder," he sighed at her misfortune. Seeing that she had somewhat recovered herself and was on the phone, Charlie said "Meet me out front in four or five minutes."

"I don't know, Charlie. There's a whole mess of cars and trucks out there already. You know, those television people. I couldn't find a place in front. I had to park in back by the loading ramp."

"Perfect."

While the nurse was still on the phone, Banner left and Charlie found his clothes in the closet he hadn't checked. He was in such a hurry, he only had time to pull on his white boxer shorts. As he flip-flopped down the hall, hugging his remaining clothes, the nurse looked up and forgot whom she was talking to.

Even in his delicate state, Charlie refused to ride in the cab of Banner's pickup with the two of them. Obediently, Banner crawled into the pickup bed and let his brother Harley drive the nine miles to Eaton and the Eat'n Place where Banner picked up the frozen doughnuts.

The baker was so happy to see Charlie that he provided him with a giant mug of coffee and all of the fresh doughnuts he could cradle in his left arm.

"We haven't had such a celebrity here," the baker beamed, "since both Baxter Black and Wilbur Ball ate here the same night."

"Bring you an autographed glossy next time I'm by," Charlie promised.

The ride back to Sligo was the longest Charlie could remember since getting roped into chaperoning a bus load of cheerleaders on a trip to Casper. Under normal circumstances he would have throttled both of the brothers before they turned onto Colorado 14 at Ault, but he was trapped. He was beholden to them. The ride might not have been so bad with Banner in the back if it were not for the sliding rear window which permitted him to thrust his head between Harley and Charlie.

For the first ten miles Charlie had to endure tales of the boys' forays to the antique markets. They had even rented space in an antique co-op on the Greeley mall. As children, they had been spoiled by indulgent grandparents who bought them every model of toy farm equipment available. Especially the old cast iron toys. They would have died under an avalanche of them except for Banner. As soon as he tore the box open and found the toy, he would take it outside and bury it. He was so good at it that they were seldom recovered. Harley would immediately put up a squall and the grandparents would drive to Cheyenne and buy identical toys for each boy. By the next morning, both toys would have disappeared. Like a pack rat, Banner worked at night.

"He was like a squirrel," Harley bragged. "He'd put 'em in the ground and forget where they was. Hell, if they'd been seeds of the real thing instead of the toys they were, that pasture'd be an implement store today. Go figure."

He laughed at his joke, but Banner only agreed. "There'd be big tractors and harvesters there instead of little ones."

For the past year they had been picking up serious pocket money by digging up those toys. They had purchased a metal detector and spent their spare time--which was all their time--going over and over the field.

"At first," Harley said, "I thought they wouldn't be worth much 'cause they was rusted. But people likes 'em that way. Go figure." He couldn't believe some people. "We've been gettin' near a hundred dollars for some of them. If you calculate how many Banner buried, and put pencil to paper, you'll find it to be a considerable sum."

Charlie had hoped the remainder of the trip could be in silence, but the boys started arguing over the relative merits of the Case tractor versus Farmalls of comparable horsepower.

"Case'll pull more," Banner offered.

"Yea," Harley agreed, "but at what speed. And try to turn one in a tight place."

Finally, they asked Charlie to arbitrate. "What's your favorite tractor, Charlie?"

Charlie sighed. It wasn't even a test. "Any of the ol' two-banger Johnny Poppers," he said. The matter was settled and the boys, without a word, conceded the choice. Not only was the sound of a Popper nostalgic to their ears, John Deere green had been their school colors when the three of them were classmates in Miss Teller's third and fourth grade classroom.

The tiny town that school had served had vanished from the prairie. Not even foundations remained. All the town plots had been ploughed under and planted to beans. But there hadn't been enough rain for beans. Next, the farmer planted wheat. It blew away. The people who now owned the half section on which the town had sat were making a fortune. They had placed the land in the government's CRP program. By letting the land revert to prairie, they were getting more money from the government each year than anyone in the old town had ever earned.

Back in Sligo, Charlie didn't like the looks of main street. It had cars on it. Pickups would have been okay, but cars meant trouble. "Turn left here," he instructed Harley by pointing to the old Opera House. "Let me off at the alley. I'll go in the back way. You go park in front--if you can find a spot--and if anyone asks about me tell them you haven't seen me."

"We haven't seen you," Banner said and pulled his head back through the rear window. When Charlie got out at the alley, Banner slid over the side of the pickup bed and took his place on the passenger seat.

The brothers seemed too smug, and Charlie couldn't resist getting back at them in spite of their rescuing him. "Say, Banner? You know those red socks and penny loafers you lost the night the angels took you?"

"You know where they are?" Banner was excited.

"Yep."

"Where?"

"Left 'em right where I found them."

"Where's that?"

"Atop West Butte."

As he left Banner--whose eyes looked as if he were anticipating an impossible climb--Charlie walked nonchalantly down the alley, trying to pretend it was his usual entrance. On the pretext of removing a pebble from the hospital thongs, he glanced to see if anyone had seen him enter. Someone had. The curtain in the top floor window of the Opera House had definitely moved. In fact, it was still swaying as if it had been held back and suddenly released.

Hurrying, but still trying to appear composed, Charlie entered the back door of the Quonset Cafe. It smelled of flour, sugar, potatoes, and the glue that holds labels to number 10 cans. As he cracked the door into the cafe,

another smell caused the juices in his stomach to simper. Inez had already popped some of the frozen doughnuts into the oven and it wouldn't be long before they were steamy hot. Their Bavarian cream centers would flow like sweet lava.

Charlie saw few unfamiliar faces in the cafe, but through the far window--his window--he could see activity in the formerly vacant lot beyond. It was filled with awnings and canvas-sided booths. If he hadn't known better, he would have taken it for a church bazaar.

"You better hide your face." The caution came from Inez who had spotted his eyes rolling in the darkness of the storage room. She turned her head from him and suspiciously scanned the cafe. "I guess it's okay," she gave her head a jerk, indicating it was safe. "You can come out." She inspected him from hospital thongs to naked head. "Well, you don't look any worse for the wear." The corner of her mouth clicked at the wonder of it all. "But all hell's broken loose here," she indicated the window with her shoulder. "It's worse than the day they struck oil in the Raymer Field."

"What's happened?"

"What hasn't? Just have a look out there," she pointed to his window. "You've been gone a little over a day, but you won't believe what they've hauled in out there. Those gonger things all the boys were wearing are Cracker Jack trinkets by comparison and a sight more useful."

Wiley Wentworth saw Charlie and tried to point out his presence to the Tidley brothers. They, however, were too busy watching the television set above their heads. Scarcely able to contain himself, Wiley--holding his belly in one hand to keep it from bumping people and chair backs--wound his way among the tables.

"You gotta see it, Charlie. They got an anchorite over there and they're building a cinderblock building around him right now."

"An anchor what?"

"New to me too, Charlie. An anchorite. He's a religious guy that puts himself into a little prison and gives advice to pilgrims and takes money to pray for their safety. He can't move from that spot. He's in kind of a prison. That's why he's called an anchorite."

"How long's he there?"

"Forever."

"I thought you were just *renting* those lots? And how in heck's he going to eat?"

"Oh, that's no problem," Wiley raised his belly with his hand. "They're going to leave a little hole in front about head high for him to talk to pilgrims through. And besides, they're leaving a soft-serve ice cream machine in there with him. He'll be able to sell it to the pilgrims and buy eats in turn." He pictured the exchange through the window. "I think I'll go see how they're progressing," he said and left.

"Soft-serve," Charlie considered.

"I thought you'd change your tune," Inez nodded, knowing his weakness for ice cream. "You've been after me to get one of those contraptions for years."

"Would be good on pie," Charlie admitted. "And it would be easier to make malts with one of those machines than with the hard ice cream."

"Get your mind off malts, Charlie," she intoned. "You got problems bigger than an anchorite and some snake oil merchants." She paused for his inquiring eyes to meet hers. "The little ladies are getting restless." She raised her chin to show she was above such jealousy.

"The little ladies?"

"They're organized now. *Colleen for Charlie* they call themselves. They have little blue pennant flags with the letters *CFC* on them. You'll see them. They're flying from the antenna of every fourth car you see pass here. And there's a lot of cars these days."

"What in tarnation put the bees into their bonnets?"

"You were on every major network yesterday," she barely controlled a smile. "And you did look awfully lonely and helpless up there. I guess a lot of women saw it too. Some of them may even have heard the network that said you were advertising for a wife."

"When I learn who placed that ad in the *Lonely Windmills*, I'm gonna--" The wringing of his fists completed the sentence.

Inez ignored his theatrics. "Western Union hasn't hand delivered a message in a quarter of a century," she said, "but the Denver office got so many the branch manager was curious. He brought them out here himself in a plastic trash bag."

"Where are they?"

"We trashed them after the boys had a good time reading them. But that's not your real problem."

"More?"

"Apparently some of your"--and she enjoyed the next word--"*brides* were in here. They got the idea you have been toying with them. Placed that ad just to flaunt your manhood. Throw your singleness into their faces, as it were. The way I gather it, and I couldn't catch all they were saying, but after they catch you they're all going to draw slips of paper out of a hat. The one who gets the piece of paper with the black dot on it gets to--" She paused for effect. "That's what I didn't hear. Just *gets to* something." This time she



couldn't control it. The smile was so broad and delicious that patrons turned to see it. People who had know Inez since childhood wondered who the grinning woman in the back of the store was.

Sorting his way among the surprised faces was a man Charlie didn't recognize. "You Waggles?" he asked.

"This," Inez explained, "is the man you wanted me to call about sucking out the prairie dogs."

"I got 'em," he thumbed over his shoulder. "About fifty of 'em. Big ones. Little ones. Some that aren't much of either. They're in the collection chamber." He stood a moment before asking "What you want me to do with them?"

"That quick?"

"Doesn't take a whole lot of time to stick a hose into a hole and suck 'em out. I'd ah got them sooner if all those crazies hadn't been out there. Had to get some of them to move their tents." He looked at Charlie again, expecting a response. "Well?" he asked. "What do you want me to do with them?"

Charlie reached for his hat to beat against the ham of his left hand and help him think, but he was out of luck. Befuddled, all he could come up with was "I haven't eaten yet."

"If you were going to eat them, why didn't you just shoot them?"

"Charlie," Inez tapped her foot and crossed her arms, "doesn't really go in for eating prairie dogs alive," she explained to the dog catcher, "but don't dangle a wiggling, baby New Zealand Giant rabbit in front of him, though."

"You people are never going to forget that, are you?" Charlie wished he had a hat to hide behind. "It wasn't what it looked like."

"Well it looked to me like you put its entire head into your mouth and would have bitten it off if the kindergarteners and first graders hadn't tried to tackle you."

The prairie dog man was unimpressed. "Where do you want the dogs?"

Charlie finally cajoled the man into taking the prairie dogs to Bode Road's new house and shoveling them into the back of his Jeep pickup. The man assured Charlie that they wouldn't be able to climb out and that he would throw a half bale of alfalfa in with them so they could keep out of the sun.

When he left, Charlie watched him go, but Inez watched Charlie. "Just how *did* you get up there?" she asked.

Charlie looked for his hat again. It, like the answer, was still missing. "Beats me," he shrugged.

Inez shook her head at his behavior for the millionth time. "I declare. If it's out there to step in, you'll find it, and apparently," she looked at his feet, "barefooted even." After surveying the unusually crowded room, she looked back to Charlie like an indulgent mother. "Sit over there," she pointed to the table near the bathroom. "You'll be less conspicuous. And I assume you want the usual for breakfast?" It wasn't a question. "And there's yet another matter."

Though it was still early morning, Charlie fell forward and let his forehead bounce on the table top. Like an irritated cat switching its tail, he rapped his knuckles on the table next to his head.

"It's not that bad this time," Inez eased his twitching. "It's that Associated Press reporter. Trust or something. He called to say he missed you at the hospital and that he's on his way out here. I'm supposed to delay you if I can."

"Six big fat burritos," he muttered into the table and accentuated the order with another rap of his knuckles. "A big custard pie--any kind." Another rap of

the knuckles. "A magnum of coffee. And a couple of tortillas to sop up anything that's left. *That's* how you can delay me."

Twenty minutes later he was mopping up the last of the oily-pink globules of grease on his plate when he realized that he felt no urge to go to the bathroom. And that was after half a carafe of coffee, too. It made him wonder just what they had done to him in the hospital after the knock-out shot.

Not knowing what to do and without transportation, he ambled out of the cafe--his back warm from the slaps of well-wishers--and onto the gravel street. The fellow in moccasins was still selling gongers from the old location, but now he was covered by a blue and white-striped awning and the variety of his wares had increased. Charlie gave him a two-finger salute as he passed and focused his attention on the Tidley brothers. They were about to disappear into the midway of booths in the company of a young man with a pompadour hair-do and wearing white shoes and a yellow sports jacket. Both looked as if they were stolen from a rock music museum. Charlie wouldn't have noticed them if they hadn't seemed so intent on avoiding him. In spite of his curiosity, he let it drop. After one 70-mile ride with the Tidleys he was no more interested in their ilk and their doings than he was in a second enema.

Nearly everyone at the carnival was a stranger to Charlie. He didn't recognize them, and they didn't recognize him. Without his hat, badge, and revolver, they didn't even recognize him as a lawman. And, without his work shoes he didn't even feel like a *man*. Compounding this feeling was the flip-flopping noise he made as he walked. It caused some eyebrows to rise and some of those eyebrows were on young men or on the faces of older and well scrubbed men. Seeing their leers, Charlie tried to make his swagger less interesting to them. In solid, steel-toed work shoes he could have stomped down the midway. But in thongs no matter how bold the steps, they still

suggested mincing. Feeling especially vulnerable, he tried to hide himself among the customers at one of the booths.

"How about you, mister?" the hawker called over the heads of those at the counter. "Would you like a glass?"

"Martini. Shaken. Not stirred."

The hawker laughed indulgently with the customers at the counter. "That would be nice, sir," he patronized, "but I am offering you a mind-enhancing beverage."

"What's it do?"

"Make you smarter," the hawker replied smugly and the customers at the counter lifted their glasses as a testament.

"Like coals to Newcastle," Charlie admitted, "but I'll give her a try."

The hawker gave Charlie a tiny *sampler-sized* paper cup drink. It looked a little like ground cashew nuts in a water base. Saluting the hawker with the cup, he lowered it to his lips and tossed it off like a shot of tequila. "What, no chaser?" he asked after running the back of his hand across his lips. His audience laughed politely.

"Would you like the prescription size?" asked the hawker.

"No, thank you," Charlie shook his head. "I think the sample turned the trick."

The hawker was curious. "Just what do you mean?"

"I mean I now know that this is crap--worthless as udders on a bull. I wasn't sure *before* I took a swig, but I am *now*." Charlie handed the paper cup back to the hawker. "You may have something here, fellow," he winked and headed into the maze of booths, canopies, and tents.

Glancing down one of the avenues, he saw the anchorite standing upright as if he had been buried that way. His hands were crossed at his chest and

his hair resembled the popular androgynous picture of Christ. His beard, however, was execrable and would never pass a health department inspection. The soft-serve would have to go. Oblivious to hygiene, however, the anchorite, his eyes closed, successfully maintained a beatific smile while the masons--a la "Cask of Amontillado"--walled him in.

Charlie was next attracted to a booth festooned with earphones. He pulled a pair from their hook on the pipe above and listened to what may have been waves crashing to shore or to some Manhattan spinster's white noise machine.

"So soothing," this hawker's tranquil eyes rested on Charlie.

"What kind of noise is this?"

"It is the celestial-learning, beta-wave-inducing vibrations of the cosmos."

"That's what I thought."

"And submerged deeply within the aural aspects are autonomic commands, commands that will exhort you to gather up the threads of your life, to weave a future as beautiful and transcendental as a morning, dew-daubed, golden spider's web."

"Ah," Charlie understood. "A subliminal tape." He looked at the earphones with renewed respect. "Say," he inquired of the hawker, "I've been meaning to ask someone like you about some tapes I bought. They were to make me more *confident, assertive*. I listened to them for hours, but I couldn't hear anything but music. I even tried to play them backwards."

The hawker, his eyes closed in understanding, held up a knowing palm. "The message is ultra-sonic."

"I don't follow."

"It's pitched above the human ear. You can't hear it consciously, but the unconscious mind can grasp it."

"High pitch, you say?"

"Exactly."

"Well," Charlie sighed. "I guess that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Why all the dogs and bats in my neighborhood have been so darned cocky of late."

The hawker was not amused.

Tiring of the game, Charlie wandered through the maze of psychic booths, looking this time at the customers and not at the merchants. What struck him was a sameness in the faces of the fair goers. It was a sameness that was hauntingly familiar. It puzzled him until an exploding balloon startled him and he remembered. They all reminded him of a blue merle collie he owned as a boy. It was a handsome dog, gray with black spots. Its one blue eye and one pigment-free eye made it the envy of his playmates. He called it *Sully*, but his grandfather--Old Sheriff Waggles--noted that it couldn't keep its mind on anything and couldn't be trained. Any time he saw it around the house, he just called it *Silly*.

One thing *Sully* never learned was that when a rattlesnake bit him in the head it would swell up, his eyes would nearly pop out, and chunks of his decaying flesh would drop off. And it would happen *every* time. *Skunks* was a similar lesson never learned.

Charlie was thinking of rattlesnakes and skunks when a familiar voice halted him.

"Where are your shoes, Sheriff?" It was the cute, insinuating voice of one so important he couldn't be troubled to digest his own saliva. Even before Charlie turned he knew he would see a syringe in the guise of a ring hanging from the speaker's left earlobe. "Of course those flip-flops do look more

appropriate on you than those old work shoes." He spat, the phlegm skipping under a clump of grass near Charlie's naked big toe.

"My shoes?" he thought, looking at his toes. "Why I left them with a group of ignorant cobblers. Some fellas who have cobbled themselves into some real trouble. I'm not overly worried, though. It's just a matter of time before they get too bold and break their last."

The smirking fellow with the syringe acted as if he understood Charlie and spoke too loudly to his buddies behind him. "I don't think this fellow," he pointed a pink index finger at Charlie, "has the lean and hungry look necessary to police this part of the world."

"I'm a patient man," Charlie sputtered for words, wishing he had his hat. "I can wait."

"I understand that's what you do best," the syringe wiggled and the fellow gave a smile as thin as a needle to his buddies. "Wait. Wait in bars. Wait in restaurants. Wait in your pickup, *asleep*."

"Where's your star and your gun, Sheriff?" This voice came from one of the boys in back, a ditto of the leader as were all. In surveying their similar backward caps, their baggy but cut-off pants, their nightgown length T-shirts, and their identical athletic shoes, Charlie wondered how Drinker could make a nickel with his uniforms.

"I told you I'm a patient man." Charlie ran his hand over the portion of his vest that had held the star. "They'll turn up."

"You may be patient," the leader spoke knowingly and directly to Charlie, "but maybe the other people out here aren't as patient. Maybe if more cows are taken by the flying saucers or if other mysterious things happen they'll become even less patient. Maybe want you out. Gone. History."

"It's not nice to burn people's things. You could get into trouble, you know," the snotty voice in back spoke again but was silenced by a look from the syringe.

"My friend may be right," the leader turned back to Charlie. "And you of all people surely know that there is more than one way to handle a barn burner. Sudden and in the night is not always the best way. Maybe a slow sizzle. Maybe a spit over not too hot of coals. Slow." With his threat delivered, the bearer of the syringe motioned like a bored emperor and the band of boys dissolved into the crowd.

Just as the last one moved into the blur, Charlie yelled after him. "I have some new uniforms in mind for you boys. I think you'll like them. They're state issue." Maybe the boy heard him. Maybe he didn't. Once they had affected that oh-so-weary-with-life look it was hard for them to change expressions.

Wishing them to the Devil, Charlie made a mental note of how he was going to handle them and turned his interest back to the booths. The food booths interested him until he discovered that all the delicacies--even the most appetizing in appearance--were nothing more than disguised tofu and bean sprouts. Discouraged, he started back to the cafe but stopped when he saw two cars brake in the middle of Main Street. Flapping from the top of each antenna was a blue pennant bearing the letters *CFC* of the Colleens for Charlie. The passenger door on the lead car opened and a broad shouldered, heavy bosomed matron stepped out and inspected the crowd like a Secret Service agent. Tied around her left biceps was a blue bandanna. At a nod from her all the doors opened, eight in all, and seven more broad-shouldered matrons emerged. Instead of arm bands, these wore folded blue bandannas around their foreheads. Blue bandannas. Blue-gray hair.



Like a shadow fleeing a spotlight, Charlie shrank between two booths and then leaned forward just enough for his right eye to see the road. What he saw caused him to jerk back. These were big women, probably descendants of the Germans who migrated to Russia under Catherine the Great and then to America when the trouble there arose. They were more than women. They were field hands. He could tell by their shoulders and massive arms that they had cultivated sugar beets from the time they were old enough to wield a short-handled hoe. They had tossed full bales of alfalfa around until they could do it with the ease of a Roman senator plopping grapes into his mouth. These were the kind of women who didn't train horses. These were the kind of women who beat them into submission.

When the women, two abreast, left the street and marched into the psychic fair with jackboot precision, their stolid heads scanning the crowd like eight radar dishes, Charlie knew his next move. Run.

In flip-flops it was difficult, but he ran. They hadn't seen him, but these were women who would persevere. He zigzagged through the aisles, never taking the same path but always working away from the street where their cars were parked. When he ran out of booths and aisles, he nearly panicked, especially when he looked down the midway and saw the eight Gestapos as they goose-stepped straight toward him, their forearms alternately crossing their bodies at breast height, their steel-gray eyes piercing each patron at the booths.

Springing like the jackrabbit he had startled two nights before, he dashed for the road bordering the far side of Bode's property and ran smack into a moving car. It hadn't been moving fast and Charlie hadn't gotten up momentum so the only damage was the surprise. He tried the passenger door handle, but it was locked. As he stooped to look through the closed

window, he recognized the car. It was the white Lincoln Towncar driven by the severe lady who had organized the psychic fair.

"For the love of justice," Charlie pleaded to the shadowy driver behind the tinted windows. "Open the door."

The shadow, which had been in profile, turned slowly to look at the side window. Then a languid hand, single finger extended, pressed a button and the window slid down two inches. Charlie put his eyes to the crack. "Please." The eyes he saw held no compassion. They were as noncommittal as diamonds in a showcase. She didn't answer. Her only motion was to extend the finger again, and the window slid up, nearly trapping Charlie's clutching fingers.

With his hands still pressed to the window, he glanced over his shoulder and saw the Brown Shirts, or rather the Blue Bandannas. They had spotted him and were jack-booting toward him at a quick march. He was trapped between an uncertain death and a locked door.

Then the sound. It was a clunk, a metallic certainty, a cold retracting of metal from metal. That single finger, attached to that languid, turquoise bejeweled hand, had pressed another button and the door unlocked.

Charlie was inside in an instant. Before he could say thanks, the Lincoln accelerated and buried his sweaty back into the plush coolness of leather.

"I'm heading to Sterling," the driver said casually.

"I can't be choosy," he looked over his shoulder at the pursuing women. They had broken rank and were running back to their cars. Even so, at the rate the Lincoln was moving, they were already being left in the dust. As the car sped past the consolidated school, Charlie suggested "You might take 89. It's the quickest route to Colorado 14."

"No," she asserted. "We'll take the pavement. There's no real hurry." The look she gave him wasn't intended for inspection. It was for control.

Charlie wilted further into the seat and his voice, when it came, was withered and desiccated. "This is one of those times I envy Meshach, Shadrach, and Abed-nego."

Her smirk softened the sharp severity of her profile. "I'm not all that much of a ball-biter, Sheriff." She looked at him and her faint smile was almost one of relief. "Sometimes, when the occasion arises, I can actually nibble."

"I've seen your taste in men." He pointed to his flip-flops and then wished he hadn't. "You know, the one in moccasins."

"That's not a man, Sheriff." She looked longer at him than the speed of the car made safe. "A man," and she gripped the wheel tighter, "is someone you can't see through. He's someone who plants his feet and challenges the wind."

"Someone who knows the difference between a hat and a cap," he suggested.

She looked at him too long again. When she got his meaning, she bit off the word "Exactly" and twisted her hands on the wheel. "A man to match my mountains, if you will."

She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Her small breasts subsided and the richness of her simple dress settled and sucked to her solid, thin body. It was a body honed on small portions. Its leanness spoke of lean, choice cuts of rare meat surrounded by sculpted, exotic vegetables and splashes of carrot-colored sauces.

She reminded Charlie of a letter Ben Franklin wrote to his son. Women, the randy old man advised the boy, age from the top down. Charlie could see that there was a lot of youth left in this woman.

Her hands were more relaxed on the wheel now, oddly more confident. "You're sought after," she almost batted her eyes. "I like that in a man. It's the difference, if you will, between a vinyl bench seat and a deep, calfskin leather recliner. I," she emphasized, "love leather."

"If by sought after you mean those eight Storm Troopers--"

She didn't even need a word to cut him off. She simply raised a single finger from the wheel. "According to the television news I saw just before leaving Fort Collins, approximately 2,000 rural widows are at this moment en route to Sligo to offer themselves to you. In fact, the announcer said there wasn't a gray head of hair left between the Republican River on the Kansas border and the Red River of the north. The weatherman, when it was his turn, even pointed to a satellite view of the midwest. He said what looked to be a cold front wasn't. It was all those gray heads moving west."

"I may not be Meshach, Shadrach, or Abed-nego," Charlie began to relax, "but if I'm not mistaken I'm feelin' some heat."

She removed her right hand from the wheel, extended that one finger and licked it. Then, while watching Charlie, she lowered the licked finger to her thigh. "Sssssssssss," she burned.

Charlie found new interest in jumping from the frying pan into the fire. "There's a small motel in Briggsdale," he suggested.

She wagged that finger at him without looking. "Patience, Sheriff. Patience. We have plenty of time. Besides, I've seen that motel. We can do better. Much better." The slow movement of her head toward him revealed a very friendly face. But it was still in charge.

"Why do I get the feeling you don't believe in anything you're selling back there?"

"I don't sell. I facilitate."

"So you put the fleecers and fools together and take a cut. Is that it?"  
She nodded to Charlie's question. "You're a regular P.T. Barnum."

"No," she disagreed. "I have it better than ol' P.T."

"And how?"

"I," she seemed relieved, "don't have to fool with elephants."

It was a good answer. "Some trick," he admitted. "A circus in a briefcase." The thought intrigued him as they raced down the blacktop toward Briggsdale and Colorado 14. He was so intrigued he almost forgot to check behind him. Almost. When he looked, he could see the two cars loaded with women, but they weren't gaining. They were at least a mile and a half behind.

The lady ignored Charlie's fear of the following cars. "Actually, I don't even need a briefcase. It's for show. Usually I just have to tell my secretary where and when the show is to be held, and she spreads the word. The sellers are only too happy to go where I go."

"And just how do you pick your spots? How do you know where to set up?"

"Lights in the sky," she said simply. "A mutilation or two doesn't hurt," she added.

"So you follow what that fellow of yours called the *Psychic Center of the Universe*?"

She laughed at his innocence. "You don't really believe that garbage do you? That's New Age verbiage. Money doesn't follow the Psychic Center. The Psychic Center follows the *Cash Registers*." She was becoming much more friendly than Charlie could have imagined. And, she was confirming what he had always known.

"My kind of woman," he said.

She didn't respond immediately. Instead, she concentrated on the intersection with Colorado I4 that was about a mile ahead. When she did look at him, all she said was "Probably." She said it without emotion and let it drop before adding, "But at my time. And at my place."

"Why are you so friendly with me?" he put his arm across the leather seat and thought of touching her shoulder but instantly knew better.

"You're making me a very rich woman."

"How'd I do that?"

"By getting yourself on top of that butte with all the world watching." She checked the rearview mirror as she spoke and began to slow for the intersection.

"You didn't put me up there did you?" There was a pause. "By any chance?" he tried again.

"Sheriff," she admitted finally. "If I could have, I would have. But I didn't."

The car had stopped at the intersection and Charlie automatically glanced to his right to watch for oncoming traffic. Instead of traffic, he spotted a car he recognized. "There's Gavin's car," he almost yelled. "That reporter fellow. I'll get out here and catch a ride with him. You go on to Sterling. I'll see you later."

He was out of the car before he finished speaking. The pursuing cars were still a mile away and did not see him scoot out and hide among the volunteer Chinese elm in the ditch. The last thing he thought he saw from the lady as she sped out onto the highway and roared toward Sterling was a cold, surgically correct kiss. He was sure she had pursed her lips and then opened them, propelling an Arctic blast in his direction. But he wasn't totally sure. The windows on those rich cars were so dark.

The two carloads of *Colleen for Charlie* didn't stop at the intersection. They careened around the corner, one of them going into the ditch on the other side before righting itself and returning to the highway.

Charlie watched them disappear into the east, still chasing the white Lincoln Towncar. Feeling relieved, he walked across the gravel parking lot to Gavin Trust's car and leaned on it. When Gavin came out of the little store, holding an orange pop, he froze.

"How's it goin', Corn Plant?" Charlie called. He was feeling better than he knew he had a right to.

Gavin pointed the bottle of orange pop and a finger at him. "No more silos," he protested, almost backing into the store. "No more silos."

###

"You've got to play fair with me," Gavin advanced down the porch of the tiny tavern. "I've been honest with you and all you've done is throw me down a silo." His hair, tossed to one side by the breeze, was nearly the color of his soft drink.

"I was just testin' your mettle, Corn Plant. Just testin' your mettle." Charlie used his hips to thrust himself free of the fender on Gavin's car.

"I damn near got fired. And my head," he slid the orange drink across his forehead, "I couldn't even put it on a pillow. You put liquor in that drink that was supposed to make me see better in the daytime, didn't you?"

"Four Roses," Charlie confirmed his suspicion. "What you were tastin' was the very essence of the earth, breath-giving sustenance drawn up through the roots of barley and other precious grains. Drawn from the darkness to the light. You are correct in your surmise. I offered you life itself."

"Don't try to snow me, Charlie," he pointed the bottle of orange pop. "If I don't phone in a decent story on you today, they're going to send me to Missoula, Montana. I'll never get to New York. Never become a bureau chief."



"Now hang on, Corn Plant." Charlie held both his palms up as a promise. "You give me a lift today and you'll have a story no one in the country will have."

"What's that?"

"I found out some things up there on the butte that no one else knows. Things that will make one racket of a story," he promised.

Gavin, wanting to believe but still suspicious, held the nearly empty bottle halfway to his mouth.

"First off," Charlie walked over to Gavin and slapped him lightly on the back, "let's go to Bode Road's new place and pick up my dog and my Jeep. Got to tend to some prairie dogs while I'm there, too, but that's another matter." When Gavin balked Charlie held up two fingers. "Scout's honor. It's Pulitzer Prize stuff."

"No more silos?" Gavin asked, the keys to his car jingling hopefully in his left hand. "You promise?"

"On my mother's upside down coffin."

Gavin drained the bottle. "Well, okay," he started, but a state highway pickup pulled off Colorado I4 and up to Charlie.

"Hey, didn't expect to see you, Fly Boy," the man behind the wheel laughed good naturedly at Charlie. His sun-abused face pealed like the rusting paint on the Keota water tower. "Didn't get any of that really strange stuff while you were in the saucer, did you?"

"No," Charlie deadpanned, "your wife wasn't aboard."

"Well in the Enquirer it says them aliens are all hot to mate with us virile earth men."

"Didn't happen this time," Charlie said, "but I'm game for a little strange. That all you pulled off here for, to harass me?"

"No," flecks flew as his forehead crinkled, "we're missing a 'dozer. Can't say how long. It just wasn't there when we went to use it."

"Where was it?"

"Up by New Raymer. It was off the side of the road for a month or more. You know, where we've torn up the old asphalt and laid in new."

Charlie knew the place but shook his naked head and wished for a hat. "No," he tried to remember. "I haven't seen any signs of a 'dozer. And I think if I'd seen track marks on the back roads, I'd a made note of it."

"Didn't have tracks. Runs on wheels," the man explained. "It's not really a 'dozer. Calling it a front-end loader would be more accurate. It's one of the big ones. A Caterpillar. Got the number 950 on its side."

"That the one with the engine in back of the cab? A really heavy machine on four big tires?"

"You got it. Wheels are easier to maintain than tracks and this end loader'll do about anything a small Cat can."

"Haven't seen it," Charlie said, "but I'll keep an eye out for it." He held one finger up to what would have been the brim of his hat and saluted the state man as he ground his pickup prematurely into second gear and lugged off.

After loading into Gavin's tiny car, Charlie directed him to head east on Colorado 14 until they could head north on Weld 89 and then catch 110 heading east.

"As long as we're headed this way," he yelled over the noise of the wind rushing past the open windows, "we might as well stop by my trailer. I can pick up my other pair of shoes. Don't think I've got another hat. When we get to Bode's, we can hop into my truck." He looked at the tiny car and could tell

just by sitting that the seats were made for narrow, foreign fannies. "A man's vehicle," he added not so much as an afterthought as an assertion.

Gavin looked at his own eyebrows and let the steam escape from the corner of his mouth opposite Charlie. "What are these things you learned while on the butte?"

Charlie wasn't listening. He was fishing through the tiny glovebox--without luck--for a stray candy bar.

"You promised," Gavin reminded.

"Well," Charlie reluctantly halted his quest, "you know about the marks made in the sand where ol' Banner and the young bull were found--"

"Just Banner's," Gavin glanced at Charlie. "No one told me anything about the bull. I couldn't even get in to see it. The only thing I got was from the rancher, and he didn't say much. All the time I was trying to talk to him, his wife and kids talked their heads off. All I could understand from them was that it had tentacles and eyes. They said it was alive."

"It did look kind of alive," Charlie remembered. "But back to the bull. Between Banner's legs there were just three lines. Like someone took a stick and scored three marks in the sand. But, between the bull's legs was a picture. Looked like a stovepipe hat. You know, like Lincoln wore."

"And John Kennedy," Gavin added, reaching for his spiral notepad on the narrow dash in front of him. "Draw me a picture." He flipped to a blank page and handed the pad to Charlie. "A pencil's in the spiral."

Charlie placed the pad on his knee and tried to find room for his elbows. "Something like this." With the clumsiness of a first grader, he pinched the pencil between his big fingers. "Just lines."

Gavin wasn't really watching the drawing. His eyes were on the road. "Is this the road coming up?" He saw a road sign in the distance.

Charlie glanced out his side window and said "Yea. Then take your first left and your first right and we'll be at the trailer." The directions given, he resumed drawing, taking an unexpected pride in his sketch.

Still watching the road, Gavin asked "What was on the butte that was different? Another sign?"

"First off, there was Banner's shoes. Those silly penny loafers he wears. They ain't even worth the two cents tucked into them. His red socks--the one's he was wearing the night the angels got him--were pulled over my toes. Gaudy," he remembered, and shuddered.

"Where are they now? They might make a good picture for a Sunday feature, a roundup of this story."

"I left them there, and if you want a good picture you might keep your cameraman on Banner. He's liable to climb up and try to get 'em."

"I thought it couldn't be climbed."

"It can't. But have you ever seen a spider tryin' to get out of a bathtub? They can't get out either, but have you ever seen one quit trying? That'll be Banner."

Gavin knew Charlie shunned bathtubs himself but chose not to mention the fact. "This is interesting," he admitted. "But you said something about signs. The shoe bit is good--no one has that--but you led me to believe there was more."

"There was." Charlie stuffed the pencil back into the wire spiral. "There's no sand up on the butte. It's pretty much all cap rock. You know, limestone on top keeping the sandstone below from washing away," he explained. "So, there was no sand to leave a mark in. Instead, the marks were scratched into the limestone, with a nail or something."

"What were they?"

"Same as the ones in the sand. Three marks. A stovepipe hat." Charlie pictured the marks in his mind. "Then there was the paper the shoes were sitting on. It and the shoes were between my legs. I didn't make the connection at first, but why put the shoes on a paper between my legs? Why not put them to my side or above my head?"

"They were a message," Gavin nearly shouted. He was warming to the news. This information would scoop all the reporters--national and international--who were at that moment winging to Colorado. His byline would appear in every Associated Press newspaper in America and the world. And that was thousands.

"You got it, Corn Plant." Charlie couldn't forget the nickname he had given Gavin. He had only to look at his carrot top and narrow shoulders to remember. "At first I thought it was just a form of torture."

"How torture?"

"You ever read the North Weld Herald?"

"I've just glanced at it," Gavin admitted. "It's country journalism. Almost every reporter has a soft spot for such papers. It's one of the decisions you have to make when you get out of college. Do you want to go big time and know almost no one but other reporters, or do you want to go small daily or weekly and know all kinds of people."

"Well you read the Herald," Charlie conceded, "and you'll know all kinds of people. Particularly the Abroghast sisters."

"You didn't have to read it."

"Oh, no?" Charlie begged to differ. "You ever been stuck atop a butte for five hours with nothing to do?" Gavin mouthed the word "no" but kept his eyes on the road. "Well if you had," Charlie continued, "you'd read anything to pass the time. Even the Abroghast sisters' local gossip column. Who, I ask you,

cares what the Goodknights had for Sunday dinner," he roared above the wind past the windows. "Who cares that the Roads went up to Pine Bluffs to visit her relatives? Who cares if only nine members of the Coleman slash Prairie View communities showed up for their quarterly get together. Good Lord, there's nothing left of those communities but a few crumbling foundations anyway."

Gavin smirked. He knew that such "community report" columns were the staple of small weeklies and actually sold the papers, most of them being sent out of state to former residents.

"And that ain't the half of it," Charlie continued his tirade. The way he kept smoothing his hand over his hair told Gavin that he was upset. "Get this," he remembered, "one of the ladies' clubs opened its meeting with a simultaneous recitation--now get that I said simultaneous--of the Pledge of Allegiance and a poem called Collect for Women. I got to look that one up," he mumbled more to himself than to Gavin. "And that still ain't even half of the half of it. During the meeting they recited the poems A Package of Seeds and In the Garden. I gotta attend one of their meetings just to see. It's gotta be a wonder."

"They always do things like that out in the country. You ought to know that."

"I do know that," Charlie admitted again. "But usually I don't have to read about it. And here's the topper," he ranted on. "They closed this meeting by reciting another poem, and you ain't going to believe the title of this one."

"I'm ready." Gavin enjoyed seeing Charlie fit to be tied.

"We're Queer Folks Here." He said the title and paused. "We're Queer Folks Here," he said it again. "Good Lord, who doesn't know that already? They don't have to advertise the fact."

The trailer was in sight just beyond the graveyard, but Charlie didn't notice.

"And you know what another of those non-existent community clubs did? They gave Ol' Peg-Leg Bowie a lifetime membership in the Sligo Senior Citizens Club."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Gavin asked innocently.

"What's wrong with that? Hell, Peg-Leg's a hundred and one years old. How much good do you think he's going to get out of a lifetime membership. Was that a joke?' he asked Gavin. "Was it?" When Gavin didn't answer, Charlie looked out his window and saw the trailer. "Lord," he cooed as Gavin pulled into the circular drive, "people out here shouldn't have to recite poems saying 'We're Queer Folk Here.' They ought to be made to wear badges." He was out the car door and flip-flopping to the trailer when he remembered something. "At least there was one good thing."

"What's that?"

"I didn't have my reading glasses with me up on the butte so I had to read it at arm's length. That way I didn't have to both read it and smell it."

When he came back in a pair of even older work shoes, but walking proud, he knelt to look at the gravel in front of his trailer. "Been a lot of traffic through here."

"Probably reporters," Gavin explained.

Charlie looked at the marks again. "I hope so," he inspected the distant rises but didn't explain.

From the trailer to Bode's was a quick trip. And when they were a half mile away, Charlie could see that his pickup had been removed from the field in back and parked in front of the house. They were making the switch to

Charlie's truck when Mrs. Road slipped out the front door and leaned back against the frame.

"Want your dog?"

"He still here?"

Mrs. Road cracked the door behind her and Dog stumbled out, bumped his chin on both of the steps, and dirtied his nose on the ground. He nearly climbed up Charlie's leg like a cat when he reached the familiar Dickie trousers.

"Hold on," Charlie cautioned, lifting Dog to his chest. "Hold on. It hasn't been that long. You'd think I'd been to another planet or something."

Gavin watched the reunion and wondered about the comment "another planet."

"The superintendent," Mrs. Road started but put her finger to the top of her dress just between her breasts when she saw the reunion of Charlie and Dog wasn't about to end soon. "The superintendent came and picked up the sound and light stuff," she said when Charlie had time to look up. "And Lauren brought your hat by. It's on the seat of your truck."

Charlie jerked his door open, and there it was. Simultaneously tossing Dog onto the seat and picking up his hat, he placed it on his head--squarely--and turned to look at Mrs. Road. "Thanks," he said, saluting her properly with a finger to his hat brim, "for looking after everything."

But she wasn't finished. "That bottle you left. It's still here." She took a slow breath. "You can come and pick it up," and she looked from Charlie to Gavin, "some other time."

Gavin knew the heat wasn't meant for him, but his face flushed to match his hair. The last time he had seen anything like this, it was in black and white, the man and woman were in a room with twin beds, and the man had to



keep one foot on the floor. He couldn't remember the movie title exactly. It was either God's Little Acre or Long, Hot Summer. Both proscribed by his parents and his church.

"Where we going?" he asked as soon as Charlie pulled out, leaving Mrs. Road leaning against the door frame, watching.

"Don't know," he admitted. "But under the circumstances I think we'd better keep moving. Lot of loose ends out here."

"Loose ends for you?" questioned Gavin. "What do you think about me? I've got some marks on a paper and nothing else. How can I make a story out of that?"

"Ah, but there were other marks." Charlie was heading south on I03. He didn't care where he was going, so long as he was moving. "There were numbers on the Herald, too."

"What kind of numbers?"

"Number, numbers," Charlie tried to remember. "They were in association with the page numbers in the paper. I tried to make sense of them but I couldn't."

Gavin took out his spiral notebook and flipped to the page on which Charlie had made his sketches. "What were the numbers?" He waited with the pencil.

"They were odd. For instance, the pager number on page two was circled, but an arrow came out of the circle to a hand written numeral three."

"A numeral and not spelled out?"

"Exactly. Then on page four that page number was circled and the arrow out of that pointed to the written numerals two and three."

"You remember all this?"

Charlie glanced indulgently at Gavin. "I was up there for five hours. Not only do I remember those, I also remember that on page five the page number was circled and the arrow led to a written numeral one."

"Did the other pages have numbers?"

"No, just two, four, and five."

Gavin wrote 2, 4, and 5. Then above each of those numbers he wrote the number the arrow had been drawn to. "Is this what it was?" He showed Charlie his figures.

3    2 and 4    1

2        4        5

"Something like that," Charlie agreed, but he didn't look at it too closely.

"Maybe," Gavin wet the pencil lead with his tongue, "the written numbers are the order the other numbers are to appear in because the written numbers go from one to four. The circled numbers aren't in sequence."

"Maybe," it sounded reasonable. "What are the numbers if you rearrange them.?"

Gavin read what he had already written. "Five, four, two, four. Put that together with the three strokes and the top hat and what have you got?"

The Jeep slowed and stopped. Charlie kept his hands on the wheel and continued staring out the windshield even while Dog stood up and put his paws across his forearm. "I've said it before, and I'll say it again. Someone's yankin' my chain and it's just a matter of time before I crawl up that chain and bite them on the arse."

"What does yankin' a chain mean?" Gavin asked.

"Means someone's tryin' to rile me, get my goat, put pepper in my snuff. Either that or time's runnin' backwards."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'll tell you plain, then," Charlie turned to Gavin and at the same time placed a hand on Dog's head. "Everything that's happened has been planned in sequence. The strokes between Banner's legs, the picture between the bull's legs, even the blood dumped on my truck, and now these numbers in the Herald."

"Charlie, I'm lost." Gavin had his pencil to his notebook but didn't know what to write.

"Well, I'll make it even plainer for you. I was lost, too, until you said top hat. I'd been calling it a stovepipe hat. 'Bout the same thing but not the right words." He pulled Dog into his lap and let him look out the driver's window while he gave him a good scratching. "Maybe you don't know it, but there's a bunch of crazies that go around climbing to the top of the highest point in each state. Some of them call themselves Toppers. I wouldn't know about it except that I get asked by total strangers where they can find the highest point in Nebraska."

"Why would they come to Colorado to ask for the highest point in Nebraska?"

"'Cause, Corn Plant, you can stand on the Colorado line and hit it with a rock. Shucks, if you have a ball you can dang near roll it down hill and hit the highest point in Nebraska. It's Promontory Point. Right over there." He pointed over his shoulder, to the north.

"But what does the highest point in Nebraska have to do with anything?" Gavin was exasperated.

"Again, Corn Plant, it's crystal clear. Those three strokes between Banner's legs weren't strokes. They was ones. One hundred and eleven. That's Weld County road III. That road leads straight north to the highest point in Nebraska. Without walking across fields, that's the only way you can get

there. And five, four, two, four just happens to be the altitude in feet of the highest point in Nebraska. And if those two hints weren't enough, the top hat puts the capper on it."

"I understand it all," Gavin presented both exasperated hands to the windshield in front of him. "But what does it mean."

"It means, Corn Plant, that someone wants us to go there. And I say time's a wastin'."

###

14  
...  
Star

The high point in Nebraska was a good twenty miles to the north and there was no direct route. Charlie had to turn around in the middle of the road and roar back toward Bode's house. When they passed, Mrs. Road was still leaning against the door frame watching them. Only Gavin saw her. At least if Charlie saw her, he gave no indication.

He was intent on the road. At 112 he turned right and produced a rooster tail of dust until he slowed for a left onto 107. For six miles they sailed straight north, passing four windmills and a microwave tower before turning right onto 124. The only structure on this road was the old Zion Lutheran Church. It was little more than a white clapboard box and squat bell tower in the middle of a still green wheat field, but to Charlie it looked like a puff of whipped cream on an ocean of green Jello. He would have continued past if the Jeep Cherokee of his recent acquaintance hadn't slid from the far side of the church and threatened to collide with them.

Slowing, Charlie noted that if the four boys weren't the same four he had encountered earlier, they were nearly identical. The two in front waved their arms out the windows for him to stop and he obliged by pulling along side, facing the opposite direction. The one in the passenger seat, this time right next to Charlie instead of on the opposite side as before, was the exact same character down to the syringe for an earring. The syringe was in his left ear. His right ear sported a dangling crucifix. One thing Charlie hadn't noticed before was the sticker in the lower right hand window. It was a parking sticker for Colorado State University in Fort Collins.

"You boys out scouting for a new club house, are you?" His tone was gentle, non-threatening, casual, concerned--and as a result, ironic.

Taken aback, the fellow in the passenger seat rocked his earrings in consternation before explaining why they had hailed him. "We saw something weird, man. It was back that way." The voice and the finger pointing east didn't belong to the young man Charlie had talked to before. For some reason he was trying to sound ignorant and innocent. He was imitating a Mexican, or at least a migrant worker. "It was like out of this world, man."

"How," Charlie played the game, "was it otherworldly?"

"There's this big bare patch out in the middle of the field," the driver took over, sounding as if he had taken a big toke of something and was trying not to exhale. "It's like a big circle and nothing's growing in it. I mean like no grass or nothing."

"Happens," Charlie said.

"But there's something else, man." Feeling more comfortable now, the passenger with the syringe really affected his speech. "In the very center of this thing, you know, are four cube things. Just sitting there. They were in a square like this." He drew one with his finger. "You know, like they were in the four corners of a box?"

Gavin, his notebook out, leaned over Dog and near Charlie so he could see the young men. "What color were these cubes?" he called.

The two in the front seat conferred before answering. "One was white, man," said the driver. "And one was kind of brown, you know. Like a turd," he said, and grunted at the cleverness of his simile.

"The others were greenish and yellowish," the passenger offered without further description.

Charlie considered their description. "And you say nothing was growing all around these blocks?"

"Nothing," the driver said. "And the ground was all tore up, man." "What size were the blocks?" Gavin leaned over, "and what were they made out of?"

"About this big." The driver held up his hands to show a distance of eight to ten inches. "I don't know what they were made of, man. It was too spooky. I wasn't going to touch them. But they looked like chalk."

"I think they held people's souls." The passenger in front had lost his accent and his voice had an edge of threat.

Charlie ignored the suggestion. "Nothing else, then?" he asked, putting his truck into gear.

"I'll say there was, man," the driver leaned over farther. "There was a dead cow. I mean really dead. It was in an underground cellar and was all dead and swelled up. It was a sight, man."

"Then that should have been right up your alley," Charlie deadpanned, "seeing as how at least one of you's in vet school up at CSU."

This caused the four in the Cherokee to freeze before looking at each other. Gavin, still leaning near Charlie, smiled, realizing that the boys had just learned that the Sheriff was at least a little sharper than the country bumpkin they had taken him for.

"I'm surprised," Charlie continued nonchalantly, "that you didn't jump down in there with the cow and do a little autopsy. At least practice, say, a caesarean cut, a C-section."

"Maybe I might have," the driver added, his accent also disappearing. "But there was a tree limb across the cellar steps so the cow couldn't get out. It was weird. We're getting out of here. I don't want no flying saucer to cut off

my--" He looked at Charlie, wondering if he dare name them. After a pause, he said "--you know whats."

"I'm with you on that one, fellas," Charlie put his finger to his eyebrow as a half salute. He knew who had won this encounter. "Sounds like you're describing something out on I20. You guys came in off the Kimball highway, did you?" The driver, fast losing interest in the conversation, nodded that he thought he had. "Well, don't worry about it. I'll drive on over there and take a look see."

Charlie pressed the accelerator and drove east for a half mile before taking a left onto Ill. "Soon as we hit the state line we'll be almost at the high point," he told Gavin.

"But what about the guys in the car?" Gavin asked. "What about the dead cow and the circle and those strange cubes? Aren't you going to check it out?"

Charlie took pleasure in his answer. "Nah," he said.

Gavin was beside himself. "This is a story. This may be the *key* to what is going on out here. You can't just let it go."

"It's the key, all right," Charlie half laughed. "And I've already placed it in the proper lock. All I'm waiting for now is the proper time to turn it."

"You know where these flying saucers are coming from?"

"Same place they've always been coming from. Your mind."

Gavin choked for air until his topknot flopped. "Are you saying I've dreamed all this up? The bull, the blood, you getting kidnapped? And the craft? Hundreds have seen it."

"Oh, all of that's real enough. You forget that I was the one taken?"

"And you're not the least little bit afraid of it, or them?"



"I'm always afraid of ignorance. It can kill, particularly when someone's around to take advantage of that ignorance. But give me a shotgun and I suspect I can take care of any flying saucers."

"A shotgun?"

"I'm not all that good with a sidearm," he admitted and patted the spot where his missing revolver usually made sitting uncomfortable. "But give me a scatter gun and I'll hold my own."

Gavin almost threw his notebook to the floor.

"Give me a couple of hours, Corn Plant," Charlie tried to sound reassuring, "and we'll go a long way toward solving this little puzzle completely. And if those numbers you have written down in that little pad of yours mean what I think they mean, you'll have yourself something to write about besides surmise

Bulldogged, Gavin slumped back into his seat and silently vowed to check out the bare spot and the four cubes himself. Charlie's other chatter was nothing that would make a story

Two miles further on the pickup began to slow. "You've changed your mind?" Gavin brightened.

"No." Charlie was looking at the barrow ditch and the prairie. "If I remember right, this is Slim Bigsby's place." Even with the pickup stopped, Charlie continued to inspect the prairie. He clicked his front teeth with his thumb nail. "Now that I think about it, I'm sure."

"Sure about what?" Gavin tried to ask Charlie, but he was already out of the truck lowering the rear gate of his pickup.

"I'm pretty sure he said he wanted some prairie dogs. Said he felt lonely without 'em." Dog had flopped out of the cab behind Charlie and followed him to the rear of the truck. "Here, you go," Charlie interrupted his thought and

lifted him into the truck bed and placed him on the alfalfa. "Yep," Charlie was sure, "I distinctly remember ol' Slim Bigsby wishing he had some prairie dogs."

"But," Gavin protested, "ranchers hate prairie dogs."

Charlie gave Gavin a disgusted look. "Will you let a man have some fun? How's a man supposed to entertain himself if you keep yappin' in?" With that, he climbed into the bed and began pushing the alfalfa to the back of the truck.

Dog was interested in the new activity, but went absolutely manic when he learned that there were live creatures beneath the alfalfa. He tried to bark at them but usually ended up growling at Charlie's work shoes as they scooted the alfalfa and the hidden prairie dogs off the end of the tailgate and onto the road.

"Shoo 'em on into the barrow ditch, will you, Corn Plant?"

When they were back on the road heading to Nebraska, Charlie leaned toward Gavin. "I like to do good whenever I can," he winked. "Let's just consider it an early Christmas present for 'ol Slim Bigsby. But let's not brag about it. It'd be unseemly." As an after thought, and to seal his certainty, he added "a kindness as it were," and nodded his head.

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The highpoint in Nebraska was everything Charlie said it would be and less. It was nothing more than a tombstone-looking monument with engraving that identified the spot. Near these stacked blocks of granite, and balancing on a pedestal of pipe, was a metal guest register. Gavin pulled the heavy drawer open and found pencils and a bound register inside. Taped to the floor of the drawer was a notice advising anyone who *climbed* this lofty spot to report to the Chamber of Commerce office in Kimball for a certificate attesting to that fact.

"This is unbelievable," Gavin marveled, reading the register. "There are people from all over. Here's someone named Stebbins who says his dad was the second person to reach the high points in all the forty-eight contiguous states. He says this is his third high point today--his fifth, sixth and seventh."

"Probably Oklahoma, Kansas, and here," Charlie explained, wondering why the clues had directed him to this location. "There's another group of fools that hit all the state corners. You know, where three or four states comes together. Look down the hill," he pointed west, "and with a little imagination you can see the marker where Colorado, Wyoming, and Nebraska meet."

Gavin glanced, but he was busy ticking off the number of states listed by visitors in the register. "Twenty-four states represented within the last thirty days. There's a story here most people don't know about."

"Keep your mind on the *one* story and try to cypher out why we're here. Got to be a reason we were sent." Charlie walked around the cairn marking the location but found nothing. He even peered nervously into the crack between the large block of granite and its base. Nothing. Helping to make him even more irritable were the clouds swelling in the northwest. They were heavy, ugly-looking thunderheads, green, angry, and electric. He could feel the short hair on the back of his neck begin to stand. "Are you sure there's nothing else in that contraption besides the book?" he snapped.

Gavin stopped reading. "That's all I saw," he apologized, replacing the register. "Just the book and some pencils." He replaced the register, but instead of pushing the drawer in he stooped and peered into the darkness beyond the book. "But wait." He reached cautiously into a darkened corner. "I think there's something. Something small." When he withdrew his hand he held up--

"My granddaddy's star," Charlie cheered and took it from him. "Whatever kidnapped me the other night wanted to return my star." While trying to re-pin it to his leather vest, which had also belonged to his grandfather, he couldn't get the catch open. "What the hey's holding it?" he asked and turned the star over.

Inside, printed on a piece of tape, were three sets of numbers.

**87/110/89**

Gavin looked at them. "Can't be a date."

"It ain't, Corn Plant," Charlie was matter of fact. "This case is getting easier as we go. Someone's still yankin' my chain, but the lead is getting shorter. It's just a matter of time. Just a little time."

"You mean you know what the numbers mean?"

"Don't mean anything other than road 110 between 87 and 89. You'd a figured it out yourself if I'd given you the time. This is kids' foolishness. But," he looked warily back at the building clouds, "we better haul tail if we expect to get there before the storm."

"Where's that?"

"The big Minuteman Missile survey tower on 110 between 87 and 89. How'd you miss it? We passed it on the way to the trailer. It's got to be at least fifty-feet tall, for Crimany's sake."

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The race back to the other side of Sligo and even beyond Charlie's trailer was waged against the billowing storm. Where the thunderheads weren't billowing white, they were green. "Gonna be some hail out of that fellow," he promised and narrowed his vision to the task of driving. "Could make it a little exciting for those yahoos at the psychic fair."

"Maybe it'll help the cafe's business," Gavin said. When Charlie wrinkled his brow, Gavin explained, "By driving the fairgoers into the quonset."

Charlie thought about it but decided "Nah. Those yahoos don't eat real food. But they're the least of my worries anyhow. I got to riddle this mute thing out in a hurry. Profit margin on stock is already narrow enough. With grass as dry as it is, you're lucky to make \$50 on an 18-month-old steer. A rancher can't handle a mute. Especially with vibrio and lepto spirosis being the problem they've been."

Gavin didn't understand the diseases, but said "You got more problems coming than just the psychic yahoos." He liked Charlie's word and was going to look it up to see if he could use it in print.

The Jeep broke speed as Charlie took his foot off the accelerator. "What are you talkin' about, more problems?"

"Before I left Denver today I read a story coming in over the air that the Children of Ascension are heading this way."

"The Children of Which?"

"Ascension," Gavin explained. "Most people just call them the Ascenders. They believe God is coming in a flying saucer to take them directly to Heaven. No Armageddon. No millennium. No waiting. Just straight up."

"Well, they better bring tents. Rooms for a hundred miles around are already full, what with the fair."

"They will be. They've got permission to camp between the Pawnee Buttes. They've promised to bring their own water and to dig latrines."

"They can't camp there," Charlie protested. "That's mostly forest service land. Some of it's private as well. Even visitors to the buttes are supposed to stay on the path."

"They got permission form the President's people directly."

"What?" The Jeep cab, even with the windows open, scarcely contained the word.

"I can't remember the whole article," Gavin admitted, "but the President said something about freedom of assembly, religious rights, and American tolerance."

Charlie pounded the wheel until even Dog, wondering why, stood with his paws on Charlie's thigh. "Why is it that every time election year is even vaguely close politicians turn shamelessly to those two sure fire vote getters--Guns and God?"

Gavin had no idea.

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For the trip to the tower, Charlie had decided not to retrace his steps. By catching I36 heading west, he was able to turn south on 89 and head directly toward the tower. The path took them past Sligo, and when they crossed over the old railroad right-of-way, Charlie looked to his right at the fairgoers. He saw none of the blue pennants, but his immediate concern was swelling in his rearview mirror--the storm.

The tower, when they reached it, was a three-legged behemoth that would have intimidated even the Jack of beanstalk fame. It rose from the middle of a section of buffalo grass and prickly pear, each leg an impressive tree, a tree larger than any grown in Colorado. They had to have been hauled in from the northwest for this project. And, after the line-of-sight surveying was done for the installation of the Minuteman missiles, probably lasting a single summer, the structure--braced by crossed timbers nearly as massive as the stanchions--had been left to the elements. The only concession to safety, and it was an attractive nuisance to any fool idiot enough to climb it, was that the ladder to the top had been cut off ten feet from the ground.

Gavin whistled and leaned toward the windshield in an attempt to see the top of the structure. "Wow. Anybody who'd climb that thing should take a parachute along."

"Nah," Charlie scoffed, turning the Jeep around and backing toward the ladder. "It's a piece of cake. A baby could do it."

When the rear of the Jeep bumped the post to which the ladder was affixed, Gavin saw Charlie's plan. *Someone* would stand on the other's shoulders. Then the *one* on the shoulders would be able to grab the ladder and climb to the top.

"Oh, no you don't." Gavin was already out of the Jeep and walking away. "No way, man. You got me down into one hole already. You ain't going to get me up that thing." He didn't need to point.

"Don't be a sissy, Corn Plant," Charlie scolded as he climbed into the bed of the pickup. "A girl could do it. A sissy little girl could do it easy." "Then get a girl. I'm not going to climb it. I almost fell climbing out of that silo you locked me in."

Charlie grabbed the pole with both hands. "Now get up here." He didn't sound as if he were joking. "This ladder has metal loops that you crawl through. It couldn't be safer. Besides, if you don't climb, you'll have to let me climb on your shoulders to get to the ladder."

Gavin's shoulders drooped into a Dutch roof.

"Course," Charlie talked to the pole, "if no one climbs this thing we'll never know what's up there." He heard Gavin's hands grasp the pickup bed sides. "I'm sure every reader would understand a story that told them something was up on top of a tower but no one would climb it. I'm sure the Pulitzer committee would understand."

Gavin's left foot hit the bed of the pickup. "Give me your keys."

"Keys? What do you want with my keys?"

"The last time I thought I had a story and you were around, I spent three hours in a silo. I got to work late and got chewed out."

"Did you tell them why you were late?"

"I did," he confessed, "and I'll never tell another living soul that story."

Charlie took one hand off the pole. "The keys are in the ignition where they belong," he pointed. "I never take 'em out. That way I always know where they are."

"But what if someone steals your truck?"

"It would be the last thing he'd ever steal." Charlie's tone made his statement believable. "And while you're in there getting the keys, you might take a snort or two of my Climber's Helper. It's under the seat."

"Climber's Helper?" Gavin asked as he jumped to the ground and reached for the door handle.

"Sure. It increases the strength in your grip. Makes your legs strong. Cures vertigo. It's in a bottle that looks a lot like that Astronomer's Helper I gave you."

"No, thank you," he mouthed as he reached for the keys. Dog, sitting in the middle of the seat, ignored him and watched the swirling green clouds out the side window.

"Well, as long as you're there," Charlie placed his hands on the pole again, "you might fetch me that bottle of Pole Steadier's Helper. It's in the same bottle."

When Gavin returned, he had both the bottle and Dog. He eased Dog into the bed of the pickup and pushed the Pole Steadier's Helper between Charlie's hand and the pole.



"Okay," Charlie instructed. "Pull out my back pocket and put your foot in it."

"Stand in your pocket?"

"Don't worry. These are *Dickie's*. If they're *Dickie's*, they're durable," Charlie assured. "And once you've done that, put your next foot on my shoulder and work your way on up the ladder."

In spite of all his protesting, Gavin performed the feat easily and was twenty feet up before he looked down.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you," Charlie cautioned. He was steadying the pole with only one hand. The Steadier's Helper was in his other and had just been lowered from his lips. "That's not a move you should make on an empty stomach."

Gavin didn't need Charlie's advice. One glance down had been advice enough. Instead of looking at the prairie through the ladder, he concentrated on each rung. He concentrated and counted. When he reached the number twenty-five, the rungs gave way to a smooth platform guarded by a single, wooden rail around the periphery. In the middle of the platform was a wooden cage. The surveyors had probably stood in it for protection while taking their readings. The wind moaned through its one-by-four boards like the sound track from a Stephen King movie. Sheltered by one of the legs of the cage and the two-by-four securing it to the platform was a shoe box.

The distance to the box was only ten feet, but Gavin's legs trembled. He needed to climb only one more rung to allow him to belly to the surface of the platform, but that single step would expose his upper body to the air. He would no longer have the security of the ladder to cling to.

From a great distance below came Charlie's wind-tossed voice. "Better hurry," he hallooed. "The storm."

Gavin glanced over his shoulder and saw a stampeding herd of buffalo a half mile to the north. Their thundering hooves threw up a gray-green curtain of moisture that obscured the prairie behind it. Above him, dancing on its hind legs, a thunderhead tossed its lightning charged mane.

"Don't worry," came the feeble voice from far below. "Lightning never--"

The gray day flashed brilliant and the shoe box glowed. Behind him, Gavin heard the buffalo turn and rumble across the prairie toward him. As their hooves enveloped and passed him, the day cracked brighter again and in the middle of the darkness, suffused in a shimmering halo, Gavin found his body. It was lying flat on the platform. Just in front of its outstretched arm was the shoe box. Unbidden, his body snaked forward, grabbed it, and shoved it powerfully. Again the nightness around him froze into a brilliant tableau, switching from negative image to positive. The shoe box, at the edge of the platform, disappeared into darkness only to reappear in brilliance. It clung to the edge. Not falling. Teetering.

After the next nova of light, Gavin found his body at the edge of the platform. He watched as his finger reached out and decided the box's fate. It tumbled through a series of exploding, stroboscopic rotations and disappeared.

When Gavin next discovered his body, it was lying on its belly while cold, wet mothballs danced on the wooden platform. His head hung over the side and stared down the hoop sheltered ladder to the wet bed of a pickup fifty-feet below. After more blinding flashes, more stampeding herds of buffalo, more dancing mothballs and slashing sabers of water, he watched his hands cling to each rung of the ladder as his arms mechanically walked him backward. His legs dangled free.

Simultaneous with the next explosion, a buffalo fell on his chest, and his arms flailed amid the pelting mothballs as he tried to make his lungs inhale. After the first breath came, and then the next, his arms fell to the bed of the pickup, splashing floating bits of alfalfa to the sides of the truck bed where they stuck.

Charlie, warm and dry inside the Jeep, was inspecting the contents of the shoe box when the passenger door flew open and Gavin crawled in.

"What'd you do to your hair?" Charlie asked innocently.

Instead of dangling like the pollen tassels of a corn plant, his red thatch stood on end, drooping just enough at the top to make him look like Woody Woodpecker. But Gavin didn't seem to mind. His eyes, glazed at the excitement of still being alive, stared out the open window beyond Charlie. Popcorn exploded from the ground and attempted orbit. Some of it fell back to earth and pounded the pickup roof above him.

"Little hale don't hurt nothin'," Charlie said and thrust the object in the shoe box under his nose.

Gavin sniffed it and attempted to look out the windshield, but it was fogged. As the pupils in his eyes irised from the size of marbles to those of peas, he noticed a puppy sitting beside him. Gavin placed his hand on the puppy's head and immediately he was back to earth.

"It's a gun," his voice came calmly, though still vibrating with static..

"Of course it's a gun," Charlie still looked at his hair. "My granddaddy's. An 1860 Colt Lawman. Forty-four caliber. And it's a revolver. Does your hair always stand up like that when there's a little lightning around?"

"Nothing else?" Gavin asked absently. "No other messages?" When Charlie shook his head Gavin asked, "Can I go home now?"

En route back to Bode Road's house and Gavin's car, the sun dropped below the black cloud bank and rested on the horizon. Its rays scattered from the moist grass and brought the fresh, stereoscopic glister of a crisp winter morning to the spring prairie. The landscape, which has been threatening to turn green, had finally made up its mind and smiled at the departing sun with its chlorophyl teeth.

"What could be the motive for all this?" the young reporter asked after he got out of Charlie's truck at Bode's house. "Why would someone or some *thing* do these things?"

"People," Charlie tried to be patient, "do things because they *can*. If they can't, they *don't*. No real mystery. No morals, no ethics. Just Dirt and Dumb."

"Just Dirt and Dumb," Gavin repeated.

"Exactly," Charlie nodded as Gavin got into his car. After watching until the reporter disappeared south, Charlie put the Jeep into gear. As he rolled from the yard, he saw Mrs. Road holding a window curtain aside.

He'd collect the rest of that bottle of brandy another day.

###

Vacation Time

Coming back into town the next morning, Charlie wasn't surprised to see the street filled with cars and the psychic fair once again in full swing. The rain of the day before had freshened the spirits of both sellers and buyers. Charlie, however, could have used a shave and looked as if he had spent the night curled up on the floor of a horse trailer. His eyes, blurred more by weariness than dissipation, scanned the rows of cars for blue pennants.

Finding none, he next studied the bumper stickers on the cars--cars formerly having been rare sights on the pickup-truck ruled streets of Sligo. *Subvert the Dominant Paradigm* read one of the stickers. *The World Needs More Wizards* announced another.

One sticker elicited a response from Charlie. *It's Not the Size of the Wand...But the Magic in it* the sticker said. "Dream on," said Charlie. The one reading *The Goddess is Alive and Magic is Afoot* only made him snort. Every car had a sticker. One of the booths was probably selling them, he reasoned.

Where he would normally have parked were two cars. They were the cars of sensible people, the type of people who valued under-powered transportation molded from recycled Spam cans. The sticker on one of the cars in his parking place read *Witches Heal*. The other informed the reader that *My Other Car is a Broom*.

As he drove past the cafe and grocery, still irritated at the interlopers, he saw another bumper sticker on a car parked in front of the Post Office. It was one he not only agreed with, but one he wished the boys would sneak out and affix to his own bumper. *Close Encounters Do Not Mean Ramming Me in the Ass* it read.

He drove past it and was about to make a right at the corner when a pimply-faced kid in a near-mufflerless old Oldsmobile passed him going east. By habit, Charlie checked him out in the rearview mirror. There were two stickers on this youth's bumper. *Support Your Local Wizard* read one. The other said *A Mind is Like a Parachute/It Must be Open to Work*.

"I guess," Charlie told Dog, "that is one of them Oxy Morons I've been hearing so much about."

For only the second time in his memory, Charlie turned into the alley behind the Quonset Grocery and Cafe. He knew the curtain in the second story window of the old Opera House behind him would be pulled back, a pair of eyes spying on his movements, but he was too weary to care.

After entering the cafe by the back entrance, he cracked the storage room door and peeked into the dining area. Half the customers were strangers to him, but he saw none whom he feared, that is except for Inez. As soon as she spied his face at the crack, she was on him like grease on a griddle.

"What kind of law and order we got out here?" The dish towel she carried habitually was knotted in her left hand and fisted against her hip. "I've never seen so many people try to walk out without paying. I have enough trouble with you regulars, but at least I know you honyocks will be back when you get hungry."

Charlie rubbed his face and stared lovingly past Inez. Both coffee carafes on the warmer were full. They held real coffee. Not the no-lead variety the city cafes were always trying to push, that and their *latte* whatever.

Inez recognized the pleading in his eyes and tossed the dish towel onto the cutting board before pouring Charlie a big cupful. "And Kandi's been in a snit all morning trying to get a hold of you. She says its *real* important. Couldn't even reach you at home. She didn't try your truck radio. She knows better."

Charlie took the coffee cup in both hands and steadied it at his lips. "What's she want?"

"Wouldn't say," Inez became more friendly at the sound of his voice, "but she says she's got to get a hold of you right now." Without explanation she left him abruptly, saying "I see you're wearing your star and revolver again," and walked through the side door into the grocery portion of the quonsets.

"If she calls again," Charlie called after her, "tell her you saw me and that I've been busy all night with some problems with this psychic fair." He took a deep, slow draft of the hot coffee. Feeling the pain between his eyes, he sucked in his breath. "Tell her I said for you to take a message."

Inez returned with a disposable safety razor in its cellophane wrapper. "I don't know where you've been, and I don't care to know," she lied, "but it's not like you to go more than two days without shaving. Now take this and go to the sink in the storage room. You can use bar soap for lather. I'll have your breakfast when you get finished." Almost without taking a breath, she asked "Where's Dog?"

"I gave him half a can of wet food this morning after we got up. He's sleeping in the truck right now. He'll be okay."

"I take it you didn't get home last night?" She turned to retrieve the dish towel as if she weren't interested in the answer.

"Dog and I spent the night out near Murphy Reservoir. It was cool out so I thought it'd be good experience for Dog to hear the coyotes and bob cats. Smell a skunk maybe or see a badger."

"Murphy Reservoir? The one on Howard Creek?" He nodded to both questions. "Serves you right," she turned to hide her smile, "treating those poor women that way."

"I didn't--"

"Oh, go on about your toilet," she flailed the dish towel at him. "I don't want to hear any more of your excuses."

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Since the view out his accustomed window was so depressing, Charlie chose to eat his breakfast watching the television on the wall above the counter. He was surprised to see both the male host and Gavin Trust on the same screen, albeit a split screen. Through some miracle of make-up, the red graduation tassels Gavin called hair had been separated and laid smoothly across his skull, front to back.

"All in all he's not a bad looking kid," Charlie admitted to anyone who cared to listen. "Look a heck of a lot better in a hat, though. A big hat. One that comes about down to here." He pointed to his throat with his fork.

Harley Tidley swiveled on his stool. "Hold it down, Charlie. We're trying to listen. This is interesting." His brother Banner swiveled on his stool and affirmed the accuracy of brother Harley's statement with a curt nod. Wiley Wentworth wasn't at his accustomed stool, but it was being held open in his honor. He was across the street supervising the activities on his rental property.



"Let me get this straight," the New York City television host leaned toward the camera, though he was actually talking to Gavin who sat in a television studio in Denver. "You were one hundred feet up--on top of a tower, the tallest structure for fifty miles--and during a monstrous electrical storm? Weren't you terrified?" The host's voice quavered with concern.

Whatever Gavin's reply was, no one heard it. "A hundred feet," Charlie bellowed around a mouthful of tortilla, hamburger, onions, lettuce, tomato, and jalapeno. "That structure isn't more than fifteen feet high. A baby could have done it. I'd a done it myself except my old football knee was acting up."

"You never played football," Harley turned on his stool, irritated at missing Gavin's reply.

"Who said I *played*," Charlie countered. "Don't you remember that fight I got into behind the stands up at Burns, Wyoming?"

"That wasn't a fight," Harley explained. "You tripped over a post in the ground after saying something about one of their player's girlfriends. There would a been a fight if he hadn't felt sorry for you when we found you lying out in that field."

"It's funny how time affects *some* people's memory," Charlie glared accusingly at Harley before redirecting his attention to his fork, the handle of which he held in the palm of his hand. On the table at his elbow were copies of the *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Denver Post*. Both were current issues as Banner and Harley had picked them up on their doughnut run to Eaton that morning.

The News' two-line tabloid headline read: *Reporter Risks Life / Securing UFO Clue*. The Post's headline, less glaring because of its more conservative broadsheet make-up, said simply: *Lightning Strikes Reporter Seeking Answer to Mutilation, Kidnapping Riddle*. Below this impressive headline was a

smaller headline: *Gavin Trust: his story*. Breaking up the type in the second column was a picture of Gavin. His hair looked more natural.

Charlie pulled his reading glasses from the breast pocket beneath his leather vest and scanned the first few paragraphs of both stories. "Humph," he grunted, pushing them away. "A baby could a done it."

"You're not going to believe this," Wiley hurried in the front door, holding his belly to keep it from pile driving him into the floor.

"Maybe not," Charlie agreed, "But I've sure been primed for it." By way of explanation he waved his fork at the papers.

Wiley saw the gesture but didn't understand. "You know that soft-serve machine the Anchorite has?" He didn't wait for a reply. "Well, he just sold a small cone to a kid in a wheel chair. I don't know what's wrong with the kid, but he doesn't have any coordination or anything. You know, a spaz." Some of the listeners indicated they understood. "Well," Wiley swallowed, "the kid tried to put the cone in his mouth, but he missed and hit his forehead."

"That the kind of action that spins your wheels, is it?" Charlie asked.

"But that's not it," Wiley dipped his knees slightly in his excitement. He was trying to keep from wetting his pants. "Just after he did that, he got this funny look on his face--like he just remembered something, or something--and he stood up."

"Walked?" Harley asked.

Wiley didn't wait for Banner to echo his brother before answering. "A couple of steps. Then he fell flat on his face. I thought there was going to be tears and howling and all kinds of bawling, but the parents were crying because they were *happy*. They said he hadn't been able to get out of that chair by himself for two years."

Charlie draped his face with a big hand.

"It's a miracle," Wiley spouted for those who didn't already recognize it. "Everyone at the fair is lining up to get some of the soft-serve. It's like holy water."

The phone rang in the back of the room and Charlie absently noted that Inez had picked it up and looked at him.

"Say, Charlie," Harley offered a suggestion. "Why don't you throw soft-serve at the spooks instead of holy water?"

For just a moment Charlie pictured himself sitting before quality speakers vibrating to the strings of Copland's *Red Pony Suite* while he spooned ice cream from a gallon bucket. "Sounds delicious," he confessed to the boys, "but I think I'll stick to the tried and proven. As for those yahoos lining up out there--" He paused with the last of a tortilla in his hand and considered the problem. "Oh, I suppose it's all right," he relented. "In New Mexico they're charging them for dirt. In Lourdes it's water. Israel sells salt water and air," he remembered. "All in all, I'd have to say that in Sligo they at least get something for their money--protein, calcium, and calories." He might have gone on, but Inez, still at the phone, cautioned Charlie into silence with a raised palm.

"It's Kandi," she placed the palm over the mouthpiece. "She says to *run*. Get out of state." To Charlie's furrowed brow she explained further. "The District Attorney is after you."

Charlie was up and headed toward the storage room and his truck out back. He still carried his coffee cup. "What am I supposed to have done this time?"

When he pushed through the *Rainbo is Good Bread* screen door and out onto the concrete loading dock, a man in a three-piece suit stood ready to answer his question. He held one of those cumbersome legal-sized papers

folded, for convenience, to a fourth of its original length. Behind him stood Deputy Grover Ford, the ironed-in pleats on the front of his uniform shirt still sharp.

"You got a few wrinkles behind your knees," Charlie, trying to be helpful, pointed to Grover with the coffee cup he still held. "Why don't you take your pants off while you're in the vehicle and lay them across the front seat. Myself, I never wear my pants in the cab during the summer."

The deputy district attorney who held the subpoena wondered for a moment how Charlie got his pants off over his work shoes before suspecting that Waggles might have spoken facetiously. "We're not here to discuss uniforms," he regained the moment. "We're here because of your embarrassing display of prejudice in the treatment of six non-papered citizens in a railroad box car near Nunn."

"The *non-papered* which?"

"The undocumented residents you threw from the box car."

"Oh, the *Wets*. Why didn't to spit it out and save time?"

"Your callous disregard for foreign nationals is noted in here," he said, punctuating the importance of his message by slapping the subpoena into Charlie's open left palm.

Charlie started to reply but the screen door opened against his back. It was Inez. She glared at the lawyer and sniffed at Grover before punching Charlie in the back. "We'd be serving coffee out of paper cups if I didn't keep my eye on you." That's what she said, but she didn't seem in a hurry to get back to her duties after wrenching the cup from Charlie's finger.

Taking her free hand like a dancer, Charlie twirled her about and guided her back inside, patting her fanny as it disappeared. The interior door slammed her answer.

"Let's get serious for a moment," Charlie sobered. "Serious and honest if you're capable." The words were directed to the lawyer who huffed, pretending to be offended. Grover, behind him, never took his eyes from the ground. "What do you reckon would have happened if those six Wets were just your average every day hobo? White hobos. You'd be out here this instant to give me an accommodation for throwing them out on their ears, wouldn't you?"

"Save your hypothetical rantings, Waggles." The lawyer ineffectually gestured with his hand for he seemed naked without a subpoena to wave. "Fortunately the six chose not to sue you or the county, probably because we provided a sling for one of them and bus passage to Chicago for all of them."

"A sling?"

"You broke one of them's collar bone," Deputy Ford barked petulantly, caught himself, and timidly returned his eyes to the ground.

"That's what the X-rays seemed to indicate," the lawyer confirmed. "And since Chicago was their destination we thought it only fair to provide bus tickets for the remainder of their journey."

"And," Charlie smirked, "what was wrong with the box car they came in?"

The reply was mumbled but Charlie took it to mean the railroad would have nothing to do with the Wets. "Besides," the lawyer became more audible, "the Mexican government has lodged a protest over our mistreatment of its citizens."

"Just back up there a second," Charlie tried for a point of order by shaking two fingers at the lawyer's forehead. "How can these yahoos be non-papered *American* citizens one moment and simultaneously *Mexican* citizens? Am I allowed to have double citizenship?"

"I haven't the time to explain legal niceties to you, Waggles. All you need to know is that the protest was delivered at the highest levels and has filtered down to me. The date for your appearance on that subpoena has been moved back beyond all generosity. We don't want to mess with this thing while it's hot. Let it cool and it'll be better for all of us. Especially for you. It just might keep you out of jail. In the meantime, I'd suggest you take a good, long vacation."

"I haven't had a vacation since World War II. And how high did this protest go anyway? To the President? Did those *macho* dandies in Mexico go to the President with their pathetic mewings?"

Without answering the lawyer acknowledged that "It *was* delivered to the highest levels."

"Didn't have the guts to go to a deputy or a county sheriff, did they? They'd a gotten their tails kicked for such impudence. Let me guess, was it that same Mexican politician that scolded us for not putting all their illegals on welfare? For not taking in all the Indians they were forcing out. And they *are* Indians. We at least put ours on reservations and gave them gambling. The Mexicans shove theirs up here along the Food Stamp Trail."

The lawyer realized Charlie couldn't be answered. Instead of trying, he motioned to Grover and the two headed toward the patrol car parked behind Charlie's pickup.

"If we had a real President he'd have sent the army to the border long ago," Charlie continued as they walked. "Instead he's sold out to big business, and big business is tired of sending its factories to third world countries. They now want to bring the third world here instead. It's easier that way. Don't have to learn another language. The payoffs can be conducted in English."

The lawyer was uninterested. "Give it a rest Waggles," he said as he opened the passenger door and slid onto the seat. "This thing is bigger than even you."

"A lot of things are bigger. But at least I'm trying. Apparently the only one who is. I'm a thousand miles from the border and still I've got to stem an invasion. And I'll do it in spite of you fifth columnists," he challenged.

The lawyer questioned Charlie's last statement, but finding it unintelligible, he dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "If we find you around here before the date in that subpoena, Waggles, we'll find some other reason to haul you in. I suggest you try another state. Why not another country? Mexico perhaps," he smiled victoriously.

Fortunately Grover backed the patrol car out of the alley because Charlie could find nothing else to say. It was one of those many moments when simple logic was useless. Only a club would have answered.

"I've got a nice special today on ham sandwiches. Carved ham, not the canned kind." The voice was Inez'. Charlie didn't know how long she had been listening at the screen door. "Do you want mustard or mayonnaise?"

"Both. About four of 'em in a paper sack. Lots of chips. Dog and I are goin' to be doin' some travelin'." When she didn't ask why or where, Charlie knew she had never left the storage room and had hear it all.

"I can go in the grocery side and pack some Snickers if you want?"

"That'd be a nice touch," Charlie nodded, "and could you slice some of them big chilis I saw in the cold case across the top of the ham. You know, those big New Mexican chilis. The ones they call *mira sol*."

"Well," Inez acknowledged the obvious, "you don't have anything against *their* food."

"I don't have anything against *them* except that they don't have the guts to fight and clean up their own country. Find it easier to take handouts *here*. What I hate are the honyocks who permit it. I don't ask anything much of my government but to live in the United States of America. In Colorado. In my daddy's and my granddaddy's land. If I wanted to live in the country my government seems hell bent on creating, I'd move there."

"Where's that?"

"Ain't it obvious? Bangladesh for crowdedness. Yugoslavia for divisiveness. Course here we call it *diversity*." He studied her face for a moment before having to remind her. "Lots of chilis." And then as an afterthought. "One can't go too heavy on the mayonnaise."

###



## The Return

Charlie was not missed--in Greeley. Charlie was not missed--in Denver. But in the territories to the east--the towns, communities, and crossroads covered by the *North Weld Herald*--lay devastation. The loneliness there was as evident as a single pair of white shorts flapping on the otherwise naked wire of a prairie clothesline.

An economic depression was also noted. Pie went stale in the Sligo Cafe. Rocky Mountain oysters went uneaten at the weekly nut fry at Rock Port. In New Raymer the waitress even quit scrawling the weekly "all you can eat spaghetti special" in chalk on the blackboard bill of fare.

At the Corner Bar in Kimball, Nebraska, the patrons came outside onto Main Street and leaned against the sandstone blocks of the building. They looked south down Highway 71, but none of them would admit why. The regulars at the Buffalo Bar in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, were strangely distracted and couldn't even watch the television. Most of them went home sober.

In September his name was somewhat mentioned when lights were again seen in the nighttime sky and a yearling steer was found mutilated. Around Halloween, his name was mentioned with a little more urgency when lights were again seen and a farm dog and a cow were found mutilated. Both were discovered lying in a blowout in the general vicinity where the others had been found. Drawn into the sand of each of the three blowouts was one word. Taken in order, they read (1) *Give* (2) *Us* (3) *Waggles*.

In November Inez received word from Charlie. It was a letter. She couldn't recall ever having seen his handwriting--his printing she had seen--and since the envelope didn't have a return address, she was surprised to find it was from him. Once she saw his script, she knew why he had avoided using it. It was beautiful. "I could have told you as much," Miss Teller snapped when Inez showed her the letter. "It was I who taught him." She did, however, hang around the cafe long enough to hear Inez read it aloud to the boys. When it was finished, she returned to the second floor of the Opera House with her sack lunch and ate it while staring out the window.

*"I've been bunking with an ol' buddy named Jack here in Tucson," the letter read. "Dog and I have even been learning about the desert. It's a heap like the prairie only there's more water and more growth and more critters here. Dog and I have taken up friendship with a blacktailed rattlesnake named Blackie. We call it Blackie because we don't know if it's a him or a her. I'd have to turn it over and count the scales below the cloaca to know for sure and I ain't that curious. Blackie is a solid enough name anyway.*

*"I've even been teaching Dog to drive the Jeep. He's not bad, but like most teenagers he can't keep his mind on what he's doin'. He's also learning to sing. We sit out on the porch, it overlooks Bear Creek, and sing up a storm. Sometimes it even brings the ringtailed cats out to have a look.*

*"Dog, he's pretty good. He can catch the air pretty well and sometimes he dang near gets the words right, too. He's got company here to keep him happy. One is a black lab named Matilda. The other is an old German Shepherd named Hershe. They're both females but they've been spayed. Not that that seems to make any difference to Dog. You know teenagers."*

The letter trailed off from there. It sounded as if he was forcing it, and the boys and Inez could tell. "Teenagers," Miss Teller remembered with an upward tilt of her chin as she left for the Opera House.

In December, during the school break, a large bull was found atop a snow-covered knoll--mutilated of course. The *Rocky Mountain News* had a front page picture of the scene and investigators. The men stood around the bull in the snow. Their collars were raised against the wind and their hands were in their pockets. All their eyes were on the mutilated bull. One of the puzzled investigators was Weld County Deputy Grover Ford.

Ranchers in the area were starting to talk loudly and long. "Where's Charlie when we need him?" they asked, and the newspapers and television stations meekly repeated the question.

January, as usual, was cold and windy. But it was on February sixth that all Hell broke loose and government helicopters rained out of the sky over Sligo like fluff from a spring cottonwood. Charlie's entire former territory, all I, 650 square miles of it and then some, was sealed tight. No one. Absolutely no one was permitted in or out. Food was delivered to ranchers and farmers by Air Force personnel from Warren Air Base in Cheyenne. No vehicle was permitted to move. The only customers Inez saw in the cafe had come from walking distance, and some of them had hiked miles just to see a familiar face. Wiley Wentworth had ridden an old bicycle six miles to get a cup of Inez' coffee. His wife had insisted upon it.

It wasn't cattle this time. And it wasn't a farm dog. It was a whole bus load of cheerleaders and spirit club members from the Sligo Consolidated School. They had disappeared from the face of the earth along with the bus driver and the new science teacher who had gone along as sponsor. Even the bus had disappeared.

The girls had attended a cheerleading clinic in Sidney, Nebraska, and were on their way home when they and the bus disappeared. The last time anyone recalled seeing them was when their bus left the parking lot at Cabela's in Sidney. Cabela's described itself as the "World's Foremost Outfitter" and no one went to Sidney without visiting the store. Even Charlie sometimes looked it. It did have a lunch counter.

Kept from the scene, the media went into a feeding frenzy. For the first time since the flood of '65 they joined forces, print and--finally--electronic. The pressure from the public, as well as from the media, was so great that no politician could dare avoid questioning. Realizing this, a massive press conference was called at McNichol's Arena, home of the Denver Nuggets professional basketball team and the National Hockey League Avalanche--a rental from Canada. Chairs were set up on the floor for the world's reporters. Those to be interviewed, including the governor, state director of the FBI, the regional defense minister, state National Guard director, and the Weld County sheriff were on a raised dais where a basketball goal normally would have stood. Filling the tiered seats around the floor were paying spectators. It was a full house. Information on the girls and the disappearance of the bus was so scarce that the crowd leaned forward in its seats, hushed. The giant television screens, used to show replays of the games, brought the speakers' faces close to all in the arena.

The only important people not on the dais were the black suited men whom reporters witnessed going into and coming out of the restricted zone. Some of these men were scattered throughout the audience. What organization they served remained unknown.

As this was occurring, Charlie was on his way back to Colorado. Not at the behest of Colorado authorities, but at least in a style he felt he deserved.

"But governor," one of the reporters cried after the mike was extended to him, "we've been at this an hour and still I've heard nothing of substance. You don't have a single lead. All that your people have done is storm an old school bus parked way off Weld County Road 120. The pool photographer and reporter you allowed to go along said it was a 1960's bus, that it had no wheels and no engine. Couldn't you have told that from the air?"

"Would you like to handle this, Larry?" the Governor spoke to the FBI special agent.

The look the agent gave the governor was not one of thanks. "You are correct in your accusation," he admitted to the reporter. "Our intelligence was woefully inadequate. We came out with egg on our faces."

"What about Waggles?" This cry came from amid the pack of reporters and without the benefit of a microphone. It was echoed by a few others.

"Sheriff?" The Governor indicated for the Weld County Sheriff to speak.

"Mr. Waggles is no longer a member of our force."

"But who knows the people and the territory out there better than Sheriff Waggles?"

The Sheriff bristled, but it was an old burr under his saddle and he was somewhat calloused to it. "Mr. Waggles is not now and has never been a sheriff. You reporters are constantly confusing him with his grandfather, a truly legendary Weld County sheriff who died in the late thirties." The comment sounded memorized. "Handling field operations out there today is Deputy Grover Ford. He, himself, is a country boy and knows the people."

"But Sheriff Waggles has always gotten results. What about the *Ultima Thule*?"

"That," the Sheriff bit his words, "was blind luck. Charlie Waggles' techniques, if you can call them such, are so out of date as to belong in a museum. He can't even pronounce the word *Miranda*."

"Out of date?" another reporter yelled without benefit of microphone, and his concern was supported by a murmur from the audience. "How can you say that? Have you been listening to the news reports? He single-handedly saved the city of Tucson."

"Antiquated--" started the sheriff.

"How can you possibly say that?" The 17,000 bodies in the hall moved closer to the edges of their seats. "Antiquated?" the reporter repeated theatrically. "He only made use of the Met Life Blimp and a hang glider to administer justice. And that was while he was on a forced *vacation*."

The sheriff hadn't given up. "His age--" he tried again.

A new reporter nearer the front defended Charlie this time. "Age?" he couldn't believe his ears. "He attacked seven young men, killing six. The survivor said from his hospital bed that Charlie came at them like a windmill?"

"That's easily explained," the sheriff stood to defend himself. "They shot his dog."

"Shot his dog a reporter asked?"

"Yes," the sheriff reseated himself. "If you'd known how Mr. Waggles felt about his dog you'd know why he went berserk."

"Killed the dog?"

"No," the Governor reported, embarrassed at knowing the information. "He was only winged, but his leg is in a cast. Waggles left him back in Tucson with a friend to heal."

"Thank you for that information," the reporter sobered, "but why is it that Sheriff Waggles is revered in Arizona and across much of the civilized world, but in Colorado he is considered *persona non grata*?"

"Mr. Waggles," the sheriff tried again, "has never really been what by any stretch of the imagination could be called a *regular* employee of the county. If his name had not been Charlie Waggles, a name actually revered in the county, he would have been fired long ago for inefficiency. We don't even provide him with a vehicle. The truck he drives is his own. *Some* of the gasoline we do pay for. All we do is send him a monthly check, which we begrudge, and that is for the services of a deputy junior grade, not for a sheriff."

The reporter let him finish because the information was news to him. "Yes," the reporter continued, "but are you aware that at this moment a special train is arriving at Union Station just a few blocks from here. That train, smothered under more bunting than President Truman's campaign special and President Roosevelt's funeral train combined, not only carries Charlie but the entire legislature of the state of Arizona and the entire city government of Tucson. Are you also aware that the highways between Phoenix and Denver have been paralyzed for three days by the cars of private citizens from Arizona paralleling the train's route. Have you seen any of the television coverage of the whistle stops this train has made? Of the multitudes that have appeared at every grade crossing just to wave their gratitude? Do you know what a giant of a man you are keeping from this case?"

The Governor leaned slightly to his left and spoke into the mike. "Larry?" he said.

A revolution on the dais was averted when the giant screens in the hall switched from showing the faces of the reporters and the men on the dais and showed instead the scene at Union Station.

"Are we live?" the reporter called into her microphone. She was looking at the ground, one hand covering her free ear to smother the din of activity around her. "We are?" she looked up and composed herself. "Hello, this is pool reporter Casey Carruthers reporting live from Denver's Union Station where the *Charlie Waggles' Special* has just pulled in. I understand from an advance man that the Arizona governor wishes to thank the people of Colorado for producing such a legendary lawman as Sheriff Waggles. And," she brightened, "if we're lucky, we may get a few words from the legend himself, although I have learned that he has been celebrating rather heavily the last nine hundred miles."

A hiss of released air behind the reporter caused her to jump and a porter took the opportunity to place a step at the door of the rail car. No sooner was it in place than the Arizona governor stepped out and waved a boyish hand in the air. Although he was unknown, the crowd at the station roared a greeting.

"I am hoarse from singing the praises of Sheriff Charlie Waggles from one end of this great country of ours to another," he called, and he was hoarse, "so I'll make it brief." More cheers from the crowd. It was the governor's misfortune to look exactly like an aging, over-fed Dennis the Menace. He spoke briefly--anyone sober in the audience could not only have predicted the speech, but could have written it as well. And as an additional surprise, the speech ended with a presentation.

"And so," he spoke over his ailing voice, "it is to you, Sheriff Waggles, that I take great pride in presenting this hand tooled, jewel bedecked belt." He held it aloft for all to see and cheer. "As you can tell, the turquoise lettering



reads 'Six With One Blow.'" More cheering. "I'm just sorry you couldn't match the hero of fairy tale fame," the governor smiled, "but then you were fighting terrorists and not flies."

At that moment, the entrance to the rail car darkened and Charlie stepped into the glare of the television lights. The roar not only deafened those at the rail station, but members of the audience at McNichols' Hall covered their ears as well. People outside the arena could hear the roar even over the vehicle traffic on the Valley Highway dividing the two sites.

Charlie relieved the reporter of her microphone and waited for the cheers to subside. "Well," he marveled, "there's almost as many people here as at a pay phone in a housing project."

More cheers. In McNichols' Arena, those on the dais quietly slunk off unnoticed.

"I've been missing ya," he told anyone listening. "Tucson's nice, but there's something about the plains that is open. They're honest. What you see is what you get. And a little more."

The crowd still cheered though most of them hadn't heard what he said, and those who had heard hadn't understood. Charlie's face, which had been pensive, even morose, suddenly brightened. "Corn Plant," he yelled and reached into the crowd of reporters below his step. "Come on up here."

He pulled the slightly reluctant Gavin Trust onto the step with him where, next to Charlie, he looked like a three-tined pitch fork leaning against a corn crib. "Why don't you be the gentleman," he encouraged, "and do the interviewing for this little lady here?" He gestured to the lady reporter who was trying to smile instead of cry.

Gavin took the mike and looked at the multitude. He could now see their heads, and their rounding, bounding unevenness reminded him of a pebbled

sidewalk at his grandmother's home. He felt elevated. Alive. "Well, Charlie, we all know what you've done recently. The question is what are you going to do next?"

"I?" the big man shrugged and tried to modestly bury his chin in the hollow of his shoulder. "I have no job. It wouldn't do for me to go foolin' around in official police work."

A multitude of defiant fists filled the air. "Charlie. Charlie. Charlie," they chanted.

"But, but," Gavin waved the crowd into silence. He was feeling more confident than at any time in his life. "If you were on the case, how long would it take for you to solve it?"

"You mean this UFO, mutilation, missing cheerleader thing?" he asked innocently.

"That's the one," Gavin nodded. "The girls and the bus have been missing for three days now. No sign of them."

Charlie took a dramatic pause and looked obliquely to his left for his muse. "If I hadn't a been fired," he calculated, "not only would the case have long ago been solved, the girls would never have been taken."

"Then you know who did it?"

"Who?" Charlie asked slyly, "or *What?*" He raised his eyebrows so high even those at the back of the crowd were awed. He enjoyed playing to the audience.

"As you would say," Gavin grinned, "*Exactly.*"

"If I didn't stop to eat it'd take a couple of hours," he said. "But knowing my appetite, I'd guess the girls'll be back home in two," he figured, "three days at the outside."

"Then you think they are okay?"

"They're cheerleaders," Charlie protested. "Who'd want to hurt a cheerleader? This ain't no television show, you people got to remember. It's real."

"But, Charlie," Gavin also protested. "You can't get into the territory. It's blocked off."

"Corn Plant, my boy," Charlie put his arm around his shoulders. "Why don't you just go and pack yourself an overnight bag. There's more than one entrance to a prairie dog hole."

Just then a ramp slid down from the baggage car hitched to Charlie's combination dining/sleeping car. The governor leaned out of the train window behind him. "Another little present for you, Charlie."

The governor didn't have to explain. Charlie recognized the engine of his Jeep warming up. He left the step and walked to the ramp, the television cameras struggling to follow. Just as he got there, the Jeep, immaculately clean, gloriously painted, and brilliantly chromed, rolled down the ramp and onto the railway tarmac. It bristled with antennae. A chromed and padded roll bar, sturdily buttressed, curved up from the bed and protected the cab. Six square and leather wrapped KC lights stared from atop the roll bar. The truck looked like a giant, multi-eyed beadle. Forward from the KC lights were two spotlights, each with inside controls. Chrome running boards filled the space between the fenders, an accessory Charlie had always wanted but couldn't afford. But they weren't the best item. That was the legend on the outer sides of the bed. *The Big Honker* read the scrolled lettering.

"That's me all over," Charlie said, but not before pulling Gavin's microphone toward him. "Doesn't look at all like the same blood-covered Jeep you saw that first day, does it?"

"You mean the day I spent in the silo?"

Charlie practiced his belly laugh. It was good to be back. "Tell you what, Corn Plant, let's get you packed and we'll get out there and solve this little affair."

"Not. Quite. Yet." The three words were spoken distinctly, as if they had been three raps on the skull from a ball peen hammer. Even the television audience paused.

Gavin was afraid to move and didn't dare after a single finger slid over his shoulder and tapped the microphone. The finger was followed by a turquoused hand followed by a turquoused wrist. The microphone was snatched from him.

Charlie, less intimidated, turned and saw the lady from the psychic fair. She was still richly dressed, still imperially slim, still serenely correct, and still as cool as the water in Crow Creek when it flowed.

"Before," she announced to a national television audience, "Sheriff Waggles sets forth to free anyone, he must attend a small, very private, welcome home party at the Brown Palace Hotel. Are you ready, Sheriff?" She handed the microphone back to Gavin and extended her arm to Charlie to be escorted.

Charlie put his hand through her elbow and led her to his pickup. "We'll leave tomorrow morning after breakfast," he called back to Gavin. "Meet me at the Palace about ten."

"Make that eleven, reporter," the lady instructed Gavin. "Breakfast should be chewed slowly."

Speechless, Gavin held the microphone and watched another world unfold before him. He didn't notice the black suited gentlemen behind him.

The last thing Gavin heard Charlie say was "The Brown Palace, huh? That sure does beat the Briggsdale Motel."

"These seats," the lady uttered as they drove off, "are *not* leather."

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Lollipop

During the National Western Stock Show the Brown Palace always exhibited a prize bull in its lobby. The pens for these behemoths were in the middle of the lobby, directly under the rotunda, and beneath the American flag. Little more was required for these beasts than a scattering of straw and a velvet cord corral. Though their size was intimidating, they were little more than curried kittens and saw humans as only food sources and not as rivals.

Since the stock show was over, the management of the historic hotel allowed Charlie to drive his gussied-up Jeep into the richly furnished lobby and park it. *The Big Honker* was such an attraction that a bell hop had to search the basement for the velvet cord that had defined the bull's space and place it around the Jeep.

When Charlie came down in the elevator the morning after his arrival, he found Gavin sitting inside the Jeep with the door open. A desk clerk had tried to expel him from the lobby, but a bell hop had recognized him. Like the tail of a comet, Gavin glowed with the sloughed off radiance from Charlie.

"Ya ready, Corn Plant?" Charlie wasn't really asking. He was simply trying to let the autograph seekers around him understand that he was on a mission.

An older lady, whose clothing showed she could clearly afford the world class luxury hotel in which Charlie had spend the night, placed her hand gently on Charlie's muscled shoulder. "May God be with you, young man." Normally, Charlie wouldn't have looked twice at such a lady, but this time he did. She was *very* old, he decided.

"Get 'em, Sheriff," another in the crowd encouraged.

Charlie straddled over the velvet cord and crawled into *The Big Honker*. The bell hop pulled the cord aside, giving him a straight shot to the double front doors and out onto Broadway. Only a rap on the window kept him from turning the key.

"Sheriff?" The rapper curled the word suggestively up at the *ff's*. The black suit behind the voice smiled, but it was the shield and picture I.D. in his hand he wanted Charlie to see. "This shouldn't take too long. Would you come with us please?" The *please* had all the nuances of a Mafia request, so the two other dark suits behind the speaker were not required to assure his compliance.

Aware that all eyes were on them, the three dark suits strolled regally from the lobby and onto the sidewalk outside. Charlie and Gavin, exchanging questioning glances, stumbled behind.

"Who are they?" Gavin asked.

"Heck if I know," Charlie shrugged.

"But he showed you his identification."

"Didn't have my reading glasses on," Charlie pointed to his eyes.

"You follow anyone who flashes a badge?"

"Quit your worrying, Corn Plant. We can kick these suits' little tails if they get out of line."

Charlie and Gavin followed the three men, two of them constantly eying passers-by. They hadn't gone far up the street when the lead man turned into an alcove, not of a business, and all followed him up a flight of stairs. When they reached the landing above, it was obvious to Charlie that he and Gavin had entered a hastily set up intelligence gathering center. Machines hummed as far down the hall as he could hear. Serious men and women exited one room, walked silently down the hall, and entered another room. Their eyes were either on nothing or on pieces of paper they held.

"In here, please." The man who had rapped on his window held a door open for Charlie and Gavin to enter. After they were inside, the man pulled the door to and left them alone. It was as cold as an examination room in a doctor's office--two chairs, straight backed and wooden, and one table, about three by five feet. It was empty. The walls were indifferently daubed with institutional paint. The room was devoid of pictures, reading matter, or loose objects to throw.

Besides the door through which they had entered, there were two others. One on each side of the room. The wall opposite the entrance was blank and probably butted against another office. Behind the door with frosted glass to their right, Charlie and Gavin could hear a conversation. It wasn't a two-way, continuous exchange of words. It was more of a "Here?" followed by a "No."

"What about here?" followed by a "No." Whatever the conversation, the questions were as truncated as the answers.

"Dashiell Hammett would like this room," Charlie told Gavin and made a curious upward motion with his chin.

"Who? What?"

"It's got a transom." Charlie's finger pointed up.

"What's got a what?"

Charlie knew why he always found young people so exasperating. They had no vocabulary. It took so long to explain the simplest things. "The little window above the door."

Gavin looked at it and pretended to understand.

Though the facade of the building was modern, the interior was only nostalgically modern. Air conditioning had been added and probably new wiring and plumbing as well, but the old doors had been retained--probably for their retro affect. It was hard to look at an old transom without seeing Elija Cook, Jr. or Humphrey Bogart peering down. At least someone wearing a quality hat.

Charlie motioned Gavin to within whispering distance. "One of us should stand on the other's shoulders and see what's going on in there."

Remembering who always got the worst end of any of Charlie's tactics, Gavin almost panicked until his eyes lighted on a chair. "Why not use the chair?"

"Could Work," Charlie conceded. He lifted one and placed it quietly next to the door. By using Gavin's shoulder as a support, he planted one foot into the center of the chair and pushed his bulk aloft. Gavin's shoulder disappeared into his rib cage.



When he tried to peek through the side of the transom, Charlie found his hat in the way, took it off, and whirled it to the table top. Now able to get his eye closer, he could look down into the other room. It was identical to the one from which he was spying, except that in this room a blindfolded woman sat at the table, her back to Charlie. At either shoulder was a black-suited man. Each was in charge of two stacks of seven-and-one-half minute topographical maps. When one of the agents slid a topo map from in front of the lady and replaced it with another, Charlie realized what they were doing.

The lady was dowsing the maps. Charlie didn't know what she was dowsing for--gold, oil, or water--but he had a hunch it was for a missing bus load of cheerleaders and pep club members. Actually the entire Sligo Consolidated female population. Pinched between the lady's right thumb and forefinger was eight inches of monofilament fishing line. Attached to the end of the line was a plumb bob, but in this case the bob was a crystal.

"I don't feel anything," the lady protested, and the crystal swayed peevishly. "Maybe if I could see what the diviner was doing I could concentrate better."

The agent on her right looked at the agent on her left who shrugged. "We'll try it," the agent on the right relented, "but we'll have to start all over." He relieved the lady of the blindfold and then helped the other agent rearrange the topo maps. When they were ready, she shifted the diviner to her left hand and renewed the search.

By the time their own agent returned, Charlie and Gavin were seated on either side of the table in the middle of their room. "I've got something here for you to look at," he breathed audibly as he flourished a stack of giant pictures onto the table in front of Charlie. The first was an aerial view of the Pawnee Buttes' area. It was taken from a great height.

"Satellite?" Charlie inquired.

The agent ignored his question. "Do you see anything out of place in this picture? Anything that looks as if it doesn't belong there or has been placed there recently."

After finding his reading glasses, Charlie ran his fingers up and down the picture, his eyes following. At a location near the bottom center his hand paused and his forefinger tapped the spot. "What are these three vehicles parked in front of my trailer?"

The agent was irritated. "Possibly they are our vehicles, though I have been informed of another groups that has been assiduously seeking you. Our boys have learned to avoid contact with them. I might add that these *others* have been quite nasty."

Charlie didn't ask who the other group was. He ran his hand up and down the remainder of the picture. "Maybe if I had one of those fancy crystal plumb bobs I could divine something out for you."

Catching on quickly, the agent said "I don't know what you are talking about."

"You fellas wouldn't dabble into the occult, would you?" When the agent didn't respond, Charlie added "I've been told you boys don't go in for that sort of thing."

"Are you finished with that picture?" Charlie brushed it aside with his hand and the agent replaced it with another. "This is an infra-red shot taken at night. It shows heat sources--"

"I don't recall leaving my porch light on. Did your boys do that, too? Do you know what six months of electricity costs for a hundred watt yeller bulb?"

"Please, Mr. Waggles. Look at the picture. Are there any heat sources you can't readily account for? Any that look suspicious to you?"

"Miss Teller's got her heat turned way up again. She's going to burn down the old Opera House one of these days."

"We've canvassed the town and the farm and ranch buildings we have been able to discover. It's these other heat sources we're interested in." His hand indicated most of what was not Sligo, Hereford, New Raymer, Briggsdale, and Keota.

Charlie leaned closer and followed his finger. "That's the I20 stock tank. Little cold for a bath this time of year," he mumbled to himself. "Here," he moved his finger, "is probably that seep on Little Crow Creek west of Grover. Used to be a spring before all the ranchers started puttin' down wells."

"Then it's water?"

"Of course water. What'd you expect. It's warmer than the ground. And look at these other spots." He indicated a dozen or more. "Those are all cattle tanks. The ones you can see probably aren't locked down and the water pumping into them is warmer. There's some more in here that don't show. "They're probably not being used and are frozen up."

"And these other heat sources?" He indicated the entire picture.

"Cattle."

"We were sure of that," the agent said, "but still--" He moved the picture Charlie was looking at to one side and replaced it with another. "This one was taken the same night, two hours later."

"My porch light's still on."

Again the agent ignored Charlie's observation. "Now this," and he indicated the previous picture, "is what we judge to be east of the buttes. We can tell because of all the lights from the Ascenders that are between the buttes."

Charlie was amused. "They're still there, are they?"

"We tried to evacuate them," the agent admitted, "but the State Department wouldn't hear of it. Now look at these heat sources to the east of the buttes," he returned to the original point.

Charlie leaned toward the agent's finger and focused his reading glasses. "Cattle," he observed simply.

"That was our guess." The agent moved his finger to the same location on the second infra-red picture. "This was taken two hours later. You'll notice that most of the sources have drifted to the south, but not these two sources."

Charlie glanced at them.

"Now if you'll notice, they are in the same spot in the first picture. They hadn't moved in two hours. And they are--or maybe it's just our imagination--a little larger than the other heat sources."

Charlie was unimpressed. "Bulls are usually bigger than cows," he almost yawned. It had been a night. "And if you was as heavy as a bull, you wouldn't be in any hurry to get up either. Probably just enjoying their cud."

"Our guess as well."

"Did you check it out." Charlie's interest was genuine this time.

The agent nodded. "Low level aerial photos the next morning revealed nothing unusual. And no bulls"

Charlie threw his hands into the air. "Well, there you are. Can we go now?"

The agent re-stacked the photos and nodded his okay.

Outside in the hall, Charlie and Gavin were about to descend the stairs when a black suit burst from the door in the room they had spied on. "I knew it," the excited agent squealed as he opened the door across the hall and addressed someone inside. "I knew it. It's Devil's Tower."

"The one in that movie *Close Encounters*?" the voice from inside the room asked after a pause.

"Yes," the agent squealed again. "Life is imitating art."

Gavin wanted to remain but Charlie took his arm. "That lady should have plumb bobbed his head for brains. Maybe not," he reconsidered. "*She'd* have found some."

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The Brown Palace was sorry to lose *The Big Honker*--it was such a positive attraction--but Charlie explained as he drove out the front doors that he and Gavin had work to do. Their trip back to Sligo was fast and by a route Gavin couldn't fathom. He had heard of the Prairie View Community Building, the old school house Charlie once attended, but he had no idea it was possible to turn east at it and follow a barbed wire fence for six miles without encountering a road or fence of any sort. When they finally found a gravel road, they continued heading east until they got to Charlie's trailer.

The porch light had either burned out or been turned off. "I don't see anyone within a couple of miles," Charlie glanced about nervously. "The guards, whoever they are, don't seem to be about, but at least they're keeping the Colleens at bay." After checking further, he entered his straw stack of a trailer and emerged with clothing and anything else he thought he might need and threw it into the truck bed. Then he slid into the cab and headed east.

Gavin hadn't questioned before, but he was curious. "Where we heading?"

Charlie's hand didn't leave the steering wheel, but the upward brush of his fingers indicated east. "Oh, I thought we might have a little look at the end of I10. A lot of erosion there on the west side of a bluff. Some of it was a little

different color than the other in the picture the agent showed me. No doubt it was just the light, but we'll give her a look. We're in no hurry."

The route took them past the buttes, a view Gavin never tired of seeing. Charlie didn't even glance at them. "You wake up on top of one of 'em, you've waked up on top of 'em all," Charlie explained when questioned.

At the end of I10 was a wire latch gate that Gavin, with his spindly arms, had trouble pulling tight so that he could release the hook wire. When he finally pulled the hoop over the top of the post, the gate sprang free and hit the bumper of *The Big Honker*.

"Ride that horse, cowboy," Charlie yelled at him out the window. When Gavin returned sheepishly to his seat, Charlie told him "You gotta learn to hang onto them gates, Corn Plant."

Charlie drove across the pasture to the bank of erosion and stopped. Both of them got out and walked to it. "Doesn't look a lot different to me," Gavin confessed. He buttoned his coat and turned its collar up to ward off the cold wind.

Charlie didn't answer. He was on his way back to the truck. After digging through the debris in the bed, he produced a big flannel-lined *Big Mac* work jacket and pulled it on. "Somethin' I didn't need in Arizona," he bragged, or complained. He wasn't sure. Coats felt comforting.

Returning to the expanse of sand, Charlie knelt and poked it. Apparently there had been some slight moisture in the past week or so because the surface was crusted. "No," he finally answered Gavin. "Doesn't look different. But notice," he pointed all the way up to the top of the bluff, "no tracks of any kind. Not even animal. Surely something ought to have wandered over this sand, an antelope or rabbit or something. Even a cow takin' a short cut."

Placing his knuckles to the sand, he pushed himself to his feet and moved forty or fifty feet down the sand. "Nothing." He poked the sand with his toe. This time a crust didn't break. Instead, the grains of sand pushed easily and cascaded. "Maybe nothing," he corrected himself. He stooped down to pick up a fistful of the sand and let it pour through his fingers.

Gavin came to his side and watched the last of the sand slide free. "Find something?"

"Can't say. Why don't you take a walk out across that expanse of sand there?" He indicated the patch directly in front of him.

Gavin obeyed and walked out onto it. "This good?" he turned. Charlie was in the process of raising his collar against the cold, but he motioned for him to go farther. "How about this?" he called after marching a similar distance.

"How does it seem? The sand?"

Gavin took his hands from his coat pockets. "Seems like sand."

Charlie strode toward him with precise steps. He pounded his feet into the sand. "You don't feel nothing?"

Gavin shook his head, no.

"How about now?" Charlie commenced bouncing by flexing his knees and then righting himself. "You do it with me. In time. Now." He used his arms as a conductor. "One. Two. Three."

When they did it together, even Gavin noticed. "It gives." The first time he said it, he was only making an observation. The second time he said it, he realized its implications and fell to his knees. "It gives," he yelled again, oblivious to all but his digging hands.

Charlie pulled him up by his collar. "There's a shovel in the bed of the truck and a tire iron behind the passenger seat. Go git 'em." While Gavin ran

to the Jeep, Charlie paced up and down the sand, bouncing and kicking at it with his shoes. When Gavin returned, he extended his arm. "Gimme the tire iron." Taking it by the lug-mate end, he poked it into the sand until the pointed end thudded against something that wasn't rock.

Gavin started digging with his hands. "It's the bus."

"Could be," Charlie hunkered down. "But if you was to bury a bus, would you back it into the hole or drive it in?"

The ridiculousness of the question made Gavin stop playing badger.

"So's I'll know where to dig," Charlie explained. "I don't want to dig up the whole thing just to find the door."

"Drive it in," Gavin guessed.

"That's what's got me worried. A complete fool *would* drive it in. Someone who knew something about buses would prefer a reverse gear in sand." Charlie didn't know the answer so he resumed poking the sand with the tire iron. It didn't take long to lay out the dimensions of the object under the sand, and it was bus sized. "Let's dig here," he pointed to the front edge of the sand. "I'm guessing it was backed in. Somebody seems to know something about machines."

Gavin started digging. In about fifteen inches he struck metal and dropped to his knees to brush the sand aside. Most of what was revealed was school bus yellow. One blotch of black, still covered with sand, told them the rest.

"It's the front of the bus all right," Charlie pointed. "That bit of black is one of the toes of the tiger salamander that's painted on the top and sides of the bus. The school mascot" He remembered how salamanders spent the winter. "Fits somehow."



Gavin took the point of the shovel and pounded on the roof. Then he waited for an answer. Nothing. He started to pound again when Charlie took the shovel from him and ushered him aside.

The sand flew, and it was Gavin's task to push it away from Charlie so that it did not slide back into the hole. Charlie was down to the door in no time, but he couldn't push it open because it was blocked by the sand below.

"Spell me," he handed the shovel to Gavin and returned to his Jeep for a snort of shoveler's helper from the bottle under the driver's side seat. As he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, he looked at the sky to the north. Gray slate and cold. It was as featureless and frightening as the blackboard in Miss Teller's fourth grade classroom. It promised no good. When the snow came, and it would, it would be as dry as vermiculite. It would rattle against the windows like miller moths trying to get to a warm light.

Back at the hole, Gavin was sweating in spite of the cold. "Here," he handed Charlie the shovel and sat down on the pile. He puffed on his hands and was amazed that he couldn't see his breath.

"Too danged dry and cold for that," Charlie noticed and returned to his task. In ten minutes the hole was broad and deep enough for Charlie to push the door open. He grabbed the hand rail on the left and moved up a step. "You want to be first, Mister Reporter?" he asked. When Gavin didn't volunteer, Charlie looked out the door and found Gavin's head peering over the top of the hole. "Then go and get my flashlight. It's behind the driver's side."

While waiting, Charlie stared into the quiet darkness in the back of the bus and heard nothing.

Emboldened by the flashlight, Gavin slid down the side of the hole and stood on the first step behind Charlie. "I'll do it, if you want," he volunteered.

Charlie moved aside and leaned against the sand-darkened windshield. "Still after that Pulitzer, huh? Well, have at her." His arm ushered Gavin in.

Cautiously, bathing each seat in light and checking each shadow as if it were a lurking hobgoblin, Gavin worked his way toward the back of the bus.

"You might look for booby traps," Charlie advised. "You know, wires and such that might set off explosives."

The suggestion didn't improve Gavin's confidence--or increase his speed. Still, he crept toward the back. Impeding his progress was the overhead rack. He had to stop and investigate each pompon and megaphone before he could move on.

While Gavin searched the back of the bus, Charlie sat down on the top step and breathed hard. The shoveling had been exhausting. He inspected the handle that opened and closed the bus door. He found the device that allowed the driver to extend the flashing stop sign from the left side of the bus. He looked up into the large mirror above the driver's seat and saw Gavin's flashlight illuminating the last rows.

Taking another deep breath, Charlie rose from the step and inspected the bus driver's seat. In looking for a hand brake, he noticed a box wedged between the seat and the side of the bus. It was in a place almost no one would notice it, probably lodged there by the driver. To get at it, he had to reach under the seat. Once he had it, he wiggled it until it slid free. It was a box of lollipops, twenty-four count. When he opened it, he found only two remaining.

He was unwrapping one when Gavin returned.

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing. Where could the girls have disappeared to?"

"Let me borrow your flashlight." Charlie pulled himself up and stood next to the driver's seat. He had to stoop a little.

While Gavin flashed the light toward the back for a final look, Charlie crushed the lollipop box and shoved it into his coat pocket. He kept the two lollipops in one hand, and--when Gavin relinquished it--the flashlight in his other. Slowly, but not as slowly as Gavin, he inched toward the back of the bus. He was looking for lollipop sticks. When he found none, he returned to Gavin. "This is one on me," he confessed and pushed the flashlight into his free pocket. "Here," he offered a lollipop to Gavin. "Pick your flavor. We can chew on these until we get to Sligo and get something for a man's hunger."

Gavin picked the red one--the cherry flavored--unwrapped it, and pushed his lips around it. Charlie, pretending to unwrap the orange, pulled the flashlight from his pocket and walked to the back of the bus where he sat down in the dark.

Gavin sat in the driver's seat and worked at the lollipop. Anytime he became curious and looked to the back of the bus, Charlie flashed his light against the walls and pretended to be reading pencil marks. He didn't have to pretend much as the paint back there was covered with grade school messages and such first-grade shock words as *fart*.

"How you feelin'?" he finally asked Gavin.

"Okay," came the sluggish reply. "Just a little tired. I had to work the swing shift after the press conference yesterday and didn't get as much sleep as you did." He yawned as if to prove it.

"How's your lollipop?"

Charlie saw his chin drop to his chest and then snap to attention. "I'm fine."

"What do you say we go into Sligo and get a bite to eat?"

No response this time. Charlie watched as Gavin's head disappeared below the top of the driver's seat. His body poured out of the chair and part way down the stairs. His head rested on the accelerator.

Patting the lollipop in his pocket, Charlie got up and walked to the front of the bus. Though Gavin was skinny, he was a bigger handful than Charlie wanted to carry. Reluctantly, he reached down and grabbed him by an arm. Getting his other hand under his opposite armpit, he half dragged, half carried Gavin to the back of the bus and curled him up on one of the seats. There, he slept soundly.

"Not much of a mystery as to how to immobilize a bus load of girls," Charlie told the sleeping Gavin. "What girl--even one on a diet--has ever resisted sweets?"

On the way out of the bus, Charlie picked up the remainder of Gavin's lollipop and rewrapped it in its paper. He pushed that into the pocket with the uneaten one and climbed out of the hole and walked to his Jeep.

Opening the door, he leaned in, flipped on his radio, and pulled the mike from its cradle. "Kandi? You there?"

The radio didn't answer back.

"Kandi? This is Charlie. Gotta talk to you."

"Who is this, really?" Kandi knew she was being had.

"Charlie."

"No, I mean really. Is that you, Grover?"

"This ain't no Grover. Do I sound like a candy-tail? This is Charlie."

"Don't try to fool me again, Grover. I know this is you. I can tell. Your imitation of Charlie ain't no better than it was yesterday." She tried to imitate Grover imitating Charlie. "Kandi, this is Charlie," she growled into the mike. "Got big doins out here." Then she laughed.

"Kandi," Charlie yelled. "If you don't want me to come in there, hog tie you naked and throw you up on top of the caboose in the railroad park, you'll straighten up."

Another pause. "I heard you was back in town, Charlie, but when did you start using the radio? You always have Inez call."

"Unlike the rest of you yahoos, I use it when I got something to say and stay off it the remainder."

"Well, all right then," Kandi's voice returned to its gum-snapping self. "What is it you want?"

"Found the bus the girls were last seen on."

The excitement at the other end of the mike was palpable. "Where? Where? You aren't foolin' me are you, Charlie? This isn't really Grover is it?"

"If you'd quit chewin' on your bit long enough , I'd tell you. It's buried at the end of 110. 'Bout a half mile from where the road ends at 127."

"Grover, if this is you we're going to be in a whole shit pot load of trouble."

"Kandi," Charlie roared her into silence. "A half mile east of 110 where it dead ends at 127."

"Okay, Charlie. But if this is really Grover, we--" Charlie mercifully relieved himself of the chatter by switching off the radio. Why he had ever bothered to turn it on, he couldn't fathom.

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Apparently she had broadcast the alert to the proper authorities because before he got within five miles of Sligo a fleet of troop carrying Air Force helicopters from Warren Air Force Base thudded over heading east. In his side rearview mirror he saw smaller lights winking in from the west. These were probably news helicopters which could not be held back by the bulletin.

He wasn't sure if it was his imagination or just the coming dusk, but he thought he would see clouds of dust rising from all the roads toward Denver.

In Sligo the civil defense siren behind the city hall was complaining and tiring, complaining and tiring, complaining and tiring. Eventually it became so tired it whined itself to sleep. The only people at the psychic fair, and they were still holding their ears, were the merchants who had insisted upon guarding their stock and had remained in spite of threats to leave. Charlie's place, and indeed nearly all of the places in front of the Sligo Grocery and Cafe, was vacant. He considered a possible threat from the *Colleens for Charlie* before deciding that threat was nil.

"I know you've closed the grill and turned the pots off," he complained when he entered the cafe, "but I'd appreciate it if you could rustle me up something to eat."

Inez had seen him park in his usual spot and had run to greet him, only just catching herself at the door into the grocery. While he was reading the new community announcements attached to the glass door, she scurried back behind the cold counter and picked up her dish towel.

"Oh, it wouldn't be all that much trouble," she tried to act as if she hadn't seen him only since breakfast. "Once the announcement came over the T.V.," she waved a hand to suggest it was no work at all, "the few that were in here skedaddled out." She finished polishing the cutting board behind the cold counter. "I could heat up some Mulligan stew. Maybe make you a breakfast. Pie?" she asked. "We have lots of pies of late."

"Yea," Charlie agreed. "That'll be fine." Instead of taking his usual seat. He took Banner Tidley's stool at the counter and watched the television.

"Here," Inez shoved a whole lemon custard pie in front of him. "This should hold you until I can microwave some stew and get the burritos going."

Chaos was ensuing on the television set above him. First there was a network logo with the word Bulletin superimposed over it. Then the tube showed a newsroom filled with scrambling reporters and an anchor with a plug in his ear. This was replaced with the Bulletin only to be replaced with first the puzzled face of an anchor from the Denver affiliate and finally with the network anchor.

"I believe we will be able to take you directly to the scene in a matter of moments," the anchor told the audience, but his attention was directed to his ear.

"Are we on?" the voice registered panic. This time the voice was that of television pool reporter Casey Carruthers. She was just a shadow in the cold, winter evening until the flood lights illuminated her cold face and red nose. "We're on. We're on. My god, we're on." She scrambled to untangle her feet from something and grimaced into the camera.

"The scene behind me," she told her national audience, "is one of hope. Hope that the missing girls of Sligo have been found. We here at the scene on this cold, windswept prairie of northern Colorado have been given very few details. All we know is that the bus in which the girls were last seen has been found." She motioned for something off camera to occur. "Pan over," she finally told her cameraman.

"In the background you can probably see the sand. It is a large expanse of sand, the result of erosion from the rise behind it. We have been told that the bus is buried there. As of yet, we have received no report concerning the girls."

"Crackers and catsup?"

"Yea," answered Charlie to Inez' question. "And some hot sauce and pepper. You know how your Mulligan stew can be bland." In spite of his

request for condiments he dipped immediately into the bowl while watching the television above his head.

From one side Casey Carruthers was being shepherded by Air Force MPs in an attempt to keep her away from the buried bus. From the other side a thumb and forefinger tugged at her coat sleeve.

"I know who found the bus." The speaker was Bode Road. The reporter didn't recognize him, so he explained. "I was interviewed when Sheriff Waggles was up atop West Butte."

"Yes, I remember," the reporter lied.

"The man who found the bus was Sheriff Waggles." Bode nodded into the camera. "Saw him hightailin' it this way earlier in the afternoon and saw him hightailin' back just before the choppers started comin' in. Real man, that Waggles. If it's there, he'll find it."

"As you have heard," the reporter re-took control of the camera, "it has been reported that Sheriff Waggles, who has been back in the state scarcely a day, has found the missing bus. As yet, we do not know if the girls are aboard and, if they are, what condition they are in."

She stepped aside so the camera could get a better view of the rescue area, which was now well lighted, thanks to the Air Force and its electric generators. Toiling in the cold spotlight were a dozen men with shovels. They were widening the hole Charlie and Gavin had dug earlier.

"One guard," the reporter said, stepping back in front of the camera, "has just told us that at least one person has been found inside the bus. We do not know in what condition."

The men behind her stopped digging and allowed a medic and two men carrying a stretcher to enter.



"It doesn't look good," the reporter said. She stood to the side of the camera but the audience could still see her chewing the fingernails on the hand that held the microphone.

"Will six hold you?" Inez pushed the plate of breakfast burritos next to the empty soup bowl. When he didn't answer, she sat on the stool next to him and watched the television. She had brought herself a cup of coffee.

"They're coming out," the reporter announced. "Someone is coming out of the missing school bus. Oh no," she lost it. "They're being carried on a stretcher."

The airmen struggled up the sandy slope and trotted across the sand to one of the helicopters. Medics on either side of the stretcher tended to its passenger.

"The person's hand is moving," the reporter spoke hopefully. "I saw it move. I can see some of the person's hair. It's red. It's bright red." She looked off camera for help. "Which of the girls had bright red hair? Does anyone know?"

The camera made several very unprofessional motions before the reporter understood what the cameraman was trying to tell her.

"I have just been informed that the body that has just been removed from the missing bus is not that of one of the girls at all. It is the body of a Denver reporter. A reporter for the Associated Press. His name is--" She had to listen carefully to the voice behind the camera. "Gavin Trust," she said. "Gavin Trust. I understand that no one else was found in the bus and at this time we do not know how Mr. Trust got onto the bus. One of the rescuers off camera has just told me that Mr. Trust was found sleeping in one of the back seats. He seems to be okay, but is still quite groggy. If you will remember, Mr. Trust was the reporter who helped Sheriff Waggle recover his badge and

revolver after it was taken by the UFO." After saying it, she reconsidered. "After it was *allegedly* taken," she corrected.

"That Corn Plant," Charlie shook his head in disbelief and turned on his stool to face Inez. "I never seen such a hog for the limelight."

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Bulls

The next morning Charlie arrived back in Sligo even before Banner rolled in from Eaton with the doughnuts. The excitement of digging the bus up the day before had drawn so many curiosity seekers onto the grasslands that the authorities had given up and taken down the roadblocks.

In spite of the cold and the almost certain snow, hordes of bundled-up pilgrims had made the journey and were milling through the aisles of the psychic fair even though the proprietors had yet to throw open their canvas doors. Their dark bundled bodies, contrasting with the gray, leafless elms and the yellow, almost white, prairie grass in the distance, reminded Charlie of a Pieter Bruegel, the elder, painting. *Return of the Hunters*, he thought it was called.

Because of this tableau of activity, Charlie drove around behind the cafe and came in the back way. When he entered and looked cautiously around, Inez noticed that he was clean shaven and rested. "Where'd you spend the night?" she asked innocently enough. "With all this publicity about your return and the bus, I wouldn't think you could go home to your trailer."

He took his hat off and threw it onto the table nearest the bathroom. "Too many reporters and those others," he explained nebulously. "I spent the night--" He didn't complete the sentence but his hand indicated up north.

While Inez started his breakfast, and after she brought him a cup of coffee, he strolled to the front window--watchful of the strangers in the cafe--and scrutinized the customers across the street. The effeminate man selling the gongers was still in his original location, though his peddler's stand had been replaced with a glass display case, and a series of plastic tarps lashed to a pipe frame now protected him from the elements. Even so, he was cold and stamped his feet against the hard earth. To shield himself from any breeze, he now wore furry moccasins and a full length fur coat to match. Canadian lynx, Charlie guessed.

Ignoring the cold that worried the gonger merchant, most of the pilgrims were lined up in front of the Anchorite's soft-serve ice cream stand. He had opened early as he had no where else to go, and the pilgrims were licking their cones with religious fervor. Their glazed eyes turned inward as if waiting to feel the tumor shrink or the arthritis ease.

On his way back to his table, with a stop behind the counter to refill his coffee cup, Charlie was distracted by a stifled cry from Inez. She stood frozen at the grill. One hand touched her mouth and the other gingerly held a large tortilla.

"Burn yourself?" he asked.

"No." She looked at the men in the room before taking her hand from her lips. "Look at this," she whispered to Charlie and motioned him nearer. When he was next to her, she pulled the tortilla from the grill and unfolded it.

"I don't get it," he said. It was just a tortilla sprinkled with the usual brown and black spots from being heated on the grill. When she rotated the circle forty-five degrees, he got the picture, a picture he had seen before. Usually, however, it was on postcards picturing leaves in melting snow. Sometimes it was a shadow on an oil tank. Other times it was a reflection in a church window. What Charlie saw in the speckled tortilla was the traditional, connect-the-dots picture of an androgynous Jesus, long hair and all.

"Give me that thing," he snatched it from Inez and stuffed it into his mouth. After chewing savagely and swallowing powerfully, he explained to Inez. "That's just about all we need around here," he said and stomped to his table. "If you think those zanies are bad," he pointed to the window and the carnival outside, "you ought to see the Catholics."

Inez, irritated by his antics, ignored him but she did bring his usual six breakfast burritos. She also left him a bottle of grape pop. Charlie looked at it questioningly, but she didn't explain.

He was still working on his burritos when the postmistress appeared. "I heard you were here," Gloria said and extended a handful of letters. "As you asked, I've been throwing away all the circulars, but I've still got these."

"About six months' worth," Charlie guessed.

"And I also did you another favor," Gloria explained. "I've been throwing away all those smelly ones, but I haven't been getting many of those of late and none at all recently. Even these aren't addressed to you personally. Most are addressed to *He of Little Time*, or *That Snake in the Grass*, or *Worm Bait*, or *More Repulsive than Road Kill*, or--"

"I get the picture. I'm not universally loved." He mopped up the remaining beads of grease with a piece of tortilla and stuffed it and his finger into his mouth. "Are you sure these are all to me?" he indicated the pile she had thrown onto the table.

"Couldn't be anyone else," she explained, her hands on her hips as if she defied him to question her logic. "*Box I Sligo* isn't the most difficult address in the world to remember. A letter addressed to that'll get to you just as sure as a letter addressed to *The Pope of Rome* will find the pontiff. Hell, one of those letters I threw away was just addressed to *Sheriff Charlie*." With that said, she left Charlie alone with his mail--and the half of an apple pie and fresh coffee Inez had provided him.

While he ate, he separated the envelopes and spread them across the table. One of them was from the Weld County Medical Center. "Thirty-two hundred dollars and sixty-nine cents," he roared after opening it. The boys at the counter looked down from the television set. "A hospital bill for that night they dragged me off against my will," he waved the letter .

Harley leaned across the counter and yelled at Charlie. "You get a brain scan, too, like brother Banner?"

Banner pointed to his head. "Brain scan. Looking for alien implants."

Charlie looked at his bill and then back at the Tidley brothers. "Did they find anything, Banner?" he asked.

"Nothing," Banner shook his head.

"Doesn't surprise me," Charlie mumbled into his bill while trying to decipher the code. "Surgical procedure, parentheses, cactus needles," he read aloud and looked to make sure his audience was listening. "One hundred and twenty-five dollars. Surgical procedure, parentheses, colonic.

One hundred and fifty dollars." He looked up with a question for the Tidley brothers. "What's a colonic?"

"Oh," Banner brightened. "Did you lose weight on that hospital food, too?"

Nothing made any sense, Charlie decided. "Surgical procedure, parentheses, catheter, dash, extra large." Charlie smiled. "I could have told them as much." He wadded up the bill and tossed it in the general direction of the corrugated trash can.

"Charlie," Banner and Harley motioned him from the counter. "There's another special coming on about the bus thing."

By the time he ambled over to the counter, the announcer was well into his report. "Trust could offer officials no explanation for his being in the school bus. The public information office at Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne reports that Trust does not even remember how he got into the bus. In fact, he says he remembers nothing about yesterday. Otherwise, doctors report, he seems in excellent condition.

"How he got there is another story. No vehicle was found near the buried bus, and Denver authorities report impounding Trust's car this morning in a no-parking zone near Union Station. Employees at the Brown Palace were at first sure Trust was seen with Sheriff Waggles yesterday, but they have since retracted their stories.

"I personally called the Associated Press Bureau in Denver this morning," the reporter said, "and when asked if Gavin Trust was an employee of theirs, the bureau chief--a Sandals Norgrin--declined comment."

Wiley Wentworth, sitting next to the wall on the other side of Harley, leaned forward so he could see Charlie. "Why don't you tell them he was with you, Charlie?"

"And spoil their mystery? No way. Besides, ol' Corn Plant's enjoying this."

Wiley leaned back and Harley leaned forward to take his place. "You ain't fooling us, Charlie. You just don't want to share any of the glory."

The boys laughed at Charlie's expense and Banner repeated "None of the glory," and laughed. He inhaled when he laughed.

"Come on, fellas," Charlie reached into his coat pocket. "You boys got me all wrong. Here," he said, pulling out a lollipop. "I'll treat the three of you." He pretended to search his other pocket and found nothing. "Well, I'll have to git you other fellas yours later. They're in my glovebox. Here, Banner," he offered the lollipop. "You take this one. It's orange."

Wiley leaned forward again. "Say, how's Dog?"

Charlie watched the set and answered without looking. "Still in a cast. They shot him up pretty good. I left him at Jack's to heal. When he's well, he'll ship him out."

Banner was still trying to figure out how to open the lollipop when the announcer on the television slid into a transition. "In a possibly related story, the popular Wyoming tourist attraction Devil's Tower has been temporarily sealed off. For that story we go to Carlos Hilliard in northern Wyoming."

Carlos repeated exactly what the anchor had said and then switched to the tape of a previous interview. The man being questioned was enveloped in an artificial environment suit. He could barely be understood even with the microphone pressed against the plastic visor of his helmet.

"Pica droppings," he said. "The disease center in Atlanta, Georgia, has discovered that picas in this area carry an especially deadly Hanta virus that is passed along in its droppings. To make the Devil's Tower safe for tourists, we

are vacuuming all the nooks and crannies of the talus slope around it. We should be completed in a few days."

"What's a pica?" The question was from a man standing behind Charlie.

"Rat without a tail," Charlie explained before turning around to discover Ike Wilson. "Say, Ike. Haven't seen you around here in a spell."

Ike looked at the floor. "I'd a been around sooner if I'd a known there was so much going on around here." He waved his hat toward the window. "Been doing my shopping up north. Don't have much time for the set." He indicated the television on the wall.

"You still running cattle out east of the buttes?"

Ike nodded.

"How many bulls you got now? Four? Five?" Charlie asked.

Ike wadded his stained, cloth hat between his hands. "I've got four now, but one of 'em's a renter."

"With the cows now, are they?"

The question seemed odd to Ike. "It's comin' up calving time, Charlie. Why'd I want bulls with my cows now? It'll be soon enough in a couple of months."

"When's the last time you were out to check on your cows?"

"Week. Ten days ago maybe. I checked the water at Three Tanks a couple of days ago. The animals I could see were doing fine. It's winter and I haven't got that many head on grass anyway," he tried to explain his seeming lack of concern. "Plenty of water. Left a new salt block."

"Nothing unusual?"

"Wind was colder'n a bitch. That's about all."

Charlie swiveled back to the counter and his near empty coffee cup. Ike slid over behind the boys and joined them in staring at the television set above



them. After killing the last shot in his cup, Charlie walked behind the counter. "Give me another hit on this, will ya, Inez? I got to go out in the cold."

Her lips tightened as she re-filled the cup. "Why don't you bring this cup back for a change? I know it'll break up that matched set of twenty you have rolling around on the floor of that truck of yours, but I could use it."

"Bit testy today, aren't we?"

"Oh, Melody was going to come down from Cheyenne and help me bake the pies today. Just before you came in here she called and said she couldn't make it."

"Your daughter?"

Inez looked at him oddly. "I'd think you'd have recognized whose daughter she was by now."

Charlie tried to bury his face behind the coffee cup as he headed for the back door. Once outside, he started the Jeep's engine and turned on its heater. The sun was getting higher, but it was far south and the day was turning colder. When he placed his hands on the wheel, he wished he owned a pair of gloves, but a real man--as he knew--wouldn't be caught dead wearing gloves unless he was working.

He took the county gravel highway and turned off at 112. Passing his trailer, he was cheered to think that it would be much warmer this winter with the straw bales around it. That is if he could ever go home again.

As he raced past the buttes, he noticed that the clouds were so low they nearly touched their tops. He would have liked a closer look, but he didn't turn into the buttes on the road the public would use. That would only take him to the Ascenders, and he didn't want to see them. When he looked, none of them were out, but smoke issued from their tepees and cardboard shacks.

Instead of taking the public road, Charlie drove two more miles and used the old road, the one that--if pursued--led directly between the buttes. Before he got to the major erosion on the south side of the buttes, though, he turned right and went directly up a hill and followed the crests of several more until he braked down the other side and stopped at Three Tanks, Ike's spring-fed cattle watering station. It consisted of three tanks and a row of Chinese elms protected by the inside of an elbow of low hills. The elms were gray and black, their starkness ghosting into the dismal horizon beyond. Charlie knew that if he looked into the frigid waters of the tanks, he would find orange, red, black, and silver Koi carp. He knew they would be there because he had stocked them three years before.

Continuing past Three Tanks, he tried to outflank the 10-to-20 foot deep arroyos to his left by heading east. His destination was east of the buttes where the major arroyo from the south joined the major arroyo from the north. At that point it became a branch of Pawnee Creek. This was the location at which the infra-red pictures had shown the two bulls.

A quarter mile past the tanks, and just as he rounded a small rise to the left, he discovered a nearly dilapidated shed. He remembered that it marked the site of a failed homestead--the occupants hadn't proved up--but he hadn't remembered that any of the structures remained.

Dry snow was starting to blow across the prairie and Charlie would have driven past the shed if he hadn't noticed the unusual pattern the flakes were making on the ground. Getting out of his Jeep, he crouched and inspected it. The flakes, just of the consistency of vermiculite he had predicted, were lodged against the windward sides of a series of ridges. Tire marks.

Ike, he figured, had probably been out checking to see if there were any early calves more recently than he remembered. But the tracks were too

large for a pickup. They were monstrous. Glancing back, Charlie saw that the pattern of snow led to the shed.

Getting up, he walked through the frozen silence toward the ancient structure. The brittle grama grass crunched under his work shoes, reminding him of the Shredded Wheat he ate as a boy. The exertion of the slight uphill climb caused his breath to puff from his mouth and cloud before him. At the shed, he leaned against the door, placed his hands to the sides of his eyes, and peered through a large crack. Beyond the smoke of his breath, which twisted like ectoplasm into the darkness, he discerned something monstrous and yellow. Caterpillar yellow.

He jerked one side of the double door, and, as it had only leaned against the building, it fell. Inside was the missing end loader. To make sure, Charlie walked around to the side of the machine and read the number 950.

From the darkness of the interior, he looked out at his pickup and beyond. Almost like the imprint of a giant chain, the pattern of snow led across the hoary prairie directly to where the "bulls" had been resting. But the pattern was disappearing. It was filling with snow. Soon the ground and sky would join to produce a frozen dusk that would be impenetrable to lights. A man on the prairie would be forced to walk with his arms extended. His mind would not know where his steps would fall until they had struck.

Hurrying now, Charlie returned to his Jeep and followed the quickly fading tracks. When they disappeared, he drove across the fresh snow to what he knew must be the point. Most of the distance he had been following a deep arroyo to his left. He knew it was the arroyo where the cliff swallows nested in the summer, but all he could now see was a deep shadow in the grayness.

Leaving his truck on the top of a ridge, Charlie slid down the embankment on his seat and walked across what in wetter seasons might be called a slew.

He crossed the flatness, looking for open spaces, patches of snow that might cover expanses of sand large enough to hide a couple of school buses. Across the wide channel where the two arroyos met, Charlie thought he saw something standing near the north bank.

With his revolver drawn, and ignoring its icicle coldness, he stalked boldly toward the towering figure only to see it shrink before his eyes and resolve itself into a pipe about four inches in diameter. He rested the barrel of his pistol on the top of the three-foot tall pipe and tried to imagine the distance between the two bulls. The picture had been taken from a considerable height. Were they twenty feet apart? Forty? Peering into the snow, he discerned another wavering indistinctness about thirty feet from him along the bank. If it wasn't a person or a fence post, it could be another pipe.

Moving cautiously, ever aware of the pipe receding behind him, he approached the figure and placed his free hand on it. Another pipe. It was cold, but not as cold as he had expected. Glancing back at the first pipe to make sure it hadn't moved, he lowered his nose to the pipe he held and sniffed. He drew his head back and almost gagged. He had waded through blood in slaughter houses. He had castrated hogs with his teeth. He had endured the smoky stench at a rendering works. But this was worse. It was human.

What he did next almost brought his breakfast up. He put his mouth to the pipe and yelled "Hello?" Immediately, he turned his head to place his ear at the end of the pipe. The shrieks from inside told him all he needed to know.

Clumsily, blindly, he ran across the frozen channel and fought to scale the south bank. He failed on his first two tries before discovering an angling path the cattle had worn into the bank in their treks to water. Reaching the top of the ridge, he stumbled toward a vagueness he hoped was his Jeep. It

bounced on the gray horizon before him and shrank maddeningly into the snowy distance. Stretching, extending his arms for it, begging it not to disappear entirely, he fell at last onto the driver's side front fender and leaned heavily against it, panting hoarsely.

He cried from the exertion. Each breath shredded his throat. His hands and arms were numb with cold and his legs trembled as he moved down the side of the Jeep and tugged at the door. Opening it at last, he turned the radio on.

"Kandi? Kandi? Kandi?" he panted into the mike. "Kandi? For God's sake answer."

The voice when it came was cautious. "Who is this, really?"

"Kandi, I've found 'em. I've found 'em. They are buried. Just like the other. Buried east of the buttes." He was still wheezing and his words came only when he could spare the breath. "They're in the ground where the two major arroyos meet. Where North Pawnee Creek starts."

"If this is you again, Grover, I'm going to kill you."

"Oh, no," Charlie cried. "No. Not again. How stupid can I be. *Not again.*"

After a moment Kandi broke the silence. "That *is* you, isn't it, Charlie?" The radio beneath the dash crackled as the voice awaited a response. "Charlie?" she tried again.

No answer.

Audibly, the radio in Charlie's Jeep clicked off.

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19

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Rescue

The Tidley brothers and Wiley Wentworth went outside the Sligo Cafe and looked into the snowy, lowering clouds as wave after wave of helicopters wafted invisibly over their heads. Some thudded. Some thumped. And some clacked, but whenever one flight sounded into the distance toward the buttes, it was replaced by another.

Across the street the vendors at the psychic fair tied their canvas shutters to their frames and joined the procession of cars heading east down Main Street. One after the other, more even than during Rodeo Days in early June, the cars--their lights illuminating the firefly-sized snowflakes--slid past the boys, the packed snow on the gravel street eerily muffling the hurried procession. The chilled air carried a hush of whispers as quiet as those filtered through a thick comforter to warm ears. Because of this close, comforting silence--made seemingly more secure by the snow diminished horizon--the boys felt warmer than the temperature suggested.

Even so, after learning they could stuff their fists no farther into their pockets and that they were shivering, the boys finally returned to the counter inside the cafe and to the hot coffee in their mugs. Wiley turned on his stool and discovered that the lighted cafe made the world outside the window dark.

"Sheriff Charlie Waggles has done it again." The voice came from the television set above the boys' heads. "He said it would take him two or three days to do it, and he has done it in two. His report of the discovery came into the Ault sub-station of the Weld County Sheriff's office a little before noon today and from there the location of the buried bus was broadcast to all authorities.

"As you can see across the river bed, dimly I must admit, men are at this moment digging the bus free. One of the rescuers has managed to talk to its occupants and they are all alive and apparently in good health. They do, however, complain of being tired, dirty, and hungry for what the girl called *real* food.

"The questions we reporters have been asking each other is *Who would have done this?* and *Where is Sheriff Waggles?* We haven't been able to find him, although we have found another man who *claims* to be the Weld County Sheriff." The reporter, Casey Carruthers, pushed her cheek out with her tongue.

"We know this scenario all too well, don't we, Casey?" The face now on the screen was that of the anchor in New York City. He lifted his eyes knowingly. "They come out of the woodwork, don't they?" Trying to act nonchalant, he slid a paper in front of him on the desk and read it quickly. "In a related story," he ad-libbed, "I have just been handed a wire dispatch that says the President is at this moment airborne for Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne. When he arrives, besides greeting the captive girls, he plans to

award Sheriff Waggles the highest medal available to citizens of this great country."

Reporter Carruthers clutched her coat collar to her throat. "Some of us here feel Sheriff Waggles has left the scene because he wishes for this moment to belong to the girls alone."

"What a guy," the New York anchor said.

The boys at the counter in the cafe were less impressed. "Probably sittin' in front of the T.V. at the Corner Bar in Kimball right now gettin' a laugh out of all this," Wiley spoke honestly.

"And free drinks, too," Harley added, "if I know my Charlie."

Back at the rescue site, one of the airmen extended his arm into the hole his buddies had just dug. "I think they are coming out," Carruthers yelled, interrupting the anchor. "Yes they are coming out."

As she spoke the camera showed hundreds of people sliding down the bank on which she stood and running across the snow toward the buried bus. The reporter, too, was on the run. "We're going to try to get as close as we can," she looked back at the camera. Her face was visible for an instant before she, too, slid down the snow-covered bank.

Wiley and the Tidley brothers' heads tilted from side to side as the camera--held to the shoulder of the running, sliding cameraman--rocked back and forth.

"I can see one of the airmen reaching into the hole," the reporter's breathless voice vibrated as she ran. "He's pulling out the first of the hostages. I can see her arm. It's. It's--" She paused, trying to remember a name. "It's not one of the girls. And it's not the bus driver. It's a younger woman. It's Miss Chelsea Winters. The chaperon on the bus."



"No," Chelsea Winters screamed into the television lights of the world as soon as she saw them. She fell to her knees in the freshly dug sand and snow, but her fists pounded the air. "Never, never, never again," she threatened anyone near, "will I chaperon a bunch of bloody teenaged girls. If the bloody parents," she screamed into the nearest camera, "want their bloody kids to go on these bloody field trips, they can bloody well take them their own bloody selves."

She might have ranted further, but two women her age--apparently fellow teachers--smothered her with their heavy coats and dragged her away from the cameras. Watching the women as they dragged Miss Winters past him was Superintendent Hall who bit his tongue in consternation.

Inez paused to look at the screen. "Serves him right," she said as she pushed a cloth about the counter in front of Harley. "Getting those young out-of-state and out-of-country girls to come here--sight unseen--by telling them Sligo is in the mountains. By the time they pay to get here they have to stay and work to get escape money.

Not interested in Inez' tirade, the boys went back to watching the television where the airmen were pulling the girls from the hole one by one. As soon as they hit the air, they were enveloped in an Air Force blanket and the arms of their parents. Once out, the girls were easy to spot among the milling bodies. Even without the blue woolen blankets around their shoulders, their matted and tangled hair was a dead giveaway. If that wasn't enough, their forked fingers--and those of their mothers--continually poked at the rats' nests on their heads in an effort to look presentable before the cameras.

"Helping me today," reporter Carruthers said, hugging a small woman to her side, is an intern from the journalism school at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Melinda Carmen." Miss Carruthers motioned for her cameraman

to crouch so that more than the top of Carmen's head could be seen by viewers. "I understand that you have just interviewed one of the hostages."

"That's true, Casey," the nervous intern said, looking at her notes more than at the camera. "I didn't get to talk to her much because men, from some agency I have been unable to learn, are corralling them into the helicopters and preparing to take them somewhere."

"But you did get to speak to one of them," reporter Carruthers reassured herself and the anchor in New York.

"Yes, briefly. It was a Linda Gillespie. A freshman cheerleader. She said none of the girls remember what happened. All she could recall was leaving the parking lot of a store in Sidney, Nebraska, and ending up in the buried bus."

"Did she say anything about the inside of the bus?" Casey encouraged, noting by a glance over Miss Carmen's shoulder that no one would be permitted inside for a while except authorities.

"Yes she did," Carmen nodded. "She said some kind of metal plates had been placed over all the windows and doors from the outside and that even by breaking the windows they were unable to get out. She said that until moments ago they did not even know they were buried."

"Didn't know--" Casey tried to break in but corrected herself. "Go on."

Melinda Carmen looked at Casey to be certain she was to continue and received it when the reporter nodded vigorously. "Miss Gillespie said they had plenty of food. She said it was some military stuff in dark green cans. *Military stuff* was her words," Carmen looked at her notes.

Casey Carruthers was as eager as her viewers. "How did they breathe? How did they stay warm?" she pushed the microphone closer.

"There were sleeping bags for everyone, Miss Gillespie told me. And when they awoke the first day, several lights were burning and under one of the lights was information on how to survive."

"Yes?"

"The lights were attached to several batteries and the batteries were attached to two stationary bikes. The directions told them that if they kept peddling they would keep the batteries charged and at the same time circulate fresh air into the bus. Also, they had plenty of extra light bulbs and cases of food. Whoever placed them there must have expected that they would be there a long time."

"Obviously," Casey Carruthers looked into the camera lens, "they underestimated the tenacity of Sheriff Waggles." She struggled with her cold face to force a wink and then asked the question every woman in her audience was aching to know. "How, or rather, where did they go to the bathroom?"

"I asked that, too," Carmen admitted. "She didn't want to talk about it. That's all I could get before they put her on the helicopter," she apologized. "I'm sorry."

As the helicopters on the embankment north of the burial site began lifting into the snow muffled early evening sky, reporter Carruthers recapped for her national audience what she had just witnessed. Before turning the story back to New York City, she asked the questions that had been haunting her.

"What connection," she asked her viewers, "does the buried school bus found yesterday have to this? And just how is Associated Press reporter Gavin Trust involved? As you know, he was found asleep in the bus discovered yesterday. Although Trust has not been charged with any crime,

we have been told that he is still being held in Cheyenne--for medical reasons I believe they said.

"And one final question. Where is this man, this Sheriff Waggles? The world is waiting to give him a pat on the back. And," she forced another cold wink, "a hug from this reporter."

The boys at the counter in the Sligo Cafe continued to sip coffee and watch another recap of the events, a re-hash and a re-re-hash. Inez, having cleaned up for the day, came out from behind the counter and had a busman's holiday by drinking a cup of coffee at her own counter. She watched a panel of experts on terrorists speculate on those behind the kidnapping and sat through a highly inaccurate biography of Charlie. It was difficult to separate Charlie from Old Charlie and the past ten decades seemed to slide into one.

Every time a car passed outside, she turned around to see if it might be Charlie coming in for a late evening snack. But he didn't come. Finally, after even the boys couldn't take any more of the story--as far as television was concerned there was no other news in the world--she ran them out to their trucks and closed up.

The last thing she did was turn off the television set. Casey Carruthers was still out on the prairie east of the buttes. She, and all the other reporters, had been shooed back onto the south bank of the drainage where they had been earlier in the day. For the viewers' benefit, she pointed across the drainage to the burial site. All the television showed was four armed airmen standing in the glare of floodlights. Behind them was the buried bus, the hole leading into it protected by a plastic yellow ribbon with black lettering.

At the back of the building, Inez leaned through the door leading into the grocery store. "I'm going home, Marvel. See you tomorrow."

Inez didn't see Marvel, but she heard her voice. "Okay," she said. "Drive careful."

"I will."

"Haven't seen Charlie yet, have you?"

"Not hide ner hair," Inez' voice echoed in the darkened grocery.

"It figures."

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20

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Miss Teller

The snow blew for days and still Charlie did not put in an appearance at the Sligo Cafe. Even the President, after sharing a press conference with the kidnapped girls and the leader of the Ascenders, had to return to Washington D.C. without awarding Charlie his medal.

For the first five mornings after the rescue, Inez broke ten eggs into a crockery bowl and scrambled them. These she set to one side of the grill. As soon as she saw Charlie's truck pass the front window or heard him in the back room, she was going to spread them over the heat, fry them in butter, and fold them into tortillas.

The first day she let the eggs sit so long in the bowl she had to throw them out. After that, she waited a while--the wait growing shorter each day--then started using them whenever a customer ordered scrambled eggs. On the sixth morning she even quit looking out the window. The traffic at the psychic fair was so great, and the disappointment at seeing another small, sensible foreign car drive past so enervating, that she just gave up. Some days she didn't even bother to wipe the smudges off the cold case window left by the boys when they pressed their noses to inspect the pies.

Bode Road came in one morning about three weeks after Charlie's disappearance and bragged about what a good job Charlie had done in ridding his new house of spooks. "Quiet as a mouse around there, too," he said. "And the wife, well she sleeps better than she has in years. Probably just the comfort of knowing that he's just down the road if we need him again."

On the one month anniversary of Charlie's disappearance, the Tidley brothers came in with a cast iron toy train they had dug up and got into another argument over which was the best all around tractor for the money. Wiley Wentworth calmed the waters when he told them that both their arguments had good points and offered them a hundred dollar bill for the train. He had been flush since renting his lots to the psychic fair.

That settled matters in the cafe for another week until the Tidleys learned that Wiley had taken the toy train into Greeley and gotten three hundred dollars for it. The row that started from that left the cafe quiet for several days because the boys didn't return for fear of running into each other. It was also the time of year when real farmers and ranchers were out in the fields. The cafe always did less business in calving and branding seasons. Wives usually fed their men in the fields.

Gavin Trust, still walking on egg shells at the Associated Press bureau in Denver, came out to do a story on Charlie's disappearance and started a whole new round of controversy. He noted that the mutilations and lights in the sky had stopped with Charlie's disappearance and speculated that the sheriff, himself, had been the target of the aliens all along. After all, the mutilations while Charlie was gone had included the message *Give us Waggles*. Now that they *had* him, they were satisfied.

Business at the psychic fair increased three fold and deputies from the Sheriff's office in Greeley were sent to direct traffic in a town that held only 120 permanent residents. Deputy Grover Ford was in charge. A few even began calling him *Sheriff* when he came into the cafe. But not Inez.

Two incidents happened at the fair that Gavin turned into stories of national interest. The first was the appearance of a scrawny, bedraggled prairie dog that showed up at the fair one morning and tried to reclaim a hole. The picture of the bedraggled creature was compelling. Gavin's words describing its fifteen-mile trek from where it had been dumped taxed credulity, but Disney took an option on the story anyway. His story neglected to tell what became of the rodent.

The second story gained equal dissemination but lacked the emotional appeal. On March fifteenth a bolt of lightning from a dry, blue sky struck and destroyed the cinder block home of the Anchorite. Some fair goers were injured by the flying blocks and all were covered in a blizzard of soft-serve ice cream. Gavin quoted Wiley Wentworth as saying "If Sheriff Waggles was here, we wouldn't have had to clean up anything. We'd a just turned Charlie loose to graze."

Another change in the community was the second floor of the old Opera House. As far as Sligoans were concerned, it was more terrifying than the

lighted window in the movie *Psycho*. Passersby had often thought they saw the curtains move slightly, but now they were sure of it. In fact, one of the curtains in Miss Buelah Teller's apartment was permanently ajar. When Gavin Trust showed up one morning and told Inez that he had been called by Miss Teller, a sepulchral silence descended upon the room.

But the announcement was not unexpected. All morning Miss Teller's curtains had been wide open, and her silhouette--arms akimbo--had darkened the windows. People were afraid to walk the street beneath her gaze. Once the customers scurried into the cafe for protection, Inez couldn't get rid of them.

"I don't like it," Banner Tidley remarked from his stool at the counter. The room, filled with nervous chatter, immediately went silent. Banner seldom offered the first observation on anything. The effect was eerie.

The morning talk show on the television set had already set the patrons on edge. The hosts had just interviewed a psychic diviner who claimed near credit for discovering the girls in the buried school bus. "It was an error anyone could have made," she insisted to the host. "I was only off by a few minutes of a degree." She pinched nothing with her thumb and forefinger to show just how small the error had been.

"And still there are disbelievers," the host marvelled before pausing for some important messages.

"Yeh," Inez agreed with the diviner. "A few minutes of degree. And four hundred miles."

The heads in the room didn't have time to nod in approbation before they were snapped to attention by a loud *Thwack* on the table nearest the front door.

"Get. Your. Shovels."



Wiley, Harley, and Banner didn't have to turn on their stools to identify the voice. A month seldom passed without it terrorizing their dreams. Any reminiscence of the good old days was brought up short by the memory of the Wicked Witch of Prairie View School standing in a bare yard while cowering children filed meekly past her into the cold building.

"But Miss Teller," Wiley tried, "we don't have our shovels with us."

"Get. Shovels." The words had been sliced with a cold cleaver, but it was her eyes that lifted them from their seats and propelled them to the door. Not bothering to watch their exit, Miss Teller sat rigidly in the nearest chair and propped her hands, at arms' length from her body, on the cane she had used to whack the table. "Are you," she addressed Gavin, "the young man to whom I spoke on the phone?"

He could only nod. Though she was enveloped in a long, gray cloth coat of many buttons, he was awed by her thin, poker-erect body. He had seen her kind before. That stern set jaw and severe visage with eyes that could bore through centuries had watched him from the walls of his boyhood home. Those critical eyes had been in the faces of his Mormon ancestors who had pulled and pushed two-wheeled carts along the Oregon Trail. These were the same eyes that at Fort Bridger had cowed mountain man Jim Bridger himself and caused him to flee into the woods to wrestle with a grizzly bear--something he had a chance with.

"I believe you shall have another story," she turned her head to the east wall of the quonset and stared at a 1925 picture of Sligo. "*Meanwhile,*" she spoke to the entire room, "we shall wait."

The boys were back in three minutes, each holding a shovel as if it were a crucifix. They tiptoed to their stools, sat, placed the pointed edges of the shovels on the floor, and held the handles at arms' length in imitation of Miss

Teller. With their eyes on her, they waited. And they waited. Their eyes, like the muzzles of three hungry dogs watching a biscuit, never moved from Miss Teller's profile until a Charlie-sized shadow blocked the door into the cafe.

"Okay, honey," her gum popped. "Where do you want the dog and the tape player?"

Miss Teller's hands and erect body did not move. But her head did. It turned just sufficiently to scrutinize Kandi, the Japanese electronics she carried, and Dog, sporting a wire leg brace. After taking in all the details, her chin and eyes lifted defiantly to Kandi's face. This, she decided--her ancient sphincter tightening--was not the day for the battle of Titans. "There," she pronounced, less harshly than she had spoken to the boys. Her hands rotated her cane tip upward, and it pointed to the lunch counter.

Slapping her clown-sized feet on the floor and rocking her shoulders like a self-conscious fullback, Kandi trundled through the tables and deposited Dog and the tape player on the counter.

Inez eyed the animal's feet on her counter but said nothing.

The tip of the cane came up again and pointed to the tape player. "You may begin." Her eyes narrowed in an attempt to move Kandi's body.

"It's not too good," Kandi said, pushing in between the counter and cold case--displacing Inez--"because I had to record it off the tape at the office."

"The tape. *Pah-leeze*." The pronunciation was a concession to the other real power in the room.

"Okay," Kandi placed her finger on a button, "this is some of the first conversation I had with Charlie. You know, the first school bus?" her gum cracked questioningly.

When she saw Miss Teller's eyes upon her, she pressed the button: "Well, all right then," it was Kandi's voice. "What is it you want?" "Found the bus the girls were last seen on," responded Charlie's voice.

"There," Miss Teller pointed her cane. "Play that last sentence again.

Kandi complied: "Found the bus the girls were last seen on."

Miss Teller shook her head in approval. "You may continue." Her ears, projecting from beneath her severely pulled back gray hair, seemed to rotate toward the expected sound.

Kandi pressed the button again: "Kandi, I've found 'em," came Charlie's voice. "I've found 'em. They are buried. Just like the *other--*"

"That will be fine, thank you, Kandi." Miss Teller had one hand in the air and her head bowed. When she took a deep breath, her head came up like a filling balloon and she fixed her eyes on the ceiling. "I have had occasion before to remonstrate with Charles on his lamentable diction," she breathed in sharply and lowered her gaze. "Still," she conceded, "he says what he means."

Everyone in the room waited for the explanation. Gavin had his notebook out. "Yes?" he asked.

Miss Teller ignored him and re-searched the ceiling for a memory. "I recall that in the fourth grade he had such wonderful diction," she reminisced wistfully. "I can still remember his stirring rendition of *Casa Bianca*. He was so forceful. His little feet spread and planted firmly on the deck. School room floor, I mean." The memory caused her to remove her hand from her chest and place it atop the one on the cane.

Harley forgot himself. "Little feet? Little?" he asked. "What was little about Charlie?"

Her face leveled on Harley, her lower lip pugnaciously arching her upper. "I believe the polite term for Charles at that age would have been *Husky*."

"Miss Teller," Gavin lost his patience. "What does all this mean?"

"You heard distinctly for yourself," she gathered her collar about her throat. "When Charles means one he says *The*, as in *the* bus the girls were on. When he means more than one he says"--and it was difficult for her--"*Em*. He used to say *them*."

"But," Gavin pointed out, "he could have been talking about the girls."

"As you recall, young man, two school buses were taken. A large one, in which the girls were held captive, and a smaller twelve-passenger vehicle. That vehicle is still missing. It requires no great leap of fancy to surmise that Charles is at this moment buried in that smaller bus somewhere in the vicinity of the first."

"But," Gavin again protested, "Charlie's Jeep was found parked behind his trailer last week. No one knows how long it's been there. Maybe the whole time."

Miss Teller's eyes narrowed on Gavin. "Young man, I have some advice for you. If you wish to flourish in your chosen profession, I suggest you simply follow and report. Speculative cogitation is obviously not your forte." She threatened the others in the cafe with her eyebrows. "Are we ready?" When they didn't answer, she nodded to Kandi. "Bring the dog."

"I'll bring Charlie's Jeep," Inez included herself on the expedition. "I've had it parked out back for safe keeping." Before she left to follow the others, she got out a felt-tipped pen and a sheet of paper and scrawled an announcement on it in big letters. Then she taped it to the outside door.

**Cafe Closed, it said. Gone to Resurrect Charlie.**

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## Ducklings

For the first two miles Miss Teller led the way, peering over the ferris-sized wheel of her 1953 green Chrysler. Impatient with the progress, however, Inez, in Charlie's pickup, sped into the lead. Sitting beside her was the now mature, though still shepherd sized, Dog. He could finally see out the windows, and, though he wasn't sure about the driver, he was sure about the pickup.

When she passed the buttes, Inez held her arm out the window, palm up--as if to ask "Where now?"--and Wiley took the lead in his International pickup. He led the rest of the way, past Three Tanks, and right up to the south bank overlooking the burial site of the girls' bus. The Tidley brothers were in the last vehicle, but they shouldn't have been. Gavin had been bringing up the rear. When the boys banged out of their truck and looked back, they understood why. Gavin was running across the prairie. His tiny car, nosed into a depression the other vehicles had negotiated without trouble, was a half mile back. The boys waited for Gavin to catch them and climbed back into their pickup cab just as he jumped into the back. When they caught up with the others, they were already standing on the bank overlooking the drainage.

"The dog?" Miss Teller rotated her head and discovered the animal standing next to Inez. His attention was directed into the eyes of each adult. He wanted to know what the game was. "Miss Botts?" Miss Teller flipped her eyes up from Dog to Inez. "Is there something in Charlies' vehicle which may still retain his scent?"

"His hat," Inez remembered. "His hat was found resting on the seat." She opened the door, retrieved it, and handed it to Miss Teller."

She stooped, using her cane for support, and motioned to Dog. "Come here, you. Come here." After she encouraged him with a motion of Charlie's hat. Dog sidled cautiously closer, watching the others' eyes to see if it was safe. Their eyes were uncertain.

"Now smell this." Miss Teller held the hat in front of Dog's nose. He sniffed it curiously, questioning the intentions of the strange, old woman. "Go find your master," she whispered.

For a moment Dog stood on the brown, but greening, prairie and eyed the hat and Miss Teller balefully. Then his tongue lolled out of his mouth and he gamboled in a clumsy circle, dragging the wire walking brace he was compelled to wear until his wounds healed completely. Dog knew what was wanted. He and Charlie had played this game in Tucson. Charlie would hide among the rocks and trees down on Bear Creek, and he would have to nose him out.

Seeing that Dog understood, Miss Teller encouraged him. "Go for him, Toby."

"Toby's not his name," Harley corrected. "It's *Dog*."

For his trouble, Harley received a withering glare from Miss Teller. "You never really did read that Sherlock Holmes' book you reported on, did you?" Harley decided to blend into the scenery, a difficult task on the prairie.

Dog started his search by dragging his brace up and down the edge of the arroyo, sniffing the breeze like a bull searching for a cow in estrus. Finding nothing, he became more animated and tried to discover a way down the embankment and into the channel. The sand, where it wasn't muddy and spongy, was patched with dingy snow. On the far bank, drifts of snow still found shelter beneath overhangs.

"Over here, Dog." The encouragement came from Kandi who had found the path the cattle used to get to water. Accompanying her, and watching the watermelon pistoning of her thighs, was Wiley. He knew her from bars around Greeley.

Once Dog found his way down to the stream bed, he was the acknowledged leader. The seven humans followed him as if they were his extended tail. Miss Teller would permit Kandi, Inez, or Wiley to come between her and Dog, but if the Tidleys or Gavin crowded in front, they were whacked for their efforts.

After taking a couple laps of the scant water in the drainage, just to taste it, Dog headed north until he found the disturbed sand where the large school bus had been buried. By the end of the spring rains, this site would be indistinguishable from any other portion of the sandy draw.

Still with his nose in the air, and circling, Dog led the procession west toward the buttes. They towered precipitously above the intrepid seven, threatening to topple and bury them if the clouds moved another inch and bumped them.

The scent of an animal's tracks in the moist sand distracted Dog for a moment. Wiley correctly identified the tracks as "Probably a bobcat. No toenails." When Dog was about two hundred yards higher in the drainage

than the discovered school bus, he turned and faced into the breeze coming up from the east.

Sniffing the various shelves of what to him was an invisible pantry of aroma, he caught something that wetted his delight and he yapped once and renewed the procession. After retracing their steps for 50 yards, Dog veered left, stopped, and turned back to look at Miss Teller. He wanted his reward.

"Pipes," Wiley yelled and pointed. "Two of them, just over there."

A scant hundred yards up from where the first bus had been found were two pipes, identical to the ones Charlie had discovered. Since the second bus was smaller, the pipes were closer to the north embankment and apparently--or intentionally--were easy to overlook. Miss Teller, slower than the others, brought up the rear but had the presence of mind to rap stoutly on the first pipe with her cane. Dog leaned against the other pipe with his good forepaw. He had won the game and was waiting for his ears to be scratched at least.

"Try the other pipe," Wiley encouraged Miss Teller. The seven of them, as well as Dog, encircled the second pipe and she gave it a good banging.

The delayed reply came from the first pipe behind them. It was a Rap, rap-rap Rap rap to which Miss Teller immediately replied--rap, Rap.

Banner's shovel starting flailing the sand followed quickly by Harley's and Wiley's. Miss Teller ignored their efforts until she had poked the sand sufficiently with her cane. "Over here, you fools." They looked at her dumbly before trotting over to excavate the tiny hole left by her cane. The spot she had chosen was the northwest corner. "It's a small bus," she explained to Kandi as the men worked and Gavin watched. "They probably drove it west up the draw and then backed it east into the hole."

"There's a big rock down here," Wiley complained after fifteen minutes' work. "It's blocking the door. And there's metal in back of that to boot."



"Well," Miss Teller huffed, "dig around it until we can get some muscle in there to move it." She looked at Gavin but discarded that notion in a hurry. "Miss Kandi," her eyebrows arched and then indicated the lightweights in the hole.

Kandi waded down into the pit the three boys had dug and marshal led them aside with the bulk of her upper arms. She then climbed atop the rock blocking the door and measured its heft with her feet. Sliding down behind it, she straddled it, braced her back and ample buttocks against the door, and gave a mighty heave with her arms.

The boulder moved enough for her to scrunch further down behind it. She then put her back to the bus and her feet to the rock and pushed. "Give me some help, you idiots," she grunted as it moved. "Get down here and push with me."

Wiley and Banner slid into the pit, but Miss Teller grabbed Harley. "Take this shovel. Go on, take it. Dig a little ledge for them to rest the boulder on. We don't want to waste all morning getting it to the level of the creek bed."

The tactics worked. With Wiley's and Banner's shoulders on each side of Kandi's feet, they moved the rock to the newly dug bench. It rested about six feet from the door but three feet from the top of the hole. The only thing keeping the metal-shielded door from opening now was an iron bar thrust through three eyelets. Kandi removed it and lunged against the door, causing it to give inward.

Without consulting each other, she, Wiley, and Banner scrambled out of the pit. Only dog had the courage to inspect the bus. He slid down the sand and disappeared into the darkness. Almost instantly he backed out, not sure of what he had found.

"You better back out of here you plump, hobbled sewer rat," the voice inside advised. "You're the closest thing to real food I've seen in what must be months."

"Charlie," Inez called and knelt at the edge of the pit. All but Miss Teller joined her in that position, but the old teacher moved to find her own point of advantage. No response to Inez' call came from the bus, but the long fingers of a slender hand curled around the door jamb and into the light.

"Charles?" This time it was Miss Teller's voice. "If that's you in there, come on out this instant."

Another hand curled around the opposite door jamb. Together, the fingers of both hands tightened and pulled a body into the light. The eyes that looked up into the sun for the first time in six weeks were lost in a tangled coppice of hair and beard. The body, nearly skeletal, barely rustled the enveloping tent of clothing.

"That you, Charlie?" Banner asked and looked to his brother. "Maybe we dug up the wrong bus."

"Who'd you expect," a foreign voice issued from the thatch of beard. It completely lacked its old timbre, the basso profundo that resides within bulk.

Harley looked at the *Dickie* work clothes hanging from Charlie's frail shoulders. "Dirty as a diaper," he sniffed.

"What a filthy mess," Inez shielded her nose.

Gavin put pencil to notebook and wrote the word *stench*.

"Such an execrable mess I've never seen," scolded Miss Teller. "Now get yourself out of that hole and let's get you cleaned up."

Banner was still befuddled. "That's not Charlie, is it Harley?"

"Well," Harley considered, "with all the hair and whiskers it's hard to tell, but the body does remind me of old *Slim* Waggles. You remember Slim.

That's what we called Charlie for the four or five months there when he spurted up tall and the rest of him was about half a year catchin' up."

"Slim Waggles," Banner remembered vaguely.

"When you Yahoos get tired of lookin' at high school yearbooks, you might extend me a hand and get me out of this little Chateau D'if."

"You too weak to get out, Charlie," Gavin asked, still taking notes.

"Weak my eye," Charlie scoffed. "I must have rode that bicycle in there a million miles. All of it uphill against a force five gale. No I ain't weak. I just want you to hold onto me lessen I float right out of this hole and don't stop risin'."

Three hands were extended.

"But wait," he pushed their hands back with his palms. "There's a couple of things I want done first and done immediately."

"What's that, Charlie?"

"First off, what day of the week is it?"

"Monday, isn't it?" Wiley asked Harley who agreed.

"Monday," Charlie considered. "The big Rocky Mountain oyster fry at the Rock Port Inn." He could taste them. "Okay," he looked back up at the people rimming the hole, the welcome blue sky smiling beyond their heads. "Call my bank in Hereford and tell them to open me a line of credit."

"We can do that."

"And second, call the Rock Port Inn and warn them that I'm comin'." With the promises made, he grabbed two of the extended hands and almost sprang to the surface. "Wow," he took a deep breath. "Does that prairie smell good?"

While Charlie breathed deeply, the Tidleys and Wiley slid down the hole and entered the buried bus. Almost immediately they fell over each other in their efforts to get out. "That ain't Charlie up there," Wiley laughed while trying

to cover his nose and crawl out of the hole at the same time. "It's an impostor. The real Charlie's stacked in one corner of the bus down there. At least the better half of him is."

Charlie ignored them and continued to enjoy the air.

"Tell me, Charlie," Gavin asked the obvious, "aren't you grateful to at last be out of that hole?"

"If I have one thing to thank the Lord for, Corn Plant, it's not for my freedom. It's for something I've discovered in the past weeks that's a lot more precious."

With his pencil poised, Gavin bit. "What's that, Charlie?"

"Olfactory fatigue."

"And, Charles," Miss Teller spoke, trying to be uncharacteristically polite, "speaking of the olfactory, would you please stand down wind from us."

"Little gamy, huh?"

"Gamy was Noah's Ark," she explained. "This is more of the Chicago stock yards of *The Jungle* era," she explained. "A book I loaned you years ago, much to my regret. All you could remember from it was that the children's ears froze and snapped off when their father tried to warm them by rubbing them."

"Ears," Charlie hummed. "Roasting ears. Lots of butter."

"Come on, Charlie," Inez said, taking control, but not before looking to Miss Teller for permission. "Let's get you out of here and get you fed. And thank the lord it's not my place you've picked. Now get on up that bank there. I've got your Jeep and I'll drive you to your trailer so you can shave and clean up. A haircut'll have to wait."

"But I can drive," he protested. "I may not look it, but I'm stronger than before. Shucks, rich fat folks would pay a fortune to be put through the regimen I just survived."

"No one said you couldn't drive. All I'm saying is that until you get cleaned up only Dog and I will be occupying the front seat. You are taking the first leg of the journey in the back."

Gavin kept Charlie company in the truck bed for the first half mile. Then he got off, waved good-bye, and waited for Wiley and Kandi to catch up so he could extract his car from the depression. Wiley said he would use a chain, but Kandi told him it would be quicker if she just lifted it out.

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Back in his *own* trailer, Charlie was manic with joy. He sang as he clipped his beard and made a few hacking motions at his hair. While under the shower the refrain "Back in the saddle again" echoed and re-echoed through the trailer. "I don't remember this shower stall being so *large*," he yelled at Inez.

She had managed to find Dog an unopened can of food and they were out on the front porch. She glanced back into the trailer once and saw the new Charlie dancing with a dirty towel. She had never known he could be so slim or so muscular. For *some* reason she was reminded of the lady who rented the land for the fair from Wiley.

"That woman from Sedona sold her interest in the psychic fair," she called. "I think she got a quarter million in cash for it." She listened for a comment but heard none. "I wouldn't have known except that she dropped in one day, nice woman in her way. She told me to tell you good-bye if I ever saw you again."

"Is that food I smell out there?"

"Yes, but Dog beat you to it. So ha!"

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On the road to Rock Port, the only manifestation of civilization on U.S. 85 between Nunn and Cheyenne, Charlie caught up on six weeks of his life.

"I suppose I'll have to start looking for a job in a couple of days or so," he sobered at the prospect.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Inez said. She was still driving and Dog sat between them. "You got a job."

"But they fired me."

"That was before you came back. Since you've been missing the state legislature has passed a resolution asking the county to take you back--which it did, reluctantly--and they voted you your back wages to boot, all six months of it. And that's not the half of it. As soon as Gavin gets the word out and they find you're still alive, you'll have to fly to Washington."

"Washington?"

"The president wants to put something around your neck and get his picture taken with you."

"But what about this prejudice rap they hung on me."

"It seems," she sighed as if even she couldn't believe it, "that you were right on all counts. Those six *Wets*--and she used the word--"you threw off the box car, remember those?"

He did.

"Well, it seems that they took the bus tickets the county gave them and cashed them in as soon as they hit Cheyenne. Then they hopped another train for Chicago. Once they got there, they used the money from the tickets to buy a gun and held up a series of liquor and convenience markets. Get

this," she smiled at Charlie. "They hid the gun in the sling of the one who was supposed to have broken his collar bone."

"He didn't?"

"It was an intern who read the x-ray. That was an old break. The wet just knew how to act. He faked the symptoms. And as far as the public is concerned--at least what I've seen of it on the television--they wish you had thrown them all out on their *heads*. There's a group in California that'll pay your way out and put you up if you'll just come out there as a symbol."

"Is the worm really turning?" Charlie's question was to his own amazed eyes.

"The whole episode has spawned a new graffiti on the box cars of the West," Inez smiled, knowing how Charlie would relish this. "What is appearing now is *Charlie is Watching*."

"I like that," Charlie admitted. "But I'd prefer a drip of water, ringed in with a circle, and a bar slanting diagonally across the circle and the drip."

"Too subtle, Charlie. But what I'd really like to know personally--and what most people in general would like to know--is if you are really prejudiced."

Charlie considered. "I don't really know what the word means. I know what the apologists for the Wets want me to think it means. But I don't know," he looked out the window at the prairie. "All I know about my *prejudice* is that I'm either guilty of it, or I'm guilty of a lifetime of very telling and very accurate observation."

"Why don't you just quit worrying about the whole fiasco like most folks and just let nature take its course? You know, survival of the fittest?"

They were turning right out of country road I22 and onto the highway to Rock Port. "It's not *Darwin's* law that I'm worried about," he confessed. "It's Gresham's."

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Word of Charlie's resurrection had reached the masses and the parking lot was filled. There was no room in the lot, so Charlie was permitted to pull around back and park by the restaurant owner's residence.

The cafe ran out of oysters early. Since Charlie was eating them, everyone had to have a plateful. Most of those served were breaded and fried--Charlie's favorite--but they also came baked, pickled, and boiled in stews. Sliced cold and put between pieces of bread with plenty of mayonnaise and onions was the way most rookies took them. And they were good that way.

After the oysters and the accompanying pitchers of beer, Charlie grazed through the menu. Nothing the cook brought him was refused. When the ice box and the freezer were exhausted, he raided the bar side of the cafe and decimated the racks of potato chips, Slim Jims, Blind Robbins, Fritos, and crackers. Even the Atomic Eggs.

About two in the morning, while Inez collapsed over a table in the bar from exhaustion and Dog cowered under a nearby table for protection from feet, Charlie stumbled out the back door of the cafe and collapsed to his knees onto the concrete porch.

The Chinese elms, always an ugly but hardy tree, swayed their naked upper branches, beckoning him into the darkness beyond. He rocked his head with their motion and talked incoherently to them. Maybe it was the satellite passing overhead, maybe it was the motion of the trees, or the sudden boom of a night hawk. Maybe. But probably it was the metric tons of protein and cellulose and starch and fat and carbohydrates and fluids he had consumed in the past three hours.



The old Charlie might have been able to handle it. But the new Charlie had been weened on crackers out of cans and biscuits that would have made a pirate homesick. The pressure was too much, and he relieved it with a force that would have impressed even John Colter on that first day he stumbled into the Yellowstone thermal basin. It arched into the night, glistened under the flood lamps above him, and splattered into the Rock Port proprietor's yard beyond.

While Charlie slept, his cheek against the cool concrete of the porch, three baby ducks, possibly confused by the noise or the flooding of light into their nighttime sanctuary, waddled toward Charlie and inspected his spew. It was a veritable harvest of their favorite foods.

As they fed, Charlie raised his head painfully from the concrete porch and saw before him--as it trailed off the porch and into the yard--the remains of his Roman repast. He recognized the potatoes. He remembered them well. He recognized the undigested oysters. Those he really remembered. He even remembered the hamburger, the lamb, and the spaghetti. The dinner rolls he remembered. He remembered eating the Fritos and Atomic Eggs and Blind Robbins and popcorn. But? But?

"I'll be hornswoggled he uttered before his cheek hit the concrete again, "if I can remember eating the baby ducks."

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## Interview

A week later, and still not sure about the baby ducks--Inez continued to insist that he had eaten them and he was in no position to dispute the contention--he called Gavin Trust at the Associated Press bureau in Denver.

"If you want to be in on the end," he told Gavin, "you'd better get your tail out here. It's liable to come tonight or within the next two. I'll be at the trailer. Come about dark."

Gavin wanted to ask what was special about those nights, but Charlie hung up. He was anxious to go but knew the boss wouldn't let him off on anything that had to do with Charlie. After sleeping through the discovery of the first bus and after being held by the military police while the girls were rescued from the second bus--and leaving the AP without a firsthand source at the scene--he was fortunate to have a job at all. Even so, to get out of the office by late afternoon he began complaining first of a headache, then about a fever, and finally about an upset stomach. When even that was questioned, he surreptitiously gagged himself and spewed proof of his dyspepsia on the floor.

It worked as well as holding his breath and turning blue had when he was a child, but at least this time he didn't have to be prayed over by doting parents. The only eyes he had to face were those of the reporter called in from his single day off to take his place.

Even with all that, he arrived at Charlie's trailer next to the Sligo Cemetery much later than he had intended. The trailer was dark and Charlie's pickup was gone. "Charlie?" he called timidly as he cracked the door of his car. "You around?"

"That you, Corn Plant?"

The voice came from above causing Gavin to re-close his door and hunker down.

"Up here, Corn Plant," Charlie called again. "We're up here on top of the trailer."

Gavin leaned over to his passenger side window and looked up. At first he saw nothing, and then he saw only motion. It proved to be Dog, standing on an upper bale of the straw insulation and looking down at him. A darker shadow, Charlie's, loomed thinly behind him.

"Park your vehicle behind the trailer next to mine," Charlie called down. "You'll find the ladder up. Can't be too careful with them Colleens for Charlie snoopin' around again. They've been past here a couple of times tonight already. It's all I can do to keep Dog from growling at them, though I can't blame him."

Gavin chugged his smoking car around back and parked it behind Charlie's Jeep. When he got to the top of the ladder, he saw that Charlie had carried a couple of folding chairs up and positioned them atop some of the planks that held the tarp down. He had also carried up his telephone and a

shuttered Coleman lantern which emitted a muted light. It sat in the middle of an old tire, also holding down the tarp.

"Watch that you step on the planks, Corn Plant. I can't afford having you crash through to my living room." Dog came over and inspected his pant leg. "You can manage to stay awake for *this* one, can't you?" chided Charlie.

"You never explained what happened to me on the bus."

"Can't say for certain," Charlie speculated, "but there appears to be something going around. Kind of a sudden narcolepsy. People just falling asleep. Banner, you know--the guy the angels got first--, had a spell of it in the Sligo Cafe a while back. Caused some little concern, but it passed."

"And you've never told anyone how you got into that little bus, either."

"That's why we're here tonight, Corn Plant. With a little celestial help you'll get all the answers you want and a whole passel of recent problems around here will be brung to a halt."

In the sudden silence that followed, Charlie and Gavin looked into the moonless sky. The stars, freed from the pollution of city lights, hovered expectantly. The only sound was the clank, clank, clank of Dog traipsing up and down the length of the trailer to investigate imaginary sounds or to stir up some activity where he could find none.

"I've got a contract," Gavin spurted after listening to Dog, "to interview you for a national magazine."

"Oh?" Charlie's intonation could have been ridicule or interest. "Which one?"

"*People*. They want a story on *you*. The real you. One of the editors said they already know the myth.

"Sometimes," Charlie observed, and opened the shutter on the lantern a notch, "myth is just fact that's been fortified a little." When Gavin didn't

respond Charlie had to prod him. "Well, come on, Corn Plant. Get your notebook out and start. What'd you think I opened the light for. To attract miller moths and crazy widows?"

Gavin opened his ubiquitous notebook. "I'm not sure where to start."

"Why not with my granddaddy.?"

"Okay," he scribbled, "but first, I want to know why you weren't concerned about the dead cow in the cellar? The one the four boys by the church told you about."

Charlie, just a wisp of his former self, chuckled in the dark. "Odd you didn't ask me about them colored cubes long ago. Don't you remember? One of them yahoos said they were trapped souls."

Gavin's words were unintelligible and Charlie made him repeat them. "Because," he nearly yelled, "I drove out there and looked at them."

"Salt blocks for the cows, weren't they?"

Charlie made him repeat his answer again. "Yes," he snapped petulantly, "but that doesn't answer the cow in the cellar."

"No mystery there either. The cow got curious, looked down the cellar, fell down the steps, broke her leg and died in there. She was too far gone for the rendering boys by the time I found her, so I just put the first thing I could find--an old, dead elm limb--across the steps to discourage other cows."

"But how did you know the cow was there at all? The cellar is flat to the ground and a hundred yards from the road."

Fortunately, because of the darkness, Gavin couldn't see Charlie's exasperation. "Magpies, Corn Plant, don't usually collect out in the middle of nowhere unless there's something. And magpies are meat eaters. You see a bunch of them, you wonder." His open palms held the darkness to show that it was obvious.

Gavin leaned closer to the slit of light from the lantern and completed his note. "Okay, now your granddad."

"Now there's an interesting story, my granddaddy," Charlie relished the change. "His was a virgin birth."

"Oh, come on, Charlie."

"Don't look at me," Charlie said as if Gavin could see in the dark. "That's the way my granddad, Old Charlie Waggles, always told it. He said his folks had homesteaded some land west of what is today Sterling. They had the land, you see, but that wasn't enough. To prove it up they had to put in a well and fence and so on. Anyway, according to Old Charlie, they each took jobs at ranches along the South Platte to raise the necessary cash.

"The two of them, my great grandparents, you understand, had jobs about twelve miles apart. Well, each Sunday they'd pack a lunch and walk six miles toward each other. They met at a cottonwood tree about midway between them. Wasn't hard to find since there weren't many trees then. In fact, there was two trees in one place and people built a town around them. It's called Iliff. It's on the Platte. You can find it on a map."

"Forget the trees. What about the virgin birth."

"Well, the way Old Charlie told it, he said his parents told him they met there every Sunday until they raised enough money to get help sinking a well. All they ever did, he said, was sit and watch the scenery and eat their picnic lunches. So, as he said it, he figured his had to be a virgin birth."

Gavin snorted.

"Course it was better when he told it. He remembered the little details that escape me. You know, the fresh linen, the butter pickles, fresh bread, and the hard boiled eggs."

"But what about your parents?"

"Had two of 'em." He offered no more and waited for the next question.

"Well, what about when you were young?"

"My youth?" Charlie stalled. "Well, you may find this hard to believe, but I was born small. I got my growth on jack rabbits. About all I ate during the Depression. In fact, for a while there, I thought I was turning into a jack rabbit."

Gavin shook his head wearily but wrote it down anyway.

"Scoff if you will, but I came close to having long ears. There was a time there that whenever I heard a strange dog bark I lit out for cover. Course we finally got enough rain that the bean crop came in and I could get some of *that* kind of protein. It was a close call, though. That was about the time that new game was all the rage. Catchin' rattlesnakes and countin' the rattles."

This impressed Gavin.

"Probably sounds pretty tame to a rounder like you, Corn Plant, but we got a kick out of it. Even after we wore it out, we managed to keep our interest up. Course we had to change the rules a little." He turned slowly to inspect the stars to the east. "Blindfolded and barehanded *did* put a new spark into the old game."

Afraid to miss anything, even if it weren't true, Gavin scribbled hurriedly. He could hardly see his writing. "Slow down. I can't get it all. I won't be able to remem--" He didn't finish but kept scratching his pencil against the pad. "Is a sheriff all you ever wanted to be?"

"Pretty much, though there was a time in high school when I was all in a sweat to be a horologist." After a suitable pause he added, "But then I found out what it really was."

Gavin wrote w-h-o-r and then stopped, wondering if the *E* was dropped before *ologist*. He would look it up later.

"Then there was the time I had my heart set on being a remittance man, but I didn't have the parentage for it."

*Remittance*, Gavin wrote. Another word to look up.

"If you're looking for promise of leadership, I think I have the incident for you. A real case of leadership, it was. There was this three-story hotel in Buckingham and it caught fire. Don't go looking for Buckingham, now," he inclined the shadow of his head to Gavin. "That's been torn all down. Anyway, the longest ladder they had reached only to the second floor, and the man they were trying to rescue was sitting on a third floor window ledge. I was proud of myself for what I did," he leaned back in the folding chair. "Quick thinking for a ten year old."

Gavin finally stopped writing and took two deep breathes. "What'd you do?"

"Wasn't much when you think back on it, but I ran to the hardware store next door and got a length of rope. Then I ran back outside and tossed one end to the man on the ledge. 'Tie it around your waist,' I remember yelling up to him. And he did. Then I tied the other end to the front bumper of the fire truck."

"But I don't get it," Gavin was puzzled. "How'd that help. How'd that show you were a take charge person at ten?"

"Where's your mind, Corn Plant? While all those adults were running around not knowing what to do and doing nothing. I did something. I pulled him down."

Charlie seemed satisfied with the story and rocked back in his chair. "Them was the days," he agreed with himself. "But even then something was wrong. My granddaddy saw it. 'The world's goin' to Hell in a hand basket,' he used to say. In fact, my daddy used to echo it, too. 'The world's going to Hell



in a hand basket." Charlie mouthed the sentence to himself. "And now I'm sayin' it."

"And you were all wrong?" Gavin asked. He didn't see the point.

"Wrong?" Charlie gasped as if he couldn't believe Gavin's ignorance. "No way were they wrong. And I'm not wrong. And anyone who thinks about it knows it."

"Then why isn't someone doing something about it?"

"The short and simple of it, Corn Plant, is that everybody thinks he's got a piece of the action in hand basket sales."

Gavin tried to let it sink in, but the image of a hand basket kept floating in his brain. Finally he gave up and trusted to his notes. He'd have time to go over them later and make sense of them. "You never married, Charlie."

"That's right, Corn Plant. I've never had the benefit of clergy."

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it says

"But you've been a bachelor a long time. Think you'll ever get married?"

"Can't say. Haven't given it a whole lot of thought, though others have."

"But what if opportunity just up and fell in your lap? Would you get married then?"

"Well," Charlie considered and glanced again to the east, "at this stage of my life it's hard to say. Course if opportunity did fall in my lap, and if she wanted my whole-hearted and undivided attention, she'd have to fall into my lap face down."

Gavin didn't know whether to finish writing *that* response or not. He wasn't even sure how to word it. Or if *People* magazine would print it if he could find the words.

"If you ever get to be my age, Corn Plant, you'll see your values and tastes change. Women's a good example. Used to be I was choosy. I was concerned about what a woman looked like and what other people thought of her. You know, every thing that makes absolutely no real difference. Now a days, about the only thing I can ask for in a woman is that it be *dark*."

Gavin had stopped writing, but it wasn't because of the subject. The moon was rising in the east. "Look, Charlie. There's the top edge of the moon."

"Moon?" Charlie inquired mildly. "Odd, seein' as how this is the new moon, meaning *no* moon. A *black* moon. What you're seeing over there is why I called you. That UFO you folks have been so interested in."

"The one that put you on the butte? The one that mutilated all those animals?"

"The same," Charlie gazed calmly to the east. "What say we saunter on over there and have a look see?"

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23

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### Very Close Encounter

"It's fading," Gavin whispered. "It's going away."

"It won't go far," Charlie promised, picking up the phone and pushing the buttons more by feel than sight. It was answered immediately. "Kandi?" he called in a subdued voice even though the glow had been three or four miles away. "Radio the troops and tell them to stand by. "We're gonna reel this catfish in tonight."

Kandi was more frazzled than usual. "Where," she chewed like sixty, "are they supposed to go? They're going to ask?"

"I'll radio the location at the last minute and not an instant before. If I tell now, they'll just mess it up."

Charlie could hear a rustling at the other end and when a voice spoke it wasn't Kandi's. "Waggles? This is agent Akorn. We met in Denver at the Brown Palace. You've got to tell us. We've got to be ready for any contingency. We've got to know what type of beings we'll be required to handle."

"Angels," Charlie told him. "Mama's little angels. Each and every one of 'em."

"Waggles, I'll have your ass."

"Suit yourself," Charlie relented, "but it's a bit spare at the moment." He patted his rear and felt little more than billfold. "Give me a few more weeks at the Quonset Cafe, though, and I'll put a cute little swell in it that'll make you sit right up and take notice."

"Waggles," he lost it and screamed impotently. "We've got to know."

"Should be easy for you fellas to find," Charlie's voice crackled sarcastically. "Just get yourself one of them there crystal plumb bobs and dangle it over a map. Shucks, you yahoos would probably zoom right in on it--give or take a thousand miles." Charlie returned the phone to its receiver and set the instrument on the roof.

"Time's a wastin'," he nodded to Gavin who had been taking notes. "Let's get on the road." He pushed himself up spritely from the chair and stepped lightly to the ladder, being careful--even at his new weight--not to cave in the roof.

Anticipating the move, Dog was already down the ladder ahead of him, clanking the brace on each rung. Even in the dark, Dog's eyes glistened with excitement as he looked up to Charlie. His tongue disappeared into and out of his mouth like a piston.

"We'll get there in time," Charlie said after he was down and walking around the trailer. He lowered two fingers for Dog to lick. "But we got to get dressed first." He bounded up the three steps to the front door and disappeared inside. When he reappeared, his arms were loaded with clothing and weapons. "Leave your vehicle behind the trailer," he told Gavin who was just rounding the corner of the trailer. "We'll take my truck. Gonna need the four-wheel drive."

Charlie walked back around the trailer to his Jeep and spread the accouterments across the hood. Then he began dressing. First he strapped his grandfather's revolver around his waist, pulling the belt past the last original hole to a new one he had punched in with a nail. The end of the belt flapped free like a spent buffalo's tongue. Next he pulled his grandfather's leather vest over his Dickies work shirt and buffed the scratched star with his sleeve.

"What kind of creatures are they, Charlie? Really?" Gavin's voice was flat. His nearly hidden face, ghoulishly gray, smoldered with unabashed concern.

Charlie recognized the honest fear and looked up while pulling on a pair of leather chaps. "Just keep behind me, kid, and you'll live to tell your mama all about it."

"But what are they?"

Charlie ignored him for a moment. He was busy snapping on another pair of chaps. This pair he put on backwards to protect the rear of his legs. When he reached for the thick leather jacket to go over his vest, he finally answered. "How many elements have I told you there are, boy?"

"Two. Dirt and Dumb."

"You afraid of Dirt?" In the darkness Charlie could see Gavin shake his head to indicate he wasn't. "Then are you afraid of Dumb?" Charlie could barely see Gavin's shoulders shrug. "Well you ought to be because tonight you're gonna meet Dumb with a capital D."

Gavin's lips opened and his tongue pressed the ridge behind his upper teeth, but he didn't say "D".

"That's right," Charlie nodded as he dangled a cartridge belt of 10 gauge shotgun shells over his shoulder. "We're talking Pernicious Dumb. Ugly Dumb. Talk Show Dumb."

All that now remained on the hood of his pickup were two shot guns and Charlie took them by their straps and hung them over his head and shoulders. They crisscrossed his back and his silhouette against the lighter sky made him look like a Mexican bandito. But something was missing.

"My hat?" he remembered and looked into the cab. The lightness in the dark cab was his hat, and he pulled it out the window and placed it squarely and ceremoniously on his head. With it in place he felt confident. "After tonight," he told the darkness and Gavin, "you may have earned yourself a hat like this. A man's hat."

The voice barely issued from the constricted throat. "A man's hat?" the kid asked.

"A man's hat," Charlie repeated. "You see a lot of males walking around *under* hats. It takes a man to *wear* a hat. It takes a man who has seen the Elephant and *not* turned back."

"Elephant?" His voice might as well have been sifted flower for all the strength it had.

"Read your history, boy. You're in Colorado now. This isn't no pansy state. It was settled by men. They may have been boys, but they were men. And they all saw the Elephant. They saw it, and they didn't turn back." As he spoke the glow grew in the sky to the east again and Charlie saw it over his shoulder.

"That's your Elephant," he pointed. "Tonight it's going to be standing on its hind legs. It's gonna be bigger than your biggest fear. You survive tonight and you'll never bother looking under your bed for lightweight goblins again."

Charlie looked at Gavin. He hadn't moved. His eyes were on the small, mysterious moon hovering just above the horizon south of the Pawnee Buttes. The only movement in the still night was the quivering of a page on the notepad against his right thigh.

Charlie watched the pad as Gavin nervously rapped it against his knee. Then he nodded toward the Pawnee Buttes. "We better get rollin'," he said. "Look at the Ascenders' lights. They're not pointing straight up anymore. They're pointing toward the glow. They think it's their Messiah come to take them home."

"But--" Gavin's voice sifted from his throat. "But is it?"

Charlie looked at the Ascenders' lights winnowing the night. "Probably," he conceded. "It's as close as they'll ever come." He moved toward the driver's door on the Jeep, took his hat off and tossed it through the window, removed the shot guns and placed them in the truck bed, and opened the door. Gavin still hadn't moved.

"Come on," Charlie urged. "Let's see just how big that Elephant of yours is."

With Dog between them, his paws on the dash and his eyes on the road ahead, they pulled quietly from the circular drive in front of Charlie's trailer. As soon as they were on the gravel, Charlie turned off the headlights, eased the truck up, and turned on the panel lights briefly. "Eleven point four," he informed Gavin. "When it reads about fourteen point nine, I want you to get out and open the gate. Think you're strong enough?"

"What gate?"

"The gate just after what would be 105 if there was a road. There's an old water tank maintenance road there. Hardly used anymore, though. And when

you get out, be quick about it. I don't want the dome light to stay on long. Better yet, you can crawl out the window."

As he spoke, Charlie braked. Immediately in front of them was a road block--a single length of 2-by-4 between a pair of sawhorses. Charlie couldn't quite read the sign on the board, but he knew it said *Road Closed--Bridge Out*. He eased the Jeep forward, tipped the road block on its side, and drove over it.

Gavin watched the wood splinter from his window before speaking. "What about you? You going out the window?"

The thought hadn't occurred to Charlie and it took him several seconds before he found the solution. He made a fist of his right hand and crushed the dome light.

"What?" Gavin whispered in amazement. "You could have taken the cover off and loosened the bulb."

"Yeah," Charlie conceded. "I coulda crawled out the window, too. But that's just not a man's way."

"But what's wrong with lights?" Gavin pointed to the beacons from the Ascenders. "At least we could see where we're going."

"I made that mistake last time." Charlie didn't elaborate, but Gavin knew he meant the time he woke up on top the West Butte. Charlie was looking out the open window of his truck, trying to count fence posts. "Let's see," he figured aloud. "If they're a rod apart--and that's stretchin' it--there'd be about 320 to the mile."

"What?"

"Can you see the posts on your side?" They were creeping along so slowly that the sound of gravel crunching under the tires was louder than the engine.



Before Gavin could answer, the mysterious object burst to life again on the horizon to their right. It wasn't much over a half mile away, if that. It wasn't as round as it had appeared from atop the trailer, however, because a low ridge separated the truck from the glow. All Gavin could see was a quarter circle of light.

Quickly Charlie flicked the dash lights on and off. "Fourteen point seven," he read. "Start counting now," he ordered Gavin. "When you get to sixty, let me know."

Gavin, accompanied by Dog, thrust his head and shoulders out the window and began tolling the posts off with the index finger of his right hand. "Fifteen, sixteen," he counted and then cussed because the lights on the craft winked out again and it was difficult to see.

"Twenty-three, twenty-four," Charlie continued for him on the other side of the cab. "Keep--twenty-five--one eye closed--twenty-six--when the thing's glowin'--twenty-seven--so you'll have some--twenty-eight--night vision left--Twenty-nine."

Gavin picked up the count again and kept one eye closed, even though the only glow was from the flashlights of the Ascenders. Judging by the location of their lights, they had left the area between the buttes and were pilgrimaging toward the ridge the Jeep was now abreast. On the other side of the ridge was the source of the light.

"Sixty."

Charlie stopped the pickup. "Get out and walk along the fence. When you find two posts together, that's the gate. Open it, pull it back, and just lay it down."

Gavin was half out the window when Charlie grabbed his leg. "Use the door," his voice sounded in quiet disgust. "Just don't slam it." Gavin slid back

in and eased the door quietly open. As he stepped to the dirt in the barrow pit, Charlie grabbed unsuccessfully for another object. Failing, he whispered hoarsely to Gavin. "Dog's out there with you. Don't step on him."

Inching along, Charlie followed Gavin with the pickup. When the slim, nearly invisible, figure stopped, Charlie counted three fence posts together. When one of them moved, he knew it was Gavin. The stick figure fussed with the gate, trying to squeeze the two posts together and lift off the latching wire. Failing that, he grabbed one post, placed both of his feet against the other post and pulled and pushed with all his might. His legs were stronger than his arms--barely--and the just discernible light between the two posts narrowed. With a flick of his hand, Gavin sprung the latch wire and the gate recoiled away like a rubber band propelling a spit wad. As it clattered to the earth, Gavin rolled into the barrow pit with an "oof", and a four-legged shadow scurried up the trail to distance itself from the noise.

"Judas Priest," a disgusted, but subdued, voice issued from the cab. "If I hadn't a seen it, I wouldn't a believed it. Threw him clear across the opening." Still shaking his head in the dark cab, Charlie pulled the Jeep through the now open gate and shifted into four-wheeled drive.

"Do I get in now?" a sudden whisper exploded into Charlie's ear.

"Cripes," he jumped. "No. No. You and Dog stay behind the truck. We're going straight up this draw." He indicated a deeper shadow in the night.

As he spoke the craft whooshed to life again just the other side of the ridge. Even though they had been going slowly, Charlie and Gavin had outdistanced it as it moved east. They were now two to three hundred yards in front of it.

"It's moving toward the buttes," Gavin whispered, still at Charlie's window.  
"Why doesn't it rise?"

"Why doesn't the human I.Q. rise?" Charlie whispered back as he turned on the radio.

"Look, Charlie." Gavin stuck his head half in the window. He was now on the running board. "If we go up this draw we'll meet it. It's moving this direction."

Charlie held the mike in his hand. "That's the idea."

"But it'll see us."

"Don't worry. Their show's not for us." He nodded to the Ascenders' beacons of light which were now on Road 112 heading west from the buttes. "It's for them. If we're quiet, we're the ones who are going to do the surprising." He pressed the button on the radio's mike. "You there, Kandi?"

The reply was instant and facetious. "Like I was going somewhere else tonight. You knows I *never* go out on Saturday nights."

"Those dancing boots of yours'll see other Saturday nights," he promised.  
"Now here's the directions. Get 'em cause I'm giving 'em once."

"Don't worry. There's more than one pair of ears here."

"Maybe they'll dance with you?"

The pause was just long enough for her to draw up her face snottily.  
"They don't look to me like the type who even admit to going to the bathroom."

"Not without help, they don't," Charlie agreed, "but tell them to get their posse to haul ass straight north out of Keota on I05. Lights and sirens. Make a big show of it. When I05 dead ends, barrel right straight ahead onto the prairie. There's only a three-strand wire gate, so even one of their vehicles can break through. Once on the prairie, continue heading dead north for

about three miles. And tell them to hang on. It's liable to be a little bumpy. They should be able to skirt the draws."

"But Waggles," exploded another voice, and Charlie placed his hand over the Jeep's speaker to squash the noise. "What are we going to see? What are we supposed to do?"

"Do?" Charlie asked. "Nothing. I'm going to do all the doin'. I'm just calling you guys in to take names and kick ass. Over," he said with relish and flipped off the radio, but not before the speaker squawked incoherently.

After resting the mike in its cradle, Charlie reached under his seat and pulled out a pint bottle.

"Not again," Gavin's voice complained at the window.

"It's not what you think," Charlie whispered back. "This is for night vision. A swig or two of this and things become as bright as day." He tilted the bottle up, pulled a draw, and mopped his lips with the back of his hand. "There," he nodded and looked about. "Better already."

"You're not taking me in this time, Charlie. That stuff is no more for night vision than that other stuff was for day vision."

Charlie took another slug. "Suit yourself," he sniffed and wiped the water from his eyes, "but it's sure working for me." Charlie started to push the bottle back under the seat when Gavin spoke.

"Would a teaspoon be enough?"

"Hey," Charlie said, retrieving the bottle. "Take a whole tablespoon. It won't kill you." He handed the bottle through the window. "But first, scout out ahead there a little and see just where this trail leads down into the draw."

Holding the bottle in front of him for balance in the dark, Gavin inched slowly ahead. When he disappeared suddenly straight down, his head following his feet like a fishing bobber pulled from sight, Charlie knew that

wasn't the path so he pulled the Jeep to the left. He was about to get out and check for the path himself when Gavin appeared out of the gloom.

"It's over here," he called in a whisper. As Charlie eased the pickup from the prairie surface down into the draw, Gavin came along side and offered to return the bottle. "It does work, doesn't it?"

"Course it does. I wouldn't be foolin' you at a time like this. But go easy on it. Take too much and you go snow blind. But you keep it for now. Just use it when you need to see a little better."

As he spoke the craft exploded into view again. It was still on the other side of the ridge, but just barely. At least half of its spheroid shape was showing and the light issuing from it came in irregular pulsations. Further east, up the road toward the buttes, a chorus of voices rose in awe. The Ascenders had seen the craft renew its luster and had quickened their pace. Charlie couldn't actually see the bodies, just an eerily glowing white mass beneath a thousand ribbons of light rippling in the sky.

Dog uttered a youthful yip of delight and headed up the draw.

"I'm going to follow the dog," Charlie whispered to Gavin. "You stay behind the truck. And when all hell breaks loose up there,--and it will-- stay behind me. Ya hear?" He didn't wait for an answer. With the transmission in low, he eased forward, the front wheels pulling over sandy bumps and soap weeds and the front bumper gouging dirt from the walls of the gully.

Gavin trailed behind, one hand on the tailgate and the other clutching his note pad and the bottle. "It's still there even when its not shining," he hissed between his teeth and pulled himself along the truck bed to Charlie's window. "I can see it even when it isn't glowing," he whispered. "And its still moving this way. Slow, but it's moving."

"Told you that stuff works," Charlie said, peering through the windshield in a futile effort to see the gully bed ahead. The ridge above was visible where it differentiated itself from the lighter sky. "I see it, too," he admitted. "And I see other things."

Gavin had to stop because the gully narrowed and he would have been crushed between the truck and the dirt. As he fell back to the rear of the truck, he squealed a question through his constricted vocal chords. "What other things?" He squinted but could see nothing but the shadow of the object against the sky. It wasn't so much as black on lighter black as it was an absence of stars--a circular absence of stars. And silence.

As the object inched east, Charlie urged his Jeep south up the draw. Once he reached an impasse, but he backed out as quietly as possible and found a new avenue. When the craft glowed again, Charlie was so close that its light illuminated the gully ahead and he saw Dog leading the way. Instead of narrowing and becoming impassable, the gully widened, leveled, and joined the top of the ridge in a smooth curl.

Slowly, wheel rotation by rotation, Charlie inched the Jeep out of the draw and onto the smooth Buffalo grass. The Jeep was still slanting upwards--toward the top of the ridge--when Charlie halted, set the brake, and got quietly out. He left the engine idling.

He wasn't concerned about the sound of the engine because it was easily drowned out by the groanings of the Ascenders who had left the road and were heading straight across the prairie and up the ridge toward Charlie and the mother ship.

After straightening his chaps and leather coat, Charlie reached into the back of the pickup and quietly withdrew his two shotguns. One of them he slung over his head and shoulder. The other he carried at the ready. He was

looking at the dark craft floating silently toward him when Gavin crawled up and glued himself to Charlie's back.

"It *is* eerie," Charlie chuckled inexplicably and nodded down the hill toward the Ascenders. "They're supposed to be coming joyously to meet their maker, but they sound like they got their sensitive parts caught in vice grips."

When Gavin turned to look, his face was so close to Charlie he brushed his nose on his leather jacket. The Ascenders, a glowing mass of white, swarmed up the hill below, their flashlights still too feeble to illuminate their prize.

"They'll be here in maybe ten minutes," Charlie whispered over his shoulder. "But your Elephant, boy. Look at him. Maybe two minutes."

As Gavin looked past Charlie's arm, the ship rose higher and higher. It was the Elephant, rearing erect and pawing the night. "Look," Gavin gasped and squeezed the leather on Charlie's jacket.

"Saw 'em earlier, boy," Charlie said and sidled to the door of his pickup. Casually, he reached inside the cab. He did nothing immediately. He simply stood silently, one arm inside his pickup. "All hell's about thirty seconds away," he observed quietly.

Coming over the rise before them, and preceding the craft, were a dozen or more floating white figures. Lights glowed from their center sections. The figures moved smoothly--gliding, sliding, sweeping from side to side.

"Charlie," Gavin barely breathed at Charlie's ear. "Those are the feelers that rancher's wife described. "We've got to get out of here." He started to edge back when the craft exploded to life again. Fire issued from its bottom and it rose fifteen or twenty feet.

Charlie and Gavin could see it clearly now. Port holes ringed the center of the craft and at each port hole the silhouette of a large-headed creature

peered out. Some held spindly arms to their large eyes so as to see better into the darkness outside.

As quickly as it had ignited, it extinguished. With the glow gone the night was blacker than ever for Gavin. "I can't see, Charlie."

"You didn't shut an eye, did you?"

Gavin had backed away from Charlie when the craft ignited. The rods in his eyes were still seeing the illuminated craft. No matter which direction he moved his head, he saw the glow and little else. He was blind and reached unsuccessfully for Charlie. "Charlie?"

Still with his arm inside the cab of his pickup, Charlie spoke reassuringly to Gavin. "Look out the sides of your eyes, boy. Never look at anything in the dark straight on. It disappears if you do."

Gavin tried. By not looking at the craft, he could see it. By not looking at them, he could still see the feelers--with their glowing eyes--inching closer. Maddeningly, when he looked directly at them, they disappeared into the pink glow of what had been.

The fluid, floating motion of one of the feelers suddenly became erratic. It became as amorphous as a dense fog in a capricious wind. The abrupt change in its motion attracted Charlie and he watched as the figure twirled and dodged. The light at its midsection appeared and disappeared. Sometimes it shown heavenward, but in the next instant it illuminated the ground.

"Who the hell brought this dog, anyway?"

No one answered. "I didn't say that," said Charlie. "Did you, Gavin."

Charlie took the guzzling sound behind him to mean *no*.

"Well do something about this dog."



The voice came from beneath the craft, now towering nearly above them. The light at the midsection of the feeler became steady and focused. It illuminated a small black and white dog. It was worrying the hem of a white sheet, first with its teeth and neck muscles and then with the metal brace on his left leg.

"Shoot it," the voice of the feeler called in mild panic. Another feeler glided over. It pointed its light at Dog, a muffled pop sounded, and Dog yelped and began chewing his hip.

"Those bastards shot my dog," Charlie yelled and simultaneously flipped on all the lights on his Jeep--the headlights, the KC lights, the spot lights. As a result, the night lit up like a shopping center.

Instantly, the craft burst to life. It roared. It bellowed. It tried to rise and escape. The port holes again became visible and the same aliens in the same silhouetted positions peered out. The roar of its flames almost drowned out Gavin's cries.

"The flames, Charlie. They're going in. Not out. It's a balloon. A goddamned balloon."

"What'd you expect," Charlie held his arm out to keep Gavin from surging forward, "ET?" The entire area was now illuminated. The balloon was trying to escape south down the escarpment from which it had come. "Those ain't feelers, boy," Charlie called, still trying to hold Gavin back. "Those is called yahoos. And what yahoos need is a little rock salt."

With that, he shouldered the shotgun he had been carrying at the ready and fired. The blast was followed by a couple of screams. "At least I think that was the rock salt," he said with a smile in his voice and loosened off a couple more blasts.

Gavin took advantage of Charlie's firing and broke in front of him. "It's a balloon," he yelled again. Still amazed.

"Of course it is," Charlie yelled back over another blast of the flame feeding the balloon. "Do you think I'd bring you out here if I thought it was something else?" He placed the shotgun filled with rock salt on the hood of the Jeep and pulled the other shotgun over his head. "Don't you reporters ever use Occum's Razor? Don't you ever think of the obvious?"

He tilted the new shotgun up at the balloon and squeezed. It exploded with a 10-gauge fury that rocked Charlie's feather-light body. "Or doesn't the obvious sell?" He was still yelling at him when Gavin surged ahead into the fray. As he ran, he held his notepad aloft as if it were a flag of non-combativeness.

Charlie ignored him and emptied four more shells into the balloon. The rends he made were not large, but they were obvious. They spilled so much hot air that the pilot of the craft had to leave the flame on continuously, and that was dangerous.

Slowly, the balloon moved south, pulled by the ropes extending to each "feeler." Not willing to let it slink off and lick its wounds, Charlie reloaded and blew the heads off five of the silhouettes peering from the fake portholes. Slowly, it began to sink. It could no longer maintain altitude.

As Charlie reloaded for a third time, he saw the flashing lights racing across the prairie from Weld County Road 105. The lights were really bouncing and Charlie smiled at the thought of slickly moussed hairdos being mashed against car ceilings.

By the time he had reloaded, the basket of the balloon rested on the ground. The navigator bailed out, but the pilot flame still flickered. The ropes

used to guide it hung limp. Charlie aimed his shotgun squarely at the propane tanks. "Sayonara, baby," he said and pulled the trigger.

A ball of flame rolled up the balloon and beyond. It climbed, rolled into itself and disappeared, re-exploded and climbed anew. When it had exhausted itself, all that remained was a glowing spider's web of what had been the balloon's envelope. Charlie watched it as it glowed, eating each filament of nylon. He watched it until it turned as black as the sky behind it and filtered its carboned remains to the buffalo grass below. The frayed wicker basket remained standing but glowed like the mantle in a Coleman lantern.

The phalanx of Weld County Sheriff's cars, CIA cars, Secret Service cars, and cars from agencies Charlie had never heard of were still crashing across the prairie. He could see by their headlights that they had discovered the cars of the balloonists and the small flatbed truck they used for quick and easy transport.

"I reckon they're bright enough to figure it out," Charlie muttered and turned back to his pickup. Its lights were still melting the darkness, so he reached inside and flicked them off. With them extinguished, he became aware of the thin line of dawn and judged the hour to be about 4:30. A Sunday morning, he regretted. That meant he would have to drive into Wyoming to get a bottle. Colorado and its Blue Laws.

Coming through the early light and parting around him, the Ascenders shuffled by like the dead. Charlie tried to look into their faces, but it was impossible. Their hoods--like those of trappist monks--completely covered their heads. As they moved toward the charred remains of the balloon and basket, they clicked off their flashlights and allowed them to dangle hopelessly at the ends of their arms. That's when Charlie noticed it.

"You idiots are barefooted." He would have thrown his arms into the air in supreme supplication to the idiocy of the world, but he was still holding the 10-gauge. "As I always said," he sighed, "you can judge what's in a man's head by what's on his feet."

Dawn was coming rapidly now, and Charlie could make out the cars on the flat prairie below. He also saw men chasing fleeing figures in white. Farther to the south and west he could see blinking red and white lights in the sky. He also heard the unmistakable thump of helicopter blades.

"The news boys. Right on time."

Coming up the hill from the prairie below was a figure Charlie could recognize at a distance. It was slim, boyish, and impeccably dressed in a tailored and starchily pressed Weld County Sheriff's uniform--the image Charlie was supposed to present.

It was Grover Ford. As he wended his way among the now kneeling or sitting or lying Ascenders, he raised a friendly, but timid, hand. "Howdy, Charlie," he said as he neared. "See you've had a night of it."

Charlie rubbed his hand over his hair and admitted "Yeah, I think I'll put it down as another day to remember. Least wise it won't be one of those days to slip into the nothingness of the past."

Taking a liberty, Grover reached down and plucked a tranquilizer dart from the chap below Charlie's knee. "Here, Charlie," Grover offered. "A souvenir of the night."

Charlie took it and looked at it but said "No thanks, Grover. Why don't you keep it as a remembrance of your brief stint out here on the prairie. Maybe you could put it on a watch fob," he suggested. "No," Charlie reconsidered and held it up to the right side of Grover's head. "I think it'd make you a nice pierced earring."

Grover smirked and took the dart from Charlie without looking at it and buttoned it inside his breast pocket.

"Seen my dog?"

Grover nodded. "He's down the hill a piece. Sleeping it off."

"I figured that might be the case. Hope he didn't get too big a dose."

"I think he's going to be okay," Grover said, and he could see the appreciation in Charlie's face. "Seemed to be breathing just fine."

"How about an Associated Press reporter? Built like a shock of November milo? Couldn't miss him. Only yahoo on the prairie who's not in some kind of costume."

Grover shook his head.

"Well," Charlie signed and laid his shotgun on the hood of his pickup with the other. "I guess it's over." He also removed his thick leather coat and the extra pair of chaps. These he threw into the back of the pickup. Turning around, he felt the morning breeze and flapped his loose shirt to draw it nearer to his skin. "Time to take a stroll," he nodded to Grover and left, tucking his shirt back into his pants.

Grover remained behind. He knew better than to destroy the moment.

Like Grover, Charlie had to wind his way among the Ascenders. Most of them were now lying flat on their backs, and he could see their faces. "Just kids," he observed. Then he saw the cactus needles in all their bare feet. "Just idiot kids," he amended his remark.

Not far down the hill from where Charlie had seem him darted, he found Dog. He was lying on his good side, the brace and injured leg up. All of Dog's legs were working though, scurrying impotently.

"Chasing rabbits, most likely," Charlie grunted as he leaned down to pick him up. Dog grunted a little, but it may have been at the rabbits.

On his way back to the truck, he spotted a costume different from the Ascenders. It had a white hood and the white robe extended only to just below the knees, not to the ground as with the Ascenders. He knew it wasn't an Ascender because this figure wore black pants and black moccasins.

"That's how they appeared to float," Charlie explained to dog. "It wasn't all that tricky. This one," he continued, reaching down to lift the robe, "must have caught a stray dart. Or he had a friend who *wasn't* a friend."

Attached to the "Feeler's" waist was a black box. Charlie had seen such gadgets before. At the McDonalds in Cheyenne. It was the newfangled way the employees had of keeping in contact even when they were in other rooms or taking drive-by orders. Just to make sure, Charlie dropped the robe back and looked at the boy's head. He still wore the hood, but Charlie spotted the ear and mouth pieces attached to the harness over his head. And he saw something else. An earring. An earring made from a syringe. Charlie smiled his sardonic approval. "I have a hunch you didn't get your tranquilizer dart by accident."

Now knowing all he needed to know, he started to leave the hill for good but was stopped by voices from below.

"Sheriff Waggles," came the cry. The appellation was music to his ears. "Sheriff Waggles," the man again cried breathlessly. "Can we talk to you?"

Charlie turned and saw the print media reporters and photographers laboring up the incline toward him. He knew they weren't the electronic media. He could see them far behind. Some were straining under the weight of cameras and battery packs. Others were feverishly trying to run and comb their hair at the same time.

"Make it quick, guys," Charlie motioned and turned back toward his pickup. By the time he reached it, the reporters had caught him. Charlie

ignored them and placed Dog in the bed on top of the leather coat. He then reached inside and pulled his hat from the seat where it had sat during the battle.

The reporters swooped about him like gnats around a sore eye, but he waved them aside. He was busy dressing. First, he pulled the bandoleer over his shoulder and strapped both shotguns across his back. Last, he placed his straw cowboy hat squarely and proudly on his head.

"Photo op, boys," he announced and walked to the highest point on the knoll. Once there, he ushered the photographers--who had now grown in number--to set up southwest of him. When they were ready, he spread his legs and planted his feet firmly to the earth. Then he folded his arms imperiously across his chest, being careful not to hid the star on his vest, and told the boys to "Fire when ready."

Through their view finders, the photographers saw Charlie--trim, but still massive as granite--standing astride the prairie. His face was as composed and definite as were the crossed shotguns on his back, the bandoleer over his shoulder, the star on his chest, and his grandfather's gun in its holster. He dwarfed the open, treeless prairie. In the distance, and under his left elbow, were the Pawnee Buttes. Both the buttes and the left side of his face glowed in the just risen sun. At his feet, and scattered all about the hillock like discarded tissues, were the bodies of the Ascenders. No one, taking even a cursory glance at the picture, would wonder who was in charge out in the West.

Still holding his regal pose, Charlie spoke through clenched teeth. "Boys, when this appears on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek* and *People*, I want the caption to say just two words--*Sheriff Waggles*."

He gave them a few more seconds before breaking his pose and attempting to leave. "Well, I gotta git. Can't stand around here all day talking about what *wunsta was*."

The reporters panicked. "But Sheriff, we've got to get the story. You're the only one who knows it."

Charlie saw they outnumbered him. "Well," he considered and readjusted his hat, "I was trying to spare the sensibilities of the ladies here." There were a few. "In short, I have an urgent personal matter--if you catch my drift. Now I could squat right here in front of nature an all, and I'm sure you'd turn your backs, but those fellas," he pointed to the television cameramen still laboring up the slope, "would have me on one of them infotainment shows."

The reporters understood. But they had their stories to get.

"Tell you what," Charlie reconsidered. "My trailer's just three and a half miles down that road," he pointed to 112, clearly visible from where they stood. "Why don't you go back and get your vehicles and meet me there in a half hour. I'll break out some refreshments and chairs, we can have our little talk, and if you need a phone you can use mine."

The reporters wavered but weren't convinced. "It'll also offer the added advantage of not letting the TV reporters get to me up here." The print media reporters and photographers broke from the ridge and sprinted down the slope to their vehicles, nearly a mile in the distance.

Charlie ambled back to his truck and pulled the shotguns and cartridge belt over his head. In shoving the weapons across the seat of his pickup to the passenger's side, one of the shotguns slid muzzle first to the floor and discharged.

The blast was like a cherry bomb inside the cab, but because it had been confined to the cab the sound didn't carry far. Sheepishly, he looked down the



hill. Apparently, no one had heard it. When he glanced into the truck bed, he saw that Dog was unfazed by the blast, though he was still chasing rabbits.

Trying to be nonchalant, Charlie went around to the other side of the pickup, opened the door, and inspected the damage. A hole the size of the barrel had opened where the floorboard had been. Looking through the hole, Charlie could see that no further damage had been done. He solved the matter simply by pulling the floor mat over the hole.

Driving back out to the road was much easier because he didn't have to labor his way down the draw. Instead, he kept to the smooth buffalo grass at its western edge. He hadn't gone fifty yards, however, before he saw a figure that he recognized lying on its back on the prairie. If it hadn't been for the unruly shock of red hair, he might have missed it all together.

Stopping the pickup, but leaving it to idle, he got out and walked over to the body. It was Gavin. Judging by the location of the body, Charlie guessed that Gavin hadn't lasted long after rushing forward. He probably hadn't even seen Charlie blast the balloon out of the sky and explode its propane tanks.

The eager young reporter didn't seem to care, however. He lay tranquilly on his back grinning ridiculously into the heavens. His chest, shallow as it was, rose rhythmically and easily. He was in no real trouble but would sleep for another hour or so.

"Biggest story of your life," Charlie chided, "and here you are takin' a nap." Gavin didn't change his silly expression. What he was smiling at Charlie couldn't figure. "Chasin' your own rabbits, I s'pose." The only reply was the flapping of a page on the notepad he still clutched in his right hand. The page was blank, and it was the only page left on the pad. The remainder drifted across the prairie to the west. By the time Gavin awoke, they would be decorating barbed wire miles away.

Charlie went back to his pickup and was ready to leave when he looked at Gavin's body again. Grudgingly capitulating to an inner impulse, he picked his hat from the seat and walked back out on the prairie to Gavin. "You might hurt your eyes smilin' up at the sky that way," he said. "Try this on for size."

Charlie placed the hat squarely over Gavin's face, completely swallowing it. He was halfway back to the Jeep when he turned. "You can keep the hat," he said. "Guess you've earned it."

He hadn't walked ten feet when a sound from the prairie to the south froze him mid-stride. Thunderous classical music--probably a Wagner overture--blasted from tinny external car speakers. Swiveling, he saw what he feared most--The ladies of *Colleens for Charlie*. They were mounted in five matching white four-wheel drive vans and were barreling from Road 105 directly across the prairie toward him.

By the long fishing pole aerials attached to the left rear bumpers, he could tell each vehicle was in communication with the others. The blue and white pennant of their brigade fluttered from the tip of each aerial. It was the guidon that led them into battle.

Once the line of vans had cleared the scattered vehicles of the police, reporters, and balloonists, the five vehicles pulled abreast into a cavalry charge and made for the hill. Even at his distance, Charlie could see silver-blue heads leaning from each passenger window, scouting the terrain ahead for obstacles.

Charlie had seen *his* Elephant, and he was gone.

###

Tranquil Seas

Racing home was out of the question. First of all, the *Colleens* knew where he lived and would look there first, probably tearing apart each bale to make sure he wasn't hiding behind one. And secondly, he had never intended to meet the gentlefolk of the press in the first place.

The only good reporter, he realized, was one lying out on the prairie with a tranquilizer dart in his arm. He looked to Dog but remembered he was still dozing on the leather jacket in the truck bed.

When he reached the gate that opened onto Weld Road 112, Charlie spun to the right. If he continued east on this road, he would eventually pass the buttes and after about twenty miles, and as many turns, he would meet Highway 71 and could high tail it straight north to Kimball, Nebraska.

Nebraska sounded good to Charlie. He needed a drink. But continuing straight ahead was out of the question. If anyone was trying to catch him by road, they would logically come up 111 and could easily cut him off before he hit the prairie farther east. Before this moment he had always loved the oceanic vastness of the prairie, but suddenly he felt like a coyote roused a mile from its hole. And the reporters had helicopters.

In panic, he skidded left onto I07 and headed straight north. He knew the road didn't go through to Nebraska, but he had little choice. What he hoped was to make the rise a mile ahead and get over it before the *Colleens* crested the hill where the space ship had exploded. From that vantage point they just might be able to see his fleeing pickup.

With the accelerator to the floor and his eyes glued to the rearview mirror, Charlie leaned toward the windshield, trying to be aerodynamic. Just as he crested the hill, he thought he saw some movement atop the battlefield hill behind him, but he was over the rise and out of sight before he could be sure. At that distance he hoped any dust trail would pass as haze because of the slanting, diffused sunlight.

The wind rushing past the open windows didn't help Charlie think. If he continued north, he'd eventually have to turn east and end up at the Zion Lutheran Church of the Prairie. And that wouldn't do. For him to darken their door would cause the drapery behind the alter to burst spontaneously into flames. There were a couple of other possible routes, but they ended at a microwave tower or at a free-spinning windmill. Dead ends.

He could make a left at I22 and head straight into Sligo, but since that was the nearest food, he knew that would be his pursuers' second choice after the trailer. As he racked his brain, road 118 appeared on his left and he spun off I07 and onto it. Taking this road made no sense, so Charlie reasoned that it was a good move. This road, after a wide turn, wound back to I22, the Sligo road.

As he flew west, it occurred to him that this was the road on which the drug lab had operated. He knew the boys he had encountered on the prairie in the past year were behind the drug lab, but he had no desire to connect them with it legally. It would be enough to see them squirm when charged

with the hot air balloon and all its implications, including the mutilations, kidnapping of the girls, and his own abduction. He alone knew why they had been harassing his section of the world, but he wasn't about to tell the authorities. If it ever came out, it would have to come from *them*. All the more humiliating.

Ahead of him, past the turn-in to the destroyed drug lab, the road turned north and would connect with the Sligo road, the road anyone would look for him on. In front of him was a three-strand wire gate. The gate had been used so seldom that Charlie could see no wheel tracks on the buffalo grass beyond. After looking in his rearview mirror, he got out and opened the gate, drove through, and re-latched it.

He was now out onto virgin prairie, prairie untouched by anything but passing Indians, buffalo herds and cattle--in government approved numbers. Even though the road he had just left was only gravel, he now felt clean. He also knew he wasn't trailing dust. To keep from leaving tire marks visible from the road, he turned and followed the fence north for 100 yards before heading directly west. Anyone coming down 118, as he had just done, would look out onto the prairie and see no tracks. *Old Charlie Waggles* would have approved.

Where he was now headed, he didn't know. He did know that it was at least four miles across the prairie before he would encounter another gravel road. There was a path about three miles distant that led to a windmill on National Grassland property. Only the rancher would be able to find his way to that, so it might be safe.

Instinctively, he kept to the draws and avoided the hills, although they afforded easier travel. He was torn between resting and moving on. He would have loved to pull up next to an eroded bank and take a nap, but he

knew that was unwise. Any helicopter would spot him, and he had seen at least three at the crash site. On the other hand, if he continued, he would eventually find civilization and that, too, was repugnant.

Drawn between sitting and running, he decided to think with his feet.

West was his direction of choice. Though he was now three miles due north of his trailer, he knew he couldn't go there, although it would provide a dramatic reappearance. The prospect of emerging from a grassy wilderness into the focus of fifty million television sets was tempting. He was not immune. But the questions, the cameras, the *Colleens*. No way.

He continued west. At one point he used a rancher's windmill road but left it when a side gate offered an inviting prairie, also heading west. In another mile he would encounter road 95, and he didn't know what he would do when that happened. Separating him from that road was a massive, rolling hill. It was nearly as high as the buttes, and from it he would be able to see Sligo, his trailer, the crash site--and possible escape routes.

Without traveling a mile north or south, he would be unable to skirt the hill. If he went directly over it, he would expose himself. Knowing this, he chose the summit of the hill. At the least it would afford the opportunity to spot pursuers. Moving slowly to attract less attention, he rolled to the crest, easing the Jeep quietly, and peered over.

Three miles ahead was Sligo, but it was so quiet it might as well have been Bethlehem on a Christmas card. In place of the star was the water tower. The quonsets would have to do for the manger. Road 122 to the north seemed to be empty. At least no tell-tale dust. For three and a half miles south on Road 95 there was nothing. He was not being followed. At least not yet.

Looking around for an escape avenue, his eyes fell on an edifice a half mile to the south. It wasn't that it was just over the rise on which his pickup rested. It wasn't that it hadn't been there six months ago. It wasn't that the view from its veranda was the best in the valley. And it wasn't that it was cubits long and cubits high. It was simply that it was an Ark.

*The Ark*, as massive as Noah's, perched on the western slope of the hill. It looked as out of place on the dry prairie as a Baptist in Hell. Its huge braces held it erect, braces that would collapse when the waters rose and allow the chosen to float smugly over the remains of the damned or over those who had inadvertently hit the snooze alarm out of habit.

Charlie sat and stared at it. He wondered if, perhaps, that dart Grover pulled from his chaps had penetrated his skin and he was dreaming.

Repulsed from and propelled toward, he urged his Jeep over the crest and let it coast diagonally across the massive hill toward the Ark and the path that connected it with Road 95. Walking along that path, a bucket in his hand, was a man. He had obviously just finished feeding several animals in small pens near the public gravel road. Charlie saw two goats, two ponies, two sheep, two calves--two of whatever. Obviously the owner had followed the first flood story in Genesis and not the second. That required *seven* of the clean and two of the unclean.

The whole picture didn't really make sense until he saw who was carrying the empty bucket. It was Drinker Westwoman.

"Drinker," he yelled as soon as he came into hailing distance. "Hide me."

"Well, well, well," he drawled dryly once Charlie pulled along side. "I heard you'd risen from the dead." Joe wasn't wearing a T-shirt printed to look like a tuxedo this time. He was wearing a real coat with tails. A real cummerbund. A real frilly shirt. And a dangling bow tie. They were all soiled,

of course, and didn't match the red-suspended shorts or combat boots he was wearing, but Charlie didn't notice.

"I got problems, Westwoman," Charlie pleaded, and his shifting eyes showed his concern. "What with the reporters and the crazy old biddies I don't know where to head."

Westwoman pursed his lips and then sucked on his teeth. "Yep," he burped, enjoying a laconic moment. "The high waters do seem to be coming, don't they." He changed the empty bucket from his right to his left hand and brushed a palm over his bronzed, bald pate. What hair remained, as long and as luxuriant as Custer's, now hung to his shoulders. After checking the weather and the length of his fingernails, Westwoman finally stepped onto the running board and grabbed the window frame with his right hand. "The clouds may be foreboding, but I wouldn't be surprised but what we could find shelter up ahead," he gestured toward the Ark.

Charlie, just sure he was going to spot a vehicle turning off 95 to catch him, hurried his Jeep the quarter mile up the hill toward the Ark. As he neared and slowed, Westwoman leapt off the running board and jogged ahead. By the time Charlie arrived, the artist had opened large double doors in the side of the Ark.

"Into the hold," he motioned Charlie, and as soon as the pickup passed he pulled the huge doors to. They matched so perfectly the casual observer would never have spotted them.

The inside was like a barn. In fact, it was filled with hay and lumber. Charlie could see chickens nesting in the straw and cats lapping at saucers of milk. A dog, about the size of Dog, cheerfully approached the truck, greeting Charlie.

"Hey," he realized, stepping from the cab. "This thing won't float."



Westwoman laughed. "Come on, Charlie. It was only meant to float as a metaphor. Not as an Ark." As he spoke, he reached into the pickup bed and lifted Dog out. "I'll put him over here on the straw," he informed Charlie, and did so.

Charlie approved. "He'll think he's gone to bow-wow heaven when he wakes up and finds this little bitch here to greet him."

Westwoman motioned for Charlie to ascend the wooden stairs to the living quarters. "Ain't the half of it, Sheriff."

Charlie had one hand on the rail and turned. "Yeah?"

"She's in heat."

Charlie shook his head at Dog's misfortune. "They just won't leave us alone, will they?"

After lifting the trap door at the top of the stairs, Charlie found an immense, well appointed living compartment. Given its height from the ground it was almost a penthouse. The east and west sides, for the Ark's axis was north and south, were lined with picture windows. To the west, after miles of rolling prairie, were the Rockies. Because of a line of bluffs to the east it was impossible to see the buttes, but the view was still worth studying.

While Charlie inspected the Ark, Westwoman hurried over to his work table and covered a series of drawings. In spite of the artist's precautions, Charlie had already seen them.

"Sports uniforms and caps," Charlie noted. "What team'd go for those colors?"

Drinker shrugged. "Doesn't really matter. So long as they keep expanding the baseball and football leagues, I'll be a wealthy man."

"Notice you didn't say a *contented*, wealthy man," Charlie raised his eyebrows suggestively.

"No," Drinker shook his head. "Contentment is as hollow as the slurping sound a straw makes at the bottom of a chocolate soda."

"Meaning you want another one?"

"No, not really," he shook his head again and started to the east door. "What I prefer is the *hunger* to the *have*."

Charlie smirked and stepped through the opened door and onto the deck. "I suspect we're more alike than either of us wants to admit. We even got some of the same words in our philosophies. Couple of 'em are swapped around, of course."

Once on the deck, Charlie inhaled and loved what he smelled. The morning made his unbathed body feel fresh and clean. Even the sun had risen enough to cease being a nuisance. "This view gives a man an appetite," he stretched and pulled a deck chair to the railing. "Wouldn't mind propping my feet here for an eternity." He looked to the south end of the Ark, the bow, and noticed a white television dish. At the same instant he heard a television set click on in the kitchen, just inside the door. It was hurriedly turned down so as not to be audible on deck.

When Westwoman reappeared, he offered Charlie the single beer he held. "Understand it isn't too early for you," he nodded to the bottle.

"In fact," Charlie glanced at his wrist watch, "I am a little past my schedule." He took a swig, enjoyed it, and then asked Westwoman "How'd you come out on that code violation--the one where the county didn't want to let you build a fort or whatever it was?"

"Fine," the artist twiddled his bow tie. "In fact, they never came back. Not clear up the hill, anyway. I saw a county car stop down by the pens one morning while I was putting the finishing touches on the roof. They just sat

there a while and then drove off. Couple of weeks later I got my tax assessment."

Charlie was interested. "Oh? What'd they hit you for?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" Charlie took his feet off the railing and turned in his chair.

Westwoman seemed pleased with himself. "I got a religious exemption," he said and disappeared back into the Ark. Three or four minutes later he reappeared. "What happened out there, anyway? The television people are making you out to be some latter day Sherlock Holmes."

"Eh," Charlie waved disgustedly at the reporters' notions. "It loses a lot in the tellin'."

"I know. 'Everything becomes commonplace through explanation.'"

"Exactly, but it sounds better in Latin." Charlie got up and dragged a telescope and its tripod nearer to his chair.

"That mean you're not going to tell me?"

"Oh, no. It's a trifling thing really. I'd a lost interest in it long ago if it wasn't for that Associated Press fella. Had to keep him amused. The Yahoos doin' the butchering weren't even a challenge. I was on to them from the first serrated edge."

"Serrated edges?"

Charlie was leaning over to look through the scope and waited until he had righted himself to explain. "They was usin' pinkin' sheers. If they'd a just used knives and razors like the rest of the honyocks back in the 70's, they might have kept me wondering for a while longer. But these fools had done all their research out of *one* book, and I'd read *that* book." He paused to wet his whistle. "Hell, they didn't even have imagination. Followed it like a

cookbook. Right down to the two holes in the jugular, what was cut off, and even to the cut that mimicked a Caesarean."

"But you couldn't have known it was a balloon. Everyone was taken in by that."

"Was easy. Like grabbin' my ass with both hands." He demonstrated with his free hand and noticed the spareness. "It was easier to find in the old days," he conceded. "But hey, I couldn't miss. There was no challenge. It didn't seem to move. Never got more than two or three miles from its launch point. It didn't take a peck of brains to see that was just easy walkin' distance. And another thing. It never appeared except on absolutely calm nights. Not much of an interstellar craft that can't take a little breeze."

"But how'd you know it was kids?"

"Who else is silly enough or has the energy or the *time* to waste on such nonsense," Charlie returned to his chair. "Put that together with the fact that all the sightings coincided with vacations at the colleges and universities around here, and what else do you have?"

"Kids," Westwoman agreed. "Something I never was."

"Same here," Charlie agreed. "But another thing was that everything seemed aimed right at me. Seemed to be an attempt to embarrass me. All I had to do was figure out who wanted to dump on me."

"The hard part?"

"Exactly." Charlie paused to swill his beer. "But once I'd narrowed it down to the living, it wasn't too tough. I remembered breaking up a party of kids out on the prairie one night some years back. Spoiled brats. Mama's little angels, you know. Guess they'd never been spoken to directly or in such clear, concise, unambiguous language."

"Reamed them good, huh?"

"Exactly." Charlie put his feet back on the railing as if enjoying the memory.

"The TV," Westwoman said, indicating the set in the kitchen with his thumb, "said some of them wore DeMolay rings. Several states were represented."

"Wouldn't doubt it," Charlie sighed. "That's one of them silly secret organizations--quasi religious--that snooty kids join. Makes them feel even more superior. Like they're on a plane above the rest of us. Probably got a secret hand shake, and all."

Westwoman nodded. "I remember some of the boys in my high school joined it. They weren't quite the same after that. It was as if they drove better cars than the rest of us, or something."

"Can ruin a kid," Charlie agreed, slamming his near empty beer bottle down on the arm of his deck chair. "Lot of them go on to become--" He searched the air with his hands for an example before finding it. "--judges and lawyers."

"Exactly," Westwoman nodded. "What a waste. I heard, too, that they have a motto that they can't say out loud. Have to whisper it in each other's ear."

"*Service*," Charlie said it out loud and began laughing.

"That's it."

"*Service*," Charlie continued laughing. "When I found them, they had a calf with its front legs dangled over the cable between two scratching posts and were--how should I put his delicately--*servicing* it."

"They must really believe in that credo," Drinker joined the gayety.

"Appears so," Charlie said, "I guess they had tired of the Job's Daughters and were looking for some strange. I didn't have the heart to tell them it was a steer they had straddled over the cable."

Drinker could barely stand from laughing at the idiocy of the scene. "But why--" Westwoman started as he stumbled into the kitchen. "Why," he repeated after reappearing with a fresh bottle for Charlie, "did they do the kidnapping?"

"Oh, they were just trying to get me back in the state so they could continue trying to embarrass me. Seems I'd *also* done a little something to upset one of their businesses. The kidnapping wouldn't a happened if I'd been allowed to remain," Charlie grew wistful. "I'd a brought them back to earth a lot sooner." He took two swigs before returning the bottle to the arm of the chair and pulling the telescope nearer. "Even burying the girls wasn't original. That had happened in California a couple a decades back. They were a little better on the provisions and the electronics, though. I'll give 'em that."

Suddenly Charlie's interest in the telescope became paramount. He left the chair and crouched before the eyepiece, adjusting it gingerly. "Those yahoos," he muttered in disbelief. "What are they up to now?"

Westwoman took the scope and looked through it. Three figures, shovels over their shoulders, were walking across the prairie about two miles to the east. "I've seen them out there two or three mornings," he admitted. "I can't figure out what they're doing."

"I don't know what they're doing either," Charlie carped, taking the telescope back. "But I sure as sin know who they are. Only one person I know wears a red cap and coat, and only one guy I know has a belly like that. It's the boys."

Westwoman eased Charlie back into his chair. "Don't let them bother you. You've had enough adventure for a while. Take it easy."

Charlie did lean back but it was to drain his beer. He wanted to throw his bottle at the figures on the prairie but settled for setting it beside the other empty next to his chair.

For the first time he noticed a long chain leading from the bow of the Ark to an object on the prairie. "What's that chain attached to?"

"An anchor. What else?"

Charlie squinted at it. "Looks kind of queer to me."

"Somewhat strange," Drinker admitted. "I melted down all those pennies the banks wouldn't take and made an anchor of them. It's another metaphor. Pennies? An anchor? Get it?"

"Close enough," Charlie understood, remembering how many of the little portraits of Lincoln he had seen lying friendlessly on the ground.

"I been thinking," Drinker changed the tone of his voice, "and I think I've got the answer to these women that have been hounding you." He had ambled over to the railing as he spoke and leaned against it. "In fact, I've about got it written in my head."

"Well, spit it out. Let's me hear it. Otherwise, I'll be like that fellow who couldn't go home again."

"Well," Drinker looked to where the boys had disappeared. "Since all the trouble began with that advertisement in the *Lonely Windmills*, why don't you just write an explanation to the ladies who have been, uh--inconvenienced."

"If you've seen 'em, you'll know that'll take some doin'."

"You underestimate me, Charlie. An artist is an artist in all phases of life. The way I figure it, you have got to make them think you were avoiding them to save a woman's reputation, not to make fun of womenkind"

"I was avoiding them to save my tail," Charlie snapped.

"Now hear he out. What if I write to the magazine--call it really--under your name of course, and say that you had already given your heart to a lady who answered the ad but that because of delicate legal matters she was going through you couldn't announce that engagement?"

"Just could might work."

"But we'll need the name of a woman to make it sound believable. Any suggestions?"

It wasn't that much of a problem for Charlie. "Klara Klapsaddle," he said. "Use K's wherever you can."

"Klara Klapsaddle?"

"A lady from my past who stole my heart. She used to dance at Sid King's Crazy Horse Bar on Colfax in Denver. He had one of those bars that goes round and round while the girl dances in the unmoving middle."

"What was so special about Klara Klapsaddle?"

"Well, she was what today we might call anatomically challenged. As a result, she could do some wondrous things with tassels. I never see a high school graduation without thinking of her."

"Let me make a note on that." He left the railing and disappeared inside. He was gone longer than required to write down the name and Charlie heard the television talking again. When Drinker returned, he was still in a pensive mood. "Tell you what," he moved back to the railing. "I'm going to need some help delivering the pups in six weeks or so. You know? Your dog and mine? You might as well hang around here and help me. And," he said, indicating the excess length of belt hanging from Charlie's pants, "you might take the time to rebuild your--" As an artist he searched for the correct word. "Your *strength*."



Charlie patted his flat belly.

"You know," Drinker encouraged as he disappeared briefly into the kitchen, "we could spend the intervening weeks sailing across the prairie."

Charlie wasn't sure he had heard him correctly. "What was that?" he called over his shoulder. "Did you say sailing or *wassailing*?"

Westwoman emerged from the Ark holding two more beers. "Whatever," he said off handedly and extended Charlie his third beer.

Charlie liked that answer. He got out of his chair and walked down the Ark, rubbing his hand along the railing. He liked the idea of the Ark. He liked the prairie. He liked the prospect of six weeks of ease. And he liked the potential solitude. But most of all he liked a spot of earth about twenty-five feet below where he stood.

It looked like the perfect spot for petunias and nasturtiums.

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Honestly Earned Hat

South of the Ark, clean-up operations continued at what would become known as the *Battle of Waggles' Wash*. In one of the three news helicopters hovering over the site, a weather girl--pressed into reportorial duties--said the sight reminded her of the Battle of Little Big Horn.

She and the camera lens beside her looked down on the carbonized residue of the balloon. What remained suggested the fossilized imprint of an Archaeopteryx in lithographic shale. Surrounding it and the splintered wicker basket were hundreds of white-clad figures. They were the Ascenders. Exhausted from their three-nights' vigil and emotionally enervated by the crushing truth of their messiah, they had curled into their sheets and sought Nirvana. They didn't look like fallen cavalry, as the weather girl with Custer on the brain indicated. Their resemblance was closer to that of sickly white grubs wrenched prematurely from the soil and denied their metamorphosis.

Amid these figures trapped in Cenozoic blindness was one that stirred, one that struggled to rise from the depths of prehistoric ignorance to light. It was Gavin Trust. His leafless notepad still clutched in his right hand, he unclosed his sleepy eyes narrowly and inspected the early morning light filtering through the high crown of an extra large straw cowboy hat. He tried to focus his eyes and make sense of the blur he saw, but couldn't.

Dreamily, he tried to wonder, but his mind was no more focused than his eyes. He could have wondered where the dart in his right shoulder had come from. But he didn't. He could have wondered why he was lying squarely atop a prickly pear cactus. But he didn't. He could even have wondered why he had been summarily fired from his job with the Associated Press. But he didn't.

All he wanted to know was how Charlie had managed to talk him down into the bottom of another silo.

The End