

# Eye of Newt Toe of ...



By Mack Hitch

# Eye of Newt, Toe of . . .

(The Charlie Waggles Saga)

To: My own Herculean tenacity

Novel (81,200 words)

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## One Night on the Prairie

*Eye of newt* they were short of, but *toe of frog* they had aplenty. . .

The first crone spread the unfortunate amphibian's legs and held them up to the palsied pair of pinking shears jerking spastically in the equally erratic beam of a flashlight. The shadowed wall beyond was already adorned with severed and paired parts of tiny animals.

After the snip the cutter asked, "What do we do with these?"

"Pin them to the wall."

The one holding the pinking shears turned to a body outside the bubbled glow of the flashlight. "Toes to the rows," she said, and the tiny parts disappeared into the night.

After each snip the parts were handed over her right shoulder.

"Knees to the breeze," she said as if addressing a cauldron.

"Head to the shed," was another response.

When she said, "Orbs to the boards," she lowered the shears. "These won't work for the next animal," she said, twisting the shears in the unsteady light.

The first crone's eyes followed the light's now moving beam to the animal in question--the antelope. "Use the hatchet."

The second crone shifted the pinking shears to her left hand to pick up the hatchet, but for what she prized on the male pronghorn she would need a free left hand. She dropped the shears and grabbed and stretched the prize.

"Must you?" the first crone sighed. Other voices in the darkened room--many voices--sniggered. "Snip, snip," they said. "Chop, chop." Adding rhythm to the words, arthritic hands beat a tattoo on ancient robes covering elderly thighs.

The previously palsied hand rose steadily and came down cleanly. Fingers crawled back into the light, grabbed the prized pair and held them up to the beam. "And," she twirled them for the ladies in the dark to admire, "what do we do with these."

The first crone signed but relented. It had already been done. "Pin them to the wall as well."

"Bal. . . " the second started to call.

"No," admonished the first crone. "This is no time to rhyme."

The ladies in the dark were disappointed. They so much liked rhymes. "But, Buela," one voice protested timidly. "Be fair. It's her turn and she can say what pleases her."

"Oh, very well."

The second crone handed them to the unseen decorator in the darkness over her right shoulder. "Balls to the wall," she commanded cheerfully.

The first crone signed again, but this time with disgust. "I would have preferred something less of the belly and more of the bard. *Let the testicles be spectacles*, she suggested.

The crones beyond the reach of the glow purred with delight at the alliteration and stroked their stubbled chins. There was a reason Buela had been chosen Hecate.

(1)

## Goldfish

If Banner Tidley had known what awaited him in Sligo, Colorado, he wouldn't have been thinking of goldfish. He'd have been thinking of a pair of pompon festooned athletic shoes sticking from a patch of sweet clover near the fire hydrant on main street. The shoes, secured to the feet with black and yellow laces, adorned a pair of abnormally white, cold legs.

But Banner wasn't thinking of the shoes or of the doughnuts he usually thought of on such trips. Today, as his eyes hypnotically followed the zipper-like white line that secured the two halves of the blacktop, his mind was on those goldfish. Though the aquarium of his mind was usually devoid of life, on this morning he could not be faulted for his thoughts because he was entering one of the stranger regions of the state.

Calling it insular or isolated--or even provincial--fell far short of what it was and the effect it had on its inhabitants and visitors. It was as if the universe consisted of two soap bubbles paired through eternity by surface tension. Inside one bubble was normality, reasonableness, rational thought--the world most people know. Inside the other was . . . well, not quite the opposite but a perversion of the normal, a slanting from the level true.

Moving from one bubble to the other was like passing through a time portal, or at least a portal that led to an alternate universe. In an effort to evoke this strangeness, H. P. Lovecraft, that horror writer of early in the last century, would have shrouded Sligo and its environs in an eerie New England mist and filled the distance with lonely fog horns or the lapping of unseen waves. Mark Twain, who passed within rifle shot of this region on his 1861 stagecoach trip to the silver mines of Nevada would have eschewed such verbiage and left the creation of the atmosphere to the viewer. He, simply and accurately, would have called it *singular*, perhaps elongating the *iiinnnggg* to suggest the ricocheting of an aberrant thought through an empty head.

And *singular* was the best description for what had filled Banner's mind with goldfish, for just as the conjunction of two countries engenders the bizarre, much like the border towns between Mexico and the United States--or even the regions of cheap tobacco, gambling, and alcoholism on the borders separating America proper from the so-called Indian nations--the point at which the two bubbles joined, the normal and the . . . well, para-normal, was marked by *Pleistocene Park*.

It was a roadside attraction that promised, through cloning, a menagerie filled with Pleistocene puppies, Pleistocene chickens, Pleistocene deer, antelope, camel and bear, Pleistocene mice, rabbits, squirrels, ravens, eagles and cranes. One highway billboard on the Colorado I4 that Banner was now traveling even boasted a baby Imperial mammoth, though those who paid extra to see it claimed that it looked like a baby Indian elephant with foam rubber humps glued atop its head and shoulders. Whatever it was, it loved peanuts.

The particular billboard that spawned the goldfish in Banner's mind promised Pleistocene rosy carp. "Suitable for the home tank or backyard pond" the sign promised. The owner/operator of Pleistocene Park, Pointe Ruffner, had promised Banner a quarter each for all the goldfish he could deliver. Rising to the bait, Banner had driven to Greeley last fall and purchased a dozen large goldfish. At considerable risk to his pickup, he had bounced across the prairie and dropped a single goldfish into the cold, clear water of twelve isolated cattle tanks. When spring came, and it was now spring, he would return with a net and scoop the living money from the tanks, leaving a single specimen to continue compounding his fortune.

With the net still beside him on the seat and the empty minnow bucket in the bed of the pickup--along with the dozens of doughnuts he was carrying from Eaton to the Quonset Grocery and Cafe in Sligo--Banner watched the white line on the road and puzzled over the lack of little'uns in the tanks. Of the singular people who lived in and around Sligo, Banner was hands down the *most* singular.

He was in the middle of a disappointed sigh when something struck the roof of the pickup cab above his head and bounced off. It was almost an explosion and he jerked his foot from the accelerator preparatory to stomping down on the clutch and brake. But before he could react, his eyes spotted the object in the rearview mirror as it rolled on the highway behind him. Too small and inconsequential to investigate, he decided.

The thump, whatever it had been, startled a flutter of miller moths on the dash and he shooed them to the vent window with the palm of his hand. This was sport to Banner, anything to distract him from the terrain he was traveling through. While the view through his windshield might have been interesting to some, it wasn't the mountains, the green meadows, or the trout streams that appeared in Colorado travel brochures. In fact, the prairie his pickup was crossing resembled a moth-eaten old Army blanket that had been carelessly spread in anticipation of picnickers. The gentle sand hills that undulated monotonously eastward toward Kansas looked like ripples in the blanket. Here and there the timid yellow or pink of a sunflower or cactus blossom--like moth holes--punctuated the drabness.

At Briggsdale Banner turned north onto County Road 392 and was happy to do so for several reasons. First, he avoided all the cars lining the



road ahead that were waiting to get into Pleistocene Park when it opened. Second, he could count the tourists standing before the giant billboard at the intersection of Colorado 14 and 392. They were waiting for the morning light to improve so that they could be photographed in front of the sign. This billboard helped to further immortalize Charlie Waggles, that other attraction of the skewed world of the Pawnee National Grasslands of which Sligo was the hub. *Sheriff* Charlie Waggles, that is. *The Sheriff* Charlie Waggles, grandson of the legendary Weld County sheriff of the same name.

The third reason Banner was pleased to be turning north was that the sun was about to rise and it wouldn't blind him. As he shifted into a lower gear to make the grade up from the state highway he cursed Daylight Savings Time and blamed it for the plague of miller moths. At the entrance to Crow Creek Campground on his left was a small car he almost recognized. It was parked at the gate, not down in the campground where the few tourists cars would be, and he was attempting to identify it when a dark object fell vertically from the sky, thumped against his pickup hood, bounced two inches, and settled to the metal.

Pushing the slowly moving truck into neutral, Banner let it coast to a stop while he stared at the object on the hood. It was a bird. A starling, a glistening black male in breeding fettle, its feathers flecked with gold. And it was dead. As he watched its unmoving body, another object fell from the sky fifty yards ahead of him and plopped onto the asphalt. It was about the size of the bird on his pickup hood, but it wasn't a shiny black. Probably a female starling.

Curious, he cranked the driver's window down, stuck his head out, and looked up into the morning sky. Nothing but the imminent prospect of sun. As he pulled his head back inside the cab, he spotted movement in the Briggsdale Cemetery on the east side of the road, a running figure, not running in panic, but still running. It might have gone unnoticed except that it had leaped the low gravestone marking the six bodies of the family that had been murdered back East and then shipped out to this lonely prairie cemetery, the inexpensive plots having been purchased long before. The *North Weld Herald* had splashed the story up good.

Banner pushed his pickup into gear and crept forward, timing his speed so as to meet the figure as it exited the cemetery and flashed by his passenger window, waving.

"Dwayne Dobson," Banner muttered to himself, not in amazement. Not even in interest. Dwayne was the young science teacher at the consolidated school in Sligo. He had been there less than a year and thus stuck out like a pickle in a cucumber salad. He didn't look like the lifelong residents of the community. He didn't think like them. He didn't even walk like them. And none of them would be caught jogging.

Still not thinking about the sports shoes and the cold, dead-white legs he was about to find, Banner tossed a belated wave to Dwayne, now knowing who owned the little car he had seen, and went back to thinking, not about goldfish, but, this time about cream. As soon as he delivered the doughnuts to Inez in the Quonset Cafe he would gently lower a spoonful of heavy cream into a mug of coffee and watch the floating globule stretch its lacteal arms like a yawning and awakening octopus.

Banner's final turn east into Sligo showcased the town's only point of pride--the water tower, its four trestled legs supporting a squat, spoutless and handleless metal teapot that baked the water in the summer and froze it in the winter. It towered fifty feet above the scraggly Chinese elms groveling at its feet in what was called Charlie Waggles Memorial Park--named for the present Charlie's grandfather. The tank had just been painted white and adorned with the mascot of the Sligo Consolidated School--the tiger salamander. Yellow and black, the amphibian clung tenaciously to the tank, the current year painted below its belly, compliments of a nighttime visit by the current graduating class, all five of them.

Some of the trees near the tower's metal stanchions were draped in toilet paper. The high school kids, Banner remembered, were preparing to celebrate their annual Sadie Hawkins Day, an end of the spring term ritual.

As he continued down the main street, Banner finally saw the sports shoes, not at all unlike those Dwayne Dobson had been wearing as he raced through the cemetery. They protruded from the weeds and sweet clover just to the west of the only fireplug on the street. Showing mild surprise, Banner lifted his foot from the accelerator and finally pulled the hand brake.

As he waded through the damp growth between him and the shoes, flushed miller moths clouded about him. Even so, he could see that the shoes were attached to feet and that the feet were encased in short sports socks, the kind with little pompons dangling at the back.

Up from the socks were a girl's bare legs, a short pleated black and yellow skirt--the style that rose into a circle like a daisy when the girl twirled--, and a white sweater boasting a tiger salamander identical to the one on the water tower.

It was one of the Sligo cheerleaders, Banner recognized. The one with the blonde hair. Unblinkingly, she stared into the blue-gray morning sky above while a miller moth crawled across her Kabuki white cheek. Banner pushed some of the weeds back to get a better look and shooed the miller moth away with a wave of his hand.

"Say," he called. "Ain't you Truman Gillespie's girl?" When she didn't answer, he looked up into the sky from where the birds had fallen.

In Sligo, both the question and the glance would pass for normal.

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## Morning Resurrection

While Banner rushed to the Quonset Cafe with the news of his discovery, Deputy Sheriff Charlie Waggles--grandson of the legendary Weld County sheriff of the same name and inspiration for the billboard near Pleistocene Park--pressed two fingers to the Formica top of the sink counter in his trailer home on the east side of the Sligo Cemetery.

He looked at the fingers, the index and middle of his right hand, and knew that they were all that kept him erect. Where he had been the night before eluded him, but he might have looked in at the Buffalo Bar up north in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming. Another possibility was the Corner Bar in Kimball, Nebraska. Judging by the pain between his eyes and the wobble in his legs it had probably been both.

Wherever, he hadn't made it the length of his trailer to the bedroom when he got home. He had slept on the couch in the front room and, thus, the distance to the counter had been only three reeling steps. While he waited for his eyes to focus and for his inner ear to find its gyroscopic center, he clasped a shaky palm to his left rear, hoping for further support. The stiffness of the cloth reminded him that he hadn't changed his boxer shorts since loaves of bread came sliced. The solemn ceremony was overdue.

Feeling purposeful but woozy, he leaned back from the counter and surveyed the trailer floor. Immediately obvious, aside from dirt and the dust raccoons, were two paperback novels by Philip K. Dick and two piles of clothing. He toed the books gently under the couch with his still-stockinged foot--he'd tend to them later--and turned his attention to the piles.

"Hey, Dog," he called, and brought a heel to the floor. "You don't wanna miss this. I'm about to put on a clean pair of shorts." His eyes, as lifeless as the dried coffee stains on his pickup truck's dash, stared questioningly at the floor but no reply came from under the house. "This could be my day to die, Dog." Still no reply. Dog was either dead or gone or ignoring him. Pets were like that in this region.

There were two piles of clothes on the floor. One was clean, the other dirty. He knew that but couldn't remember which. Groaning like an elephant seal guarding its beach, he bent his ample bulk to the pile under the fold-out table, scissored an article of clothing between two fingers, and sniffed it questioningly. It was a possibility. Tossing the T-shirt back onto its pile, he lumbered a few steps to the next pile, the one in the corner between the sink and refrigerator. This time he retrieved a pair of white boxer shorts, smelled them, and grunted in satisfaction.

"Remind me to get some new shorts, Dog. Even the clean ones are getting a little yellow." After listening for Dog, he explained, "I mean yellow all over."

Leaning against the counter, he pulled his dirty shorts down and toed them across the floor to the dirty pile. To hoist the clean pair required much more effort, and by the time he finished he was leaning heavily against the sink and trying to focus his eyes on the faucet. He ran the tap, splashed some cold water on his feverish eyelids, and sucked some of the fluid from his cupped palm.

The cool water and the feel of clean shorts bolstered him. He arched his body erect, pulled the shorts up tight, and snapped the elastic band around his belly. With more confidence now, he backed into the center of the room and looked down the hall to the full-length mirror on the bedroom door.

"Not bad," he said, admiring the smoky image. He patted his belly lovingly. "Lunch-bucket biceps." He liked his reflection--white work socks and white boxer shorts. He didn't trust anyone who wore any other kind or color. "A man's body," he nodded in approval.

Though he weighed nearly 250 pounds and disciplined his body through vigorous applications of gluttony and dissipation smothered in butter, Charlie had

his strengths, at times a majesty. His broad shoulders and barrel chest cantilevered over the belly and all but hide it, and his shoulders, hips and legs were iron. No excess tissue clung to his upper arms, and his forearms and wrists would stand with Popeye's. The generous likened him to a large Ernest Hemingway. The less generous found less literary comparisons. But regardless of their views, critics and champions alike agreed that once he got his feet under him, so to speak, and headed in a straight line, he was a powerful man. It was his direction they usually questioned.

With his shorts on and his belly well patted, he began the hunt for his pants. They were on the floor in front of the couch, but before he could fetch them the phone rang.

"Sheriff Waggles here."

"Can it, Charlie. If the real sheriff heard you answer that way. . ." It was Kandi, the radio operator at the Ault sub-station of the Weld County Sheriff's Department. For her voice to trail off as it just had was out of character. "And just where in hell have you been all morning, anyway?" she rebounded, getting her wind back. "I've been trying to raise you on the truck radio for half an hour."

"I was out seein' about a problem," Charlie lied. "What'd you expect? I can't hang around waitin' on your beck and call. Besides, you know I don't turn that radio on until I'm wantin' to hear your sweet voice. And you know how often that is."

He hadn't fooled her. "Crashed on the couch again, didn't you?"

"Like I told you. I was out. I found an abandoned baby antelope and I was giving it a bottle of milk and Karo syrup."

"Don't test me, Charlie. I might ask to see the little fellow or call the game and fish boys to pick it up. Besides, I know your head isn't in any condition to be creative." She laughed like a woman who enjoyed seedy bars and the company of men attracted to boiler makers and loud women. "And you can stop worrying about the pool table at the Buffalo Bar," she popped her gum into the receiver. "That is if you remember it. The owner says the felt needed replacing anyway."

"Word's got down to Ault already has it?"

"Charlie, if the *Rocky Mountain News* would follow you around Friday nights, they'd sell more copies than the *National Enquirer*. But that isn't why I'm calling. Banner Tidley's found a girl's body on Cibola in Sligo."

"Run over?"

"How should I know? That's for you to find out. Inez did the calling for Banner. Said the body is beside some fireplug."

"Can't remember but the one on the main street," he said almost to himself. "Ain't but the five plugs in the whole town. If they call back before I get rollin', Kandi, you tell 'em I'm on my way."

"Don't go fartin' around as usual, Charlie. Get out the door now. You know the sheriff's watching you. He's not like the others. He doesn't give a fig about your dearly departed granddaddy."

"Got a kiss for you, Kandi." Charlie was going to lower the receiver to the rear of his clean shorts but Kandi, wise to his generous nature, had already rung off.

He was still looking for his hat when he stepped out onto the trailer's wooden porch and inhaled. No matter how devastating the night, no matter the season or



the weather, the view from his porch always straightened his back. A green prairie that would have delighted even a spoiled Shakespeare rolled north in a moist haze toward Sligo, a haze so timeless that Charlie expected to see a mounted Mongolian chieftain rise over the nearest hill, his nervous little pony bouncing on stiff legs.

"Hey, Dog," he called perfunctorily as he lumbered down the three steps of his porch toward his own pony--a gun-metal gray Jeep pickup. He was proud of it, but not proud enough to wash it. "Dog?" he tried again. When he still got no response, he trudged back toward the trailer and stooped to call into a crack between two bales of straw. It was the opening the dog used to get under the house. All the walls of the trailer, windows and doors excepted, were insulated by bales of straw. The top of the trailer was covered by several tarpaulins, weighted down with lengths of lumber and old tires. From a distance his home looked like a stack of bailed hay.

Sniffing at the entrance hole, Charlie detected something dead, but decided it was something Dog had dragged home and not Dog himself. The pooch had only been missing two days.

As he headed back to his pickup, several magpies, familiarly ignoring him, rocketed over his head and landed just beyond the far end of the trailer where they busied themselves in the scraps Charlie sometimes threw out. Only after he had eased the Jeep out onto Weld County Road 112 did he noticed his high-crowned straw cowboy hat riding on the bench seat next to him.

When he was abreast the Sligo Cemetery he glanced into his side mirror and watched his haystack of a trailer recede into the oceanic vastness of the prairie. For a moment he had hoped that Dog, hearing the pickup start, would bound out

onto the road looking for excitement and want to go along. But he stayed gone. Once the trailer disappeared he could see nothing but green and emptiness and the Pawnee Buttes poking above the eastern horizon. This was his territory, all one thousand six hundred and fifty square miles of it. It extended from U.S. Highway 85 in the west to the Logan County line in the east, from the Wyoming and Nebraska borders on the north to Colorado Highway 14 on the south.

When he reached County Road 390, which the locals called The Highway even though it was gravel, he turned north and paralleled the now-dismantled Burlington Northern Railroad line to his right. He hadn't gone a quarter of a mile before something plopped into the bed of his truck. Slowing, he turned his huge body in the cramped cab and looked through the rear window. A small dark object lay near the tailgate.

It was a male starling. Its beak was as yellow and hard as a kernel of corn. And it was dead.

Uncommon odd, Charlie thought, and drove on to have a look at the girl's body.

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For thirty years Charlie had been turning left off the county highway and into Sligo. And always, even as he was now--hung over and badly needing several cups of coffee--the town seemed to be waiting for him, yet not conscious of time. Maybe it was the stark, high prairie light that both brightened the colors and flattened the object, making what he saw seem to be a one-dimensional representation of something rather than the round, tangible object itself. It needed a fleshy, a corporeal presence to give it weight, to make it live. Each time he

entered Sligo he wondered if it was really alive, had an existence of its own, a sentience, or if it was simply waiting for him to give it consciousness. Like a cowboy shoving a half dollar into a jukebox.

The scene down the street in front of the old Opera House did nothing to dispel the eeriness. A man stood in the middle of the road stiffly waving an arm back and forth like a gaily clad automaton in a European clock tower. The figures on the concrete apron at the side of the Opera House ebbed forward and flowed back as if responding to the restraint or laxity of the two arms-extended figures corralling them.

Compounding the feeling, skewing even further the quirky queerness that pervaded Charlie's territory, was the man whose baton-like arm the other figures played to. Banner, the doughnut courier, the gold fish mogul, that *singular* fellow, was now conducting the movement. Through some obscene joke of Nature, or the animus that passed as such around Sligo, Banner considered himself to be a Take-Charge-Kind-of-Guy. The men helping Banner control the crowd were of Banner's ilk. Together, the three men, were almost as famous as Charlie was in that part of the state.

Even though the Jeep had stopped, Banner was still dramatically motioning for it to stop, or perhaps to play dead. Usually he was dressed in primary colors--red cap, blue insulated jacket, and what single-color polyester pants remained in his closet from his late wife's yard sailings--but he was dressed differently today. It was his turn to play the Neanderthal man at Pleistocene Park and he had already strapped on his hump and donned a fright wig. Even so, he still held himself as stiffly erect as a child's plastic farm action figure.

"In the weeds over there" Banner called, still waving his arm and holding Charlie's Jeep to its position blocking the road.

Charlie turned the ignition off but didn't remove his resting arm from the window frame. Instead of getting out he studied the scene through his windshield. The two men holding back the spectators were Banner's brother Harley and their friend Wiley Wentworth. Collectively they were known as *The Boys*. They would be all right to take fishing if it was with cane poles, but no adult worth the title would permit them to bait their own hooks.

"I'm going to need a cup of coffee before I can tackle this, Banner," Charlie said, leaning his bare head out his window. "Would you be a sport and run get me a cup of Java from Inez?" Banner shrugged his hump and marched reluctantly toward the cafe.

"You don't have time for coffee, Charlie," Wiley Wentworth said and pulled at the pickup door. He had left the herding job to Harley Tidley. "When Inez called the sub-station they switched her straight to Greeley. She told them they probably needed an ambulance."

"An ambulance?" Charlie considered the waste. "We could have thrown her in the back of the truck and saved the county the money. You have any idea what a 140-mile round trip ambulance costs?"

Wiley ignored him. "It's one of the cheerleaders," he nodded toward the fire hydrant. "Truman Gillespie's daughter."

"Not the blonde one."

"Lucky for us the Abroghast sisters were here earlier when Truman and his wife got to town. Talk about a scene," Wiley remembered. "It was all the Tidleys and

me could do to keep them away from the body. Clara and Dorothy, though, they calmed 'em down. Got them over to the parsonage."

"I hear they've already lined up covered dish dinners for the family up into next week." The voice was that of Banner's brother, Harley. He had left the spectators on their own and stood behind Wiley working one of the many zippers on his blue coveralls. When he stopped talking the zipper continued to sing in the silence and Charlie felt compelled to respond.

"Well, good for Clara and Dorothy," he grunted as he opened the door and eased out of the cab. "Course they're right in their element here." The sisters, he knew, kept bereavement cards and black ribbons in stock the way most folks kept postage stamps. He was smoothing back his thinning hair with his left hand and retrieving his hat from the seat when Banner returned with the coffee.

"Inez was already halfway here with it," he said, explaining his speed and simultaneously nodding to Inez' back as it disappeared into the grocery Quonset. He had held his free hand over the top so at least two-thirds of the liquid remained.

"Say, where's Dog?" Harley asked, searching the cab and bed of the pickup while his fingers froze on a zipper.

"Got me," Charlie said, trying not to act concerned. He directed his attention to the coffee instead. "Must have smelled a lady in need somewheres and took off. He's obliging that way."

"You seen my Chester, haven't you?" Banner asked. He too had a dog but people didn't care to be reminded of the fact. If they had seen him carry on once with it outside the Quonset Grocery and Cafe, they could do without seeing it again

ever. It was a tiny, nervous creature. Charlie didn't even consider it a dog. To him it looked like a cross between a rat and a bad idea.

Suddenly, Banner cried and changed subjects as if he'd caught a fish. "This is Dwayne Dobson, Charlie." While they were talking the young man had come up behind them and Banner snagged him. "Science teacher at the consolidated down the street."

"I know where the school is, Banner." Charlie gave Dwayne his hand but didn't need to look at him. He had completed his inspection earlier and already knew Dwayne by reputation. The older women in the community were concerned by the young man's sparseness. They were used to sending their round little husbands to early graves by greasing the skids on their coffins with deep fats, thick gravy, and buttered dumplings. It was all they could do to keep from leaving pies on Dwayne's porch steps.

The younger girls were less concerned about his diet. When they weren't brashly appraising his buttocks, they were looking at Karen Crowley, the second-year English teacher at the school. What could she have that they didn't have, they wondered. True, Miss Crowley was cute, but she had a baby. Another man's baby.

"That's his rental there." Harley pointed to the small, white asbestos-shingled house sitting to the back of the large lot. He had to remove his hand from a zipper to point because the other was in a pocket. "The fireplug and the body are practically in his front yard."

"He was running through the Briggsdale Cemetery this morning," Banner remembered. He had returned to his own pickup and was now carrying a white rat-looking object that squirmed and squealed.

Charlie looked at Banner much as the science teacher had earlier--wondering not what species, but what phylum--and decided to ignore him. It was time to check the body. Placing the empty coffee cup on the hood of his pickup, he strode to the east side of the plug and crouched in the road. He looked like a golfer lining up a putt. Spotting nothing unusual, he gave up and pushed the knuckles of his right hand into the gravel to help himself stand. The view from the walk leading to Dwayne's house on the west side of the plug was no better.

"Hold the fort for a moment, will you, Wiley? Got to see a man about a small horse."

Wiley held both hands beneath his belly where it pouted from between his red suspenders. Among *The Boys*, he was what passed for brains. "Right here?" he asked in disbelief. "With the whole town watching?"

"I'll go behind the house," Charlie assured him and began walking to the back of Dwayne's rental as if looking for clues or Easter eggs. The sixty or so people in front of the Opera House watched the giant figure in Big Mac khaki work clothes and clodhopper work shoes recede toward the alley. When he disappeared behind an embarrassingly small tree, they knew why he had sought refuge from the public eye. Far from being disgusted, the spectators were blasé about the performance. After all, they weren't about to deny a man the freedom they afforded a cow.

When he emerged from behind the tree redressing himself, the leather vest worn by his legendary grandfather and the silver star of authority affixed to it had not been tarnished in anyone's eyes. "A little potassium for the petunias, boys. A little nitrogen for the nasturtiums," he explained. "Kandi set such a fire under me this morning that I didn't have time to fertilize the flowers between Albert Vigil's

and Presley Yount's gravestones. Besides, anytime you can save a flush it's that much less stress on your septic tank."

Ignoring the fact that Charlie used the Sligo Cemetery as a urinal, Wiley waved him back to the fireplug. "I kept everyone away so as not to mess up any tracks," he said proudly.

"Tracks?" Charlie questioned and winced at the hangover that throbbed between his eyes. "Do I look like some Tonto?" Pinching the bridge of his nose for relief, he clomped into the wet sweet clover, following the path Banner had made earlier, and squatted stiffly beside the body. Startled miller moths filled the air.

"She hasn't moved since I found her," Banner called innocently while stroking his pup and several in front of the old Opera House, accustomed to laughing at anything Banner said, guffawed before they caught themselves. It was a typical Class C Post Office town, about 120 people, and humor had to be both as appreciated as fresh eggs and as husbanded as hens.

Charlie permitted this distraction to lift his eyes from the girl's body to the spectators and then to a narrow window on the top floor of the Opera House. A white lace curtain was pulled back slightly to reveal a patch of mysterious darkness. Holding that curtain back, Charlie knew, was a yellow white hand, marbled with blue veins. The thought of those hands caused him to picture the shards of squiggly blue crockery that still littered abandoned home sites across the prairie. Slowly, as he watched, the darkness shrank almost imperceptibly until the curtain hung lifeless. He knew the figure behind the flimsy curtain. And he knew



that she was one of those few "cowboys" whose half dollar could animate the music box of Sligo anytime she chose to insert it.

Before the movement of the curtain, Charlie hadn't felt particularly on display, even with the spectators in front of the Opera House. Now, with sweat beading at the back of his neck--from the hot coffee, he told himself--he knew his every move would be scrutinized. The curtain may have been released to its limp position, but he knew that a pair of eyes, cold and gray, remained behind it.

Lowering his own eyes to the body he was struck by just how pretty the girl had been. Pretty of the too pretty type. Too confident of her looks. Too ready to play the coquette. Too willing to flaunt her too, too nubile pubescence. The young Air Force boys who drove their blue pickups through Sligo on their way to check the Minuteman missile silos all knew her, at least at a distance. They would have surrendered their stripes for a single date. The oil field roughnecks rattling into town in their battered, abused trucks eyed her with lust while pretending to draw ice water from the gaudy plastic coolers in their truck beds. When it was her day to sell admission tickets at Pleistocene Park, men and boys who had seen the menagerie a hundred times would show up just to push money at her through the barred cashier's window.

She had been on stage since the age of three when she learned that men, all men, would do most anything she suggested if she just cocked her head to one side and smiled in that special way. It wasn't a smile she had been taught or seen and copied. It was there at birth, as natural as her blonde hair, long legs, and the fatty tissue in all the right places.

Even dead she was still on stage and that irritated Charlie. The people didn't seem to know that the girl was really dead. They didn't seem to realize that they had seen her at the Tiger Salamander football and basketball games and more recently behind the backstop at the baseball games, and that they would see her no more. The scene before them wasn't real. It was just theater. Television without a satellite dish.

Or was it that other thing? When Charlie raised his head to look at the people lined up along the side of the Opera House, a buzz vibrated in his brain, disorienting him the way a whale is confounded by a submarine's sonar. He shook his head and looked again. The people, as one, listed slightly to the east as if responding to their own centers of gravity. By comparison, the building behind them might have been the Tower of Pisa though to Charlie it appeared to be the object that recognized the true perpendicular. He leaned to the east himself until the people seemed to return to plumb, but his inner ear warned him that *he* was about to fall.

Shaking his head again, it cleared, but he was still exasperated by the people. This feeling quickly turned to pity, however, and finally, as was his nature, to concern. Ultimately, he felt chagrin as he realized that the Charlie Waggles squatting beside the body was absolutely loving the moment, even knowing that he was being watched from behind a curtain on the top floor of the Opera House.

The body, after he fixed his eyes and mind on it, revealed nothing suspicious. No blood. No bruises. Nothing except her vacant eyes to suggest she was doing anything but sleeping. The toes of both shoes pointed skyward instead of splaying outward as he would have expected.

Shifting his weight, he reached out and inspected her scalp with his fingers. Then, after pulling his reading glasses from his breast pocket, he checked the skin on her bare arms and legs for bruises or punctures. Lastly, and as he knew he had to, he lifted her skirt and looked at her satin, frilly panties, panties intended for display.

"Couldn't resist a peek, huh, Charlie?" Wiley half cracked. He had waded into the clover and was holding the fresh cup of coffee Inez had sent over. In the act of extending it, his eyes too had focused on the panties but instead of releasing the cup to Charlie's grasp he asked, "What's that?" He tried to point with the cup.

Following Wiley's gaze, Charlie looked back and saw a piece of cloth, different in texture, extending from inside the panties and for a few inches down the leg. Taking a pencil stub from the left pocket of his leather vest, he speared a fold of the cloth and slowly pulled it free.

"A hankie," Wiley said, still holding the coffee.

Taking it from the pencil, Charlie spread it across his open left palm. He knew what it was. A lady's hankie. A delicate piece of cloth elaborately embroidered along its edges. It was for show, not for service. At the very most it was intended only to daub a tear at a christening or to hide the lack of same at a funeral. The last corner of the hankie was yet to be unfolded and smoothed across his palm, and Charlie held his breath before doing so.

When it was accomplished neither of the men spoke at first. Finally, Wiley breathed the word Charlie had feared.

"Witches."

The hankie was like dozens of others sold at charity bazaars by the older ladies of the community, but this one differed in that it held the delicately stitched figure of a trident, a three-pronged stabbing instrument. The few ladies who carried such hankies and who took great care to accidentally display the trident denied what it was when questioned. It, they averred, was simply the print of a three-toed dinosaur, a homage to the Cretaceous creatures which once abounded in the Sligo area and whose home landscape still remained--the land beneath Pawnee Buttes being the most prominent.

"It was the witches that killed her," Wiley repeated, a little louder this time but not so loud the boys at Charlie's pickup could hear.

When Charlie lifted his eyes to the upstairs window in the Opera House, the curtain was once again falling into place. The eyes behind it had craved a more unobstructed view than was possible through lace. The two windows on the first floor of the old Opera House, now the library, were unabashedly occupied by Marcia and Phyllis, the volunteer librarians. The half smirks on their faces seemed to challenge Charlie..

Below the windows and outside on the concrete apron was another twisted smile, twisted as if by knowing what Charlie had discovered. That was the smile of Carla Beatty. She was held erect by the supports of her four-legged aluminum walking frame. Charlie didn't know what her complaint was, besides old age, but he was sure the old expression *dropsy* sounded like what ailed her. Flesh dropped from her chin. Fat hung from the backs of her elbows. And the blue stumps of her legs were not to be scrutinized.

"Keep this quiet for a while, would you, Wiley?" Charlie asked, wadding the handkerchief into his fist. "First off, those old ladies aren't witches, just bored old ladies. And besides, there's a bunch of good reasons why that handkerchief could have been there."

"Give me one."

"The ladies aren't the only ones to have these. There's others about. Maybe she thought it was her time of the month and came out without . . ." He didn't know what word to use. "She just shoved it in there to protect her clothing."

Wiley saw the reason, but wasn't convinced. Witches sounded better.

"Maybe it was *her* handkerchief, given to her by her grandmother. Maybe that's just where she carried it. Those uniforms don't have pockets."

"Maybe," Wiley said, but he said it because he knew that was what Charlie wanted to hear.

Charlie was stumped for a better explanation. "Let's get out of here," he said finally, motioning to Wiley. "And give me that coffee."

"How'd she get there?" Harley asked over the sound of his zippers when they got back to the Jeep.

"Didn't walk," Banner offered.

"You've got me," Charlie said, ignoring Banner while sipping his coffee. "Looks like she was laid out there on purpose. Laid out and straightened up. Hands put on her belly." He lowered the coffee to look back at the girl's body. "Wiley?" he called over his shoulder. Wiley had gone back to crowd control. "Did Inez tell Greeley that the girl was dead?"

"Yea, why?"

"I suspect they'll send out the coroner or one of his flunkies on this one. It'll take an autopsy for sure." Over the rim of his raised cup he inspected the faces in the crowd. Some of them hadn't been there earlier. One of them, who was horsing around and goosing his buddies or slugging girls on their shoulders was Randy Bedoy. Odd behavior, Charlie thought, for someone who until just recently had been the dead girl's boyfriend. But then kids had peculiar ways of expressing grief.

Another new face was that of Karen Crowley, the high school English teacher at the consolidated, the one linked by gossip to Dwayne, the science teacher. As if to confirm the back fence telegraph, she *was* watching Dwayne, watching him like a choir director needing a castrato. He had given up trying to hide among The Boys, certain that he, given the location of the body, was the prime suspect. In refuge, he had attached himself to the tailgate of Charlie's pickup. Unlike Randy, the dead girl's former boyfriend, Dwayne did seem upset. No matter which way he looked it was painful. If he looked toward his rental, he saw the body. If he looked in the opposite direction, he saw Karen glaring at him. To avoid either he absently scraped imaginary mud from his running shoes by drawing the treads across Charlie's bumper.

Drawing up behind Karen was a figure on a dirt bike. Charlie heard the loud but not unpleasant engine before he saw the rider, but even then the view didn't help much because the driver wore a black helmet. The dark, nearly opaque beaver could have been lifted like the front of a knight's helmet, Charlie was sure, but the rider kept it down. He even left it down when he straddle-walked the bike up next to Karen and needlessly revved the engine. She looked at the helmet, spoke a few words to it, and resumed watching Dwayne.

Charlie went around to the back of his truck and joined Dwayne at the bumper. "Who's your friend on the bike?"

Dwayne didn't raise his head to look. "Bob White. The math teacher."

"He the one that lives in the trailer back over there?" Charlie pointed to a spot about a block north and a block west, behind the school, where Bob had been allowed to park a trailer. Single men had to shift for themselves in Sligo and rentals were scarce. Single women, such as Karen, could live in the teacherage, just a block back from main street and almost within sight of the girl's body.

Dwayne may have answered the question, but Charlie didn't notice. Bob had lifted the visor on his helmet and Charlie got a good look. He remembered the face, especially the heavy rimmed glasses with the tape at the nose. And even though he still wore his helmet, Charlie knew the look of his haircut. It was clean. Military. The clip some had dubbed *The McVeigh*.

"I thought teachers were supposed to be a conservative lot," Charlie said aside to Dwayne. "At least those that are farmers' and ranchers' wives are. But you young single ones seem to have a little Peyton Place going here."

Dwayne rolled his eyes, whether for effect or as an honest reaction Charlie couldn't tell.

"Just makin' conversation," Charlie said, dropping his g's to show he was being friendly. "Besides, I've had about all of this morning that I can take on an empty stomach." He pushed himself away from the Jeep but his path to the cafe was blocked.

*"Tear away the blinds of superstition,"* a voice quavered through fat. *"Let the light pour through fair windows broad."*

He didn't need to look at the face. The tracks in the dust and gravel were identification enough. Two smooth ribbons punctuated by holes. The front wheels on Carla Beatty's aluminum walker provided the ribbons. The two support posts at the back the holes.

"Ella Wheeler Wilcox," she said, identifying the poet she was quoting as if Charlie or anyone in Sligo needed a reminder. The flesh at her throat undulated as she nodded toward the handkerchief still clutched in Charlie's left fist. *Sweep down the cobwebs of worn-out beliefs,/ And throw your soul wide open to the light/ Of Reason and of Knowledge.*"

"I hope that's advice you're giving me, Carla," Charlie nodded kindly to her. "I'll take it that way, anyway. Meantime, I think I hear one of Inez' pies calling my name."

*"Be not afraid/ To thrust aside half-truths and grasp the whole."* She pointed a fat finger and loose-fleshed arm at Charlie's receding back. "Ella Wheeler Wilcox."

It sounded like a vault door closing.

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(3)

## Curtain Rods

"Was that a threat, Charlie? What Carla said to you, I mean?"

Charlie squinted at Wiley through caffeine deprived eyes. "No, Wiley. I'm pretty sure it was just a sort of poetry. You know those ladies," he said, but realized Wiley didn't, and that few in town did either--even after living among them for fifty or sixty years.

"But the *handkerchief*." He cast the word safely down by shielding his mouth with a free hand. "You can arrest them."

"For blowing their noses on something besides their sleeves?" His sudden ire at Wiley was almost as effective as a cup of coffee. "Besides," he asked, stuffing the handkerchief deep into his left pocket, "what gives you honyocks the notion that they're witches anyway?"

"Well normal old ladies don't disappear into the prairie at night and come back early in the morning for one." Charlie tried to outdistance him but Wiley kept up by holding his belly with both hands. "And for another, I don't suppose those circles in Randal's wheat fields have *anything* to do with *them*. Oh, no!" he said, his sarcasm as subtle as lightning. "Then you got their evil. . ."

"It's not an evil eye." Charlie forked his fingers like a snake's tongue as if stabbing those eyes. "They're just squintin' because they're too vain to wear glasses in public. Besides. . ."

He might have explained the little law pertaining to suspects that he knew but Wilbur Hall, the school superintendent, caught up to them.

"You will be there today, won't you, Sheriff?" He was out of breath from hurrying.

"Where's the *there*?" Charlie stopped walking and found himself at the flagpole in front of the yellow brick post office.

"Why at Chalk Bluffs of Course."

"Chalk Bluffs? Why would I want to go out there?"

"Surely you remember, Sheriff?" the little man asked, lifting his worried eyebrows. "You promised to provide security for us today."

"I did?"

"It's the annual Sadie Hawkins Day festival and race. You couldn't have helped but notice this entire past week has been TWIRP Week. The toilet paper hanging from the trees alone could have told you that."

"TWIRP? What the--" Charlie started but changed his mind. "Oh, forget it. I think I remember. Well, you'll just have to call it off."

"We did consider that, Sheriff, but the members of the board who are present today agreed that since most of the children are already at the bluffs, or are heading there, that we are obliged to continue the event. Should we cancel it, many of the children would go anyway, and, if anything happened, the school district would no doubt be held liable. Those bluffs can be quite dangerous--"

Charlie scoffed at the notion. "I was climbing them when I was in three-cornered pants," he said, and then asked innocently: "I really said I'd be there?"

The superintendent nodded and bit his lower lip as if to keep from tsking *for shame*. "Perhaps you'd had a drop or two in when I asked, Sheriff," he suggested, scrutinizing Charlie with a tilted head.

"A drop or two?" Charlie bellowed, snapping the superintendent's head to. "You know how I detest moderation, Wilbur."

Banner idled up next to the trio in the road. He had to lean forward in the cab because of the hump. "Going to work," he announced and then jerked his thumb to the scurrying noise in the bed behind him. "Why don't you say hello to my dog, Charlie? She's dying to meet you."

Not caring to insult a man's dog to his face, Charlie reluctantly shuffled over to the truck bed and extended his arm to pet the rat. Instantly, the tiny, furry, white blur seized the unbuttoned cuff on Charlie's sleeve and worried it savagely. Even after Charlie lifted his arm from the truck bed, suspending the dog in the air, it continued to hang on tenaciously, twisting crazily like a wind sock in a dust devil.

Finally, Charlie had to work the fingers of his free hand into the dog's mouth to loosen the animal from his sleeve. Then he tossed it into the bed but not before stuffing an oil rag into its mouth for it to do battle with.

"Frisky fella," Charlie noted to Banner while watching the dog's death struggle. It growled and rolled about as if in combat with an anaconda.

Banner grinned proudly. "Ain't she though," he said, and allowed his truck to idle on past.

Missing his own dog, Charlie resumed his march to the cafe but was interrupted yet again. At times he was surprised the people didn't ask him to hold their hankies while they blew or to wipe. . . He usually dropped the thought about there.

This time the delay was caused by a Prairie Gold 1938 Minneapolis Moline Comfotractor spinning around the corner at the east end of the street near the Depot Museum. With the speed it had up, it would throw dust over the spectators still gathered in front of the Opera House and disturb the miller moths around the body as well.

Wearily, Charlie ambled to the center of the street and held up a single hand. The driver--as anyone knew--was Bode Road. No one else drove such an antique vehicle, and he was doing the full forty it was designed to go. Since Charlie was his destination anyway, Bode braked to a skidding stop beside him. The large grill, reminiscent of the Chevrolet grills of the thirties caught the sun as did the chrome rims on the fender-mounted headlamps. It wasn't a vehicle that should be on the road. It belonged in a museum.

"Problems, Charlie. Have I got problems." The sorry words issued from his dry lips even before he got the window rolled down. "This is a ghost like neither myself or the misses has ever seen." He didn't have to indicate his wife. She sat behind Bode and let the rumble of the vibrating engine undulate through her body. Her face could peel the red oxide off a weathered barn, but few men in northern Colorado had ever successfully raised their eyes from her lower anatomy. The word *pulchritude* had been coined by Merriam-Webster in her honor.

"What kind of ghost magnet are you anyway, Bode?" Charlie was relieved that this trouble at least didn't involve toilet paper. "You attract more spooks than a porch light on Halloween." He looked to Mrs. Road for confirmation but detected only heat. She sat cross-legged on the fold-down seat behind Bode and held her body rigid against its giggling. Her eyes were glazed, her lips parted. It was the distracted smile of a Mona Lisa, but its mystery and promise were directed at Charlie.

"It was like nothing I've heard or experienced before." Bode tried to look Charlie squarely in the face, ignoring the boys as they began to crowd around. "I tell you even before I started to run the hair was standing on my neck."

"You ran?" Charlie removed his eyes from Mrs. Road.

"You bet we did. The misses and I were out at our new place getting things ready to move in. You know, dustin' and sweepin'. Anyway, we were both up on kitchen chairs we had brought and I was nailing in the bracket for a curtain rod."

"Nailing?" Charlie asked.

Bode paused but didn't understand the question. "Yes, nailing," he repeated. "I had nailed in the one bracket and the misses was up on the other chair holding the curtain rod to it. 'Give it to me,' I says to her so I could see if it was going to reach. I'd only put one nail in the bracket so far, but as I went to grab the rod it just fell. I knew there was something funny even before I looked down because I didn't hear anything. Didn't hear it hit. When I looked, I couldn't see it. 'Did you see where it went?' I asked the

misses, but she was in some kind of a daze, just staring out the window at the mountains in the distance."

"So," Charlie tried to hurry him along, "you drop a curtain rod and now you want me to drive out there and pick it up for you?"

"But it wasn't there. I looked," Bode protested. "I got down off the chair and looked all over. There was nothing in that room but a couple of kitchen chairs and a wood floor."

Harley Tidley, who had joined the group when Bode drove up, digested the information like a small snake swallowing a large toad. "It must have fallen into another dimension," he pronounced, his eyes bulging at the difficulty of the idea, his right hand resting on a zipper toggle.

Charlie had listened to Bode, but his eyes had rested on his wife all the while. She continued to smile at him, but hers were not the only proprietary eyes on Charlie. Inez had emerged from the Quonset Cafe and peered in his direction. When she knew she had attracted Charlie's attention, she wiped the backs of her hands on the apron at her hips and then rested her knuckles there.

"If you expect any breakfast from me this morning you can just quit ogling that trash and get your size nines in here." Actually she didn't move her lips and Charlie didn't hear a word. Long ago he had learned to decipher the bullets from her eyes.

"Sounds like something in my line, all right," Charlie said and rapped the fender of the Comfotractor with his knuckles. Something like this came up almost daily in his territory. Usually Charlie handled it by putting it on the back burner until the problem either boiled away or explained itself. "It'll

have to wait, though. At the moment I've got birds fallin' out of the sky and a dead girl down the road."

"So that's what it is," Bode turned to look through the windshield. "I thought it was the rodeo parade forming up."

"Couple weeks early for that," Charlie explained. "It's one of the cheerleaders."

"Not the blonde one?"

Charlie's nod confirmed Bode's suspicion.

Bode licked his dry lips before worrying an inner cheek with his teeth. "Maybe there's something I ought to tell you. . ." he started, causing Charlie to shift his eyes from those of Bode's wife.

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Dwayne Dobson still leaned against the tailgate of Charlie's pickup. He was afraid to move but had grown bored inspecting the tops of his running shoes. He couldn't go home because he would have to pass the fire hydrant, and he was reluctant to join the diminishing crowd in front of the Opera House. He knew why and they knew why.

Undecided as to which direction to turn, he looked up at the faded white paint on the Opera House. A ghost of the word *opera* was just visible near the top, but he had learned that the building had never really been so employed. It had seen some local theatrics and an occasional traveling show, but its last real use had been in the thirties and forties when a couple charged to see movies on a small screen on Friday and Saturday nights. Now, however, it was just an apartment on the top floor and the community's volunteer library on the first.

As he stared at the fading paint, a lace curtain in an upstairs window moved slightly, the same window that had distracted Charlie. Dwayne ignored it and directed his attention instead to Karen and Bob, who had lowered his visor but was still talking. Judging from his gestures, Dwayne guessed that he was offering her a short ride back to the teacherage. When she shook her head and Bob released the clutch on his bike, he was sure of it.

"Karen," he called just as Bob sped away, petulantly throwing gravel. Instead of answering, she turned and started toward the teacherage on foot. "Wait a second. Why are you running off?"

"I'm not running." She flung the words over her shoulder.

"What'd I say? What'd I do? You knew I couldn't come over last night. I *told* you I had things to do."

"I'm sure you did," she hurried on. "I'm *quite* sure you did. To *your* mind at least."

"What are you talking about?" His voice so lacked conviction that Karen stopped and turned.

"If I were you, Dwayne Dobson, I'd go home and look under my bed for pompons." She was moving as soon as the period slammed shut the sentence and her mouth.

Dwayne watched her go. "But. . ." he stuttered impotently, wondering just *how* she knew. Finally, in frustration, he yelled, "You can't put pompons under a water bed." The people remaining beside the Opera House stared at him unabashedly. Usually, for them to get such entertainment a satellite dish was required.



Pompons? Dwayne knew what she meant, but for the first time he realized just *how* she might know. Standing on the corner in front of the Opera House, he realized for the first time that from this vantage he could see both doors--his door and Karen's door at the teacherage. From their own porches, however, the Opera House obtruded.

Faced with the choice of going home past the body and the gawkers or to the teacherage--the cafe would be even more uncomfortable--, he meekly followed Karen.

The teacherage, shaped like a U with the open portion toward the street, was for women only. A Chinese elm hedge, parted with a gate, protected the grounds from the dusty parking and gravel street. Each apartment was little more than a bedroom. Karen's bedroom door opened into a communal kitchen with the bathroom door on the right. The bedroom door of her apartment mate, Nancy, opened into the other side of the kitchen.

What had first seemed an inconvenience and a compromise to privacy had actually proved positive. Nancy's husband was in the military overseas, so she felt obligated to stay close to the teacherage. Additionally, Nancy doted on Karen's little boy, Ricky, who was barely two, and she was available as a sitter at odd hours. While school was in session, Ricky stayed across the street to the west in the retired farmers' complex with Mrs. Scheilli.

Dwayne walked through the barrow ditch to the hedge and opened the wire gate. When he knocked on the door to Karen's apartment, no one answered. He knew she was mad at him, but he thought she'd at least let

him in. After he got no response to a second knock, he tried the door, found it open, and entered. The apartment was empty but for only a moment. Just as he shut the outer door behind him, Karen entered from the door to the kitchen and bathroom and closed it softly.

Even though she knew why he was there, she said, "What are you doing here?" They were to go to the festivities at Chalk Bluffs in his car. She moved away from him along the wall and shrank into the corner near the vanity, making herself look smaller than she was.

As she slid into the corner, Dwayne was reminded of a puppy he had once scolded and later found hiding in a dark garage. It had shivered and wanted to be picked up, but its hurt wouldn't let it weaken. Dwayne had made the first move that night. "What's wrong?" he asked Karen. His voice was soft, not threatening.

Karen turned to the wall and traced a flower on the wallpaper with her finger. "You know."

"No, I don't." The lie strained his words.

Fortunately or unfortunately--or perhaps typically--their relationship had always encountered such problems. Both were hesitant to make a move without first knowing the other would say yes.

"You *do* know," she insisted, still tracing the flower.

"Look," he started toward her, but she turned completely into the corner, giving him her back. "Okay, I know what's bothering you. You think I had something to do with Linda's--being found almost on my lawn." After a pause he asked, "Right?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly but didn't turn toward him.

"But that's crazy."

"Is it?" This time she turned her head, looked at him fiercely, and waited for a reply.

Dwayne tried to meet her eyes but couldn't. In resignation, he turned and collapsed into an arm chair near the door and threw up his hands. "Are we going or not?"

It had always been difficult, he realized. Difficult just getting to talk to her even though she was the only available woman in town and he and Bob the only truly available males. At first he hadn't even wanted to be interested in her. She had a child after all. Maybe he wouldn't have become involved at all if Bob White hadn't immediately started showing his own timid interest at the first faculty meeting. Somehow, he and Bob had ended up together at Karen's teacherage apartment the first week of school. Not wanting to talk to Karen while the other was present, and not really knowing how to talk to her anyway, they had sat on the floor pushing a toy fire engine back and fourth across the floor to each other while Karen's son watched silently.

About 10 P.M. they had been shyly asked to leave and they departed sheepishly, both knowing they had done worse than fail. They had humiliated themselves.

With Bob returning each weekend to his mother's home in Loveland, Dwayne and Karen might easily have drifted into their own isolated little worlds--she into motherhood and he into midnight and early morning jogs followed by unregenerate reading binges. But soon after school started they began meeting in the Quonset Grocery. At first they only nodded

politely when they met, but they kept meeting in the small store and at school.

"Tell you what," Karen found courage to say one day, "I've been wanting a Porter House steak for weeks but the smallest packages at the counter come with two. I can only eat one."

He knew what was coming.

"So if I buy them," she asked with as steady a voice she could muster, "would you come over tonight and eat one?"

"I'll eat both of them, if you want me to," he had said. They had both laughed with relief.

When she pulled the bottle of wine out of the cupboard after the meal-- wine required a road trip to get--, Dwayne knew she meant business. Still, the persistence required to subdue her coyness was exhausting. Once she finally gave herself permission to let go, however, she fell from a great height with thrashing abandon.

Dwayne could hardly believe it was the same shy girl who had timidly invited him to dinner. He felt as if he were being attacked by some alien that was trying to draw itself into his body to metamorphose. He could see instantly why she was a mother, even if she hadn't wanted to be.

Her body, which had previously seemed incidental to him, was a surprise. Although everything was small, it seemed roundly ample upon later inspections. The dichotomy between what she seemed at school-- cool and mechanical--compared to what she was in the dark presented a fascination that had held him for eight months. She reminded him of one of those Japanese toys he had treasured as a child--the tin frog with the gum

trigger. As a boy he would depress the spring trigger into the gum on the bottom of the frog, right it, and then wait until the spring freed itself and the frog sailed into the air. The thrill was always worth the wait.

Physically, Dwayne would offer Karen anything she wanted. It was the spring of his emotions that he never freed.

"Karen?" he decided, remembering the cold puppy. She was still huddled in the corner. "I bought two steaks last week and put them in the freezer. They're stuck together and I'll have to thaw them at the same time. How about having dinner at my place tonight after the Sadie Hawkins thing?"

She turned from the corner and scurried across the room to him as he rose from the chair. Though she permitted the embrace, she held her elbows in and her fists to her throat.

"You don't really think I had anything to do with Linda's death, do you?" He hadn't intended it, but his voice was cajoling.

She shook her head. "No," she said, but the sound didn't convince Dwayne. Only when she removed her arms from between them and wrapped them around him did he begin to feel safe.

"Then what's bothering you?"

"I don't know." She snuggled her left ear into his chest. "Maybe it's because I couldn't get to sleep last night." And then after a pause. "Robert called last night." Robert was her ex-husband.

Dwayne tried not to seem suspicious. "What'd he want?"

"He was lonely, I guess. Just wanted to talk. . . Wanted to know how Ricky was doing." When Dwayne failed to respond, Karen looked up to his

face. He was looking blankly at a picture on the wall. "We just talked. That's all."

"It's your phone."

"Well he *is* Ricky's father. And he wants to visit."

"When?"

"I don't know. I put him off." Both were silent until she squeezed him and asked the question he dreaded. "Do you still love me?"

He hesitated, then squeezed her in return and kissed her forehead. "Come on," he said abruptly. "Let's go. If we don't get to the bluffs soon, old man Hall will throw a fit."

She called bye to Nancy in the other half of the apartment, picked up a picnic basket and rain slicker, and joined him at the door. "Do you think that sheriff is going to be there?"

"Waggles? Sure. The superintendent said he would be. Why?"

"I don't know. I guess it's because of the way he was watching us out there today."

"I've got nothing to hide." He looked into her eyes to see if she believed him. "Do *you*?" he asked.

She averted her eyes. "Of course not. It's just the way that man behaves."

Dwayne took the picnic basket from Karen. "That's just Waggles' way. Charlie being Charlie. He only does it to entertain people. Liven up the place."

"Well, I don't care how other people react. And I don't worship his dead grandfather the way most people around here do either."

She had to think of a better reason and found one. "And just the other day I was in the grocery with Ricky and he had a cookie in his hand.

"'Watch out,' Inez Botts, the waitress, said to me. 'Charlie's in the cafe and he'll steal candy from a baby any chance he gets.' Just then a little boy, he couldn't have been over four, came out of the cafe.

"'Look at what I tell you,' Inez said. She took the boy by the arm and held it up. 'When he walked into the cafe he was carrying a Snicker bar,' Inez said, 'but look at him now.' She showed me teeth marks clear down below the child's wrist."

"See, I told you he wasn't so bad." Dwayne chuckled. Realizing she didn't understand, he explained. "You've seen the mouth on that man. He could have taken the whole arm if he'd wanted to."

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(4)

## Sack lunches and Rattlesnakes

As Dwayne braked to pull off Weld County Road 122 and turn north onto a primitive road that would have been 45 had it been marked, Karen reached for the map Superintendent Ball had photocopied and given each teacher.

"This isn't the way the superintendent says to get to Chalk Bluffs," she fingered the map. "We're supposed to be way north of here and come in through the Wyoming Land and Cattle Company gate. It owns the Bluffs now."

"This'll save a lot of time and miles."

"But do you think it's legal?"

"Sort of. I was jogging out here early last fall and the man who manages the ranch now said I could go in any time I wanted so long as I closed the gates and didn't pester the cattle or leave any trash."

Three miles on, Dwayne pulled across another primitive road, little more than two ruts, and stopped before a wire gate. He got out, opened it, and walked back into the field with the swing end. Karen slid over behind the wheel, pulled the little Nissan on through, and waited for Dwayne to replace the gate and slip the latch wire over the top of the post.

Ahead of them, the path, now little more than two discolored strips of Buffalo grass, wound between two smaller bluffs. These bluffs were the gateway to the palisade of larger bluffs just beyond. When they topped the rise between the two, Karen forgot the wildly rocking car and leaned forward. She had seen the bluffs before, had been to the identical location the year before, and had seen the bluffs in the distance often, but from this angle they were intoxicatingly evocative.

They were northern Colorado's answer to the White Cliffs of Dover, though not nearly so tall. And, unlike England's famous cliffs, these were cut by many small, but steep, arroyos. Some of these eroded paths, surrounded by high chalk walls, emerged atop the plateau above after twisting endlessly. That is if the climber was lucky. Many of the canyons--and the explorer would need a map to know which was which--ended atop, not the plateau, but an isolated bluff that stood like a giant golf tee above



the prairie except for a narrow curtain of soil that tethered it to the plateau or to another towering island.

This labyrinth of trails, these mysterious passageways into the unknown, had drawn people to the Chalk Bluffs since the first Americans.

A half mile ahead of them on the trail was Charlie Waggles and his silver-gray Jeep pickup, bristling with spotlights, KC lights, and flailing antennae. He had taken the unsanctioned road as well and was just pulling into the line of cars belonging to students and teachers who had followed the map and come down the middle of the bluffs' largest gully.

Dwayne rolled his car in next to Charlie's and stopped. "I see you took the back way in, too," he said, emerging and addressing Charlie over the top of his Nissan.

Charlie was still trying to extricate himself from behind the wheel. "Back way, nothin'. I've been using this entrance since I was a kid in the . . . Well, back whenever." He reached into his pickup and retrieved his hat. "This used to be the only way in," he said, settling his hat but immediately tipping it to say, "Morning, ma'am," to Karen.

Before he could readjust his hat, two little girls ran up carrying a cardboard box. "Sheriff Waggles," they cried together. "Would you like a kitten?" one of them continued.

"What are you grade schoolers doing out here?"

"Our momma said to come out here today with our big sister Sarah and try to give 'em away. She said high school kids are silly about cats."

"Your momma's half right, anyway," he said and squatted for a better look. "How many you got?"

"Six," chirped the one in the beltless, washed-weary cotton dress.  
"Two boys and four girls."

Charlie picked one of them up. "Which is which?"

The little girls' toes turned pigeon, especially the shier, smaller one who was barefooted. "We don't know," said the other.

"But mamma told us that was how many they was," the barefooted one piped as if to say, "so there."

"Well, I'll take 'em all." Charlie began filling his big hands with kittens.  
"They're just the right size for catfish bait."

"Catfish bait?" the girls chorused.

"Sure. All you have to do is take a big hook and run it down their mouth and out their belly button. Leave the tail swinging free. That really attracts the big catfish."

"You can't have 'em," the little girl slapped his enormous wrist with her tiny fingers. "You leave 'em alone." The bigger girl pushed his hands down into the box and pried the kittens free.

"If that's the way you feel," Charlie said as the little girls backed away hugging the box, "I won't use them for catfish bait. I'll troll for pike instead. That way you only have to run the hook from ear to ear and let the whole body, tail and all, trail along behind. Those northerns can't resist it."

"You're mean, Charlie," the older girl said, hugging the box as she turned to get away. Her little sister, a hand on the older one's back for reassurance, turned also. "Yea, Charlie. You're a meanie."

Charlie watched them take a few steps and then called after them. "You wouldn't have some puppies at home you'd like to git rid of, would ya?"

When the little girls were completely out of earshot, he turned back to Dwayne. "Try to do someone a favor and look what you get." He pretended to be hurt but only until he saw a passing cluster of married school teachers, wives of local farmers and ranchers. Each carried a picnic basket.

"Time's a wastin'," he said and ambled off after them.

Luckily, Karen was still in the car eyeing him suspiciously, so Charlie hadn't seen her basket. "Come on," Dwayne called. "Leave the basket in the back seat. I want to show you something up one of the gullies."

They might have walked hand-in-hand, but since they were teachers they had to remain aloof and pretend they were above such things, pretend that all that mattered was the ethereal, the academic.

Most of the students they encountered were in small huddles, probably talking about Linda's death and speculating on the cause. Near the entrance to the canyon Dwayne had chosen for their walk were two signs with arrows pointing in opposite directions. *Little Girls' Canyon* read one and the other *Little Boys' Canyon*.

"Who names these canyons?" It was difficult to tell if he was critical or just curious.

"Those are the bathrooms," Karen scolded him. "*Au Naturel!*"

The soft hum of a dirt bike purred from above and Dwayne craned his neck to look to the top of the bluff to his left. Silhouetted against the

cloudless sky, like an Indian on a pony, was someone on a dirt bike, probably Bob White. The area would have been a Mecca for dirt bikers, but the current managers of the ranch had better sense than to permit it.

The canyon up which Dwayne and Karen started was wide at the mouth and guarded by two towering bluffs, probably part of the expansive plateau above, but from below she couldn't tell. She could see, however, that the canyon narrowed and was choked by cedars about 200 yards up. At the base of each bluff was a slope of debris, composed almost exclusively of fine sand and limestone. Because of the recent rains this talus slope was soft, almost spongy.

"The walking is easier down here," Dwayne suggested when she split from him and walked up the slope.

Karen found the top of the slope pleasantly soft and wasn't ready to come down. Like a school girl, she jumped up and down, causing Dwayne to turn away in embarrassment. "Oh, don't be a baby," she chided. When she saw that he was serious, she returned to his side, taking giant steps down the incline.

On the climb up the draw they passed many side canyons that reminded Karen of passages in a cave. She felt like Becky Thatcher lost in McDougal's Cave with Tom Sawyer. "Did you bring some string and candles?" she asked, her face etched with false concern.

They were just reaching the cedars and Dwayne grabbed onto the tip of a branch for support. "What?"

"You science people have no romance." She didn't offer further explanation, and he remained mystified. Just beyond the choke of cedars,

the canyon narrowed to a gully and finally to a slit. Karen extended her arms and let her fingers trail along both sides. Above, the sky wheeled dizzily.

"We're here," Dwayne said. Karen looked past him to discover that the narrow slit was only a passage into a large room. Inexplicably, a boulder, about seven-feet in diameter, lay in the center of the opening like a softball in a punch bowl.

"How did that get here?"

"I don't know," Dwayne admitted. "A terminal moraine or a flood or something. There are rocks scattered around the area but not many like this. Almost looks as if it were brought here by some primitive peoples." He patted the rock as an old friend and then took Karen's hand. "Over here."

Hidden behind the rock was a shallow cave, obviously man made and not of recent origin. "Look at some of the dates in here." He pulled her into the cave and pointed to the ceiling. "1887 there," he pointed. "There's an 1892 and over here is a 1908. This was on the route of the old Texas Cattle Trail," he partially explained.

"Are the dates real?"

"I don't know. Some of them maybe. These," he pointed again, "I think you can believe." The names and phrases he indicated were those usually found carved romantically into trees. "Because they're in here out of the rain and wind they can last a long time."

"What's on up?" She nodded to the gully which narrowed the other side of the boulder and twisted mysteriously to the left. The alienness of

the landscape invigorated her. "Come along," she encouraged and pulled him from the cave.

At times the walls threatened to close in and end their exploration. Each time, however, the opening widened just enough to permit easy passage, and they continued onward and upward. Occasionally, a tantalizing side passage opened, and they were tempted to take it.

"No," Dwayne advised. "Probably a dead end."

Finally, they reached the top, but the path, instead of taking them onto the main plateau that led north into Wyoming, had delivered them to a narrow bridge that led out onto one of the towering islands. It was one of the bluffs that guarded the entrance to the draw they had entered from below. In their circuitous wanderings they had come back almost to the beginning, but to a spot that was 100 feet above the original.

"Let's go down."

"No," Karen said. "I want to cross over this little bridge to the island." The little bridge was actually part of the island. It had eroded until it was about five-feet wide and thirty-feet long. The drops on either side were precipitous.

"I'm not going."

"Oh, don't be a baby." She grabbed his hand to drag him along.

"No!"

When, teasingly, Karen pulled again, Dwayne threw himself to the ground and clutched it with his free hand, his face pressed desperately into the earth.

Karen let go his hand and knelt quickly beside him. "What's the matter with you?" When she turned his face toward her, it was white and she could feel him shaking. "Oh, God, I'm sorry," she cried. "I didn't know."

She moved to his legs and started pulling gently on them. "Come on. Back this way. Back down the path."

After sliding a ways, Dwayne got to his knees and crawled farther down into the path.

"I'm sorry, Dwayne." Karen's hands were at her face, clawing. "Forgive me. I didn't know. I was just playing."

He sat and waved a hand to show it was okay. "Just a little acrophobia. That's all." After checking he looked up and said, "At least this time I didn't wet my pants."

"A *little* acrophobia," Karen cried and sat beside him. "You're supposed to tell me these things. You're supposed to tell me. . ." her voice trailed off.

Embarrassed, Dwayne signed wearily. "Enough of this hiking. Let's head down."

They didn't talk on the way back. Karen held submissively to his belt loops and trudged behind. Upon re-entering the room containing the boulder, Dwayne leaned his forehead to its surface and began pounding it with his head.

"What are you doing?"

"Setting things right. That's why I brought you up here. To show you this boulder. Every time something gets out of kilter, I come up here and bang my head against it. Makes me feel better."

The explanation was lost on Karen. She wasn't watching Dwayne. Instead, she was looking into the cave. "What are you doing here, Randy?"

"The girls," he pointed down the gully. "I'm hiding from the girls."

Dwayne raised his face from the rock and looked at Randy. He wasn't acting as juvenile as he had at the murder scene earlier, but he still looked like a typical American high school student and dressed like one. Instead of looking as if he came from a well-to-do family with all the advantages--which he did--he looked as if he had just stepped out of the battered foyer of some inner-city housing project. The teenage costume of the day no longer emphasized the class distinctions it had in the past, but it also hadn't become a social leveler. Instead, it had become more of a debasement of all humanity.

Dwayne's silent critique of Randy must have shown on his face, for Randy took one look at the science teacher, emerged from the cave, and said, "I guess it's clear now. I'll head back down." And he left.

His departure brought a welcome natural silence but this was soon broken by the huffing and puffing of an engine laboring up more than an eight-percent grade. The engineer, when he wasn't complaining about the climb, was thrashing at the cedar branches obstructing the right of way. Finally, after the engine and tender had squeezed through the tunnel and into the room, Dwayne and Karen were hardly surprised to see a red-faced Charlie.

"Figured you'd be up here," he puffed. "Come here myself on occasion. Easier to come from above, though." He took one of his bracing arms from his knees and pointed briefly up the draw.



After panting and letting off a little more steam, Charlie stumbled into the clearing and leaned heavily against the rock. "Most of the kids down there wouldn't or couldn't tell me much. They'd been cryin'," he winked, "or at least pretendin' to."

While Charlie contented himself by flapping his leather vest to promote a breeze, Dwayne moved to the boulder and crouched. He felt awkward standing in the vicinity of a man so imposing, even one leaning against a rock to catch his breath. "Any idea on what might have killed Linda?"

"Couldn't say. Have to wait for the coroner's report." He stopped flapping his vest and took off his hat. "I didn't see anything external myself, so that pretty much leaves the obvious. Drugs of some kind." He took a once white handkerchief from his right hip pocket and mopped the head band of his American Hat Company straw hat. "Why they can't settle for a little illegal booze and be happy with it is beyond me. Too much television, I reckon. Think they got to kill themselves the way city idiots do. I knew them satellite dishes would bring no good."

"I haven't heard any real talk about hard drugs," Karen offered, looking to Dwayne for confirmation. "A little about marijuana and alcohol maybe, but not a great deal of that even."

"They'd tell you, would they?"

"They pretty much talk as if no adult is in the room," Dwayne said without looking up.

"Did either of you happen to hear of anything about the break up between Randy Bedoy and the dead girl, anything out of the ordinary?"

They'd been quite an item for some spell. The prettiest girl and the richest boy and all that goes with being those things."

Karen looked at Dwight to see if he was going to respond. When he didn't move she said, "They were cool to each other in my class, but I didn't have the impression it was over for good. Just something they both thought of as a phase." She added, "Randy was just up here."

"Passed him on his way down," Charlie nodded and wondered about what he had seen. "Makes you wonder if any of today's young have values that *aren't* external. But taken all in all, I suppose he isn't half as bad as he could be, what with his father dead and him inheriting all that wheat and cattle land. He's got a temper on him, though, I'll say that. Had it since he was a boy. I remember one time when he was in a kids' horse race at the New Raymer Community fair, his horse came in second and he picked up a surveyor's state that just happened to be nearby and he would have blinded his pony if I hadn't picked him up and set him on the other side of the fence. Mad as a cornered badger, he was. Good thing it was a sturdy pole fence I put between him and me," Charlie chuckled. "That boy," he remembered and put on his hat, "does not like to come in second."

The throaty purr of a dirt bike coming down the draw interrupted him. "Looks like we got company comin'."

Had Dwayne and Karen not seen Bob White on his dirt bike earlier, the apparition approaching from the upper draw might have been frightening.

Dwayne was amazed. "How'd you get that thing down here?"

Bob cut the engine and flipped up his visor. "Not that tough. Had to go back up and start over just once. And I saw you up there, too. You and Karen."

"I didn't see you."

"You weren't looking. What happened to you up there, anyway? Fall?"

Bob, Dwayne noticed, was more confident when he wore a helmet and had a dirt bike between his legs. "Just tripped," he explained. "Loose sand."

"And barked his shin," Karen offered, still a little Becky Thatcher in her voice.

"Well hey," Charlie offered. "If that's the case, when you get back down, come over to my truck. I'll have something in there for you. Peroxide or iodine or something like that. Even an old folk remedy. . ." he started but stopped, thinking Karen might not appreciate a palliative composed of cobwebs and urine.

"I think I'll retrace my tracks and go back up," Bob said, watching Charlie squeeze into the mouth of the path leading down. "Looks a little narrow." Sitting on his bike but walking with it, he worked his way up the draw.

When the motor indicated Bob was at a safe distance, Charlie stuck his head back into the opening. "Odd sort of fellow," he inclined his chin up the trail. "How well do you know him, Dwayne?"

Dwayne was hesitant because it was the first time Charlie had addressed him by name. "Hard person to get to know," he heard himself respond honestly.

"I had a hunch as much," Charlie said, patting the wall of limestone at the level of his face and then scratching it with a fingernail. "Say, what's this TWIRP thing?" he asked. "I know the Sadie Hawkins bit--the Al Capp and Little Abner and Daisy Mae end of it, anyway--but what's this TWIRP thing?"

"The **W**oman Is **R**equired To **P**ay," Karen told him, emphasizing each word. "T. W. I. R. P."

"How's that?" Charlie turned his better ear. His finger on the wall stopped moving.

"The girl," Karen explained further, "is supposed to pay the cost of the date. She asks the guy out and pays for it."

"Cracker Jack of an idea. Why didn't they think of that when I was in school?" The three of them pretended that Charlie had cut a wide swath--figuratively--in high school and chuckled at the picture. "Now do you mean to tell me," Charlie squinted at Karen from beneath his hat brim, "that the girl can *initiate* the date. She can come right up to the guy?"

Karen nodded.

"Now don't that take the cake." He shook his head over what might have been. "Any boy?" Karen nodded that he was correct. "Any *man*?" She nodded less vigorously this time. "It could make for some awkward situations, I'd imagine," Charlie said, and his fingers resumed tapping the wall.

The half question was directed at both Karen and Dwayne, but it was Karen who answered. "Some girls might carry it too far."

Charlie took his hat off and waved it in a farewell gesture. "Thanks for the information," he said and disappeared.

Apparently the down grade was more to his liking than the climb up because he broke into song.

"There's a shortage here of whores in Sli-i-go.

Oh, there's a shortage here of whores in Sli-i-go."

The song explained how the men remedied the problem but Charlie cleaned it up a bit to avoid embarrassing the matrons below who had turned their faces to his bombing voice.

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When Charlie got to the bottom of the draw the festivities were well advanced. A line had been drawn in the sand, and all the Sadie Hawkineses--all of the girls in school who wished to enter--were behind it. In front of the line were the Little Abners, all the boys who showed up whether they wanted to participate or not. Most were eager in spite of their denials and the few who were truly timid had had their backbones calcified by parents who well knew the value of the event. At the very least the chase would assure a date for the evening's dance and perhaps to next spring's junior-senior prom as well. For the seniors it could provide someone to promenade with at graduation. Charlie, never fleet of foot at any age, had missed this tradition by a decade and a war. That fact--and, as he always said, an allergic reaction to crinoline--had sealed his bachelorhood. Plus, during that magical spring spooning season when the other members of his class had been caught wallowing in the shallow waters of automobile back

seats and forced to marry, Charlie had been caught with a cracked crank case and a faulty voltage regulator.

At the drop of his arm, Superintendent Hall sent all the boys rushing crazily--and symbolically--up a blind canyon. Thirty seconds later the wave of screaming girls was loosened. As intended, the result was like shot gunning apples in a wash tub.

"The uglier they are the faster they are."

The voice came from behind Charlie but he recognized it. "Well, I see you boys made it," he turned and addressed Wiley and Harley. Banner was at Pleistocene Park. They looked pleased with themselves. Wiley rubbed his belly and Harley worked the gold breast pocket zippers on his overalls. They weren't interested in Charlie; it was the chase that drew their eyes.

One by one the boys in the box canyon were tackled and pinned submissively to the earth. Randy, the Mister All-Everything of Sligo athletics, used his deftness and quickness to successfully dodge the homelier girls while managing to remain only finger-clutching distance from the prettier ones. He made it look honest when he barely twisted from one girl's fingers and stumbled into the arms of the prettiest girl in school. Until that morning she had been considered the second prettiest.

"You know," Harley considered aloud, "if you put pencil to paper--you know, figure it all out on a balance sheet and get the totals square--that boy did right well by losing his father." He indicated the struggling Randy with his chin. His hands were too busy with the zippers to point.

"He got the money, all right," Wiley agreed.

"And he hasn't stayed settled for a minute since they put his old man in the ground," Harley zipped. "Huntin' in Alaska. Fishin' in the Gulf. Yes, sir, you put pencil to paper and do some figuring--"

"Would you put your pencil in your pocked," Charlie interrupted. "Crimanetly, cut the boy some slack."

"Bit testy aren't we," Wiley observed to Harley, tipping his thumb and curled fingers to his mouth. "Could it be you had a touch of the beaver last night, Charlie?"

Harley said, "I hear tell the boys up at the Buffalo Bar in Pine Bluffs is gonna frame that pool table cover. Hang it on the wall as modern art. Soon as it dries out at any rate."

Charlie ignored them and watched the mouth of the draw where girls were dragging their limp captives across the finish line to Superintendent Hall. He was playing the role of *Marryin' Sam* and reading the boys their last rights. One of the older teachers entered the names of the victor and her prey on a computer generated marriage certificate and Marryin' Sam pronounced them husband and wife for the remainder of the day. The husbandly duties of the new groom were to help eat the box lunch his new wife had brought to the bluffs and to take her to the Sadie Hawkins Victory Dance at the school that evening.

As always, girls outnumbered boys at the annual event, but the unlucky were not completely shut out. These husband-less girls received a *Certificate of Effort* which granted them admission to the evening's affair and a dance with any or all of the boys in attendance. No stags were

allowed. If they wished to attend the dance, they were required to take their chances in the box canyon with the others.

Charlie was comparing the looks on the faces of the winners and losers when Harley broke his concentration. "That's a humdinger of a bumper sticker you have on your pickup, Charlie."

"What?" He ambled to the back of *The Big Honker*, the name the state of Arizona had air brushed on to his pickup after he performed that service for them. It had been written up in all the papers and flashed about on television. "When are you yahoos going to stop defacing my truck? It's not wise to monkey with a man's mount." When he got to the rear and looked at the bumper, he frowned.

Heaven doesn't want me;

Hell's afraid I'll Take over

"You should be happy, Charlie," Wiley pointed. "Whoever put it on there at least cleaned that part of the bumper."

"Well," Charlie re-settled his hat, "I kind of like that one. Maybe I'll leave it on a spell."

He had no sooner spoken than two of the married teachers came up behind him and grabbed his arms. "You're our'n, Charlie," they chorused and laughed. "You been tauntin' us with your bachelorhood far too long," the one on his right arm accused.

"Are you comin' peaceable like, or does my daddy have to git his scatter gun," the captor on the left laughed.



"Well now," he looked at the tiny ladies swinging on his arms. "I'll come as peaceable as you like if it means you *both* have a box lunch for me."

"Actually," the one on the right said seriously, "we've accosted you on Inez' behalf. She told us to deliver this sack lunch to you."

"She said you plumb run off this morning and forgot it," the other explained further.

Charlie took the heavy sack and pretended he had ordered it, and--more preposterous yet--that he had forgotten it. "Thank you, ladies," he tipped his hat. "I'll be sure to tell Inez of the kindness of your delivery."

As the ladies strolled off, Charlie glowered at Harley and Wiley. "What you honyocks grinnin' at. I can be nice at times. Nothing brings out the gentleman in me like a heavy sack lunch," he explained. As he walked off--looking for a shady spot--he noticed that the little high school ladies were spreading table cloths over conveniently-sized rocks and were laying out sumptuous spreads for their new husbands.

Also watching were three ladies Charlie had not expected to see there. Clara and Dorothy Abroghast, the angels of mercy in the community, and Carla Beatty, the aged lady with the walker who had railed at him earlier in the day.

"Ladies," Charlie doffed his hat, an unconscious reflex that had been drilled into him since childhood. "Enjoying the sun and fresh breezes I see."

The airiness of his greeting surprised the sisters. They touched the brims of their own sun bonnets in response. In the back of the sisters' car,

however, Carla Beatty had decided to be less cordial. "Quit the palavering," she crabbed, "and get on with what we came here for."

"Now, now, Carla," Clara Abroghast tried to settle her with a sweet voice. *"Remember, You cannot charm, or interest, or please/ By harping on that minor chord, disease."* *Sotto voce* to Charlie, she explained that Carla was suffering more than usual from her arthritis.

*"Say you are well, or all is well with you,/ And God shall hear your words and make them true,"* Dorothy finished the poem.

Charlie mouthed the expected response as Carla spoke them from the back seat. "Ella Wheeler Wilcox."

With serenity restored, Dorothy cleared her voice--the dust in the air at the bluffs was more than she had allowed into her own home since FDR was in office--and spoke directly to what Clara had alluded. "Sheriff, there's talk in the community is that our little literary group is somewhat suspect in the recent death?"

"Now ladies," Charlie scolded the very idea. "What manner of good people in their right minds could ever come up with such an idea?" He knew what manner--and could provide several names--but volunteered nothing. "Your ladies' group is the very light and life of the prairie. Without your smiles, it would be a spring without a sunflower."

"Our quilt and lap robe sales and auctions have provided quite a number of books for the library," Dorothy conceded with pride. "But there was talk concerning our group even before this recent unpleasantness--nasty accusations if you know to what I am referring."

The misfortunes of more than one individual, Charlie knew, had been blamed on the ladies. He had been forced to stop one committee delegated to speak to the women. The incident involved the state championship six-man football game. When Gary Biggs had dropped a perfectly thrown, potentially game-winning pass from Randy Bedoy, everyone in the cars lining the field was sure who had caused the tragedy. Gary simply wouldn't drop a ball of his own accord. Especially not one that easy to catch.

"I'm at a loss to discover your meaning, ladies," Charlie continued in what Inez called his *stained glass* voice, the utterances that squeaked past strained vocal chords. "You are always spoken of highly in the community."

"It is pleasant to hear you say so, Charlie," Dorothy continued, "but I was speaking of something quite specific, quite recent." Slowly, purposefully, she withdrew a small handkerchief from her purse and daubed at a speck of dust in the corner of her eye.

"Your reputations in our community, ladies, is as spotless as your hankie and I intend to see that it remains so."

Clara Beatty, who had been straining to hear Charlie's speech, shifted her bulk in the back seat and yelled. "And that's what you are going to say even after what you found today?"

It sounded like a question, but Charlie wasn't sure. He lowered his voice and head to speak directly into the open window. "It is what I have always said and will continue to say."

"Time to go, girls," Clara motioned stiffly to the ladies. "And you," she shooed Charlie away, "had better find some shade and get to eating before you waste away."

To Charlie, the suggestion seemed sound.

By the time Karen and Dwayne came down the draw, most of the picnickers were lying about in the shade, having been broken down by the chicken, the sandwiches, the pickles and pie, and by the morning's activities. This tranquility might have continued until departure except for the cry:

"Rattlesnake!"

One of the new wives stood atop a large rock at the base of the sentinel bluff and pointed behind it. Her new husband, bravely at her side, threw rocks at the unseen serpent.

"You younguns get on away from there." With surprising speed and purpose, Charlie strode from the shadows where he had been lying. He was carrying a revolver the size of Matt Dillon's in the old *Gun Smoke* TV show. When holstered and next to his hip, however, it looked like a toy.

"Now go on. Move away from there," he waved the spectators aside. Reluctantly the new husband dropped his stones and complied. Charlie, using smaller rocks as stepping stones, climbed atop the boulder overlooking the snake.

"I don't want any of you to come over here afterwards," he ordered, "because a dead rattler is as dangerous as a live one." He turned and, with both hands supporting the revolver, fired six rapid shots. While the echoes still reverberated, he inserted six more cartridges and blasted away again.

"That ought to handle the varmint," he said, ejecting the spent shells and reloading before descending the rock. "Can't be too careful with such critters," he explained to Dwayne as he passed en route to his pickup.

Amazed at the display of firepower, Dwayne and Karen watched Charlie until he got to his truck. Then, with more curiosity than he could handle, Dwayne climbed atop the rock and looked over.

The snake, unscathed, coiled in the center of a moon's worth of pock marks. It was mad enough to spit its own bullets.

By the time Dwayne and Karen got back to his Nissan, most of the participants had already left. A steady line of cars wound up the sanctioned draw and out through the land and cattle company's main gate. Charlie sat in his pickup, the windows down, watching them go.

"Maybe," Charlie winked as Dwayne opened the door to his own car, "I should have adjusted for windage."

"I'll leave the gate open for you," he smiled, knowing that Charlie would follow him out the back way.

He'd never pictured Charlie as a rattlesnake lover.

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(5)

## Spring Ablutions

With the weekend's festivities over and only two weeks remaining before summer break, Dwayne was almost eager when he walked the block and a half to school Monday morning.

The students were unusually responsive and watched his every move. It was so eerie he asked them jokingly if somehow his class had gotten mixed up with a rerun of *The Twilight Zone*. The attempt at humor was lost on them, but he chuckled none the less. Having taught in city schools, Dwayne knew the eight and nine-member classes he faced each hour would have seemed like *Leave it to Beaver* to those teachers who hourly faced the drama of *Blackboard Jungle*.

The irony of his question wasn't lost upon him when during his second hour Superintendent Hall appeared at the door with a grandmotherly lady who smiled as if she had just won the Pillsbury bake-off and was eager to share her muffins.

"Dwayne," he whispered and crooked a finger. The whispering was unnecessary as all his students' eyes were on the superintendent as were the eyes of those students across the hall who sat near their room's opened door.

"Mr. Dobson," the superintendent said, introducing him to the woman, "this is Mrs. Countryman. She's the retired teacher whose slot you filled."

Not knowing what else to do, Dwayne nodded.

"I've asked her to fill the remaining two weeks of your assignment," he whispered without explanation. "Would you come to the office with me?" It was a question, but the superintendent held Dwayne by his sleeve and wouldn't even let him return to the board to replace his chalk in the tray. At a loss, Dwayne pushed the chalk into his pants pocket and allowed himself to be led away.

"This is highly unusual," Mr. Hall conceded after seating himself behind his desk. Dwayne remained standing. "And I don't know how to broach the subject any more directly than by getting right to the point."

"And?" Dwayne encouraged, eager to get the superintendent off his verbal dime.

"And the upshot is that--after a late night meeting with the school board--we have decided it would be advantageous to all concerned if, for the remainder of the term--with your usual pay, of course--you were relieved of your teaching duties."

Dwayne tried to burrow into the superintendent to discover the truth. "What happened? Did your committee have to settle on me to blame because they wouldn't let you burn witches?"

"Our *private* surmises are not on trial here. The board and I came to our decision last night after much serious discussion. After all," he folded and re-folded his hands on the desk before him, "the girl's body was

practically found on your front porch. And you were discovered out running very early the next morning. Obviously *something* was on your mind."

"The body," countered Dwayne, finally sensing the gravity of the moment, "was practically in the middle of Main Street." He didn't attempt to explain his morning jogs.

"Let's not quibble over a few feet," he re-folded his hands. "Last night it was decided that since the body was found so *near* your home, and since your marital status is--"

"Embarrassing?" Dwayne offered.

--of a single nature." Mr. Hall had ignored the help. "We felt your immediate removal was for the best. For the children, I mean."

"For the best?"

"More importantly is, of course, the other matter which I don't care to discuss here."

"Other matter? What other matter?"

"We've decided to let Sheriff Waggles handle that subject as it is his jurisdiction." The superintendent, having finished his delicate task, spread his fingers on the desk and admired the manicure his wife had given him.

"Waggles?"

"Yes," he looked up. "You are to meet him at the 120 cattle tank. I believe he is awaiting you at this moment."

"A stock tank? At a stock tank?"

"That's what I said," the superintendent raised his eyes from his watch. "Just head west on 120. After you pass 58th, you'll see a rise. Continue along that road until you reach the top of the hill. You'll see the tank to your



left. I thought everyone knew its location. Any number of students go skinny dipping there."

The thought of a refreshing dip in a tank didn't cool Dwayne. "I assume, now that I'm convicted, I won't have to check out. Mrs. What's Her Name will do that for me. So, please do me at least this one favor. Give my final check to Mrs. Crowley."

When he left the superintendent's office, Dwayne saw Karen leaning out of her door. Others along the hall were similarly curious. All he could do was shrug and mouth the word "later."

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The drive west calmed Dwayne. A prairie will do that, especially for one just relieved of his duties.

This far out there were no fences, no trees, no shrubs. The moss green grass rolled toward the horizon unimpeded by even a large stone. For want of trees or pinnacles, hawks sat on the open ground at a distance from the road and pulled flesh from freshly killed black-tailed jackrabbits. On the far crest of the green to the west were the Rockies, puny at this distance and insignificant when compared to the vastness of the truly open, unfenced prairie.

In a distant haze to the north hung the white curtains of Chalk Bluffs. They rippled on the horizon like vaporous time, inviting the sojourner to part them and enter another dimension. Dwayne thought of his rock there and would have preferred to visit it than meet Charlie.

The superintendent's directions had been easy and accurate, and when Dwayne topped the rise just after intersecting road number 58 he

saw the windmill, the big, round concrete tank, and Charlie's pickup. Since there was no fence, and because he could find no road, Dwayne turned his car off the gravel and headed across the prairie directly toward the tank.

Even before he pulled up beside Charlie's pickup, Dwayne started looking for Charlie. He wasn't in his truck. He wasn't anywhere around the tank, and he wasn't on the prairie. If he were, Dwayne could have seen him even if he had been a half mile away in one direction or ten miles away in the others.

The answer to his disappearance came as soon as Dwayne closed his car door, for, like a breaching humpbacked whale routing krill in an Arctic sound, Charlie surfaced near the middle of the tank. The water in the 20-foot concrete circle tsunamied from side to side and splashed over onto the ground.

"You're here," Charlie called, stripping water from his nose with his fingers and then using those same fingers to smooth back his wet hair. "I see the super got a hold of you."

"That isn't the half of it," Dwayne said. "He seems to think I'm suspect number one."

"About that," Charlie admitted while paddling to the side of the tank. "Number one suspect, but of just what I'm not sure."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the way she died," he panted.

Dwayne didn't answer. He waited for Charlie to explain.

"The coroner says she died of the bends," he called after pounding water from an ear. "Now if that don't beat all. Out here on the prairie we

have to pack a lunch when we go looking for water." Charlie clung to the concrete side of the tank near the water spout and tried to catch his breath.

"The bends?"

"Yea," he puffed. "You know. When a diver goes down too deep and stays down too long and then comes up too quick."

"I know the bends."

Charlie ignored him and started bobbing in the tank. "When a diver stays down the nitrogen gas he breathes in from his tanks dissolves into his blood. If he comes up too fast, the gas boils out of solution and forms bubbles in the blood stream, and the joints, and the brain." He stopped bobbing and looked at Dwayne. "It's like opening a bottle of pop too fast. All that fizz comes out at once. That's what happens to a diver." After a pause and a few more bobs he said, "And that's what happened to the Gillespie girl. At least according to the coroner's preliminary report."

"The bends? But that doesn't make sense."

"About as much sense as a peacock on a teat," he admitted. "But like it or not that's what the pathologist says. At least he said something like that."

"Not the bends?" Dwayne was confused.

Charlie inched along the edge of the tank to the spout and put his head under the spurting water. Only now did Dwayne notice the turning windmill. Perhaps it had been silent when he arrived, but now the sails pinwheeled causing the pump rod to clack up and down. "The pathologist called it an air embolism," Charlie yelled over the clatter and pushed from the wall to the center of the tank.

"What's an air *embolism*?" Dwayne called.

"Same thing as the bends." Leisurely, Charlie paddled to the far edge and tried to beach himself on the side of the tank. Even with the buoyancy provided by the water, his bulk was too much for his arms. Giving up, he used his hands to pull himself around the edge of the concrete tank until he reached the spout. Turning backwards, he placed the pipe under his right armpit and placed his left hand on the edge of the tank behind him. With a tremendous push and pull, he drew himself from the water and sat on the edge of the tank.

Charlie was buck naked and the sight to Dwayne, if not memorable, was impressive. He had enough pale white skin to clothe a small planet. Floating around this pallid bulk like satellites were his bronzed neck, face, and forearms.

"As I was saying," his breath came easier, "an air embolism can be the same thing as the bends, or can be caused by the bends. Anyway, it's what does the damage. A big bubble of air--in the Gillespie girl's case anyway--got into the bloodstream and then got to the brain. If the bubble's big enough, or if it finds the right place or places, it can cause a stroke. It can cause lots of damage. It can even kill."

"But the pathologist's got to be an idiot," Dwayne objected. "Look out here?" he waved to the vastness. "How can he say the bends? Is he sure she wasn't taking some drug by needle and accidentally injected some air?"

"No," admitted Charlie. "He said he couldn't be hundred percent about anything. But he did look for needle marks. Said he went over her with a

magnifying glass looking for marks. Looked in places he said he didn't want to talk about."

"No drugs involved?"

"He said nothing positive yet. Didn't find any of the things he expected might show up. Gonna run some other tests, though. Those could take a while."

With Charlie now sitting on the edge of the 6-foot-high tank, Dwayne no longer needed to stand in the mud at the foot of the concrete to see him. "Why was I asked to meet you out here?" he asked as he stepped back and sat on the hood of his car.

"Good a place as any." Charlie scratched where Dwayne didn't care to watch. "Besides, I had a hunch you'd wanna get out of Sligo for a while. I heard about the meeting. You and the witches were running neck and neck, thanks to Wiley."

"Is this your normal bathing hole?"

"Nah, not hardly," he laughed and pulled himself to a standing position on the edge of the tank by holding onto one leg of the windmill. "It was colder than a . . . Give me a minute and I'll think of some comparison that doesn't begin with 'Well digger.'" He couldn't, so he went on. "No. I was just seeing how deep it was."

Dwayne pointed to the sides. "You can see from the outside. About six feet."

"About," Charlie nodded, still hanging to the windmill. "But since I was out here--well hey, why not? Besides, I had to make sure." His clothes

were hanging on the windmill's support struts, and he reached for his sleeveless undershirt.

"Why? Why make sure?"

"Something the pathologist said." These words came from inside the undershirt as Charlie struggled to pull it over his wet, bulging chest and belly. "According to him, it's possible to get an air embolism in as little as four feet of water."

"Four feet?" Dwayne asked, surprised. "Every kid in America would get one at the swimming pool every summer if that was correct."

"Suppose so. But there's another requirement. The kids would have to be wearing diving gear and breathing air from pressurized tanks. If they were breathing underwater and ascended without expelling air from their lungs as they went, they could get an air embolism."

"And you're saying Linda Gillespie was scuba diving in this tank Friday night, came up too quick, suffered an air embolism, and died?"

Charlie was looking at his boxer shorts. "Mother of Mary, I got to get me some new pairs. Look at how yellow and dingy these things are?" He waved them at Dwayne who took the opportunity to inspect the prairie beyond. "If my mother could see these she'd roll over in her grave, or whatever you do when you're buried head down."

"Head down?"

"I'm liable to get myself killed one of these days and all they'll say on the T.V. is that he died in a pair of yellow and brown stained BVD's."

Feeling better at the sight of Charlie's real concern, Dwayne smiled a little. "What was that about your mother being buried on her head?"

"Ah, forget I said anything," Charlie waved the shorts at him. "Like you said, it does sound strange that anyone would be scuba diving around these parts. They could go up to Horse Tooth near Fort Collins, though. Or maybe even to North Sterling Reservoir or maybe Jackson's Reservoir over by Fort Morgan."

He was nearly dressed now. While standing on the edge of the tank he had struggled into his khaki pants and then pulled his work shirt and leather vest over his massive shoulders. His current frustration was trying to pull dirty socks over wet feet while sitting on the edge of the tank.

"Her clothes weren't wet," you know. He halted his explanation to grunt as he pulled his shoes over twisted socks. "In fact, everything about her was neat. Just like she'd been laid down to sleep."

Dwayne tried to make his next question sound as if it were in logical sequence. "Raped?" he asked.

Charlie looked at him and then back at his shoes. His arms, reaching over a protruding belly, were having a tough time tying shoelaces. "Not so's anyone would notice. The doc said she was an active girl. No jizzum, if that's what you mean. Maybe some recent sex, but if there was any it must have been consensual

"Where do I fit into all this? Why am I a suspect and not your witches?"

Charlie looked briefly at Dwayne before lowering his body to the ground. "Because of what Bode Road says he saw." His hat rested on one of the posts of the small fence that protected the windmill from the cattle and he had to stretch and groan to pluck it free. "Bode," he pulled the hat

down squarely on his head, "was driving through Sligo Friday night to help someone up north haul some cattle early the next morning. He says that when he passed your place he saw a girl on the stoop. Says the door was open so she was back lighted. Says you was on the other side of the screen and acted as if you was about to let her in."

Dwayne didn't move. He sat on the hood of his car and watched Charlie take a few paces out onto the prairie and turn his back to him. "Says he was pretty sure the girl was wearing a cheerleader's outfit and that her hair was the same style and length of the Gillespie girl."

Dwayne's only protest was a random hand gesture and silence.

If Charlie saw, he ignored it. His back was to Dwayne and he was finishing a task prompted by the cold water. "Like I always say, you can judge a man by the size of the room he takes a leak in." His eyes scanned the immensity of the prairie. When he turned around, he was still bow legged from trying to stuff his member back into his yellow shorts. "Yes, siree," he nodded. "Fences do constrict a man's prostate somehow."

Dwayne needed to make water of his own--and to avoid Charlie's eyes--so he walked to the side of the tank opposite the sheriff.

Charlie had placed a muddy shoe on the front bumper of his Jeep near the power wench. "I didn't *quite* hear you say the Gillespie girl wasn't over to your house Friday night." He looked at all that was visible of Dwayne, his head, and at the reflecting water. An inverted blue sky and white clouds--a tranquil purity too pristine to be sullied by their conversation--floated between them. Abruptly, this placidity was marred by a breeze that caused the windmill to probe the earth screechily with its pump rod.



"You don't have to answer," Charlie called over the noise. He looked up at the windmill's rudder and read the ubiquitous trademark that lorded above the prairies of America: The *Aermotor*--Chicago. "I figure that little filly of yours, the Crowley girl, is just about the same size. And besides, well--I'm not saying Bode's blind or anything, but he ain't getting any younger. And he's started drinking earlier in the evening than he used to."

Dwayne had finished his task, but he seemed to be shaking it more than was necessary for a younger man.

"I was just wondering, what with TWIRP week and all, if maybe Linda might have tried to overstep the bounds of propriety--not that she ever recognized any bounds. And you, being an *obliging* fellow, might not have wanted to hurt her feelings. I've a dog like that, quite obliging. Don't hold it against him. Guess I couldn't hold it against you, either. 'Course there's the matter of your being a teacher."

Charlie laid the bait and waited for Dwayne to nose it. When he didn't, he continued. "Like I say, you don't have to say a thing." He waited but Dwayne didn't move. "Of course, it's all pretty much moot now. Just to settle things in my mind, I called your girl this morning and asked her."

Dwayne's face raised to Charlie, but he said nothing.

"She says it was her. Said she was over to your place about that time."

Finally Dwayne moved, but it was in the opposite direction. He looked to the ridge to the south and saw the tiny silhouette of an antelope and the even tinier silhouette of its baby, scurrying along behind.

"Then why am I your number one suspect?" He had to yell to overcome the cranking of the windmill and the distance.

"Because," Charlie yelled right back, "no one ever believes a woman who thinks she's in love." Dwayne, unmoving, watched the antelope until they crested the ridge. "Besides, like I said earlier," Charlie tried to ease the tension, "I thought you might like to get outta that school for a while."

Dwayne didn't answer. He walked awkwardly back to his car in silence. But he didn't head for the door. Instead, he made a wide circle to the rear and leaned on the trunk with his arms extended. "If you think I did it, and you said as much by saying Karen lied, why are you messing with this water thing."

"First of all, I didn't say she lied. I just said she was a woman, pretty much. Besides, the real point is that I know you *didn't* do it."

This caused Dwayne to push himself from the trunk. "Didn't because I don't have a motive?"

"Motive my. . ." He didn't say the word but he slapped his rear and removed his foot from the front bumper. "You been watching too many of them T.V. shows." He placed his other foot on the bumper. "Everybody has a motive. The trick is to discover who *could* do it. Not someone who has a motive."

"*Could* do it? What do you mean *could*?"

"Crimanetly, man. Don't you know people? Look around you. Does a man cheat on his wife or a wife on her husband because the other is a lousy lover or because they hate each other? Hardly. They do it because they *can*. Don't look for a reason. Look for *can*. If they want to do

something and think they *can* do it and get away with it,--physically or emotionally--they'll do it every time."

"That's not an investigative procedure. That's cynicism."

"Cynicism. Philosophy. Call it what you want," Charlie turned aside to blow a last bit of water from a nostril. "I call it a lifetime of observation. And you," he looked Dwayne up and down, "*can't*."

Dwayne was uncertain. "How am I supposed to take that?"

"Sometimes," Charlie headed to the driver's door of his Jeep, "it's a compliment. Sometimes it ain't."

"Then I take it you don't think I have the guts to do it?"

"*Guts* I don't know about, but *can't* I do. So we better check on this water connection. Normally," he said, forcing himself behind the wheel and slamming the door, "I wouldn't give it a second thought. But we got something going on out here on the prairie that's been causing me some concern."

Dwayne thought he knew, but as he headed for his own driver's door he questioned Charlie with his eyes.

"Witches," Charlie said the expected. "According to a fellow at the University of Northern Colorado, we got more covens out here per capita than any other place in the States. 'Course I doubt if he could tell his granny from a witch." He started his engine and prepared to leave. "Why don't you follow me on into town. There's another tank of water we ought to check out and if there's time I know a couple of old ladies we ought to see."

Dwayne got into his own car and, after starting the engine, leaned over to call out the passenger window. "Do you suspect the witches?"

"Nah," Charlie yelled back, his pickup starting to move. "They're just old ladies who have worn out their interest in Double Deck Canasta and are trying to while away the time until a spot opens for them in the cemetery. One group calls itself a Thanatopsis Society. You know, people who get together and read poetry to each other. I'm a little curious about this one. Calls itself the *Ella Wheeler Wilcox* branch."

"Why you curious about that one in particular?"

"Oh, it's just that they also go by another name they haven't been too careful about keeping secret. When they are alone, they call themselves the *Daughters of Neptune*."

Suddenly, the babble Dwight had heard from Wiley about a harpoon began to make sense. The harpoon had been stitched into a corner of a handkerchief Wiley said Charlie found on the body.

"Could this," he called to Charlie's retreating pickup, "have anything to do with a handkerchief?"

"It could might."

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(6)

## Everybody's Fool

The bath in the stock tank had seemingly washed the starch out of Charlie's resolve. He didn't park in front of the cafe as usual. Instead, he pulled up short and nosed into a slot in front of the Post Office. He was so tired after pushing his pickup door open and turning sideways that he had to rest his head on the door frame.

"What I need's a quart of coffee," he told Dwayne who had pulled into the adjacent space.

Dwayne doubted the problem was coffee. Charlie's sudden enervation seemed connected with the two faces Dwayne had seen in the Opera House windows. In the lower window was one of the librarians. The upper was filled by the boldly placed, defiant body of an elderly woman he hadn't seen before.

The women's eyes still held steadily on Charlie, but his rose to meet their gazes only occasionally and briefly. It was a Mexican standoff they were winning.

"I got an idea," Charlie half brightened. Why don't we shoot on over to Highway 14 and Pointe Ruffner's place? There's a water tank out there I think we ought to have a look at and I can get a coffee there."

"You mean Pleistocene Park?"

He did, but when Dwayne crawled into the passenger side of the Jeep Charlie still seemed distracted. Distant. Weary. The pickup, with Charlie's hands on the wheel, aimlessly selected its own roads. When it looked as if they were headed toward the old White Store at the disappeared community of Coleman, the wheel turned south and they stopped on a bridge over Crow Creek. "Off to the right," Charlie pointed, "is the old stone barn my granddaddy used to square dance in."

Dwayne looked and saw a small stone barn on the north bank of the creek. The side nearest him bowed out and didn't look as if it would hold much longer.

"They danced upstairs," Charlie explained and moved his hat on the seat so he could shift to see around Dwayne. "On winter nights they'd all bring blankets. Almost nobody had a car back then--in the 10's--and the trip home by horse was too long and too dangerous at night without a bright moon. There weren't any real roads. They made a good thing of it, though. The younguns did a lot of snuggling under them quilts. To tell the truth, half the older folks on this prairie were conceived in that hayloft. *Bundling*, I think it was called." He forced a laugh. "I think that's why the ladies like to quilt so much. Reminds them of their sparkin' days."

Just beyond the barn, Crow Creek split a row of hills on its way to Heart Reservoir, like the creek, dry most of the time. Coming through that split, and right down the center of the dry creek bed, loped a coyote holding something in its mouth. "Looks like a white rabbit," Dwayne leaned back to give Charlie a better view.

"Could might be," Charlie said, "though I doubt he'd find a white one running loose around here."

As the coyote--apparently unconcerned by their presence--drew nearer, Dwayne realized what he had first taken to be fur was hair. "That looks like Banner's dog. That crazy little rat-dog of his."

"Watch your head," Charlie cautioned as he pulled his rifle over both their heads from the gun rack behind them and then pointed it out his window after easing the door open quietly.

Sill unconcerned, the coyote slowed to a trot as it ducked under the bottom strand of wire and approached the gravel road.

Blam! The pebbles immediately in front of its head exploded, some of them probably hitting the coyote in the chest. Startled, it stopped and turned its head toward the pickup.

Blam! This time the explosion was immediately under and between the coyote's legs. The flying rocks caused it to leap back and drop Banner's dog. Twice more Charlie fired, each time just missing the coyote. Deciding it had met its match, it leaped over the dog, scurried under the opposite barbed wire fence, and tore across the prairie in its original direction, turning its head back occasionally in wonder.

"Shucks," Charlie uttered without passion. "Guess I forgot to correct for windage."

After replacing the rifle in its rack, Charlie and Dwayne left the Jeep and walked up the road to the dead dog. "Lord, look at how dirty it is," Charlie whistled. "Looks like that coyote drug him through an irrigation ditch." He squatted and scooted his left hand under the limp body and

picked it up. "Boy is he dirty." He lifted the dog's hair with the fingers of his right hand so Dwayne could see the dirt and mud.

"Do you think Banner knows?"

"I doubt it. The dog looks fresh dead and Banner's probably at the park wearing that crazy costume Pointe gave him. I wouldn't be surprised if the coyote didn't take him right out of the back of Banner's pickup. The tourists have been feeding them so much they ain't afraid of people anymore. Banner probably won't miss the mutt until he looks into the back of his pickup. And when he finds him gone he's liable to go ballistic."

Dwayne was becoming more interested in the problem. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"If you're thinkin' we ought to clean this pup up and curl him up in the back of Banner's truck as if he's asleep, I'm with you. The shock of this rat dying is going to be trauma enough for Banner, let alone having him discover that a coyote killed it. We *could* just ditch it, but I don't want to have him looking all over the country the next month or so to find a missin' dog."

Charlie rose with the dog still in his hand and walked uncertainly back to his truck. "It's kind of grungy, though. Maybe we ought to clean it up a little bit before we put it in his truck bed."

Dwayne pointed down the road. "There's a windmill and tank off that direction. They're not far from the road. We could wash it there."

Charlie nodded that it was as good an idea as any. He placed the dead dog in the back of his pickup and crawled into the cab just as Dwayne slammed his door. "Drying it after we wash it is going to be a problem," he



told Dwayne. "Course we could tie it to one of the aerials on top of the cab. It'd probably be dry from the wind by the time we get to the park."

Dwayne shrugged. He couldn't think of anything better and it was certainly a diversion from worrying about Linda's death. And it was *certainly* better than being in class. When they drew abreast of the windmill, he followed Charlie over the fence to the tank. At first Charlie tried cleaning the dog by holding it in one hand and scrubbing it with the other, but the dirt was too stubborn. Finally, he took the dog in both hands and rubbed it up and down the corrugated inside of the tank like a woman using a washboard.

"At least leave some hair on it," Dwayne made an attempt at humor.

Charlie took his work seriously and raised the dog from the water to inspect the progress. "That's going to have to do it," he said after turning the tiny, drenched object in his hand. "There ain't enough dog here to support what hair's left."

Following his original plan, Charlie carried the dog back to the Jeep and tied it to the aerial above the driver's side. The twine came from scraps in the truck bed. "Let's git," he said when finished and dived into the cab."

He tore down the road toward Colorado I4 with his arm out the window so he could fluff the dog's hair dry as the wind blew through it. When they were a mile from Pleistocene Park and when Charlie was finally satisfied with the results of the blow dryer, he pulled the pickup to the side of the highway and cut the dog loose. He didn't want to bother untying the knots and chance being seen.

When they pulled into the park and around to the employee's parking lot, Charlie's hunch proved correct. Banner's pickup was there. "We're in real luck," Charlie said, getting out but hiding the dog's body within his big curled hand. "Banner might not even know his dog's dead till supper. After I get through, he'll just think the dog's tuckered out and sleeping if he looks in back."

Glancing about to see if he was being watched, Charlie went to the driver's side of Banner's truck and placed the dog on the metal bed. He curled it, much as a pack rat might sleep, and shoved it into the corner directly behind the driver's seat. To make the dog less visible, he pulled a minnow bucket up next to it and tucked some rags around it. He had to push a pointed shovel to the other side of the pickup bed to make room.

"Sleepin' like a little angel," Charlie cooed and then remembered to check his frayed sleeve. "But, hey," he motioned to Dwayne. "Let's get on around to the front parking lot. We don't want to get caught here. Not after this," he nodded his head sideways to the dog.

When Charlie idled the Jeep around to the public lot, it was crowded with tourists' cars as usual. Some of the tourists were just pulling in after photographing the huge billboard of Charlie a mile to the west. It stood forty feet high with Charlie's head and hat rising above the rectangular portion and silhouetted against the sky. His arms were folded defiantly across his chest and the lettering off to the side read: **Watch Out! You're in Charlie Waggles' Country.** Other tourists were busily preparing to leave, but not before affixing recently purchased bumper stickers that read *I Visited Pleistocene Park* or *I've been to Waggles' World.*

While walking across the regular parking lot to the entrance, Charlie noticed that the park owner, Pointe Ruffner, had already gotten himself a new ticket girl, a pretty one. Charlie thought he recognized her as a student at Prairie School, the consolidated east of New Raymer. Pointe, never one to miss a bet, had gotten himself another cheerleader and a blonde one to boot. He also noticed a three-foot high caricature of himself emerge from the screen door of the souvenir shop. The young villain--obviously indulged by well-heeled parents--sporting a diminutive straw cowboy hat just like the one on Charlie's head. In addition, he boasted an imitation leather vest adorned with a replica of Charlie's star, actually his granddaddy's star. If the child had not been fiddling with his new plastic pistol--a replica of the 1860 Lawman .44 Cal. revolver strapped to Charlie's leg--he wouldn't have run smack into the giant version of himself.

Feeling that he had walked into the side of an unexpected mountain, the child nosed the huge revolver strapped to Charlie's thigh and recognized it as the model for the one in his tiny holster. Cautiously, the child raised his gaze slowly up the monument before him. At first he saw the belt buckle, then the vest, and finally the star. The hat towered above him like a cumulonimbus blocking the sun, but the kid recognized it as a barrel-sized version of his own.

"Mama!" the kid tried to cry out. The force was there but the vocal chords refused to vibrate. "Mama," he tried again while backing away. This time he managed a squeak. When he was far enough back to be surrounded by adults, he recovered his voice entirely. "Look, Mama. It's the man on the big sign."

Trunk lids on a dozen cars near Charlie popped open and adults ran for still or video cameras. He thought of scurrying for cover, but the tiny replica of himself stood--hand near holster--as if challenging Charlie to draw. Slowly, Charlie raised his hands to vest pocket level and flexed his fingers. "Not on a day when the sun's shining, partner," he addressed the kid and eased cautiously toward the souvenir shop. "I promised my dying mother. If it were another kind of day, a cloudy one, we'd draw down." His way to the door was blocked by video cameras and snickering flashes from tiny, disposable cameras, but Charlie persevered, causing the admiring bog to part before him. Just before disappearing into the darkness behind the screen door, he turned and saluted the crowd by touching the brim of his hat. "The name's Waggles," he told them.

Dwayne, nearly invisible when in Charlie's presence, tugged at Charlie's sleeve. "What am I supposed to do here?"

"Been here before?"

"You kidding?"

"Then buy yourself a ticket. Tell me what you can learn about the new girl in the booth. Just ask anything that comes to mind. Then take the tour. After, tell me what you think about the big fish tank they got in here."

"That's all?"

"It's enough if you find out anything. Meantime, keep out of my way. Might be best if they don't know we came together." Dwayne nodded that he understood and Charlie continued on through the open screen door.

Inside, Charlie was as much an attraction as he had been in the parking lot. A grandmother who had been examining the Charlie Waggles

action figure dolls looked up to find the real thing scrutinizing her. A teenaged girl had just flapped the wrinkles from a T-shirt and was judging its size by holding it to a friend's shoulders when she noticed the similarity between the figure on the shirt and Charlie. Self-consciously she crushed the shirt between her fists and wrapped her crumbling body around it. "Oh, my god," she squealed to her friend. "There he *is*."

Pointe, the owner, was behind the cash register. "I tried to get you in on this stuff," he indicated the Waggles' paraphernalia that nearly filled the store, far outnumbering the usual Colorado souvenirs. "But no, you said you weren't interested. Told me to have at it if I was fool enough to waste my money." Pointe, all eyes behind steel-rimmed glasses, was as perpetually alert as a farm dog afraid of the dark.

Charlie picked up one of the non-Waggles items in the store and turned it with his fingers. It was a plastic sabre-toothed tiger. He turned it over, put his reading glasses to it, and discovered it was made in England. Satisfied with his inspection, he placed it back on the counter amid other Pleistocene animals such as giant sloths, mammoths, and bison.

"Come on back here," Pointe motioned. "You won't believe what I just got in." He took Charlie to a stack of boxes behind a large wooden tank filled with water. Opening one of the cartons, Pointe pulled out a dinner plate. Baked onto its enamel surface was a picture of Charlie. He stood atop a small hill with his arms folded imperiously across his chest. The bandoleer that crossed his chest was nearly hidden by the straps of the two shotguns that loomed either side of his head. No one looking at the picture would doubt who was in charge out in the West.

"This," Pointe needlessly told Charlie, "is the same picture that was on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. The one on *People* was a little different angle, if I recall." Pointe offered Charlie the plate but he declined. "If you don't want the plate," the owner blinked behind his glasses, "I got the same picture on tumblers, mugs, ash trays, and place mats." Charlie wouldn't budge. "Well," Pointe looked around for a likely gift, "out back I got a shed full of cookies in little round metal containers, you know, like fruit cake comes in? The same picture is on the lid but prairie scenes are painted around the sides. I get the containers from Taiwan by the thousands."

"I suppose I could find use for a couple of those," Charlie tried to be gracious. "But, I'll pick 'em up on the way out. I got a couple of other rows to hoe if you don't mind."

"You mean the Gillespie girl?" Pointe's glasses caught the outside light and nearly blinded Charlie.

"Yeah." To avoid the glare, he looked into the large wooden water tank beside him. It was about five feet deep and ten feet in diameter. "What you got this old tub in here for?"

Pointe finished repackaging one of the crates before investigating Charlie's question. "That? It's where I keep the Pleistocene rosy carp. The big ones."

Charlie looked into the tank and discovered the fish idly twisting about in the darkened water. For some reason the wall of the store was build across the tank so that half of the tank projected outside. "Look a lot like gold fish to me."

Pointe lifted his glasses to look into the tank and agreed. "Don't they now."

"I notice you've got yourself a new ticket girl already. Another pretty one."

Pointe wondered at the question before answering. "I don't have trouble hiring around here. In fact, I have a waiting list. Carole out there has been on the list a good while. Why?"

"Just asking," Charlie shrugged and rounded the tank, trailing one hand along its rim. On the customer side was a sign advertising Pleistocene rosy carp *Suitable for backyard pond. Own a little Piece of the Ice Age.* "Why don't you give me a tour of your menagerie. It's been a time since I've been through."

Pointe took him into the park by a side door but Charlie was still able to read most of the educational signs tacked up for the tourists. The animals, according to the sign nearest the entrance, were the results of successful clonings. The DNA came from still viable tissue found in undisclosed glaciers in Colorado.

"I'm just a country yokel when it comes to this cloning stuff, Pointe. Could you fill me in a little?"

"It's mostly trade secrets," Pointe said, placing a hand between Charlie's shoulder blades and urging him toward a building labeled *The Nursery.* "In here you can see some of the embryos that are about to hatch."

Sure enough, Charlie saw several lighted drawers of eggs and a hundred or so tiny precocious fowl under heat lamps pecking at seemingly nothing. "That looks a lot like old Stanley's incubator and brooder."

"His son sold them to me when the old man died. I use them now for my Pleistocene pea fowl. They sell like hot cakes."

"So that's what those critters are, huh? Pleistocene pea fowl." Charlie was sure he had seen the creatures before. "Look an awful lot like guinea hens to me," he said and shaded his eyes to see through the window better.

Pointe mimicked him by shading his own eyes. "Don't they now."

As they ambled on, Pointe gestured to first one animal he had cloned from bits of DNA to another. One was a Pleistocene prong horn that looked an awful lot like any of the thousands of antelope that grazed the prairie around the tourist attraction. In another pen was a Pleistocene bison, a dead ringer for Ralphie, the mascot the University of Colorado football team trotted onto the field before each game. The Ice Age deer and elk were also hauntingly familiar.

The *Mustelid Enclosure*--Charlie was sure he recognized it as one of Bode's old rabbit hutches--reminded Charlie of a thousand creatures he had seen frozen in his headlights on midnight runs. There were mink, martens, badgers, and even an otter. The peccaries, porcupines, skunks, and beavers in the next bank of enclosures were indistinguishable from those that now roamed free. When Charlie pointed the fact out to Pointe, he leaned forward and admitted, "Don't they now."



In an open area, away from the midway, eight to ten prairie sparrows and larks were pecking the gravel. Pointe reached into a pocket and tossed them a few grains of wheat. No sooner had he done that than a black figure darted from the platform on his windmill and just missed him with a viscous, white and gray glob expelled from its cloaca.

Pointe brushed gravel over the near miss and began to curse the bird. "Damned starlings," he snapped. "Just another immigrant living off the county."

"I missed that," Charlie inquired, recognizing the starling that had just made the sortie as a kin to the one that had fallen into his pickup bed, dead.

"The starling," Pointe explained. "They're immigrants. They don't belong here. Someone wanting to stock America with all the birds named in the Bible let a bunch of them loose in New York's Central Park and we've been cursed with them ever since. They don't fend for themselves. They steal from other birds and from people. They can't live without handouts. Eighty to ninety percent of the food they eat is produced by man." He looked around at some other birds nesting in a hollow beneath the eaves of one of his sheds. "And the English sparrow ain't much better." To prove he wasn't against all birds, he reached into his pocket and tossed more food to the native birds. He also kept a watchful eye on the sky.

Pointe didn't jump, but the birds he was feeding scattered as a peacock charged among them and then proceeded to strut regally as if it had always been the only creature on earth. Occasionally it deigned to lower its splendid head to peck at a single grain.

"A Pleistocene peacock?" Charlie couldn't continue suspending his disbelief.

Pointe nodded. "Their bones were found in the La Brea Tar Pits. They were an Ice Age animal. I think the first immigrants--you probably call them the first Americans--killed them all off to make headdresses."

If the early Indians could be blamed for decimating the mammoths, Charlie figured, why not lay the blame on them for the peacock. "Say, I hear you have a baby Imperial mammoth."

"That," Pointe said, "costs extra," and he didn't offer to waive the admission. "This creature, though, is a real prize," Pointe gushed. "I probably should put him off in a special exhibit, too, but I can't keep them alive long enough to grow into adults."

The sign above the cage said *Baby Smildon*, the famed saber toothed tiger. Charlie stuck his finger through the wire and the kitten came over and sadly rubbed its head against his first knuckle. To Charlie, it looked like any old farm cat who had mistakenly gone to Transylvania for its orthodontia.

"I could sell a zillion of those if their fangs didn't keep falling off," Pointe complained.

Charlie had trouble seeing the rest of the menagerie because of the crowds of paying tourists in front of each cage--either being pictured themselves or taking pictures of the occupants. He didn't mind because he had already seen horses, camels, vicuna, goats, mice, rabbits, and two colors of squirrels. These *particular* species he had never seen, of course, since they were Pleistocene.

When Charlie looked at Pointe this time and shook his head, he didn't have to say anything. All Pointe said was, "Don't they now."

But Charlie was growing weary of the animals. "This Gillespie girl, did she have any particular beaux who hung around while she was working. High school boys from Sligo maybe or Prairie or Highlands, even Briggsdale?" Pointe thought but shook his head to the contrary. "Air Force boys? The ones who service the Minuteman Missiles?"

"There were always boys or men hanging around. But the only one she seemed to pay any attention to, though, was Banner."

"*Tidley?*"

"Yes. My Neanderthal," Pointe colored. "I didn't clone a cave man because I felt that might be a little unethical. That's why I hire some of the boys to dress up for the parts."

Charlie already knew that explanation. "I know. But how did they get along?"

"She teased him."

"How'd she do that?"

"The back door of the ticket office opens up so you can see the front of the *Hall of Man* window. Sometimes she'd throw pebbles up on the tin roof. Banner would go wild when she did that, but she kept at it even when I told her to lay off. I finally had to start scheduling them at different times."

"Let me see the set up."

Pointe took him to the back door of the ticket booth and opened it to the chagrin of the cashier who was nosing the protective bars and trying to

kiss Randy Bedoy. "Mr. Ruffner," she protested weakly. "You're supposed to knock first."

"At my own store?"

Charlie paid no attention to the girl, Pointe, or Randy. His eyes followed the line of sight to the *Hall of Man* and he didn't like what he saw. Banner, wearing a hump and a fright wig, was playing dominoes with Bode Road. "Bode," Charlie swaggered over to the exhibit and pounded on the glass separating them, "what's that priceless Minneapolis Moline doing parked out back? Why aren't you driving your pickup?"

At first Bode pretended not to hear but reconsidered and came over to the window to yell back. "My pickup's out of gas."

"Well, you're here now. Pointe has plenty of gas. It may be *Pleistocene* gas but it'll sure burn in your truck. Now get that Comfotractor home before it gets damaged."

Bode threw a domino at the card table between him and Banner and stomped out the back way. "Nearly the only thing he's ever had of value," Charlie explained to Pointe. "Weren't but 150 of them built and only three or four of them are still around. The folks at the Pioneer Museum in Minden, Nebraska, have been camping on his doorstep for years trying to buy it from him but he won't budge. Says he needs a back-up vehicle."

Without Bode for a partner, Banner was reduced to building houses with the dominoes. But the tourists didn't mind. They continued firing away and raising the stock of Fuji and Kodak. "This is more fun than a Sunday school picnic," one woman with a camera kept saying to all she met, even strangers--even Charlie.

He ignored the tourists and watched Banner.

"You don't think Tidley, there, had anything to do with Linda's death do you?" Pointe gestured toward the window. "It's about all he can manage to take a coffee break. Someone's *always* having to show him the way to the break room."

"I'd be surprised if he did," Charlie admitted. "Still, I've know him since we were kids. He always was strange. Used to swallow tadpoles for a nickel each."

"So?" Pointe asked.

"So," Charlie looked down at the proprietor, "makes you wonder what he'd swallow for a quarter. Or *do* for a dollar."

On the way out of Pleistocene Park, Charlie ran into an old friend. "Say, isn't that Old Abe, the one you named after the eagle logo on your first Case tractor?"

Pointe had to admit it was. Charlie had befriended Old Abe the bear, the first member of the menagerie, back when Pointe was only trying to create a simple roadside attraction, a kiddie's zoo that he hoped would entice parents to stop and fill their tanks with gas.

"Hey, Abe," Charlie went over to the hog wire cage. "I see the kids have been feeding you bread." Rings of crust littered the cage as Old Abe would eat only the centers out of white slices of bread. "I haven't got any bits of Snicker bars for you today. Maybe next time. But chew on this meanwhile."

Charlie stuck his fist into Old Abe's mouth and let the bear gum it for a while. He had lost most of his teeth long ago and lived on mush. While he

gnawed away, Charlie read the sign on the cage. *Ursus Horribilis Pleistocenii.*

Pointe watched the reunion uneasily. "How did the Gillespie girl die?" he asked. "I've been hearing all sorts of rumors. One said a cougar got her and tore her up pretty bad. Another was that she was accidentally killed in some kind of a witch initiation."

Charlie left his fist in Old Abe's mouth but turned his head to look at Pointe. "Who told you that, anyway?"

"I can't remember," the proprietor shrugged. "Could have been Wiley or Harley. Maybe it was Bode. Can't be sure. A lot of people are saying that's what it was. Either witches or a painter."

"A wagon of fools." Charlie removed his fist from Old Abe's mouth and rubbed the bear's ears. "Nobody knows what happened. I'm supposed to call the coroner later today to see if he's learned anything new. My guess," and he gave Old Abe a playful slap on the jaw before removing his hand from the cage, "is that she and some of her friends got into some drugs that were way over their heads. Give 'em a couple of days. The kids'll come around to telling what happened."

They had worked their way to the main gate where a teenaged boy was collecting admission tickets. The sign behind his head read *Pleistocene Means Most Recent*. Charlie paused to read and re-read the sign. "Mighty recent," he uttered, but to no one in particular.

"Old Abe doesn't have it as bad as it looks," Pointe followed Charlie out the gate. "I let him out to wander the zoo at night. Keeps down on most intruders. At least those that don't know him."

"That fish tank of yours? Do you ever have any trouble with people breaking in here and gaining entrance to the store through it? I mean they could slip in from the outside and swim into the store."

"I suppose it could happen. I did find a lot of splashed water inside one morning, but I thought the fish might have just be spawning or something. I keep a lid over the outside at night anyway. Lock it down most of the time."

Charlie considered the information but said nothing. He could see Pointe was working on something else. "I don't know exactly what you think of me, Charlie," he got it out finally, "but I've been doing pretty good of late."

"I see you have." Charlie idly fanned the right flap of his vest as a crowd gathered to take his picture. "I saw that new double-wide you pulled onto your acreage next to the old trailer. Looks nice."

"It's not just that, Charlie. It's more. You remember how hard I used to work. Nobody worked harder or longer than I did. And I had nothing. I was nobody's fool and I didn't have two nickels to rub together. But look at me now." He stood for Charlie's appraisal. "When I was nobody's fool I was broke. Now that I'm everybody's fool I have to get a Wells Fargo escort when I drive into Ault to the bank. It's a strange world."

"I hear you," Charlie tried to reassure Pointe, but at his own expense. "Stranger than I care to know about."

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Back at his pickup he found Dwayne waiting.

"The tank's about five and a half feet deep and the girl is just like any other pretty girl her age. I didn't get much out of her anyway because Randy was hanging around. I get the impression he doesn't like me."

"Could be he has his reasons. Always was a jealous, possessive type." Charlie didn't explain and they both let the subject drop.

"What'd *you* learn?" Dwayne asked.

"I learned that some of the kids that weren't too bright in school can come out alright. I also learned that I need a rest. Got to get out of the state before I bust. Been working too hard."

"What brought this on?"

"Somethin' that happened the other day. I got a hankerin' for a Grapette drink and couldn't find one. The fella in the Rec Hall in Stoneham said he didn't think they even made Grapette anymore. Said that if they did the Simkins in Sterling twenty-five miles down the road would know, so I drove in to the Simkins' Store and the brothers said they hadn't stocked it in a long time. They used to carry sixty-four kinds of pop in their store. You could stick your hand in the cold water and fish around until you found one. Lord did they taste great. Just thinking of the shape of the bottle makes me thirsty."

"What's a Grapette?"

"Lord, God Almighty. Am I gettin' that old."

Dwayne thought of buying Charlie a Pepsi from the nearby machine but reconsidered in time to save his teeth.

Or, maybe it was the blackbird that fell from the sky to be surrounded by curious tourists, their cameras poised.



(7)

## Not so tall tales

Mornings had never been Charlie's strong suit, but this was the first time he could remember awakening to an out-of-body experience.

His spirit body floated near the ceiling and looked down on his corporeal body. Charlie didn't know whether to be frightened by the event or appalled by the sight of the dingy white boxer shorts and the behemoth they were stretched around.

"I've got to get into Monkey Wards and get me some new shorts," he regretted aloud and was startled to see the figure below him mouth the exact words at the exact instant. Slowly, a new theory of reality seeped into the soggy bottom land of his mind. To test it, he purposefully moved a sausage-sized finger to his right nostril and picked it. The figure below aped the movement.

Instantly, the world wheeled round and he was no longer looking down: he was looking up into the mirror-covered ceiling of the No-Tel Motel in Kimball, Nebraska. He remembered now. He had reminisced too long at the Corner Bar the night before and after last call had been called for the last and final time, the No-Tel was the only motel with a still flashing *vacancy* sign.

"Lordie," he smacked his sticky lips and ran a hand over the stubble on his face. He was an habitual shaver but he hadn't brought a razor with him. It would have to wait. What couldn't wait was the alcohol chafed lining of his stomach. It needed something--anything--in a big hurry and Sligo was still miles away. He knew Inez would be miffed if he didn't make it in to breakfast, so as he pulled on his clothes he decided to stop off at the gas station and convenience store and pick up three or four Snicker bars. That should hold him until breakfast. A pop or two wouldn't hurt either, he decided. A quart of chocolate milk sounded good, too, particularly if it was washing down one of those giant chocolate chipped cookies.

He finished those eats before his Jeep was out of Nebraska and by the time he pulled onto Sligo's main street they wouldn't even have been a memory had not their carcasses littered the passenger floor of his pickup like beer bottles along a reservation road.

His usual parking place in front of the cafe's window was vacant, but next to it was a Weld County sheriff's car, an official one. Standing next to it were Dwayne and a deputy Charlie knew all too well.

"Need some help?" Charlie asked as he pulled in. It was as much of a challenge as Charlie ever offered and the young deputy cast his eyes anywhere but at the Jeep.

"Not really, Mr. Waggles. Just some bikers passing through." He reached into the patrol car and pulled out his police baton and shoved it into its holster.

"Gonna hit a few grounders for the boys, are you?" Charlie said, looking at the baton. "Let the boys shag a few flies, maybe?"

"It's part of the standard issue, Mr. Waggles," the young deputy replied and peered into the cafe window. "Besides, you never know how these guys may act."

"Are they acting up?"

"When I pulled up, this man"--he indicated Dwayne--"came out and told me they were making a lot of noise and spilling some of their drinks. *Accidentally* on purpose."

"I saw the shield on the side," Dwayne explained, "and thought it was you in a different car."

Charlie ignored him and spoke directly to the deputy. "I think the behavior you're describing," he said with an acidic exactness, "is being a horse's patootie." He stuffed his hat indifferently on his head and looked the young deputy over. Polished shoes. Trim, G.I. haircut. Tailored uniform. White T-shirt at the neck. Brushed Smokey-the-Bear hat. "This," he told Dwayne, "is Deputy Grover Ford. They send him out here every now and then to learn the ways of a real lawman. We've been on a case or two together. Got a bit yet to learn about Wets, though." Charlie saw how the word annoyed Grover so he said it again. "And this," he grudgingly admitted Grover's official capacity, "is Dwayne Dobson. My number one suspect. You're out here to check on the case, I reckon." Charlie sounded resigned, but a night such as he had just endured would resign him to an earthquake.

Deputy Ford nodded a hello to Dwayne. Neither Dwayne nor Grover spoke but they instantly recognized a kinship in finding Charlie intimidating.

They were relieved when he turned and entered the cafe, but they followed him reluctantly.

Inside, Charlie ignored the two black T-shirt and leather vest clad bikers sitting at his table and ambled over to the cold display case behind which Inez worked. "What's the special this noon, Inez?" he asked, fishing his hand around and into the back of the case.

"If you don't take your hands off that shaved ham," she threatened, holding a broad knife smeared with mayonnaise, "it's going to be steak fingers and this time I mean *fingers*."

Dwayne and Grover, delighted to see someone Charlie couldn't cow, moved to an empty table in front of the meat counter.

"At least there'd be some real meat on the menu for a change," Charlie said, still ignoring the bikers. He stuffed the thinly sliced ham into his face and walked toward the bathroom in back. "And set me up about half a lemon meringue pie and a pot of coffee at the counter next to Harley and Wiley." The two boys were at their habitual seats. "And while you're at it, would you get me one of those disposable razors from the grocery." Maybe it was a question.

Having seen his face and having known his perpetual hunger since school days, Inez was already moving to the tasks. She set the pie at the counter, knowing she could have substituted anything so long as it was in sufficient quantity, and hurried into the storage room for a razor rather than take it off the rack in the grocery quonset.

When she returned from the back and looked at the bathroom door, her shoulders drooped wearily. It was all they could do to support the

washed-thin cotton dress she wore. It looked like one of those all-weather flags that had endured too many rains, winds, and heat waves. Her dresses hadn't changed in the thirty or forty years since school and as far as Charlie knew, or cared, it was the same dress.

"Charlie Waggles," she shook a practiced finger, "how many times have I told you to keep that bathroom door closed?"

"A man needs room," Charlie's unseen voice explained. It was oddly strained. "And I like a little scenery with my morning ablutions. Maybe if you'd put a picture calendar on the back of the door instead of this *Eastman Brothers, Inc., Wholesale Candy and Tobacco* calendar," he read, "I might leave it closed."

Inez stepped forward in disgust, threw the razor at him, and slammed the door shut on her way to the grill. "What are you fellows going to have?" she asked Dwayne and Grover. Their looks were enough to indicate that they couldn't eat at the moment.

When Charlie returned, already having gone to the sink in the storage room to shave, the bikers were still at their table next to the window, the table Charlie usually occupied. He ignored them and sat down to the pie and coffee awaiting him at the counter.

He was chewing his second mouthful when a water glass on the table behind him accidentally toppled. Deputy Grover, who had an unobstructed view of the bikers and saw the "accident," tensed and looked to Dwayne for sympathy. He just knew Charlie was waiting to see if he would exert some authority.

"My, my," scolded a voice. "You've got to learn to be more careful. You've gone and tipped over another glass."

Harley turned on his stool to watch the bikers play, but Charlie remained over his food.

Then the glass accidentally rolled off the table and shattered.

"Now *see*. You have gone and done it again. You have just got to be more careful."

Inez left her preparation of the lunch special, picked up a cloth towel, and walked timidly around the meat counter to clean up yet another mess. She had just drawn even with Grover and Dwayne's table when Charlie moved.

"Don't bother, Inez," Charlie said smoothly. "I'll take care of it." Slowly, his hands pushing himself up from the counter, he rose. "The rag please, Inez."

Nervously, she squeezed between Grover's chair and the meat case and handed Charlie the cloth.

With the ease and grace of a big man aware of every muscle in his body, Charlie strode the two paces from his stool to the table. Politely, he leaned over the table and began mopping up the spilled water. When the cloth became soaked, he shepherded the excess water across the table and pushed it off the edge. Each time, one of the biker's greasy-jeaned lap was recipient of the small cascade. The talkative biker watched the water bead across his thighs and slide to the floor.

Next, Charlie knelt agilely and picked up the broken glass--taking care to get each fragment. After opening the trash bin at the end of the lunch

counter and dumping the glass inside, he resumed his seat. His timing was perfect as Inez removed the empty pie tin and slid a plate of stew under his chin.

"I take it you're the main *heat* around here?" the voice that had been scolding its partner asked. Charlie didn't respond but Harley and Deputy Grover saw the smirk on the speaker's face and watched the other biker laugh silently at the brass of his taunting friend. Charlie's interest was on the rapidly disappearing stew.

The voice came again. "I asked if you was the *heavy* around here?"

Holding his spoon as if it were a stick, Charlie scraped the last of the juice into it and poked it into his mouth. "Another, Inez," he called. Almost as an after thought, he turned on his stool and looked out the window past the two bikers.

"*Heat?*" he finally said, ignoring the second question. "We don't need heat around here. I'm just out here to watch old ladies on their picnics and to keep the kids out of the deeper pools on Crow Creek--when it's running that is. But as for law," he shook his head at the suggestion. "Nah, we don't need it out here. These people have *real* justice."

"*Real* Justice? What are you talking about, deputy?"

"Well, let me give you an example." He ran a hand over his now smooth face. "How many years ago was it them three bikers came through here, Wiley? Was it five or six."

"More like six," Wiley answered, looking to Harley to see if *he* knew what Charlie was talking about.

"I wasn't here to protect them, you understand," Charlie said, extending his hands palm out to show he was innocent of what had happened. "Seems they irritated some fellows--right here in this cafe." He pointed to the floor.

"So?"

"Like I says, I wasn't here. But the fellows who were said the bikers just got on their bikes and rode out of town. I think they told me they were heading west."

The two bikers were silent as Charlie watched them. Finally, the one who had done all the talking asked, "Is that the end of the story?"

"Far as I know," Charlie shrugged. "I did get a message from the office in Greeley about three weeks later, though. Wanted to know if I'd seen any bikers passing through. Said they'd raised hell in Snyder, in Stoneham, at the cafe in Raymer, and last they were seen they were heading down dirt 390 towards Sligo." Inez slid another plate of stew across the counter and Charlie swiveled back to it.

"Is *that* the end?"

"Like I says, I wasn't here. The office told me later that those three fellows--and their bikes--were never seen again." Charlie busied himself over the plate and didn't speak until he had taken a half dozen spoonfuls and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "I suppose I could have gone to the expense of having the area out here photographed from above with an infrared camera. That might have shown hot spots. If there were any bodies buried, you understand," he explained to the two at the table. "But



it's such a big land out here." He shook his head at the bleak prospect of ever finding a buried body.

The talkative biker quit looking at the back of Charlie's head and lifted his glass. When he had finished swallowing, he set it down gingerly.

"The trouble some strangers out here have," Charlie expanded without encouragement, "is that they don't look at the back windows of pickups out here. Most of them have varmint rifles. You know, for snakes and varmints. The next mistake they make is thinking they can outrun a radio."

"A radio?"

"Of course. Most of the pickups out here have CB's. At least they did back then. Now it's cell phones" Charlie explained. "If a stranger hurts a fellow here--say gives him a black eye or a bloody nose--he thinks it's over with when he gets into his car and drives away." Charlie took advantage of the pause to turn on his stool and face the bikers. "There's some awfully long, lonely, isolated roads out here. I do my concerted best to protect such folks, but I can't be everywhere."

"You call that real justice?"

"Pardon?"

"You call that justice. No arrest. No trial?"

"Oh, I see what you're getting at. *Pussy justice*," Charlie realized aloud. "No, no. We don't have no pussy justice around here. If you want pussy justice, I'd suggest you find yourself a big city like Denver or Cheyenne. No, on second thought, not Cheyenne. But if it's lawyers and haranguing and wasted time and a lot of expense you want, get yourself a big city. Out here, for justice, we don't have to spend much more than--" he

rubbed his chin in thought. "What is it we pay for a box of shells out here, Deputy Grover?"

Grover was facing Dwayne and not Charlie. He didn't answer.

Charlie looked at the side of Grover's shorn head with the smirk that had been on the biker's face. "Well, whatever it costs it ain't much." And then suddenly, as if what he had been saying was of no import, he swiveled on his stool and yelled. "Inez, where's that pie you promised me?"

When a single piece of pie replaced the empty stew plate, he attacked it as if he were newly famished.

"You keep eating like that, you're going to die," Harley said. He was looking at Charlie with the disbelief anyone showed on his face when he watched Charlie eat.

"When?"

"When? What do you mean *when*?"

"If you can't be more precise," he said, meringue clinging to his lip, "I can't be bothered."

"Charlie's what they call a *Bird of Passage*," Harley explained to Wiley. "He won't be around long 'cause he's digging his grave with his teeth."

"The boys up at the Buffalo Bar," Wiley joined the attack "say Charlie can't drink unless they punch up martial music on the jukebox. Says his arteries are so clogged the alcohol molecules can't get through unless they're in single file."

"Well, you boys know my views on keepin' healthy," Charlie said between mouthfuls. "Feed a cold; founder a fever."

During the conversation, the bikers left the cafe and pushed their bikes down the street before starting them and hurrying toward a larger city.

Finally sated, Charlie pushed the plate from him. "Well, I can't put it off any longer. Time to do a little work." He picked up his hat from the stool next to him and carried it to the door that led into the grocery and then outside. "Time to see if witches *do* fly."

"Going to the Opera House, huh?" Inez called after him, but he didn't answer.

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"Why me?" Grover asked the friendlier confines of the cafe after Charlie's departure. "Why do I have to be the one they send out here?"

"Come on," Dwayne tried to help. "Charlie ribs everybody. His bark is worse than his bite."

Inez wiped their already clean table, causing them to lift their arms. "I take it you didn't see that little boy's arm the other day. Teeth marks down to here," she pointed to her elbow.

Grover was disconsolate. "But I've been sent out to replace him and he knows it. He knows the sheriff wants to get rid of him."

"Replace Charlie?" The idea was preposterous to Dwayne. He was just getting to know the world famous deputy. "He's a landmark. You've seen the billboard. And you should have seen the way the tourists were in awe of him yesterday. Half of them were wearing T-shirts with his picture on them."

Grover nodded that it was all true. "That's why he's still on the payroll-- the way tourists, and politicians for that matter, react to him. Or just the sound of his name."

"What's his name got to do with it?"

"Because that was his granddad's name, and when you say Charlie Waggles, even when you mean *this* Charlie," he pointed to the door to indicate the one who had just left, "everyone gets him confused with his grandfather."

Dwayne wasn't making the connection.

"The man's a legend in Colorado," Grover explained. "There isn't a kid in the state who hasn't had to read about him. The old Charlie Waggles was sheriff out here when the county stretched all the way to the Kansas and Nebraska border. It was 175 miles long and 100 miles wide. He performed more legendary feats on foot, on horseback, and later in a Model T Ford than any man has a right to have done. He was written up in enough Dime Thrillers to fill a bookcase."

Dwayne noticed that the boys at the lunch counter were leaning closer to the conversation because the freezer motor had just kicked in.

"I'm talking Indian fights, range wars, cattle rustlers, murders, kidnappings, womanizing, drinking, breaking up of fights, sheep troubles, and homesteaders. The man's a legend and most of the people in the state think Charlie is the *old* Charlie Waggles.

"He'd have been fired long ago if it wasn't for his granddad." Grover's back straightened as he talked and his breathing became less desperate. "About the only excuse they've really had for letting him stay is that he pays

for his trailer, he buys his own patrol vehicle, and pays for a good portion of his gas. About all they do is send him a salary check once a month. He knows the area. That's a given. But after I replace him I'll be stationed in Ault. That's 50 miles from here. A lot of territory will be left uncovered."

This was too much for Harley and Wiley. They left the counter and came over to the deputy's table. "Don't get too concerned, young fella," Harley consoled, fumbling for a zipper at his chest. "They been sending uniforms out here for a quarter a century trying to run Charlie off. Didn't work then. Won't work now. Sheriffs don't learn Charlie can't be moved until they've been voted out of office and *he's* still here."

Wiley pulled a chair from the table--affording himself the opportunity to rest his belly--and left Harley to stand. "Hain't but the one Charlie, that's for sure," Wiley agreed. "Takes a big man to fill up this country. A big man."

"That's a fact," Harley added and leaned back against the cold case. "He doesn't just need room, you've *got* to give it to him." Whether intended as a demonstration or not, he unzipped both breast pockets on his blue overalls.

Dwayne took advantage of the zipping sound to clear up a question. "What's this Charlie said about his mother being buried head first?" The boys looked suspiciously at each other. "No," Dwayne broke in. "Charlie mentioned something about it while he was in the stock tank taking a bath."

"Charlie took a bath? Really?" Harley asked. "I know he told Inez he did, but I figured he was just braggin'."

"Sort of. He didn't have soap."

"I was worried there for a moment," Wiley winked to Harley.

"He got wet. I saw him," Dwayne grew peevish. "Now tell me about the burial."

Harley looked seriously at Wiley before deciding to tell the tale himself. "Most folks don't know about this, but I figure if Charlie mentioned it to you, it won't do no harm in my telling it.

"His pop, you may or mayn't know, was a little strange." He looked to Wiley for confirmation and got it. "His mind really went south when his wife died. Kept insisting that she was headed for Hell and that he wanted to speed her on her way. Said to point her down 'cause that was the direction she was headin' anyhow.

"The preacher and those folks who knew what he was intending tried to talk him out of it, but since it was a family cemetery and not church property there wasn't much they could do."

The solemnity with which Harley told his story greatly affected Wiley. His face was tense with concern. "After it was done, a bunch of us met back here and decided to wait until it was dark. She died in late winter so we didn't have to wait long. Then we went back out there, dug up her coffin, and re-planted it right."

Wiley nodded the righteousness of their action.

"But after we got back here," his eyes indicated the cafe, "we got to thinking."

"He'd also placed her face down in the coffin," Wiley explained the problem.

"That's a sad fact," Harley agreed. "Placed her face down in the coffin because he said that was the only way he could ever stand to look at her--face down. So, cold as it was, we figured we had to go back out there. And we did. Went back out there and re-buried the coffin--upside down this time."

Dwayne and Grover shared a glance and decided not to laugh. Wiley and Harley sniffed and ran index fingers beneath their closed eyelids.

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While the boys at the Quonset Cafe embellished truths--or as Inez later told Dwayne, "carved into stone what otta be there"--Charlie went to the library to confront Phyllis and Marsha.

"Where's your dog?" Phyllis asked as soon as Charlie slammed the foyer's screen door and then opened the door into the library proper.

He looked to his side as if expecting Dog and then admitted to Phyllis, "He's run off." After a pause he added positively, "But he'll be back."

Phyllis and Marsha weren't sisters, but they looked as alike as the Abroghast sisters who consoled the bereaved in the community. One reason they looked like twins was their insistence on wearing the same shapeless old high-collared dresses over their equally thin and shapeless bodies. More than once young out-of-town girls, particularly those from back East, had attempted to buy the dresses off their backs.

Their hair had long since turned gray and then--through a mystery of chemistry Charlie cataloged under *the progesteronic unknown*--blue. They looked alike, thought alike, and walked alike. To seal the resemblance, they had lived together longer than either had lived with her long dead

husband. If Marsha didn't always use a purple glass broach and Phyllis a cameo clip to keep their high collars fastened, Charlie would have had difficulty distinguishing one from the other. Phyllis, however, was given more to talk than Marsha.

"I suppose you ladies have taken in all there is about the Gillespie girl," he said by way of introduction, looking at the books and not at the ladies.

"Such a ghastly affair," Phyllis tsked. "Don't you think so, Marsha?" Marsha, who was needle pointing a sampler that would soon read *Not Only is the World Stranger than You Know, It is Stranger than You Can Know*, nodded. The blue-gray bun on the back of her neck said yes more than did her mouth.

"Have you ladies heard anything about it. Any gossip I might check out?"

With identical and measured motions, their heads swiveled from side to side while they continued their chores. Phyllis was preparing a display of books by area authors. "We have heard an ugly undercurrent of rumor," Phyllis conceded. "A current that I don't think I should dignify by repeating."

Charlie knew to what she was alluding and decided not to make her repeat it. "There's a chance her death had something to do with a water accident," he said instead, still addressing her rumor. "The coroner says it was the bends or an embolism. Whatever it was, it killed her."

"Isn't that interesting, Marsha," Phyllis smiled, or maybe just parted her thin lips. Marsha nodded her agreement, or at least her bun did.

"Now you ladies know I'm not a person who sticks his nose where it doesn't belong," he began, and their chins nodded as if pulled by the same



string, "but there's something in this community you know more about than I do." As a hint he looked at the occult section, by far the largest collection in the library, larger even than the romance novel section--and that took some doing.

"Now since the coroner's office thinks the death is connected with water, and connected in a strange way, I was hoping you could tell me of any--" He searched for words with his hands. "Aquatic groups," he sputtered lamely, but knew they understood.

Phyllis pulled her reading glasses down and rotated slowly toward Marsha. Her companion, poking at her needlepoint, pursed her lips and almost imperceptibly moved her head *no*.

"Well, the way I heard," Charlie met Phyllis' eyes when they rotated back to him, "there's a group somewheres around here that calls itself the *Daughters of Neptune*. Ever hear of it?"

Phyllis' head again swiveled slowly toward Marsha and again her lips pursed and again she ever so minutely shook her head.

Charlie's consideration for older women was fraying. "Now Phyllis, you can quit fiddling with Wilbur's and Ernestine's books there and talk to me straight because I'm not leaving until I get some answers."

Even before Phyllis could turn her head, Marsha's chin and pursed lips were ever so resolutely indicating *no*.

"Ladies, I'm not the one to go faultin' you for the way you spend your off hours. But this is different. This might be murder or a criminal accident at the least. Years ago you used to meet and sew quilts together. Nice they were, too. Why, I even bought some tickets when you raffled them off.

When you went traipsing off to those Double Deck Canasta parties and ate too many wine balls and drove home funny, I didn't butt in. But this is different."

Knowing that Phyllis was his best hope, Charlie waited while she tested one of Wilbur Ball's pamphlets to see if it would stand when opened. Ernestine Koenig's book had already passed the test. He knew he couldn't bring Marsha to heel with a crowbar. "Fine. Let me put it this way. Is there any book I could read or any place I could go that might help me understand what's going on around here?"

Phyllis' head turned but she didn't need to look over the top of her reading glasses to know what Marsha would say. Instead, she said to Charlie, swaying with the meter as she spoke, "*One ship drives east and another drives west/ With the selfsame winds that flow./ 'Tis the set of sails and not the gales/ Which tells us the way to go.*"

"Ella Wheeler Wilcox," Marsha piped the benediction.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Charlie was losing and he was frustrated.

"I'm suggesting," Phyllis explained, "that you take a different tack. Trim your sails here and head upstairs." She smiled, knowing she had him over a barrel. "All your answers are up there. And you *know* that."

Seeing his dilemma and delighting in it, Marsha became almost voluble. "Smile, Charlie," she chirruped, offering him a brief one of her own. "*'Tis easy enough to be pleasant,/ When life flows along like a song;/ But the man worth while is the one who will smile/ When everything goes dead wrong.*"

"I know," Charlie's disgusted voice sounded as he left the building.  
"Ella Wheeler Wilcox."

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Charlie was still stomping when he entered the Quonset Grocery and leaned his head into the cafe. "Be back shortly. I've got to get a haircut."

"A haircut?" Wiley, Harley and Inez chorused, but he was already gone. They could see him bounding east along the gravel toward Marvel's Marvelous Coifs.

Wiley, still remembering the burial tale, had already forgotten Charlie's intrusion. "That old man Waggles was a real cuss."

"You've got to say this for him, though," Harley said. "He sure knew how to teach Charlie to swim." His face brightened with the memory.

"Threw him in the river," Wiley explained for Grover and Dwayne.

"Hell," Harley corrected. "He threw him into two rivers at once. Took him down to where Crow Creek runs into the South Platte and tossed him in."

Grover didn't believe this. "How old was he?"

"About two, the way I heard tell it," Wiley said. "I don't know if he actually swam, 'cause Charlie was chunky even back then and he might have floated the couple of miles before some fishermen finally pulled him in."

Dwayne didn't believe it either. "Is this true?"

The boys shared a glance. "On the Gospel," Harley pledged, holding two fingers up in the Cub Scout salute. "But that was nothing compared to the time he tried to teach Charlie to fly."

"Fly?"

"If they hadn't been over North Sterling Reservoir at the time," Wiley added, "no telling how high he'd a bounced."

"This is apocryphal," Dwayne stood and demanded the truth. "I'm not going to listen to any more of this until you admit you're making it up. Tall tales are good and fun, but these are just lies."

Harley spread his arms wide and leaned back against the cold case. "What can I tell you. That's the way I heard it, and I haven't met anyone who says it's otherwise."

"The best part of the story I think," Wiley inserted, "was that the two fishermen who pulled him out of the reservoir were the same ones who had pulled him out of the river. I'd love to have seen their faces."

"Me too," Harley said. "But Charlie's turned this story in his favor, as usual. Some of the TV people in Denver heard about it, but they heard he was a deputy when it happened and that drug smugglers were trying to kill him. They also heard that he disabled the plane as he was being thrown out and it crash landed and Charlie swam to shore and arrested them."

Grover looked at Dwayne who was too amazed to do anything but sit. "See what I mean?" he asked. "What'd I tell you about his reputation? And the office sends me out here to replace him."

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It wasn't a barber shop, but Charlie pounded on the door anyway and shielded his eyes against the glare to see into the store. He knew this wasn't one of the two days a week Marvel was open but her car was in front.

"Is this Coif City or what?" he yelled through the glass to a shadow in the back.

The shadow moved forward, a mass of billowing hair atop its head, the type of mound that only a beautician with wholesale-priced spray could afford to maintain. "That you, Charlie? You know I ain't open. Just picking up some things to carry to Briggsdale. This is my day in Briggsdale. Tomorrow at the Bowl in Hereford and then here the next two work days."

He pointed to his head. "Need a quick haircut."

She fiddled with the bolt lock and opened the door. "What you up to," she squinted at him. "I ain't never given you no haircut before."

"That's right, Marvel, and I figure it's about time I had some professional help."

"I thought you always done it yourself. Least it always looked that way."

"I did have one of those combs with a razor in it, but the razor got dull. For a while there I had a pair of those thinning scissors, but Nature, in her infinite generosity, stepped in and saved me the expense of having them re-sharpened." He took his hat off and showed his hair. "Just a trim? A quick trim?"

"Oh, get in here," she pulled on him. "As long as I don't have to wash it, I'll have time." She reached up and spun a loose lock of his hair between her fingers. "Second thought, I think I'll *insist* on the shampoo."

She led him to the rear of the room and pushed him into a chair that collapsed back until his head rested in a sink. Looking up, he could see the water stains on the ancient plaster ceiling above. Marvel's salon was in the

western most of what had been a commercial block. The two stores adjoining to the east were not only vacant but their windows were broken and the walls were down in places. The lath that showed was an indication of just how old the building was.

"What sort of rent does Chester charge you for this place?" He knew she got the place free so long as she kept glass in the windows and promised not to sue Chester if one of the walls or the roof fell in. She didn't answer and he wouldn't have heard anyway. The feel of her fingers massaging his scalp was about the best experience he could remember since Dog licked his face after winning the Best of Animals title at the annual pet show in Charlie Waggles' Memorial Park. Named for the Old Charlie, not his grandson.

"Say, Marvel. You see the Daughters of Neptune about once a week. . ."

"Don't know what you're talking about." She wrapped a towel around his head and pushed the chair upright. "Over there." She pointed to a chair near one of the front windows.

He waited until he was seated before trying again. "You know who I mean. Miss Teller. The librarians. Mrs. Beatty. A few others. I see them traipse in here religiously each week."

"You're talking about my steady customers."

"Steady at everything, including church goin'. I'm not asking you to convict them of any crime. I'd just like to know if you hear them talking about anything I might be interested in."

She acted as if he hadn't spoken and continued lifting his hair with a comb and snipping at it. "You ever use a conditioner, Charlie?"

"A what?"

"Something that puts back into your hair what the sun takes out of it. Guards against split ends."

"What do I care about split ends? I wear my hat anytime I can."

She still didn't consider his words. "I have a big bottle of Nexus up there," she pointed with her scissors, "that comes with all sorts of vitamins and minerals and maybe some overheard conversations."

"All right, I give in. Put it on the tab." He was about to call her bluff when a motorbike sped past and Charlie had to sit up quickly to make sure who was on it. It was driven by Bob White--he assumed it was White because of the black helmet and face plate. Behind him, hanging on as if frightened, was Karen Crowley, Dwayne's girlfriend. "Curiouser and curiouser."

"You ever been under a dryer, Charlie?" she asked but didn't wait for an answer. "It's like another world when you're under there. You can't hear and you assume others can't hear either since most of the people you want to talk to are also under dryers. You spend most of your time with one palm cupped to your ear and the other around your mouth."

"Are you trying to tell me you're a fly on the wall?"

"I'm a beautician on my feet. Often we're treated like furniture. Oh, they know I'm here, but I seem harmless. And I am."

"I already bought the bottle of conditioner. What else am I going to have to spring for?"

Marvel was doing a job with his hair that even Charlie would approve of. "I think you have these ladies all wrong," she said.

"So do I but most of the honkyocks in this town and within ten miles are trying to pin a death on them. I'd appreciate it if you could let me into their secret little world a bit. I'm not out to get them. I want to help."

"As I was saying, sometimes when people are under the dryer they think they are in a separate world. They say things that they think third parties can't hear."

"You being the third. . ."

"If I were a young sheriff's deputy and I was wanting to impress my superiors as well as check up on the activities of some ladies of years in the community, I might have a look at Jackson's Draw."

Charlie held up his arm to keep her from snipping further at his sideburns. "That's a pretty long draw," he said.

"The draw just to the west of Coleman," she said and went for his nose with the scissors. "On the side of the road where the old White's General Store stood."

"Still a piece of property to consider," he said.

"Between there and where the black homesteaders used to live is an abandoned house."

"There's only one that I recall," he sat up. "Sets way back? Two or three hundred yards? Can't see it from the road?"

She snipped her scissors near his nose. "I believe it is now surrounded by winter wheat."



Ready for action, Charlie stripped the apron from around his neck. "Don't cut the hairs in my nose. The ladies might get the idea I'm married and not be so friendly."

"Where have you been, Charlie. *Wives* don't keep their husbands' nose hairs trimmed. The only ones who are concerned as to how their lovers look are the *mistresses*."

Charlie looked at himself in the mirror. "Trim 'em short," he smiled at his reflection. "And while you're at it, have a go at my ears."

With his hair slicked back and smelling fine, with his nose hairs tackled and his ear hairs ambushed, Charlie allowed himself to be ushered out the door and into the fresh breezes of Sligo's main street. "This could become a habit, Marvel."

"Well, if it does become one, let's keep it *after* hours," she cautioned. "I do have some customers I'd like to keep." She pushed the door to behind him but opened it almost immediately. "I think you would be surprised as to what motivates these ladies." She winked but it wasn't a come-on. "They are more complex, more *clever* than you know."

"Oh?" he turned.

She held up a finger, not for a warning, but to make a point. "*Tear away the blinds of superstition; let the light pour through fair windows broad as Truth itself.*"

Charlie accepted the poetry as cheerfully as a vampire an oaken stake.

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"Of course," Wiley became even more wound up. "These stories ain't nothing to the Battle of Waggles' Wash."

"Waggles' Wash?" Dwayne looked to Deputy Grover for explanation.

"You haven't heard of that battle?" Harley couldn't believe it.

"Where have you been?" Inez asked. "In another country?"

"Not only did he bring down a UFO with a shotgun--surely you've seen the pictures--he helped capture a whole bunch of the creatures on board."

Dwayne looked first at Inez and then Grover. "This is a joke, right?"

Inez shook her head. "It made every newscast on earth. Where were you?"

"Time's a wastin'," a voice bellowed from the grocery entrance. It was the well-groomed Charlie. "Come on, Dwayne. You too, Grover. We have an appointment with a coven of witches."

"I'll save some supper for you boys," Inez called after them.

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(8)

## Moths and a Single Owl

Under the bright sun that flattened it against the chalky pastel distance and the yellowing prairie behind it, the deserted house Charlie had been sent to waited with a silence that suggested more than sleep--hibernation, maybe. Still, it did shimmer amidst rising heat waves, wrinkling and warping in a way that reminded Charlie of the sound tinfoil around a Hershey bar made when he unwrapped it in hopes of finding some crumbs. The house itself *was* silent, but it *looked* as if it made that sound.

Charlie, Dwayne and Grover had reached it after driving a hundred yards across the prairie from the road and then walking an additional hundred and fifty through a patch of winter wheat that was still six or seven weeks from harvesting. The house itself was clapboard with wood shingles, both of which hadn't known the smell of paint since man walked on the moon. Because the house was not visible from the road, it still possessed its windows intact and the front door still hung from its hinges, though it was ajar at the moment.

What brought the men up short after their hike was the single-wire fence that protected the house and its few outbuildings from the cattle that sometimes nibbled on the first wheat shoots in late fall. Charlie and Grover were straddling over, but Dwayne froze and refused to move.

Instead of talking, he pointed.

"I see it," Charlie said. "Now let's git on with it."

Dwayne still didn't move. On each barb of the wire in front of him an animal or insect had been impaled. Most of the victims were grasshoppers, but one was a mouse and two were field sparrows. The latter had been suspended from the wire by pressing a barb through their throats.

Dwayne looked at Charlie for an explanation.

"A butcher bird," Charlie said. "Now let's move."

Dwayne still drew a blank.

"A loggerhead Shrike," he explained further. "That's how he attracts a mate. Shows he's a good provider."

Still lost.

"Oh, for crimanetly's sake. That's the male bird's fast car and fat wallet. Trust me, if I know my lady butcher birds, a mouse's entrails is as quick as liquor any day."

Dwayne's knowledge of science included protons and Newton's laws, but a bird's wallet he had never seen.

Careful not to jiggle the wire too much, Charlie startled over. When he reached the one-step front porch, he halted and looked at the ground. It was dimpled with footprints. Grover, feeling more in his element, knelt and placed his index and middle finger into one.

"Strangest looking cowboy boots I've ever seen."

"Ain't cowboy boots," Charlie said. "Them's what's called *sensible* shoes." Charlie continued to inspect the ground and pointed to an odd impression. "And unless I miss my bet," he directed Grover's attention, "that looks like the three-pronged cane one of the Abroghast sisters

sometimes uses, especially when she's got a distance to go and fears she might get leg weary. And look over there," he pointed again. "That's Carla Beatty's aluminum walker as sure as shootin'. As clear here as the tracks she left in Sligo the day Linda's body was found."

Dwayne knew some of these ladies. "What are those old biddies doing way out here?"

"If I'm right in my guess," Charlie said and stepped to the porch, "Double Deck Canasta and Bingo just don't thrill the way they used to."

He was in the door frame when a burst of white exploded over his head. The three men hit the dirt. Dwayne turned in time to see a white apparition dart silently over the wire fence, glide briefly on its wings, and crest out of sight over the wheat.

"Barn owl," Charlie tried to say matter-a-factly while re-holstering his revolver. "That's always a good sign," he said, but didn't mean it. He hadn't fallen so much as squatted, and when he rose he filled the door frame. The men behind him could see nothing. "Well, I'll be," he marveled.

"Make a little room, Charlie," Dwayne pushed timidly. Charlie moved farther into the house, allowing the two to squeeze past.

Grover's eyes adjusted to the dim light more quickly than Dwayne's, and he found himself looking down into a stairwell to his right. The well was choked with broken furniture, dishes, cooking utensils, a broken tricycle, and scores of cheap, plastic children's toys. On top of the heap was a Raggedy Ann doll.

Grover descended the two uncluttered steps and reached for the doll. It was a typical Raggedy Ann, all rag and stuffing. Its blouse and dress

were covered with red hearts pierced by blue arrows. He rocked its head and the black disks of pupils rolled lifelessly back and forth.

"Better leave it lay," Charlie said. "Ain't ours."

Grover threw it back on the pile where it landed face up. The black disks stared up at him. Feeling for his own pistol as he went, Grover brushed past Dwayne and followed Charlie into the kitchen, which was straight ahead.

It was brighter in this room and less eerie. Above the stove, and surrounding the hole where the stovepipe had curved to enter the wall and ultimately the chimney, was a large red heart. The blue arrow that pierced it extended from the upper right-hand ceiling to the left-hand floor. The entering shaft disappeared into the stovepipe hole and emerged the other side of the heart.

"I don't think this is a Valentine's card," Charlie said, extending his lower lip. "Look at the point. That's not an arrow head. It's a trident."

Dwayne called from the living room. "You're not going to believe this."

"I probably will," Charlie promised as he and Grover shuffled back to the living room and looked at an animal's leg resting on the first step of the stairs that ascended to the second story. "An antelope's." He pushed it aside with his left shoe and started slowly up the stairs. His right hand brushed his pistol and Dwayne, who shadowed him from behind, heard him singing softly and haltingly to himself:

Jumped for the saddle.

The saddle wasn't there.

Rammed two meters of--

He stopped singing at the landing. The first door on the left was slightly ajar, and Charlie started to push it open with the barrel of his pistol. Noticing the two men on the stairs below him, he reconsidered and holstered the gun. With a bold thrust of his hand he pushed the door open and stepped abruptly into the room. Its floor was littered with religious tracts, all ripped apart. He stooped and scooped up a double fist full. "Mostly *The Watch Tower*," he said. "I don't know if we're dealin' with the undead, but I'm sure the Jehovah's Witnesses would call them the unsaved."

Next he hunkered like a mountain gorilla, waddled over to a large pile in the corner, and pawed the paper aside. Beneath the debris was a television set, its screen kicked in. "Reminds me of the one outside my back door."

While Charlie and Dwayne fished among the religious tracts for clues, Grover left them and opened the door to the other room on the landing. "Jesus Christ," he yelled and backed away to the railing.

"Just call me *Charlie*," Charlie requested politely, but started for the door anyway. When he got to the hall, Grover was returning his gun to its holster.

"The damn wall in there is alive," he pointed with his now free trigger finger. "It's crawling."

"Yeah, right," Charlie smirked and pushed into the room. After one step forward he stepped back two and continued to inspect the room from the hallway. "If that don't beat squashin' toads on the railroad tracks." Using his hat, he pushed the door open fully. "Shoo." He fanned the room

with his hat, causing thousands of miller moths to panic in chaotic circles about the room.

After the first cloud swept out the door and flittered past him down the stairwell, Dwayne poked his head into the room. Charlie had replaced his hat and was studying one wall of the otherwise empty room.

The remainder of the antelope was there, pinned, nailed, and tacked to the wall. First, and from the upper left--as if reading a written page--Dwayne saw its eyeballs. They dangled from their optic nerves, the irises and pupils long hazed over. Along the top row, nearest the ceiling, were its tongue--curled and drying--its ears, lips, nose, and finally its horns. They were tied together with a leather strip--probably part of its hide--and left to dangle. Miller moths covered this row as they did most of the matter pinned to the wall, and their movements made the grotesque dismemberments appear to pulse.

Below the top row was what remained of the antelope, its legs--two fore and one rear--and his tail. A bare nail had probably held the hind leg now at the foot of the stairs.

"Someone else has been here before us and *after* them," Charlie said, fingering the bare nail. Next to this nail was the last of the antelope. "Well, at least we know it was a male."

The antelope was just a start. In rows beneath it were heads of mice and other burrowing rodents. They were arranged in descending order of size. Following the heads were the legs. They were arranged by front by rear by left and by right. The tails were next. They had been affixed to the wall with straight pins as were the ears that followed. These, probably



because of their small size, were stuck to the wall in pairs. It was all done very neatly.

Below these were birds--beaks, wings, legs, tail feathers. The final row, near the floor, contained the remains of one toad. Its parts had been centered beneath the row above.

Charlie stooped to look at the nail between its eyes. "Looks like froggie went a courtin' just once too often." He straightened and turned his head to take a breath from the clearer center of the room. In so doing he saw the opposite wall.

It was empty except for a giant red heart painted over the wrinkled wallpaper. In the middle of the heart dangled a Raggedy Andy doll. Dangled was only partly correct. It was upside down. Its feet had been tied with strips of hide and the hide extended to the exposed ceiling joists above. Someone had knocked the plasterboard out, probably with a stick, and its crumbled remains were scattered across the floor.

Though it hung by its feet from the joist, it couldn't swing freely. Piercing its raggedy chest--and securing it to the wall--was a miniature trident. Maybe not a trident. It looked as if it might have seen service years earlier as an olive fork.

"Go figure," Charlie said to Grover who was looking a little peaked.

"How do you mean?"

"I mean look at this." He started to use his hat as a pointer but reconsidered. "I know most of the women who probably did this. And what's more, I knew most of their dead husbands. I'm tellin' you these women were too priggish to grab their husbands' tallywhackers now and

again, and here they are ripping out tongues and pinning testicles to the walls."

Charlie kicked the broken plaster at his feet and crushed it on his way to the window. He cleaned a circle on the upper pane with the ball of his hand and looked out at the surrounding wheat. "No wonder they died early." After watching the wheat, he mellowed and looked disgustedly back into the room. "Oh, what the hey. They're just gettin' old like the rest of us." He looked at the walls again and then motioned with an abbreviated movement of his arm. "Come on. Let's get out of here. If you've seen one pair of vole ears, you've seen 'em all."

He was about to move when he heard a distant sound. The whine of a dirt bike, probably in the draw a couple hundred yards behind the house. "School must be out," Charlie observed. "If that math teacher friend of yours," he looked at Dwayne, "doesn't be careful where he rides that bike of his, he's liable to find *his* privates pinned to one of these walls."

Dwayne and Grover smiled weakly and followed Charlie down the creaking stairs and out into the clean air.

Back at the Jeep, Charlie reached under the seat and pulled out a pint bottle of Old Grand-Dad and asked, "Anybody for a snort?" Grover, ever the one for rules, tried not to look. "Come on, Grover. A little never done much harm. Out here it helps me to temper justice with mercy." He tilted the bottle to his lips. "This one's for *justice*," he said and took a swig. "This'uns for *mercy*."

He drew his lips back from his teeth and sucked in air to show that he appreciated it.

"Come on, Grover. Do it *wunst* for me," he said, but he was tapping the extended bottle against Dwayne's chest.

With a reluctance that may have had something to do with rules, Grover took the bottle. Discretely, he wiped the mouth of the pint on his shirt sleeve and put the opening to his lips. "*Wunst* for Charlie," he said and poured a slug down his throat. After choking, he tipped the bottle again. "And *wunst* for me."

No one has ever adequately explained the mechanism involved, but Charlie and Grover got on much better after the passing of the bottle.

Dwayne would have gotten none if he hadn't wrenched the bottle from Grover and took a shot before returning it to Charlie who stuck it safely under the seat to await another emergency.

It was near four when they arrived in Sligo, but it looked almost like parade day. Channel 9 out of Denver had set up its satellite link-up and was going to do a broadcast from in front of the Quonset Grocery and Cafe.

It was near the end of his shift, so Grover excused himself. He couldn't hang around for the excitement, he said. The drive back to Greeley would take an hour.

Unusual for her, Inez was not only out from behind the counter, she was out in the street waiting for Charlie. "I think there's something cooking that you ought to know about, Charlie." She still clutched a dish rag.

"I can see it. There's a television crew here. Happens plenty of times."

She looked at the bustle of people without seeing. "It's not them," she said nervously. "It's something else. Something of our own."

Charlie was patient. "I'm not following, Inez."

"It's the *ladies*. They've been asking me silly questions all day. When you get some time"--she stopped to look at a tiny woman waiting for her to finish talking so she could have a turn with Charlie--"I want to have a quiet word with you."

He, too, noted the bright-eyed elf creature watching them. "Soon as this is over."

As soon as Inez turned her back the cute little lady reporter approached Charlie. She wanted to interview him.

"*Live!*" she squealed, thrilled at his presence.

"That should work," Charlie smiled at her enthusiasm, "I ain't never been anything else."

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## Ch. 9

### One White Rabbit

"That nose of yours reminds me of a hog-nosed gopher snake's," Charlie kidded the diminutive reporter. As he leered down at her, he caught the shadow of Inez watching him from inside the cafe. "Turned up, I mean. Cute like."

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said, brushing it off as one used to being petted. Then she explained that they would be on the 4:30 broadcast as it permitted more time for chatter.

Because of her small stature, the cameraman went into the grocery and reappeared with a plastic milk case. He placed it on the ground and helped the reporter up so that she was level with Charlie's shoulder. Now, both could easily be fitted into the picture. The background shots had been taken earlier, so the television audience would know the structure they were standing in front of. The grocery and cafe were housed in two side-by-side Quonset huts, the half-circle structures that once housed soldiers in World War II, though these were much larger, farm implement sized. Two walkways connected these rounded mounds, one up front, where customers to the cafe entered after first using the door into the grocery. The second was in the back and allowed Charlie to use the toilet each morning while, with the door open, watching customers at the meat counter.

The usual cafe crowd came out and stood behind them, jockeying for positions so they could see the small monitor mounted at the base of the camera's tripod support. It showed the well-groomed news readers smiling and bantering silently to one another. Theirs was the typical early evening fare--ratings at the expense of content.

The reporter next to Charlie watched the anchors and pressed the ear piece tighter to her head. When she received her cue, she dropped her hand, broke into a broad grin, and began talking as if she had just been interrupted in some pleasantry.

"Thank you, Rick and Janet. I'm standing next to the legendary Weld County Sheriff Charlie Waggles--"

"Thanks for the promotion, little lady," Charlie leaned into the mike, "but I'm just another one of the county's many fine, hardworking lawmen. A deputy, actually."

"Lawman or not, this is a big man I'm standing next to, Rick and Janet. If you could see the whole picture, you would see that I am standing on a milk crate. He's as big as his legend."

Charlie didn't think it fitting to deny something the little lady was so convinced of.

"Sheriff, do you have anything new on last Friday night's murder?" She started to extend the mike but pulled it back quickly to add, "Rumor has it that witchcraft may be involved." Her eyes rose as she said *witches*, to suggest that even she thought it was farfetched.

"Well, little lady," Charlie looked sincerely into the camera. "I don't know what we have here. It's a mysterious death, for sure. Might even *prove* to be a murder. But as for witches, nah." The glance he gave the crowd over his shoulder hinted at otherwise. As soon as he turned back, he regretted the look and tried to make amends. "We *do* have a Halloween party or two here in late October each year. A witch or two always shows up, though I think the Darth Vaders always outnumber them."

"But, I interviewed a professor at Northern Colorado University yesterday who claims this area is rich in covens."

"I notice you didn't go to Boulder and the university there to gather such nonsense. Far as I know, everybody in these parts is Christian--at

least come sun-up." He hated himself again. Next time he faced a television camera, he promised himself, no more nips from a bottle of 114 proof Old Grand-Dad.

"How else, then, can you account for the manner of the girl's death? She died of the bends, didn't she? And there's no deep water around here."

"The coroner said it was *similar* to the bends, but not necessarily the same. An air embolism, I believe he called it. As for the bends, it can occur when a diver who is breathing bottled air comes to the surface without taking certain precautions."

"That still has to be deep water, doesn't it?"

"I understand as little as four feet could do it, and we have any number of stock reservoir tanks out here at least that deep. I've been taking an informal survey of them myself."

"So no witches?"

"Hardly. But should you see any, tell 'em to come see Ol' Charlie. I'll show 'em how to get propulsion out of their brooms."

This elicited hoots from the crowd causing the reporter to look nervously over her shoulder. She started to ask another question but was interrupted by a voice in her ear. "Rick and Janet want to know if you've recovered from your last burial?"

"Let's just say I'm still disappointed at not having been able to attend my own funeral--again. I understand it was lovely." The laughter behind them crescendoed. Charlie had been declared dead and buried so many

times that it was assumed he had nine lives. A few even called him The Big Cat.

"And have you received all the apologies you were due after solving the potter's death and that unfortunate episode with the six undocumented aliens? You took a beating on that for months even though you were later proved correct and exonerated--and given your job back."

"Let's just say one or two world leaders are yet to be heard from. Especially the ones down south."

The laughter behind them was befuddling to the reporter. She was new to the region and didn't know the history behind the questions she was being fed by the anchor persons.

"This is a question from Janet--"

Charlie waved at the tiny screen. "Hi, Janet. Drinks are on me the next time."

The reporter, not understanding the promise, ignored him and went on with the questioning. "She says the world knows what a legendary gourmand you are, but she'd like to know what your favorite dish is." The 4:30 *news* segment included a daily guest chef who hurried through a *simple* recipe.

Charlie took his left arm, placed it around the diminutive reporter's shoulders, and drew her into his side. "Honeymoon salad," he told her and looked suggestively into her eyes.

Rookie that she was, she bit. "What's a Honeymoon salad?"

Charlie squeezed her visibly and winked at the camera. "Just lettuce alone. No dressing."



One person among the crowd behind them laughed. Belatedly, the others followed but they sounded like children laughing because adults around them were laughing.

"That's a pretty blush you have there, little lady," Charlie said and took his arm away. "Now I'd like to ask you a question. Aren't you the little weather person who described a tornado touching down near the *city* of Buckingham?"

"I believe I reported that," she admitted and looked to the monitor for help.

"Do you know how many people live in the *city* of Buckingham?"

"No," she admitted. This time she looked pleadingly at the monitor.

"Four," he laughed. "And two of 'em you wouldn't want to meet." He grinned broadly at her embarrassment and hugged her with his left arm. "A dozen or so of us were watching your broadcast on the TV at the Hereford Bowl bar and we nearly died laughing. Buckingham--a *city*."

The little reporter swallowed and visibly sought for control. "How many people live in Hereford?" she asked.

"Oh, not many more than twenty, I'd say."

"Well, Rick and Janet," she addressed the monitor. "We may not be doing well in Buckingham, but it sounds as if Channel 9 is still number one in Hereford." Knowing she had salvaged the interview, she winked. "Now back to you. This is Melinda Carmen from in front of the Quonset Grocery and Cafe in Sligo, Colorado."

She was the only one who could hear what the anchors said, but it cheered her. "Congratulations, Melinda," Janet had said. "You have held your own against a living legend."

The camera switched over to Rick who nodded agreement. "There's only one Charlie Waggles," he ad-libbed smoothly. "They broke the mold when they made that man."

Followed by his entourage, Charlie swaggered back into the Quonset Cafe. Inez, who seemed unimpressed, wiped the counter in front of him and clinched the rag at her hip. "I couldn't tell what they were laughing at," she indicated the television hanging from the wall above the counter. "Some of us have to do a little work occasionally. Don't have the time to go gadding about the country."

Now that the television crew was packing up, the space in front of the cafe was nearly deserted as was Charlie's accustomed chair at the table in front of the window. After he and Dwayne took their seats, Charlie curled his finger for Inez, who had been watching for it. "Now what's this you're sayin' about the women folk?"

Inez looked uneasily at Dwayne but Charlie reassured her with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Well," she began quietly, talking down to the table to keep her words from being heard by the boys at the counter, "you know the ladies out here don't usually talk to me except to be overly polite. In fact, I don't suppose I've exchanged fifteen non-food words with them in years."

"And?"

"Well, it's been different today. To begin with, the Abroghast sisters came in asking about bulls. This was just shortly after you got your hair cut today."

"Why would they want to know about bulls?"

"It wasn't bulls in general. They wanted to know if I knew if there were any range bulls out near Three Tanks. Imagine them asking me, of all people?"

"Bulls? Three Tanks? You don't mean those three cattle tanks just east and south of the Buttes? The ones near that little grove of Chinese elm?"

Inez nodded more times than Charlie asked questions.

"Uncommon odd," was Charlie's muffled reply as his eyes drifted to the window and his mind to elsewhere.

"There's more," Inez said.

"More than Three Tanks?" He looked back slowly.

"It wasn't long after the Abroghasts were in that Phyllis from the library dropped by. Marsha stayed outside in the car." Inez waited for effect, much to the annoyance of Charlie. "You'll never guess what she wanted to know."

"Well, if I'd never be able to guess, why don't you just go ahead and tell me. Save us all some time, though I suspect one of us is enjoying this little conversation."

"She asked me if I knew if the natural spring that filled those three tanks was still flowing." Inez was pleased with her statement and the consternation it brought to Charlie's face. "I told her it had been flowing for

the fifty years I've known about it. That was an odd question, don't you think?"

"*Most* uncommon odd."

"And I'm not finished yet."

"Well, git on with it."

"Carla." She let the name drop like a dollop of mud and waited for Charlie's face to redden. "She lumbered in here after Phyllis left, banging the chairs with that walker of hers, and asked me right out loud, if you please--all manner of men were in here who probably knew better--if the road was still open that led to the old homestead that's just over the rise east of the spring."

"What'd you tell her?"

"Nothing. One of the men in here spoke up and said it was still fairly passable, though the road from there on over to Three Tanks wasn't much good."

Charlie moved his hat from one chair to another, but it proved no help. "Okay, I'll keep it under advisement," he told Inez. "Meantime, you think you could manage something for a starving legend."

She was already moving.

"Wiley," Charlie asked, turning around to the boys who were glued to their stools at the counter beneath the television, "Where's that knife I gave you to sharpen for me?"

"I'll get to it. Just give me a little time."

"I gave it to you a week ago," Charlie complained.

"I said I'll get to it."

"What's wrong with tomorrow. You got all day."

"Tomorrow's my birthday," he said, "and I don't plan to do anything but take it easy. All I'm doin' is going fishin'." He patted his belly contentedly. "Even then, I'm takin' help."

Annoyed at still being without a serviceable pocket knife, Charlie turned from the counter in time to see two cars pull up simultaneously in front of the cafe. Each contained two old women who Charlie knew, but instead of getting out and entering the grocery as he expected, they continued to sit.

Across the street, in front of the abandoned implement sales building, the Eastman Brothers' delivery truck from Sterling braked to a dusty stop. When the driver entered the grocery side, Charlie yelled at him through the connecting passage. "Haven't seen my dog, have you?"

"You mean that black and white kind of an Australian sheepdog?" The driver was holding three cases of potato chips. They were light but the weariness in his face showed he couldn't wait to get back to Sterling that night.

"That's the one." Charlie straightened with interest.

"No. Sorry," the driver said. "What'd you pay for that dog, anyway?"

"Hundred or so." Before the driver could comment Charlie continued. "I know it sounds like a horse price, but he's a good dog. Besides, have you checked horse prices lately? Just for dog food they're bringing fifty to seventy cents a pound. If a man had a 1,200-pound horse he could almost retire."

The driver waited patiently for the story to end and then disappeared to shelve the potato chips. Charlie had always been friendly toward him, but today he thought Charlie's words dragged on a bit as if he were worried about the dog or just nervous in general.

Outside, the four women still sat in their two cars. Inez brought a bowl of bean chili, a mountain of crackers, and a carafe of vinegar, but they didn't last long. Charlie was scraping the remains of a second bowl with his spoon when he noticed a first-grade aged boy looking at him from the grocery side.

"I wouldn't be worryin' that loose tooth too much if I was you," he advised the boy and then licked the back of his spoon.

The kid paid little attention to Charlie. He had an agenda of his own. "When it comes out, I'm going to sell it to the Tooth Fairy."

"The Tooth Fairy, huh?" Charlie pushed the empty bowl aside in search of another packet of crackers. "I see you know all about the Tooth Fairy, but your folks apparently haven't told you about the *Tooth Grinch*."

The boy stopped wiggling his tooth.

"Maybe it's just as well." Charlie turned and motioned for Inez to bring him another bowl. When he turned back, the boy was still staring at him. "I take it you want to learn about the Tooth Grinch?"

The boy nodded his head.

"Well, the Tooth Grinch is a lot like the Tooth Fairy, 'cept he doesn't leave money. He takes teeth, though. Sometimes more than you want him to take." Charlie nodded to show the accuracy of his statement. The

three boys at the counter also nodded earnestly. Dwayne, hadn't heard this story.

"Now the way the Grinch works is to look around until he finds a little boy wiggling a loose tooth in public. Then he knows to follow that particular little boy home. When bedtime comes, he sneaks in and drugs the boy's parents so they won't hear his screams."

The little boy stopped wiggling his tooth.

"Then he goes into the little boy's room with a pair of pliers and takes the tooth. He usually takes more than the loose one, too, because he can get a good price for them from the Japanese. I hear they grind them up for computer chips."

"He sells my teeth?"

"Of course he does. Then he splits the take with the Tooth Fairy. Where did you think the Tooth Fairy gets her cash? She isn't hurtin' all that bad herself, though, because she sells her teeth to the people who put paint in spray cans. That rattle you hear in there when you shake the can is a tooth, you know," Charlie explained. "Least that's what I heard on television."

The boy disappeared only to be replaced after two minutes by his mother who nearly pushed her grocery cart through the wall in getting there. "Charlie Waggles, you should be ashamed of yourself."

"That's my name. Don't take it in vain."

When she saw that she was going to make no headway, she jerked her cart viciously backward and disappeared. Shortly, Charlie saw the little boy staring at him with wide eyes from the far end of a row of groceries.

The child watched him for only an instant, however, because an arm reached from behind and snatched him out of sight.

Inez brought him a third bowl of bean chili, and he was eating it when a car pulled up and stopped in front of the Eastman Brothers' truck. Only one woman was in this car, but, unlike the others who still waited, she got out and opened her trunk.

Inside was a white rabbit, probably already discarded as some child's Easter pet. The woman, who proved to be Bode's cousin's wife, lifted the cage containing the rabbit from the trunk and closed the lid. Before she got across the street, one of the ladies in front of the cafe got out of her car and opened her trunk. The rabbit was placed inside, and the woman who had brought the rabbit joined the others in the first car.

The excitement hadn't stopped Charlie's eating, so when Inez lifted the pie over his head and in front of his face, he was ready for it. "Apple," she announced.

"What," he complained. "No ice cream? What kind of pie is that, anyway? It's naked."

The pie rose back over his head and disappeared. While he waited for it to return, adequately clothed, he watched the two in the other car get out and join the three in the car with the rabbit. "The Abrogast sisters," he muttered to Dwayne who, sitting to Charlie's left, was largely unaware of the activity outside. As he leaned over for a better view, he saw the car back out and head east. He shrugged as if to say "so what?"

The pie arrived, modestly attired in three scoops of ice cream, and Charlie dug in. "This'll do," his pie-gagged voice told Inez.



Another car heading east passed the window. It was chauffeured by a college aged girl unknown to Charlie, but in the back sat Carla Beatty. He would have known who it was even if he hadn't seen her face. Sitting beside her was the now ubiquitous aluminum walker.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he told Dwayne.

When the third car passed, Charlie could take it no more. This one contained the volunteer librarians, Phyllis and Marsha. They sat up front. In the back, riding regally, was Miss Teller, Charlie's old time teacher and the woman who inhabited the apartment at the top of the old Opera House.

"Inez?" he stood and yelled. "What's the phase of the moon?"

She paused in her duties. "I couldn't say."

"Well check the Eastman Brothers' calendar in the john. It has the phases."

"I'd think you'd have memorized them by now."

"I haven't got time for you to be cute, Inez. What's the phase?"

She pulled the door on the bathroom open and looked at the calendar. "Full moon," she said.

"Lord almighty," he backed away from the table, still chewing.

"We got to do some gittin', Dwayne," Charlie called, putting his hat on as he hurried to the door. "Let's get to it." He was pushing open the grocery door to the outside when Inez yelled from the back.

"Do you want me to put the rest of the pie in the freezer for you?"

"Pie?" he asked innocently.

Inez walked toward the counter until she was close enough to glance over it and the boys who were still watching the television news. All she

saw were three empty chili bowls, a pile of spent cracker wrappers, and an empty glass pie plate.

"Never mind," she said.

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(10)

## Range Bull Chagrined

"If there's a way to ruin a perfectly good full moon, they'll find it." Charlie was pointing his Jeep south on County Road 390 toward the Sligo Cemetery. "Don't these people know how to drink? Can't they learn to gamble? Don't they have homes?"

"Where are we going?"

"My place. If we're going to spy on whatever they're doin', we're going to need some help." He mumbled something else Dwayne didn't catch, or maybe Charlie was just strangling on his disgust. By the time he finally quit grumbling and spun into the semi-circular drive in front of his trailer it was dusk. "Come on inside."

If the trailer, encased in straw bales, impressed Dwayne, he said nothing. If the disarray inside the trailer depressed him, he again said nothing. With his mouth shut, he found a clear place on the floor and watched while Charlie ransacked drawer after drawer.

"Here's one." He handed Dwayne a foam rubber padded stick with a pair of earphones attached to it. "Put those on your ears and you can hear conversation up to 200 feet away, especially on the prairie. That's what the ad in *Science News* said, anyway." He went back to rifling another drawer before admitting, "They're crap, however. But they'll do you some good." He continued to toss items from the drawer. "I got a better pair from my *DAK* catalog. Somewheres."

Stepping gingerly, Dwayne picked his way to the blanket strewn couch. On the ledge above it were two framed pictures. One was an old photograph mounted on brown backing and sealed in a wooden frame. It showed a man in a derby hat sitting in what looked to be a new buggy. Its accordion top was folded back, and the man sat self-consciously erect, his hand on the holstered whip. Harnessed to the buggy was a sturdy, young gelding. Dwayne turned the picture over and read the identification-- Charlie Sells and Sam. Frankfort, Indiana 1898.

"A relative of yours?" He indicated the picture when Charlie looked up.

"No," he said and ducked back to hunting. "Found that picture in a DAV store in Denver. Two and a half bucks they wanted. They were selling the frame and didn't give a fig about the picture. The horse and the driver looked so proud I couldn't let someone else buy it and throw the picture away. That man *belongs* to someone." Just the thought of such

disrespect annoyed him. "You don't treat people that way, even if they're dead." His voice was muffled because he had his head in a closet in the hallway.

Sitting next to the picture of the stranger was a photograph of Charlie and his rig. Surprisingly, the picture was set in the desert. The Jeep and Charlie were surrounded by saguaro cactus, ocotillo and cholla. The hill above them was yellow with blooming brittle bush. Charlie had his foot on the front bumper of what was then his *new* Jeep pickup. It was difficult to recognize because it was washed and polished. Sitting proudly on the hood--as proud as the horse Sam in the other picture--was a black and white dog. It had apparently been wounded because its chest had been shaved and bandaged. Its left leg was in a cast. Despite the damage, it panted happily and intelligently at the camera.

"That was taken in Arizona. During the Tucson Affair."

"You mean when you saved Tucson?"

"That's what they told me, but that's another story. I was on special assignment." He paused. "At least that's what the former Colorado governor ended up telling the press." Dwayne had pointed at the dog so Charlie added, "Yeah, that's Dog. He had a run in with some bad guys. But he's okay now."

"This the dog that Banner said dug you out of your grave?"

Charlie took a lingering look. "Out of one of 'em, he did. But *that* picture was another time. That time," he poked a finger at the photo, "he kept me *out* of one."

When Dwayne replaced the photo, he noticed a small, flat wooden case about four inches in length and three inches wide. It was still ornate in spite of age and handling, and he could see that the case's contents were protected by purple velvet. Inside was the oval portrait of a man who obviously had just walked through hell. His forehead bulged as if from a beating and his eyes pleaded for release from a place no one but he could name.

But it wasn't a photograph, for the surface of the portrait felt like porcelain. The man's carelessly knotted string tie and the buttons on his coat drew Dwayne's attention. For some reason, the buttons were on the wrong side of the coat. They were on the left instead of the right, an oddity he ascribed to the whim of fashion.

"This is a strange one."

Charlie looked up from his hunt and hurried to Dwayne. "Not that one." He snatched the portrait from him and closed it without looking. After replacing it on the shelf behind the couch, he explained curtly. "That's the *Ultima Thule*." He said the two strange words without preamble or summation and went back to his search.

Dwayne had heard those words only once before and even then he was eavesdropping on a conversation. It had been between Inez and the postmistress. "The *Ultima Thule*," the mistress had said, "may be his most famous case, but it's the one that also completely broke his heart. He hasn't been able to look at women the same way since." The ladies looked sad for an instant but brightened and laughed when Inez quipped, "Of course, it hasn't hurt his appetite any."

Finally, Charlie found the other listening device and they went outside. As often happened--more frequently of late than in the past--Charlie needed to relieve himself and walked over to the barbed wire fence separating his property from the cemetery.

"Here's a little potassium for the petunias, Albert," Dwayne heard him say. "And here's a little nitrogen for the nasturtiums, Presley."

On the way back to the Jeep, he looked at the hole in the bales of straw that made a fortress of his trailer and called, "Hey, Dog." After no response, he squeezed into the pickup and they bounced out onto the county road.

"Talk about a big mother," Charlie whistled. They were heading directly east and the full moon was rising like an unwanted pregnancy. "Reminds me of many other nights," he said. "None of them pleasant, as I recall."

As it got higher, the moon lost some air, but it was still impressive.

"By the time we get there," Charlie leaned toward Dwayne, "it should be as dark as it's gonna get." His face was lighted from below by the dash lights and from above by the moon. "I think I know where they plan to go in. They can get close, but it'll still be a devil of a hike for their old legs. We'll take another angle. The *Big Honker*'ll get us there easy." He patted the dash.

Charlie's guess proved correct. After driving a mile and a half down a windmill maintenance path, they spotted the moon illuminated tops of a cluster of cars at a distance to the east. They were parked at the base of a small hill that separated the ladies from the stock tanks. "If they have any

sense at all," Charlie said, "they'll head west and walk down the draw to Three Tanks. Otherwise, they'll have a big up and a steep down. Steep for them, at any rate."

He pulled off the maintenance road and drove right up a hill. When the pickup bogged, he engaged the four-wheel drive and the front wheels grabbed, pulling them along easily. "I don't want to get so close they can hear the engine," he explained. "But it never hurts to shorten a hike."

Charlie judged correctly again and stopped just before the last gentle rise. Leaving the pickup, they crept toward the crest of the hill on the west side of the tanks. The moon was in front of them, so they didn't worry about silhouettes. Even so, they crawled the last few yards. When they could see the three cattle tanks, the grove of five trees, and the cluster of witches, they stretched out on the short buffalo grass and donned the earphones.

"I don't hear anything," Dwayne complained.

Charlie jerked back and put a hand painfully to his ear. "I can hear you wonderful," he whispered. "Just turn that little knob on the side. And remember, we only have to just barely whisper to hear each other."

Dwayne found the knob. At first, however, all he could hear was the wind in the trees and the women tapping the earth with their canes and walkers. After a time he managed to make out individual words.

The women, little more than a hundred feet below them, were fussily trying to prepare an altar for the ceremony. They were on an open, gravelly space between the three tanks and the scraggy Chinese elms. It was the site killdeers used each spring for nesting.

"No, no, Dorothy," Clara Abroghast scolded her sister. "A pentagram has five points, not six. The Star of David is absolutely of no use to us." Dorothy was trying to draw the figure in the gravel with her cane, but it was difficult to keep her balance and etch the lines at the same time. Clara's arthritis was such that her activities were restricted to directing. She stood with both hands on her three-pronged cane and fussed. "You're making a mess of it, Dorothy." Her voice ascended and descended imaginary stairs of impatience. "I just knew it."

Phyllis, looking less spinsterish now that she was out from behind the desk in the library and not wearing her reading glasses, marched into the middle of the drawing. "Give me your cane, Dorothy." She shooed her away irritably. "I'll do it. You hang on to Clara's arm."

While Phyllis drew, fellow librarian Marsha filled paper bags with sand and placed them on the ground at the ten acute angles of the figure. Miss Teller, though the oldest, followed nimbly behind Marsha and placed a candle inside each paper bag. After she lighted them, the brown paper luminarias glowed eerily. They weren't cheery at all but would have served well for a Halloween.

Carla Beatty plopped her walker around the perimeter of the pentagram and inspected it for accuracy. "That line there," she pointed. "Do it properly, Phyllis. Straighten it. Use the candles as a guide."

"Somethin's funny here," Charlie whispered to Dwayne. "They haven't a clue as to what they're doin'. They'd have better luck giggin' frogs with crochet needles."



The college-aged girl who had driven Carla Beatty to the prairie also troubled Charlie. She seemed too nonchalant. In fact, she acted bored as she carried the rabbit and its cage to the center of the pentagram and placed it on the ground. She was, however, wary of the old ladies, so Charlie guessed she was a grand niece of one of them and had been roped into the evening's affair. Once her task was finished she retreated well back from the luminarias and contented herself, fingering the crystal pendant at her neck.

"The liturgy," Carla Beatty called, and the ladies began encircling the pentagram. "Who's doing the liturgy?"

Dorothy Abroghast retrieved her cane from Phyllis and stepped forward. "You promised me, Carla."

"Very well, Dorothy." She hastened to distance herself from the rabbit by placing the walker ahead of her, the two rear legs coming to earth first. When the legs and wheels were all on the ground, she shuffled into the frame and repeated the process. "You may begin," she said as soon as she was clear.

Dorothy poked to the center of the pentagram and leaned on her cane next to the rabbit's cage. After an appropriate silence she looked up to the sky. "*Clasp me close in your warm young arms,*" she sang in that voice priests use at high mass, "*While the pale stars shine above. And we'll live our whole young lives away, in the joys of a living love.*"

"What in Tarnation is going on?" Charlie whispered. "You're the witch expert here, Dwayne. You ever hear any such nonsense?" Charlie's

knowledge of witchcraft was restricted to a re-run of *Rosemary's Baby* he saw late one night in a Nebraska motel.

"Let's hurry up ladies," Clara whispered dramatically, and Charlie wondered why whisper. "The mosquitoes are going to eat me alive if we tarry much longer."

A furtive motion of Miss Teller's hand attempted to silence the offending voice. "Did you see that?" Charlie whispered. "For whose benefit is she trying to make these shenanigans look good? They're out in the middle of the prairie for God's sake," he said a little too loudly, and then amended for whom's sake it was.

"We would all," Phyllis sounded ominously, "prefer *flies*, Clara." Charlie would have sworn he saw her eyes roll in disgust at the mention of mosquitoes.

"Now I've forgotten the rest," Dorothy said in a stage whisper.

"Fake it," sister Clara snapped, again *sotto voce*. "We'll all have malaria before you have done with it."

Frustrated but filled with resolve, Dorothy closed one hand over the handle of her cane. Her free hand reached toward the east and cradled the moon between her thumb and index finger. "*On the white throat of the useless passion/ That scorched my soul with its burning breath/ I clutched my fingers in murderous fashion,/ And gathered them close in a grip of death.*"

Her hand remained in the air and her mouth remained open.

Perhaps she had forgotten the remainder, but if she had it was chanted into her memory by the voices of those on the edges of the pentagram.

*"For just one kiss that your lips have given/ In the lost and beautiful past to me,/ I would gladly barter my hopes of Heaven/ And all the bliss of Eternity."*

"Now just a Consarned minute." The voice didn't come from the ladies. It was Charlie's and it was injudiciously loud, so loud that one of the ladies turned from the group, looked almost directly at him, and yelled:

"Range bull."

She had already started for the protection of the trees when Miss Teller whispered threateningly and halted her. "Get back here, Marsha. You know we checked it out, and there are no bulls in this section."

Not completely convinced, Marsha--who Charlie knew could freeze a bull with just one of her Arctic glances--edged back into the group. Dorothy was about to continue when a new sound caused her to pause. It was a frenzied rattling, a rasping against the darkness as if the full moon were attempting to scour the night clean. For Charlie and Dwayne the sound was magnified. "Could be a distant helicopter," Charlie guessed.

"He's coming," Dorothy cried. "It *really* worked." As with Marsha before her, she broke, but not for the trees. She was headed straight over the hill that separated them from their cars.

"Oh, tosh," Miss Teller yelled and pointed for Dorothy to get back within the pentagram. "It's nothing but the miller moths. The candles have attracted them, and they are battering against the sides of the paper bags."

Several of the women placed relieved hands on their breasts and then looked around to discover if others had detected their fears.

"Now let's finish and get it over with," Miss Teller spoke firmly. "Dorothy, you begin. We'll follow. And do the lady proud."

Up on his hill, Charlie already knew who *The lady* was. And he knew he had been *had*.

*"But I know, too, if an angel beckoned,/ Standing close by the Throne on High,"* Dorothy began and the others chimed in, *"And you, adown by the gates infernal,/ Should open your loving arms and smile,/ I would turn my back on things supernal,/ To lie on your breast a little while."*

The man on the hill could take it no more. He pulled the listening device from his ears and stood up. "Ella Wheeler Wilcox." Charlie's voice rolled across the prairie as if he *were* a range bull bellowing.

One of the ladies excused herself from the circle and walked to the foot of the hill. It was obvious she could barely see Charlie, but she knew well who was there.

"I was fearful," Miss Teller spoke with control, "that you would not make your presence known until we were forced to sacrifice the rabbit. It would have been such a waste of good meat."

Dorothy Abroghast spoke and caused Miss Teller to turn from the dark hill. "Well, if we had sacrificed it," Dorothy sneered, "it wouldn't have been done with the knife my sister brought. Can you imagine, she brought our mother's good bread knife?"

"But it *would* have worked," a meek voice offered hopefully.

"So would a grapefruit knife," Dorothy hissed, "but it wouldn't have been any more appropriate. Besides, I distinctly told you to get father's carving knife."

"Enough." That was all Miss Teller had to say. And to the young girl who had accompanied them: "Turn the rabbit loose."

The girl, with the expected and affected ennui, sulked into the pentagram and opened the door to the cage. Intrigued by its freedom, the rabbit scampered into the night to answer a coyote's howled prayer.

"Charles," Miss Teller turned back to address the darkness. "I shall expect to see you at my apartment bright and early tomorrow morning."

"Early?"

"Eight sharp."

"Eight?" That was a working man's hour.

"As I am sure you remember from your years at the Prairie View School, *Promptness is Politeness.*"

"Yes, Miss Teller," came the contrite, resigned voice from the top of the hill.

"And before you are excused, Charles, do you think you have learned your lesson?"

"Lesson?"

"The one that teaches not to be fooled by an obviously, and clumsily, planted clue. Any number of fine ladies have been made the subject of irresponsible talk. They have even been subtly ridiculed before a television audience by one deputy sheriff. Am I making myself clear, Charles?"

"Yes, Miss Teller. Abundantly clear. It was remiss of me not to speak up publicly in your defense days ago. And to *insist* on your innocence," he added.

"Better late than not at all, I suppose." The breath she took was audible. "You are excused."

Behind Miss Teller the ladies were already cleaning up the mess they had made. The paper bags were emptied and the lines in the sand were effaced.

Above the activity, Dwayne and Charlie slunk back to the Jeep. But, chastened as he was, Charlie didn't leave the prairie immediately. He waited until he saw a line of lights winding down from Three Tanks before he shifted the Jeep out of four-wheeled drive and headed for Sligo to drop off Dwayne.

"We won't mention this little episode, will we?" Charlie grinned sheepishly.

"It could have been worse."

His face lit by the dash lights, Charlie looked to Dwayne for just *how* it could have been worse.

"She could have made you stay after and clean the erasers."

"In my day we used a rag. Besides, the punishment was to pour lye down the privy."

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## Nightmare Revisited

Miss Teller, Buella Teller to the adults on the prairie, had clanged her attendance bell in Charlie's nightmares long after he graduated from the eighth grade. Any student who had sat in Miss Teller's classroom was always her concern, her responsibility--her property. The measure she held students accountable to was taller and straighter than that used by other civilizations, and it could come down with a more resounding thwack on a recalcitrant back or knuckles than the others. Even escape into high school was not possible. There, if he was sluggish, all his current teacher had to say was that if he didn't straighten up, "I shall inform Miss Teller the next time I see her."

Many times Charlie had been *requested* to report to her desk once school was dismissed, but as he drove past the Quonset Cafe toward the Opera House he could think of only one other required meeting that had generated such dread. It had occurred during his trapping days. One morning, in the early dark before school, he had checked one of his Montgomery Ward muskrat traps only to find a dead, frozen solid skunk. Not having time to skin it and not wanting to take it to school, he suspended the skunk, still in the trap, from a spindly cottonwood. As was his luck, the skunk twirled in such a way as to show Charlie its scent glands, or where they could be found if he pressed on each side of them.

He never understood why, but he cut one of the frozen glands out and put it into his coat pocket. He was showing it to Wiley in the coat room later that morning, rolling the solid gland between his thumb and forefinger, when it suddenly thawed, burst, and squirted all over the door frame that led into the classroom.

In a big city, perhaps, school would have been called off. In Miss Teller's class it was simply another object lesson. Without saying a word the students learned implicitly that they must live in the world created by those around them. If they didn't like that world, they had best be about changing it and the rules that permitted its creation. Modern teachers use the word *pro-active*--if indeed it is a word. Miss Teller used a skunk. One has more staying power.

Dutifully, while the others donned their coats and boots and broke for the out of doors and fresh air, Charlie marched to the front of Miss Teller's desk. He was confused when she simply asked him to sit down in the front row, asked with a sweetness that belied the sternness in her features, that belied the horehound candies she sucked on daily. Instead of cleaning black boards or pouring lye down the holes in the privies out back--a needless task in such cold weather--her request was that he tell her about his trapping.

That was easy, though it came out haltingly. Miss Teller's gaze, even when attempting to be pleasant, could do that to vocal chords. He talked about the muskrats, the occasional mink and ermine, the raccoons and very rare badger--they were always alive when he discovered them and



that was a problem answerable only to the large stick he carried. Ammunition was too costly.

She listened patiently and with seeming interest. But after he finished she rubbed her hands together, probably from the cold, and asked about house cats. "How much does the catalog pay for the skin of a domestic house cat?"

Charlie knew, though it wasn't something he bragged about after catching one. "From ten to fifteen cents," he told her.

The price wasn't grand, but in a stack of other pelts it did repay the effort to send it along to the dealer. "As you may know," she smiled, "I enjoy feeding birds at my place. Suet this time of year mostly."

Charlie knew suet came free from the butcher, as free as the middlings he scooped up at the grain elevator and poured bacon fat over for his dogs. Today, both were packaged and sold as bird food and dog food. Back then, middlings and suet were nuisances that had to be carted away and buried--hot dogs not yet being all that popular. "Yes'em," he answered to her feeding question.

"A stray cat, a feral creature, has been hanging about and killing some of my birds. We all know what damage a feral cat can do to the wildlife, the birds and rabbits. And the quail and pheasants I know you enjoy trapping and eating?" she asked knowingly, her head bobbing until he nodded his own.

Feral animals of any kind were not to be tolerated. If they came in and hung around the barn--did some good there--they were tolerated. But a truly feral creature was worse than a varmint.

"I'll have it in a week," he promised her. And he did. But what concerned him was that he caught cats in that trap three nights running. He was afraid to go into town for a month for fear of being questioned. Since that time he hadn't been much on trapping or any hunting for that matter. He figured it was just something boys did and then grew out of. Additionally, he could never look at a rabbit's foot key chain after that winter because he saw one once that was a dead ringer for the fur on the second cat he took beneath Miss Teller's suet feeder.

Would that the meeting he was about to have with Miss Teller would go as well. He didn't slam the Jeep door when he got out. Unnecessary noise she didn't appreciate.

Inside the old Opera House, Charlie took the door he didn't want to. It opened to the right off the foyer and led up narrow, creaky stairs to a narrow creaky landing. The first door, he knew, hid a lumber room containing all the furnishing that had filled the building when it was the center of activity for polite society in Sligo.

The door at the end of the landing to his left was his destination. As quietly as he could, he tiptoed to it, removed his hat and smoothed back his hair, enhancing his widow's peak. Feeling for stubble on his ruddy cheeks, he was pleased to remember that he had shaved, one of the few duties he performed with a regularity that had become habitual. Reluctantly, he raised his hand to make a fist and to knock. Any bravado that may have remained from the T.V interview had sunk lower than his quivering knees.

"You are tardy, Charles," piped an imperial voice from within the room. "But you may enter."

He would rather have spent a night in the room with the dismembered animals, but he shifted his hat into his left hand and tried the door knob with his right. As the door swiveled open, it revealed a room that might well have been a diorama in a museum. Antimacassars and lace and bell-rope pull curtains, as heavy as a theater's, filled the room. The lamps, dripping with colored crystals, were Tiffany, or should have been. Music boxes and China statuary rested squarely in the centers of doilies placed squarely in the centers of delicate round tables.

Oval portraitures of ancient people in somber clothing stared from the walls. The severity of their expressions contrasted with the busy, florid wallpaper behind them. Beneath the picture of a painfully erect man standing next to his seated, unsmiling wife sat what at first glance was a stiff-backed mannequin. It sat in what was probably the identical chair in the picture.

"Take your seat, Charles," the mannequin spoke. Her dress also looked like the one worn by the wife in the picture.

"Yes, Miss Teller," he said, barely audible, and hurried to the indicated chair. He sat on the edge, his knees together and his back nearly as straight as Miss Teller's.

She eyed the belly swelling onto his lap and noted his attempt to hide it with his hat. "Had you any sense you would have been here sooner, *days* ago." She seemed almost offended, and her chin--already tilted--elevated ever so disdainfully to the right. "Oh, Charles. *We flatter those we scarcely know,/ We please the fleeting guest,/ And deal full many a thoughtless blow/ To those who love us best.*"

"How was I to know you were going to feel this way? You seem to encourage the belief anyway. Besides, it was one of your handkerchiefs. Or one of the ladies. I tried to hide it, but Wiley was there."

"To be mysterious is one thing. To be thought a murderess is another. You could have ameliorated the problem by immediately climbing the stairs and questioning me. Instead, you listened to the nonsense of Carla Beatty. Allowed her to get carried away with her own charade. Allowed the community to hold us in disrespect. Suspicion even."

"But Miss Teller. You ladies seem to dote on their reputation."

"Should you live to an advanced age--which with your habits seems unlikely--you might better understand our motivation as well as our motives." She adjusted her collar, allowing for deeper breaths perhaps. "We, the other ladies and I, grew up in a different era. An era that respected its elders, accorded them due privileges."

"But none of you ladies are in straits."

"Finances are not the question. I am speaking of the common civilities that were displayed to the older members of a community. A polite 'Good morning' for instance. A tip of the hat. An open door. In my day our grandparents and any person of a similar age were shown respect. By contrast, today we are looked upon as an encumbrance. As a horse and buggy in the rush hour of life. The ladies and I can not be faulted for fighting back."

"Are you talking about the ghost house?"

The very words caused her to roll the blue crockery of her eyes. "Always searching for the melodramatic. It is nothing but an old, long abandoned home whose walls we decorated."

"Decorated with animal parts."

"We found them convenient. And it did work."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Charles. Am I going to have to explain that to you after what I've already said and after our little outing on the prairie?"

"Apparently."

"Oh well. I was speaking to you before of the loss of respect for the elderly. We have remedied that. You are not the first to find that house, or similar displays. The rumors as to our coven are not entirely unfounded. Not *entirely* unwanted." Her words were smug, satisfied. "We, today, are accorded the deference from the young that we deserve. That it comes from fear of us, fear of our occult powers, is not a concern to us so long as it *comes*. To see a hot young swain step from the path and give us clear travel when earlier he would have shouldered past us is gratifying. Granted, we would prefer respect. But granted, we will settle for fear."

"I have to agree with you that the animal parts nailed to the wall did the trick with me. I didn't think you were witches, but I was ready to believe most anything else."

She dismissed the notion with a wave of a hand. "Tosh. You give us entirely too much credit. It was road kill all. Unfortunate creatures that found their way into the grills of our cars. We save them. Before we envisioned what you call the ghost house, we held little burial ceremonies

for them. I believe it was the talk in the community after seeing us on the prairie with a shovel that gave us the idea in the first place."

"One of you ran over an antelope?"

"That was *found* road kill. Carla was on her way back from Pine Bluffs one Sunday." She saw that Charlie wondered about a Sunday trip. "It was a liquor run. Colorado's blue laws can prove an inconvenience. Anyway, we made use of it. What wasn't killed by vehicles was dragged in by the cats owned by the ladies of our circle. That accounts for the mice and frog."

"I understand all that," Charlie said, "but why pin the Raggedy Andy doll to the opposite wall with a little harpoon. Not a harpoon, really. It looked more like a shrimp fork."

She looked at him steadily before speaking. "I do not know to what you are referring."

This surprised him. "You don't?"

"I don't, and in any case," she brought her chin down slightly, "I asked you here today to discuss another matter. Something you should have broached me with that very first morning. The false witches' sabbath was your *punishment*. It ended there. I asked you here to discuss the Gillespie killing, if that is indeed what it is." Her eyes pushed him slightly back in his chair.

"Fine with me." All Charlie could think of at the moment was that he wanted to make water and wondered why he hadn't done so at the cafe before coming. Her eyes continued to stare in his direction, and, gradually, he perceived that they weren't looking directly at him but at the small glass

figure on the table next to his chair. "May I?" he asked. When she nodded he picked it up. It was a chunky elephant, obviously hand blown and very old. Its glass trunk curled up and joined the forehead. The tail curled against a hip. "Very nice," he said and replaced it as carefully as he could.

"You don't remember it, do you?"

"Ahh," Charlie tried but drew a blank.

"You gave it to me for Christmas when you were in my second grade class."

"Oh," he half remembered.

"You've been well?" When he nodded that he was, she added "And I see you've recovered the weight you lost as a result of your *absence* during the recent cattle mutilations."

"Yes," he said with growing relief. "I'm back to my fighting weight again."

Her eyes, ignoring his girth, rose in her head and drifted sideways. "If you say so, Charles." When her eyes lowered, they stared at the tiny drawer in the small table beside Charlie's chair.

He was better at following her cues now and pointed at the drawer. "Open it?" She assented and he pulled it open, rocking the table as he did. Inside was a small gift box.

"Open it please, Charles."

Inside was a white handkerchief, delicately embroidered with the letters B.T. For Buella Teller. "It was a gift from you for Valentine's Day. Also during the second grade year."

Charlie looked at the embroidery. "My mom was always embroidering things back then, he explained."

"I know your mother's hand, Charles. It was the finest in northern Colorado. That handkerchief," she pointed with a bony, blue finger, "was rendered by a much younger, highly unskilled hand. The hand of a second grader, I should say."

Carefully, Charlie re-folded the handkerchief, patted it down in its box, and placed it in the drawer. He had trouble raising his eyes to meet hers. "We'll keep this to ourselves?" He nodded hopefully and waited for her delayed response.

"Whatever you say, Charles," her blue lips moved stiffly. "It was once a most startlingly white handkerchief. I've seen only one object whiter." She was obviously waiting for him to ask.

"What was that, Miss Teller?"

"Your face when you came to the Prairie View School and discovered that I was going to be your seventh grade teacher."

That Charlie remembered.

"We, together, forged a breakthrough that year, I remember. Do you?" Her remembering eyes drifted from the ceiling to his. He didn't move. "We had those high windows back then. Do you remember?" He nodded. "Do you remember the long pole I used to open the upper halves of those windows?"

His memory was becoming more painful.

"And do you remember how I used to carry that long pole across my shoulder? And do you remember how one day I swung around to talk to



one of your classmates and, in so doing, struck you squarely in the head with the end of the pole?"

Charlie rubbed his head and his left cheek rose in a forced half-smile. "And do you remember, Charles, that from that day on you performed your homework diligently and prospered greatly?"

"It would be a boon to education if teachers were still permitted to carry such poles, Miss Teller, but could we get to the reason you've called me here?"

"We already have, Charles." He looked startled, so she explained. "You are sitting in *my* chair. Now what is in front of you?"

It was the television set she was sitting next to, and he inclined his head toward it.

"And what do you see if you just slightly move your head to the right?"

He moved more than his head and looked. "The teacherage."

"And to the left?"

"Dwayne Dobson's house. And," he raised in his seat, "without a whole lot of trouble I can see the fireplug where the girl's body was found." He knew where she always sat. "Just what did you see last Friday night, Miss Teller?"

Buela Teller's hands were in her lap. "Now I don't *pry*, mind you, Charles." She shifted her hands, moving the top one to the bottom and then intertwining them. "I was not brought up to do so. But I *do* observe."

Charlie began to feel more at ease. "Just what did you observe, Miss Teller?" He leaned expectantly toward her, at least as far as he could lean against his belly.

"Television was even more banal, more insulting than usual. And, as you know, I am not one of those who rents the movies on video from the Quonset. Additionally, my eyes had been burning all day, an allergy to something I suppose. So, I lowered the lights and turned on some soft music from out of Greeley."

"And sat in the dark?"

"Precisely. Most of the time my eyes were closed, but a sudden increase in light caused me to look out the left window--toward the science teacher's home."

"And you saw a girl?"

"I saw a cheerleader."

"Are you sure?"

"My glasses are for reading, Charles. At a distance my eyesight is excellent. Not only was it a cheerleader; it was Linda Gillespie."

"You're sure?"

"The cut of her hair, her gait, and her body are distinctive. I know all the girls, Charles. Perhaps from a distance, but I know them."

"Did she enter?"

"She did."

"Did the door close?"

"It did."

"How long was she in there?"

She breathed in and sat even more erectly. "As I told you, Charles, I do not *pry*. Even so, it *is* improper for a young lady to enter a bachelor

gentleman's home after sunset without escort. Or at any time for that matter." She placed an agitated, nearly transparent hand to her throat.

"Then that's all?"

She shook her head. "Another door opened." Her head inclined to her left and Charles turned with it. He saw the teacherage.

"Did Mrs. Crowley, Karen Crowley, come out of her apartment there at about that time?"

"Actually, her door opened first. It was her light that attracted me, but I gave it little attention until the second door opened, Mr. Dobson's door."

"Okay, let me figure this," Charlie nervously tapped his lower teeth with his thumbnail. "Mrs. Crowley comes out at almost exactly the time Linda Gillespie is talking to Dwayne on his porch. But," he looked up to Miss Teller who motioned him to discontinue his nervous habit, "Mrs. Crowley couldn't have seen the Gillespie girl because this building is in the way."

"But she saw," Miss Teller almost smiled and squeezed her hands together triumphantly. "She came down the teacherage walk, crossed the street, and came along the barrow pit across the way." She indicated the ditch opposite the Opera House.

"Why the barrow pit?"

"Charles, there is no walkway on the other side of the street. One chooses either the road or the barrow pit. Since it has been recently mowed, the barrow pit is a sound choice."

He was embarrassed. He should have known.

"But she came no farther than was necessary to see Mr. Dobson's door. For, when she saw the opened door, and the cheerleader standing in it, she froze."

"How long did she stand there?"

"Only until the Gillespie girl entered and the door closed. Then she hastened back to the teacherage and slammed the door. I could hear it from here."

"So she lied to me. She told me she was with him that night," he explained.

"I believe," Miss Teller whispered, as if someone else were in the room, "that the word *lie* is a little inappropriate. The poor girl has a child and no husband. And even in this day of fast transportation and good roads, the prairie can be very *lonely*." She nodded knowingly at Charlie.

Charlie agreed but added, "All the same, a desperate woman who thinks her hope is slipping away can become pretty mean."

"A better word, Charles, would be *vicious*. Even *vindictive*." She nodded as if she were intimately acquainted with both these words.

"I hadn't considered her as a suspect because she's so small."

"There's something I once heard you say on the school grounds, Charles. It concerned the female anatomy--I won't deign to undignify myself with its repetition--but its rhetorical pattern is certainly apropos. It went something like this: Big girl, big temper; little girl, all temper. You, however, were not referring to tempers."

Charlie melted like L. Frank Baum's Wicked Witch after she had been dowsed with a bucket of water. Even after all those years, he knew exactly

the word she was referring to. "So, what it comes down to," he bluffed his way through, "is that I now have two major suspects in the girl's death. And I don't think either of them did it."

Miss Teller's eyes dropped to, and through, the floor.

Charlie knew what she meant by looking into the library below. "And I don't have any *other* suspects either." She wasn't going to let him forget the witches for a long time.

"So," she asked suggestively, "you have only *two* suspects?"

"That's about the size of it, and suspects in just what I don't know."

"Meaning you don't know the real cause of death?"

"Greeley thinks it's going to turn out to be drugs of some kind. I think that's why they aren't swarming out here with their detectives. They let me handle the obvious."

"Then maybe I should tell you that I think you have three suspects, Charles, not two."

"Three?"

"The *third* party I saw that night."

"But you didn't--" And he stopped. "I know," he realized. "I didn't ask."

"The third party was behind the post office. In the shadows."

"What was he doing?"

"I didn't say *he*. I choose my pronoun carefully when I use one. It was simply a shadow--in human form--that moved occasionally."

"Did Mrs. Crowley or Mr. Dobson or the Gillespie girl see this figure?"

"No. But it saw all three."

"How long did it stay there?"

"I can't say."

"What do you mean you can't say?"

"I mean, Charles, that it was time for the evening news. I seldom miss that. The weather forecasts, at least, are amusing." Charlie's face was incredulous, so she felt compelled to explain. "Charles," she raised her eyebrows, "I find the affairs of the young to be diverting. Not consuming."

"Yes," he shook his head, getting up. "And you don't *pry*."

"Precisely."

"Would you," he asked, standing, "please tell me what all this nonsense about Ella Wheeler Wilcox is?"

"Nonsense? She is simply a lady poet of the past who speaks to our sensibilities."

"I tried to look her up at the university library in Greeley but I could only find a couple of her poems, in a book of collected poems. I had a student try the internet to see what was there and all he could find was an article that seemed to have been written while she was still living. No date. No byline. Nothing."

"I'm not surprised."

"Not surprised that she's disappeared? That she's no longer considered a major poet?"

"I'm not surprised that she is unknown to the young, to the internet groupies who think intelligence began with their birth. It isn't that *she* has disappeared. It is simply that the sensibilities she addressed have disappeared."

At the door, knowing that Miss Teller was correct as usual, he paused and looked back at her suspiciously. "Did I happen to give you any gifts during the seventh grade?"

"That will be for another time, Charles," she smiled with that delicious irony he knew could raise welts. "But before you go there's a little problem I'd like you to see to."

He had been trying to ease out the door but paused with his hand on the knob. "What's that?"

"Small birds have been dropping dead from the sky. Would you please see that it stops?"

"I'll take care of it," he promised. "I won't need my traps this time. Shouldn't take more than a single word."

"A *single* word?" Her questioning hand crawled to her throat.

"I think one will do it." He was confidently smug.

"Are you suggesting, Charles, that you are capable of magic?"

"I've had my moments, Miss Teller," he said and turned the knob.

To have established a small beachhead with Miss Teller made Charlie feel buoyant as he exited the Opera House, so buoyant that he decided to cross the street and pick up Dwayne for another trip to Pleistocene Park where he would put a halt to the falling birds. He should have done it earlier but didn't have the heart at the time to confront Pointe Ruffner while *he* was feeling so confident.

Walking up Dwayne's driveway, Charlie had to step into the grass to get around the little Nissan. As he passed the car, unable to look at it with anything but contempt, he was halted by what sat in the front seat. The

last time he had seen it, it was hanging upside down with a harpoon through its chest. In the Nissan its head didn't even come up to the bottom of the steering wheel, but still its stitched mouth was smiling.

It was the Raggedy Andy doll.

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(12)

## Death of a Legend

That line of smile on the doll, that curl of smugness, repelled Charlie from the window of the Nissan and sent him back across the street to his own pickup. He had intended upon his first crossing of the gravel road to bang on Dwayne's door, wake him up, and tell him they were back to square one--that he was again the number one suspect but that now a second square had been added, the shadow behind the Post Office. Charlie was too susceptible to the wiles of women to ever suspect them of anything but run-of-the-mill, pedestrian guile, the daily finagling of events with a patience and subtlety that had to be genetic. For this reason Karen had never been a suspect in his mind. He went with history, with the odds. Men were the crazy ones. True, he agreed with Prof. Henry Higgins that "men are a marvelous lot." But it was just that he met so few of the marvelous ones. They were hiding in the cities he suspected, when he thought about it at all.



Actually the *first* impulse when he saw the Raggedy Andy doll was to throw his hands up in defeat and head to the Quonset Cafe for a heavy, greasy breakfast--and pie. But that impulse was so constantly with him that he didn't recognize it and went instead with the fresh.

It was that impulse that hurried him out of town, barely affording him the time to wave a good morning to Banner and Harley Tidley who had simultaneously pulled up in front of the cafe. They had left the space in front of the window vacant. When he turned right at the end of the street, he spotted Inez briefly in his side mirror. She held a dishrag in her hand and may have been waving it at him, but he didn't have time.

*Who* would put the doll in Dwayne's car? That question nagged him as he flew south and west down county roads. *Why* it was there, Charlie knew, or feared he knew. That's why it was fortunate he had found the doll and not Dwayne.

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The gate into the pasture was still latched, so Charlie had to get out and open it. He pulled the barbed-wire contraption to one side and left it lie. There were no cattle to worry about. He was relieved to see that the only tracks in the field were those he had left on their first day to the witch house. Apparently, the ladies had not been back and, more importantly, vandals and the curious had not yet stumbled across this museum dedicated to the elderly's' need for relevance.

He found a way and drove farther than on his previous visit and had only to straddle the fence that protected the buildings from cattle when they were about. The ancient yard, now little more than dry weeds and dust, if it

had ever indeed been more--folks in the country are not given to ornamental grass--was filled with the click and hum of insects, brightened only occasionally by the protestations of a bird. Another sound may have been behind the hum, a mechanical annoyance, but Charlie wasn't positive so he squared his straw hat and paced toward the front door which again stood slightly ajar. He couldn't remember if they had closed it or if it would even stay closed.

The bill of his hat pointed down, as if he were scarcely aware of his surrounding, but his eyes swept the path in front of him and to the horizons on each side. As he eased it open, the door squeaked on its hinges and he would have been disappointed if it hadn't, but still it was unsettling. The cacophony of insects behind him hushed instantly at the rusty complaint. Only the distant skree of a hawk, complaining at some unwanted presence, remained.

After his eyes adjusted to the dark, he softly pushed the door closed behind him and leaned against it. The cellar stairwell to his right was still cluttered with abandoned toys, old shoes, and other moldering debris of impoverished lives. Missing was the Raggedy Ann doll Grover had thrown atop the pile. Charlie had particularly looked for those black eyes and, not finding them, reached for the revolver at his side.

He only glanced into the kitchen. It remained as before, the same painting, the same ancient filth. The living room which he hadn't bothered with on his previous visit was bare. The floorboards looked salvageable but not the termite-eaten base board. Miraculously, except that the house couldn't be seen from the road, the windows were still unbroken.

The antelope leg remained at the foot of the stairs, though it had been moved and poked part way through the bannister supports. Charlie was sure he, Dwayne, and Grover had not left it in that position. As he rose cautiously up the stairs, his revolver preceding him and his lips moving to the words of some bawdy chant, the building groaned under his weight. It was the only sound he heard. Wind outside would have been a relief. The renewal of the insects' chorus would have been as soothing as Samuel Barber's *Addigo for Strings*. He paused, but the only sound to reach his ears was his breathing. When he stilled his lungs, he imagined he could hear the silence of heat rising in an old building. It may have come from his dripping forehead, back, and shoulders. Even so, he was certain that if he blew his breath into the passage before him it would condense into a visible cloud. His revolver, already extended into that space, felt cold. It reminded him of the chill he felt when he reached into a freezer case to grab a Fat Boy ice cream sandwich.

At the top of the stairs he eased the first door open and looked about. It hadn't changed from his last visit. More cautious now, knowing that if someone were in the old house he had to be waiting in the next room with the animal parts, Charlie kicked the door open and danced out of the way of any bullets that might fly. The only sound, after the reverberations caused by the door slamming against the wall, was that of bits of plaster falling from the ceiling. When its rain ceased, Charlie was alone with his breath and his revolver.

With one giant step he moved across the doorway and to the other side. He saw nothing unexpected as he passed. When he moved again it

was with his gun as a guide. Over its sights he surveyed the walls of the room, found nothing meriting concern, and returned it to its holster.

The animal parts, more desiccated and as a result less smelly, still adorned the wall to his left. The clean spot on the window in front of him that he had caused with the heel of his hand that first day let in a beam of welcome light. Missing was the Raggedy Andy doll that had been suspended from the ceiling and impaled to the wall on his right. In its place was a cord, also hanging from the ceiling and possibly tied to a rafter. At the end of the cord was a small, square piece of cardboard. The lettering on it had been cut from a magazine, and, because the print was small, Charlie had to search his inside breast pocket for his reading glasses.

With them on, the close-up world became clear. The card was legible. *To see the surprise above, it read, pull the string.* Charlie was fingering the piece of cardboard carefully when someone outside yelled.

"Hello, the house."

\*\*\*\*

Though it was getting late for a school teacher when Charlie dropped him at his house in Sligo after the fiasco out at three tanks, Dwayne didn't feel sleepy. Additionally, since he was no longer a teacher, the deliciousness of a late night on a school night was not to be wasted.

Knowing there was only one person in Sligo who could keep his secret--and he was dying to tell about the witches in spite of Charlie's pleading--he jogged over to the teacherage and knocked on Karen's door. "Let's go to Cheyenne for supper or something. If nothing else we can have pie at that place out east of town, Shari's."

She wasn't dressed for it, but agreed with a weary smile that displayed a lack of eagerness. "I don't see you at all, and then when I do see you it's a full moon. What are you after, blood or sex?"

"The pie first, anyway."

With Ricky between them, they drove to Cheyenne in Dwayne's car and ate pie and drank coffee while Dwyane told his tale of the witches. Karen was interested, amazed actually. "That hardly sounds like the old women I've seen at the grocery," she had said. "I wouldn't believe it if you didn't seem so serious--and silly." Even so, something else occupied her mind. Much of the time Dwayne spoke she stared out the restaurant window at the mowed lawn and pine trees, a visual relief from Sligo. On the way home their energy level waned in spite of the full moon and coffee. Neither had the energy to start a conversation but the silence didn't seem strained because the moonlit prairie invited quiet contemplation, or just a tranquil numbness.

"I'd better warn you that my ex-husband will be by sometime near the end of school," Karen informed him at her door. "In a week or less. Visiting rights," she explained.

Dwayne heard, but acted as if he didn't care. After a perfunctory kiss he excused himself, went home to bed and spent the next hour counting and re-counting miller moths as they arranged themselves into constellations on his bedroom ceiling. Coffee and witches, he realized, do not make for an early night.

Why he awoke when he did in the morning was one of those mysteries of consciousness that give comfort to those who fear death. One instant he

is utterly, utterly without existence. There is no Earth, no Milky Way, no Cosmos, no Mind of God. There is only a non-color, non-amorphous blackness that does not even exist itself. There is nothing and has been nothing to compare nothingness to. The next instant his eyes were open, his mind was alert and eager, and his legs had left him standing next to his bed without his having commanded them. Had he died in the night, he wouldn't have known it and would have felt cheated at missing such an event.

When he went to his east window and ducked to avoid the half-pulled blind, he saw a cluster of men standing in the road in front of the cafe. They surrounded a prone figure. Hurriedly, Dwayne pulled on his clothes and slammed out his front door. His first thought was to take his car, but after opening the door he decided it would be quicker, and wiser, to walk the distance to the cafe.

He was closing the door when he saw the doll and picked it up. Confused--knowing where it came from but still confused--he carried it with him as he walked briskly to the cafe. His original intent had been to investigate the man lying in the street, but now the doll consumed his mind. He had to find Charlie and if he wasn't at the cafe Inez would have a fair idea where he was.

"Damnedest thing," Wiley directed Dwayne's attention to the body in the road. "Damnedest thing."

"What's the matter?" he asked out of politeness, wanting to get away and into the cafe. When he got closer, he saw that it was Banner who was lying at the rear of his pickup.

"His dead dog," Wiley pointed to the pooch curled up next to the minnow bucket in the back. "Look! It's Banner's dead dog."

"I can see. I'm sorry."

"But that ain't the half of it," brother Harley explained. "We buried that dog days ago. It choked on a rag so we buried it on the banks of Crow Creek out near the old stone barn."

More eager than ever to get into the cafe, Dwayne chose his words carefully. "Then how'd it get there?" he asked. The finger he used to point with wasn't as spontaneous as he had hoped.

"Ain't it obvious," Wiley pointed to the clean and well-groomed body. "It's a miracle. A miracle. That's what it is. The little dog loved Banner so much it crawled out of its grave to be back with him. Probably floated through the air in the night."

Still cautious, Dwayne asked: "A dead dog did that?"

"You don't think we buried a live one, do you?" Harley challenged.

Dwayne excused himself and went into the cafe. The men were so busy with their miracle that they didn't even notice the doll he was carrying. One of the men did say, however, that the dead dog's journey was so unusual that they should call one of the television shows that deal with such miracles. "This is definitely one for the books," the voice said. "And for television," said another.

"Have you seen Charlie this morning?" Dwayne yelled to Inez as soon as he ducked into the cafe from the grocery side. "I have to see him, fast." He held up the doll but didn't know why.

Inez looked at it. "I thought that Crowley girl was keeping better care of you than that. Big boy like you shouldn't need dolls." Even when she tried to be cheery Inez sounded curt. Maybe it was her idea of droll.

"No, I really have to find him. It has to do with this." He showed her the doll again before leaning it against the cash register. "It's an emergency."

"Maybe you are right," Inez paused in her cleaning and looked at him. This time he could see concern. "I saw him go by twice this morning without stopping. That's not like him, but I don't know where he's off to. Why don't you try the sub-station?"

Dwayne hesitated.

"It's a toll-free call," she explained, almost as an order, and indicated the phone near the bathroom door. "The number's above it."

Kandi's voice at the sub-station sang with delight when asked Charlie's whereabouts. "Let's see. Where would Charlie be? If this was Monday, I'd say he was at Rock Port having Rocky Mountain oyster sandwiches and the matching soup," she said, "but it's not Monday is it? Or is it?"

"I've forgotten the day myself, Kandi, but it's not Monday."

"If it was Tuesday, it's a sure bet he'd be down at the cafe in Raymer. All you can eat spaghetti in Raymer on Tuesdays," she explained, "and the liquor store's in the same building. He likes to look at the Dempster windmills they got there, as well."

"I know he eats," Dwayne was exasperated, "but where is he?"

"If this was the first or fourth Wednesday of the month," she continued, "you'd be able to find him at Snyder. They've a new Mexican restaurant



there, and all-you-can-drink draft beer comes with the *Plato Fantastico*, a losing proposition when Charlie shows up." She stopped for an instant to brag. "Do I know my quarry, or what?"

Dwayne nearly yelled into the phone. "This is not Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday. This is--" But he couldn't think at the moment because of the anger she was causing.

"Well if it's Friday, then, I couldn't say for certain. Fridays there's a lot of good eats all over the state. He goes to Pine Bluffs up in Wyoming mostly, but that's later in the evening. "But," she brightened. "If this was Thursday, I'd know in a minute where he was--Hereford. Biggest chili size in the West."

*Pa-leez*, Kandi."

"Now this isn't December 16 or March 2, is it?"

"No!" he yelled.

"Well, if it was, he always goes to visit the grave of some writer in Fort Morgan. I don't know who, but that's what he always says. Just between you and I, though, I think he just uses it as an excuse to go on down to The Drovers in Brush and eat. He says it's a place where a man can wear a new hat and still feel comfortable."

"Then you don't know where he is?"

"Not off hand, I don't, but if he drops in I'll tell him you called."

"Kandi? You're a pain in the ass."

"That's polite to what Charlie always says," she sang and rang off.

Dwayne shook his head at Inez. She was behind the cold case making a sandwich for Bode Road. Though she didn't say anything, they

exchanged a look of concern. Bode wanted to talk about the ghost that was still haunting his new house--it was whistling now--, but Dwayne put him off and left.

When he got back to his yard, he looked at his car and decided to go out to the witches' house alone. He didn't know who had placed the doll in his car or why. Perhaps, he reasoned, it was a secret message from Charlie. A message only he would understand. After all, how many people knew about the house. Just he, Charlie, and Grover. And, after he thought about it, all the ladies who had been there. But, he decided, only Charlie and Grover knew *he* had been there.

It was a distance to the house, but Dwayne made it even longer by not knowing the way. He drove miles before he finally saw the stone well that had stood in front of the old White General Store. When he finally got to the gate that opened into the prairie, he saw that it was open. Knowing that someone was probably already at the house, he pulled his car through the opening and parked. Instead of driving as Charlie had done, he ran the quarter mile across the prairie and jumped the three strands of barbed wire that separated it from the wheat. The fence immediately in front of the house brought him up short because he hadn't been looking for it. His attention was drawn to Charlie's Jeep pickup parked to the right. Obviously, he had found a second gate in order to get across the wheat.

Still on the other side of the fence, Dwayne looked at the house. Beware the barn owl, he told himself as he straddled the wire and walked slowly toward the slightly opened door. Remembering Charlie's actions, he stopped to look at the tracks on the ground. The earth had dried under the

recent winds. Even the deeply embedded tracks of the old women were just barely visible. Fresh tracks were there, however. What he thought to be fresh. They were Charlie's he hoped, but he had to make sure.

"Hello, the house," he called and waited for an answer.

Nothing from the house, but in the distance he thought he heard a dirt bike. As it faded he started to search the ground for a weapon. A three-foot stick, part of a window frame that had weathered off or been ripped off, lay nearby and he tested its effectiveness with his hands. One end of the stick was broad, so he placed that in his palm. With the pointed end, he poked the door and pushed it completely open.

He could see through to the kitchen, but he saw nothing unusual. The heart and arrow were unchanged. The only alteration he saw was that the antelope leg had been pushed to the right of the stairs and through the bars. Someone, he reasoned, had pushed it aside rather than step over it. Probably Charlie.

Quickly advancing, his weapon preceding him, he inspected the kitchen and the living room. Nothing. That left the two bedrooms upstairs.

As he moved toward the first step, he noticed how quiet it was. The door behind him was open, but none of the usual prairie sounds entered. Even the wind was still. The first step squeaked loudly as if he were in a cheap horror movie. So did the second and the third. When he was high enough to see the landing and see that it was empty, he switched his stick to his left hand and placed much of his weight on the banister. This stopped some of the creaking.

The first bedroom door was squarely open, and Dwayne could see the entire room. What portion wasn't visible through the door was visible through the crack between the door and the frame. It was still cluttered with torn religious tracts.

The door to the other bedroom was only slightly ajar. Moving stealthily closer, he pushed it gently with his palm. As it opened slowly, he received his second view of the witch wall. The parts were still there but were no longer so frightening. Most of the miller moths had disappeared to the mountains, and the heads and tongues and tails didn't seem so alive as before.

Just as he eased the door open a little farther, a voice exploded the silence.

"Hello, the house. You in there, Dwayne."

Dwayne recognized the voice. It was Grover's. He sounded as if he was directly outside that bedroom window looking up.

"Is that you, Dwayne? It's me--Grover."

"It's me," Dwayne called back, relieved to find a companion. He went to the window and looked out the circle Charlie had cleaned with his fist that Monday. "I'm up here," he looked down. Grover had his pistol out and was looking up at the window. It was obvious he couldn't see Dwayne for the glare off the glass.

"I'll be right up," he called, but stopped to look over his shoulder. From a distance, he could hear the sound of an engine. Perhaps a motorcycle or a dirt bike. "Have you seen Charlie?"

As Grover spoke, Dwayne noticed out of the corner of his right eye a large object against the wall. Looking over, he saw Charlie pinned to the wall by a six-foot harpoon. His hat was off, and his tongue extended from his mouth comically.

Dwayne looked back out the cleaned portion of the window and called to Grover. "Charlie's dead," he called.

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## The Planting

"Dead?" Grover yelled as he ran up the stairs.

"Well," Dwayne hedged, "he's as dead to polite society as he's always been."

"Hey, hey. Cut me some slack," another voice sounded in the room, causing Grover to pause at the top of the stairs. "Just let me get my pants down and I'll show you some polite society."

Grover looked in the door to find Charlie pretending to hang from the wall by a spear between his right arm and his body.

Grover holstered his gun and frowned at Charlie's cocked head and lolling tongue. "To bad about the miss," he quipped. "A few more inches to the right and the Sheriff could have gone to bed tonight a happy man."

Charlie took his arm from around the spear and retrieved his hat from the floor. "Not bad, Grover," Charlie considered the prospect of his own death, "not bad at all. It could give me a rest and make us all happy, the sheriff, too, at least until the resurrection."

"Whose resurrection?" Dwayne asked.

"Mine, but don't go gettin' biblical on me. I don't like time lines. No, what I got in mind is a little disappearance. That rest I've been after. Maybe a chance to see if I can chase down the elusive bottle of Grapette. Then, too, I could use the time and the room. Been gettin' mighty close out here on the prairie of late."

Dwayne, thinking logically, asked, "But what good would a vacation do us?"

Grover liked the idea. "I could sell this, Charlie. I have a hunch the Sheriff might jump at the chance to bury you, even if it is just an empty coffin and even if it's for a short time only. Especially if I can convince him that I can solve the case in your absence. That would give him ammunition to get rid of you. Prove you're really ineffective."

Charlie looked at the ironed-in academy pleats extending down from the front pockets of Grover's uniform shirt and into his pleated pants. He knew the pleats had mates on the back as well. "I kind of had in mind

directing you two from the background. Not stepping aside to have my throat slit. My death could give me a little space to work with. Let me watch without being seen."

"I didn't have slitting your throat in mind, Charlie. I don't want to be stationed out here. That's just the selling point I'd give the Sheriff. Tell him your death was *your* idea and when it backfired, well. . ."

Charlie sounded skeptical. "Well, give it a try, but meantime the both of you have to admit someone's watchin' us. Someone knows our moves. If it did nothing else, this little booby trap proves that. I figure if I'm dead I can maybe watch you honyocks from a distance and keep the both of you out of trouble."

"Why did the person who set the booby trap for you put the Raggedy Andy doll in my car?" Dwayne asked.

"He didn't," Charlie explained. "That was me. I found it in my pickup when I came down from Miss Teller's and put it in your car so you'd know where I was. Didn't want to wake you, seein' as how you're a civilian and all."

"That doll gets around," Grover said. "It was sitting against the cash register when I went into the cafe this morning. Inez told me Dwayne left it, so I knew where to head."

Charlie nodded at the efficacy of the doll. "It worked perfectly," Charlie said, knowing that in its most important mission it had failed. "Got us all here, but it won't work for always. Tell you what. If we don't meet now and then, or if we need to meet or if I need to give you some directions, I'll call

Dwayne's place and leave a message on his answering machine. That way I won't have to try to chase you all over this end of the state."

The idea was fine with Dwayne. "But how are you going to get around? Everyone knows your Jeep."

Charlie handed him the keys. "Now give me your car keys. I'll use yours. You'll use mine. No one would believe I would tolerate letting some teacher drive my rig if I were still alive." Turning to Grover, he asked, "Is your county car up by the road?" Grover nodded. "Then let's all try to get to my Jeep without being seen. Then we can split up. Give me some time to get up north before you announce my death. Don't make it too gory. Last thing we need is to draw too much attention to this end of the county."

"What about this?" Grover pointed to the harpoon in the wall and the hole in the ceiling from which it had shot.

"The mechanism is up above the plaster." As Charlie spoke he craned his neck to follow the twine attached to the cardboard sign. "I suppose the crime boys will have fun crawling up there to try and find prints. If they come up with anything you'll be sure to let me know. I suspect they'll come up empty, though."

Still staring up into the darkness of the shallow attic, Charlie began to loosen his belt and to drop his pants. "One good thing about having to see Miss Teller is that I finally got around to getting some clean underwear. Had to bang on some doors late last night in Kimball to do it, but they was glad to help."

"But--" Dwayne wanted to protest. Seeing Charlie undress made him uncomfortable.



"Here now," Charlie handed Grover the white boxers. "I'll have the undershirt in a jiff." When both items were finally folded and stacked atop Grover's well-scrubbed palms, Charlie turned one leg of the boxers up to show a sticker. "I want this left on when you deliver these to the sheriff. There's no way that I'm gonna let that sheriff say I died in a dirty pair of undershorts. And he would, too, if he could."

Not knowing whether Charlie was serious or was just showing off, Grover accepted the shorts and brought them closer to his eyes to read the sticker.

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INSPECTED BY

MILDRED

The re-clothed Charlie tapped a finger on the label. "And make sure the shorts are on the top of the pile and folded so that this is out. If there's a photographer around, get him to shoot a picture."

"I never figured you for a vain man, Charlie," Grover uttered as he led the procession down the steps to the still open front door. "Do you think it'll hurt your image if Dwayne washes your Jeep before he starts driving it around?"

Charlie harrumped without meaning, but at the landing he pinched Grover's starched shirt sleeve and held him back to allow Dwayne to step outside first. "Keep a close eye on Dwayne," he spoke low to Grover. "I found that doll in *his* car this morning. That harpoon was meant for *him*."

Charlie was the last out of the gate when they reached the county road. The others waited in their cars while he pulled the wire gate to the latch post and secured it. "Now remember," he yelled at the heads sticking out of the windows. "The two of you are in charge of my funeral.

"Keep it low key," he yelled.

"And above all, keep it *tasteful*."

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Four mornings after the announcement of Charlie's death the main street of Sligo was filled with satellite dishes and broadcast trucks from all the major networks and CNN. Regional interests were represented also. The equipment was set up on the newly mowed clover surrounding the deserted implement company building across from the cafe, Wiley's property, and he was collecting rent, the closest he had come to honest income since the government accepted his land for the CRP program and began paying him to do nothing--which he excelled at.

To the east and far beyond the old Railroad Depot Museum, were horses, horses, and yet more horses. Almost no equestrian in the state had passed up the opportunity to ride across the prairie. The dismounted riders clustered in knots of conversation while their horses radiated in circles around them like petals on a flower. On private property just south of the horses was a battalion of motorcycles. Their charges either walked stiffly up and down the rows of machines, squeaking of leather, or stood beside their mounts polishing their helmets. The cyclists who did not belong to sanctioned groups wrung the sweat from their headbands. Like the equestrians, they couldn't miss the opportunity to display their

renegade power and to rev their near-mufflerless engines in something other than the canyons of a city.

Limousines, both black and white, trailed from in front of the Post Office all the way back to the school. Fifteen buses--which had brought marching bands from Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Kansas--stretched beyond the limousines to the bend in the road a quarter mile to the west. The town had opened the rodeo grounds to tourists, and the entire parking area was filled with the RV's and tents of people who hoped to gain entrance to the Funeral of the Century, as CNN was calling it, not yet comfortable with their pronunciation of *millennium*. Even in Briggsdale, 20 miles south, the Forest Service had been forced to close the Crow Creek Campground because of crowding.

One of the television personalities had corralled Banner Tidley--probably because of his dress--and was waiting for his cue before beginning the interview. Behind the pair was the usual collection of Sligoans, including Wiley and Harley, both wearing black arm bands, but not for Charlie. After the funeral they were to help film a documentary on the struggle of a dead dog to return to its beloved master.

"In five, Willard," a man behind the camera cautioned the large, jovial, skin-pated interviewer. "Now," the technician mouthed silently and pointed.

"It's a sad occasion that brings us to these northern Colorado plains today," he told the camera. "The death of a living legend. The death of a man who was not only large in body but large in courage. The death of the man who helped tame this section of the West, the man who saw the range

wars and squashed them almost singled-handedly. That man was Charlie Waggles."

The network researchers had chronicled the wrong Charlie Waggles, his grandfather, but the crowd of locals gathered around the camera didn't notice or just naturally assumed he *had* done it. Why not? He'd done everything else.

"And with me this morning is a friend of Charlie Waggles, one Banner Tidey."

"That's *Tidley*," Banner corrected. "As in *Tiddlywinks*."

"Or as in *Diddly Squat*," added a voice from the back of the crowd. Willard ignored it.

"Say, Banner, before we went on the air you told me you were probably Charlie's best friend. Is that right?" Banner nodded and looked seriously at the camera. He was wearing his usual, a red baseball cap with ear flaps and a blue quilted ski jacket with black arm band. Next to his Neanderthal costume, this was his formal wear.

"Then," Willard continued, "you and Charlie were probably pretty close."

"I didn't say that," Banner replied, and the crowd behind him laughed.

Willard smiled at the camera but with a look obviously intended for the anchors sitting comfortably on their couches back in New York City. "Well then, is there anything about Charlie, any little remembrance you'd like to share with our viewers?"

Banner stared into the lens and didn't respond.

"No anecdote or pet saying Charlie often used?" Willard had to nudge him.

"There is one," Banner awoke, causing Willard's smile to become less strained. "There was a saying Charlie used to say."

When the silence grew, Willard encouraged, "And what was that?"

"Charlie used to say that man was at a disadvantage when it came to women because Nature had given him only one end to work with." He pointed to his own head to show what end he meant."

"Yes?" Willard looked at the camera and smiled nervously.

"Women," Banner continued, "were given two ends to work with."

Willard's nervous smile grew. "How's that?"

"Well, Charlie said it was okay even if women did have two ends to work with because he'd never known one to use one end well or the other end wisely." There was a long pause that even Willard failed to fill. "He didn't say which was which," Banner explained, "but I suspect if he was here he could tell you."

Willard mopped the perspiration from the top of his head with a handkerchief. "We'll be back with the weather after these words, followed by the funeral." When the camera indicated that he could quit smiling, he glared at Banner as he was ushered back into the cafe, a local hero.

Another network had done better and collared Colorado's governor. She stood with her chin lifted to de-emphasize the turkey flesh at her throat. Her gray, beehive hairdo pointed back at the Quonset Grocery.

"Yes," she admitted, "I had occasion to meet Deputy Waggles in his law enforcement capacity."

"You mean *Sheriff* Waggles, don't you, Governor?" the reporter asked. He smiled kindly at the governor's accidental demotion of the legendary sheriff.

"No I do not," she spoke crisply. "I encountered *Deputy* Waggles while en route to Sterling along Colorado 14. He stopped my limousine and asked if he could have my *Colorado* license plate when I was finished with it."

"And did he get it?"

She looked down the street but couldn't see her limousine because of the television trucks in the way. "It is still on my car," she gasped and tilted her head back even more.

"Then, I take it, that was the end of the affair."

"Not quite. While en route to Sterling, I took the opportunity to write a personal note to the *true* sheriff of Weld County. I advised him that if the vehicle Deputy Waggles was driving was truly a county vehicle, it should be washed occasionally. Barring that, the deputy's hands. And barring that, the filth, at least, could be removed from beneath his fingernails."

The reporter assumed the story was some elaborate private joke. "So if you didn't know the sheriff personally, then you are here today to help lay to rest one of Colorado's finest."

The governor's nostrils flared, her already brightly rouged cheeks flashed hectic, and she strode off in the direction of her air-conditioned limousine.

The state's local television news teams had to settle for lesser lights. A station out of Fort Collins was taping interviews with high school friends of the dead girl and students who had known the sheriff.

"And you are?" the interviewer, little more than a teenager himself, asked.

"Randy Bedoy. I dated Linda Gillespie, the dead girl," he explained. "And I've talked with Waggles several times."

"How did he strike you?"

"We didn't always get along, you know. But I guess he was a fair man."

Randy was the reporter's twelfth interview. Thus far he hadn't gotten one usable quote or even one slightly original thought or insight--not even a repeat of something a parent might have said. As Randy passed on, the reporter looked to the next student in line, a giggling girl who was watching Randy depart. "Isn't he just the berries," she choked and snorted through her nose.

The reporter watched her clean her face with the back of her hand. "Let's pack up," he said, turning to his cameraman.

The funeral service itself was to be held in the Quonset Cafe. Its tables had been removed and stacked in the rear. Folding chairs from the community centers in Sligo, Hereford, and Briggsdale took their places. Sligo's were strangely unavailable. When Dwayne entered, the cafe was nearly empty as most of the people were still outside watching the live interviews. Only the undertaker, the hired preacher, and Inez were present.

But there was another presence--Charlie's coffin. It looked shockingly cheap and, except for its extra-large size, had probably been the least expensive on display. The casket had been placed at the far end of the cold counter and at a right angle to it. The hired minister and the undertaker stood behind it and directly in front of the bathroom door out of which Charlie had so often stared wistfully.

Inez, in a dress Dwayne hadn't seen before, one that tried to be dressy but sadly wasn't, fussed over the cutting board behind the cold counter. The undertaker and preacher were in animated, but silent, conversation.

When the undertaker left the hired preacher and walked around the casket, Dwayne approached him. "Why couldn't we have gotten one of the two churches in town?"

"I myself could not tell you," he looked furtively about while trying to loosen his high collar, "but since it is general knowledge--on every lip it would seem--I see no harm. The minister and Sheriff Waggles were not on the best of terms, I am told. In fact," he went on unnecessarily, and deliciously, "it has something to do with a remark the sheriff made about the minister's wife."

The undertaker's eyes sparkled coldly and Dwayne had only to encourage him with a nod.

"I myself would not say," he wagged a tattle-tale finger in front of his lips, "but since it is common knowledge--" He looked around again and prepared his lips with a moistening tongue. "The sheriff told the minister that his wife walked as if she had accidentally squatted over a croquet stake when she was sixteen and was still enjoying the ride." Looking



pleased with himself, the undertaker straightened his carriage by tugging at the bottom of his black suit jacket.

Dwayne had heard the story several times and had only recently learned that it was apocryphal. It was just Charlie's lifestyle in general, nothing in particular, that put off the minister. The pastor at the other church did not live in town and only visited the community every other week.

"Who," Dwayne asked, "made the final decisions about all this stuff? Grover and I only said to *handle it*." He indicated not only the folding chairs and hired minister, but the cold buffet lunch as well. It had been brought in by a caterer from Cheyenne.

"Sheriff Waggles has a sister, it turns out. She relieved us of all the arrangements," he said coolly. "Or rather hired someone," he corrected himself.

"Oh?" Dwayne was interested. "Where is she?"

The undertaker smirked to himself. "She herself," he said out the side of his mouth, "is not in attendance."

While Dwayne considered this and waited for the mourners to file into the cafe, he went to the lunch counter and sorted through the display of newspapers it held. **Charlie Waggles: Dead**, proclaimed a dated copy of the *Denver Rocky Mountain News*. **Waggles Buried Today**, blared the *Denver Post*. It had a rider across the top of the headline which read, "But the Legend Lives On." One of the stacked, smaller headlines below the main headline asked the question: "Victim of Ritual Sacrifice?"

"Let's get a good seat," a voice behind him said, and Dwayne turned to see the Tidley brothers and Wiley enter.

Now that the live interviews had ended, the service could begin. When it got as quiet as it was going to get in the cafe--not too quiet considering the cameras and sound mikes and lights--the hired preacher stood up from behind Charlie's casket and cleared his throat.

"Who's he?" Harley asked from his seat directly in front of the casket. When he was silenced with a thump to his noggin from Miss Teller, who sat directly behind him, the minister began.

For the most part it was a canned sermon, one he had delivered thousands of times at forty-five dollars a shot, but today he was getting more--mileage.

It didn't take long before the interests of the boys in front of the coffin flagged, and they looked hungrily at the buffet stacked on card tables along the west wall. They looked at the circular trays of sliced meats, each slice rolled and impaled with a cellophane-topped toothpick. They ogled the piles of olives, both black and green. They saw the peppers and wondered if they were hot or mild. The mock crab interested them because--though they had seined many crawdads out of the shallow area water holes--they had never seen such a creature. The breads--white, black, and brown, and some sprinkled with seeds--were foreign to them. They would have drooled in the direction of the buffet until the end of the service had not some unfortunate person behind them passed gas more audibly than he had intended.

"There's a kiss for you, Charlie," a voice further back in the crowd responded by way of benediction.

Wiley stood up for a better look. "Who did that?" he asked the sea of heads toward the back. A hundred fingers pointed in all directions. Wiley was intent on finding the culprit and congratulating him when he was pulled down by the librarians, Phyllis and Marsha, from their second row seats.

The minister, wondering if he could squeeze more money out of the undertaker, ignored the commotion. He sailed smoothly into Charlie's legendary qualities and noted that, as the sheriff had no doubt wished, he had died with his boots on.

"Boots?" Harley leaned across Banner and looked seriously at Wiley. "Charlie didn't wear no boots."

"He was speaking *metaphorically*," Miss Teller said, emphasizing the word, but the boys looked at her dumbly.

"Exactly," Wiley snapped his fingers, bolstered by Miss Teller's suspicion. "Charlie hasn't worn boots in years. I bet this is another one of his jokes, don't you?"

Banner didn't rotate his head in time to see his brother shrug his shoulders.

"Say, Bode," Wiley ignored the murmuring of the hired preacher and stood up. "How many times does this make that we've buried Charlie?"

"Beats me," came a voice from the back, "but this is the first time I remember having a body." The men operating the extension mikes for the various television crews were going crazy trying to catch every word and their bombs clashed above the heads of the mourners like pole axes.

"But *do* we have a body?" Harley was now standing. "I didn't go to the viewing. Did anyone else here go to Ault for the viewing?"

"Why go?" someone in back asked. "It was closed casket and I can get a good enough look at the casket from here."

"I'm with you fellows," Bode said from the back and started dividing the mourners on his way to the casket. "I'll bet a month of my pay against a year of Wiley's that there ain't a body in that box."

"If you're giving even money to anyone else, I'm in," someone countered.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the undertaker interceded, shielding his body from the boys with his embalmed white, well-washed palms. "I can assure you that Sheriff Waggles is indeed in the coffin. His body was placed in its final rest by the county coroner and his assistants. I have a certificate attesting to such."

"Says you," Wiley turned to the coffin. "I'm going to make certain. This looks like another one of Charlie's tricks, to me."

Wiley, Harley, and Bode brushed the undertaker aside and groped about the coffin looking for a handle to open it by. "I know this is all a joke," Wiley assured the others as they stooped to find hidden buttons that, when pushed, would cause the lid to pop open."

Nearly unheard in the uproar was a ringing telephone.

"But this funeral is too big," Harley began to wonder. "They wouldn't let him get away with this if there wasn't a body."

"You know how the sheriff hates Charlie," Bode countered. "You put him and the governor together and they'd put up with anything just to get

shut of Charlie for a couple of months. Besides, feel the weight of this thing."

They tried to heft it between the four of them and failed. "Could be bricks," Harley reasoned.

The telephone continued to ring.

"Could be sand," Wiley added.

"And it could be Charlie." Bode was beginning to doubt his doubts.

They considered the problem while cameramen stood on the chairs they had vacated and recorded the conference. "If you did the embalming," Wiley eyed the undertaker, "what's Charlie wearing?"

Behind the cold counter, Inez picked up the phone and shielded her ear from the commotion.

"A lime green leisure suit," he said and immediately held his palms up to show he had no choice in the matter. "His sister found it in a thrift store in Commerce City and brought it to me. The coroner wanted something else but we could find nothing he owned that didn't have the name Big Mac on it."

Harley wasn't convinced. "She found a leisure suit big enough for Charlie?"

To the right of the coffin Inez waved her arms in an effort to attract Dwayne's attention. She was finally successful.

"Not quite," the undertaker admitted. "It had to be split down the back, but then that is done with all of them. The pant legs would extend only slightly below the knees, the coroner said, but who opens the lower half of

a coffin during a viewing and a viewing wasn't permitted anyway, owing to the manner of death."

"The preacher here said something about boots," accused Wiley. "Charlie didn't own any. Never wore them."

"All his sister brought in were some old high-topped work shoes. We-- that is I--opted not to send them along on his eternal voyage."

"No shoes?"

The undertaker could feel the heat of the television lights on his already flushed face.

"What if there's cactus?" Banner called. Brother Harley tried to silence him, but Banner insisted that cactus was a definite possibility.

Fortunately for the undertaker, but to the disappointment of the national television audience, someone in the room wished to continue the service.

Crack, crack, crack, crack. The four men at the coffin threw their hands over their heads to fend off blows from Miss Teller. She had borrowed a cane from Dorothy Abroghast who sat behind her.

"For shame," she scolded. "Now return to your seats this instant." Her threatening look and her deserved reputation were enough to cause them to contritely comply. When they were in their seats, and sheepishly looking around, she spoke to the hired preacher. "You may continue."

When Inez handed Dwayne the phone, she glared at him. "What's going on here?"

Dwayne didn't answer. He didn't understand her question.

"You can hide that voice behind a thousand handkerchiefs," she pointed to the hand set, "but when the voice asks if he can *have a look at Dwayne just this wunst*, I don't have to guess twice who it is."

Caught, Dwayne could only shrug. "Guess a snake can't still its rattles," he reddened as he put the phone to his ear. "I thought you were only going to call my home phone?" he said.

"What are you doing to me?" The voice was frantic. "I said simple, quiet, low key. You call *this* simple, quiet, low key?"

"Your sister took over."

The long silence at the other end was broken when Charlie breathed. "I might have guessed. Saved her from a no good Lothario when she was a teenager and she's never forgiven me."

"If you saved her what's the problem?"

"The problem is she looks like *me*. It turned out to be her only shot at marriage. Women ain't like you and me, Dwayne. They'd rather be married a week and left with an unwanted kid than live the rest of their lives as spinsters. Spinsters don't have it as easy as we foot loose bachelors," he explained.

While Dwayne listened to Charlie's troubles, the hired preacher almost bolted the room and would have if he hadn't been bathed in television lights. This funeral--and he knew it reluctantly--was the only fifteen minutes of fame he would be allotted in this life. Even so, his body and voice shook when he returned to his lectern, the coffin.

He had chosen the last part of his sermon to detail some of the conflicting personalities that had been Charlie. He told of the time Charlie

had jacked the back wheels of Sarah Withrobe's car off the ground as a joke so that it wouldn't move. Then he contrasted that incident with the time Charlie lost a little toe to frostbite when he braved a blizzard to put chains on all four wheels of his vehicle so he could rush that same Sarah Withrobe to the hospital. "He was a man hard to hate," the preacher said, "and even harder to love."

It was at this juncture that he made his fatal mistake. He said the words *and so in conclusion*--those words dear to the ears of listeners whether the occasion be political, civic, religious, or scholarly. What he said was, "And so, in conclusion, it is obvious that the elements were so mixed in Charlie Waggles that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, This was a--"

Folding chairs clattered to the floor as men, women, and children clambered over each other to get to the buffet tables. Whatever the preacher had said was drowned out by the swilling din.

"Look at that," Charlie cried into Dwayne's ear. "Not only it is live, it'll be on every television screen in the world before this night is over. And I mean *every* television screen."

Charlie was in a motel in Alliance, Nebraska, trying, as he told Grover, to do a little, uninterrupted research on hyperbaric medicine. "From what I can learn," he said, "Linda didn't die immediately. If she had been found earlier and put into a hyperbaric chamber, the air bubbles that killed her might have been forced out of her blood system."

Karen slid in next to Dwayne by the phone and placed a hand familiarly, but discretely, on his thigh. "Isn't this awful," she whispered. She



didn't know who was on the other end of the line. Dwayne's eyes showed that he was listening to her, as well as to the phone, and for her to continue. "Have you seen Bob White?" she asked. "His mother called *me* today. How she got my number or knew about me I don't know. But she's worried."

Dwayne put his hand over the mouthpiece. "How long has he been missing?"

"As near as I or his mother can figure, since the day of Charlie's death. I went over to his trailer and his pickup and dirt bike are both missing. I couldn't get inside to see if his clothes and things were still there."

Still looking into her eyes, Dwayne slid his hand from the mouthpiece. "I've just learned that Bob White, the math teacher, has been missing since *Charlie's* death." He accented the word to let Charlie know he couldn't talk openly.

"Good lord," Charlie breathed into the phone. "He wasn't on my short list. Weird, yes, but I didn't figure him for it. But there was that other shadow behind the Post Office watching Karen watch you the night Linda went into your place."

"What?" He spoke so loudly Karen stopped watching the boys at the buffet tables, took her hand from his thigh, and put two fingers to her lower lip. She almost looked as if she expected to be hit. She definitely looked as if she had been accused of something.

"Don't blow our cover," Charlie cautioned. "I just saw you and Karen on television. Yes, she saw Linda go in. I figure that's why she gave you an alibi. Tryin' to protect your worthless hide."

Charlie," he said and then turned to make sure Karen hadn't heard him, "I'm more than a little confused. This means you know I lied to you."

"Nothing to be confused about. You didn't exactly lie to me that day at the tank. You just didn't *answer*. Besides, it's all going to be simple as pie. Piece of cake."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're all simple, Dwayne. Once we get this one straightened out we'll wonder why we didn't see it all along. Anyway, go after this Bob White thing. See what you can find out. Remember, we heard motor bikes both times we were out at the witch house. Someone beside us was in the neighborhood."

"I'll get Grover and we'll get right on it."

"Fine, I'll leave a number where I can be reached if I'm able to. Otherwise, I'll just leave you messages. Right now I have to contact some professor at Duke University if I can. The hyperbaric medicine thing. I understand he also gives lectures to amateur divers somewhere in the Caribbean, Bonaire or something."

"You work your end. We'll work ours."

"But before you hang up, one question. Did you or Grover happen to take that other doll that was on the cellar steps? The Raggedy *Ann*?"

"No. Why?"

"Something seems uncommon odd, so you watch your step," Charlie cautioned and hung up.

Dwayne and Karen went to the window to watch the non-Sligoans leave for the burial. The residents pulled the stacked tables down from in

back of the cafe and were filling plates with meats, strange salads, and little baked items wrapped around pieces of meat. Their jaws worked the delicacies questioningly, like dogs trying to eat bubble gum.

Over the din in the room, Wiley held up one of the tooth picked items and called to Bode. "Say, ain't these what Charlie called *whore's ovaries*?"

Tired of being entertained by the boys inside, Dwayne, Karen, and Grover went outside to watch the funeral parade leave for the Sligo Cemetery. Leading the parade was the Weld County Mounted Sheriff's Posse followed by two limousines for the decedent's family. Both would have been empty except for drivers if not for the local tricycle brigade. No way would their mothers let them attempt the six miles. So, they parked their crepe paper-decorated tricycles in front of the Killdeer Inn--the bed and breakfast--and piled into the limousines.

Behind these rolled a horse-drawn caisson carrying the coffin. Following this, with its reins tied to the back of the caisson, was a riderless horse. Boots had been stuffed backwards into the stirrups and wired in place.

With horses and motorcycles and limousines and fifteen high school marching bands and the Rocky Mountain Drum and Bugle Corps, military drill teams, policemen, highway patrolmen and deputies in uniform, and shoals of Boy and Girl Scouts, the procession made its lonely way across the vast prairie to Charlie's final resting place.

"Do you know where he's being buried?" Dwayne asked a man who looked as if he were of importance, in spite of his overalls.

"In the Sligo Cemetery, of course, near his trailer. I was up there earlier this morning delivering a wreath of flowers from the President. It's a nice spot. I'm sure he'll like it. It's between a couple of fellows I think he used to know--Albert Vigil and Presley Yount."

Down the street by the flag pole in front of the Post Office were the ladies Charlie and Dwayne had spied on at the Three Tanks ceremony. With Miss Teller acting as director, the ladies bade Charlie a good-bye.

Charlie is taking a drive today;  
They have hung with purple the carriage way.  
Kings and Princes and Lords of the land  
Shall ride behind him, a humble band.  
And over the city and over the world  
Shall flags of all nations be half-mast furled.  
Uncover your heads, lift your hearts on high,  
Charlie in silence is passing by.

"I've never considered myself literary," Dwayne spoke to Karen, "but I think I know who wrote that poem. Ella Wheeler Wilcox."

Karen, the English teacher, looked up at Dwayne. "Who?" she squinted at the unfamiliar name.

It took forty-five minutes for the parade to completely leave Sligo and head up 390 to the cemetery. Buzzing above the parade like persistent horse flies around a carcass were four helicopters, but the muted dirges from the marching bands nearly silenced their thrashing blades.

When the parade could no longer be seen, and only the helicopters a distant buzz, Dwayne walked slowly back into the cafe. Most of Sligo was

still there, eating. None of those who had known Charlie were attending the burial. He would be lowered into the ground by strangers.

It wasn't their coldness that struck Dwayne as he watched. It was their silence. If anyone spoke it was only to ask that something be passed. Finally, even that died. All Dwayne could hear in the room was the munching of food and the palsied clatter of forks vibrating against restaurant China. It was mechanical, lifeless. Quite unlike the din of activity that surrounded Charlie any time he was present.

The only purposeful signs of life came from a television crew that had remained in town. Loading into the crew's van were Harley and Banner Tidley. The last crewman to disappear held a lively, white puppy and a stuffed white dog about the same size.

They were en route to the old Stone Barn to re-enact the story of Banner's dog, to show it digging itself out of a shallow grave and crawling seven miles over a coyote and badger infested prairie to leap four and a half feet off the ground and curl sedately up next to a minnow bucket in the bed of a pickup. All while being stone, cold dead.

The crew was in a haste to get the shoot finished, for once it was completed they were off to Roswell, New Mexico, for their annual visit.

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## Resurrection Rumors

The morning after the funeral--or rather that still moist darkness that both farmers and roisters call *early*, but with utterly different meanings--Dwayne pulled on his running outfit, laced up his shoes, and jogged down the concrete walk in front of his house to the gravel street. On the prairie, any direction was open but destinations were few. It was more satisfying to run somewhere, get there, and then to return than it was to simply run in one direction for thirty minutes or an hour and then to turn around.

He seldom met anyone on the roads he chose, and after meeting Banner near the Briggsdale Cemetery that morning Linda's body was found, he had chosen his routes more carefully. This morning he turned to the left after reaching the street in front of his house. His destination was the fifty-foot survey tower, of telephone pole construction, that was erected in the early 60's when the first inter-continental ballistic missiles were loaded into the ground.

The run was long, would probably take two hours, but Dwayne had time to kill. Grover had promised to return from Greeley at a reasonable hour at which time they could begin their end of the investigation.

As he ran south with nothing for comfort but the darkness and the crunch of his running soles against the gravel, he wondered about a message Charlie had left on his answering machine, probably just after he had hung up after talking to him in the cafe during the funeral. "I forgot to tell you one thing," he said. "I promised Miss Teller I'd take care of a little problem for her. It's none too complicated. I suspect even you or Grover can manage it. Just drive out to Pleistocene Park and corner Pointe Ruffner. Say Charlie spoke to you from the grave and said one word." Dwayne wondered how one word could solve anything and missed the word when Charlie said it. He had to rewind the tape in his answering machine to get Charlie to repeat it. "The word is *Avitrol*. That oughta do it. I think Grover might know what I'm talking about. Anyway, it makes no difference. Pointe'll know. And after you're finished, tell Miss Teller that Charlie, even dead, took care of that little matter she spoke of. You won't have to tell her anything else. She knows I always clean my plate."

Dawn wasn't even a suggestion when Dwayne touched one of the wooden stanchions of the survey tower and headed back to Sligo. He was back in town with enough time to shower, dress, and seat himself to a full breakfast with Twinkies on the side before Wiley came into the Quonset Cafe holding his belly and needing a coffee.

"Lord, how that boy can eat," he said, not to Dwayne, but to Inez. "If I ate like that I'd--" He didn't finish, knowing that he *did* eat like that and carried around a distended belly as punishment.

Dwayne bit into one of the Twinkies and inspected the white goo inside. "I have a fast metabolism," he explained to Wiley. "Eat, eat, eat and I can't put on an ounce." This was one form of cruelty Dwayne permitted himself. Relished actually.

"Say, did you hear?" Wiley moved to his stool and looked at Inez in an effort to avoid Dwayne's spareness. "Somebody says they spotted Charlie the day before he was buried but after he was supposed to be dead."

Inez turned enough to look at Dwayne but kept her back to Wiley. "I'm not surprised," was all she said.

"No, it's true. Said he was in a silly little car when he pulled into Last Chance. They said he bought a banana split at the Dairy King, ate that on the way back to the car, pulled the car down the road to that convenience store that's set up in a trailer and bought a couple of Snicker bars."

"That sounds sure enough like Charlie, all right." Inez, her back still to Wiley, sounded uninterested.

"But here's the clincher. They said he left the store, drove across the intersection to the public outhouse that's in front of that little sink pond, and, instead of going into the crapper like anyone else would do, he went behind it and took a leak."

"Least he didn't leave the door open," Inez said and turned to place a tray of sliced tomatoes into the cold case.



"Could be a doppelganger," Dwayne suggested. Wiley looked squarely at him this time, wanting an explanation, but fortunately Harley and Banner Tidley burst into the cafe carrying boxes of frozen doughnuts.

"Did you hear?" Harley asked breathlessly.

"I heard nothing," Inez silenced him, "but I can see by the clock that you are an hour and a half late, Banner."

"He had to swing by and pick me up," Harley explained rapidly. "My battery went bad. But did you hear about Charlie?"

"Last Chance?" Wiley asked.

Harley looked at him as if he had been hit by a snowball at a summer picnic. "Last chance for what?"

"Colorado. Last Chance, Colorado. Charlie was seen there."

"No he wasn't," Harley objected, scarcely noticing when Inez relieved him of the doughnuts he was carrying. "It was in Williston, North Dakota. At a Wal-Mart. Well it was at a Wal-Mart but in a McDonald's that's inside the store. Witnesses said he ordered two double cheeseburgers and a large malt and then decided to have everything super-sized. And guess who he was traveling with?"

Wiley stared at Harley but didn't ask.

"None other than the King himself--Elvis Presley."

Wiley was impressed. It was thirty seconds before he could ask what Elvis had ordered. Harley was explaining that the reporter on KOA out of Denver didn't know what Elvis had ordered when Dwayne left a five dollar bill that covered both his meal and a generous tip.

Outside, the bright sun was well into the sky just as if Charlie were alive to enjoy it. Down the street he could see cars angled into spaces in front of the consolidated school where students and teachers were going through the motions of the final days--pretending to give tests, erasing marks in school books, signing yearbooks. Across from the school in the Charlie Waggles Memorial Park, someone had set up a yard sale. Since Grover was not yet in from Greeley, Dwayne decided to check it out. Just behind the park's fence--composed of a single cable suspended between four-inch diameter pipes--a man was sitting next to a collection of card tables, probably the ones from the funeral banquet.

"The estate sale of one Charlie Waggles," the man, distinguished only by a *Jack's Bean Co.* baseball cap, explained. The bean company, now as dead as the giant, was near Eaton, Dwayne knew, but the man was a local even though his wife seldom let him eat at the cafe.

Everything that had been Charlie was there, stacked on the ground or on the card tables. Predominating were the books. They were stacked on, around, and under the tables.

"They found out why Charlie slept on his couch," the man in the cap said. "All these books and many more were stacked in his bedroom. No room to sleep. I didn't know he could even read," the man said in mild surprise. The last sentence sounded as if he had uttered it before.

"How much are the books?"

"Dime a pound." When Dwayne showed his surprise, the man explained "They ain't worth anything. The ladies from the library were over here just as soon as I unloaded. Said they couldn't find anything of use to

their readers. The couple of books that might have been of value went to a man out of Greeley. He and his wife were here just a minute ago. Got word somehow that we'd have books galore and left Greeley about four this morning. Said he was going to open a book store soon as he finished his last year of teaching. I was going to give him all he wanted at a dime a pound, but his wife kept trying to dicker me down so much I upped it to a quarter. Besides, she kept dripping what she was eating all over the goods."

"Those three pictures on the table over there," Dwayne pointed. "How much?"

The *Jack's Bean Co.* hat got off its chair and picked up the pictures in two hands. "Oh, the frames are fair," he said. "Guess we can let them go for a dollar for these two." He looked at the little encased picture Charlie had called the *Ultima Thule*. "This one," he turned it over and checked the back. "How about a quarter?"

Dwayne took the pictures and looked at them. The two frames the man would let go for a dollar were the picture of Charlie Sells and Sam of Frankfort, Indiana--the one Charlie had rescued from the DAV in Denver--and the other was the picture of Charlie, Dog, and the Jeep taken in Tucson.

"If you think I'm askin' too much for 'em, how 'bout if I throw in this as an extra?" The baseball cap handed Dwayne a very old magazine, *New York Dime Library*. It was an issue from 1892. "Just some more of the trash Charlie kept around."

It was a typical yellow pulp thriller. On the cover was the drawing of a tall, muscular man with a lithe woman thrown over his shoulder. In his right hand he held a smoking revolver. Surrounding him were Indians in war paint. The teaser beneath the picture read: *Charlie Waggles Rescues Denver Socialite from Renegade Heathen Band.*

"Hey, Dwayne?" The call came from across the street. When he looked he saw Grover leaving the school. He hadn't seen the deputy's car parked in among the others.

Dwayne turned once more to the baseball cap. "Where are the proceeds of this sale going?"

"We're going to wire in the church bell tower to keep the pigeons and bats out."

Dwayne was certain Charlie hadn't thought of the disbursement of his goods by his sister when planning his death. Much of his "effects" was garbage, but he knew Charlie would miss it. "What do you want for the whole mess?" Dwayne indicated the card tables. The *Jack's Bean Co* hat hadn't thought about a total price. "What about a hundred dollars?" Dwayne suggested.

The man looked at the tables. "Seems fair, probably."

"Look, I haven't got the money with me but I'm good for it."

"I know where you live." The man's voice didn't indicate a threat but his eyes did.

"Then for the hundred, box everything up and deliver it to the side of my house. Up beyond where I park Charlie's Jeep."

The *Jack's Bean Co* hat capitulated with a shrug. At least this way he wouldn't have to sit there in the hot afternoon.

"Let's get going," Grover said again. He was now at Dwayne's shoulder and approved of what he had done. "Don't know why I didn't think about that when I was at his trailer later yesterday. I wanted to make sure some of the mourners didn't trash his place," he explained. "I didn't know how to lock it."

"Charlie left a message on my recorder. I didn't understand it, but maybe you will. Anyway, lets take the Jeep. Make people think Charlie's still alive. Leave the county car there in front of the school. No one'll say anything."

"Course Charlie just might not be dead," the man boxing Charlie's effects paused to explain. "A talk station out of Denver says he was seen by a couple visiting Ash Hollow."

"Where's that?" Dwayne asked.

"Nebraska," Grover spoke abruptly and Dwayne knew why. "That's where the people on the Oregon Trail got their first good water after crossing the prairie from Kansas."

"That's the place," *Jack's Bean Co* said. "The people who say they saw him said he was cranking the water pump down by the picnic area and filling a couple of jugs."

"Charlie?" Grover asked and looked critically at the man. "Water?"

The man paused in his packing. "Got a point there," he admitted. "That couple must have seen another man looked like Charlie."

With that brush fire stomped out, Dwayne--still carrying the three pictures--and Grover walked east down the middle of the street toward Charlie's Jeep, parked in Dwayne's drive. "I tried to find out just where Bob White was the day Charlie was murdered," Grover explained his visit to the school, "but I didn't get much help."

"Old man Hall not cooperative?"

"Oh, he told me what he knows, but he wasn't keeping close rein on the faculty that day. A work day or something. No students were there anyway. Said he did remember seeing him talking to your girl, but he isn't sure what happened after that. And that could have been around noon or before."

At the Jeep, Dwayne placed the pictures behind the drivers seat. "We've got to go to Loveland to see Bob White's mother and we've got to stop by Pleistocene Park for you to say one word to Pointe Ruffner, but on the way I'd like to have a look at that draw behind the witches' house. Remember, both days we were there we heard what sounded like a motorbike."

"Way ahead of you."

"You been there already?"

"No, but I already had our visit planned. What I want to know now is what word I'm supposed to say to Pointe."

Dwayne pulled out his wallet and found the slip of paper he had written it on. "This is only a guess at the spelling."

Grover inspected it, folded it, and tucked it into the breast pocket that supported his badge. "Close enough," he said.

"What does it mean?"

Grover smiled at knowing something Dwayne didn't. It was the kind of knowledge a country fellow might possess without effort but which would baffle a city fellow. If Dwayne took Grover into an espresso bar in Denver or Ft. Collins, the shoe could be on the other foot. "We'll wait until Pointe hears it to see if it has meaning. Pointe might be using a generic."

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Now knowing the back way to the house, Dwayne hurried Charlie's Jeep down paved 77 toward Colorado 14 until he reached 106 and turned left onto the gravel. When he neared the knoll behind which he knew was the witch house, he slowed.

"Hold it," Grover sighed. The gate was down. "Well, won't be long now until you know what gristly wall will be on all the television screens." The prairie leading to the wheat field in front of the house was fairly eaten up with the tire tracks of the curious from miles around. "The sheriff is going to skin me alive."

"Why?"

"For letting this get screwed up. He's been putting off the Colorado Bureau of Investigation as it is. If I-- If we don't come up with something in a week, they'll try to come in like it or not. And when they see the way this so called crime scene has been treated, they'll. . ." The rest was left to both of their imaginations.

When they got to the witch house they only looked in the front door. The graffiti on the walls told them a further look inside would be fruitless.

Instead, they walked straight down to the draw about a quarter of a mile behind the house.

"I suppose you heard," Grover said, kicking a piece of crockery with blue whirligigs on it, "that Charlie is rumored to have emptied his revolver at whoever killed him."

"Another Denver talk show?" Dwayne asked.

"Probably. Anyway, he is supposed to have made almost a perfect circle around whoever shot him with the harpoon gun."

"You'd think the Sheriff could have come up with a better cover story than that," Dwayne suggested. "I know he didn't want to let the story about witches get out, but come on. A handgun against a harpoon? In a James Bond movie maybe, and then only if it was James Bond who had the harpoon."

"Makes you wonder how he could have missed anyway--close as he was."

"Windage," Dwayne said, but he didn't explain. He was remembering the rattlesnake at Chalk Bluffs and the coyote that had Banner's miracle dog.

On the other side of the fence which protected the house and its outbuildings from grazing cattle was pristine prairie--buffalo and blue grama grasses. It made the walking easy. In the Blue grama sections the ground was clearly visible between the clumps.

"Something's been here," Grover pointed and knelt. A rock about the size of a boy's marble shooter rested on the undisturbed soil between the clumps of grama. He picked the rock up and moved it back about two feet



toward the house. It fit exactly into an empty depression. "Whoever was walking this way just scuffed the top of it and rolled it ahead. We're not the first to walk this direction recently."

The gully was a drainage, but only during times of extreme wet. It had probably run once that spring, and then only on the day 1.9 inches of rain fell on Hereford, twenty miles to the north.

"Christ," Grover exclaimed. "Looks like a motor-cross course." They had walked directly to an area where a dirt bike had gone round and round. The grass on both sides of the shallow draw had been displaced and the dried impressions in the draw itself were deep and obvious, though without tread pattern.

"And look over here." Dwayne had walked up the draw to more tracks. "This may be a single set of tracks, although it looks confusing. I guess the front and rear wheels didn't take the same course."

"That's normal," Grover explained. "Two tracks usually equal one trip." He was looking down the draw. It would eventually meet I06. "There's tracks going that way, too."

Dwayne came back to inspect them. "These tracks are a lot deeper than the ones above."

Grover looked at the tracks he had discovered, walked up to the ones Dwayne had found, and walked back. "You're right. No matter where the tracks are, on the grass or in the draw, they're deeper heading toward the road--or *from* the road. Hard to tell."

"It could be," Dwayne suggested, "that there were two riders and one of the bikes broke down. They could have both gotten onto one to go to the road."

Grover studied the tracks, both upper and lower. "Could be, but it looks to me like something happened right here," he indicated the circle where the dirt bike had gone round and round."

"Are there any footprints in with the other tracks?"

"There might be two sets. It's hard to say. And what's to say these tracks have anything to do with what went on in the house." He continued to study the torn-up soil. "Let me see the bottoms of your shoes," he said suddenly to Dwayne.

Dwayne looked hurt but complied. He sat back on the ground and lifted one of his running shoes. Grover looked at it and at the ground. "Similar," he said. "But not the same."

"And my other pair are like these." For some reason he felt compelled to add, "Honest."

"Did Bob White ever wear running shoes?"

"I don't know," Dwayne admitted. "Most of the time he walked around in boots, engineer's boots. You know, high tops--the pull on kind. Not cowboy."

Grover studied the ground some more. "Could be some of those here," he said. "What kind of a vehicle does White drive?"

"Toyota pickup. White. He straps his dirt bike upright in the back."

"When we go through Ault this afternoon, I'll have Kandi check to make sure and then put out an APB on him. But from what I've learned about him so far, he's a momma's boy. Won't go far."

"Come on, Grover," Dwayne reasoned. "None of this makes any sense. First of all, Bob would have had to kill Linda Gillespie. For starters, I don't think he's capable of that. If he did, it would have to be an accident. And besides, Charlie isn't suspicious of Bob, other than that he is a little weird. And who out here isn't?"

"What about the shadow behind the Post Office," Grover interrupted. "That could have been him. He could have been following Karen. I mean he only lives a block from the teacherage." When he saw how much he had startled Dwayne, he explained, "I'm talking about the shadow Miss Teller saw."

"You know all about that?"

"Charlie doesn't hate me as much as he pretends, at least personally. Just in a general sort of way because of what I represent."

"Then you know--"

"I know most everything he knows except what he's onto with this hyperbaric medicine. At least I know what Charlie told me."

"Still," Dwayne was unconvinced, "I don't remember Bob ever mentioning anything about scuba diving, and if he'd owned a spear gun I'd have probably seen it the times I was in his trailer. It's a small one and people usually hang spears on the wall. And what about diving tanks?"

"I don't have an answer," Grover said. "Let's follow these tracks to the road at least and then get to Loveland."

The tracks were so deep a blind man with a sensitive cane could have followed them. But when the draw hit the barbed wire fence separating the field from the road, they disappeared. Scuff marks beneath the wire showed that something had been dragged beneath the wire to the road, probably the bike, but after that only the well-traveled gravel road remained. The tracks didn't resume in the draw on the other side of the road either.

"I figure they--or he or whatever--went from here back to where their trucks were parked," Grover said. "If they used one bike to get out on, they could have gone back later to pick up the one that conked out."

Dwayne looked up and down the gravel road. In the distance to the west were the puny Rockies. To the east was a single cottonwood tree--probably marking Crow Creek where it crossed the road. "Kind of like the farmer getting the fox, the goose, and the corn across the river when he can only carry one in his boat at a time," Dwayne said.

"But not all that complicated," Grover disagreed. "Even so, it would be a whole lot easier if we knew for sure how many foxes there were."

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They walked up the road to Charlie's Jeep for the drive to Loveland and the interview with Bob's mother, but first they stopped in at Pleistocene Park and that didn't take any time at all.

"Hey, there, Pointe," Grover called and waved familiarly to Pointe when they entered the Park's souvenir shop. Pointe knew who Grover was, but that was all he knew and he was pushed off balance by the deputy's forwardness.

"Can I help you boys?" He leaned against the wooden tank holding the Pleistocene rosy carp.

"Well, Pointe," Grover tilted his chin up and looked directly into the man's eyes. "I was playing around with an Ouiji board last night, Dwayne here and I were, and we got a message from Charlie. He has one word he wants me to say to you."

Pointe's face showed that what was happening was singular. "Yes?"

"The word is *Avitrol*."

Pointe's face changed until it looked as if it were choking beneath the dark, green water at his elbow.

"Well, Pointe. Do you get the point?" Grover asked with a smugness that caused Dwayne to feel sorry for the proprietor.

"Point well taken," he breathed and his face lost some of its strangled aspect. "Should you be talking to Charlie again, tell him the matter will be taken care of."

"Thank you," Grover nodded professionally, but on his way out he called. "Look a lot like goldfish to me."

"Don't they now," Pointe said, relieved to see their backs.

Grover was growing in Dwayne's eyes, but he recognized it as a growth that could lead to abuse of power. Power was something that Charlie always wheeled, but never abused. "What was that all about?" he asked once they were back in Charlie's pickup.

"*Avitrol*?" Grover asked with mock innocence. "It's a poison that some farmers, particularly dairy farmers, use to kill unwanted birds--such as starlings. They hang around the troughs and eat the grain put out for the

cattle. The idea, at least the way it's sold, is that it kills a few birds, scares the others, and they leave."

"Does it work?"

"Kills the birds all right. But if you know starlings you know a dead companion just means more for them to eat."

"Charlie was right," Dwayne smiled. "He said most things are dead simple once you know the whys. Now it's obvious why the birds were falling out of the sky. But for a while there I was starting to believe the story Banner was telling?"

"I missed that one."

"Death rays."

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For Dwayne, the visit to Bob White's mother was more upsetting than Linda's death. A lifeless body didn't compare to a suffering, living body.

She said she knew nothing. She had no idea where her son was. She remembered that he had taken a couple of scuba diving lessons when he was in college, but that it led to nothing. And as for a spear gun, she said he not only never had one, but that he had even rented his flippers and other equipment when he took the class.

After meeting them at the door and answering the questions, she retreated to a chair beside a window overlooking the back yard. There she sat, an elbow on the chair's arm and her fingers tapping her lips, while Grover and Dwayne searched Bob's bedroom.

The room was hung with the pennants and airplane and boat models of a well behaved high school student. His desk calendar was filled with

things to do--Dental appointment. Pick up new glasses. Tune-up. Chaperone picnic. She's gone!

Grover stopped flipping the pages. "She's gone!" he read. "Who's gone?" he asked Dwayne. "This was written the same day as the Sadie Hawkins' picnic."

Dwayne looked closer at the calendar. "He didn't have to chaperone the dance that night, so I guess he went home. Looks like it."

"But he was in Sligo the night Linda was killed, wasn't he?"

"Probably. It'd be too long a drive to get from Loveland to Sligo in the morning in time for the picnic. He probably stayed in his trailer."

"And his trailer is only two or two and a half blocks from your house. Right?"

"About."

"Then he could have killed Linda, put the body in front of your house, gone to the picnic as if nothing had happened, gone home that night and wrote this."

Dwayne shrugged. "Doesn't sound like Bob. Seems like a dumb thing to do, really. If he's going to kill someone, why write it on his calendar where anyone could read it?"

"Murderers sometimes do dumb things."

"Sure. Especially on TV they do."

"But who else would have been riding a motorcycle out behind the witch house both times we were there?"

"It could have been him both times, but that still doesn't mean he had anything to do with the murders. If he knows what's been going on in that

house--and he probably does--he might have had enough curiosity to check it out occasionally. It's possible he was trying to learn who was doing it. Makes sense to me."

"Sure it makes sense," Grover admitted, "but people have been hanged on less circumstantial evidence."

The calendar was the only thing of interest in the room and Grover ripped out the entry with the words and put it in the left breast pocket of his uniform.

When they excused themselves, Mrs. White didn't respond. She still sat in the chair, looking out into the back yard and tapping her lips lightly with her finger tips.

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(15)

## You can kill that way?

On the way back from Loveland they stopped in at the Ault sub-station and Dwayne got his first look at Kandi. She was just as Charlie had described: four pounds of cottage cheese topped with a dollop of lavender whipped cream. The cream proved to be the puff of teased hair that rose a foot above her head. It was the same color as the thistle that bloomed in disturbed patches of ground around Sligo. When she smiled at their entrance, two little plums popped out above her rouged cheek bones.



"Thought you'd be in for Charlie's things," she said, popping her gum with a seldom seen energy and pointing to the back room. "I got 'em in a box on his desk in there." When she tired of pointing with her double-jointed elbow, she looked at Dwayne and sized him up. "So you're the little lady killer," she said, one hip cranking to the side as a challenge.

"Leave him alone, Kandi," Grover said in passing. He picked up a note pad from her desk and printed on it. "Find the make and the license number on Bob White's pickup. Dwayne says it's a Toyota, white, late model. And while you've got Greeley on the line, have them put out an APB for White. It's looking more like he's the killer. At least he had something to do with *Charlie's* death."

She batted her lavender eyelashes at Dwayne before accepting the piece of paper from Grover--as if it were germ infected. The reason for the extreme care was her *Luscious Lavender Lady* polished fingernails. "I'll get on it as soon as my nails dry."

On the way back to Charlie's seldom used desk, Grover warned Dwayne. "Better look out," he winked. "Kandi's got her eye on you."

"Don't worry. I can out run her."

"I wouldn't wager any money if I were you until I saw her on the dance floor. She can flat get around. And on red high heels no less."

Dwayne looked suspiciously at Grover. "Sounds like you're talking from experience."

"Let's just say I've seen her clear out biker bars. And she's been banned from nearly every Karaoke bar in the three-state region."

"Hey," she yelled from the other room, and Dwayne understood why bikers cringed at her voice. "What am I supposed to do about these calls I've been getting from some professor back east who keeps tryin' to tell me that Charlie's still alive?"

Grover lowered the lid on the box of Charlie's effects, the ones he had left in his sometimes office. "What are you carrying on about?"

"A professor," she yelled, now in the doorway. Grover attempted to lower her voice with a movement of his hand. "He insists that Charlie is alive," she whispered dramatically. "Says he's been talking to him all along."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"The usual. The same thing he was talking to Charlie about before Charlie *died*." Her voice softened suddenly at the word. "Some kind of medicine or such."

"Hyperbaric?" Dwayne suggested.

"That's the one," she pointed, and let her gaze remain too long. "The hyper one. I remember now. Charlie had me call the Colorado University Hospital in Denver to get the name of someone who was an expert in this hyper stuff."

"Who was it?"

"I disremember, but I got the number around here somewhere." Her fleshy arm arced back toward her desk which held little more than a compact, a tube of lipstick, a can of hair spray, and a teasing brush.

"Well, what'd this professor have to say?"

"I kept telling him Charlie was dead, but he kept insisting that he had talked to Charlie. I told him that he had been talking to Charlie but that was *before* Charlie was dead, not after." She finally ran down and her shoulders drooped. "That's what I tried to tell him, anyway."

"But did he have anything to say?" Grover insisted.

Kandi almost couldn't be bothered by the notion. "Oh, something or other about someone Charlie asked about. Said the person *had* been to one of his lectures down in the Caribbean. Bermuda or Cuba or--" She hung fire.

"Was it Bonaire?" Dwayne asked.

"That's the one. A Spanish name."

"Well, what'd he say about the person? Did he say who it was?" Grover breathed out slowly, trying to maintain his patience.

"How should I know. It was some kind of class he gave and whoever Charlie wanted to know was there, was there. That's all it amounted to." Her frustration showed in a slacking of her hip and the nervous popping of her gum. "I told you I tried to tell the man he was wrong. That Charlie was dead."

"Find the number for me, Kandi," Grover ordered. "Understand?"

Chastened, Kandi's voice became baby-doll like. "Do you want me to get on it right now or do the other thing first?"

"Both." Grover ignored her and lifted the lid on the box. About all that was inside was a hat, Charlie's spare hat. Below that was a belt and a small felt box of the kind that usually held jewelry. "Hat's too big for me."

How about you?" He ceremoniously placed it over Dwayne's head and watched his eyes and ears disappear.

"Maybe I'll grow into it." When Grover removed it, Dwayne brushed a length of hair back onto his head.

The leather belt wasn't as long as most people would have thought. When they pictured Charlie, it was as a big man--which he was. It was just that his size was above his waist. At any rate, the belt wasn't actually meant to wear, no more than a world champion cowboy wore his silver buckle to the grocery store. Mounted into the leather was a marble bag full of blue-green turquoise. The stones spelled out the words *Seven With One Blow*.

Dwayne took the belt from Grover and studied it. "What the heck does this mean?"

"I don't know exactly. It's something the state of Arizona gave him for that thing he did in Tucson a few years back."

"Was that the time Dog got shot?"

"You seen Dog?"

"Just in the picture Charlie had above his couch. The one I bought back at the park."

"That was the time," Grover nodded. The last item in the box was the jewelry container. When he opened it, Grover had to turn the item inside over several times to figure out what it was. "It's the Navy Cross. I didn't know Charlie was ever in the Navy."

Dwayne took it and turned it over. "This is the highest the Navy gives. And it's Charlie's. Look here." He pointed to the initials C.W. at the top of the metal and to the word Yamamoto at the bottom.

"What's a Yamamoto?" When Dwayne didn't answer, Grover opened a bottom drawer on Charlie's unused desk and placed the belt and medal inside to the back. The hat he took with him as he left the office. "I've got a present for you if you can find that number I want." He tossed the hat toward Kandi as she raised from idly fishing through a drawer, careful of her fingernails.

She placed it atop her coif where it rested securely, a bit small but snug. "Thanks," she said, really meaning it. "This'll get me a free drink or two if I know my hats."

"You'll find that number now, won't you?"

"I will. I will."

"And when I get back here tonight I want it written on a piece of paper, the man's name as well if you can get it, and taped right here on this counter. *You* may be gone, but the number will be right here." He lowered his fist on the spot.

"Don't get your dogs riled. I'll get it. But don't you want this number first?"

"What's that?"

"The make and license number of Bob White's pickup."

"Hey, that was quick," Grover praised. "Good work."

"Wasn't nothing. Pete Bailey gave it to me."

"Who's Pete Bailey?"

"He's a rancher out near Wild Horse Reservoir, just off Road 115 on Road 94. He just called and said he found the pickup in one of his silage pits. You know, one of those long trenches they dig in the ground and then fill with silage?"

"I know."

"He says he was using his front loader to fill his truck with feed when he uncovered the Toyota. Says he don't know how in hell it got in there, but that someone had to have used his front loader to dig out the silage and then use it again to cover the truck."

Grover looked at Dwayne. "Why in hell would he hide his pickup? And does he know how to use a front loader?"

"I don't know," Dwayne said. "All I know is that he's out there on a dirt bike. He can't go many places. It's rough on pavement and is illegal on most city streets."

Grover still couldn't believe. "Why in hell hide his truck? Did he steal another car we don't know about? Say," he thought, "did you see if his mother had a car in her driveway?"

Dwayne shook his head to all the questions.

"Well, we better get the hell out there while there's still light. And Kandi, have that number for me when I get back tonight. I'm going to be making some calls even if I have to wake people up."

"It'll be *right* here." She pounded the spot mockingly.

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Pete Bailey was standing at the mouth of his silage pit looking dumbly at the tailgate of Bob White's pickup when Grover and Dwayne arrived.

Little more than the tailgate was visible. The rest was still covered with the sweet smelling silage.

Whoever had buried the Toyota had lifted the old tires off the thick, heavy black plastic that covered the pit. Once the tires were off, the plastic had been folded back and a portion of the silage removed--most certainly with the nearby front loader. Then, the pickup had been driven into the depression, the silage replaced, and all evidence covered by the plastic and old tires.

Grover reached under his Smokey-the-Bear hat to scratch his scalp. "If you hadn't decided to get in here now, that truck could have been missing for ages."

"It was indeed fortune," Pete Bailey admitted, his hands in the pockets of his hickory striped overalls. "If I hadn't had to bring in a couple of sick cows, I'd a never needed the feed." He continued to stare at the tailgate. "Ain't nothing like this ever happened to me before."

Grover talked Pete into using his front loader to pull the pickup free from the silage. Once done, they helped him stuff the feed back under the plastic and shore it up against unwanted moisture. When they had finished, Grover told Pete, "A man will be out here in the morning to tow it away. Meantime, don't touch it."

Pete put his hands back into his pockets, but when Grover and Dwayne got into Charlie's Jeep to leave, he ambled up to Grover's window. "Ain't nothing like this ever happened to me before." Then he pulled one hand from its pocket and held it aloft, motionless. His way of saying "so long."

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When Dwayne dropped Grover off at his car in front of the consolidated school, it had already been a long day. And it would be even longer for Grover who had to drive 45 miles back to the sub-station before even thinking of bed.

Dwayne decided to go directly to bed and take a shower in the morning. While pulling off his clothes, he noticed the blinking red light on his answering machine. When he pressed the playback, he heard Karen's voice. She had no doubt called much earlier in the day. "Where have you gotten to, stranger," the voice said. It didn't identify itself. It didn't need to. The sound of the voice made him feel good, especially its pleading loneliness. It felt different to be wanted. It felt good. When he slid beneath the sheet, he tried to think about Karen, but her name melted through his mind like caramel--and he slept.

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While Dwayne slept, Grover roared down Colorado 14 toward Ault. It was already too dark for him to see the used cowboy boots pushed over the fence posts to mark the old Gun Barrel Road. He always checked that faint trail, all that remained of the pioneers' road to Eaton and Greeley. When he hit the railroad tracks at Ault, he was nearly flying. Luckily the local police weren't lying in wait in the little park to his right. They were probably drinking coffee at the Dairy Queen in Eaton.

True to her word, Kandi had taped the number and an extension, but not the name, she had gotten for Charlie onto the counter. When Grover reached the long-distance number, it turned out to be a switchboard at a



hospital. He wouldn't have known whom to ask for if the operator had not told him the doctor's office was closed. After he explained to her, and then pleaded with her, that it was an emergency, she got in touch with the doctor's answering service which promised to call the doctor and have him call Grover, if the doctor so wished.

Grover understood the need for doctors to maintain their home privacy, but sitting in the empty sub-station for forty-five minutes, drinking the thick coffee Kandi had forgotten to throw out, and having to re-heat it in a microwave at that, was nerve wracking.

When it finally rang, Grover snatched up the receiver to hear, "Waggles? Where the hell have you been?"

"This isn't Charlie Waggles," Grover explained. "Charlie's dead. This is Grover Ford. I'm a Weld County deputy sheriff."

"Oh for god's sake let's cut the crap. Do you know what time it is back here? I've already wasted more time than I can afford trying to get through that gum snapper that has been answering at this number all day."

"Sorry, sir. The situation here is a bit delicate at the moment. And Charlie *is* dead."

"Now stop that, deputy. I was on the phone with Waggles while the funeral was on television. He had to convince me that he was alive while I was looking at the coffin and listening to the governor and some idiot talk. But he did it, and now I'm not about to be dissuaded. Now let's get on with it. I was supposed to call him back at a motel in Nebraska, but there was an emergency with one of NASA's astronauts. He was practicing for

weightlessness in one of the pools and had an accident. I had to get to Houston, so I missed getting back to the Sheriff when he'd asked."

"I suspected as much, doctor, but I need to know what you told Charlie."

"Nothing. I haven't been able to get a hold of him and I've been out of easy contact. NASA won't put calls through while I'm with an astronaut. And when I did call the motel the person who answered said no one had ever been there named Charlie Waggles. When I gave the room number, the person looked it up and said that room had been rented by a man named Humbert Humbert."

"But what did Charlie want to know?"

"If someone had attended one of my lectures on the isle of Bonaire. And he had. That's all the information he wanted. Said it was all he would need to close his case, whatever that is."

Grover was almost afraid to ask. "What was the name?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't remember. Actually it isn't that I can't remember. I turned Waggles over to my secretary who would handle the matter anyway, and she took the name. She was the one who would go through my records and call the hotel in Bonaire if necessary. When she was able to get a message through to me in Houston, all it said was 'The individual Sheriff Waggles was interested in *was* at your lecture.' It was a fax and that was all it said."

"I need more information," Grover pleaded. "This isn't making sense to me. Why would Charlie want to know who attended your lecture?"

"The lecture was my usual about nitrogen narcosis. It was for divers. You may be familiar with it. The euphoria and the possible embolisms. Most people just refer to it as the bends. It was the standard fare. The reason Waggles was interested in that particular lecture was because on that one I got a bit off the subject. I talked about a girl who had been brought into the compression chamber at my facility at Duke. She was near death from what looked like the bends, but she had *not* been near water."

"I've got to know about this, doctor," Grover said quietly, searching Kandi's drawers for a pencil and paper. When the doctor had finished his brief tale, Grover laid the pencil aside and gripped the receiver with both hands. "You're not kidding, are you, doctor?"

"I'm afraid not. So you can see why Waggles wanted to know if that individual was at the lecture. If he didn't know what he was doing, it would be manslaughter. If he did know, well--it would be murder."

"Please tell me again, doctor. Can you actually kill a girl that way?"

"I've found sixteen such cases in a check of computer files."

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(16)

## An old Trojan

As Dwayne dozed toward wakefulness the caramelized memory of Karen that had eased him to sleep the evening before candied in his mouth and he smacked against its tackiness. Another long night, a night--like the other--strangely without dreams, a sleep that had enveloped him like a sealed and posted missive to a non-electrified dimension where gray cells truly rested, vibrating only to their scant biologic needs.

He didn't want to get up, unusual for him. He wanted to recline in this other dimension, taste its sweetness in his mouth, and dissolve into its numbing white noise machine. For the first time in days he had no urgent mission. Charlie wasn't coming. Dwayne would probably drop by. Then, and only then would he consent to re-enter the world where he was still a suspect in a girl's murder.

But the remembrance of Karen's voice on the machine the night before moved him from his trance, caused his body to stretch, his animal needs to surface. She had sounded lonely in that sweet pouting way, not saying right out that she wanted him to come over, but definitely inviting. He could see her body move to the remembered words, and he thought of crawling over to his answering machine to play her message back but remembered that he had not bothered to push the save button.

Without realizing he had accomplished it, he found himself sitting sideways on his bed, his feet on the floor. He was moving without destination. He didn't need to think about it, but moved to the front window and pulled the shade up. A school bus, the yellow and black tiger salamander clinging to its top, dusted past carrying students back into the country, an early morning silliness Dwayne was unable to fathom. He had been told it was tradition. The night following graduation all students returned to school to clean out their lockers and to pick up their final report cards. It was to take only an hour and a half and then the buses would return the students to the country. So much for theory. What happened was that the buses returned to the country empty, except for the unfortunate or ostracized individual who *had* to return home. The others were headed to another tradition, a weekend at Little America--an enormous motel complex on the highway west of Cheyenne--where they could swim, dine, frolic, and do whatever else children did when away from adult supervision.

Not knowing what had caused it, Dwayne realized he wanted to go for a drive in the country. Maybe, if the spirit moved him, he would find Interstate 80 and take it to Little America. He had seen the highway billboards advertising their fifty-cent soft-serv cones and decided he wanted one.

With a mission now before him, he dressed hurriedly. For him it was easy. Shaving would have taken time but a glance in the mirror showed that he could put it off a day without offending anyone.

After he inserted the key into the ignition of Charlie's Jeep, he paused to check the numbers on the odometer, ninety-eight thousand miles and the pickup wasn't many years old. Charlie's territory may be large but the mileage suggested that he covered it, and often. Either that or the odometer included many long trips into Nebraska and Wyoming that Charlie didn't often speak of. As he put his right arm across the top of the seat so as to look through the rear window while he backed, Dwayne realized he was not alone in the cab of the pickup.

Sitting next to him, with bright, black, buttoned eyes and a sewed semi-circle of smile, was Raggedy Ann.

At first he stared at it dumbly, pounded into senselessness by its very implication. It was her mate who had directed him to the witch house and to the discovery of Charlie. Not knowing what else to do, he lifted the doll, but not before checking to see that no wires or threads were attached. It was just a doll, he decided, and not a bomb. Idly, he rocked its head back and forth and watched the dime-sized black pupils roll above the silly, sewn smile. What could it mean? The last time he had seen the doll it was atop a pile of plastic toys that clogged the stairs to the cellar in the witch house. Had it been there when he discovered Charlie's *body*? Or had it been there and *later* removed? Charlie had asked about it, but he couldn't remember what they had decided.

And what did it mean now, sitting on the seat of what had been Charlie's vehicle but which everyone now knew was his, at least to drive until Charlie's sister could get her title-seeking hands on it? He looked into its eyes. The Raggedy Andy, he reasoned, led him to Charlie's body.

Therefore, logic directed, the Raggedy Ann would lead him to a woman. What woman?

What *other* woman could there be?

He was out of the pickup and racing down the street toward the school before the driver's side door slammed shut. Mr. Hall was in his office when Dwayne burst through the front door, but the superintendent did little more than frown sternly. The halls were quiet, the way they always should be, he found himself thinking dumbly. For him, students had always destroyed the educational environment.

Karen was not in her room. In the room next to hers, Bob White's, was a stranger, so he didn't pause. Nancy, who shared the kitchen and bathroom with Karen in the teacherage, was in her room.

"It's lunch time," she explained. "Or at least the students are gone. She's probably at home. Sometimes she picks Ricky up at Mrs. Scheilli's and takes him home to lunch." The look she gave Dwayne was more than surprise at his panic. It was hauntingly sympathetic. It held a hurt for him he couldn't fathom and didn't have time to question. Without replying, he ran back down the hallway to the front entrance and out.

He continued running, past the Opera House--where an upper curtain parted ever so slightly--through the grassy barrow pit, and in through the gate leading to the woman's teacherage. At his first knock, he got no response. At his second he could hear a noise--the closing of a refrigerator door, he thought.

When the door did open, it did so cautiously. Karen's eye peered from the crack. "Yes?" her voice came timorously as if she were expecting

Superintendent Hall to be checking on her. "Oh," she warmed when she recognized him and pulled the door fully open. He hadn't gotten past the door frame before she squeezed him and buried her face in his shirt. "God, you've been gone so long. And you didn't call," she scolded, feigning a pout. "We've missed you," she continued to talk, indicating Ricky who toddled in from the kitchen.

She took Dwayne's hand and pulled him further into the room. A desperate passion consumed her, and she couldn't get enough of him. "I could just squeeze you to death," she said, again hugging him. Dwayne, grateful but dumbfounded, looked over her head and into the upturned eyes of Ricky. He was a typical child, Dwayne realized--all plumbing and scant wiring. The light that shown from his eyes was a reflection from the ceiling fixture. The kid had no idea who Dwayne was, yet mysteriously he extended his arms, wanting something.

Sensing that Dwayne seemed detached, Karen backed from him and looked at Ricky. "Oh," she realized, "you've brought him a present." She took the Raggedy Ann doll from Dwayne and handed it to Ricky who hugged it and disappeared back into the kitchen.

Dwayne looked at his empty hand. He had forgotten that he had been carrying the doll. Maybe that could account for Mr. Hall's strange frown.

"I found it setting on the front seat of Charlie's Jeep not five minutes ago."

"*Sitting*," she corrected. Then the connection with the other doll registered and she put her hands to her face and gasped. "You're not



going out to that witch house they showed on television, are you? Don't do it. Don't go out there." She was pleading.

"No way," he reassured her, and for the first time returned her hug.

"Someone wants to kill you, Dwayne. You're the one they're after," she said. "Charlie just somehow got in the way. The first doll was probably also meant for you. You can't go."

"I've got to get a hold of Grover," he told her. "Something has to be out there, and I can't figure what it is. It could even be another body."

"It doesn't have to be anything," Karen pleaded. "Wait until Grover gets here. Someone must think you know more than you do. Or maybe think you killed Linda. Anyway, they want to hurt you." She looked up into his eyes. "Maybe someone wants revenge. Maybe," she looked away, "it could even be Linda's father."

His first reaction was to ask, "Why him?" But when he remembered that Karen had seen Linda enter his house that night two weeks ago, he understood why.

"This isn't Bob White doing this," she explained. "I know that you and everyone else think he's just a lame person, but he's not. He's just a nice guy. He's disappointed. Been disappointed all his life. He can't make the world work for him."

"And we can?" Dwayne asked, still holding her but meaning them as individuals.

She rubbed the side of her face against his shirt and thought. "We've been able to bend it our way a couple of times in our lives," she said. "Usually for just a moment. But at least we know it can be done. Rarely."

She stopped talking and Dwayne thought she might be crying. "Bob," she started. And then she was crying.

When she stopped, she told Dwayne of a trip to the Buttes Bob had recently taken her on. The details were sketchy, but it was obvious Bob had placed his life and ego on the line. And had been politely destroyed.

"I politely said *no*," Karen cried. "A polite *no*. That's what he has been getting all of his life."

"Maybe he snapped. Maybe that's why he killed Linda."

"No," Karen shook her head vigorously. "This happened after her death. He said he couldn't stay at the school another year if I was going to be there and not be his girl."

She moved her hands up his back and pulled him into her face. Dwayne responded, and for the first time he could remember, he was responding without overt sexual desire. He was trying to comfort and reassure the core of her being--not to excite her into satisfying him.

Gazing blankly over her head, he focused his eyes randomly on the nearly empty waste basket between her bed and nightstand. The single item in the basket rested squarely in the center. Dwayne was rocking Karen reassuringly, so it was not difficult for him to pivot slightly to his right for a better view.

In the bottom of the waste basket, squarely in the center, was a rubber, a condom, a prophylactic, a safety. No matter what it was called, Dwayne could see one thing. It had been used.

Slowly, he released her. As if just awakened, Karen teetered and watched Dwayne questioningly as he bent to pick up the waste basket.

She seemed unable to fathom what had broken the moment. His back was to her. She could see he had the basket, but she couldn't understand why.

When he turned, she reached for the basket and held it for an instant while looking questioningly into his eyes. When she lowered her own eyes, she dropped the basket. The object in question didn't tumble out. It remained stuck to the bottom.

"Oh, my god," she said, unmoving. "Oh, my god." For the second time since his arrival she held her hands to her face. Dwayne didn't move. Desperately, she looked about the room, but nothing helped. Finally, she picked up the basket and started toward the bathroom door. Just then Ricky came out of the kitchen, still hugging the Raggedy Ann doll.

"Come with Mommy, Ricky," she took his hand and set the basket down. "Go into Nancy's room and watch television until Mommy comes and gets you. Then we'll go back to Mrs. Scheilli's."

When she had placed Ricky on Nancy's bed and turned the television on, she left the room, closing the door, and took the basket into the bathroom. Dwayne heard the toilet flush. When she emerged, she was not holding the basket.

Dwayne looked at her face. It was absolutely white. And she was absolutely calm. Dwayne thought he recognized the look. It was the face of someone filled with terror. A terror so overwhelming that it brought control. She looked as if her very future was on the line, and she knew it. Dwayne, with a cold detachment, also knew it.

"Robert." It was a one-word explanation. The name of her ex-husband.

Dwayne didn't know anything that could be said. In lieu of words, he extended his left arm, the fingers inviting a touch. Carefully, Karen extended her right arm, and their fingers just touched. For the moment that was enough.

"He said he still loves me," she looked steadily at Dwayne. Her lips began to quiver and the tears flowed. They stood in the middle of her bedroom, their arms extended. The only contact was still the tips of their fingers.

"I'm soft for that," she explained through tears, though still possessed by a controlling calmness. "I know it's only words," her eyes pleaded. "But I need them."

Dwayne moved his thumb forward and placed it atop her middle finger, pressing it to his own.

"A soft word, Dwayne. Couldn't you give me a soft word now and then?" she asked. Her eyes were still wet. "I know it's foolish, but I need it." She lowered her head and cried, still touching her fingers to his.

Dwayne moved his thumb and inched forward with his fingers until he was holding her entire hand.

"I made him use the rubber," she said, "because he wasn't *you*. I felt sorry for him--or maybe it was just sympathy. All he wants is to be loved. Is that so much to ask? He's kind of like Bob White except that once, just once, he turned the world his way. I married him and that was what he wanted. All he wanted. He was so simple, so easy to please. Maybe that's why I fell out of love. I never hated. I just stopped loving."

Dwayne extended his other arm and she raised hers to grasp his hand.

"It's you I love," she said, not looking at him, but looking at his shirt. "It's you I want. I made him use the rubber for distance. *Distance*. Impersonal distance. I don't ask you to use one because I want you. I want your nearness. I didn't cheat on you. I just--" She couldn't find the words, but Dwayne felt he understood.

Gently he pulled on her hands and she stumbled into his arms. Once there, she sobbed.

When she had regained some control, he parted from her, still holding her hands, and looked at her. "I've got to go somewhere and do some thinking," he said. "Thinking or forgetting. I'm not sure which. Maybe both. Maybe neither."

His fingers slid from hers and he was gone.

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(17)

## The Cure

For Dwayne there was only one place to think--the Chalk Bluffs. But before starting the drive, he phoned the Ault sub-station to tell Grover about the Raggedy Ann doll he had found in his car.

He could hear the gum popping at the other end of the line even before Kandi spoke. "He ain't here," she said. "He was talking to someone on the phone. Then he rushed out of here like a wild man."

"Say where he was going?"

"No. Just told me to spit out my gum."

"Well, if you get a hold of him, tell him I found--" He decided not to bother. It would have been too complicated for her. Instead, he snapped a "goodbye," hung up, and left a new message on his answering machine before returning to Charlie's Jeep and his belated trip out onto the prairie.

When he got around to the side of his house, he looked in through the pickup window before opening the door. How long had the Raggedy Ann doll been sitting on the seat before he found it? Was he meant to find it last night? Probably not. He had been with Grover most of the day and in the Jeep. It had to have been placed there after he went to bed last night or early that morning. But who could move around such a small town without attracting suspicion? Who would be almost invisible? Whoever it was, he or she had placed it there to draw him to the witch house, but that was the last place he would go alone.

By contrast, the Chalk Bluffs were inviting. They were quiet, peaceful, and deserted. Just the place to think or, better yet, not to think. Besides, he had to beat his head against the rock he had shown Karen the day of the Sadie Hawkins picnic. He hadn't gone there often, but after each visit he had always gained--if not relief--at least perspective.

Nothing made everyday concerns seem so puny as pounding his head against quarter-a-billion-year-old stone. Just bouncing his head off it a

couple of times, and the ridiculousness of the action, always brought a weak smile.

He took the back roads to the bluffs, Charlie's way. When he got to the wire gate at the end of Road 45, he got out, pulled the gate into the field, drove the Jeep through, and got out again to replace the gate. He didn't see any cattle in the vicinity, but he felt good about being responsible all the same.

He remembered his last trip along this path, with Karen, and he had been an ass that day. Short with her. Curt. In spite of what had just transpired at the teacherage, he regretted his pettiness on Sadie Hawkins Day. If Karen had been with him, he would have reached over and patted her thigh reassuringly.

As he passed through the two smaller bluffs that served as the gateway to the others, he realized he had no right to be mad at Karen. He shouldn't even be disappointed in her. What she had done only revealed her compassion and needs. Her humanness. All the qualities he kept in check.

Dwayne parked the Jeep exactly where Charlie had parked it not two weeks ago. It was still a hundred yards from the bluffs, but walking into them from a distance always proved dramatic. Their 80 to 100-foot height seldom seemed impressive at first. It was the progress towards them that caused them to grow, to rise as if they were blocks of glacier thrust up by subterranean forces. Once they had risen sufficiently, surrounded and engulfed him, he felt as if he walked through an Arctic quiet.

High above him in the canyon, he could see the stand of cedars that choked the narrow passage just before it widened into the room containing the rock and the cave. To his left were a set of tracks that led up the spongy talus slope to the base of the bluffs. He recognized the old prints. They were Karen's. He remembered being embarrassed by her playfulness. Thinking the footprints looked lonely--like those of the first astronauts on the moon--he walked along side them up the slope and followed them back down. He was pleased with his effort. His footprints sank in even farther than hers.

He had covered half the distance to the cedars when he heard a noise, a buzzing. It was the time of year for insects, he reasoned, and the sun would have warmed the grasshoppers to life. But, because of its persistence, he changed his mind. It had to be a helicopter out of Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne. Turning and looking down the canyon, he spotted the true source of the irritation.

Heading toward him from between the two gateway bluffs, and following the path he had just taken, sped a dirt bike. Its rider leaned over the handlebars, urging the machine to greater speeds. The figure--still half a mile distant--was too small to recognize, but Dwayne froze when he saw the black plastic helmet and visor. He also recognized the bike.

Quickly he calculated the distance between himself and the Jeep and realized that Bob could reach it ahead of him. His only hope was to work his way up the canyons to the plateau on top and then, somehow, make his way to the land and cattle company headquarters before Bob ran him down.



Could a runner outmaneuver a dirt bike in the canyons and arroyos of Chalk Bluffs? Dwayne didn't know, but the question was academic. Panic had already turned his feet up the canyon. He couldn't actually run, though, as the grade was much steeper than he remembered. Walking slowly and pausing to enjoy the scenery was one thing. Trying to out distance a motor bike--even for a conditioned runner--was another.

He swung his arms and lifted his knees, attacking the slope. At first his panting was loud enough to drown out the dirt bike. And then it wasn't. He could hear the rider accelerate or back off according to the terrain.

When he reached the first of the cedars, he was already exhausted. His legs quivered from the effort, and he wondered if he would be able to reach the plateau above. The cedars offered some protection, so he paused, placing his hands on his knees and panting. Though still facing up slope, he looked past his right hip and down the trail. The dirt bike snarled at the mouth of the canyon but made no attempt to head into the bluffs. Instead, it circled slowly, as if the rider was making up his mind.

Then the bike stopped, its front wheel facing up the trail. This is it, Dwayne thought. But the bike didn't move. Instead, the rider struggled with something strapped to the back of the bike. What it was, Dwayne didn't know. But he didn't have long to wait.

A handful of sand leapt from between his feet and showered the cedars higher up the gorge. What kind of burrowing animal does that? Dwayne stared dumbly at the ground. When the report of the rifle reached his ears and reverberated through the canyons, he knew.

As soon as he started to force his way through the cedars, the bike began to roar. Though the trees were not close together, their branches were and they slapped Dwayne as he bolted through them. Could a bike get through, he wondered. He realized that was the same question the rider had asked himself. The rider either knew he couldn't follow or didn't know for sure if he could. That's why he chose to take the long shot rather than run him down and shoot him when he became exhausted.

Thrashing through the last of the trees, Dwayne broke into the narrow opening and scrambled up the slope to the slit that led into the room enclosing the rock. He would have cheered when he saw the opening if any breath remained. It was narrow. Very narrow. Charlie had been forced to turn sideways to get through the day of the picnic. Remembering this, and realizing the bike wouldn't be able to get through, Dwayne broke into the opening and fell to all fours. He was so exhausted he rested his forehead on the sand.

For a moment, at least, he had time to breathe. Time to think. He looked at the sand beneath him and breathed heavily into it. He was so close each breath dug a pit that looked like an ant lion's trap. Behind him labored the dirt bike. He could hear it biting into the sand, losing its purchase, spinning freely, and then finding sufficient traction to lurch forward.

Not bothering to stand, he crawled towards the boulder and butted it with his head. The brief pain was wholly anticlimactic. The whine and grind of the dirt bike had long ago cleared his mind of anything but survival.

By the time he collected himself and crawled to the back of the boulder, the bike was at the slit. Peering around the rock, Dwayne saw the rider take several tries at the opening, twisting the front wheel in an effort to find clearance for the handlebars. The rider's face was hidden behind the impassive black visor that, alternately, reflected a flash of light or mirrored the canyon walls.

Reluctantly, the dirt bike backed away, but then, surprisingly, it roared at the side of the slit, hitting it with its wheel and dislodging a chunk of the sandstone. Backing off again, the rider bent his black visor to the broken earth and stared at it while the engine idled.

Because he was so bent on the slit, the rider, Dwayne realized, was not aware that he was in the opening just twenty feet from him. Had he known, he might have unholstered his rifle and come after him on foot. When the rider allowed the bike to back from view, Dwayne decided it was time to flee. He was pushing himself away from the rock when he stepped on something that didn't feel like rock or sand.

He intended only to glance at it, but when he saw what it was he froze. It was a pair of glasses. A pair of black glasses wrapped with adhesive tape to ease the pressure on the bridge of the nose. They were Bob White's glasses. The ones he usually wore when he went riding. How was he managing to see without them?

Dwayne looked up from the glasses in time to see the rider approach the slit. He held the still idling bike high above his head. The weight was oppressive, but he was sliding it against the sloping canyon wall, which helped. Slowly, he inched the bike toward the slit, and Dwayne could see

that the rider would be successful. The slit was wider about six feet from the floor and the front tire and handlebars would easily clear.

Dwayne was mesmerized by the sight. How could Bob do that? He watched as the rider struggled to move the bike along the canyon wall toward the slit. He was still watching when his peripheral vision alerted him to something in the shallow cave. It was a body. A man's body.

Even in an advanced state of decay, and even after being eaten by small animals, it was still recognizable as the body of Bob White.

The sinister, black-visored visage of the dirt bike rider suddenly became more frightening. To be pursued by someone he knew, even a crazed someone, was less frightening than to be pursued by a stranger. Whoever was on the bike must have also been the shadow behind the Post Office that Miss Teller saw.

As Dwayne bolted through the opening, and out of the room containing the boulder and Bob White's body, he realized it was much wider than the entrance into the room. Once the rider got his bike past the slit, he would have adequate clearance for a considerable distance.

Dwayne forced his legs to propel him at speeds he knew he couldn't maintain. He was using the effort of a sprinter, not the patience of a distance runner. And he had a long way to go. Intelligence, he told himself. Use intelligence. He couldn't outrun a dirt bike. He would have to out think the rider. He would have to find passages the bike couldn't navigate.

When he reached a fork, one branch seemingly leading almost straight up and the other winding narrowly out of sight to his right, he stopped. He

recognized the juncture. He had seen it only two weeks before with Karen. That day he had gone straight ahead and found himself on that narrow strip of soil that led to the towering bluff beneath which his car was now parked.

He remembered lying on that narrow strip of soil, clutching the earth, while Karen coaxed him back down. He remembered the fear of the precipitous drop on either side of the path. And he remembered the childishly debilitating fear of heights that had increased with his growth rather than diminished.

He bolted to the right, up the unknown path. Anything but the path to those memories. Behind him, the whine of the dirt bike told him that the rider had gotten the bike through the slit and was now on his trail. While laboring up the narrow gully, Dwayne heard the chortling of the engine. Apparently, the rider was circling and re-circling the boulder, probably inspecting Bob White's body or studying the passage out of the room.

Anything to give him time. Dwayne didn't care. Ahead of him the trail narrowed and turned to the left. Once he made the turn, the sound of the dirt bike diminished and seemed less of a threat. He could hear his own breathing again. It bellowed desperately. Each exhalation brought a whistle, a product of the exertion and the remnant of childhood asthma.

Dwayne placed his hands on his quivering knees and cursed his oxygen debt. He couldn't go much farther without collapsing. As he wiped the sweat from his forehead to keep it out of his eyes, he inspected the gully above. It narrowed to a slit. Struggling through the loose sand to the opening, he looked down. The narrow crease he was in opened into a

much wider gully, but the opening was at least fifteen feet above the floor of the new gully.

He had no choice. He forced his legs through the slit and sat on the saddle that was the end of the path he had been following. When he heard the dirt bike engine rev, he let go and slid and fell the fifteen feet to the floor of the new draw. His legs were too weak to break the fall, and he pancaked face down into the sand. It stuck to his moist skin, but he ignored it and started the climb up the new draw.

Behind him he could hear the bike spinning its way up the first draw. He heard it pause, the rider, his hand depressing the clutch, revved the accelerator. Finally the bike moved, and Dwayne was sure it had headed up the narrow draw he had chosen. The driver would have to turn back. Even if he could get through the slit into the larger arroyo, he would not drop his bike fifteen feet.

Cheered, Dwayne began to move slower. He would regain his breath while the bike went up the blind draw. Even so, the climb was still arduous. Besides his general exhaustion, fine sand had sifted into his shoes and collected beneath his arches. It hurt to walk. He wanted to take them off and empty the sand, but settled instead for shaking the sand into the toes of his shoes. The maneuver worked for about thirty yards before the sand settled back beneath his arches.

Again the path split before him. Each of the new gullies appeared navigable, but Dwayne chose the route to his left. It was steeper and might be the shorter avenue to the plateau above. At times, he found himself on

all fours as he scrambled up the narrowing incline. He wished he knew where he was. All he could see was the sky, and it offered no clue.

The dirt bike, probably no more than fifty yards from him--but separated by the ridges of several gullies--renewed its rage, and Dwayne guessed the rider had reached the end of the blind path and was roaring back down it to take an alternate route. For the moment, at least, the rider and Dwayne were equal. Neither knew exactly where he was. Dwayne didn't know where his path would open above, and the rider had to search alternate gullies in hopes of finding Dwayne's tracks.

At the next split, Dwayne took the path to the right. He was too tired to make an intellectual choice. It just looked easier. Twenty laborious paces up the incline, he eased to all fours and panted. He wanted to lie on his back and really rest, but he couldn't. The dirt bike sounded nearer. Apparently, the rider had lucked onto the path Dwayne had chosen. Maybe there was really only one path to the top and all the other gullies were just tributaries leading into the one where he now rested.

Feebly, Dwayne pushed against the sand with his arms, but he was unable to stand. By toppling to the side and then rolling to a sitting position, he was just able to rise. His legs shivered with fatigue and his knees wobbled. Consciously willing each step, he lurched forward. His face burned with the heat of his blood, and he could hear it ringing in his ears. The sweat in his eyes distorted the smooth walls, and they flowed beneath his feet, trying to carry him back down the gully. Frantically, he clawed at the fuzzy sky and tried to draw it nearer.

And then it was nearer. He wiped his eyes with the knuckles of his index fingers. The sky and the horizontal surface were just yards ahead. He reached for it. He forced his stiff legs onward.

He was so weary, he could barely force his head to turn to investigate the explosion of sound in the arroyo below him. What he finally saw was just a glimpse. The rider, his head stationary above the fishtailing bike, aimed his black visor at Dwayne as if it were radar controlled. Then, he leaned into the bike and rotated the accelerator handle. The bike reared onto its back wheel and danced in the sand. Regaining control, the rider leaned his weight over the front wheel, and the bike shot forward up the draw toward Dwayne.

Scrabbling and crawling, Dwayne crested the rise and looked over the vast prairie. He was on top. But it was a dead end. It was the exact spot where he had gone with Karen. His only route lay across the narrow earthen bridge to the huge sentinel bluff. It floated before his eyes--blurry and insubstantial. He could no more cross that narrow bridge to the bluff than he could fly to a cloud.

Time to die, he told himself and collapsed on his face at the approach to the bridge. He lay and listened to the dirt bike laboring and complaining up the draw. It was taking too long. Why did he have to wait to die? Why couldn't it be swift?

He was so irritated that he forgot his exhaustion and fear and rose to his knees to investigate. The sand in the arroyo was so fine and the incline so steep that the bike could find no purchase. What it gained in one lurch, it lost in another. Dwayne watched the struggle with detached interest.



Dispassionately, he reasoned that if the driver let up on the gas and took the incline more slowly he could make it. He might even have offered the suggestion if the rider had not looked up and discovered him.

Instantly, the black visor rotated toward the rear of the bike and the rider's hand pulled the rifle from its holster. Dwayne looked at it as the barrel lowered from the sky, the butt seated against the rider's shoulder, and the sights leveled at his forehead.

Then he bolted. The adrenalin of a panicked rabbit filled his blood and he sprang toward the towering bluff. He was halfway across the narrow earthen bridge before he realized it. When he did, he fell and pressed the length of his body as tightly to the narrow strip of earth as he could. The adrenalin had gotten him only halfway across.

Behind him, the sound of the dirt bike was less frantic. Apparently the rider had dismounted and was pushing it to the top, using its engine for help. Dwayne raised his right arm and looked under it just as the rider, pushing the bike, rose into view.

Like a weary lizard, Dwayne twisted his body forward toward the bluff. From his angle near the earth, the narrow bridge looked broad. He saw the surface of the bluff expand and wrap around him as he slithered onto it. He was going to make it. But make it to where? When he reached the center of the bluff, he stood and looked about. He felt as if he stood on a gigantic mushroom, the sides curving perilously away from him, inviting him to slide into space.

He had simply moved from a narrow trap to a broad trap. The only way off the bluff was the narrow earthen bridge, and the black-helmeted

rider--now sitting on his bike and holding the rifle aloft in his right hand--was rolling menacingly across it toward him.

As the bike rolled nearer, Dwayne cautiously inched toward the edge of the bluff. He slid one foot toward the edge, tested the support, and then slid the other foot to it. One foot step, one foot slide. Gradually, the edge of the bluff slid toward him like water at rising tide. He wobbled. The earth tugged itself from beneath him, leaving him nothing but air and gravity.

The bike, now across, sat idling. The rider still held the rifle in his right hand, but slowly, methodically, he lowered it and sighted. Dwayne slid a foot toward the edge and then another. With the last slide he could feel the toe of his right foot resting over nothing. He looked down--straight down. That's all there was. Down. No slope. No twigs. Nothing to grab onto. Beneath the toes of his right foot was 100 feet of fall.

And it beckoned. The brink sucked at his body like a bass at a minnow. He felt his knees melt and his shoulders droop. The sky and prairie swirled into a vortex of sound. Just as he fell, the rifle cracked.

The slug missed his left side but caught him across the right abdomen, twisting him and slamming him to the ground. When he opened his eyes, Dwayne found himself looking at the sky. He was completely calm, submissive. He knew that the left half of his body hung in space. The edge of the bluff ran almost directly down his backbone. His left leg hung over the side. The least movement would send him over.

Idly, he fingered the wound across his right abdomen with his fingers and held the bloody result before his eyes. Then he looked toward the

rider. He had dismounted and laid his bike on its side. All his attention was now on the sights of his rifle which he again lowered at Dwayne.

Dwayne let his right hand fall to the earth. He looked directly at the rider and waited. The rider continued to aim. But something was wrong. He didn't lower the rifle. He just looked over it. Then he raised the black visor and looked into the distance.

Dwayne could see his eyes. And he could see the face. And he recognized it. When the rider's eyes lowered again to the sights, and it was obvious this would be the final shot, Dwayne spoke:

"No way," he said, "will I give you the pleasure." Then he rolled into space. It was quiet there. Unhurried. His body twisted slowly like a leg of pork on a spit.

On one revolution he thought he saw a white car racing crazily across the prairie toward him. On another he thought he saw a small plane printed against the blue. Snap shots of life on his way to death.

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(18)

## Semi-permeable Membrane

Grover Ford looked professional as he braked to a halt in front of the school in Sligo, but he was in such a hurry to get into the building that he left the door open on the patrol car.

Superintendent Hall saw him coming, got up from behind his desk, and was about to greet the deputy when Grover bolted past him. "The students are not here this afternoon," the superintendent called after him. "Only the teachers."

Grover didn't stop. He strode down the hall, looking into each room. "Where's Mrs. Crowley?" he asked. His nervousness showed like sticky apple juice at the arm pits of his short sleeved uniform.

"Here, Grover." Karen had been staring out her classroom window when he arrived.

"Where's Dwayne? I was just over at his house, and I couldn't get an answer."

"You heard he found another doll in his car, didn't you?"

"What?" His pupils swelled. "A Raggedy doll?" When Karen nodded he asked, "He didn't go back out to the house, I hope?"

"No." She didn't elaborate. She didn't tell what had transpired earlier at her room in the teacherage. "But I don't know where he is. He doesn't work here any more, you remember." She looked down the hall at the superintendent who stood watching them.

"We've got to find him," Grover whispered nervously, wary of the still listening superintendent. "Charlie told me to keep an eye on him. He thinks Dwayne was the target of the harpoon in the witch house."

"He *who*? Charlie? You're talking about him as if he were still alive."

"I'm talking about what Charlie told me. He didn't find the Raggedy Andy doll in his car. He found it in Dwayne's."

"What? Back up, Grover. I'm lost."

"Charlie said the doll was placed in his pickup the morning he interviewed Miss Teller. That's not true. Charlie found the doll in Dwayne's car and then went to the witch house himself. He didn't tell Dwayne the doll was meant for him because he didn't want to worry him. But he told me where the doll was first found and told me to keep an eye on Dwayne."

"Why?" Karen moved closer to Grover so she could lower her voice. "What'd Dwayne do?"

"I don't know," Grover whispered dramatically again. "But someone is out to get him." He glanced over his shoulder at the superintendent and then at Karen. "Do you have a key to his house?"

Karen also looked at the superintendent, but didn't hesitate. "Yes." She was moving as she spoke. They ran down the hall, ignoring the superintendent. Once outside, they ran past the patrol car and directly to Dwayne's house.

The key was on the ring with her personal keys, and she had it ready by the time Grover opened the screen door. He wouldn't let her enter first, which surprised her. Instead, he pushed the door back slowly and surveyed the room. He had a hand on his holster, the gun part way out.

When he saw nothing to cause concern, he moved into the center of the living room and looked at the books and papers on the sofa and end tables. Then he moved softly into the hall and looked into the kitchen on his left and into the bedroom and bathroom on his right. Nothing.

"Do you see anything in here that might suggest where he's gone?" he asked Karen.

She looked around and saw a pair of Dwayne's shoes, not his running shoes. "No," she said. "But sometimes he tells me where he is by leaving a message on his answering machine."

Grover went to the phone at the end of the sofa and looked at it. "Do you know how to make this one work?"

Karen nudged him gently aside and depressed the announcement review button. When Dwayne's voice began, she and Grover looked into each other's eyes without seeing. "Grover or Charlie!" the excited voice on the recording blared, "If this is one of you calling, I found another doll. Talk to you about it later. Maybe we should go back out to the witch house. Meanwhile, I'm going out to bang my head against a rock."

This was followed by a beep and a moment of silence before Karen depressed the button again.

"Bang his head against a rock?" Grover asked. "Bang his head--"

"I know where he is," Karen interrupted. "He showed me the rock he's talking about. It's up in the Chalk Bluffs. It's a place he goes sometimes."

"Well, this is a hell of a time to go out into the country. Someone's trying to kill him. And that doll was an attempt to get him back out to the witch house. If he'd gone there, he'd be dead by now."

"Let's go out to the bluffs and get him then." Karen took his bare arm and started leading him toward the door.

"Wait. Wait just a minute," he freed his arm. "What's that flashing red button on the machine all about?" He pointed and Karen looked closely at the light.

"Someone called," she said. "It's a message." She looked up at Grover. "Should I play it?" When he nodded, she pressed the message replay.

Following the beep was a static filled silence. About ten seconds later a voice spoke uncertainly, almost embarrassed. "Never mind," it said. "Catch you later."

"I can't blame whoever it was," Dwayne said. "How else are you going to answer someone who says he's going to bang his head against a rock?"

Karen's eyes stared blankly at the floor. "That was Randy's voice," she said.

"Randy Bedoy? The boy who was going with Linda Gillespie?"

Karen nodded that he was correct. "We can wonder about why he was calling later. Let's get out to Chalk Bluffs right now and bring Dwayne home."

Grover closed the house door and Karen was re-locking it with the key when the telephone inside rang. When the bell sounded twice, Karen explained "The answering machine will kick in after the fourth ring."

Grover motioned for the door to be reopened. "Let's see who it is."

Dwayne's voice was still explaining his absence when Karen and Grover reached the phone and heard it beep for a reply.

"Well you picked a cockamamy good time for it," the voice growled and Karen instantly knew who it was.

"That's Charlie," she piped and looked at Grover, surprised to see that he wasn't surprised.

"If you're there Dwayne, pick up. Got something important to tell you. Pick up," he yelled. "Don't bother wiping and come to the phone. I ain't got all day."

When Karen realized Grover had frozen at the voice, she snatched up the receiver. "Charlie, this is Karen. Dwayne isn't here. He went out to Chalk Bluffs to hit his head on a rock." She heard her own voice in stereo as it was also coming from the answering machine.

"Well," Charlie considered Karen's reply, "when I was young we at least had the courtesy to use something a little more honest. Loping a mule or exercisin' a knot hole tester, for instance. Something a little more imaginative at any rate."

Karen had no idea what he was talking about, but Grover knew Charlie was highly agitated or he wouldn't have used such expressions, especially in front of a lady, and definitely while he was sober. He took the receiver from Karen. "It's me, Charlie. Grover. I'm here but as the lady says,



Dwayne's up to the bluffs. I've been wanting to get in touch with you anyway, about something a professor back east told me about."

"You mean the semi-permeable membrane?"

"That's the one."

Karen cocked her head at the answering machine from which she was hearing both voices. "What are you guys talking about? What's a membrane got to do with Dwayne or this case?"

Grover repeated the questions for Charlie's benefit.

"Well give her the phone so I can tell her."

"It's not necessary. Go ahead and talk. She can hear your voice over the answering machine. At least for a few more seconds."

"Well, okay then. Karen, if you can hear me, what it means is that Dwayne is completely in the clear but that the fellow that killed the Gillespie girl probably knew what he was doing and is now out to kill Dwayne, probably because the killer thinks Dwayne saw him--or something like that." His voice trailed into evasiveness in an effort to keep from complicating Karen and Dwayne's relationship.

"But what's the membrane?"

Charlie sighed. "Well, you asked for it. The professor at Duke says he knows of several cases where girls have been killed because boys--thinking they were macho or something--blew forcefully into their. . . How shall I put this. Their vaginas."

Karen looked at Grover to see if she had heard correctly. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Grover repeated her question into the receiver.

"Exactly, little lady. The insides of a woman are somewhat delicate. The vagina is one big semi-permeable membrane. That means air can pass through it as it probably does on a very small scale most of the time--into the blood stream, that is. But if air is forced into the vagina, large bubbles can pass into the blood stream and cause problems. Strokes. Aching joints. Death, if enough air enters the blood stream and the girl isn't rushed to a compression chamber to force it back into solution until the body can take care of it naturally."

Charlie may have gone on talking but the tape on the answering machine ended and the machine cut off.

"I've got something you may need to know, Charlie. It's about that professor. I got a hold of him late last night and he said he was unable to reach you, something about an accident at NASA."

"Go on, what'd he have to say?"

"Said that name you were interested in *was* at his lecture."

"What? *Bedoy* was there?"

"You talking about *Randy Bedoy*?"

"Of course I'm talking about Randy Bedoy. Now it makes sense. Linda's death was murder. That means Randy was the shadow behind the Post Office that Miss Teller saw. That means he knew Linda went into Dwayne's house and he probably surmised the rest as any of us could. Trouble is he's the spoiled, jealous type."

Grover placed his hand over the mouthpiece and spoke to Karen. "Charlie says it was Randy Bedoy who killed Linda Gillespie and that he

knew what he was doing. Learned how to kill that way from a *lecture* he attended."

Unaware of what Grover was doing, Charlie continued talking. "That's why Randy is trying to kill Dwayne. Simple revenge for taking what Randy thought was his. Killed Linda just for having the temerity to cheat on him."

Grover placed his hand over the mouthpiece again to deliver the new message. "He says Randy wants to kill Dwayne just to get revenge for having anything to do with Linda. He was possessive that way."

The implications froze Karen, but only for a moment. "Charlie," she pulled Grover's hand from the mouthpiece and yelled, "Randy knows Dwayne is at the Chalk Bluffs. He called sometime just before we got here and heard the same message you did. And Randy knows where that rock is. He was hiding behind it on Sadie Hawkins Day when Dwayne showed it to me. I'm positive Randy heard."

"Good God," Charlie shouted into Grover's ear. "Get out there and take Dwayne out of those bluffs before Randy finds him."

Grover was bending near the phone's cradle when he delivered his last words. "On our way, Charlie. But what about you?"

"What about me?" he blew up at the other end. "I'm at the Corner Bar here in Kimball. I couldn't possible get there in time. Even so, I'm on my way."

Grover knew Charlie meant business because the Sheriff didn't bother to replace the receiver in its cradle there in Nebraska. It just thudded against wherever it was dropped.

"Don't bother with the door," he grabbed Karen. "We've got to get there before Randy finds him and we're forty minutes to an hour away." Pushing her ahead down the walk, he asked "When do you think Randy called and got the message?"

"I don't know. You can't tell unless the person calling says. It's not one of those fancy answering machines."

"Then Bedoy could have hours on us," Grover yelled as they ran down the middle of the street toward school. "If that's so, Dwayne is probably dead already."

"No," Karen shook her head as she reached the patrol car. "I saw Dwayne not an hour ago. That message can't be more than fifty minutes old. Probably not even that. Maybe only twenty or as little as ten."

"You think so?"

"I'm pretty sure," she stopped to open the passenger door. "I'm the one who sent him to the rock," she told Grover over the top of the car. "If it wasn't for my stupidity, he'd still be at home."

"Fifty minutes or so at most," Grover thought aloud. "Then Randy could have a five to fifty-minute lead on us. Damn it," he realized. "We've got a long gravel road ahead of us if we go one way, and pavement part of the way if we go up through Hereford."

"Get in," Karen ordered and ducked from sight. "I know a short cut. We won't have to go up through Hereford. Go as straight west as you can to Road 45. It's a straight shot in from there."

In backing out, Grover spun the car completely around, had to spin it again until it faced west, and then gunned it, fishtailing past the school and out of town. He had never done that before and felt a little silly.

Stepping to the door of the school, Superintendent Hall watched the dust rooster tail behind the car, and when it disappeared from view behind the trees he walked to the street to watch the car as it careened left toward Crow Creek. Once it was out of sight--leaving only the curtain of dust--he turned and looked at the school's windows. Behind nearly every one of them was a teacher's face. The superintendent scrutinized the windows with his own face, panning from left to right. As he did, the faces disappeared and the teachers returned to their final tasks before leaving later in the day for summer vacation.

Only on a test track during officer training school had Grover driven as fast, and that was on a paved surface. "Seat belt he advised between his teeth. "And there should be two helmets behind the seat. Get me one and you put on the other." Karen, not yet strapped in, was placing a helmet over Grover's head and strapping it when they raced past the I20 Road cattle tank where Charlie had taken his bath the Monday after Linda's death.

When she was safely strapped into her seat, a helmet on her head, Karen felt safer, though so excited she couldn't keep her mind still. "Do you really think a girl can be killed that way?"

"I've never driven this fast on gravel," he answered. "I don't know how this rear-wheel drive car will handle it." When her question finally filtered

through to his concentration, he said, "That's what the professor told me. Exactly what Charlie said."

When the grading for I20 ended, he slowed the swung the patrol car north onto Road 55. "What puzzles me," he spoke, his eyes not leaving the road ahead, his hands on the wheel just below his chin, "is how the hell Bob White fits into this whole thing."

"Maybe he doesn't. Maybe he just went off somewhere." She didn't explain why she had reason to believe so.

"Then Dwayne didn't tell you about us finding Bob's truck buried under a bunch of silage out near Wild Horse Reservoir?"

Her finger was pointing and she almost forgot why. "Turn here onto Road 0. We have to go west for a while." As soon as Grover had negotiated the turn she answered his question. "No, he didn't tell me."

"Well, we did," he yelled above the engine as it dropped a gear to increase speed. After he told her the story, he said, "That's why I think White's dead. Maybe he stumbled onto Randy in the draw the time Randy thought he had killed Charlie. Thought he had to shut him up. There are some tracks in the draw behind the witch house that could suggest that any way."

Without being told, he turned onto Weld County Road 45 and headed directly north toward the Chalk Bluffs.

"I don't know where Bob is," he added after the turn, "but I know *what* he is--a corpse. When this is over, I'm going to have all the silage removed from where we found his truck."

Grover glanced hurriedly to his right to gauge Karen's response to his theories but found himself doing something else. She was pretty, she was cute, she was vulnerable. He wished, but for an instant only, that Dwayne were dead. He blinked the thought from his mind.

"The fence," Karen pointed. "It's open."

Whoever had last entered the field had left the gate open. Grover was in no mood to close it behind him, especially after the patrol car bounced when hitting the depression just after Road 45 ended. He was well into the field before regaining control.

Moving slower now that they were on the prairie, Karen felt as if she were watching a movie through the car's windshield. The twin worn paths ahead raced under their wheels. The two gateway bluffs rose and fell like tall ships in a storm. It was when they were past these guardian bluffs that Karen screamed.

"Look," she tried to point, but the car bounced wildly. When Grover glanced at her again, she explained "Someone's up on the bluff."

"Is it Dwayne?" he asked, unable to take his eyes from the path long enough to see for himself.

Karen braced her arms against the dash and tried to focus on the undulating figure. "It must be," she cried. "There's Charlie's pickup ahead. Something's got to be terribly wrong. Dwayne's afraid of heights. He wouldn't go up there." Just as she spoke, the figure on the bluff spun and fell on its back.

"What the hell," Grover exclaimed. Forgetting his vehicle's trajectory, he watched as the figure's leg dangled over the side of the bluff. "That's

got to be 80 to 100 feet." He roared past Charlie's Jeep, heading for the base of the bluff.

"No!" Karen screamed.

Thinking she was addressing him, Grover braked and looked questioningly at her, but she wasn't even aware of his existence. Her eyes were fixed on the bluff.

When Grover finally saw the motion, the body was 10 feet below the top of the bluff. It turned lazily as it descended, picking up speed. The figure might have been asleep, it looked so tranquil. Its hands rested on its stomach. Its legs and neck were so relaxed the body might have been lying in a bed.

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## Two Accidents

When it hit, it hit flat.

The body disappeared into the talus slope and sheered off a wave of fine particles that arched through the air and fell about the patrol car as it spun to a stop. Through the sliding debris on the windshield, Grover and Karen saw Dwayne's body rebound from the soil, rotate another full turn, hit the earth again, and roll down the rest of the slope. It might have rolled to the car if it had not slammed against one of the few boulders at the base of the bluffs and fell limp.

Karen was afraid to move, but Grover was out of the car instantly, tossing his helmet to the ground. When he reached Dwayne's body, the first thing he saw were the white eyes. No iris. No pupils. Just white. Instinctively, he grabbed a wrist and felt for a pulse. Amazingly, there was one. Solid. Regular. But Dwayne's chest wasn't moving.

"Come on, Dwayne," Grover urged. He wanted to do something, but he was afraid to touch him anywhere. "Breathe." Dwayne didn't move, so Grover leaned his mouth to his ear. "Breathe," he commanded.

First one eye, and then the other, rolled forward, and Dwayne stared sightlessly into the sky.

Encouraged, Grover screamed again. "Breathe," he urged. This time he placed the palm of his hand on Dwayne's abdomen and pressed slowly, but firmly. Then he did it again.

Dwayne inhaled, but it made noise. When Grover looked to the origin of the sound, he saw Dwayne's eyes. They were filled with wonder and terror. "Keep it up," Grover encouraged. "Again."

Dwayne wasn't listening, but his chest heaved again. And again. The breathing became desperate. Rapid. Shallow. "Try to breathe regular and strong," Grover called, leaning forward and looking into his eyes. "Your lungs are paralyzed. The wind's knocked out of you." He felt silly saying it, but it was probably the truth. Maybe his life had also been knocked out of him. "And you may have a collapsed lung--or more. You've got to try to relax."

For the first time Dwayne's eyes looked at something other than the sky. They were focused above Grover's head and to his right. When Grover turned to look, he discovered Karen. She had gotten out of the car but was still speechless. She could hardly will her body to move.

"Take over," Grover told her. When she didn't move, he grabbed her hand and pulled her down beside Dwayne. Then he placed Dwayne's hand in hers. "Take over. Keep him calm. I'll try to contact Kandi and get an ambulance and some backup out here." Even as he said it, he realized the futility of it. Dwayne would either live or die. The ambulance would make no difference. Help was at least sixty miles from where Dwayne lay and no driver who hadn't been there before could find his way to the Chalk Bluffs.

And the same was true for any backup to help Grover. Even so, he scurried back to the car and lifted the microphone from its cradle, wishing his vehicle was equipped with a more modern portable radio.

"Kandi," he pleaded when she responded, "get help out to the Chalk Bluffs as quickly as you can. Get it down from Cheyenne if that's possible. We need an ambulance and I need backup. We've already had one shooting, it looks like, and I've got to go into the bluffs after Randy Bedoy or we'll be sitting ducks down here."

After a silence sufficiently long enough to lay a nail file aside, Kandi said, "Is this for real, Grover?"

Grover was firm. "I'm hanging up now, Kandi, and if you aren't sending help this way within sixty seconds I'm telling Charlie."

"Charlie's dead." And then after a pause, "Isn't he?"

"No."

"I'm on it, Grover. Ten-four."

When he finished the call--not at all sure Kandi understood what he had said but confident that she was working--he looked up at the bluff from which Dwayne had fallen. Silhouetted against the sky was a rider on a dirt bike. Slowly and silently, the bike and rider backed from view. The rider still held the rifle aloft with his right hand.

"I'm leaving the keys in the ignition, Karen," he called as he checked his revolver. "If I don't come back, you'll have to get out of here yourself." Leaning over the front seat, he took his rifle out of its clips. After checking it and pumping a shell into the chamber, he leaned back into the car and retrieved his "smokey" hat from the back seat.

As he walked back to Karen, noticing that she had regained enough of her composure to remove her helmet, he settled his own hat squarely above his eyes. Just as Charlie would have.

She looked up at him with a respect he had never seen from anyone. Dwayne's eyes also looked as if he were seeing someone new. Uncomfortable at the scrutiny, Grover focused his gaze on the ground. After taking a deep breath, he looked up and winked at Karen. Then he saluted both of them by touching the rifle barrel to his hat. "Kandi," he indicated the car radio, "wanted to know if this was for real?"

"She's not alone in that," Karen said. Dwayne's weak smile said as much.

Turning, Grover--Deputy Sheriff Grover Ford as the papers and television would later identify him--strode toward the path up which Karen and Dwayne had strode two week before. He walked through sand, past sage and grass, over miniature *opuntia* and *mammillaria* cactus to a destiny that was as definitive as Gary Cooper's showdown in the movie *High Noon*. It wasn't the actress Grace Kelly watching him from a hotel window. His audience, the silent eyes of Dwayne and Karen, knew they would probably die if he was unsuccessful. Knew that if he was unable to disarm or kill Randy Bedoy that Randy would roar down from the bluffs above to kill them. Why not. He had absolutely nothing to lose. Only a satisfaction to gain.

When Grover disappeared around the towering bluff from which Dwayne had fallen, it was very quiet. A male lark bunting--noisily joyous about the fine spring day--lit on the boulder beside Dwayne and Karen.

Farther down the bluffs a female prairie falcon complained about an intruder near her nest. An ant crawled across Dwayne's nose, and Karen brushed it off. It righted itself and soldiered on.

"It looks like I may live." They were his first words. Karen took his hand in both of hers and shushed him. "I mean it," he sounded stronger. "I think I'm going to live."

Tears welled in Karen's eyes, but her face suggested more of a laugh. "Either the ground was soft or you are very hard headed," she said.

"*Was* hard headed," he corrected. For several minutes he lay listening to the animal sounds and to his own body. "I think my lung isn't collapsed any more, if that's possible. And I can move my toes and fingers."

"Where does it hurt?"

"Anywhere there's a nerve." He tried to turn his head and shoulder so that he could look at the bluff but changed his mind. "I think I had an accident."

"You mean the fall?" She was surprised he'd call his fall an accident. "Not that," he said, and sniffed. She understood. "It's Randy, you know."

She shook her head. "I know."

"Why?"

She told him the story Grover and Charlie had related to her. Explained why Randy was probably after him. When she had finished, they remained quiet--wondering what was happening in the canyon. "Are you ever going to settle down?" she asked him finally.

Dwayne moved his head slightly to indicate that he was presently wedged between her and a large boulder. "Oh, I don't think I'll move for a while."

"I mean why don't you settle down? And you know it. Why don't you get married, for instance?" When he didn't answer immediately, she turned his face gently toward her. "Why don't you marry *me*?"

He looked at the rock and then at her. Trapped. "The proverbial Rock and a Hard Place," was all he could breathe.

"If you were an English teacher instead of a science teacher," she said, "you wouldn't be able to find jobs all over the country. You'd have to stay in one place."

He sighed. "I don't know if I'll ever get up from this spot and you're already trying to marry me off. Hobble me. Besides, I don't have a job. I'm not marriage material."

"Even the Sligo school board wouldn't have the nerve *not* to rehire you after this."

"I'll think about it." He appeared to think. "You wouldn't be bitchy, would you?"

"Of course I would."

"You wouldn't throw progesteronic rages every time I looked at another women, would you?"

"And scratch your eyes out besides."

"You wouldn't complain if I occasionally stayed out and caroused with the boys, would you?"

"I'd hog tie you. Fillet you with a cat of nine tails. And hang you by your ankles from above the bed."

Dwayne nodded his approval. "Sounds interesting," he admitted. "If I ever get up from here, I might have a go at it." He didn't say more for a while but a slight smile on his face showed he was remembering something. "Hell," he said finally, "I'll try anything *wunst*."

In spite of the situation she chuckled. "Lord," she observed, "everybody's sounding like Charlie any more. And Grover's trying to look like him."

High up in the canyon, a shot reverberated. Then another. Karen and Dwayne stared into each other's eyes, asking questions they knew couldn't be answered. Their gazes held, unblinking, their ears straining. Then came a third shot. Different. Deeper. Its reverberations filled the canyon, spilled out its opening, and bounced to the gateway bluffs and back.

What followed the echoes was silence. No birds. Not even the wind. Dwayne continued to stare at Karen. He saw the hole where her ear was pierced. The tiny hairs on the back of her neck highlighted by the sunlight. The slight flaring of her nostrils as she exhaled.

But something made her hold her breath. Her nostrils stilled. Into this silence--thin, high, and piercing--came a cry of pain. Instinctively she knew it was a sound Grover would make, not Randy. Her first impulse was to go to the car and start the engine. She would have if she had not looked at Dwayne. She couldn't move him, and he probably shouldn't be moved.

Another sound, nearer, a cry of agony, pain and fear came from the arroyo leading up to the cave and rock. It was followed by a huffing, a

thumping, a dragging. Karen saw rocks and sand avalanche down the steep trail.

Dwayne's eyes stared into the sky. "Doesn't sound good, does it?"

The next cry from the arroyo was that of frustration and agony. Following it came the rolling body of Grover. He was hatless, rifleless, and pistolless. When he sat up the first thing he did was place both hands over a wound in his left thigh. He tried to stand but the slope was still too steep for only one sound leg. As a result, he fell flat on his back and began swimming through the sand. His arms doing the back stroke, his good leg pushing.

Rapidly wearying of that, he tried to stand again, successfully, and hopped toward Dwayne and Karen. His left leg was useless and he had to alternately drag it behind him or pull it with his hands. "I'm sorry," he collapsed beside them in exhaustion. His sweaty face and arms were covered by sand. "He was behind a rock in a little enclosure. I was looking up the draw when he came around it and he got off two shots before I could do one. I was lucky to make it back into a narrow passageway before he came out from behind the rock."

Karen shuddered when she looked at the blood covering Grover's khaki uniform. "That doesn't look good."

"Doesn't feel so fine either," he grimaced while trying to laugh, showing her more emotions than he had ever revealed to anyone but a mother, and that was as a child.

Not knowing anything else to do but what she had seen in a hundred western movies, she grabbed the hem of her dress and began ripping. It



didn't rip as easily or as neatly as it did in the movies, but she finally managed to remove a swath, tear it into a proper length, wrap it around Grover's leg, and twist it.

"I didn't stay in Kamp Fire Girls long enough to know for sure," she looked up at him hopefully, "but if you hold on to this and keep it tight it should keep the blood from flowing."

Grover found that if he curled his body he could both lie on the sand and still hold on to the end of the bandage. His exhaustion, his spent emotions, left him giddy. "Just as long as you don't try to sell me some cookies," he said.

"That was another group," she said. "We knew where the profit margin was. We sold condoms." She was seated between two wounded men but she looked at Dwayne when she said it. The expression on his face showed nothing but pleasure, perhaps simply at being alive, at least for a few more moments.

Up in the canyon the dirt bike snarled to life. Grover, facing away from the sound, just knew it was eager to attack. Thirsty to make an end to today's carnage. He could see Randy straddling it, hanging onto the bar grips as it clawed forward, rising onto its hind wheel.

"You don't have any guns left, do you, Grover?" Dwayne asked, swallowing and staring glumly at the sky.

"No," he exhaled. "I dropped the rifle almost as soon as I fired it. I didn't know why then. Reflex or something, I thought. But when I pulled my pistol, my leg gave way and I fell. Somewhere between then and when I finally got into the passageway, I lost the pistol too."

Karen said, "But you have some other things in the car. I saw them."

"A riot stick and some pepper gas. Nothing you could use against a rifle. But we still have the car. Dwayne and I can't get to it, and we couldn't drive if we could. But you can."

"I'm not leaving you two here." She was surprised they thought she would.

"Go ahead," Dwayne encouraged. "You have a son. We. . ."

"I didn't mean for her to leave," Grover tried to be angry. "I mean for her to get in the car and try to run Randy down when he comes out of the gully. This rock," he pulled himself over to it and rested his back against it, "can give us some protection. He'd have to get out onto the prairie to get a shot at us, and then she would be able to chase him with the car. It could buy us some time."

"Use the Jeep," Dwayne offered. "It's four-wheel drive and can handle some places Grover's patrol car couldn't. Go on," he encouraged. "The keys are still in it."

As the sound of the dirt bike changed from snarling to persistent anger--probably because it was trying to navigate the narrow passageway--Karen ran to Charlie's pickup and started it. Immediately the radio came on and a woman's voice, with the obnoxious twang of someone trying to sound country, harangued Karen's ear. "Hang on, Charlie. The cavalry and the Air Force are both on their way."

Not knowing what else to do, Karen drove the Jeep to the opposite side of the rock from the arroyo and got out, leaving the engine running. "Some woman's chattering over the radio."

"Knowing Kandi," Grover said, "she'll go on giving a play-by-play and clogging the frequency until someone goes into the sub-station and shuts off her mike."

Abruptly, the whine of the engine in the canyon ceased and the only sounds Karen's, Grover's and Dwayne's straining ears could hear were the panting of Charlie's Jeep and the exaltations of a male lark bunting trying to attract a female. The falcon east of the canyon was again complaining about something's intrusion into her territory.

"I know what he's doing," Dwayne told them. "He shut the engine off so he could lift the bike above his head to carry it through the passage that leads from the cave and rock. As soon as the narrow path opens into the cedars, he'll fire up the engine again."

While listening, their eyes suddenly jerked from the canyon's mouth to a point in the heavens above the bluffs. Nothing was there, but that was from where the sound of the shot came.

"Shooting *up* the arroyo?" Grover wondered aloud and looked to his companions for an explanation.

Again the heavens exploded but before the trio around the rock could respond two shots rang out that reverberated down the arroyo and echoed back to them from the guardian buttes to the south. "Now he's shooting *down*."

This was followed by a cacophony of shots so confusing that none of those at the rock could think for a moment. They were mesmerized by the wonder of sounds and then more haunted by the silence that followed.

Even the complaining falcon had gone to roost. The male lark bunting ceased hovering and fell to a sage brush where he disappeared.

The silence stretched and stretched. To get a better angle on the canyon, Karen walked east, moving cautiously as slice after slice of the canyon wall slid into view. A few more steps and she would be able to look up the canyon, two hundred yards perhaps, to the spot where the cedars began to grow. She was in mid stride when the dirt bike sputtered and died directly above her. As she ran back to the rock the dirt bike reluctantly renewed its sputtering behind her.

"Give it a little gas," Dwayne advised and then wondered why. When it finally kicked into life and the engine raced to clear its throat, Dwayne knew the bike was through the slit and among the cedars. It and its rider were two hundred yards from where he lay, helpless. The descent was steep and the rider would have to nurse the brakes and pick his path carefully to keep from sliding and tumbling.

And as expected, the bike came on slowly. Slowly. Creeping nearer. Alternately snorting or idling.

Abruptly, the sound changed, the engine sputtered, and stopped. Words--the echoing, garbled, unintelligible words of a dream--reverberated within the canyon. The bike's engine barked two, three times as the rider tried unsuccessfully to kick start it again.

Then a new sound issued from the canyon. It was metallic. Rhythmic. Rattling. The trio at the rock did not understand the noise until the instant the bike, riderless and silent, but still upright, bounced out of the canyon and crashed onto the flat east of Grover's patrol car.

The next thing out of the canyon was a Smokey-the-Bear hat. It sailed like a Frisbee, high above the wreck of the dirt bike, and settled to earth behind the car.

Now that the plan of running down the biker had changed, Karen was unsure what to do. She leaned protectively over Dwayne as she looked to Grover for direction. He motioned to get into Charlie's Jeep, and she was scurrying to it when a new sound from the canyon stopped her and brought tears to her eyes.

"Oh, the old brown cow is dead in Sli-i-go,  
The old brown cow is dead in Sli-i-go.  
Oh, the old brown cow is dead,  
But the children must be fed,  
So we'll milk the bull instead, in Sli-i-go."

"Charlie," she yelled with relief and sprinted toward the mouth of the canyon. When he appeared it was the old pre-burial Charlie. Same hat. Same vest. Same star, though it was difficult to see because of the rifle and pistol he clutched to his belly.

"Say, Grove," he hollered when he saw the men at the rock. "You left some of your gadgets up the draw. Shouldn't be so careless. Could rust, you know, and the sand ain't all that good for the actions either."

Charlie was trying to play the game of All in a Day's Work, but Grover, even wounded, wasn't going to let him get off easy. "Now wait a minute. You told us you were in Kimball and couldn't get down here as fast as we could. You were sand bagging us."

Karen took Grover's rifle and pistol from Charlie and laid them atop the rock. Even so, Charlie still held a hand to his belly, mimicking perhaps, Wiley Wentworth. "Not so, not so," Charlie shook his head slowly from side to side. "But you're correct, I wasn't thinking too clear. Don't know why I didn't think of it right off. I was just outside Kimball when it occurred to me, and then it maybe wouldn't have if I hadn't seen Ol' Kinábe. He had just come in after his morning's run."

"Kinábe," they chorused, wanting more of an explanation. "You know him, don't you? Ol' Paul Kinábe. Duster for this end of the county."

"An aerial applicator?" Grover asked.

"That's what I said. A crop duster. He had just landed when I was going past so I stopped in and he agreed to hustle me on over here. Didn't take no time. What took time was hoofin' it in from the road he lit on back there." Charlie pointed to the north of the bluffs. "Wouldn't land on the prairie unless I'd agree to have the county go any damages. I said it would, but he said he doubted my word would carry much weight, seein' how I was dead and all."

None of his listeners ventured a question. They were still trying to picture Charlie and his hat in the open cockpit of a powerful bi-plane.

"Say, haven't any of you by any chance seen my dog in town lookin' for me, have you? He should be back from wherever he's been about now."

They shook their heads that they hadn't. Finally Grover asked, "What went on up there?"

"About what it sounded like, I suspect. A shootin' gallery in a small place. Moving targets. I think if I was you, Grover," Charlie indicated the weapons on the rock, "I'd keep those by my side and turn kind of taciturn like."

The squint on Grover's face showed that he had no idea what Charlie was talking about.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Charlie explained, "but what one or both of those pieces will prove to be the weapon that fired the fatal shot. I had to fire more times than I should have up there, what with adjustin' for the windage and all."

"Windage in a cave?" Grover tried to sound incredulous. "And why are you trying to give me credit for the kill anyway?"

"Self preservation, my boy. Make you so popular in the department that they'll have to move you up the ranks instead of keep you nosing about out here. That way it'll take them a few more years to find some young cadet with so little political clout that they can put him out here."

"What if I deny it?"

"You'd be foolish to and you know it? You don't want to be stuck out here any more than I want a desk job in Greeley. Play along and we both get what we want. Look at it as doin' me a favor, if it'll make the story go down any easier. And it would be a favor, too."

While Grover was considering, Charlie went on to explain. "You cornered him in the narrow portion of the draw up there. So narrow neither of you could miss the other. After you was done, you dragged the body back into the cave and placed it beside White's. You wouldn't have to

stretch much," Charlie pointed with his left hand to Grover's leg, "you got a hole in you as proof. A sight more than you got the last battle we was in. You fell asleep in the middle of that one if I remember rightly." Charlie was referring to what was now known nationwide as the *Battle of Waggles Wash*. In that one Charlie brought down a UFO with a shotgun. And Grover had, indeed, fallen asleep during the melee. But that was a tale Grover didn't wish to rehash so he didn't dispute Charlie's words.

At an incredible distance, sirens wailed causing the assemblage around the rock to peer into the south.

"Maybe I'd best be getting out of here," Charlie said, regretting being hurried. "Some of those sirens might just be coming to verify my resurrection. I'm afraid Mrs. Kinábe, the duster's wife, might have let the cat out of the bag. Her eyes were as big as the spinner hubcaps on a 50's Chevy when I looked in the window out at the air strip. She was on the phone when we blew out of there."

"Charlie, there's blood on your fingers." Karen was the first to realize why Charlie hadn't removed his right hand from his belly.

"Naugh, nothing to go fussin' about. Just a little flesh wound. Shouldn't take more than ten, fifteen stitches to cinch up. I'll have it looked at after I stop by my trailer and pick up some more clothes. I got a few more days of being dead yet that I haven't worn out."

Dwayne tried to find Charlie's eyes. "If you don't find any clothes out at your place, you might check the boxes stacked against the wall on the east side of my rental."



Charlie pressed his tongue against his cheek at Dwayne's words, trying to fathom them. Giving up, he jerked his head at Karen. "Don't let him go to braggin' about surviving a fall off that bluff. A baby could a done it. Shucks, when we was kids, we used to dive off there just to see who could break the fewest bones."

From the north came the unmistakable *whamp* of large helicopters, military craft from Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne. Charlie listened to them and then turned to the south to spot at least three tiny choppers mosquitoing in from that direction. "News people, most likely." The still audible ground vehicles weren't yet in sight, but they were heading straight down 45 toward the open gate. Someone who knew the area was taking the most direct route. Maybe Kandi was still on the air waves.

"Wow," Charlie felt cheered at the sudden interest in his spot of the world, "when someone puts a fire under Kandi she shore can bring smoke. You put that fire under her, Grover?"

"I put a *big* one under her," he winked, not bothering to mention whose name he had to drop to do it.

"Well," Charlie said, almost wishing he could stay for the show, "it's about time I git. I'll put in a good word for you with the Sheriff if I'm ever unfortunate enough to run across him and not over him," he said to Grover. "But in the meantime there's one thing I'd like *you* to take some practice at."

Again, Grover had to cock his head in puzzlement at Charlie's words.

"A man," he explained while walking gingerly to his idling Jeep, a hand still on his belly, "has simply got to learn to hold his water."

"Damn," Grover hissed, dusting sand into his crotch with his free hand.  
"I was hoping he wouldn't notice."

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(20)

## Return of the Faithful

Charlie drove his Jeep behind one of the sentinel buttes and waited until the ambulances and patrol cars passed him as they raced toward the hurricane of dust that marked the settling of seven helicopters. Once his pickup bounced from the prairie and on to Weld County Road 45, Charlie stopped and got out to close the gate. It was a clumsy job, one handed, but he made it. Finished, he rested against the latch post and surveyed the prairie, his eyes missing nothing.

Well, almost nothing. Something moved that he didn't see. But it was far enough away that he wouldn't have felt inadequate. The movement was far past Geary Creek, past Little Crow Creek, even past Crow Creek itself. It was farther even than the weathered, abandoned house whose bedroom walls were still adorned with animal parts.

The movement was that of a small creature. It trotted across the prairie--gingerly skirting the yellow-blossomed prickly pear cactus--dipped under the four-strand barbed wire fence, and padded--albeit, with a limp from its left foreleg--out onto the gravel of Weld County Road number 112.

Its tongue lolled happily from its mouth, and the cheerful eagerness of its expression showed that, even though adventure was excellent, it was good to be home again. It continued to trot rhythmically up the road, turned in at a semi-circular driveway, and bounded up the three wooden steps leading to the porch.

Trustingly, it sat on its haunches and let its tongue loll happily as it looked around at the trailer house and the graying bales of straw that enveloped it.

The creature would wait. It would wait indefinitely. It would wait until its master stomped on the floor and bellowed, "Hey, Dog. You want this pizza crust?"

After half an hour of panting, the dog curled up on the porch for a nap. It was oblivious to the new stone on the new grave just across the barbed wire fence. It had Charlie's name on it, but the dates were wrong. No one, however, would notice that error. The steady stream of tourists to the hilltop cemetery were more interested in the epitaph.

Inez had remembered it as soon as the boys told her they wanted to carve something Charlie had said into stone.

"Well," Inez remembered, "there is something he once told a small boy in here who refused to eat his pancakes. It went something like this:

**Breakfast is one of the most important meals of the day. It's right up there with brunch, lunch, supper, and dinner--and whatever's on the rack behind the bar.**

--Charlie Waggles

The End